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Rosa M. Beunel

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## Les Îles dans l'Île : la créolisation réticente des Franco-Mauriciens et Petits-Blancs dans les romans de Dormann et Agénor\*

### Islands within an Island: the reluctant creolisation of Franco-Mauritians and Little-Whites in Dormann and Agénor's novels

#### Résumé

*Bien que l'« archipel de l'océan » Indien soit un concept encore récent et peu développé, le mouvement de la recherche vers une notion construite de l'insularité des îles signifie que l'étude des îles et de leur créolisation tend à favoriser les représentations qui les dépeignent comme des espaces ouverts et connectés. Si, aux Mascareignes comme ailleurs, cette relecture a rendu possible l'émergence d'études captivantes sur la production littéraire des îles, les textes qui ne correspondent pas à cette vision, ainsi que les populations qu'ils représentent, semblent parfois être laissés pour compte. En analysant les romans de Dormann Le Bal du Dodo et d'Agénor Bé-Maho, qui décrivent les communautés blanches de Maurice et de La Réunion, cet article examine comment les représentations d'expériences insulaires différentes compliquent la manière dont la créolisation de ces îles a été pensée jusqu'à présent. L'article soutient que l'inclusion de communautés « purement » blanches dans la conceptualisation de la créolisation et l'archipelisation des Mascareignes révèle les tensions qui caractérisent la formulation du multiculturalisme et de la spatialité des îles du Sud-Ouest de l'océan Indien. Comparant les représentations des communautés de Franco-Mauriciens et de Petits-Blancs, cette analyse démontre que leur rejet de la créolisation biologique fragmente l'imaginaire géographique des îles et définit leur créolisation comme un processus caractérisé par la réticence avec laquelle il est entrepris.*

#### Mots-clés

Créolisation, archipel, Franco-Mauriciens, Petits-Blancs, communalisme

#### Summary

*Although the Indian Ocean archipelago still struggles to surface, the recent move of island studies towards a constructed notion of insularity means that research on islands and their creolisation tends to favour representations that depict them as connected and opened spaces. If in the Mascarenes and elsewhere this re-reading leads to prolific and rich studies of contemporary literary production on islands, texts that do not partake to this vision together with the population they represent can be left behind. In analysing Dormann's Le Bal du Dodo and Agénor's Bé-Maho which depict white communities in Mauritius and Reunion, this article proposes to explore how the literary portrayal of different insular experiences complicates how creolisation on these islands has been theorised so far. It argues that the inclusion of 'pure' white communities in the study of the Mascarenes' creolisation and archipelisation uncovers the tensions which characterise the formulation of South-Western Indian Ocean islands' identity and spatiality. Comparing the depiction of the Franco-Mauritian and the Little-White's communities, this analysis demonstrates that their refusal to biologically creolise fragments the island's imaginary geography and defines Indian Ocean creolisation as a process characterised by the resistance with which it is undertaken*

#### Keywords

Creolisation, archipelago, Franco-Mauritians, Little-Whites, communalism

\* BEUNEL Rosa M.  
King's College London

Against the parcelling out of the Earth through national boundaries and the further partition of these territories into exclusive ethnic communities, transnational perspectives such as those offered by oceanic and archipelagic studies in the humanities, favour a more open and complex understanding of the spatial dimension of cultures.<sup>1</sup> The intricate colonial history of tropical islands from which emerged multi-cultural populations have resulted in some of the most compelling scholarship that rethinks national and racial identities through diasporic studies. Edouard Glissant’s notion of Relation, in his articulation of an inclusive and creolised cultural identity of the Caribbean, has become the foundational text on which the paradigm of tropical island cultures has been articulated.<sup>2</sup> Coming late onto the scene of scholarship on creolisation, the South-Western Indian Ocean islands have nevertheless started to be studied through a similar stance. Inspired by Glissant’s work, scholars such as Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou from Reunion, and Françoise Lionnet and Khal Torabully from Mauritius have begun to articulate a specific Indian Ocean creolisation – in Torabully’s case *coolitude* –, which can best express how this region experiences and locates its multiculturalism.<sup>3</sup> While the islands’ violent history and its continuing repercussions on their societies form the basis of their theories, they aim largely at conceptualising a paradigm for the eventual overcoming of these difficulties. As the following passage from *Amarres* shows, diversity and openness are key terms in their formulation of an Indian Ocean creolisation: “Nous proposons une réinscription dans la diversité, la globalisation pensée comme rencontres, échanges dans un monde multipolaire.”<sup>4</sup> The positive outlook on identities, undergirded by decolonising principal, invites a reconsideration of the representation of islands and their insularity. Thus, the perception of oceanic islands as remote and isolated is challenged by theories which favour flows, and movement over a more static understanding of space and broaden island geography in considering their archipelagic nature.

Indeed, Marimoutou and Vergès propose to think of Reunion island as “une île du monde créole, sur la route entre l’Afrique et l’Asie, une île sous-France, une île-archipel,”<sup>5</sup> Although the Indian Ocean archipelago, unlike the Caribbean, still struggles to surface, the recent move of island studies towards a constructed notion of insularity

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<sup>1</sup> On oceanic studies see : Elizabeth R. Deloughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific islands Literature*, USA, University of Hawai’i Press, 2007; on archipelagic studies see: Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The repeating island: The Caribbean and the postmodern perspective*, Duke University Press, 1996; Epeli, Hau’Ofa, *We are the Ocean: selected works*, US, University of Hawaii Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, Paris, Gallimard, Coll. NRF, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Françoise Vergès, Carpanin Marimoutou, *Amarres : créolisation india-océanes*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2005; Khal Torabully, Marina Carter, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, London: Anthem Press, Coll. Southeast Asian Studies, 2002; Françoise Lionnet “Cosmopolitan or Creole Lives? Globalized Oceans and Insular Identities.” *Profession*, 2011, p. 23–43. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/41714105](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41714105) ; Françoise Lionnet, *Le Su et L’incertain Cosmopolitiques Créoles de l’océan Indien*, Mauritius, La Librairie Mauricienne Numérique, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Vergès & Marimoutou, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

– especially concerning island in postcolonial contexts – means that research on islands tends to favour representations and sensibilities that depict islands as connected and opened spaces; this move also concerns scholarships on the literary production of the Mascarenes.<sup>1</sup> If this re-reading of insular spaces leads to prolific and rich studies of contemporary literary production on islands, texts that do not partake to this vision together with the population they represent can be left behind. In analysing two of such literary texts depicting white communities in Mauritius and Reunion, this article proposes to explore how the literary portrayal of different insular experiences complicates how creolisation on these islands has been theorised so far. It argues that the inclusion of “pure” white communities in the study of the Mascarenes’ creolisation and archipelisation uncovers the tensions which characterise the formulation of South-Western Indian Ocean islands’ identity and spatiality. This article demonstrates how these tensions are embedded in two intertwined aspects of these islands’ societies represented in the novels: first, their ethnic make-up; and second, their experience of space. As the close reading of the texts will demonstrate, the historical and discursive origin of both aspects are significant factors that continue to influence the French descent communities’ sense of self and will therefore be presented in the following section.

The communities that today form the island’s population are the product of multiple waves of immigration, starting with European and their Malagasy and African slaves in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Their settlement on what were then Bourbon and l’Île de France coincided with the development of environmental ideas that sprung from the colonial mission of mass deforestation in the Caribbean and its environmental consequences.<sup>3</sup> In his work on green imperialism, Richard Grove explains at length the role that tropical islands in general, and Mauritius in particular, played in the awakening of an environmental consciousness. At a very early stage of its colonisation, the island’s resources became the subject of regulations as colonisers and administrators realised their finite nature.<sup>4</sup> Knowledge did not come without its share of anxiety, and along with environmental ideas which questioned the longevity of the natural environment, climatology interrogated the survival of Europeans in tropical climates: “climatic theorists were armed with a conviction that change of climate might cause transformation or even degeneration in man himself.”<sup>5</sup> On Bourbon, wealthy colonisers were encouraged to have houses in the higher parts of the islands where the climate was more temperate and thought to be healthier for the White population.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On constructed notion of insularity see: Elizabeth R. Deloughrey; Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka, and the bounds of an Indian Ocean colony*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on the French settlement thus leaves out the history of the Dutch settlement on Mauritius.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical island Eden and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, New-York, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> Grove, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Eve Prosper, « Les Hauts Bourdonnais : pour une lisibilité des disparités », in *Inégalité et spatialité dans l’océan Indien*, Jean-Michel Jauze, & Jean-Louis Guébourg (eds.), Paris,

These beliefs formed the foundation on which the white communities of Reunion and Mauritius developed on the islands and understood their environment. To them, their life and the island itself was always in peril, and their primary mission was for themselves and their race to survive. Thus, their settlement was analogous with a fear of extinction and with the understanding of the island's insularity, vulnerability, and fragility. As climatologists' ideas suggested, the fear for European survival came from the perception of their intrinsic difference from other races and of their superiority. However, despite their ascendancy, white settlers were a minority on these islands inhabited by a majority of slaves. This discrepancy created a constant sense of danger for the white population, adding to their already anxious island-dwelling the threat of a slave upheaval.<sup>1</sup> The remnants of the racial hierarchy on which these societies were formed and the sense of threat which was synonymous with their island-dwelling can be seen in the islands' communalism that the novels grapple with.

The fear which characterises the dwelling of communities from French descent on tropical islands is manifest in the contemporary portrayal of Mauritian and Reunionese communities by Geneviève Dormann and Monique Agénor respectively. Dormann's novel *Le Bal Du Dodo* draws the portrait of a Franco-Mauritian family called the Carnoët.<sup>2</sup> They descend from the French families who settled on the island in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century and who now form a very elitist and exclusive group which has taken for emblem the Dodo. Despite the humorous tone with which it describes the family's outdated way of life, the novel is also a celebration of Bretons settlers' history and legacy. As a French Parisian author, Dormann's literary stronghold is anchored within the French metropolitan context, where she is mostly remembered for her texts on Colette and her political conservatism. Her text *Le Bal Du Dodo* evokes an imaginary of Mauritius imbued with references to Bernardin's *Paul et Virginie* and is, therefore, located within a literary tradition which explores white Mauritians.<sup>3</sup> Thus, her portrayal of Franco-Muritians is shaped by a diverging sensibility from authors more scrutinised by literary critics interested in Mauritian creolisation. Agénor also writes from the metropole, yet her Reunionese childhood and ancestry brings a contrasting awareness with Dormann's perspective of the themes explored in this article. Depicting the Little-Whites society in the midst of the Second World War, Agénor's novel was inspired by her father's memoir and his account of these events,<sup>4</sup> and follows the path of Antillean authors who in the 90s started writing on

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L'Harmattan, 2005, p. 48.

<sup>1</sup> Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mauritius*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Geneviève Dormann, *Le Bal du Dodo*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Bernardin de Saint Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, first published in 1788; on Franco-Muritians' literary representations and their relationship with Bernardin's work see: Srilata Ravi, *Rainbow Colours: Literary Ethnotopographies of Mauritius*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2007, p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene-Dutremblay Agenor, *A L'échelle de mon île*, published at the author's expense, 2007 ; Monique Agénor, *Bé-Maho: Chroniques sous le vent*, Paris, Le Serpent à Plumes, 1996.

Caribbean dissidents' movement against Vichy's regime.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Agénor's text belongs to the Reunionese literary scene and is also a part of the wider Creole cultural output. The creolised language used to describe the Little-Whites' community in *Bé-Maho* illustrates the extent of the creolisation this society has already undergone, while the novel's depiction of their problematic endogamy shows the limits of their creolisation.

Although the Franco-Mauritians and Little-Whites from the Heights are obliged to live in relative proximity with other communities, they insist on confining their marital and sexual relationship to within their social group. Living in segregation from the rest of the island, the communities have established protective and divisive borders between the population. Thus, the social constraints imposed by communalism and by the fear of miscegenation fragments islands' imaginary geography. Here, instead of a positive archipelisation of islands as conceptualised by the thinkers of creolisation, their archipelisation describe their division into the multiplying islets of ethnic belonging. The process of social and spatial parcellation emphasises islands' vulnerability and precarity, eventually leading the communities to an existential impasse; or they accept to open their communities and to forfeit the basis of their identity, that they see as being their whiteness, or they die. Indeed, each community appears in the novel to face similar fates feared by climatologist of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century: extinction and degeneration. Exploring the imaginary geography of white communities, this article shows that in considering creolisation as a threat, the white communities depicted in Dormann and Agénor's novels put themselves and their island in peril.

### **Islands within Island: ethnic-mapping and negative archipelisation**

In this section, the relationship between the two societies' endogamous lifestyle and their spatial experience will be explored, showing that its social requirements diminish the communities' liveable space and turn them into small and inescapable islets. In her novel's introduction Dormann reflects on the fact that, although Franco-Mauritians are rarely mentioned, their input on Mauritius' history and economy is tremendous. Indeed, as descendants of colonisers, this community owns a lot of the island's wealth and land. However, striving to retain a white aristocratic bloodline, the novel shows them as having evolved in a racial enclosure which, ironically, threatens their own survival. The endogamous prerogative coupled with the shortage of possible suitors means that a mild incest, a marriage between distant cousins, for instance, seems to be acceptable if not unavoidable to keep away from miscegenation and to further the bloodline. Thus, when it comes to marriage the perfect husband is "d'un blanc pur, bien nommé, pas trop cousin à cause des mauvaises farces de la génétique" (BD, 46). In persisting with endogamy and refusing to intermarry, the Franco-

<sup>1</sup> Julien Toureille, « La dissidence dans les Antilles françaises : une mémoire à préserver (1945-2011) », *Revue historique des armées*, 13 Juin 2013, p. 68-78, Accessed Online [18 novembre 2019] URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rha/7644>; Raphaël Confiant, « Mondes créoles, terres d'écrivains », in *Nouvelles des mondes créoles*, Raphaël Confiant, (ed.), Paris, Ecriture, 2013.

Mauritians have considerably reduced their space turning their large property into small villages with the stifling atmosphere “d’une petite ville de la province française il y a cent ans” (BD, 47); and where one’s freedom is restricted to what the good society and their standards allow: “Dans un monde aussi fermé, aussi restreint, le respect des traditions est impératif (...)” (BD, 60). Like the Franco-Mauritians, the Little-Whites live on a white islet within an island, but their isolation is also the product of the physical geography of the island, and their particular choice of dwelling. Although Agénor’s text is set on an imaginary island, the geography of the island she depicts and her description of this small community of white Creole leave no doubt regarding its identity. Indeed, the Little-Whites community emerged in Bourbon during the XVII<sup>th</sup> and XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries, after the island was colonised by France and after the implementation of the plantation system. The difficulties of settling in a new colony as well as the French rule of inheritance, which obliged the division of land amongst all the male descendants, meant that some white families found themselves owning very small lands from which they were not able to survive.<sup>1</sup> This unfavoured part of the colonial population was unwilling to lower their status by working for their peers’ plantation like slaves and decided to leave coastal areas and to settle in the dense and abrupt mountain range in the centre of the island.<sup>2</sup> This is where the reader finds Agénor’s little-White community, living in “hautes montagnes impraticables et inaccessibles” (BM, 40) secluded from the rest of the population by the steep peaks of the inner island.

If each community lives and evolves on small portions of the island, the characters’ peregrinations reveal the other borders fragmenting the island into small communal islets or into an archipelago-island. In *Le Bal du Dodo*, two unconventional characters of the Franco-Mauritian community, a British daughter-in-law called Maureen, and a young homosexual Dutchman named Christopher travel around Mauritius uncovering the island’s archipelisation through their trespassing. While Maureen scandalises her in-laws in discovering part of the island that the Franco-Mauritian families had “ignorés ou méprisés depuis des générations” in Mahebourg “le village Indien du Sud-Est” or in “le dédale bruyant et puant du quartier Chinois” (BD, 99), Christopher brings the young generation of the Carnoët with him on his outings. They go “fumer de l’opium dans une cabanne indienne de Trou Fanfaron” or listen to music at some “concerts indiens à Poudre d’Or” (BD, 206) and thus momentarily cross the borders between the different communities without, however, establishing any meaningful contact that would bridge the Mauritian islets together. As they breach the constrained limits of their everyday life and bear a sense of excitement and danger, the youths’ crossings are adventures. Insisting on the exotic and exciting aspects of the Indian or Chinese neighbourhoods, their outings emphasise rather than subvert the ethnic fragmentation of the island.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Chaudenson, *Des Iles, des Hommes, des Langues : Essai sur la créolisation linguistique et culturelle*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1992, p. 110 ; Megan Vaughan, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandre Bourquin, *Histoire des Petits-Blancs des Hauts de La Réunion XIX<sup>e</sup>-début XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Karthala, 2005, p. 64-65.

In *Bé-Maho* it is the heightening pressure of the war and the consequences it has on the Little-White population which reveals the deep fissures that divide the island and its society into discrete territories. As the population is split between Petain and De Gaulle's supporters, rumours of English spies and invasion throw the authorities into panic. They, therefore, decide to destroy the footbridge built above the mountain stream and one of the only passages linking the Little-Whites dwelling with the lower cirque of the island, which increases the journey to the capital by three days. The severed links between the mountains and the coast reveal the precarity and fragility of the Little-Whites settlement and shows how quickly they become adrift from the rest of the island. The parcelling out of the population is moulded on its physical geography "dissected into huge 'cirques' and very deep gorge" hence naturally divided into smaller territories.<sup>1</sup> Vergès has argued that Reunion divisive geography hindered the creation of subversive solidarity amongst the disadvantaged population through restricting travel and communication.<sup>2</sup> Similarly in the novel, the character observes "la géographie labyrinthique de notre pays nous isole beaucoup les uns des autres" (BM, 116) as he understands that the island's natural and social archipelisation requires them to forge links amongst the population to survive.

### **The White Dodo of Mauritius: Franco-Mauritians as an endangered species**

The archipelisation of the island does not guarantee the Franco-Mauritians' survival and dominion; instead, it accentuates the fear which undergirds their island-dwelling in pushing them into an identitarian impasse, represented by their adoption of the Dodo as their emblem. As an endemic species, the Dodo evolved without predators for millions of years on the uninhabited island.<sup>3</sup> Standing as a symbol for Mauritius, the bird appears on the island's coats of arms, coins, and stamps which, Vaughan argues, shows that "Mauritius has created its own native in the form of the Dodo".<sup>4</sup> Thus, when the Franco-Mauritians sing at the Dodo Ball the Dodo anthem, "Debout, dans ce pays qui l'a vu naître, D'être ses fils nous sommes fiers..." (BD, 49), they are claiming the bird as part of their ancestry and with it the title of true natives of the island. Members of the Dodo club, which can only be comprised of descendants of French settlers, see themselves as the rightful and indisputable owners of the Mauritius' territories. However, even if the Dodos were once the king of the islands, what they are most famous for is their rapid and early demise. Although Dodos shared the island with numerous other endemic species now extinct, the undying myth that popular and scientific interest in the Dodos has produced throughout the

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Cheke and Julian Hume, *Lost Land of the Dodo: An ecological History of Mauritius, Reunion and Rodrigues*, London, Bloomsbury, Coll. T & DD POYSER, 2008, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Françoise Vergès, "Indian-Oceanic Creolizations: Processes and Practices of Creolization in reunion Island" in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, Charles Steward (ed.), California, Walnut Creek, CA Left Coast Press, 2007, p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Cheke & Julian Hume, p. 14-15

<sup>4</sup> Megan Vaughan, p. 3



centuries turned them into a symbol of extinction.<sup>1</sup> As one of the first recorded and anthropogenically induced extinctions, the Dodo stands as a reminder of the fragility of living organisms that make up the Earth as well as the power of human destruction. Their fate shows the ambivalence of humanity’s progress:

Symbole écologique de l’imbécilité de l’Homme, incapable de préserver les conditions de sa propre survie et laissant disparaître autour de lui toute la diversité de son environnement, le dodo est un symptôme de notre décadence.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond their right to the land, the Franco-Mauritians’ adoption of the Dodo also illustrates the identitarian impasse they are faced with. Indeed, the community is shown to evolve in a racial enclosure and their refusal to miscegenate considerably reduces their social and marital prospects. Slowly but surely the population decreases, and the rest find themselves trapped together, yet unable to guarantee the group’s survival as their obsession with whiteness endangers them. If Vaughan understands Mauritius’ attachment to the Dodo as being “symptomatic of [an] anxiety over origins and authenticity”, in Dormann’s novel, the Dodo expresses the creolisation conundrum the community faces and the author’s nostalgic account of their demise.

The Franco-Mauritians’ declining power and significance in Mauritius is described through the disappearance of the spatial marker of their dominion, the colonial mansion. Indeed, the problematic construction of concrete buildings around the island is one of the novel’s motifs. This new and ugly architecture seems to grow exponentially and is seen as threatening the Franco-Mauritians’ environment. In Port-Louis these beautiful houses are “en voie de disparition, mangée peu à peu par une architecture délirante” (BD, 41). In describing the architectural colonial heritage as *endangered* the author reminds the reader of the Franco-Mauritians’ predicament and appeals to his sympathy. Moreover, Port-Louis is described as being *eaten* by an exuberant architecture, as the Dodo is said to have been eaten to extinction by the Dutch sailors, thus emphasising the Franco-Mauritians’ helplessness.<sup>3</sup> In the preface of an illustrated book that depicts the Mauritian lifestyle through the role of the verandah, Dormann expresses her love for Mauritius colonial architecture and advances her controversial view on their destruction: “the haste to destroy [colonial houses] also derives – whether consciously or not – from a will to suppress all traces

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<sup>1</sup> For example, The Durrell Conservation trust has a dodo as their logo. In popular culture, The Dodo *for animal people* is also the name of a site whose animal videos are widely shared on the net and whose purpose is to “help make caring about animals a viral cause.” See: <https://www.thedodo.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Richon, *Le Réveil du Dodo*, Rose-Hill, Editions de l’Océan Indien, 2008, p. XII

<sup>3</sup> This is a common myth that Geneviève Dormann herself utilises in the novel. However, Dodos’ extinction is understood to be also due to the aggressive exploitation of their natural habitat, as well as the introduction of continental fauna, most notably rats. For more details see: Anthony Cheke and Julian Hume; Julian P. Hume, “The History of the Dodo *Raphus Cucullatus* and the Penguin of Mauritius” *Historical Biology*, Volume 18, Issue 2, September 2006, 69-93. Accessed Online [13 November 2019] DOI: 10.1080/08912960600639400

of European presence in Mauritius”.<sup>1</sup> As in her novel, Dormann thinks that there is a force at work against the Franco-Mauritians and their legacy which is also the cause of their demise.

The most important symbol of the Franco-Mauritians’ dominion and legacy in the novel is L’Hermione, the Carnoët family house. However, the narrow escape that L’Hermione makes after it is partly destroyed by a cyclone at the end of the novel marks a shift in the family’s status. The house was built in 1837 by Hervé de Carnoët, with the compensation he had received after his slaves were enfranchised after the abolition of slavery (BD, 85). Since then, every Carnoët has left his mark on the house by adding extensions, beautiful pavilions or decadent bathrooms. The house was built on a former coastal military battery to fight against British invasion (BD, 87) and “de part son emplacement historique faisait un peu figure de chateau dans l’île” (BD, 266). The mansion’s appearance and its history make it a symbol of the success the Carnoët family made of a plantation and colonial economy as well as the symbol of the Franco-Mauritians’ power on the island. When the house needs to be partly rebuilt after the cyclone, the lamentation of the owner nostalgically indicates the end of an era and of the Franco-Mauritian omnipotence, because from now on for the Franco-Mauritians “ca ne sera plus pareil” (BD, 442). Thus, despite pointing at the defect of the Franco-Mauritians’ society through their association with the Dodo, Dormann’s novel does not seek to resolve the impasse this society finds itself at, but nostalgically deplores their disappearance.

### **The Little-Whites from the Heights: endogamy and degeneration**

Like the Franco-Mauritians of Dormann’s novel, Agénor’s Little-White community lives in a social and spatial enclosure. However, as the history of this society’s formation indicates, living in the steep and secluded mountains of Reunion is the marker of their identity. The spatial limits which define their community correspond to a physical reality that marks the limits of their genetic pool. Hence, at the beginning of the novel the Little-Whites are presented with the following issue: their seclusion and retraction into an unreachable part of the island led them to three centuries of inbreeding, which caused debilitating physical deformations. Although the islet’s inhabitants often mix with the white people from other islets, their disdain for the other part of the population, most notably the descendants of black slaves, prevents them from reproducing their genetic makeup and perpetuating the community they are so proud of. Their too common practice of incest generates high levels of consanguinity, to the extent that “les pieds-bots, les sourds-muets, les bossus, les arriérés mentaux ne se comptaient plus” (BM, 11). Despite the wide-spread disabilities and malformations, the Little-Whites’ simplicity and conviviality, which transpires through the creolised and at times juvenile language the author employs to describe them, portray them as inoffensive victims of their society’s accumulated ignorance. If Agénor’s Little-Whites share a similar issue with Dormann’s Franco-Mauritians, their language acts as a proof

<sup>1</sup> Geneviève Dormann, preface, *Mauritius Style: life on the Verandah*, Singapore, Archipelago Press, 2002, p. 16.

of their past creolisation which only needs to be renewed. Thus, while the Franco-Mauritians go extinct, like Mauritius endemic fauna, the Little-Whites degenerate, but their mental and physical decline ridicules ideas of racial purity and invite them to reconsider or regenerate their creolisation.

As Nazism racial ideology mirrors the Little-Whites problematic endogamy, in setting her portrayal of this Reunionese community in the context of the Second World War and its violent ethnic cleansing ideology, Agénor emphasises the problematic nature of the Little-Whites’ way of life and of the island’s negative archipelisation. However, the two narrative voices which structure the novel – the creolised language describing the Little-Whites’ community, and the formal French used by Julien, a politically committed Gaullist teacher, in his diary – emphasises the contrasting impact the island’s political turmoil has on these different parts of the society. The structure accentuates the Little-Whites’ exclusion from the political life of island and heightens their heroism when the community decides to help partisans of Free France. It is through Julien’s scandalised voice that the comparison between Nazis and Little-Whites is drawn as revolted by the Nazi’s obsession with purity, he points at its scientific implausibility in denouncing the damages of inbreeding which ravages the Little-Whites’ society. Julien describes them as “une race blanche de près de 300 ans, et pas n’importe laquelle, celles des aristocrates et des seigneurs du grand siècle de Louis XIV, préservée de toute infection, de toute souillure, maintenue dans son état originel” and rebukes the idea of a great white race “il n’a pas réfléchi aux conséquences de l’appauvrissement d’un sang non renouvelé, de la stagnation des cerveaux encrassé et du bilan monstrueux qui en découle” (BM, 179). With the spread of adherence to the Vichy regime and the slow defeat of Hitler’s Germany all the different ethnic and social groups that make up the island start fearing for their life. The metis teacher feels threatened by annihilation, “tous, créoles métissés que nous sommes, (...) les explosifs du monde entier suffiraient-ils pour nous éliminer de la planète?” (BM, 47) and leaves the coast to find refuge in the mountains. The black population, fearing the racist ideology, also has to hide in the islet, and even the Big-Whites dreading the attack of British submarines relocate in the heights. Each part of the society fears for its survival in this new social order of extreme racism, and see their living space shrink, as the whole island retracts and imprisons itself in the mountains. In permeating the islands’ pre-existing fissures, the population’s fear heightens the environment’s fragility and accentuates the sense of threat. The island appears small enough to be erased from maps, its defenses insignificant compared to the brutal power of the empires. However, the precarity of the situation offers the perfect opportunity for the Little-Whites to re-assess their seclusion while proving their valour and kindness.

Unlike *Le Bal du Dodo* which describes with nostalgia the declining power of the Franco-Mauritians and grieves their extinction, *Bé-Maho* is a novel that seeks to overcome the difficulties related to the creolisation of insular societies. As they discover that the reason for the population’s chronic disability is their inbreeding, the Little-Whites are faced with a conundrum: either they accept the loss of part their cultural identity in opening their community to other ethnic groups and regenerating

their genetic pool, or they continue to degenerate until the total demise of their community. The heightening of social tensions brought by the war shows the society at the brink of destruction; in this environment the social and spatial parcellation of communities hinders the population's chance of survival and becomes unsustainable. Forced to shelter some members of the black population who had to flee the plains and coastal regions as a result of Nazi persecution, the Little-Whites are given the chance to overcome their difficulty and renew their obsolete community. If at first the little community is angered by their presence, they soon become sympathetic to their guests' issues and learn from their stories of slavery and displacement. Some of the black people are jazz musicians and at the contact with their music the Little-Whites' society seems to open up to the world "les jazzeurs leur avaient apporté souffle et rythme, leur faisant prendre conscience de la trop grande immobilité de leur existence" (BM, 275). The new music is said to bring them *breath* as if it breathed life back into the community which was slowly degenerating. The Little-Whites had been "inchangé, devenu fantôme, inexistant aux yeux du monde, que la gangrène commençait à gagner" (BM, 276) but transformed at the contact with the black population. While in opening to other ethnic communities the Little-Whites seem to partly overcome the identitarian impasse they found themselves in at the beginning of the novel, Agénor's positive text does not go as far as narrating the biological creolisation of the Little-Whites. Nevertheless, their newly formed friendship ends the novel, and thus acts as a promise of the Little-Whites' future regeneration through a renewal of their creolisation.

## Conclusion

In investigating the imaginary geography depicted in novels representing specific white communities in Mauritius and Reunion, this article sought to demonstrate that the study of texts presenting different sensibilities with regard to creolisation would help to formulate the Mascarenes distinct creolisation paradigm. The analysis of the correlation between social and spatial phenomena through the presentation of the characters' ethnic mapping of the island, as well as the island's archipelisation into ethnic islets has revealed the identitarian tensions which fragment the island's imaginary geography, emphasising its insularity and the vulnerability of the population. Indeed, instead of providing the desired protection of the communities, their social and spatial segregation or communalism traps them into confined spaces, exposing them to the dangers related to inbreeding and isolation to the point of extinction. In presenting endogamous communities, who categorically refuse to open themselves to other ethnic communities, Dormann and Agénor introduce the reader to populations inhabiting Creole islands who yet refuse to creolise biologically. The fear and contempt around miscegenation in each community shows that racial ideologies prevent them from undergoing the process of creolisation, while the impasse each community is faced with demonstrates the necessity of that process. Thus, creolisation becomes for these reluctant groups an inescapable but undesirable reality, a process characterised by the resistance with which people undertake it. This resistance and opposition to creolisation, these contradicting and opposing movements between refusal and

necessity, or hostility and acceptance could thus be a specific characteristic of the South-Western Indian Ocean islands' creolisation created by their communalism.

The archipelisation of the inner space of Mauritius and Reunion and the negative effect it is shown to have on islands and their population suggest the ambivalence of the term usually employed positively in the field of creole studies. The reflection on the fragmented geography of the island of Reunion uttered by one of Agénor's Little-Whites conveys the archipelagic nature of this space but does not necessarily translate into a connection between the discrete islets. Instead, the bonds which weave islands into a positive or interconnected archipelago need to be established and pursued. Thus, the spatial analysis of the texts illustrates the inversion of the ideal of archipelisation. Whereas archipelagic theory such as that conceptualised by Hau'ofa or Benitez-Rojo describe archipelagos as islands connecting outward with other islands, as an outcome of the protective mechanism of white Creole descendants, Mauritius and Reunion are shown to fragment into an internal archipelago.

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