UNRAVELING DICHOTOMIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD

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Abstract

Today's world is predominantly governed by a binary order that has estranged human beings from their natural environment. However, a fundamental paradigm change and ecological vision are increasingly being put forward by intellectuals and artists in order to sustain a viable planet. On the geographical and geostrategic levels, too, the changing force fields are inducing a reassessment of prevailing worldviews. The Indian Ocean is one such case in point. The literature, visual art, and concepts from Mauritius considered in this article problematize the culturally produced attitudes of human beings vis-à-vis their environmental counterparts, and question simplistic binaries such as land/sea, human/nonhuman, etc. They place emphasis on fluidity rather than rootedness, on connection rather than disjunction, and suggest new perspectives and modes of being. Informed mostly by an animistic cosmovision based on yogic notions that date back to pre-Vedic times and have condensed into what may be described as contemporary "Indian thought," these novels and artworks explore alternative relationalities and reframe ontologies whereby environmental empathy, bonding, and interchangeability are expressed. This paper discusses the reconfiguration of the geopolitical framework as well as that of the imaginary and argues that a shift in perception is the key to redefining the relationship between the human and the more-than-human world.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Mauritian Literature, Mauritian Installation Art, Geopolitics, Fluidity, Oneness, Coral Imaginary

In this essay, I explore literary writing and art that converge to rethink binaries between land and sea as well as between the human and the nonhuman realms in the Indian Ocean. Both of these dichotomies translate into issues of rootedness and fluidity that provide an insight into a reworlding strategy that breaks down the othering mechanism. Binary division, which is a so-called "scientific" classificatory procedure, is a rather simplistic mode of ordering reality, while an alternative process may provide the means to capture the infinite potentialities and complexities offered by the interconnectedness of a seamless system. Through a combined ecocritical, cultural studies, and phenomenological perspective, I look firstly at the geopolitical remodeling that Mauritius has undergone before examining the converging discourse emanating from selected pieces of Mauritian literature and visual art. I focus mainly on two twenty-first century Francophone novels, *La vie de Joséphin le fou* [*The Life of Crazy*

Joséphin][1] by Ananda Devi (2003) and *Made in Mauritius* by Amal Sewtohul (2012), and one installation work by Krishna Luchoomun, *Humanising Nature* (2017), while reflecting on the framework of the concept of oneness forged by Malcolm de Chazal (1946) and that of the coral imaginary of Khal Torabully (2002).[2]

Reframing Mauritius: From Island State to Ocean State
In the wake of what has been described as "the scramble for the oceans" (Arvid Pardo quoted in DeLoughrey, 2010, p. 705),[3] in 2012, the Republic of Mauritius petitioned the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to recognize its rights to an Exclusive Economic Zone that comprises a large expanse of the Indian Ocean. It thus recast its status as that of an ocean state.[4]

For the record, the Republic of Mauritius includes the main island of Mauritius, situated in the southwest Indian Ocean, and several other islands and archipelagos scattered across the Indian Ocean, namely Rodrigues, Agaléga, Tromelin, Cargados Carajos, and the Chagos Archipelago. While the area of the main island amounts to 2040 km^2, the country's Exclusive Economic Zone converts its territory to an impressive 2.3 million km^2. In this respect, Mauritius is no longer a small island state, but the nineteenth or twentieth biggest country in the world.[5]

Some thought should be also given to its name, and hence to the common understanding of Mauritius. The country is often considered to be limited to, and is wrongly called, the "island of Mauritius" (especially in French: Ile Maurice) by Mauritians and foreigners alike. This designation favors a conception of Mauritius as an island state rather than a larger and more inclusive entity. In a paper entitled "What is 'Mauritius'?", writer and activist Lindsey Collen illustrates how in the 1960s, i.e., prior to the country's independence, the name "the Mauritius," which was short for "the Mauritius Islands"—analogous with the use of "the Seychelles" to refer to "the Seychelles Islands," was deviously reduced to just "Mauritius." In his novel *Alma*, J.-M.G. Le Clézio, referring to the pre-independence period, writes, "A cette

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[1] All translations are mine.

[2] I will not engage here with the concepts of creolization or hybridity, which have been mostly applied to the study of Ananda Devi's or Sewtohul's writings or of Mauritian literature in general, given that both of these concepts, built as they are on the assumption of separate and "pure" original entities, reactivate the very same essentialist paradigm they set out to condemn.

[3] According to Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2017), this scramble was triggered by the Truman Proclamation of 1945.

[4] This term was used for the first time by Mohamed Munavvar in 1995.

[5] There remain unresolved geopolitical disputes regarding the Chagos Archipelago and Tromelin Island; however, I will not address these in this paper. For further discussion on this issue, see Kumari Issur (2020).

[5] This was the third edition, after Porlwi by Light 1 in 2015 and Porlwi by Light 2 in 2016, of a cultural event designed to revisit and celebrate Port-Louis, the capital city of Mauritius, through art.

[5] Luchoomun also clads his figures in an array of physiognomic characteristics and cultural attire so as to challenge viewers' perceptions of other boundaries, such as gender, race, ethnicity, status, etc.

époque, beaucoup de gens croyaient qu'il y avait plusieurs îles Maurice" [At that time, many people believed that there were several Mauritius islands] (Le Clézio, 2017, p. 36)—both testifying that the country's name was indeed once inclusive of multiple components, and implying, through the use of the term "croyaient" [believed], that the plural was inaccurate. For Collen, the re-engineering of the name into the singular is the result of conscious and unconscious colonial and postcolonial operations that have facilitated, inter alia, the excision of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritian territory. Citing Frantz Fanon, she asserts that the logic of colonialist supremacy has induced a form of psychopathology that has produced a fractured representation of the nation: "This is the kind of statement that Frantz Fanon rightly considered a symptom of the psychopathology produced by colonization" (p. 11). The concept of the ocean state provides the Republic of Mauritius with an opportunity to amend the situation and to mobilize all its islands and archipelagos in an inclusive process. The relationship between the main island and what are still considered its "dependencies" is also impacted by the new designation, given that the Exclusive Economic Zone is calculated as two hundred nautical miles from the baseline of a coastal country. Thus, if Mauritius can aspire to be a major ocean state, it is because of the rights conferred by each and every one of the islands that constitutes its territory. The new appellation also foregrounds its maritime nature, given that the maritime is the most significant fraction of the nation's territory. By establishing itself as an ocean state, Mauritius carves out a new world in the Indian Ocean, which undeniably results in major implications in terms of geostrategy and redefines relationships with other players in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

However, while Mauritius remodels itself as a large ocean state, it does so without renouncing its membership of the SIDS (Small Island Developing States), hence playing it both ways. SIDS are a United Nations cluster of countries facing specific social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities. Of the fifty-seven countries the United Nations has classified as SIDS, Mauritius is considered the seventh most vulnerable in terms of sustainable development. This constant scale shift between a large ocean-state entity and a set of precarious islands not only requires a flexible mindset and political strategy, but is also utterly grounded in fact. For small islands, the danger of sea-level rise resulting from global warming and climate change is bitterly real, hence their uncertain relationship with the ocean, which can turn tragic at any moment.

This permanent threat—this sword of Damocles, as it were—is diversely underscored in literature. In Amal Sewtohul's *Made in Mauritius*, the dream sequence at the beginning of the novel portrays a sea surge that causes flooding of the capital city and displaces the shipping container in which the protagonist Laval was born and where he lives with his parents as a young boy. It floats down the flooded streets of Port-Louis, with Laval feeling very embarrassed that everyone should learn about their precarious living conditions. The following excerpt from Ananda Devi's *La vie de Joséphin le fou* depicts an even more drastic scene:

[…] et puis la mer, elle n'a qu'à sortir la langue un jour, sans trop se fatiguer, elle a qu'à lécher l'île de cette langue paresseuse et en un rien de temps, elle l'aura ramenée là d'où elle vient. Histoire terminée. [… And the sea, it has only to stretch out its tongue, without really exerting itself; it has only to lick the island leisurely, and in no time it would have taken the latter back to where it came from. End of story.] (Devi, 2003, p. 46)

Whether in terms of geostrategy or in terms of imaginary, the interconnection between land and sea is foregrounded. The geopolitical posture aims to consolidate the conjunction of land and sea, but does not overlook the serious threat that the sea and its rising level poses for the land. Devi's perspective on this threat is cynical and extreme, while Sewtohul posits a more assured and smooth association, as we will see later.

Fluidity

Joséphin is a hybrid creature, half-man, half-eel: a half-terrestrial, half-marine creature. He stands at the frontier between two biological communities and between two habitats; he spans the human and animal worlds just as he does land and sea territories. To live in the sea as Joséphin does is assuredly viewed as unnatural, contrary to human nature, by his fellow villagers. The question that therefore arises is how to define "human." Humans have always essentially foregrounded their cognitive faculties to justify their place at the top of the evolutionary hierarchy. Devi's novel contends that eels are a species that is equally endowed with cognition and tremendous memory. In fact, for the protagonist, human beings fail to match the genetic capital of eels:

> […] il y a une intelligence infinie dans les anguilles lorsqu'elles savent qu'il est temps, même nées d'hier, elles sentent en elles que le temps est venu de faire des milliers de kilomètres pour aller pondre loin là-bas, de l'autre côté du monde […] on sait rien de la plupart des choses qui existent autour de nous, plus vives et plus intelligentes que nous, et notre mémoire à nous va pas plus loin qu'hier, et on apprend rien, rien, on se croit plus fort. [Eels have boundless intelligence. They know when it's time: even newly born, they know that the time has come to travel thousands of kilometers to lay their eggs far away, on the other side of the world […] We know nothing of most of the things that surround us—eels are more clever and more astute than us—and our memory does not go further than yesterday, and we learn nothing, nothing; we believe we are superior.] (Devi, 2003, p. 48)

Eels know their long migratory route, from estuaries to faraway oceans, from a freshwater environment to a saltwater one; they know unerringly how to find their reproduction zone, which is incidentally also their death zone. By highlighting these attributes of eels, Devi invites human beings to be less anthropocentric and humbler in their dealings with other species.

Difference is what is considered problematic or scary: what eludes categorization and specific labels threatens the human order. Joséphin is a liminal creature, difficult to grasp (just like eels); he is rejected by humans, who consider him to be either insane or a monster, a "monster" being that which is contrary to the norm—in this context, the human norm. The figure of Joséphin, which is inspired by popular local folklore, is a fantasy that embodies the fear

fostered by otherness. While Joséphin's outright rejection by his human community runs counter to a fluid thought process, i.e. to the openness to difference, he is adopted by aquatic creatures—eels and sharks—at least initially. On first meeting, the eels hug and caress him; however, they become ruthless once Joséphin commits his crime—basically, when his predatory human nature comes to the fore. The reader is thus invited to come to grips with the ambiguous way in which sharks welcome him as if he were one of their own: "tu es l'un des nôtres, me disaient-ils" ["you are one of us," they said] (Devi, 2003, pp. 79–80). They recognize him as a predator, but it is not clear whether it is his human or his animal component that is identified as such. Ultimately, Joséphin remains trapped by his own conflicts and contradictions; he is capable of love, but ends up destroying the objects of his love, Solange and Marlène.

In contrast to Ananda Devi, for whom humans seem to be beyond reform, Amal Sewtohul has a more optimistic stance. In the aforementioned opening dream sequence of *Made in Mauritius*, the scramble to escape the flooding leads those who are stranded in their concrete houses to seek refuge upstairs, while those who live in tin houses climb roofs that collapse under their weight; others still climb up the royal palms lining the emblematic Place d'Armes, the capital city's majestic boulevard, leading to the colonial-style Government House. However, all those who opt for fixedness or rootedness—exemplified by the houses and trees—end up coveting the mobility of the protagonist's family, whose shipping container valiantly sails through the surrounding wreckage. Lack of stability, which was previously a cause of shame for young Laval, turns into a marked asset. Rootlessness proves to be a means of salvation that enables Laval and his family to transcend geography and habitat. To rephrase the title of Carl de Souza's 1996 novel, *La maison qui marchait vers le large* [*The House Moving Seaward*], the one ready to raise anchor and cast off, who shakes off rootedness, holds the key to survival. The vision of serenity and family happiness that lyrically closes this opening sequence of *Made in Mauritius*—the only time Laval experiences such a blissful family moment—discloses the potentialities of adapting to an oceanic environment:

> […] ils étaient en haute mer, remorqués par un des bateaux de pêche taïwanais, le soleil couchant embrasait la mer donnant de belles teintes dorées aux doux vallons des amples vagues calmes, et ses parents et lui, assis sur le toit de leur conteneur, dînaient autour d'un réchaud à gaz sur lequel bouillonnait une marmite pleine de bouillon de crabes. [… They were in the open sea, being towed by one of the Taiwanese fishing boats; the sunset was setting the sea ablaze, lending lovely golden hues to the soft vales of calm, broad waves, and he and his parents, seated on the roof of their container, were having dinner around a gas stove on which a cooking pot was bubbling with crab soup.] (Sewtohul, 2012, pp. 12–13)

Laval's family's container home, a new Noah's Ark saved from the flood—which is itself an emblem of a new world order—is pitched against the rooted houses, tokens of traditional bourgeois security (Issur, 2013). This ark narrative destabilizes existing paradigms and parameters and envisions the (re)establishment of an alternative framework. Moreover, in the prevalent context of material culture taken to the extreme, Sewtohul advocates surplus

stripping. He challenges the predominant attitude toward the notion of possession and contends that human beings belong to the planet, not vice versa, and that they should be able to travel light throughout life. Though a shipping container is by definition a symbol of neoliberal capitalism, the one in which Laval is conceived, born, and ultimately cremated can be viewed in this context as the ultimate metaphor for commodity and minimalism, a sort of snail shell that each individual can carry with him or her and that accounts for the lightest ecological footprint.

Binarisms versus Oneness

In spite of their varying levels of optimism, both Devi's and Sewtohul's novels seem to point toward the erasure of the land/sea binarism, a binarism that results from what one may call a "Western" dualistic thought process. At this point, a reflection on the distinction Gilles Deleuze applies to two types of islands—continental and oceanic islands—may be worthwhile. According to his definition, "Les îles continentales sont des îles accidentelles, des îles dérivées : elles sont séparées d'un continent, nées d'une désarticulation, d'une érosion, d'une fracture, elles survivent à l'engloutissement de ce qui les retenait" [Continental islands arise by accident; they are byproducts: they become separated from a continent; they are born of dislocation, erosion, fragmentation; they outlast the collapse of what was retaining them] (2002, p. 11). Oceanic islands are on the other hand "originaires, essentielles : tantôt elles sont constituées de coraux, […] tantôt elles surgissent d'éruptions sous-marines" [islands of origin, by nature: they are sometimes made of corals […] sometimes they are the result of submarine eruptions]. Despite Deleuze's intention to chart out the differences between the two types of islands, he ends up unwittingly demonstrating that there exists in fact an interweaving of the elements:

> Ces deux sortes d'îles, originaires ou continentales, témoignent d'une opposition profonde entre l'océan et la terre. *Les unes nous rappellent que la mer est sur la terre, profitant du moindre affaissement des structures les plus hautes ; les autres, que la terre est encore là, sous la mer, et rassemble ses forces pour crever la surface.* [These two types of islands, inherent or continental, bear testimony to the deep-rooted contrast between sea and land. *The former reminds us that the sea is also on land, taking advantage of the slightest collapse in the higher structures; the latter indicates that land is still there, under the sea, gathering its strength in order to break the surface.*][6] (Deleuze, 2002, p. 11)

In this example, Deleuze is unable to capture the interconnectedness of the elements regardless of what his observations report; he is so bent on drawing a distinction between the two configurations that he misses what the structures of his consciousness have otherwise noticed, that there is an interplay of sea and land. In fact, Deleuze here foregrounds binary thought: looking for oppositionality, this is exactly what he finds, though all the facts point to the exact contrary. It is all therefore a matter of frame of mind, of how one wishes to perceive one's environment rather than what is determined by the very nature of the intentional object. Deleuze's stance here is characteristic of what we may call the Western binary-classificatory

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[6] The italics are mine.

mind. Despite the concept of geophilosophy, which he formulated in collaboration with Félix Guattari (1980) and which upholds the notions of flow and unity of dynamic material systems, in the above example, he reverts to a simplistic binarism.

Binarism is not the only available framework for grasping and interpreting phenomena. Alternate perspectives can assuredly be nurtured. In *Made in Mauritius*, the episode where the children browse the atlas and reflect on geographical representations and distances is a good example of contrasting outlooks. Looking at a map of Mauritius island, Feisal, whose imagination does not extend beyond the land, considers the ocean the end of the (his) world, a space impossible for him to conceive of straddling. Unsatisfied by the case made by Feisal, his cousin Ayesha opens the atlas to reveal the map of the Indian Ocean, where Mauritius island is no more than a dot and her finger traces a route through the vast ocean to arrive at Australia's west coast (Sewtohul, 2012, p. 169). In her perspective, the ocean is not an unbridgeable space, but one that offers the possibility to create links. This realization fuels her dream to study abroad and spurs her efforts to secure a scholarship, which indeed materializes later on and as a matter of fact enables her to proceed to Australia. The same reality is out there, but the children's respective attitudes make all the difference as to whether the ocean is conceived as a means of connection or a rift (Issur, 2013).

In *La vie de Joséphin le fou*, the same apparent opposition between land and sea resolves itself in the connectedness of sisters Solange and Marlène. The prefixes of their names seem in the first instance to allude to the sun and the ocean (for example, in Spanish, *sol* means "sun" and *mar* "ocean"), especially since the novel underscores the solar nature of Solange: "morceau de soleil cassé dans des yeux d'ange" [fragment of the broken sun in the angel's eyes] (Devi, 2003, p. 73). However, *sol* in French refers to the earth; thus the contrast implicit in the names actually resides in each girl's respective connection with land and sea. This ostensible bipolarity dissolves in turn as the sisters embody two facets of the same reality. Despite all their differences—for example, one is considered to be attractive, the other ugly—together they perform oneness: "c'était un ensemble soudé à faire pleurer leur mère qui pouvait pas les séparer […] c'était une forme double qui devenait parfaite" [… it was a joint body that would make their mother cry, unable to split them up […] it was a double form that became perfect][7] (Devi, 2003, p. 73).

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[7] The Solange-Marlène duo is reminiscent of another well-known sisterly pair in Mauritian literature: Anne and Nadège, the twins in Marie-Thérèse Humbert's *A l'autre bout de moi*, where the contrast between the two resolves itself when Nadège dies and Anne steps in to fill her shoes. This pattern calls to mind the Hindu god Ganesha, who was beheaded by Shiva as a child; an elephant head was subsequently affixed to his anthropomorphic body. "Il n'est un mystère pour personne à Maurice que je prône l'hindouisme. Et la raison en est que l'Inde cherche Dieu dans la vie, parmi les fleurs, les prés, dans les eaux et le feu, sur l'aile de l'oiseau, autant que dans le regard d'un enfant, dans la voix de la femme et la communion humaine" [It is no secret in Mauritius that I advocate Hinduism. And the reason is that India looks for God in life, among flowers, in meadows, in water and fire, on a bird's wing as well as in a child's gaze, in a woman's voice, and in human communion] (de Chazal, 1962, p. 247).

The faculty to divide the world into different units instead of conceiving it as an overall continuity is what Richard Dawkins calls the "discontinuous mind" (1993, p. 81). However, the discontinuous or dualistic mind is not the only possible paradigm by which to make sense of the world in which we live. Malcolm de Chazal, a major twentieth-century Mauritian poet and visionary, upholds the idea of the unity of the biosphere. His family's Rosicrucian and Swedenborgian background allied with his own explorations of Hinduism led him to elaborate the concept of oneness in 1946. Chazal's belief in correspondences between several levels of existence induces him to underscore the unity of the planet. In a short essay titled *L'unisme* [Oneness], he writes: "L'unisme primaire fait de la fleur, du cristal, de l'homme et de la bête des membres d'une même famille de vie à âme universelle" [According to primary oneness, flower, crystal, man, and animal are members of the same family, endowed with a universal soul] (Chazal, 1987, pp. 91–92). It is worth noting that while Dawkins's definition is based on speciesism—i.e., the consideration paid to human beings and animals according to their membership in a particular species—and thus does not include the vegetal and mineral worlds, Chazal's vision is more comprehensive. It is also worth recollecting Malcolm de Chazal's oft-cited visionary experience of the flower that, endowed with the faculty of reciprocation, returns his gaze (see e.g. Joubert, 1991, pp. 140–141). The fact that he assigns human attributes to the plant may be considered problematic; however, in so doing, he acknowledges the plant's reality on an equal basis and dismantles the hierarchy between life forms.

Interconnectedness

The interconnectedness of all forms of existence is likewise explored by Krishna Luchoomun, one of the leading contemporary Mauritian artists, who—during the Porlwi by Nature cultural festival, held in December 2017 in Port-Louis, Mauritius—presented an installation entitled "Humanising Nature" (Figure 1), made up of a series of composite characters in which one segment of each character was human, and the remaining segment was made up of either plant, animal, rock, or coral. In this way, the artist enacted a dialogue between and conflation of humans and their living partners on earth. With this piece of art, he deconstructs anthropocentrism and foregrounds the sharing of the biosphere, as well as the interconnection and interdependence of different life forms.

Figure 1: Krishna Luchoomun's "Humanising Nature" (partial view). Copyright Krishna Luchoomun.

Moreover, the installation was set up to allow visitors to roam among the figures, most of which were static. One of them, however, was a living human being (the artist himself), bearing a pair of antlers on his head (in the background of Figure 1), who playfully chose whether to stay still or to move according to his fancy, often mischievously startling the visitors with an encounter with an alternate life form when they least expected it. The visitors themselves also came to be part of the installation: at first glance, one would not be able to distinguish the exact boundaries of the artist's own work and the mingling of the crowd; in fact, the ongoing flow of visitors made the installation a dynamic and ever-transforming one. The overall postmodern visitor experience generated by the installation was compelling and thought-provoking. By performing a seamless complexity of life forms, the artist pointed toward the dismantling of polarized splits. By allowing the possibility of an "insider's" view of this alternate world, the immersive experience made a deep impact on the imaginary. Furthermore, the participation of the artist unsettled the visitors and mobilized them to reassess the modalities of and potential for the relationship between man and the environment.

I will reflect on one of the installation's composite figures in particular: one with a human body bearing a coral formation in place of a head [Figure 2]. Coral is the living organism that, in tropical seas such as those of Mauritius, gives rise to reefs, which in turn stimulate marine biodiversity. Over the last decades, coral has sustained much damage from pollution, overexploitation of marine resources such as overfishing, climate change, and rising

temperatures, the direct and indirect results of a lack of respect for the ecosystem. As long as the reefs surrounding Mauritius remain healthy, the country will not be subject to erosion caused by sea waves, and is therefore physically secure. The beaches too remain undamaged, thus safeguarding not only the country's beauty, but also its livelihood, especially its sustainable tourism economy. Coral, moreover, introduces the notion of regeneration, as it patiently reconstitutes itself as soon as favorable conditions are achieved. It offers the possibility to rectify the imbalance brought about by humans. Krishna Luchoomun makes a distinction between the head and body of human beings, and it is rather significant that it is the head that is replaced by other elements. The lack of respect for the environment and its unchecked use make human beings act like predators. The human physical needs represented by the body do not account for the overexploitation of their environment; their faculty to think drives them to this, their desires and greed being far greater than their needs. By replacing the human head with coral or plants, Luchoomun might be suggesting that the nonhuman components of nature are more respectful of the balance of species and more sustainable-development friendly.

Figure 2. Krishna Luchoomun's "Humanising Nature" (detail). Copyright Krishna Luchoomun.

There is nevertheless some ambiguity in Luchoomun's title, "Humanising Nature." Does he advocate treating nature with humanism, or literally having nature to step up to lead the world? Or is it the other way around: is he suggesting bringing a greater sense of nature to humans? "Nature" being that which renders humans more humane, bringing out the best in them? One is even tempted to reverse the title and read "naturalizing the human"—i.e., surrendering the

human to nature, through the dismantling of anthropocentrism and the promotion of ecocentrism, as the only way to address the issues and challenges of the contemporary world and to counter the dynamics of environmental degradation. Like the discourse on the eel's tremendous memory in Devi's novel, Luchoomun's artwork questions human exceptionalism and the legitimacy of human beings to be considered the most intelligent species or the height of evolution. It takes human beings down from the pedestal where they have positioned themselves and contends that they are part and parcel of nature and not some sort of other in nature.

Luchoomun's installation is also another way to approach the coral imaginary put forward by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully, who writes: "The coral can be both soft, and hard, it can be found in two states, and it is traversed by currents, continuously open to new thoughts and systems. It is a living body with elements which are both vulnerable and solid, it is a symbol of the fluidity of relationships and influences" (Carter & Torabully, 2002, p. 152). Coral, which can be both an invertebrate and a mineral, indeed points toward the fluidity of being— in this instance, between what have traditionally been perceived as antagonistic categories, such as land versus sea or human versus nonhuman. This overarching fluidity is also illustrated by Hindi-language Mauritian writer Abhimanyu Unnuth in his novel *Lal Pasina*. In a short preamble, Unnuth recounts the mythical creation of Mauritius island through the metamorphosis of different components of nature, including human beings. His narrative recounts how lava from an oceanic volcano eruption mingled with the ocean water and the flesh and blood of two Buddhist monks who had ventured into the southwest Indian Ocean, giving rise to contemporary Mauritius. Though Unnuth's myth is steeped in an ethnocentric identity claim, it nonetheless upholds the interchangeability of human and other natural matter. In Devi's novels, the sea creatures acknowledge that they are of the same origin and essence as Joséphin: "on se respecte, nus ou pas, on est pareils, enfants du même corps, enfants de la même mer" [we respect each other, whether naked or not; we are alike, children of the same flesh, children of the same sea] (Devi, 2003, p. 59). This quotation evokes the Darwinian theory of evolution according to which life proceeded from the primordial ocean, underscoring the common denominators between sea creatures and human beings and the respect that is mutually due. The reference also suggests, in a subtle manner, that further evolution might take human beings back to the sea, in the manner of Joséphin.

The blurring of boundaries between humans and other life forms (Devi, Luchoomun, Unnuth, and de Chazal), between the terrestrial and the aquatic environments (Devi and Sewtohul), and between the mineral and invertebrate realms (Torabully) all reveal converging ideological stances. These postures are in turn informed by the cultural, religious, and life experiences of the artists. While Khal draws on his observation of the aquatic world to devise his "coral imaginary," which highlights his belief in a nonessentialist world, Devi, Luchoomun, Sewtohul, and Unnuth—raised in the Hindu faith, which is underpinned by yogic philosophy—are all conversant with the concept of samsara, which upholds the cyclicity of existence and foregrounds the idea of a continuum between all forms of matter. Likewise,

Malcolm de Chazal's concept of oneness is at least partly inspired by Hinduism, as he openly professes his adherence to its values and thought system. The Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedānta—*advaita* literally meaning "non-duality"—further contends that phenomenal reality may be manifold, but is governed by the same basic principle. At the molecular level, all matter, animate and inanimate, inclusive of humans, is involved in an ongoing recycling process, ergo the biosphere is inextricably interconnected. The concept of *anitya* in Hinduism or *anicca* in Buddhism—which refers to the impermanence of forms, according to which the whole Logos is subject to aging, decay, death, and renewal—underlies Luchoomun's artwork as well as Unnuth's narrative. Elementary particles constantly disassemble and assemble to form new realities in dynamic systems. This permanent "becoming-world" does not differentiate between the organic and nonorganic realms. In fact, according to several Indian religions, the distinction between the organic and the nonorganic does not apply, as all matter is imbued with sentience, though to varying degrees. Needless to say, this cosmovision fundamentally displaces standard Western ontology and its oppositional logic, which dominates the contemporary world's widespread belief system and accounts for human dominion over the environment.

Conclusion

The Mauritian contemporary writers, thinkers, and artist whose works are under consideration in this essay transcend the prevailing binary thought and draw up the convergent aesthetics of a continuum. These standpoints in turn tally with new ways of geographical thinking by political leaders and strategists, who have forged the concept of the ocean state, and open up new avenues of (re)worlding.

Literary and artistic works alike lead us to reflect on the dichotomy between humankind and the environment, which has given rise to a hegemonic relationship. The disjunctive approach is also prevalent in relation to other components, especially between the land and water realms. The paradigm of the concrete versus the fluid, in which the concrete is the domain of the human and the fluid is constituted as the other, is giving way to a merging of the two. Mauritius as a country has always been multifarious, as testified by its former name, the Mauritius Islands. The multi-insular nation does not refute its new identity as an ocean state, as it is both insular and oceanic. But while the former perspective was centered on its terrestrial component, the concept of the ocean state has not only incorporated the state's maritime dimension, but has given it preeminence—which is only appropriate, as its oceanic area far exceeds that of the islands it comprises.

Thoughts mold the world in which human beings live. The way they organize, classify, and otherize their surroundings contributes to their experience of reality. Fragmented space can be considered the direct result of fragmented thought. On the other hand, a nondualistic or complementary stand brings about unity rather than separation. One's everyday individual as well as collective agency translates into ongoing change. The solutions provided for the challenges of today's world in turn redesign the world. The cultural and artistic production of Mauritius unlocks alternative modes of being, as well as the possibilities offered by the notions of fluidity and empathy between the mineral, vegetal, animal, and human worlds.

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