Banaras in the Indian Ocean: Circulating, Connecting and Creolizing Island Stories

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What links Bernardin de Saint Pierre's 1788 novel about Isle de France, *Paul et Virginie,* with V.S. Naipaul's 1972 piece, *An overcrowded Barracoon*? What is common to Joseph Conrad's 1910 novella, *A Smile of Fortune,* and tourist brochures of La Grande Baie? What brings together the story of the ruins of Babylon and the Ghats of the Ganges? Actually, these seemingly disjointed narratives make up a vast library of inter-connecting Indian Ocean island stories. In this study I will use the image of 'Banaras' as the locus of an inter-textual reading exercise connecting the literary spaces of Mauritian writer and filmmaker Barlen Pyamootoo with other stories like those mentioned above. Pyamootoo's literary universe reveals to us the dynamic, multilayered and polyphonic nature of Indian Ocean island cultures.

According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that Banaras sits at the centre of the earth and gathers together the whole of the sacred universe in a single symbolic circle or *mandala.* It is also believed that the city sits above the earth as a crossing place (*teerth*) between this world and the far shore of the transcendent Brahman (Eck 1982). As a place that is both at the centre of the earth and sitting above the Earth, as a crossing place between worlds, and as a place of creation, Banaras can be read as a symbolic locus of transoceanic circulations and connections at the core of the thousands of stories that make up the Indian Ocean. Salman Rushdie in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* uses the image of the ocean as a perfect metaphor for world fictions. He notes that:

> The Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and to become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive. (Rushdie 1990: 71–72)

Like Rushdie's *Sea of Stories*, Barlen Pyamootoo's literary universe, revolving around the historical realities and the cultural symbolism that define 'Banaras,' brings home to us the fluid inter-connectedness of oceans, islands, nations, peoples, commodities and cultures. I argue that these circulating, connecting and hybrid stories constitute the 'cultural space' of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Pyamootoo's first novel, *Bénarès* (1999), is set in contemporary Mauritius. The narrator and his friends, who belong to the village named Bénarès in Mauritius, go to Port Louis city in search of prostitutes for a night. The story recounts their journey back from the city to the far interior of the island where their village is situated. Embedded in this return journey is the narrator's fabricated story of his own travel to the ancient Indian city of Banaras. Pyamootoo's second novel, *Le tour de Babylone* (2002), recounts the voyage of the narrator to the ancient city of Babylon in Iraq towards the end of Saddam Hussein's reign.[1] The 'tall tapering spires that whittle away at the sky' (92) seem to come straight out of the Bible yet they are hauntingly part of a war-torn country. Despite the geographical and historical differences, the Middle Eastern city 'reduced to its memories' and its people who are 'as beautiful as its ruins' remind the narrator of his compatriots in the 'steep' streets of his own Mauritian village (114). Babylon and Banaras in both books are thus described as mythical symbols that have survived the violence and desolation of present times. The spires of Babylon, the temple towers of the Indian city of Banaras, and the chimney of the abandoned sugar mill factory in the Mauritian village of Bénarès connect this inter-textual universe through the visual image of verticality.

While the literary worlds of *Bénarès* and *Le tour de Babylone* are linked through the image of the tower, Banaras in colonial India in Pyamootoo's autobiographical text *Salogi's* (2008) generates a metaphor of horizontality in the form of multiple geographical displacements which are woven into the tapestry of Salogi's life. *Salogi's* is centred on the life and experiences of the author's mother, Salogi, who migrated to France in 1972 to be a factory worker in Strasbourg in order to raise her struggling

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[1] Page numbers refer to the English translation, *Benares and In Babylon* (2004) unless mentioned otherwise. *Salogi's* has not been translated into English. All translations from this text are mine.

family in Mauritius. Over a period of time, she was able to sponsor all her children to France where they not only completed their education but also found work. Salogi belongs to a family of exiles—her maternal grandmother had come from the Indian city of Banaras, like many other indentured labourers brought in by the British from various parts of colonial India to work on the sugar plantations of Mauritius in the nineteenth century. Interwoven thus into the personal narrative of Salogi is the collective history of the movements of people across the Indian Ocean. Through the juxtaposition of the trope of Banaras in Pyamootoo's textual universe, and by inter-connection with other Indian Ocean narratives, we find ourselves enticed into a library of connecting and creolizing[2] stories of the 'Grand Océan' as Michel Racault calls it in his 2007 study of travellers in the Indian Ocean entitled *Mémoires du grand océan: des relations de voyages aux littératures francophones de l'océan indien.*

Three main streams of stories seem to appear around Banaras in Pyamootoo's 'Grand Océan': the story of eternity, the story of global tourism, and the story of language. The most prominent of the three appears to be the tale of eternity. As Mark Twain (1897) puts it, Banaras, the city, is 'older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together.' It was the capital of the kingdom of Kasi around 500 BCE and the commercial centre for muslin and silk. The *Vedas* refer to the city as Kasi or Kashi, 'the luminous one,' as an allusion to the city's historical status as a centre of learning, literature, and culture. The city, also known as Varanasi in Sanskrit, is located in the eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh, along the left bank of the Ganges river. Banaras has the holy shrine of Lord Kashi Vishwanath (a manifestation of the Hindu God Shiva), and also one of the twelve sacred Jyotirlingas of Shiva. Hindus at home and in the diaspora believe that bathing in the Ganges and dying in Kashi ensures release of a person's soul from the cycle of its transmigrations.

On the Hindu dominated island of Mauritius,[3] the myth of Banaras carries a very significant cultural currency. The social progress of the Indian community during the colonial era (Hazareesingh 1966), the economic miracle achieved by the island state since independence and the development of Hindu political power have combined to

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[2] Ulf Hannerz argues that 'this world of movement and mixture is a world in creolisation' (quoted in Stewart 2007: 2). See the concluding section of this essay for a brief discussion on creolization that provides a more nuanced explanation of this concept.
[3] 52 percent of the Mauritian population is made up of Hindus (Eisenlohr 2006).

form the powerful national narrative of 'coolie' romance (Ravi 2007). The Hindu Mauritians believe that the group's political pre-eminence and their social success have been primarily due to their steadfast adherence to ancestral traditions and cultures. What is perceived as ancestral culture is also linked to the collective memory of suffering under conditions of indenture and displacement in colonial Mauritius. Institutionalizing religious practices and creating an ethnicized discourse of difference have contributed to establishing a group identity drawing on the moral superiority of ancestral traditions. In this context the pilgrimage undertaken by Mauritians to Ganga Talao /Grand Bassin represents the local re-enactment of an important Hindu pilgrimage to the most prominent of the sacred sites along the river Ganges, 'Kashi.' As a large number of Hindus in Mauritius come from eastern Uttar Pradesh around the region of Banaras, the site itself, notes Eisenlohr (2007), stands in iconic relation to the religious topography of the pilgrimage centre of Banaras. Grand Bassin, with its Ghats and its two main temples dedicated to the worship of Shiva, can be seen as the extension of the sacred Ganges river. As Eisenlohr points out (2007: 249) the annual movement of Mauritians from all over the island to Ganga Talo during the Mahasivarathri celebrations embodies a 'diasporic orientation' towards the idea of an eternal Hindu homeland. It is through this ritualization of a diasporic identity that the story of Banaras, a Hindu narrative of eternity, is written into the account of Hindu nationalism in Mauritius. As pointed out in recent studies, this story of Banaras, as the foundational narrative of 'coolie romance,' has no place for other displaced peoples, like the Creole descendants of African and Malagasy slaves who have also played a crucial role in the story of modern Mauritius.[4] These stifled voices and muted accounts have found a place in Pyamootoo's literary 'Grand Océan' of stories. In this world, the story of Banaras has multiple trajectories: sometimes it flows into the dominant story of eternity, at times it intersects with the story of diasporic orientation and at times it changes its orientation and recreates itself completely, thus demonstrating that while the narrative of Banaras continues to vehicle the story of ancestral belonging in Mauritius it is not the only story circulating in the Indian Ocean.

We note that in *Le tour de Babylone* (*tour* means both 'tower' and 'tour' in French) it is the dictionary and not a religious text that is valorised as the window, which opens the

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[4] See Boswell (2006), Prabhu (2005), and Lionnet (2003) for studies on marginalization of Creoles in Mauritius.

world of knowledge to the narrator and the desire to experience eternity.

> I set off again, remembering the first photo I saw of Babylon, it was in an old dictionary. I shut myself in my room and spent a long time studying the ruins divested of their layers of earth and the black stones laid flat, in a line, that was when I promised myself I will see the scale of the whole plain. (99)

The narrator's journey to the Middle Eastern city of eternity brings him face to face with the immanence of destruction and desolation. At first the narrator/tourist finds himself confronted by the images of a global tourism industry that have transformed the palaces and the ruins of the ancient city into a sort of film set that seems to come out of 'Cinecittà.' Very soon, his mind is assaulted by the material realities of war, poverty and desolation in Saddam's Iraq. Even if war-torn Iraq is geographically far removed from the tiny struggling postcolonial island state of Mauritius, the narrator, at every point in his journey to Babylon, is reminded of the same kind of desolation, stillness and abandonment that describe his own village, a victim of Mauritian economic modernity. The journey to Babylon becomes transformed into a journey of self-discovery where Babylon replaces Banaras as the mythological city of self-realisation. This travelogue re-orients the narrative of Mauritian identity, away from a Hindu-homeland return odyssey, outwards towards the origins of another civilization whose iconic tower suggests the idea of dispersion, as opposed to the notion of return evoked by the religious geography of Banaras. Pyamootoo's story of a search for identity runs counter to the Hindu Mauritian story of 'coolie' nationalism (Ravi 2007).

This creolized story of pilgrimage to Babylon also runs parallel and subverts the Hindu-Hindi narrative on the island. Hindu activists in Mauritius have sought to ethnicize language by promoting Hindi as the emblematic core of a pure Hindu identity in Mauritius (Eisenlohr 2007)**.** Pyamootoo's story of Babylon, which merges with *Salogi's,* exposes yet another 'absent motif' in the national narrative. Even before the English administrators started bringing in the first indentured labourers, Indians were already present on the island. The first Indian migrants (slaves and free artisans) were, in fact, brought to the island by La Bourdonnais when he became Governor in 1738 (Vaughan 2006). These Indians came from the region of Pondicherry in South India. The oldest temple in Mauritius is a temple whose architecture and practices are inspired by South Indian temple traditions. In *Salogi's* we learn that Salogi's maternal grandmother came from Banaras, but the author's only reference to religious practices and chants are Tamil,

which is a South Indian language and associated with Mouraga worship that is popular in South India amongst Dravidian communities. The official Hindi-Hindu narrative is elitist and excludes descendants of Tamil settlers, many of whom intermarried with African Creoles and converted to Christianity while still retaining Hindu practices (Eriksen 1990). In Pyamootoo's 'Grand Océan,' the story of Banaras flows along British and French colonial histories of indenture and slavery and exposes the multiple origins of the populations that migrated from India to Mauritius.

At the end of his voyage the narrator in *Le tour de Babylone,* much like the Hindu pilgrims in the eternal city of Kasi, experiences a luminous epiphany. As he bids goodbye, he tells a local girl, Salma: 'We call (the sun), sun, but the street lamps we call them first lights' (Mais les réverbères, on les appelle des barres du jour) (*Le tour de Babylone*: 106) The street lamps come on at night but in *Kreol Morisyen* (Mauritian Creole) they are called 'barres du jour,' or first lights of dawn. In this creolizing instance the search for the eternal is rooted in the immanent and a voice (in Mauritian Creole) is given to those absent from the Hindu-Mauritian narrative of ethno-linguistic belonging. As Aumeerally (2005a) points out 'in Mauritius, national identity has also been significantly realigned around the concept of a reinvigorated global Asian diasporic kinship. The Chinese and the Indian legacies are conflated into a syncretic combination of capitalist ideology and traditional value-system.' While the Franco-Mauritian population is not alienated from this writing of nation because of their uncontested economic superiority, the African mixed-race Creoles find themselves written out of this postcolonial configuration of nation. The narrator's story of his tour of Babylon offers the possibility, through language, to those dispersed, like the African and mixed-race Creoles who can lay no claim to geo-specific ancestral roots, to narrate a story of their own.

At another level the creolized pilgrim's tale of a voyage to Babylon merges with the narrator's story of global tourism and economic transformation in the novel, *Bénarès***.** Modernity in Mauritius reproduces colonial images of the island as the exotic but docile world of *Paul et Virginie*, thus performing the perfect blend of what Aumeerally (2005a) calls 'diasporic exoticism and vestiges of colonial conservatism.' The Mauritian tourism industry, marketing itself as 'a colonial fantasy' of palm beaches, blue lagoons and Creole cuisine, has become the greatest money-spinner in this tropical paradise. In

Bénarès, the journey from Port Louis to the lost and abandoned village of Bénarès flows counter to this tourist brochure narrative of tropical paradise and the nationalist romance of economic miracle. In 1910, Joseph Conrad published his novella *The Smile of Fortune* (probably inspired by the famous writer's own trip to the island in 1888), which narrates the story of a young captain who has come to trade in Port Louis. On sighting the island port, the captain exclaims:

> Ah! 'These commercial interests—spoiling the finest life under the sun. Why must the sea be used for trade—and for war as well? Why kill and traffic on it, pursuing selfish aims of no great importance after all? It would have been so much nicer just to sail about with here and there a port and a bit of land to stretch one's legs on, buy a few books and get a change of cooking for a while. But, living in a world more or less homicidal and desperately mercantile, it was plainly my duty to make the best of its opportunities. (1910 online)

Conrad's novella about Pearl (that is how he names Mauritius in this narrative) begins by decrying the homicidal and mercantile world of the Indian Ocean, ignoring that it was maritime commerce that had brought the Europeans to these parts and which had exposed the island as a potential place for experiencing 'the finest life under the sun.' Conrad paints a bleak picture of an old and parochial French society in decline but, despite his criticism of the commercialization of the Indian Ocean, he does not make a single mention in the novella of the thousands of Indians and descendants of Africans without whom the island and the Ocean would not have become a commercial hub at the beginning of the twentieth century.

To some extent Conrad's novella foreshadows Naipaul's (1972) caustic description of the island's over-crowdedness. Pyamootoo's story of *Bénarès* inverts these narratives some one hundred years later. His story of 'Pearl' produces an image of the tropical paradise without the palm trees, the beaches and the sea. The 'desperately mercantile' bustle of the colonial port in an 'overcrowded Barracoon' is replaced by land images of immobility and vastness. A 'sea' of never-ending cane fields that replaces the ocean and its omnipresence in Conrad' story ironically heralds its imminent disappearance from the Mauritian landscape as the island advances rapidly on the route to economic diversification. Bénarès is a remote village on the island of Mauritius, a village that was once alive and prosperous before many sugarcane mills shut down in the 1970s, after independence. Deprived of their source of livelihood, most of the villagers have left in search of jobs elsewhere and the village has 'become an island cut off from the world' (1999: 29). Ironically, the owners, having benefitted from their own economic

diversification policies, have renovated the now defunct chimney as a reminder of their glorious past. The chimney thus signals the death of an era and the birth of modern and globalized Mauritius. In what can be seen as an ironic twist to the story of the Mauritian economic miracle of the 1980s and 90s, the villagers who have lost their jobs in the sugarcane fields and have had to find alternate sources of income can now afford to consume the pleasures offered by a growing prostitution industry that has accompanied the urbanization of modern Mauritius. Thus we find that running parallel to the tourist brochure narrative and the story of economic boom is the story of prostitution and ennui in the village of Bénarès. The prostitutes in Pyamootoo's story of Bénarès are first and foremost women forced into the trade, before they are Creoles or Hindus. Nevertheless, the text, instead of emphasizing the social tragedy, underscores the moments of existential happiness lived by the four young people as they ride together into the heart of their island. Such a writing of nation intersects and subverts the ethno-linguistic reading of nation symbolized by the 'Hindu' story of Banaras. It also flows against circulating stories of progress (metaphorically suggested by the reverse journey from Port Louis to the Mauritian interior where the capital city of Port Louis symbolizes the gateway opening to the world and the key to global progress in the island nation).

The double bind of the story of modernisation is paralleled in the story of reciprocal perspectives described in the narrator's own fictitious journey to the Indian city of Banaras. On one hand, the 'tall story' attests to the irony of the diasporic return narrative and, on the other hand, it introduces another angle by giving voice to the people of Banaras in India. In this invented story, the people in the Indian city of Banaras are driven by curiosity to know what a place with the same name, Banaras, in another part of the world would look like. Most stories of indenture forget to insert the narratives of those left behind. In the narrator's story, the abandoned houses and people of the Mauritian village are compared to the physical condition of those who have come to the sacred Indian city to die:

> In my mind's eye I saw the Ganges and the sandalwood and wilted flowers floating slowly down the river, and then some faces of the people who kneel all day in prayer, and the faces of the dying who sleep on the streets when they have been thrown out of old people's homes because they are the wrong caste, and the clothes they wear when they're dead, the same as those of the children who sell garlands and who hassle pilgrims and tourists for a few rupees. (Pyamootoo 2004: 48).

While the 'mind's eye' of the narrator in *Bénarès* is drawn towards the images of desolation and destitution, the author/narrator in *Salogi's* imagines the city like 'le

sésame d'un monde evanescent' (130, 'the key to the ephemeral'). In Pyamootoo's literary 'Grand Océan,' the image of the ephemeral and enchantment intersects with images of poverty and misery that in turn resonate with the stories of contemporary Babylon where romantic images of eternity have been replaced by filth, rubble and wretchedness: 'The people say they are too poor to be able to pay teachers so their children hang around the streets and play catch with stones. And the streets are filthy they must look like pools of paraffin when it rains, with all leftovers floating about' (100).

Yet these intersecting stories of desolation flow paradoxically into the story of desire for a mystical union with the universe. Like the tour of Babylon, the fictitious tourist's tour of modern Banaras in India becomes yet another creolized version of the story of eternity set in the mythical city of Kasi:

> Every time we saw each other he'd tell me he'd never have thought it, that there could be another Banaras, and it unnerved him, there being two places with the same name that are so far apart, so different, and he felt proud to live in one of them, maybe because it gave him the feeling of opening up to the world, of becoming part of some network which must have seemed pretty vast and mysterious, which he'd never suspected existed until then … (Pyamootoo 2004: 49)

Banaras, in this literary universe, is a symbolic locus of transcultural and transoceanic connections. As is apparent in the quotation above, the Hindu myth of creation and salvation encapsulated in the symbolism of Banaras is translated into a universal myth of connection. This spiritual connection transcends oceans, territories and civilizations. As noted earlier, the narrator in *Le tour de Babylone,* when confronted with the images of war and poverty in Babylon, is at first despairing: ' I am so lost in my thoughts wondering whether this trip to Babylon means anything?' (Pyamootoo 2004: 87). However it is through his narration of the ruins of Babylon, the description of urchins, street musicians, fairs, prostitutes, gypsies, shopkeepers and violence, that he finds a connection with his own village and eventually his sense of self.

In Pyamootoo's literary 'Grand Océan,' the story of Banaras is not just a creolized story of eternity, it is also the social history of plural language affiliations in Mauritius. In *Salogi's* (2008: 81), the author/narrator declares that he is fortunate that he has been fed on so many different languages (Creole, French, English, Bhojpuri, Tamil, Chinese). What he refers to as his 'babil' (2008: 82) or his babble is phonetically close to Babel (both in French and in English), the biblical tower that in turn refers us to the myth of

God's punishment of man through the creation of plural tongues.[5] But in Pyamootoo's 'language,' 'babil' is not just babble (*babillage*) or 'confused medley of sounds'—it is a conscious play with different words and accents of the different languages spoken and heard on the island, transforming his language into a source of pride and not a babelish (*babélique*) source of angst or disarray.

If we take into consideration the stream metaphor suggested by the associated verb, *babiller* in French, [6] Pyamootoo's story 'flows' against the Babel myth of linguistic confusion. The story of language plurality in Mauritius is the story of engineered harmony and not of incomprehensible disunity. Much like the author's choice of title, *Salogi's* (meaning Salogi's world) for his Francophone novel, which the author says he retained both for its semantic precision and its phonetic attractiveness, Mauritius has a very complex story of language usage. Although English, as the legacy of British colonial rule until 1968, is the official language of the Mauritian state, it is interesting to note that it is a bureaucratic medium but not a spoken language there. On the other hand, French is the primary linguistic medium on television, on radio and in the print media. Franco-Mauritians and elite mixed-race Creoles, who dominate the private sector economy and the print media, also speak French. The dominant vernacular language of Mauritius is 'Kreol Morisyen.' Mauritian Bhojpuri is also spoken by roughly one-quarter of the population. While Hindi is not a daily spoken language in Mauritius, it is considered purer than Bhojpuri that has many Creole words. Hindu activists seeking to ethnicize language promote Hindi as the emblematic core of a pure Hindu identity in Mauritius (Eisenlohr 2007: 59–80). As shown earlier, it is through the medium of Hindi that the pilgrimage to Ganga Talao and the establishment of the iconic geography of pilgrimage to Banaras is realized.

Thus in Pyamootoo's literary world, we keep travelling between several 'story streams' of Banaras in different languages; between Kasi, the mythical city described in Sanskrit

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[5] *Babel* refers to 'The city and tower, of which the attempted construction is described in *Genesis* xi, where the confusion of languages is said to have taken place; *hence* **a.** a lofty structure; **b.** a visionary scheme.' It also means 'a confused turbulent medley of sounds.' *Babelish* means 'Of the nature of a babel, noisily confused' (OED online). In French, it refers to similar meanings: 'Une tour de Babel, une Babel: lieu où, tout le monde parlant à la fois, personne ne peut s'entendre. Par ext. Assemblée formant une masse bruyante, disparate et confuse. Un babél-Désordre, confusion (en matière de langage)' (Grand Robert online).

[6] 'Bruit léger et continu comparé à celui d'une voix qui babille. Le babil d'une source, d'un ruisseau. Murmure' (Grand Robert online). 'Light and continuous noise like that of a babbling sound. The babble of a stream. Murmur' (My translation).

texts; Banaras, the colonial city; Varanasi, the post-national city; Bénarès, the Mauritian village, in *Bénarès* (written in French and translated into English) and 'Bénarès' a Franco-Mauritian cinematographic venture, written and directed by Pyamootoo in Mauritian Creole and now available on the global market with French sub-titles.[7] One could say that in Pyamootoo's literary ocean, it is through the orthographical reformulation of Banaras as 'Bénarès' that the story of eternity takes a life of its own as it transcends religion, ethnicity and nation to circulate as the creolized version of the pilgrimage story. At one level, the success of Francophone authors of Mauritian origin in Mauritius and in the wider Francophone world attests to the enduring affiliation that people in Mauritius have for the French language as medium of creative activity and prestige. At another level, the story of Salogi's economic migration to France from a struggling post-independent Mauritius, leading to the author's eventual entry into the French publishing and cinematographic industry, re-orients and diversifies the nationalist story of Hindu labour migration to Mauritius (Salogi's ancestors came from Banaras in India). Salogi's story translates the transformation of modern Mauritius (symbolized here by the author) into a leading economic mediator between Asia/Africa and Europe and showcases the island's entry into the era of high globalisation.

The story of 'Bénarès' is thus also the continuing story of Île de France. Almost 300 years after Dufresne hoisted the French flag on this island in the Indian Ocean and named it Isle de France, words in the French language have travelled from the utterances of the first French settlers via its island version which has now evolved into 'Mauritian Creole' or 'Kreol Morisyen' (infused over several centuries with Malagasy, African and Indian words). The original and creolized versions of French are now woven into Mauritian English, via the official documents of the colonial administration, newspapers and now TV, and Internet. These word streams merge, divide, and rejoin with other word streams to recreate multiple stories of *mauricianité* (Mauritianness) in their own 'babil.'

In these continuing stories of Isle de France contained in Pyamootoo's literary ocean, what seems to be conspicuously missing, at first glance, is the eighteenth century tale of *Paul et Virginie* considered in the dominant Francophone retelling of Mauritius as the

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[7] For a comparative discussion of the film and the novel, see Ravi (2010).

foundational myth of Mauritian identity[8]. A careful re-examination, however, shows that the myth is present in multiple creolized instances. Salogi's diary transcribes the voice of a 'Virginia' who, unlike her famous Creole predecessor, opts to stay behind in France and contribute to her own economic independence. On the other hand, the story of the subtle but growing affection of the young Mayi for Meena, the prostitute, as they advance through miles of cane fields towards the village of Bénarès, replays the *Paul and Virginia* myth of forbidden tropical romance. The ocean as the driving metaphor of tragedy, as present in *Paul et Virginie,* is absent in both creolizing instances.

The concept of creolization can be 'fascinating, fertile and potentially very confusing' as Charles Stewart (2007: 3) notes. The word 'creole,' coined during the early years of European colonialism, is rooted in the specific histories and social conditions of slavery in island plantation cultures. Historians, linguists and anthropologists have approached the term from different disciplinary angles to study the history, ethnography and theory of language and cultural interactions in New World societies. The Caribbean Creole poet, Edouard Glissant, in *Le discours antillais* (1981), stressing the fluid, unending nature of cultural contacts and the unpredictable and creative nature of such contacts, generalizes the Caribbean experience to cover all global processes of cultural exchanges. In *Amarres—créolisations india-océanes* (2005), Vergès and Marimoutou apply the concept of creolization to the Indian Ocean experience. Vergès explains that: 'Creolization … to borrow an image familiar to islanders, as the endless movement of waves on the island's coasts bringing new elements while taking away old elements. The line of the coast slowly changed, erosion takes its toll, but the ocean with its movements adds new deposits' (Vergès 2007: 137).

This paradigm of creolization suggests a problematic of loss and appropriation and includes the forgetting of origins which survive only 'as reconstructed and transformed.' Vergès's consideration of Indian Oceanic creolizations refers to processes and practices of contact between cultures, peoples, and ethnicities in Réunion and in the Caribbean but does not include Mauritius. This is hardly surprising, since the concept of creolization cannot be used as a blanket term to describe all cultural processes in Mauritius. Historically both Indian Ocean islands have experienced similar processes of cultural contact—they are islands with no indigenous populations that have encountered

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[8] See 'Drifting Pauls and Wandering Virginias' in Ravi (2007).

Arab trade, colonization, slave and indenture economies, European modernities, and which have now moved into a decolonized, global world. Réunion is still a French department but Mauritius is now an independent republic. While the term Creole in Réunion and in the Caribbean world refers both to the linguistic and to the dominant ethnicity produced on the islands as a result of contacts between peoples, languages and practices, in Mauritius the word Creole refers to the language and to a specific ethnic group that is predominantly Catholic and that have African, Malagasy or mixed-race origins (Bowman 1991; Eriksen 1990). Secular state legislations and assimilationist policies have been more favourable to the production of cultural forms that are widely and self-consciously mixed on the island of Réunion. On the other hand, a British colonial administration with a less interventionist approach to cultural issues and a national policy of multiculturalism have meant that a standardized 'Creole culture' associated with the entire population is not present in Mauritius. As a matter of fact, in Mauritius, a point identified by Eriksen (2007), identity is articulated as the tension between multiculturalism (based on the politics of recognition of difference) on one hand, and on the other, creolization as the self conscious and dynamic mix of symbols in a cultural space of displacement and loss. Such a reading allows us to read cultural contact in terms of creolizing instances, as moments in a space-time continuum where processes of creolization co-exist with processes of de-creolization and separation.

My reading of the circulation of the cultural symbol of Banaras in Pyamootoo's literary 'Grand Océan' shows that mixing, creolizing, separating, containing, de-creolizing and re-creolizing are instances that coexist in tension to produce Mauritian subjectivities. The road story of the narrator in *Bénarès* moves from Bénarès to Port Louis passing through the island towns of Souillac and Curepipe. It intersects with the myth of Varanasi through the creolized/fabricated tale of the narrator which in turn merges with the tale of pilgrimage to Babylon, and all these stories pour into the story of Salogi, which travels from Banaras in British India, to Curepipe in Mauritius, to Strasbourg in France, back to Trou d'eau douce on the island. These 'Banaras story streams' of eternity, globalisation and language affiliations circulate endlessly, sometimes flowing alongside, sometimes merging, and other times erasing narratives of transcendence, violence and sensuality. Unexpected events and creolizing instances occur in all these stories, their creation cannot be predicted but is predicated on all the stories that are already contained in the 'Grand Océan.'

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