

# NARRATING EXPIATION IN MAURITIUS AND THE INDIAN OCEAN AQUAPELAGO

The Islanding of Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio

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**ABSTRACT:** Islands are integral to Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's life and writing. Mauritius and the Indian Ocean aquapelago have a central importance in his work, as many scholarly studies confirm. Since receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008, Le Clézio has foregrounded his Franco-Mauritian identity more explicitly, in both personal contexts and politico-cultural initiatives. This article examines the evolution of the author's islanded identity, drawing on his biographical details, interviews and textual analysis of his fictional works, framed by recent developments in Island Studies theory.

**KEYWORDS:** Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Mauritius, Islanding, Identity, Expiation, French and Francophone Literature, Indian Ocean Aquapelago

*... for me, as an islander, someone who watches from the shore as cargo ships pass, who hangs around ports, as a man who walks along a boulevard and who can be neither from a quarter nor a town, but from all the quarters and all the towns, the French language is my only country, the only place where I reside).* (Argand, 1994: 25) <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature brought international fame and fortune to the reticent French-born author. Much of the million-dollar prize was donated to establish the *Fondation pour l'interculturel et la paix* (Foundation for Interculturality and Peace – henceforth FIP) in Mauritius, cofounded in 2009 with Issa Asgarally, demonstrating Le Clézio's desire to give back to the communities that were exploited by his colonial ancestors. When the opportunity arose to redeem his sugar-plantation family name, Le Clézio stepped up to the challenge, lending his time and resources to create the FIP, promoting the aims of intercultural understanding for peace in a highly multi-ethnic and multi-lingual island locale. In this article, I want to explore the ways in which an internationally-renowned figure like Le Clézio has influenced the identities of Indian Ocean aquapelago communities – including those who inhabit the islands of Mauritius, Rodrigues and Flat Island, as well as the waters around and between them (Figure 1). More importantly, however, I want to emphasise how Le Clézio, himself, has been islanded. Through his writing, he exposes alternate histories and current issues, while revising European myths of the islands. Through his community projects, he

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations from French texts are my own, unless an English translation has been published and appears in the bibliography.

counteracts the guilt and shame of his colonial past, in an attempt to bridge the gaps between disparate peoples. Using recent studies of islanding and postcoloniality, as well as research on Le Clézio and the Indian Ocean aquapelago, I will interrogate the impact of Le Clézio's stories on the islands' identities, and his own self-identification as a French-Mauritian writer. In this way, I will attempt to draw conclusions about the island as a place of expiation, in both imaginary and real narratives.

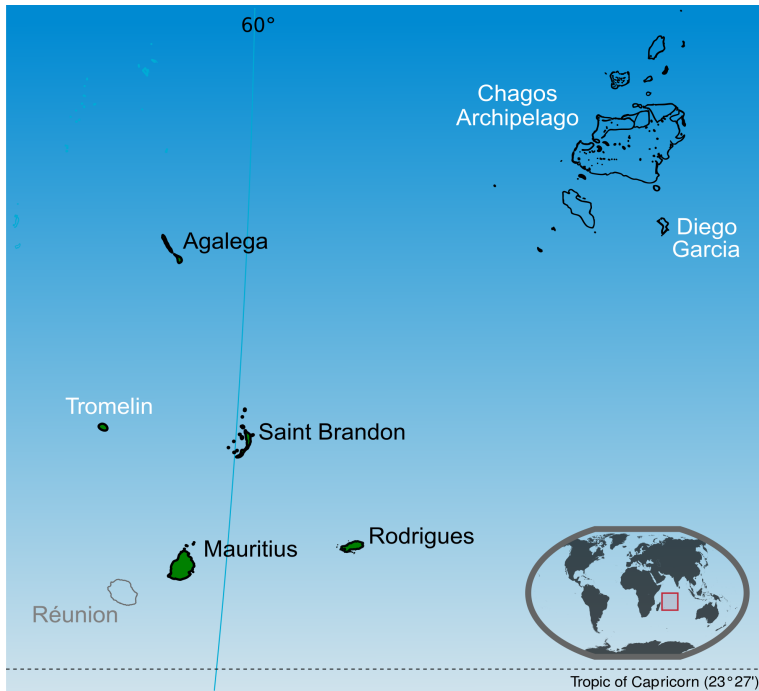


Figure 1 – Mauritius and its extended aquapelagic area (Wikimedia Commons, 2017)<sup>2</sup>

There are many studies that confirm the central importance of the Indian Ocean aquapelago in Le Clézio's work, underscoring key themes including exoticism (Thibault, 2009; Ferraro, 2002), nostalgia (Pagès-Jodlowski, 2000), hereditary memory (Dutton, 2002; La Mothe, 2002; Issur 2002), multicultural identity (Dutton, 2003; Lohka, 2011; Cavallero, 2014), geography (Gazier, 2010; Bouvet, 2010; Ridon, 2010), postcoloniality (Martin, 2012) and globalisation (Moser, 2012). However, there has not been any deep investigation of the island as a fundamental aspect of Le Clézio's identity, nor his evident links to the action of islanding.<sup>3</sup> Most research on Le Clézio and islands interprets the island as a classic mythical or metaphorical trope: an ideal for those who do not live there, invested with a certain independence due to its separation by water, yet also rendered vulnerable by its isolation. While colonial and postcolonial agendas are addressed through a close reading of Le

<sup>2</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauritius\\_\(%2Bclaim\\_islands\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauritius_(%2Bclaim_islands).svg) - accessed 8th March 2018.

<sup>3</sup> I first presented a paper on this topic at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Small Island Cultures Conference (ISIC 10), 4-8 June 2014, Fernando do Noronha Archipelago, Brazil, and in 2015, I published an article in French on the subject, focusing on the island as a place of exile in Le Clézio's life and work.

Clézio's *Révolutions* in Martin (2012) for example, the specificity of the island as a (post)colonial space is generally not well developed.

Over thirty years Island Studies have provided new theoretical frameworks for analysing islands, including deconstruction of the colonial gaze. Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares define the colonial view of the island as a "laboratory, in which to materialize the colonial will, free from undesirable alien influences emanating from the outside" (2011: xi), while Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith refer to the visual interpretation of the island as possession because "islands, unlike continents, look like property" (2003: 1). By minimising the 'continental' perspective that envisages the island's distance from the mainland and its fragility through exposure, new theories privilege instead the connections between islands (Goldie, 2011: 4-6). While 'archipelago' is the broadly accepted term for island groups, Philip Hayward (2012), Jun'ichiro Suwa (2012) and others have proposed an alternative term and concept, 'aquapelago,' for aggregations of islands that are implicated with adjacent marine spaces and resources through livelihood activities.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Hayward's initial definition - "an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters" (Hayward, 2012: 5) - I have used the term in my title and article, reflecting the importance of the sea in Le Clézio's writings, the interconnectedness of land and sea for south east Indian Ocean communities, and the identities and representations of these in the author's real and imaginary experiences.

Another significant methodological tool to critique reductive or exotic interpretations of islands as fixed entities is the use of 'island' as a verb. Godfrey Baldacchino and Eric Clark (2013) cite the Pacific poet and scholar Teresia Teaiwa's query: 'Shall we make island a verb? As a noun, it's so vulnerable to impinging forces... let us also make island a verb. It is a way of living that could save our lives' (ibid: 129). To talk of 'islanding' is therefore to move beyond polarising and useless dichotomies, embracing a Deleuzian 'becoming' as islands are made and unmade by nature and culture, and asking different questions about islands. Rather than asking 'what' or 'where' is your island, the verb implies an action, so the questions are reconfigured: "how do you *do* your island?" (Baldacchino and Clark, 2013: 132), how do you *make* your island? or perhaps even in the case of Le Clézio, how does your island make you?

Perhaps the most directly relevant work for this study comes from recent French-Australian research by Bénédicte André in her book *Îlêité: Perspectives littéraires sur le vécu insulaire*, concerning the nature of *îlêité* ('islandness) in postcolonial francophone literatures', with case studies on writers from Guadeloupe (Gisèle Pineau), Reunion Island (Axel Gauvin) and New Caledonia (Claudine Jacques). André argues strongly for the reciprocal benefits in foregrounding literary studies in Island Studies, exposing the importance of *îlêité* for understanding exoticism and creolisation, silence and memory in these novels. Many of the tropes identified and analyses are also pertinent for a study of Le Clézio's writing. However, as Le Clézio has not always written from an Indian Ocean perspective nor immediately adopted a Mauritian identity, I am focusing on his progressive movement towards an islanded identity, privileging the process of islanding rather than the state of *îlêité*. Earlier studies of *îlêité* as a concept tend to set it against insularity, determining fundamental differences between the two. Joël Bonnemaïson states that, "Insularity means isolation. Islandness means being torn apart" (1991: 119). Neither of these

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<sup>4</sup> The principal articles on this topic are archived online at: <http://shimajournal.org/anthologies.php> - accessed March 8th 2018.

modes is as useful as the active voice of becoming associated with islanding, when analysing Le Clézio's relationship to islands.

In order to understand how the personal, professional and pluricultural contexts of this author and his work are related to his islanding, I will begin with a brief overview of his background and status in the Francophone literary world, then focus on the inherent ambiguity of Le Clézio's (and his family's) Mauritian identity. This profile will be enhanced by considering representations of Mauritius and other islands of the Indian Ocean aquapelago in his writings – both fictional and non-fictional – in order to demonstrate how Le Clézio effectively rewrites European stories from an islander's perspective. The fundamental shift in his engagement with island identities will be examined via his media commentary and discourses on the Nobel Prize in Literature, together with the creation of the FIP and subsequent writings. Once these elements influencing Le Clézio's complex interactions with islands are assembled, it will be possible to trace the expiatory itinerary that leads the author from France to Mauritius, and from the island via the aquapelago to the world.

### A Writer in Revolt: JMG as an Anti-Identity

Long before receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008, JMG Le Clézio was a household name in France and much of the French-speaking world. His vast body of work – over 50 novels, essays, collections of short stories and translations of sacred Amerindian texts – have been consistent bestsellers in France, ever since his first novel *Le Procès-verbal* won the prestigious *Prix Renaudot* in 1963. From the age of 23, he has been able to dedicate his life to writing, publishing on average a book a year, travelling extensively, and making a very successful living from being an author. His popularity is incontestable – he was voted most popular living writer in France by readers of the magazine *Lire* in 1994, and since then continues to top the polls of favourite authors. A whole generation of French schoolchildren grew up reading the 1978 collection of short stories, *Mondo et autres histoires* ('Mondo and other stories'), as part of the French literature curriculum in the *collèges* or middle schools. These stories about young adolescents dealing with the traumas of transition to adulthood, resonated with their own difficulties in coming to grips with independence and authority, and the title story was made into a film entitled *Mondo* (1995) by Le Clézio's filmmaker friend, Tony Gatlif.<sup>5</sup> Another of Le Clézio's novels *Désert*, published in 1980, was on the reading lists at several French *lycées*, as a socio-historical document evoking the tensions of Francophone postcolonialism. This prize-winning novel,<sup>6</sup> interweaves historical descriptions of the splendour of desert communities in Morocco and their subsequent destruction and demise by French colonial intervention, with gritty depictions of immigrant life in contemporary France. The Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008 recognised Le Clézio as "an author of new departures, poetic adventure and sensual ecstasy, explorer of a humanity beyond and below the reigning civilisation."<sup>7</sup> Since then, his identity has been somewhat more stable, though not necessarily due to this definition by the Swedish Nobel committee. From his first success as a writer to his contemporary international status, Le Clézio has been railing against classification, in

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<sup>5</sup> Tony Gatlif is perhaps better known for his Roma films *Latcho Drom* (1993) and *Gadjo Dilo* (1997), followed by *Exiles* (2004), which won the Best Director's Award at Cannes Film Festival.

<sup>6</sup> *Désert* won the French Academy's *Grand Prix Paul Morand* in 1980.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/nobelguide\\_lit.pdf](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/nobelguide_lit.pdf) - accessed March 5th 2018.

terms of genre, nationality, residence, or style.<sup>8</sup> The Nobel Prize offered him a reason to announce his conversion from anti-identity to hybrid identity, from non-avowed French to French-Mauritian, and thereby embrace his first real classification through islanding. His roots and routes provide the keys to understanding how important the island is for this author.

In 1940, Le Clézio was born to a British father and a French mother in the Mediterranean port of Nice. Despite the different nationalities his parents displayed on their passports, they both had Mauritian connections and in fact both had the same surname even before they married – they were first cousins from two different branches of the Le Clézio family in Mauritius. This is an important detail in Le Clézio's life, because he writes about both sides of his family's history in Mauritius: the poverty that made one side of the family outcasts and obliged them to seek their fortune elsewhere in the world, and the other side of the family, who became rich sugar-plantation owners in Mauritius. However, his early childhood was rocked by the more imminent menace of the Second World War, a voyage to Africa and the absence, then presence of his father.

While the young Le Clézio and the rest of his extended family were hiding from the German and Italian occupying troops in Roquebillière, a small village nestled amongst the hills behind Nice, his father was posted as a medical doctor in Ogoja, Biafra. When he travelled to Nigeria at the age of 7 or 8 to meet his father for the first time, Le Clézio began to experience the wider world, emotionally and physically, including the importance of the ocean from the perspective of the boat. As a young boy, he wrote his first stories about this voyage to Africa, from the hold of the ship:

*I was writing what I couldn't see. I was travelling to Africa and I was writing a book that was called A Long Voyage in which I was talking about someone who was travelling to Africa – but it was someone else. (Ezine, 1995: 26-27).*

Le Clézio recognises these African stories as fundamental to his development, as was his time living in this new and different land, recounted in his African novels and memoirs.<sup>9</sup> Although Africa was Le Clézio's first physical foray into a different place with its own diverse languages and cultures, Mauritius had already entered his consciousness as a distant yet familiar space through his grandparents' memories, stories and regrets of their life in the Indian Ocean aquapelago. In a sense, he met Mauritius for the first time in Africa, as his father was more obviously imbued with the island's culture than anyone else in his immediate family.<sup>10</sup> Returning to Nice after two years, Le Clézio went through the expected culture shock, but also experienced an unexpected transformation:

*This period of Mauritian 're-education' was accentuated by my father's return. We passed brutally from the matriarchal regime to the patriarchal regime, to a purely Mauritian education that manifested itself most in the alimentary domain. (Le Clézio 1998: 23)*

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<sup>8</sup> Gerda Zeltner describes the author as "scandalously unclassifiable... as if he took savage pleasure in deliberately contradicting all of the labels that one would like to give him" (1971: 215-216).

<sup>9</sup> *Onitsha* (1991); *L'Africain* (2004).

<sup>10</sup> In his tribute to Le Clézio, Congolese author Alain Mabanckou wrote: "It's also in Africa that he finally meets Mauritius. The bush doctor is Mauritian, and he's his father." (2010: 17)

Looking back on this period, when all they ate was rice, curry, boiled meats and vegetables, while their friends were eating steak and chips and icecream, Le Clézio recalls that his “origins” were not the issue (De Cortanze, 1988: 22). He felt foreign in his own country, shackled to a new culture he had never known himself, that seemed to him “imaginary”: “For me, Mauritius didn’t exist. What’s more, when I spoke about it, people said: What? Saint-Moritz?” (Le Bihan, 1996, cited in Dutton, 1999: 8).

In this maelstrom of cultural confusion, he rejected Mauritius and developed an affinity with his father’s language – English – memorising a dictionary de Cortanze (2008), and enrolling in an English Literature degree at the University of Bath, which was never completed. Instead, after finishing his French Literature degree at the University of Nice, he became a writer identifying himself by his initials JMG Le Clézio on the cover of his first novel, *Le Procès-Verbal* (‘The Interrogation’) which was accepted by Gallimard, France’s most prestigious publisher, launching his prize-winning literary career. The book is a tale of rebellion set in Nice whose young male protagonist is unsure whether he has just come out of an asylum or the army. Over the next 10 years Le Clézio produced 10 books – all with the same kind of pessimistic outlook for humanity that pervaded his first novel. The very titles of these books – *La Fièvre* (‘The Fever’) (1965), *Le Déluge* (‘The Flood’) (1966), *Terra Amata* (‘Beloved land’) (1967), *Le Livre des fuites* (‘The Book of Flights’) (1969), *La Guerre* (‘War’) (1970) and *Les Géants* (‘The Giants’) (1973) – reveal his state of mind at that time – focusing on the pain and suffering experienced in everyday struggles to survive in modern cities. Refusing to bask in fame’s limelight, or move to Paris and join the elite literati, Le Clézio began to counteract France’s centralising forces by travelling to Thailand and Mexico and spending two years (1970-1973) living with the Embera Indians, deep in the jungles of Panama.<sup>11</sup> His intense engagement with Mexico and its Amerindian civilisations is expressed in many of his writings and translations of sacred texts,<sup>12</sup> and he is also inspired by Morocco, the heritage of his second wife Jemia.<sup>13</sup> There is a clear tendency to seek positive inspiration outside France, which begins to manifest in his mid-1970s writings, but Mauritius is a different kind of influence, an ‘elsewhere’ that does not always have favourable connotations, given his complex relationship with the island through his father’s insistence on transferring (sometimes unwanted) cultural capital, and the long shadows of colonialism and loss.

### Atavistic Explorations in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean Aquapelago

It was not until 1981, at the age of 40, that Le Clézio actually visited Mauritius and Rodrigues and engaged with the Indian Ocean aquapelago, well after the death of his father who had never returned to his island home after leaving it as a teenager. Le Clézio was already a famous author with obviously diverse international influences, but his readership was mostly unaware of his Mauritian background until the publication of the ‘Journal du Chercheur d’or’ (‘Diary of the Gold Prospector’), serialised in the literary journal *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (1983-4).<sup>14</sup> This was followed by his best-selling novels, *Le Chercheur d’or* (1985), translated as *The Prospector* by Carol Marks in 1993, then re-

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<sup>11</sup> *Haï* (1971); ‘Le Génie Datura’ (1973).

<sup>12</sup> *Prophéties du Chilam Balam* (1976); *Trois villes saintes* (1980); *Relation de Michoacan* (1984); *Le Rêve mexicain ou la pensée interrompue* (1988); *Diego et Frida* (1993); *La Fête chantée* (1997); *Ourania* (2006).

<sup>13</sup> *Désert* (1980); *Gens des nuages* (1997); *Poisson d’or* (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Mauritians always claimed the author as their own, as Le Clézio is an important and recognisable name in the community. When he first visited the island in 1981, the local press covered his appearances and interviewed all his close (and distant) relatives.

translated by C. Dickson in 2016. *Voyage à Rodrigues* ('Voyage to Rodrigues Island'), published in 1986, is an amplified version of the 'Journal', and together, these texts represent the beginning of a literary cycle anchored in the Indian Ocean aquapelago, inspired by Le Clézio's paternal grandfather – a Mauritian magistrate – and his search for pirate's gold on the island of Rodrigues. The novel is dedicated to "my grandfather Léon", and tells the story of Alexis L'Etang, beginning in 1892 when the protagonist-narrator is 8 years old and living with his sister Laure and parents in the idyllic family house at Boucan. When his father loses all his money and the family is chased out of their Mauritian paradise, Alexis uses his father's secret treasure maps to search for the Unknown Corsair's gold on neighbouring Rodrigues Island. There he meets Ouma, a *métisse* woman descended from runaway slaves, with whom he falls in love, but he is called away to fight in the First World War, returning to find neither Ouma nor the gold. The narration is immersed in Indian Ocean aquapelago, focusing on the sea and voyages between the islands, as demonstrated in the opening paragraph:

*As far back as I can remember I have listened to the sea: the sound of it mingling with the wind in the filao needles, the wind that never stopped blowing, even when one left the shore behind and crossed the sugarcane fields. It is the sound that cradled my childhood. I can hear it now, deep inside me; it will come with me wherever I go: the tireless lingering sound of the waves breaking in the distance on the coral reef, then coming to die on the banks of the Rivière Noire. Not a day went by when I didn't go to the sea; not a night when I didn't wake up with my back sweaty and damp, sitting up in my cot, parting the mosquito net and trying to see the tide, anxious and full of a desire I didn't understand. (1993: 1).*

Le Clézio's early sea voyages obviously reverberate in the content and style of his writing, as do his formative readings. He references biblical stories of Eden, the tree of good and evil, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's classic *Paul et Virginie* (1788) which relates the tragic lives of two young children, raised as brother and sister by their unwed mothers in the Rousseauist paradise of Mauritius. They fall in love, but are separated when Virginie is sent away to relatives in Paris. The ship on which she is travelling is wrecked on the rocks and she dies, followed by Paul, who dies of a broken heart. Further intertextuality brings romantic poet Charles Baudelaire's Mauritian mistress Jeanne Duval into the picture, from *Les Fleurs du mal* ('The Flowers of Evil'), and other astronomical and historical works are also integrated. But Le Clézio goes beyond these European tropes and myths to reflect a more multicultural Mauritian identity, using creole words and providing postcolonial perspectives on the Great War, telling stories of fortunes lost and describing the lives of sugar-cane plantation workers. Just as Bernardin de Saint Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) imprinted the island of Mauritius on the European imagination, and has in turn infiltrated the imaginary of Mauritians to the extent that they identify this story as part of their culture, including geographical landmarks (Valaydon, 1992), Le Clézio's *The Prospector* revived the role of travel fiction in remaking the European vision of the island. As Srilata Ravi confirms, Le Clézio re-establishes Baudelaire's "île paresseuse" ('languid island') (Ravi, 2007: 4-5), rehabilitating the image of Mauritius in literary fiction in a process that oscillates between an atavistic dream of belonging and the ancestral memory of loss. Peter Hawkins pointed out in his book *The Other Hybrid Archipelago: Introduction to the Literatures and Cultures of the Francophone Indian Ocean* that *The Prospector* has:

... become a classic of Mauritian literature and its author an influential figure in the island's recent literary development, even though his more recent texts have resumed their nomadic subject-matter and have little direct relevance to his publicly declared Mauritian identity. In this respect, he is probably representative of the extensive Mauritian diaspora, and his work symbolically opens up the postcolonial questioning of the relevance of national identification. (2007: 103-104).

Hawkins' assessment of Le Clézio's commitment to his Mauritian identity as more symbolic than essential might be questioned in light of Le Clézio's post-Nobel discourses, actions and writings, but already in the mid-1980s, his struggle with his bittersweet past was revealed in the first truly autobiographical book he published, *Voyage à Rodrigues*. Like a key to deciphering the biographical elements of his grandfather's life fictionalised in *The Prospector*, *Voyage à Rodrigues* introduces the family history of François-Alexis Le Clézio, the long-haired rebel who left Brittany to emigrate to Mauritius rather than cut his hair and join the centralising forces of the French Revolution (Ezine, 1995: 65-66):

*Thus, like a response to my distant ancestor François who leaves Brittany and embarks on the Espérance to begin a new family on the other side of the world, like a bitter echo, is my grandfather's refusal, abandoning his house and finding again the way of the wanderer with the rest of his family. (1986: 113-114).*

This house, Euréka,<sup>15</sup> hovers on the horizon as a reminder of better times in many of Le Clézio's novels, but is best observed in his grandfather's painting, a mediated vision of reality, envisaged by one who had once lived there:

*A house that is mythical for me, as I've only heard speak of it as a lost house... I see the house as my grandfather Alexis painted it in watercolours around 1870, when he was about ten years old... In the painting, the house seemed empty, almost phantom-like, in spite of the sharpness of its outlines, the shine of its new roof and the manicured French-style garden. The tall French doors with ten panes reflect the sunlight under the gentle shadows of the verandah. In the slope of the roof, there are seven attic windows, some with their shutters closed. I remember what others have told me about Euréka before, this almost ritual phrase: the house with a hundred windows! (ibid: 117-119).*

It is also in *Voyage à Rodrigues* that Le Clézio states for the first time, explicitly, that his alienation stems from being disconnected from his island roots:

*The loss of Euréka is also my concern, since it's the reason why I was born so far away, why I grew up separated from my roots, in this feeling of foreignness, of not belonging. (ibid: 113)*

After this initial plunge into real and imaginary familial history in the Indian Ocean aquapelago, Le Clézio did not abandon the topic. Instead, he continued to write about the irrepressible pull of the island for those who leave it. In the short story *La Saison des pluies* ('The Rainy Season') (1989), Gaby Kervern emigrates to France, becomes progressively

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<sup>15</sup> Euréka is now a guesthouse, where visitors can stay or dine in the restaurant. The website states that it "once belonged to a very well known Mauritian family." There is no mention of the Le Clézio name on the site. <http://www.eureka-house.com/> - accessed March 8th 2018.



alienated, ill, exploited, tragic, and then returns home to enjoy post-independence Mauritius with her son. Over 20 years later, in the final story of *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* ('The Story of the Foot and Other Fantasies') (2011), another Mauritian woman rides the Parisian metro, and muses about the island being "the beginning and end of all voyages" (ibid: 489). The 500-page volume concludes with an indication of where the voyage ends – in the short list of metro stops and towns, the last four destinations are all in Mauritius: "Rose Hill-Beau-Bassin, La Louise, Moka, Euréka" (ibid: 500). In 1990, he took a break from the personal to embrace a more ethnographic approach to the island, to record and illustrate the collective cultural histories of Mauritians. He and his wife Jémia transcribed in creole and translated into French the traditional riddles called *Sirandanes* that serve as a form of greeting and banter at community gatherings.

Le Clézio returned to the family history and especially the trope of the lost house Euréka, in four more lengthy novels. Ten years after *The Prospector*, the author turned his attention to his mother's side of the family in *La Quarantaine* ('Quarantine') (1995). Tracing the itinerary of brothers Jacques and Léon Archambau who leave Paris to join their relatives in Mauritius, the story takes an unexpected turn when all the ship's passengers are quarantined on the wild and desolate Flat Island due to a smallpox outbreak on board, and one by one they begin to die. Jacques' wife from Reunion Island does not survive, but Jacques finally reaches Mauritius to learn that his wealthy and powerful relatives knew he was there and did nothing to save him. Léon and the Indo-Mauritian lover, Suryavati, he has met on Flat Island disappear when the boats arrive to take them to Mauritius, refusing the call of one colonised and corrupted island, settling for the terrifying yet beautiful nature of another. This split scenario coincides with the author's ambivalent feelings about Mauritius, and echoes the plight of the gold prospector, torn between Rodrigues and Mauritius. Does one return to an island after having been exiled? Or does one find another island to call one's own? At this stage, Le Clézio seems torn between these two possibilities. He searches for a way to access Mauritius, and the grand familial house that represents his origins, but has not yet found a way to work through the desire for a paradisaical past that was built on the guilt of colonial exploitation.

### Narrating Expiation in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean Aquapelago

When I first interviewed Le Clézio in 1997, we discussed his autobiographical influences, and he told me that using his personal memories and family history in Mauritius as the basis for some of his novels was a means of exposing and addressing some of the ambiguous sentiments he felt about his past. His motivations are not to portray his ancestors or himself in a positive light, nor to relay a nostalgia for happier times. Instead, he strives to give something back to the communities that were exploited by his plantation-owning family in Mauritius. He wants to tell their stories and validate their struggles against the colonial hierarchies that robbed them of their lands and identities. Clearly, he is acutely aware that as a member of western society, and especially one of the colonial families, he has played an indirect part in the injustices brought about by colonisation and wars, and he wants to redress the inequalities that he perceives are perpetuated in today's societies through his writing:

*I'm not indifferent about it, it's important in a certain way that I attach myself to that past, but I can't miss it because, moreover, it's a past that is troubled. The fortune of this family, I think, like most of the grand families of the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean is founded on slavery. Therefore, it's a fortune that is suspect in a certain way, a bit like these grand fortunes in the south of*

*the United States, in the southern states like Virginia or South Carolina. So I don't feel nostalgia for that, but in return, I think that, the notion I have is not that it's a paradise lost, but a normal natural evolution of things, which means that certain generations have to pay for the mistakes of the generations that preceded them or have to repair their mistakes because "pay", that would be more of a negative thing. They have to try to repair the mistakes. (Dutton, 2003: 283)*

He goes on to explain how his father also felt this need to give back, but not go back to Mauritius, as he dedicated his life to helping poor and isolated Nigerian communities in need of medical attention. Towards the end of the interview, the author spoke about his current writing projects:

*Yes, I'm writing something which again looks at these same issues which are issues of slavery in my family's past which is something important that I still haven't really managed to understand completely. So I would like to call it *Revolutions* because I would like it to be a self-reflexive work but I don't know when it will be finished). (ibid: 287)*

The novel to which Le Clézio refers here, *Révolutions*, appeared in 2003 and does indeed do what he says he wanted to do. The author goes further back in time to imagine Jean Eudes Marro as the fictional version of François-Alexis Le Clézio who migrates from Brittany to Mauritius in 1795. In parallel, Jean Marro, the young protagonist born in Malaysia on the island of Ipoh, raised in Nice in the 1950s, in the shadow of the Algerian War, decolonisation, and nourished by his aunt Catherine's stories of Mauritius and the lost house, Rozilis, bears significant resemblance to the author. After years of torment, loss, and the eternal cycles of violent revolution, Jean the younger finally returns to Mauritius, marries his Algerian love, Mariam, who resembles an Indo-Mauritian woman (ibid: 552), and they conceive a child on this island. On the back cover, a much-cited quote from the author attests to his strange quasi-mystical relationship with Mauritius:

*It's not paradise that's lost, it's time and its revolutions. Nice, in the fifties and sixties, was the dream place to worship – secretly and rather hopelessly – the Mauritius of my ancestors... Exile, the search for a land, are part of what was given to me in the beginning. I've always thought, like Flannery O'Connor said, that a novelist must be drawn to write on the first years of his life, when the principal matter was given to him.*

The significant shift in this novel as compared to previous works is that Le Clézio goes beyond the dilemma of whether to return to Mauritius, whether it is accessible or not, whether another island offers a more fulfilling life than the corrupted familial history of Mauritius. The author introduces an expiatory element in *Révolutions*, as stated in the 1997 interview, transforming his sugar-plantation ancestors into respectful, honourable bosses for the African slaves who worked for them. Jean Eudes and his wife Marie Anne Naour empathise with the slaves they see chained together in the streets, and when their home is swept away by a storm, they set up a new life in Ebène where they build the family home, Rozilis (Euréka). Before beginning again, the family write a declaration on the 25 April 1825 – a kind of declaration of human rights – according to which Rozilis will not be divided amongst family members, and that slavery will be prohibited, including forced labour of any kind by convicts. Article 4 sums up the fundamental ideals of their declaration:

*The main aim in founding this house being the achievement of natural harmony and the principles of liberty and equality, no contrary practices can be accepted, in particular concerning the fate of labourers and workers. Any member of the Society who refuses the principles of sharing the benefits and of liberty in work will be excluded, and his share will fall to the others. (ibid: 516)*

By rewriting history in the light of his current anti-slavery ideals, Le Clézio represents his Mauritian ancestors as enlightened contributors to building a better society on the island. It is therefore a much easier choice for the young Jean Marro to overcome the exile of his aunt Catherine and her generation, and revel in his visits to the newly independent Mauritius in 1968. In addition, the author gives voice to Kiambé, a young Tanzanian woman, who narrates her own story of kidnap and slavery in Mauritius, and becoming the wife of exiled Madagascan rebel prince Ratsitatane who led the Mauritian slave uprising and was executed in 1822.<sup>16</sup> Reports from William Stone, principal clerk, on the uprisings from the government administration perspective, emphasise the violence and repression of their regime. The voice of Violette, a slave from Mozambique adds another dimension to the portrait of those who have suffered at the hands of colonisers.

In contrast to the polyphonic narratives and historical innovations of *Révolutions, Ritournelle de la faim* (The Refrain of Hunger), published in 2008 a few weeks before Le Clézio's Nobel Prize was announced, returns to the inevitable impasse, the exile of his parents' generation. This novel provides another perspective on his mother's side of the Mauritian experience: the shame of a young woman living in poverty, exiled in Paris in the 1930s, and the follies of relatives who tried to reconstruct a Mauritian lifestyle in Paris. The protagonist Ethel's eccentric great-uncle, Monsieur Soliman, even buys the Mauve House, a structure brought from Mauritius to Paris for the Colonial Exposition in 1931. There is no return to Mauritius in this fiction; just war and privations, and finally a refuge in Canada. Clearly, expiation in Mauritius is only available to the author's own generation and those who follow him.

### The Islanding of Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio

It was the 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature that offered Le Clézio the opportunity to translate his imaginary expiation in *Révolutions* into reality and complete the islanding process. When the international spotlights were turned on him for a relatively brief moment, he declared his Franco-Mauritian identity not only in terms of his personal and cultural heritage, but also as a political instrument. Statements by President Nicolas Sarkozy: "I am very proud. It's an honour for France, the French languages, and the French-speaking world" and Prime Minister François Fillon: "this award consecrates French literatures... it refutes with éclat the theory of a so-called decline of French culture" (Beech, 2008: online) emphasised the glory of this Nobel for France. In response, Le Clézio foregrounded the importance of his Mauritian heritage in gaining this accolade: "Mauritius is my country", then going on to criticise French treatment of its former colony: "I'm very happy for the island of Mauritius, which gets no subsidies for culture and fights for the French language" (Beech 2008). The author reiterates:

*It's also in the name of Mauritius that I am very happy to have received this*

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<sup>16</sup> Ratsitatane is a historical figure hailed as a hero after the 1968 independence of Mauritius. Azize Asgarally wrote a play *Ratsitatane* (1983) recuperating his voice and life, and is the first historical play written in Mauritian creole. See also Plastow (1999: 27).

*prize... France is my chosen country for culture, language. But my dear homeland is Mauritius. When I go there, I feel I've arrived home. (Andreucci, 2008: online)*

There were many more such statements made during media interviews, and Le Clézio's Nobel lecture 'In the Forest of Paradoxes' on the 7 December 2008 mentions several times his Mauritian heritage and the talents of Mauritian authors like Ananda Devi, Malcolm de Chazal, and Abhimanyu Unnuth. His final words are:

*Literacy and the struggle against hunger are connected, closely interdependent. One cannot succeed without the other. Both of them require, indeed urge, us to act. So that in this third millennium, which has only just begun, no child on our shared planet, regardless of gender or language or religion, shall be abandoned to hunger or ignorance, or turned away from the feast.*

However, Le Clézio did not give his Nobel Prize money of around US\$1.3 million away to buy books for children, nor to feed the hungry. Instead, he turned his focus to Mauritius, to repair the damage that his forefathers had wreaked on the island and the broader aquapelago in the past. Conceived to promote exchange between diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, the FIP aims to prevent further exploitation and war between peoples by attacking the roots of discord – ignorance. Le Clézio co-founded the FIP with Mauritian Professor of Linguistics Issa Asgarally in May 2010 at Port Louis, and together with their partners they have travelled to France and the United States to speak about their mission for interculturality. Their 2013 lectures on "The Intercultural and the Arts" were published online in 2017 by the Open University of Mauritius,<sup>17</sup> though the FIP website does not appear to be very active at present.<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Keith Moser in 2010, Le Clézio reinforced the idea of the island as a laboratory, no longer for colonial ends, but for multicultural futures:

*Mauritius seems to us the ideal laboratory because of its diversity of languages and beliefs, and also because this country has lived through a colonial history and experienced (still experiences) the dangers of discrimination and ignorance of others. (Moser, 2012: 305)*

Another mission that Le Clézio has personally supported is the independence of the Chagos Islands from American dominance. The Chagos inhabitants were exiled from their islands when the British Indian Ocean Territory was leased to the USA to establish their military base on Diego Garcia in 1968 (see Vine, 2008). In 2009, he addressed a letter to President Barack Obama in the major daily newspaper *Le Monde* asking the newly named Nobel Peace Laureate to allow the Chagos people to return to their islands. Although Le Clézio is not known as an activist, he has continued to express his support for these exiled peoples of the Indian Ocean aquapelago, challenging the decision of the European Court of Human Rights who in 2012 denied the Chagos people their right to return to their homeland and declare it their own. Le Clézio poetically evokes the exile of these people that means nothing to those in power:

*The European Court of Human Rights made its decision, with the indifference of the powerful of this world. What do a handful of islanders matters, little*

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<sup>17</sup> <http://cri.open.ac.mu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The-Intercultural-the-Arts-Website-2.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.fipinterculturel.com/>

*farmers, men who fish with handlines in their lagoon, when strategic and military interests are in play, and these faraway islands, lost in the middle of the Indian Ocean, can be transformed at a vile price into one of the most operational bases in the world?... The powerful of this world who made this iniquitous decision should... one day visit the modest house in Gros-Caillou, a shabby quarter of Mauritius, qui serves as a sort of refuge or memorial for the islander people, where on the walls, the Chagossian children born in exile can look at the pictures of their beloved homeland that they can never know nor ever go, not even to put flowers of the graves of their ancestors. (2013: online)*

The Nobel Prize allowed Le Clézio to complete his islanding – articulating publicly his views on the abuse of island peoples – and how Mauritius has made him the person and the writer that he is today – as well as giving him the financial means to assist the island in achieving its intercultural goal of peace between the diverse communities. In a sense, it also allowed him to recover his family's lost house. Instead of Euréka, the beautiful yet tainted fruit of slavery, Le Clézio founded a new house based on interculturality and peace.

The stories are not yet over, the narratives are not yet finished. In October 2017, Le Clézio published his first novel since winning the Nobel. In *Alma*, he delves again into his family's history in Mauritius, with parallel narratives that expose another version of the author's own trajectory and a much less privileged character whose story nevertheless needs to be told. Jérémie Felsen, a French doctoral student, is in search of the dodo (the extinct flightless bird), and his research uncovers ancient and contemporary abuse on the island, from pre-abolition physical and psychological slavery to modern-day sexual and financial slavery. His story sits alongside an equally significant voice, that of Dodo (Dominique) Felsen, a leprous creole man who is the last surviving relative on the Mauritian side of the family, but who is taken to France where he is apparently lost by 1982, according to a newspaper clipping. Jérémie's story begins, "I have returned. It's a strange feeling, because I've never been to Mauritius. How can one feel this impression for a country one doesn't know?" (ibid: 32). Dodo's begins with "'My name is Dodo. Dodo. Such a dodo. Haha, I hear them!'" (ibid: 10). The differences between the two principal narrators – one self-reflexive, wondering and wandering, the other direct, derided and deprived – are evidence of the relative fates of their families. Jérémie's family left the island with nothing, Dodo's family tried to hold on to dreams of wealth and status. They never meet, and their only touchpoint is the lost house, Alma. In the epilogue entitled "L'Etranger", Jérémie's quest is revealed as doomed from the beginning as vain, selfish and pointless:

*I also wanted to stick the pieces of a broken story back together again, the story of the Felsens of the island, now as extinct as the bird itself, dead as a dodo. Perhaps it was vanity, this feeling of belonging to a disappearing tribe, to be the witness, the weak and flickering signal of another era, another culture, all around the last survivors the world is changing, aren't we saying with a certain arrogance, to each generation, that nothing will be like before anymore? (ibid: 469)*

In *Alma*, Le Clézio's proposes a new avenue for redemption, to expiate himself and his family by extinguishing their presence on Mauritius completely. Whether or not his most recent approach redeems the sins of his forefathers, only time will tell. Le Clézio may yet rewrite again the history of his family in the Indian Ocean aquapelago.

## Conclusion

For most of his life, Le Clézio has avoided claiming an identity, skirted around literary classifications, slipped under international media radars, yet managed to make a very successful living from writing. His focus on narrating his family history in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean aquapelago from multiple perspectives has provided increasingly probing detail regarding their complicity in slavery and exploitation on their sugar plantations. With each successive iteration, the author has offered different ways for expiating ancestral guilt in his own generation, ranging from writing anti-slavery into the family's own declaration of human rights to extinguishing the family name from Mauritius forever. Throughout this writing process, Le Clézio has become more engaged with his Mauritian roots, returning to the Indian Ocean aquapelago on almost an annual basis. Since receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008, Le Clézio has foregrounded his Franco-Mauritian identity more explicitly, and founded his own house on the island, the FIP to replace Euréka, the slave-masters' seat.

Le Clézio's identity has evolved, more dramatically than ever over the last ten years. By publicly claiming Mauritius as his island 'home' in 2008, he was effectively islanded, in a fairly simplistic way that identified 'what' or 'where' he came from. When he created the Foundation of Interculturality and Peace, he translated his imaginary rewriting of the island into reality, remaking the island, as the island, in turn, remade him as a philanthropic champion who did not just go back, he also gave back. The expiatory itinerary that took the author from France to Mauritius, has also taken him from the island via the aquapelago to the world, renewing, reinforcing, and reconnecting him to his islanded identity. In 2006, when writing about Easter Island in *Raga*, he asks "Am I also from an island? Or did I want to believe that I was?" (118). Later that year, he confirmed his islanding in an interview with Jacques-Pierre Amette, when asked where he wanted to be buried. "*Sur une île*" – ('on an island') (2006: online), was his response.

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