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Carl de Souza’s *La Maison qui marchait vers le large* and the Mauritian City

Shawkat M. Toorawa

Carl de Souza was born in Rose Hill, Mauritius, on March 4, 1949. After a peripatetic primary school education, which included a stint on the Mauritian island dependency of Rodrigues, de Souza was admitted to Royal College, Port Louis, and then to the prestigious Royal College Curepipe. He read Biology at the University of London and decided to become an educator. After 25 years of teaching at the Collège St. Esprit, he was in 1995 named Rector of St. Mary’s College in Rose Hill, the town of his birth, a position he still holds. Carl de Souza has also excelled in sports. He was a national badminton player for many years before being named manager of the national team, President of the Mauritius Badminton Federation, and Secretary-General of the African Badminton Federation.


*Le Sang de l’Anglais* is, as the title implies, preoccupied with filiation, genealogies, and the role of ethnicities, contested or otherwise, in the construction of identity. The *Maison* of the title of his second novel is a real house in which people who are negotiating difficult issues of identity must live and, more importantly, live together. It is a house faced with real problems, so it is also a metaphor for Mauritius the island, a mirror of the city of Port-Louis, and, if I may be permitted this word play, of ethni-city. As a metaphor for the city, it thus becomes a space which allows all the characters that inhabit it to be linked together in an unstable relationship where the ground on which they stand is a slippery one. Indeed, de Souza does not build the Mauritian city, he
dismantles it and sends its emblem sliding toward the sea where, presumably, it will be transformed.

I would like to argue that *La Maison* is a signal multicultural text—though I am less attached to the term multiculturalism per se than to what it implies. The Mauritian playwright Dev Virahsawmy has been a strong advocate of multiculturalism for more than three decades through his Kreol plays and adaptations, and Edouard Maunick, whose *Muse* is a blend of African, European and Indianoceanic influences, is something of a multicultural Mauritian poet laureate (if one can be that when one is in self-imposed exile). But it is de Souza who brings together literature, culture, and issues of “policy.” In *La Maison*, these issues may be said to collide, collude, and simultaneously result on the one hand in a successful novel and, on the other, in a projection, a formula, almost a blueprint for citizenry, and therefore for the city and for ethnicity. Maybe this is to be expected from someone whose educational, intellectual, civic, and cultural background is multiple and plural.

Curiously, Mauritian critics expressed disapproval and disapprobation for *La Maison*. De Souza was accused of stereotyping characters. And, the argument went, if it was not bad enough that he had, like so many others, published overseas (an unfair attack as he lives and works in Mauritius, unlike a number of other Francophone Mauritian writers), he had now produced a novel that tokenized, in that it attempted to construct an “authentic” Mauritian identity, an “ideal” Mauritian neighborhood in an “ideal” Mauritian city. In short, he was accused of being too multicultural. He has not answered the charges, and he need not. *La Maison* is a finely crafted, finely tuned and attuned novel that does not construct Mauritian identity but that skillfully and subtly deconstructs it. De Souza may be a member of a specific “community”—a euphemism and misnomer for any number of imputed Mauritian ethno-religious affiliations—but he writes perceptively and knowledgeably about all the so-called communities.

A word about how these “communities” were constituted is in order. Mauritius was uninhabited when the Dutch landed there in September 1598. They abandoned their garrison after an interrupted century of presence and were succeeded by the French who saw in Mauritius, which they renamed Ile de France, an ideal entrepôt in their designs on the wider Indian Ocean world. They imported slaves from Mozambique, Madagascar, and elsewhere, whose connections to their places of origin and empathy were severed; and they encouraged so-called “free coloreds” from India to immigrate as artisans, whose connections to their places of origin and empathy remained active. With the island’s capitulation to the British in 1810 (with the proviso that
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French language, religion, and culture be maintained), and with the abolition of slavery, an important new demographic, cultural, and eventually political event took place: the influx of Indian indentured labor and the associated influx of Indian merchants. Indians now outnumbered the white "colon" population and the "esclave" population. Today, a little less than 70 percent of Mauritius is Indo-Mauritian. The Franco-Mauritians weigh in at an economically super-powerful but demographically slight 2 percent, as do the Sino-Mauritians, and the remainder (about 30 percent)—or Creol(ized) peoples—are regarded and treated as just that, the remainder, a fact underscored by the term by which this group is known, "la population générale." This category is understood to be a misnomer, an anomer, because it designates no specificity, nothing regional or cultural, indeed, nothing in particular. The death in police custody of the popular Creole Rastafarian seggae (a mixture of the local musical and dance form séga and reggae) performer and icon, Kaya, provoked island-wide riots in February 1999, and focused attention on the plight of the exclus from among the Creole population, while at the same time fueling ethnic and communal rivalries. These events are the subject of de Souza's latest novel.

"General population" is the polite term used in lieu of the (until very recently) pejorative term "Créole." That this is also the term for the island's lingua franca, the Creole language (hereafter Kreol), the mother tongue of almost everyone in post-independence Mauritius, has merely complicated the clearing of a space in which the term Creole can be used to refer to a person. The Creole-Mauritian is that person whose ancestry is mixed, usually a mixture of European and African. The term Afro-Mauritian was vociferously rejected by many Creoles for making explicit a link and a connection to a continent that many wish(ed) to erase. This explains in part the simultaneous rejection of the Creole language in favor of French by many who would establish a link with the métropole rather than recover a filiation with, say, Maputo.

The premise of La Maison is established early. Torrential rains cause a landslide and the houses of La Motte, a fictitious but recognizable mountainside neighborhood of Port-Louis, begin to slide inexorably toward the sea, a fact of which everyone in the neighborhood seems to be aware, except Louis-Marie Gaston Daronville. Old man Daronville is an obdurate, wheelchair-bound Creole (mixed white and non-white ancestry) who, because of financial hardship, is forced by his daughter Florence to rent the first floor of his splendid, aging colonial house to the Muslim Haffenjee family, and to keep only the second floor for himself. The head of the Haffenjee household, Raouf, is a clerk in the Mapou district office, who moves from a home in the
countryside to the capital so that his son, Omar, may attend a prestigious state school: "Il cherchait une maison En ville la cause mo garçon . . . you know . . . li fèque gagne admission Collège Royal..." (22), as the novelist puts it, using Kreol and free indirect discourse to enter into his character's train of thought. Daronville is contemptuous of all his neighbors, his new tenants in particular. For him, the non-"Whites" are "taking over," "taking" all the plum jobs, "stealing" all the scholarships. At one point, he reflects: "Dire qu'en général les Malabars, les Chinois et les Lascars passaient pour bien malins: pour preuve, ils piquaient toutes les bourses scolaires! . . ." (22).

To Hassenjee, Daronville is a despicable old man: "il détestait aussi M. Daronville. Non parce qu'il était mulâtre et chrétien, mais tout simplement détestable" (11). Hassenjee’s problems with Daronville stem from the old man’s personality and character, not from his ethnicity. Hassenjee’s antipathy toward Daronville is thus not simply racist, or "communal" in Mauritian terms. Indeed, as the novel progresses, the relationship between Daronville and Hassenjee becomes more complicated and subtle. In Le Sang de l'Anglais, Michel St Bart, a Mauritian of French descent, and Howard Hawkins, a Mauritian of English ancestry, had to come to terms with contradictory feelings. So too must Daronville and Haffenjee, the two main characters of La Maison. They are constantly, if differently, seeking ways of expressing and accepting their alternating feelings of goodwill and disdain, grudging admiration and disapproval, warmth and cynicism.

The residents of their neighborhood include Bibi Feroza, Haffenjee’s ailing, withdrawn wife; Tamby, the Tamil “exorcist”; and numerous others who constitute a microcosm of Mauritius. One such citizen is Lam Chok Wen, the hard-working Chinese neighbor. By adding new floors to his house, this neighbor deprives Daronville of his one joy, an unimpeded view of cars winding their way to Port-Louis and ships in harbor: "Il maudit une fois de plus le Chinois d’à côté pour avoir ajouté deux étages à sa boutique: l’énorme chantier le coinçant contre la montagne l’empêchait de voir le flot des voitures se rendant à la capitale" (10). Later he adds: "Pourtant, Haffenjee, les bateaux, je les connais. Les gros, les petits! Dites, Haffenjee, vous les regarderez un peu et vous me tiendrez au courant?" (310).

Another constituent of de Souza’s microcosm is Germaine, the unindustrious and superstitious Creole maid, who is introduced in the following terms: "Puis s’amena Zémaine. De son vrai nom Germaine Trinité. . . Elle déambulait, désinvolte, roulant ses formes abondantes et paresseuses moulées dans de minces fourreaux de taffetas. . ." (39). Every “community” is presented and represented and their particularities and misconceptions about one
another depicted and described. In spite of the delicate subject, de Souza is not judgmental or condescending. Quite the opposite: his keen observations are in a prose that is celebratory of difference. De Souza is not only describing a multicultural, Mauritian city par excellence, he is also prescribing one. It is only in this way, I would argue, that one can properly situate and understand the culinary fusions that he uses as ground for comparisons: “La mère inonda Anwar d’un regard de fierté et d’amour. Il s’y baigna comme un rasgoullah dans une crème au miel à la pâtisserie Bagdad” (136). This mandate for a plural citizenry is what makes detractors uneasy. They are uncomfortable with a melting pot, or, as Dev Virahsawmy likes to put it, a masala. For them, the boundaries between ethnicities are there, and they are sacred.11

Multiculturalism, as many scholars have noted, resonates globally but has very specific local inflections.12 In the United Kingdom, it is applied to Black-White relations, where Black encompasses Africans, Caribbeans, and Asians, all recently oppressed by British or other colonialisms. From the shipwreck of the good ship commonwealth emerged a new Anglophone, multicultural writing, and world literatures in English.13 In the United States, multiculturalism is a term that sought—I use the past tense because the term appears no longer to be used without incurring some sort of a liability14—to include all historically marginalized groups. In the United States and the United Kingdom, then, it has become a coded way of addressing issues having to do with race (Gunew 46).15

In Canada, multiculturalism “denotes those who are not included in the English-French axis” (Gunew 2). In New Zealand, multiculturalism has no real purchase because of the importance of biculturalism, a term and notion around which condense Maori claims for sovereignty and equal footing.16 In Australia, the Aborigines distance themselves from the term because of their understanding of it “as being predicated on various cultures of migration,” cultures “in which they do not participate, and with which they see no compelling need to establish connections” (Gunew 2). Similarly, in effect if not in affect, the so-called, that is, self-called, Anglo-Celtic populations do not fall into multiculturalism’s orbit either.17 The term has come, therefore, to embrace all those other than the original settler-colonizing groups, by and large also European but whose literary production has come to be called “ethnic-minority writing” by Padolsky and others.18

In the Mauritian context, the work of Dev Virahsawmy has been very influential, in particular his 1991 Kreol reworking of Shakespeare’s The Tempest.19 Yet, in spite of the inroads made by Virahsawmy, especially with regard to his (almost single-handed) consolidation of Kreol as a literary language, it is, I am suggesting, de Souza’s writing which has more usefully displayed the
universality and multiculturalism of which all cities, and the Mauritian city along with them, are in need. *La Maison* is further testimony to the fact that one can write an enduring work of art and still grapple with pressing issues. Paul Sharrad has (in another context) pertinently and eloquently felt the pulse of this sort of writing, a writing "which expresses multicultural experience, charts a shift towards images rather than objects, parameters rather than what they contain, to processes of exchange wherein the text itself functions as a porous surface instead of a solid-state reification."\(^{20}\)

This is evident in de Souza’s linguistic choices. Scarcely a page of *La Maison* goes by without italics signaling the many Mauritianisms and Kreol words, phrases, and exchanges that veritably pervade the text. Yet footnotes are only occasionally provided to explain discrete words, such as *Lascarine*, glossed as “Musulmane” (de Souza 21, et passim), or *malangue*, glossed as “Sale” (de Souza 52). For Joubert, the use of Mauritian language and expressions is an “effet de réel qui dote les personnages d’une épaisseur physique” (Joubert 75). That may be, but Joubert, it seems to me, misses the point. *La Maison* is one of the few Mauritian novels not to explain all its Kreol. This is in stark contrast to Devi’s *Rue La Poudrière*, where the visceral writing is interrupted with explanations and translations of the few usually quite comprehensible Kreol locutions (e.g., Devi 14). More importantly, this goes completely unremarked in Joubert’s review; de Souza also uses Franco-Mauritian French in his dialogue, for example, in Daronville’s exclamation: “J’ai archi-appelé chez vous toute la journée! On m’a foutu sec!” (27), or in another of his exclamatory recriminations: “Bonhomme, j’ai passé une nuit blanche à barrer l’eau qui pissait de partout, et vous en avez profité aussi, sans doute, vous aut’ en bas!” (28). Thus, de Souza writes neither in Académie French nor in Kreol, preferring a fluid prose that interweaves French, Mauritian French, and Kreol. By mixing these together, de Souza chips away at the so-called separation of French and Kreol: “Côte ou pé aller coume ça, Haffenjee? Voyez pas que j’ai pas fini de causer avec vous?” (29).

Mauritian writers are no strangers to the city, Port-Louis in particular. The best example is that of the émigré Mauritian novelist Ananda Devi in her 1988 *Rue La Poudrière*, mentioned above.\(^{21}\) Indeed, de Souza’s quartier, La Motte, can be read as a réplique to La Butte, the quartier on which Devi focuses: note the similar setting and the similar name. In the opening pages of *Rue La Poudrière*, the protagonist Paule explains where she lives in the following terms:

J’ai habité le faubourg d’un faubourg, dans la marginalité des plus marginales, à l’extrémité même, aux commissures mêmes de ce que nous appelons “la civilisation.”
J'habite sur les lèvres supérieures du vieux Port-Louis, la ligne mauve et noire qui démarque la fin de son temps et la limite de son empire...
Heureusement, je vis en marge de la civilisation. (8)

Later Paule says that “Port-Louis est comme une épine plantée dans ma chair. J'y ai vécu ma vie d'enfant, ma vie de fille, ma vie de femme” (31). Elsewhere we find the following similar collapsing of body and city: “Et Marie commençait... Sa puissance, et celle de Port-Louis, s’amplifiaient de concert” (30). The Port-Louis of Ananda Devi’s narrative, with its “maisons de mon adolescence, inébranlables malgré leur infatigable vieillesse” (75-76), has much in common with that of other Mauritian writers, such as Richard Sedley Assonne’s Kreol 1998 novel Robis [Rubbish heap].22 For Assonne too, Port-Louis has become an ambiguous, melancholic, tragic, and murderous site. As Françoise Lionnet has written about Devi:

For the first time in the literature of Mauritius, the city and its infernal elements are revealed, brought to light. But this is not the flattering luminosity that transmutes poverty, “les maisons rapiécées tassées par l’âge,” into those shining temples dear to [Robert Edward] Hart; it is rather the dim glow of mourning and melancholy, fueled by a writer’s feelings of grief and bereavement before the wretched spectacle of ruined childhoods. In Devi’s work, the city of Port-Louis loses its romantic aura to become a more troubling, problematic and ambiguously engaging site.23

Lionnet notes that Devi refuses to confine her characters to an externally defined view of what an “authentic Mauritian” identity might be (48). Here is how Devi herself put it in an interview:

My short stories tend toward universality rather than being the descriptive observation of groups that constitute our society... my novels are anchored in Mauritian reality... Rue La Poudrière takes place in a Creole milieu, the poorest and most disadvantaged of Port-Louis... but my purpose is to extract from [this description of society] the universal aspects common to the whole of humanity, to explode the geographical confines of the island. (Cited in Lionnet 48-49)

Although de Souza registers the same futilities and is as uneasy with the tyrannies of boundedness decried by Gillian Beer and others,24 his method is not to explode the city, but rather to subject it to an inexorable glissement. As Lionnet has observed, “Devi’s novel enacts the death of history, the murder of the city, and the poisoning of language in a universe where the subject’s attempts to disentangle herself from the oppressive realms that determine her behavior lead to annihilation” (68). But for de Souza there is no such murder of the city. For him, if anything, Port-Louis holds promise. His city, his neighborhood, his house are populated by people who inhabit spaces where they go about the business of living, where modernity and the post-independence condition enable rather than
fragment, empower rather than fracture. In that, his city corresponds to Marc
Blanchard’s astute view that “like every topos, it is also a cliché—a representa-
tion whose substance and raison d’être are the myth which it sustains and which
bears relations, less to the reality of the objective planner or even to the actuality
of economic exchanges being conducted in its midst, than to the fantasies of the
individual experiencing contact with thousands of his contemporaries” (4).

Daronville and Haffenjee’s almost symbiotic relationship, which is the
core of La Maison, is underscored late in the story when the two find them-
selves alone in the maison. Daronville is grappling with his slipping dream—
to die in the home his grandfather built—while Haffenjee is grappling with
his—to own Daronville’s house and thereby somehow make up for the “vies
ratées” of a wife dying of filial neglect and of a son disillusioned by a path
that leads only “vers le rêve du père” (51). Just as the house slides inexorably
toward the sea, so Daronville and Haffenjee’s lives slide toward a reality that
forces them both to transgress and atone in a most extraordinary way. In the
end it would appear that de Souza argues against the likes of Michel Tremblay
and Mordechai Richler, both of whom describe their city, Montreal, as one
inhabited by the weak, and where “many horizons are blocked and only the
strong and cunning survive.” Instead, de Souza uses La Maison to ask cer-
tain questions about Mauritius, questions similar to those Skip Gates asked
about African-American literature in Loose Canons:

Granted, multiculturalism is no magic panacea for our social ills. We’re worried when Johnny
can’t read. We’re worried when Johnny can’t add. But shouldn’t we be worried too, when Johnny
tramples gravestones in a Jewish cemetery, or scrawls racial epithets on a dormitory wall? [...] The challenge facing America in the next century will be the shaping, at long last, of a truly
common public culture. . .26

De Souza might have rephrased it this way:

Granted, multiculturalism is no magic panacea for our social ills. We’re worried when Antoine
can’t read, when Antoine can’t add. But shouldn’t we be worried too, when Akbar desecrates
Hindu property, or when Ashok scrawls racial epithets on a mosque wall? The challenge facing
Mauritius this century is the shaping, at long last, of a truly common public culture . . .

That there is hope, that de Souza sees better times ahead for the Mauritian
city, is manifestly clear from the closing sentence, and sentiment, of La
Maison qui marchait vers le large: “Vous dites bien, Vadapillay... je
souhaitais. Mais, les temps changent, les choses bougent...” (330).

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Notes

2. Carl de Souza, La Maison qui marchait vers le large (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes Editions, 1996).
4. It is true that one liability of such an approach is that it can lead to accusations of representation by tokenism. As Blanchard, reprising Burton Pike, has noted, creative writers, "not wanting to be left behind, will tend more and more to insert their story plot into an ideological discourse dealing with the social problems of the time." Marc Blanchard, In Search of the City: Engels, Baudelaire, Rimbaud (Saratoga, CA: Anna Libri, 1985), 7; Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981).
6. Thinking about cultural difference in Mauritius has often regrettably either gone the road of pseudo-scientific discussions of race and purity, or the road of ethno-religious identity politics. Together these have been the basis for spurious taxonomies, for the entrenchment of a communal, communalized, and communalizing politics, and for discussions that denied mixing, métissage, créolisation, créolité, hybridity, and cultural contagion. On "contagion," see James Nead, "European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and Community in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed," in Homi K. Bhabha, ed. Nation and Narration (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 245. Cf. "contamination" in Edward Said, "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations," in From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial, ed. Anne Rutherford (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1992), 15.
7. For census purposes, Franco-Mauritians fall into the same category.
8. The period following Mauritian independence from Britain (1968) is referred to as post-independence or post-1968, seldom (if ever) postcolonial.
9. This is changing, as Vijaya Teelock's "Family History Project" at the African Cultural Centre and Jocelyn Chan Low's heeded call for a "Centre d'études créoles" both testify, Teelock and Chan Low are historians teaching at the University of Mauritius.
10. The following summary draws in part on my 1998 review of the novel in World Literature Today 71.2 (Spring 1997): 464. Few analyses of the novel are to be found in the scholarly literature. I am aware only of Jean-Louis Joubert's review in Notre librairie 128.2 (1996): 75, and a perceptive 1998 conference paper by K. R. Issur which has appeared as "Le centre et l'épicentre dans La Maison qui marchait vers le large de Carl de Souza," in Rencontres 98, ed. Soorya Nirisimloo-Gayan and Danielle Tranquille (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute Press, 1999), 8-16. I am grateful to Kumari Issur for having provided me with a pre-publication copy of her article.
14. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Loose Canons (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 174: "What is Multiculturalism, and why are they saying such terrible things about it? We've been told it threatens to fragment American culture into a warren of ethnic enclaves, each separate and inviolate. We've been told that it menaces the Western tradition of literature and the arts."


20. Paul Sharrad, "'Temporary Suspensions': Form and Multi-Cultural Expression," in *Rutherford 60*.


