

Of beauty, cosmopolitanism, and history in postcolonial Réunion

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Abstract

Sparked off by the revocation of Miss France's crown after compromising photographs of her were found, this article traces how this incident resulted in the foregrounding of the beauty queen's Réunionese identity and, with it, the history of her island and its relationship to France. Interrogating simplistic ideas of hybridity as mixing, and showing it to be tied to a politics of action and identity in Réunion, this paper draws on previous work on hybridity and métissage in Réunion. The limits of beauty as a universal are questioned by drawing attention to the prevailing dominant male gaze as a precondition of such a universalizing principle, while at the same time cosmopolitanism is shown to be a worldview that seems untenable to those experiences that make up a certain 'Réunionese' reality identifiable today.

Keywords

La Réunion
métissage/hybridity
citizenship
cosmopolitanism

Résumé

Prenant comme point de départ la révocation du titre de la Miss France en raison des photos inadmissibles, le présent article trace comment cet événement a soulevé l'identité réunionnaise de cette jeune beauté ainsi que l'histoire de son île dans le rapport de cette dernière avec la France métropolitaine. En se basant sur des études sur le métissage à la Réunion les auteurs de ce travail remettent en question des conceptions simplistes de l'hybride selon lesquelles ce serait un mélange, et illustrent comment le métissage est lié à l'action et à des identités qui opposent l'assimilation tout en réclamant l'histoire du peuple. L'idée de la beauté féminine comme concept universel est examinée pour souligner comment elle dépend du regard masculin doté provisoirement de pouvoir. En même temps le cosmopolitisme s'avère peu pertinent aux expériences qui constituent une réalité actuelle que nous pourrions identifier comme étant 'réunionnaise'.

Réunion's Miss(ed) France

In late 2007 a young woman was crowned Miss France. A few weeks later, on 21 December, she was publicly informed (on TF1) by the president of the Miss France pageant that she would have to give up her crown. The pageant is a long-standing institution dating back to the 1920s. The reason for the revocation of the crown was the surfacing of some 'inadmissible' photographs of the beauty queen that had been

1. Julien Balboni, 'La Réunion en ébullition pour sauver "sa" Miss France', *Ouest-France*, 2007, http://www.ouest-france.fr/La-Reunion-en-ebullition-pour-sauver-sa-miss-France/re-actuDet/actu_3631-485894-actu.html, p. 1. Accessed 20 March 2008.
2. See Agnès Leclair, 'Miss France: accusations et coups bas se multiplient; polémique menacée de destitution, la reine de beauté 2008 est soutenue par la Réunion, son île natale', *Le Figaro*, 24 December 2007, p. 9.
3. Reported among others by Mustapha Tossa, 'Miss France 2008: objet de toutes les polémiques', *Témoignages*, 29 December 2007, p. 10.
4. Mustapha Tossa, *op. cit.*

published in the magazine *Entrevue*. These photographs – one of Miss France licking yoghurt in a seductive way and another of her lying on a crucifix, floating in a swimming pool – caused Geneviève de Fontenay (President of the Miss France committee) to revoke the winner's crown. At the same time, and for the first time, voting on the choice of Miss France took into account viewers' opinion, so the public stake in the crowning was more prominent, attested to by the content of numerous blogs, where the majority, from an informal perusal, seemed to take the side of the beauty queen against the pageant.

However, an even more astonishing aspect of these developments is the way in which the people of Réunion (a distant department-region of France in the Indian Ocean) rose up in defence of 'Miss Réunion', Valérie Bègue, who hails from this distant 'part of France'. Those implicated in the protest included Pierre Vergès, of the Communist Party of Réunion, and Gilbert Aubry, the archbishop of the diocese of Saint-Denis (capital of the island). In general, public attitudes were against the 'racism' of de Fontenay and her disparaging remarks in the same vein, whereby she suggested Bègue would be better off 'staying out there' ('rester là-bas').¹ Aubry drew attention to the hypocritical nature of the pageant in condemning Bègue (not just for the sexual suggestivity undergirding the yoghurt picture, but also the blasphemy embodied in the cross in the pool) while adhering to the (unacknowledged) blasphemy of having the models parade half-nude and masquerade as angels within the format of the pageant. Bègue's wish that the magazine be banned from her native island was granted by the second in charge of the Reunionese tribunal. The editor of the periodical, *Entrevue*, Gérard Ponson, accused the pageant of being rigged to offset the negative effect on tourism (from France, primarily) in Réunion after the breakout of the *chikungunya* virus in France's island department in 2006.² The implications here draw upon the long and complex history – one shaped, by turns, both by colonialism and by the neo-colonial domination of departmentalization – that continues to place France's departments in an impossible situation of dependency on the metropolis, a situation that has a closer affinity to a colonial structure than a postcolonial relationship.

Significantly, the island's past history as a French colony, exploited and then neglected by the mainland, provides a larger framework for the story of an attractive, accomplished young woman being stripped of her crown for having violated the terms of the pageant. Apparently, Bègue, like the 34 other participants in the Miss France competition, had signed a statement saying that they had not been engaged in any compromising modelling activities. In the aftermath of the revelation of the photos, the patriotism of Réunion itself was evoked and placed in question through a crucial use of terminology – and the symbolic corollaries that attach to such language deployments – by the media and in the popular imagination. On the one hand, the term 'tsunami' is used by de Fontenay herself in her televised interview regarding this scandal.³ Commonly, people in Réunion called the uproar a 'cyclone' after natural disasters and the terrible dengue fevers.⁴ And if the general feeling was that their 'hybrid' island (*métissée*) was being harmed by any attack on the beauty queen, then, by implication, the undeclared ground of the pageant controversy was

certainly that of race. From a larger perspective, the fact of the continuity of such racial concerns, grounded as they are in the hierarchies of racism and slavery that were the corollaries of colonialism, arguably confirms the perception that departmental status has done little to ease the tensions and dissonances of difference that continue to characterize this colony-turned-DOM. Despite contemporaneously occurring pressing concerns, such as reductions in funding for the public school system,⁵ the capacity of the idea of the 'Miss' both to seduce and to serve as a mascot for the island and its fragility has reiterated the territory's underlying geopolitical ambiguity even as it has paradoxically proven too strong to resist. The ways in which the island is evoked through the use of terms for natural disasters, by both metropolitans and islanders, recalls the colonialism that drove its maritime history and its historical connection to Asia given its location in the Indian Ocean. The use of the term 'hybrid' also injects the core of a critical difference in the DOM's relationship with France, evoking the ways in which the suburban uprisings of 2005 brought to the forefront of the French national imagination the ongoing difficulties within hexagonal France of accepting the presence of 'others' within its metropolitan boundaries, whether these 'others' were in fact immigrants from elsewhere or displaced *domiens* from the French 'periphery' of the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean. In fact, as reported by the *Guardian*:

[p]ublic figures, including an MP from Nicolas Sarkozy's ruling party, signed a letter demanding a public apology [by the pageant] for the insult against Reunion islanders and all of France's 'overseas citizens'. They said the row 'reeked' of a 'dark past' and bygone era in relations with France.⁶

The preponderance here of tropes of racial and historico-cultural difference reinforces the separation that haunts the relation between France and its peripheral territories. Curiously, the same article opens with this sentence: 'The fiercely competitive world of French beauty pageants is not known for sparking philosophical debate between Catholic bishops and politicians, let alone a threatened uprising on an exotic ocean island',⁷ thus reinscribing the island both as an 'exotic' artefact and as a distant one, and reinforcing the role of the pageant as the colonially-inflected forum for an unlikely political discourse.

De Fontenay's desire for Bègue to accept her moral lack is reported in the *Times*, in which Charles Bremner quotes de Fontenay as follows: 'If she had some courage and a bit of dignity she would say: "I'm resigning because I'm not worthy to carry on as Miss France"'.⁸ Calling into question the beauty queen's moral legitimacy to hold the crown, de Fontenay also indicates that she herself does not want to be associated with the islander: 'I wouldn't want to be seen touring the provinces with a girl like that. Let her stay in La Reunion.'⁹ The very suggestion that the girl is 'like that' – predicated as it is on presumptions of difference familiar to the audience – because she comes from Réunion is highly charged of course, drawing attention to France's hierarchical and deleterious relations with its 'others'. Historically, the Ile Bourbon, once also known as Ile Bonaparte before finally becoming Ile de la Réunion, was a sugar colony – complete with the classic corollaries that typically accompanied sugar cultivation in

5. See Bernadette Loubier, 'La Réunion en masse pour sa Miss; après le chikungunya et le cyclone Gamède, nouvelle catastrophe en 2007, l'île a failli perdre sa Miss France, pour cause de photos frivoles; folle semaine de mobilisation sur fond de défense de l'identité locale', *Libération*, 3 January 2008, p. 26.
6. Angelique Chrysafis, 'Racism Row: Call for Miss France to quit over Photos', *Guardian*, 24 December 2007, p. 17.
7. Angelique Chrysafis, *op. cit.*
8. Charles Bremner, 'Island Rises to Save Miss France's Crown', *Times Online*, 24 December 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article3091000.ece> p. 1. Accessed 20 March 2008.
9. Charles Bremner, *op. cit.*

10. Monique Boyer,
Métisse, Paris:
Harmattan, 1992.
11. Pierre Bourdieu,
*Language and Symbolic
Power*, Cambridge:
Harvard University
Press, 1999, p. 38.
12. Monique Boyer
Métisse, p. 128.
13. Monique Boyer,
Métisse, p. 128.

the colonial era, such as slave-based labour and rigid social divisions based on race – much like its neighbouring island of Mauritius (Ile de France and then later Ile Maurice). Though Réunion became a department in 1946 and then a region in 1974, its inhabitants never mustered a majority voice to separate from France.

The novel, *Métisse* (1992), written by the Réunionese author, Monique Boyer, problematizes the complex network of cultural avatars undergirding the inherited traces of Frenchness in Réunion: language and culture, education, entry into middle-class Frenchness and, most broadly, French citizenship.¹⁰ In addition, many of these ambiguities and contradictions are grounded in language, and more specifically in the ethno-linguistic phenomena that emerged from the culturally plural encounter with slavery, which continue to mark France's peripheral territories with specificities of culture and place that, in their turn, problematize France's projection of a national unicity grounded in universalism and *intégrisme*. Language, then, or indeed linguistic difference, becomes a powerful arbiter of identity within a social context of negotiated relationships; as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, 'linguistic exchanges [...] are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized'.¹¹ We might see Boyer's entire text, then, as an excavation and a searching critique of the narrator's possible complicity with the compound paradoxes of white citizenship in French Réunion.

In a key scene from *Métisse*, the narrator's parents encounter one another after their divorce:

Ma mère était venue rendre visite à sa sœur Iréna. Elle se retrouva au moment de sortir face à mon père sur le pas de la porte. C'était la première fois qu'ils se revoyaient.

Ma mère alors, fouillant au fond d'elle la plus dure, la plus insupportable des insultes, ma mère lui dit avec rage:

— 'Espèce de cafre!'

Il s'engouffra dans la maison de ma tante Iréna, s'assit, prit sa tête dans ses mains noires. Tout bruit avait cessé. [...]

Longtemps après il se leva, partit sans avoir ouvert la bouche, retirant enfin sa tête de ses mains. Tandis qu'y résonnaient encore ces mots, ces terribles mots.¹²

While the term *cafre* is not necessarily pejorative, its clear racial connotations become horrific in the mouth of the speaker, given her identity and the circumstance of the word's enunciation. While on the one hand the narrator continues: '[p]endant 31 ans il n'était donc resté qu'un cafre, aux yeux de celle qu'il avait sortie de la misère, la mère de ses enfants',¹³ the violence of the *métissage* Vergès invokes is recorded differently. It registers the pain of a complex interaction between two individuals, which cannot occur outside that of the over-determined sphere of interracial relations whose configurations are inherited from colonial practices; nor can it occur outside the historical imbalance of power between the sexes, itself exacerbated during the colonial encounter. With astounding lucidity, the narrator later understands that: 'les mots durs que ma mère humiliée, mortifiée par le départ de mon père, avait prononcés, fouillés

tout au fond d'elle, *n'étaient pas siens: ils étaient ceux des femmes, des hommes, de tout ce que notre terre avait porté* (added emphasis).¹⁴ This understanding is remarkable in that it inscribes and internalizes a clearly racist remark by linking it structurally to a fundamental social problematic within Réunion (our land), and, in so doing, it limits the momentum of racializing French colonial logic, and undoes the presumptive practices undergirding bourgeois individual identity as authentic or even functional for the people of Réunion. On the other hand, it renders responsible (and victimized) 'the (gendered) people' (the women, the men) as well as the entire fabric of the society – of the land. This larger understanding of Réunionness is subtle in that it is embodied in the land itself – as an isolated island whose colonial history was indelibly marked by its topography of highlands where marooned slaves escaped and towards which poor whites were pushed as wealthier immigrants arrived and took over the land, and with its treacherous harbour where various other immigrant populations arrived – so that the land is a participant in the creation of this unaccomplished 'nation' from the complex patterns of *métissage* through (still from the above quotation) the 'bearing' (carrying as well as birthing) of this relation.

The narrator, Anne-Marie, understands in the negative epithet her mother's gendered claim to whiteness as being the only space of rationality that the narrative of (failed) interracial marriage in Réunion allowed. She uncovers the myriad ways in which the colonial idiom and its accompanying logic continue to have currency even as the hierarchical legacies they left are slowly being undone generation by generation, through both individual and collective actions. The epithet underlines the fact that '[t]he specific class element, and the effects upon this of an insecure economy, are parts of the personal choice [of marriage] which is after all a choice primarily of a way to live, of an identity in the identification with this or that other person' (original emphasis).¹⁵ Marcelle's way of entering the middle class through her black husband would ultimately prove contradictory at a certain level, betraying a sort of bifurcated desire of race and class, and so could not, in the end, sustain her in the identification with a black man. This is because, for her, his blackness consistently called up her fraudulent stature within this class due to the unspoken social structure through which her middle-class position sought its validation and coherence: the acquisition of French citizenship. Réunionness, here, is 'at the very edge of semantic availability',¹⁶ and is in fact not at all available to Marcelle. It falls to the precocity of her daughter to unearth this structure in such an unlikely, personal and painful space.

It is in this sense that we can note a shift in perceived totalities that particular acts posit. In the racialized language of the narrator's parents, the French nation is the cultural and geopolitical totality that gives them coherence. But sensitive to what race signifies, and yet seeking a way out of it through class and nation, Anne-Marie's narrative accesses a new totality in the form of a structure of feeling.

Even as instinctive proclivities or the disinclination of individuals for each other takes place within the force fields of these interactions, only a critical view of the individual history of specific interactions and their relation to history helps to set critical parameters for group identity without

14. Monique Boyer, *Métisse*, p. 120.
15. Raymond Williams, 'Thomas Hardy', in ed. John Higgs, *Raymond Williams Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 119–40, p. 138.
16. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 134.

17. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, *Eloge de la créolité*, Paris: Gallimard, 1989, p. 75.
18. Monique Boyer, *Métisse*, p. 133.
19. Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 36.

being completely compromised by disingenuousness or, worse, indifference. If, on the one hand, Frenchness is always presumed to be whiteness, on the other hand, whiteness is not always Frenchness. Therefore, it is critical to note that any feeling of non-Frenchness, of non-belonging on the part of the protagonist, becomes the starting point for developing the logic of rejecting Frenchness, a strategic shift that, notably, is accessed in the Creole language. In other words, *métissage*, when lived out as a diffractive process mediating the production of non-Frenchness (of differently inflected spaces of non-Frenchness), then moves away from an investment in racial description and precision to indicate a structure of feeling whose desire for articulation seeks an alternative, non-synthesized totality of *relation* for its limits that the French nation cannot fulfil.

However, *métissage* does not generate a simplistically utopian alternative to departmental status related to French nationhood. From the perspective of the Réunionese 'people', the violent moment inscribed in Boyer's text is a devastating reminder of the impossibility of difference to be equally different (and different 'equally') from a disparate set of comparative criteria; thus the (in)famous idealistic and identitarian cry, 'Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creole',¹⁷ from another French DOM that arguably shares a comparative historical experience, is constantly rendered impossible at the level of individual interactions, and, by extension, of groups. In the end, the playing out of race and its myriad permutations in this context is so intricately bound up with pervasive post/colonial questions of gender and class, that disentangling them in each instance becomes a painful surgical process where each extricated part always connects up through the tissue to another, sometimes surprisingly distant one.

Anne-Marie's father visits his daughter, the narrator, and her newly-born child. When some guests arrive, he leaves the house unnoticed. Later, she speaks to him, upset that she was unable to introduce him to her guests, as she had wanted. At this juncture, his answer belies a shocking repetition of her mother's branding strategy. This strategy derives from a process that necessarily leads to a complex working-through of the ongoing history of colonialism in Réunion. He answers: 'Je ne voulais pas te faire honte! Ne me fréquente plus, ne me dis plus bonjour. Personne ne saura que ton père est un cafre!'¹⁸ thus reverting to the same discourse that his wife uses, for the same historical reasons, only from a differently inflected space within the same society. It is this perception and understanding of the symbolic power of discourse and its connections to points of enunciation that enables their daughter to break out of this infernal inheritance by means of a huge, courageous, and emotional effort of separation. She accomplishes this through a critical historical understanding of her parents' story as a couple, to feel her place within this nation (and to feel it into being) in a 'relational' way that is impossible for them to do.

Further, *Métisse* refuses the tenets of Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space' that 'represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy',¹⁹ because it disallows such a split between the two. The term *cafre*, for example, brought together effectively these two spaces by resolutely denying that there was any understanding of it both as a generality and then as a

particularity. The only possible implication, its only possibility of coherence, for *both* the white mother *and* the black father was the general signification of the uncivilized Negro, made a slave in recent European history, who is perceived as being culturally and developmentally inferior to the (Creole) French settler. Colonial hybridity, as an ethnocultural phenomenon, and as the colonial novel amply and plurally demonstrates (although we have neither the time nor the space to examine that today), does not undo this hierarchy. If, extrapolating from Bhabha's version of hybridity we were to ask for specifics of the process of interpretation and signification at work in this novel, it would seem reasonable that the meaning of the utterance be specified in a Réunionese idiom. In so doing, it is impossible, following this text, to impute any ambiguity to these particular usages of the term *caf're*; in other words, it cannot be read as anything other than a negative enunciation of *nègre*. Within the immediate context of the novel, the term does not give the historically objectified black man agency in the moment of its utterance – it is instantiated neither by his wife nor by himself. Neither is able to implement a significant change to the colonially driven resonances and implications that accompany this term, even within a singular, long-sought-for moment of ethical agency.

Difference is thus held together, fragmented and fragile, through a totality that the 'nation' (which is not [yet?]) provides: 'J'aime l'heure où le soleil s'éteint p'tits pas-p'tits pas, après avoir tout le jour durant, arrosé de ses feux *notre bout* de terre de La Réunion' (added emphasis)²⁰ are the opening lines of this 'récit réunionnais', as publishers Harmattan categorize the book. From a collective perspective, the question that is asked is: 'Who are we?', a question that Edouard Glissant considers urgent in the context of Martinique – as opposed to what he terms 'a question that from the outset is meaningless', that is, 'Who am I?'²¹ The close association of the Creole language and the culture of Réunion as the compound identitarian ground from which the non-French nation is experientially evoked necessarily encompasses the system of metropolitan hierarchies driving such colonial phenomena as the imposition of the French educational system and the simultaneous denigration of Creole language. Quite simply, for Axel Gauvin, to deny the reality of Creole and the reality of its speakers is to deny the reality of the 'nation': 'Les colonialistes nient donc la langue réunionnaise pour mieux nier l'existence de la nation réunionnaise' ('The colonialists thus deny the Réunionese language to better deny the existence of the Réunionese nation').²² *Métisse* allows us to identify a structure of feeling that valorizes the role of a group identity beyond class, gender and race, even while properly recognizing them. It asks Glissant's question, 'Who are we?', as the essential basis of its own *raison d'être* ('Who am I?'). And it shows that the answer, 'We are French', is dismally inadequate.²³

The limits of cosmopolitanism for Réunionese 'beauties'

Bègue was in some ways vindicated, and her island along with her, when she was allowed to keep her crown. However, her victory was conditional upon her agreement to withdraw from participating in the Miss World contest. The three hundred people (as reported by Jean-Michel Normand of *Le Monde*), who protested in the streets of Réunion's capital of Saint-Denis seem to have made more noise than the island's volcano, which

20. Monique Boyer *Métisse*, p. 7.
21. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. Michael Dash, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989, p. 86.
22. Axel Gauvin, *Du créole opprimé au créole libéré: Défense de la langue réunionnaise*, Paris: Harmattan, 1977, p. 65.
23. Analysis of Boyer's text from Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 34. A more complete analysis of Boyer's text is available in the same chapter.

24. Various websites now provide the entire *Code Noir*. See, for example, <http://www.codenoir.info/lecture.html>. Accessed 25 March 2008.
25. K. Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: Norton, 2006, p. 144.
26. K. Anthony Appiah, op. cit., pp. 137–51; parentheses in original.
27. K. Anthony Appiah, op. cit., pp. 137–53.
28. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985. p. 99.
29. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, op. cit., p. 100.

itself made news in April of 2007 for threatening an eruption. Even though Bègue is not the first to be subject to punitive action by a beauty pageant for having previously posed for ‘compromising pictures’, in her case it has struck a raw nerve from the past, in ways that are particularly interesting to postcolonial analyses. Her French citizenship from Réunion, through the latter’s departmental status, effectively rearticulates the pathetic statement embodied in the 59th article of the seventeenth-century *Code Noir*:

Octroyons aux affranchis les mêmes droits, privilèges et immunités dont jouissent les personnes nées libres; voulons que le mérite d’une liberté acquise produise en eux, tant pour leurs personnes que pour leurs biens, les mêmes effets que le bonheur de la liberté naturelle cause à nos autres sujets.²⁴

While France wanted, as early as the seventeenth century, to award to all its free slaves ‘citizenship’ and access to the same privileges as those who were born free, this twenty-first-century event suggests that the weight of having the ‘merit of an acquired liberty’ still bears heavily on the shoulders of its ‘other’ citizens. De Fontenay’s indignant reaction that such a girl should have the nerve to parade around like a ‘real’ French citizen is indicated in her exhortation that she should stay ‘there’ in Réunion where she is from, thereby conveniently both capitalizing on and reconfirming the double vision of distance and difference that frames the DOMs. It is impossible in a world where such weighted perceptions persist to embrace Anthony Appiah’s proposal for the broad acceptance of cosmopolitanism, where ‘everybody matters’ and there is a ‘commitment to pluralism’,²⁵ without asking if everyone is going to matter *as much*, or to which pluralisms it will be *more* worth committing oneself. This is particularly the case when Appiah’s plural world is not only populated by different people from different societies, but people who must come to terms with their different values as well. Only, he writes, ‘(But they have to be values *worth* living by)’.²⁶ Who decides on this worth? One is reminded of Emmanuel Levinas’ more forceful, yet seductive, articulation of an ethical force at the level of the most intimate movement of human thought pertinent to the widest range of different individuals. Appiah’s citation of various counter-cosmopolitans ends up evoking the most predictable ‘others’ of enlightened intellectuals in the community he is privileged to address.²⁷ In general Appiah’s comfortable cosmopolitanism is troubled by Levinas’ more simple notion of responsibility that instantiates limitless demands to which one can only aspire to respond. In doing so we are daily called upon to extend the limits of individual ‘love’ that seem reserved so selfishly to a bare minimum circle, and which are particularly striking today in familial and societal structures linked to highly capitalized formations over the entire globe. For Levinas, ‘the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility’.²⁸ Noting the extreme formulation, Levinas nonetheless insists that one is responsible for the Other’s responsibility to the point that subjectivity assumes willingly and yet inevitably the position of ‘hostage’.²⁹ It is precisely this voluntary ‘hostage-ness’ that Appiah helps us avoid. With Levinas one is compelled to

demand more of oneself, while in reading Appiah one is given every tool to feel good about what one has already done. In a certain way, Appiah's cosmopolitanism seeks to provide a narrative that seems to effect an overall simplification of human agency, engendering the notion, for example, of a people once rich enough to dress in traditional clothes but who still choose to 'run around in T-shirts', to which Appiah's comment is: 'so much the worse, I say, for authenticity'.³⁰ The point is that the processes by which traditional clothes are rendered too expensive for any population group are ones that deeply mark both their collective identity and the contradictions within the totality of such a collectivity. Studying *métissage* in specific contexts reveals similar complexities arising from linking particular historical experiences to current impulses and desires within Réunionese society. Thinking of mankind or of the human family in a cosmopolitan mode makes it ethically incumbent upon us, as Simone de Beauvoir wrote astutely, to assure our 'salvation' within our own existence,³¹ thus imbuing the idea of the future with both finite concreteness and the urgency of our own particular surroundings. These impulses, and their implications for addressing the lingering differences of the DOMs, are essentially incompatible with Appiah's cosmopolitan thinking.

From an alternative perspective, Françoise Vergès has suggested that there are two important moments of Creole cosmopolitanism – the appearance of what she calls 'universalist cosmopolitanism' in the first half of the twentieth century, and a 'revolutionary internationalism' that coincided with decolonization movements later in the century.³² She links the first moment to educated (and at least overtly assimilated) Creoles from France's Creole colonies serving in various posts across France's colonial empire and building a solidarity of shared perspectives across geographical boundaries within the French empire. This phenomenon was enabled by the fact of Creoles themselves not sharing similar ties to their homelands, such as existed within the ruptured history of the Creole colonies.³³ Following World War II, this position was made untenable due to the importance that the phenomenon of national allegiance would acquire in the Third World. Vergès takes up Frantz Fanon's life and work as providing an answer to the anachronistic universalist version of Creole cosmopolitanism during the period that she terms revolutionary internationalism.³⁴ Highlighting the notion of vertigo from Fanon, Vergès writes that '[v]ertigo was provoked by the gap between group identification and identification with a shared humanity'.³⁵ If the first version in its universalist reach overlooked race and class, it can be argued that the second moment effectively re-introduced them. Vergès is careful to note that both versions depended upon exclusionary practices to establish themselves.³⁶ In a rather more pessimistic view that situates Creole cosmopolitanism in a contemporary frame, Vergès proposes that it holds potential against French assimilation, as well as new nativisms, but that it cannot provide a model for similar problems in the current context of globalization.³⁷ Notwithstanding Vergès' characteristically careful conclusion, it is possible to think globally through the Creole examples, while not casting them as paradigms. This has been proposed elsewhere by analysing hybridity by thinking through particular instances of Creole

30. K. Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: Norton, p. 106.
31. Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, (trans. Bernard Frechtman), 1967–1948), New York: Citadel, p. 120.
32. Françoise Vergès, 'Vertigo and Emancipation: Creole Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Politics', *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 18:2-3, 2001, pp. 169–83, p. 4.
33. Françoise Vergès, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–7.
34. Françoise Vergès, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
35. Françoise Vergès, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
36. Françoise Vergès, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
37. Françoise Vergès, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

38. See Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects*, p. 105–45.
39. Françoise Vergès, 'Vertigo and Emancipation: Creole Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Politics', *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 18:2–3, pp. 169–83, p. 13.
40. Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005; Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, includes responses by Jeremy Waldron, Bonnie Honig, Will Kymlicka, and Robert Post; as well as K. A. Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in the World of Strangers*.
41. Quoted in Ziphezhinle Msimango, 'The Naked Truth', *Times*, 19 January 2008, <http://www.thetimes.co.za/PrintEdition/Lifestyle/Article.aspx?id=682025>. Accessed 25 March 2008, p. 1.
42. Ziphezhinle Msimango, op. cit.
43. Carpanin Marimoutou, 'La Belle Créole: notes sur une figure problématique de la littérature réunionnaise', in eds Kumari R. Issur and Vinesh Y. Hookoomsing, *Océan indien dans les littératures francophones*, Paris: Karthala, 2001, p. 407–43, p. 410.
- cultural production and agency, and recognizing the importance of the thought of both Fanon and Glissant to this context.³⁸
- Vergès also convokes Glissant's thought to cosmopolitanism, although the latter's proposals are quite different from the ones that emerge following the more recent conception of this notion by Appiah. While these differences cannot be traced here, two main points in earlier work were that in speaking about hybridity as a form of politics, the twin notions of totality and contradiction are essential to an understanding of the ethical dimension of marking hybridity in a bid for agency in situations marked by unequal power. This answers Vergès' doubt regarding the scope of cosmopolitanism for Creolized territories, communities and subjects, when she brings Glissant's work together with that of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy but asks what difference the 'Creole' specificity might introduce. Vergès notes that '[Creole cosmopolitanism] is a framework for imagining oneself in the world'.³⁹ But in contemplating the notion of 'cosmopolitanism' – as it has made a comeback in recent years⁴⁰ – it is worthy to heed Glissant's assertion that the Creole experience of uprootedness provides a framework for imagining individual encounters with the Other through a radical ethics of Otherness whose most transformative power is known at the level of self. However, it emerges that the implications of such a truly historical and material uprootedness, one that certainly characterizes the Creole experience, as we have seen in the case of Réunionese *métissage*, tend toward emphasizing local solidarity for the many unresolved historical issues that are linked to such uprootedness.
- Bègue's 'Réunionese' moment called up these theoretical questions of identity and agency with regard to her island's situation within France's 'post'colonial present. The question of identity for Bègue was first and foremost defined in physical terms, as the winner of a beauty pageant. From such a particular perspective, her pale skin, light eyes and physical traits would, for example, easily allow her to be one of the models from Joel Pelerin's photography exhibit of nude women, which claims to take as its subject *métissage* in Réunion. Entitled 'A Woman's Story', this arguably fetishized and exoticized exhibit opened in early 2008 in South Africa. While the photographs include beautiful mixed-race women from the island, it is unclear exactly what story of *métissage* is being told. Pelerin claims in the *South African Times*: 'A trans-cultural and multi-ethnic theme runs through most of my photography. But my work is more centrally focused on the femininity of Indian Ocean women.'⁴¹ While the photographer wants the world to see that racial mixing happens in Réunion and so could happen anywhere, and the terms by which femininity are defined here are certainly open to debate, the female journalist finds that the pictures seem 'less about the colour of women as sexualising them'.⁴² As Carpanin Marimoutou has remarked with regard to the history of the exoticized (white) Creole woman in literary representation: 'Derrière le mythe de la belle créole se laisse appréhender une anthropologie du regard masculin, exote ou natif'.⁴³ Bègue's crown, awarded over a century after the mythologization of the Creole woman, provides a similar stamping of some 'cosmopolitan' idea of universally recognizable physical beauty through a universalized masculine gaze. Thus the revocation of her award – and the social status and recognition that are its corollary – was also

implicitly carried out in the name of her body and its pre-pageant exposure, imbuing the latter with moral signification. These 'depraved' morals, which were not deemed worthy of the public figure that she would become, were then surreptitiously and subversively linked, particularly by the grande dame of the pageant, to the ambiguity of her already denigrated Creole origins and, by inference and extension, their basis and location in distant Réunion island.

Looking at the text, *Métisse*, from this perspective, the proclamation that Bègue is the (even dethroned) *French* beauty queen suddenly appears dimly inadequate. In the context of Pelerin's exhibit, for example, whether or not the nude photography of women is itself questioned, using nude women to represent the historical patterns and possibilities of *métissage* is at the very least quite a charged notion. However, the French-born photographer seems to completely elide the implications of this issue by saying: 'My wife is from Madagascar and I'm white. Our two children were born in Réunion Island. So I think that's why the subject of mixed race is my focus.'⁴⁴ The tensions and teleologies of *métissage* in Réunion are much broader than this 'new' instance of it recorded in the photographer's biography, just as they predate his positionality as a Frenchman who has lived in Réunion for about twenty years. The point is not simply that he did not invent *métissage*, of course, but that *métissage* as it is cited in the case seems to be somehow the most incongruous and reductive example of it to highlight, when all around him, indeed in most of his models, the physical inscription of *métissage* recalls and reinforces Réunion's *métisse* history of slavery, indenture, colonialism and Creolization. Pelerin's version of cosmopolitanism seems almost trivial in its desire to unite the cosmos as one polis. In fact, the racial and gendered articulation of *métissage*, as inscribed in the instances recorded in his photography, calls up instead Vergès' clear-sighted view of the colonially driven contexts and limits of Creole cosmopolitanism today. Indeed, this incapacity of the notion of cosmopolitanism seems to summon its implicit suggestion of sophistication from patterns of world travel and related experiences, giving rise to a certain elitism that – despite his disclaimers – Appiah's book so clearly exemplifies. At the same time, of course, it must be admitted that as a philosophical concept cosmopolitanism aspires to somehow seek the moral unity of humankind.

Is the 'post' in 'postcolonial' 'cosmopolitan'?⁴⁵

The presence of the Communist Party of Réunion (PCR) at the protests in favour of Bègue is less surprising than it might seem. Founded by Raymond Vergès soon after departmentalization, it was one of the strongest voices for autonomy for Réunion. In fact, the political history of the island can be traced quite effectively through the career of the ex-prime minister of France, Michel Debré, who succeeded in having himself elected *député* of Saint-Denis through the support of those who opposed autonomy. This right-wing position was strongly debated and opposed in Réunionese politics by the PCR, whose official publication, *Témoignages*, recently included virulent opposition to Bègue's treatment in the metropole, rehabilitating in some ways the errors of departmentalization that it had vehemently opposed in its pages right through the 1960s. This woeful moment for the beauty queen mediated the resurgence of the PCR's open

44. Quoted in Ziphezhinle Msimango, op. cit.

45. This is borrowed from Appiah's own 'Is the "Post-" in "Post-colonial" the "Post-" in "Postmodern"?' in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (eds and introd.), *Dangerous Liaisons*, Twin Cities: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 420–44.

46. Peter Hawkins, 'How Appropriate is the Term "Post-Colonial" to the Cultural Production of Réunion?', in ed. Kamal Salhi, *Francophone Post-Colonial Cultures: Critical Essays*, Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003, pp. 311–20, p. 313.
47. See Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, and Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects*.
48. Peter Hawkins, 'How Appropriate is the Term "Post-Colonial" to the Cultural Production of Réunion?' p. 313.
49. Peter Hawkins, op. cit., p. 314.
50. See Peter Hawkins, op. cit., p. 314, for a list of 'hybrid' cultural productions from Réunion.
51. See Anjali Prabhu, op. cit., p. 116–7.
52. Peter Hawkins, op. cit., p. 319.

stand against the French presence in the 1960s and early 1970s – precisely the Debré years in Réunion. Paul Vergès' revolutionary position as the leader of the communist party was reflected in the consistent positions taken by the latter in favour of the ideal of 'international' communism, whether it was for the revolutionaries in Angola or against feudalism in Afghanistan, while simultaneously supporting Soviet intervention in that country. In the 1990s, the PCR was vocally against the number of 'zoreys' (metropolitan French persons) working in Réunion, and reiterated the importance of privileging 'regional' interests over the importation of goods, services and people from abroad. In any event, the robust presence of the PCR attests to its more than 50-year-old history of articulating the island's marginal status, defending its interests against those of the metropole and constantly reminding its people of the dangers that total affiliation with France present to the interests of locals.

In making 'post-colonialism', as Peter Hawkins suggests, 'at least one aspect of post-modernism' and taking Bhabha's theorization of hybridity as the more pertinent in its 'correspond[ence] to the situation of Réunionese literary and cultural production',⁴⁶ we miss the deeply political significations of 'post'colonial articulations of hybridity that much of the cultural production of Réunion privileges and works through. The idea that one can separate the desire for nation (as one of the primary vehicles for emancipation) from cultural hybridity and its traces of colonialism does not hold true, at least in the case of Réunion.⁴⁷ Moreover, if we simplify hybridity as 'impl[y]ing' a deliberate choice, and as in the domain of horticulture, a chosen combination of characteristics with a view to certain desired results, certain new characteristics',⁴⁸ we effectively gloss over Bhabha's most radical, if problematic, claims about hybridity regarding the subject and language. For these reasons, hybridity in Gauvin's novels remains interesting, but would have to undergo huge simplification if Réunionese métissage were to be found in them because they are 'in a French coloured by the regional idioms of Réunion; at the same time, they enjoy the prestige of being published by a Parisian institution such as Le Seuil even while publishing versions in Creole of the same novels' with a local Réunionese publisher.⁴⁹ Hybridity, as Hawkins presents the Réunionese version, would then be much closer to what we define as colonial hybridity, which, in many ways, is closer to multiculturalism⁵⁰ and very far removed from analyses stemming from Bhabha's insightful and useful distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference, as well as Glissant's poetic separation between thought of the Other and the Other of thought. Both these theorists displace hybridity from its status as simply a relationship forged in the dialectic between colony and metropolis, majority and minority, or centre and periphery, and problematize the difference inscribed within hybridity by introducing the primacy of an ethics of difference.⁵¹ This is a point also emphasized in diverse ways by those whom Hawkins does and does not evoke: Françoise Lionnet, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, Bhabha, Hall, and Gilroy, for example. Hawkins then labels the purpose of his analysis of Daniel Vaxelaire's novel, which he terms a 'typical example of Francophone cultural production from the island of Réunion', apparently in order 'to show the usefulness of the new theories and approaches labelled "postcolonial" in relation to the cultural production of Réunion Island'.⁵² The resulting

split between postcolonialism and Réunionese cultural production inflects the previously cited reading of Boyer's novel, revealing that it is impossible to speak of hybridity in Réunion without accounting for: the relationship of Creole to French in both the specific literary text and wider Réunionese history; the many evolving meanings of Frenchness for the people of Réunion; the history of *métissage* (following Vergès' work); the force of nationhood as a structure of feeling that is verifiable beyond the literary text for the very period Hawkins considers; and the newer emergence of ethnic identity in Réunionese culture.⁵³ In fact, it becomes clear that, when applied to Réunion, hybridity requires a rethinking of some of the central tenets of its more cosmopolitan, postcolonial versions discussed elsewhere in greater detail.⁵⁴ Speaking of Indochina and the Netherland Indies, Laura Anne Stoler has incisively shown that 'nowhere is [the] relationship between inclusionary impulses and exclusionary practices more evident than in how *métissage* was legally handled, culturally inscribed, and politically treated'.⁵⁵ The horticultural model, then, does little to illuminate the complexity that *métissage* implies as both a socially identifiable feature and a specifically located politics of emancipation.

The multiple reactions to Bègue's dethroning as Miss France bring into sharp focus the fragility of ancient notion of cosmopolitanism that is riddled with all the ambiguities and incongruities of its more recent incarnation in Enlightenment idealism. If the basic uniting factor of humans across all divisions is rationality, it has been the experience of the Réunionese people – both as colony and as *département d'outre-mer* – to conceive quite differently of what rationality would dictate. Such difference is evident when Réunionese experience of *métissage* is compared with metropolitan colonial ideals of assimilation as well as when *métissage* is defined through the demands of different Réunionese communities as they are articulated through ethnicity, history, gender, language and class. Colonially driven patterns of hybridity in Réunion, along with an ethnicization of self and Other, have engendered locationally specific identity structures, producing assertions of affiliation – within the implied universality embodied in the DOM – that subvert European notions of homogeneous origin, self-identity and community. In any event, a combination of geopolitical and economic factors has rendered it simply impossible for the vast majority of Réunionese people to move away from their island (even to France, although they all technically carry French passports and have done since 1946) and thereby exercise even the theoretical possibility of cosmopolitanism in its more extreme articulation: to be no less attached to the people of their home than any other people in a different geographical area. Indeed, it seems more pressing to think of the questions of citizenship (whether it be Réunionese, French, or conceived in some more ideally articulated universalism) through the multiply inflected Creole idiom that is clearly an identitarian articulation rooted in the ethno-historical experience, not simply a question of language, nor one of 'culture' in some disembodied version. Such an evocation of totality – one that must be separate and different from French claims of universalism or *intégrisme* – might more graciously and *effectively* than cosmopolitanism, acknowledge, embrace and value the different historical experiences of *métissage* around which are constructed multiple versions of hybridity, both imposed and

53. Anjali Prabhu, op. cit., pp. 19–49.

54. Anjali Prabhu, op. cit., pp. 1–18.

55. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 179.

56. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1998, p. 91. For an illuminating discussion on the notion of the face, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 99, 94–96.

claimed, and which are clearly identifiable in the cultural, political and economic fabric of this island. It is clear that the pressing presence of colonial hierarchies continues to suggest relations between centre and periphery, grounding them in old and renewed power hierarchies. These latter translate into perceptions of ethnic and cultural difference that events such as the one analysed here work to expose. The fact that responsibility is the one aspect of the self that cannot be transferred remains the supreme egoism of individuals that binds us to one another through agency and over and above ties that are patriotic, historical or ethnic, for example. Encountering what Levinas calls 'the face' of the Other⁵⁶ for individuals in Réunion has led to inspiring efforts at identitarian interrogation, which are anchored in finite and concrete conceptions of the future. Such conceptions are readable in the cultural and political landscape of this island. Miss France's woes that rendered her, above all, *Réunionese*, reiterate the island's complex colonial history, question the limits of its Frenchness, as well as the postcoloniality of its status as a DOM, and thrust its (uncharted) future forward as the rekindled idea of (worldly) 'salvation' in de Beauvoir's terms. The tumultuous events surrounding the crowning of Miss France connect up the past and the future in the present of a recognizable collectivity we cannot call anything but *Réunionese*.

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