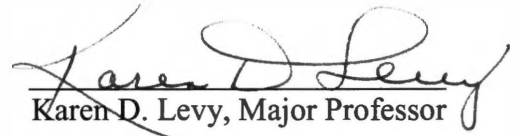
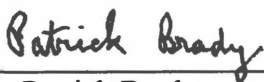


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ashlee S. Headrick entitled "Avancer pour ne pas tomber: Silhouettes of Renewal in the Autobiographically- inspired works of J. M. G. Le Clézio." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.

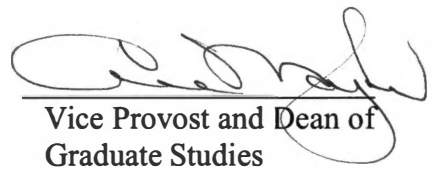

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We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:


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Acceptance for the Council:


Vice Provost and Dean of
Graduate Studies

Avancer pour ne pas tomber:
Silhouettes of Renewal
in the
Autobiographically- inspired Works of
J. M. G. Le Clézio

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Ashlee S. Headrick
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Alvin and Billiesue Sanders, teachers by nature and by profession, in gratitude for a lifetime of encouragement and the gift of the love of learning, and to my husband, Jon David Headrick, for his continual wonderful support, good humor, and fried chicken.

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*Life- giving, death- giving, which will it be,
O breath of the merciful, merciless sea?*

“City of the Sea”, Longfellow, 1881

Abstract

Contemporary French novelist Jean- Marie Gustave Le Clézio has been publishing novels, short stories, essays, and translations for nearly four decades and has been writing since the age of seven. In 1963, he received the prestigious Prix Renaudot for his first published novel, *Le Procès- verbal*, and in 1980, the Académie française awarded him the Grand Prix Paul Morand for the novel *Désert*. However, in that vast oeuvre, until the mid- eighties, the author had never written about those most personal subjects: his life and his family.

In 1985, 1986, 1991, and 1995, the author published a series of personally ground- breaking novels in which his own life and those of his family members provided the inspiration for the stories. They are, in order of publication dates, *Le chercheur d'or*, *Voyages à Rodrigues*, *Onitsha*, and *La quarantaine*. The autobiographical quality of these novels allows the reader access not only to fiction as an end product, but also to the creative process behind it. In the cases of the two novels inspired by the lives of the author's grandparents, *Le chercheur d'or* and *La quarantaine*, we can read not only the stories from the past, but also the accounts of the author's own journeys of reconstructing another time and writing the story of another. In *La quarantaine*, that process is part of the novel itself; for *Le chercheur d'or*, the author's search for the past is chronicled in the journal *Voyages à Rodrigues*. *Onitsha* is based upon the author's own experiences. By reading of the processes by which stories are discovered,

continued, and transformed, the texts provide a model for the creative process and a model for renewal.

Through language, structure, and theme, these four works emphasize the desperate need of modern societies for renewal, to live in a way that is more fully human. Creating and telling stories is one important source of renewal found in the texts, as is the willingness to meet others' practical needs, not with regard to who they are, but rather only to what they need. This way of living, which includes an attitude of generosity with resources and a recognition of the brevity of human life, is central to the call for renewal that may be found in these texts. Our participation is encouraged through their structure; the characters, narrators, and author expose both the sad results of stagnation and the life-affirming possibilities of transformation. In each of them, we find a call to renewal.

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Introduction

"Le temps apporte la mort, et le temps, c'est le renouvellement des générations,"¹ affirms J. M. G. Le Clézio, "le plus populaire des auteurs français"² in a 1997 interview. "Si vous n'avez pas confiance dans le renouvellement des générations, ou si vous avez peur que les autres prennent votre place ou celle de vos enfants, alors vous commencez de construire des murs,"³ he continues. The 1963 prix Renaudot laureate, like most of his readers, probably never questioned the existence of walls in homes or in other structures, until a life- changing experience in the early 1970s that introduced him to many new ways of thinking and living. From 1970 to 1974, Le Clézio lived on the Darien peninsula in Panama with native peoples the Emberas and the Waunanas. The experience humbled and changed the writer: "J'ai voulu être un Indien. Je n'étais pas digne d'être un Indien."⁴ He speaks about how many of his own fears were diminished after spending time in their midst: "J'ai changé mon image du temps au contact des Indiens. Avant cela, j'étais terrifié par des tas de choses qui ne me terrifient plus: la peur de la mort, la maladie, l'angoisse de l'avenir. Cela ne me terrifie plus de la même façon..."⁵ While acknowledging the technical advances of modern society, Le Clézio clearly sees in it a lack of the humanity and life- affirming character that he enjoyed with the Emberas people.

Si nous avions su vivre comme vivent les Amérindiens, ou comme ces gens du désert, nous n'aurions certainement pas eu à gérer autant de catastrophes. Certes, nous n'en

¹ Le Clézio to Gérard de Cortanze, "Une littérature de l'envahissement," *Magazine Littéraire*, Vol. 364, février 1998 24

² Marianne Payot, "J.- M. G. Le Clézio, loin de la foule," *Lire*, juin 1997 24

³ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 24

⁴ Le Clézio to Pierre Maury, "Un passeur pour l'ailleurs," *Magazine Littéraire*, Vol. 364, février 1998 56

⁵ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 24

serions pas au même degré de perfectionnement technique mais nous n'aurions pas non plus gaspillé, avec autant de facilité, nos chances de vie.⁶

Le Clézio's many and varied travels around the world have included periods of time spent in Mexico, New Mexico, Panama, Haiti, Morocco, Nigeria, Thailand, the islands of Rodrigues and Mauritius, and England, as well as in his native France; these experiences have profoundly influenced his thoughts and his writings. The author's personal experiences in many different parts of the world, along with a varied family heritage, contribute to a complex and often conflicted self. His ancestors of Breton origin established themselves on the island of Mauritius in the 18th century, and he lived the first eight years of his life with his mother and grandmother in Nice before departing in 1948 to join his father in Onitsha, Nigeria. In 1978, he defined his cultural identity as "citoyen français-mauricien appartenant à la culture occidentale."⁷

In the autobiographically- inspired novels *Le chercheur d'or*,⁸ 1985, *Onitsha* ⁹, 1991, and *La quarantaine*,¹⁰ 1995, and the journal *Voyages à Rodrigues*,¹¹ 1986, we find that the geographical diversity of the author's life and heritage have produced texts that are reflections of both the confrontations and the possibilities for transformation that arise when human beings encounter people

⁶ Ibid, 24

⁷ Germaine Brée, *Le monde fabuleux de J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Paris: Rodopi, 1990) 14

⁸ J.- M. G. Le Clézio, *Le chercheur d'or* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) All further references to this work will be made in the body of the text using the abbreviation *C* and the page number.

⁹ J.-M. G. Le Clézio, *Onitsha* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) All further references to this work will be made in the body of the text using the abbreviation *O* and the page number.

¹⁰ J.-M. G. Le Clézio, *La quarantaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) All further references to this work will be made in the body of the text using the abbreviation *Q* and the page number.

¹¹ J.-M. G. Le Clézio, *Voyages à Rodrigues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) All further references to this work will be made in the body of the text using the abbreviation *V* and the page number.

and circumstances whose culture, geography, or philosophy are in some way *Other*. The images of cultural confrontation are not from someone else's stories, but rather are part of efforts to recreate and re-imagine odysseys from Le Clézio's own life and family history. After nearly four decades of writing, the author had the courage to turn to his own personal and familial pasts as sources: "Père, mère, grands- parents... ils sont tous apparus dans l'oeuvre de Le Clézio de la deuxième époque."¹² In the author's acceptance of what Nicole Casanova describes, in a review of *Onitsha*, as "un rendez- vous auquel il avait paru se dérober jusqu'alors,"¹³ he gives up the shielding separation that previously existed between his work and his life. The result is that the four texts in question are now open to us, to be read, questioned, criticized, and continued.

The texts do not limit themselves to the story of one family. Rather, the myths, legends, and historical facts that are woven into and around the family's particular stories broaden the context of each text so that it resonates as part of the story of humanity: our hypocrisy and need for renewal and transformation are evident in these texts, as are possible sources for that renewal. Claude Jean- Nesmy notes concerning *Le chercheur d'or*, "les souvenirs bibliques donnent à cette histoire singulière portée universelle."¹⁴ Le Clézio offers these texts, which constitute a "personal archeology"¹⁵ as a context for the raising of questions

¹² Payot, 24

¹³ Nicole Casanova, "Onitsha: Le Clézio en rendez- vous avec lui- même." *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, Vol. 576, avril 1991, 14

¹⁴ Claude Jean- Nesmy, "Le chercheur d'or," *Esprit et Vie* Vol. 45, 1985 687

¹⁵ Madeleine Borgomano, "Onitsha de J.- M. G. Le Clézio, ou l'Afrique perdue," *Carrefour de culture: Mélanges offerts à Jacqueline Leiner*, ed. Régis Antoine (Tubingen: Narr, 1993) 243

whose relevance reaches much further than his own family story, and, in fact, concerns each of us.

The non-fiction journal *Voyages à Rodrigues*, published in 1986, records Le Clézio's retracing of his grandfather's steps in search of gold allegedly hidden on the island of Rodrigues. As the author/ narrator asks himself what his grandfather sought and found during the thirty years he spent scouring the unforgiving Rodrigues landscape, he writes that at the heart of every adventure lies the question, "Qui suis- je, ou, plutôt, *que* suis- je?" (V 134). It also seems to be the question that the journal and the three autobiographically- based novels simultaneously ask for their author, their characters, and their readers.

Why is "Qui suis-je?" revised to "*Que* suis- je?"? "Qui suis- je?" places the focus on the individual and his specific identity. The question "Que- suis- je?" broadens the quest. To seek to know *what* one is emphasizes function and effect rather than individuality. Implicit in the new question are the questions: "What function does my life on this earth have?" and "What effect does my existence have on those with whom I share the planet and on those who will come after me?"

The fact that these questions are privileged over the question, "Qui suis- je?", which pursues personal identity, should not surprise us. Again, the influence of the community- oriented Emberas and the Waunanas on the author resonates in this shift of focus. With the Emberas in Panama, Le Clézio discovered an example of the importance of "what" as opposed to "who" in the local food preparation and dining traditions. He points out that in their community, when a

meal is prepared, all who are present are invited to share the meal, regardless of whether or not they had any role in providing or preparing it. Nourishment is offered "du simple fait de leur existence... parce qu'ils ont tous droit à quelque chose."¹⁶ In other words, the important questions are not, "Who provided the food? Who prepared it?". Rather, it is rather the question, "What are you -- a human being?", which, in that community, establishes the right to food.

In "Sentiment et rêve de la politique," an article discussing Le Clézio's work in the context of modern political movements, François Marotin reflects on the author's time spent in Panama: "Les conceptions sur la propriété venues de l'Europe s'en trouvent relativisées."¹⁷ Indeed these texts do put many convictions, assumptions, obsessions, and myths of modern societies in a relative, rather than clearly dominant, position. The texts do not always explicitly denounce these elements, but rather portray the cultural confrontations and the journeys of the characters for the reader, and place an often disconcerting reality before us. As the author's longtime friend Jean Grosjean says, "Le Clézio n'explique pas beaucoup. Il met en présence des faits."¹⁸

What *is* put in the reader's presence in the autobiographically- inspired texts? Alexis of *Le chercheur d'or*, Fintan of *Onitsha*, Léon of *La quarantaine*, and the author/ narrator of *Voyages à Rodrigues*, all leave the places, peoples, and

¹⁶ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 24

¹⁷ François Marotin, "Sentiment et rêve de la politique," *Magazine Littéraire*, Vol. 364, février 1998 60

¹⁸ Jean Grosjean, "Le Clézio est hanté par la vie et les gens," told to Gérard de Cortanze, *Magazine Littéraire*, Vol. 364, février 1998 52

things known to them, cross the sea, and enter the unknown, “leurs ailleurs.”¹⁹ In each of these encounters, the contrasts repeatedly show that the newcomer has much to learn from the new place and those who live there. An imagined paradise becomes an all-too revealing mirror of the newcomer and/or his cultural heritage. The extent to which each character is able to learn the lessons taught varies greatly. Also, as Jean Grosjean’s comment suggests, the author is seldom explicit about what those lessons are, for these works are part of “une littérature... de recherche... celle d’un trésor caché que le lecteur attentif finit toujours par trouver.”²⁰ Character and reader alike are led, by liquid, flowing prose that reflects the sea it describes, to an unfamiliar place. In that place, be it Rodrigues, Onitsha, or the unnerving gaze of Rimbaud in an Aden hospital, both character and reader will find that the comfort and predictability left behind are irretrievably lost. A choice must then be made either to perpetually pursue the vain desire to return to the past, or to accept the risk of renewal.

In each of these four works, there are moments in which renewal seems possible, moments in which renewal is difficult to distinguish from futile repetition, and yet others in which characters reject it outright. Rarely is renewal shown to be complete, concrete, and real. Even the most hopeful moments tend to be covered in mystery, leaving the reader to imagine what the characters’ futures will be like. The texts reveal in our modern societies a desperate need for

¹⁹ Gabrielle Althen, “Narration et Contemplation dans le roman de J. M. G. Le Clézio,” *Sud* 85-86, 1989 129

²⁰ de Cortanze, 17

renewal, for a life that is more human, more inclusive, more “plein de pitié.”²¹ As Marianne Payot describes Le Clézio, he is an “écrivain souterrain [qui]... s’attaque à la modernité, aux supermarchés, aux autoroutes avant de prendre le large pour dénoncer l’exploitation des civilisations vaincues.”²² This is very true, but the denunciation of exploitation on societal as well as on individual levels does not also extend to a rejection of the *people* who have been guilty, but rather a call for us to see the reality of the effects of our own and our societies’ actions and to see that there are other ways of ordering our lives. It is the *acts* of colonization, exploitation, and the accompanying hypocrisy that the author and his work denounce. For the people implicated in these acts, the texts suggest the possibility of redemption and renewal of life that could come from making different choices.

The distinction between injustice and the imperfect human beings who propagate it is underscored by the sadness that a protagonist such as Léon in *La quarantaine* feels upon leaving his brother and his sister-in-law, despite the realization that they are self-absorbed and seemingly indifferent to the sufferings of others. When Léon sees that Jacques and Suzanne lack all concern for the plight of the immigrants who have lived through a smallpox quarantine on Flat Island with them and appear to ignore the potentially life-saving care that Suryavati, “cette jeune fille... d’une autre caste” (*Q* 413), has offered to Suzanne, he sees that a definitive split has occurred between him and Suryavati, and the

²¹ Casanova, 15

²² Payot, 25

two of them. He says goodbye to them, and accepts the fact that they will no longer inhabit the same world, but not without regret and sorrow. After the confrontation between the two brothers in which Léon tells Jacques, “Nous sommes devenus étrangers l’un pour l’autre, nous n’appartenons plus au même monde” (Q 414), Léon goes to the bedside of Suzanne, gravely ill with smallpox, and tells us of his love for the sister-in-law whom he will perhaps never see again, “Je l’aime, je ne pourrai pas l’oublier. C’est cela qui me met en colère, qui me met de l’eau dans les yeux” (Q 419). Just as the Archambau family was divided and diminished in this schism, so the human race has been by other moments of callousness and hypocrisy. In these autobiographically- inspired texts, we see some of the most tragic aspects of recent world history intertwined with some of the most painful moments and trying journeys in the lives of the Le Clézio family members. Out of those painful events, the characters in the novels, the author/narrator of *Voyages à Rodrigues*, and the reader are all confronted with the necessity of renewal, for it is clear that repetition of the past will not bring forth new life.

The possibility of renewal is suggested through events in the novels, through the narrator’s reflections in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, and through the secondary stories, structure, and language of all four texts. By secondary stories, I mean those narratives that characters or narrators tell, write, read, hear, or imagine in the course of the action of the primary story. At times, we experience the frustration of seeing a character who has been presented with an opportunity for a renewed life choose repetition instead. In other situations, we have hope for

renewal or even see it begin to take shape. In each narrative, however, there are some aspects of the plot, the source of the story, the moral position of the text, or all three, which are ambiguous. Both in the literary context, as readers, and in the global context, as individuals and as societies, it is we who must accept an active role and participate by using our imaginations and our ability to make choices.

This literature is not only one of a hidden treasure that we must find, as Gérard de Cortanze reminds us, but also one that suggests a future that we can imagine and create. Our participation is elicited in a number of ways. In some cases, there are aspects of the plot that are hidden from the reader. In others, such as in *Onitsha* and in *La quarantaine*, the texts include more than one narrative perspective, and those perspectives are in some ways competing with each other for the identity in the reader's mind as the "true" one. The reader is implicitly asked to use her imagination and make decisions as she reads in order to formulate her own understanding of the story. The processes of creating and renewal are not limited to the covers on either end of a text, for the reader must determine whether and how to perpetuate it.

I will examine how renewal is suggested on three levels: in the primary narratives, in the secondary stories and myths that infuse the primary narratives, and in the structures of the narratives. In particular, I will distinguish among clear moments of hope, moments in which renewal is rejected, and points at which the liquidity of the seductive prose tempts us and the characters to mistake repetition for renewal. I will consider the broad implications for readers of this kind of literature. In Chapter 1, I will explain how the structures of these narratives

require reader participation to fully create their stories. I will discuss structure first because it is this element that most directly pulls us into the process of creating. In accepting the risk of writing autobiographically- inspired material, the author exposed himself and his own life and became personally involved in his work in ways that one is not when writing fiction taken from other sources. As he is, as never before, an active and vulnerable participant in the text, the same is asked of us as readers. All of these stories have in common the fact that the characters find themselves, or put themselves, in unfamiliar territory, geographically and psychologically. They are asked to confront fears and hypocrisies, and to face contradictions. Yet these demons are not Grendels coming from afar; they come from within. We will see characters both face and refuse these confrontations, but none is exempt from the necessity to make a decision, and nor are we. There are questions to be resolved, completed, and continued in the texts, and it is their structures that create that tension. It is for that reason that I will begin by examining how the structures function in relation to the reader's involvement.

Chapter 2 will deal with *Onitsha*, the one work of fiction taken directly from the author's life. In this text, the author creates fictional versions of himself and his family and portrays them in the adventure of the life- changing year in which he left all that he had known to meet his father and live on a new continent. Next, we will explore *Le chercheur d'or*, in which the author's grandfather is depicted in psychologically similar circumstances. Like Fintan, Alexis experiences a rupture with life as he had known it at the age of eight. As an

adolescent, he leaves home and family to go to Rodrigues and pursue a treasure that an explorer had allegedly left there long ago. In this text, we see an opportunity for renewal rejected in favor of a cyclical pattern of separations and superficial reunions. In Chapter 4, I will consider the nonfiction text *Voyages à Rodrigues* as a model for the mutual transformation of texts and readers and as a bridge between the *Le chercheur d'or* and *La quarantaine*, two novels with “un même décor.”²³ *Voyages à Rodrigues* focuses closely on the “why” aspect of the actual search for treasure on Rodrigues made by the author’s paternal grandfather that inspired *Le chercheur d'or*, without the intricate plot of the novel. The process of searching for and imagining the past that occurs in the journal is in many ways similar to that which is portrayed in *La quarantaine*. As the only work of nonfiction in the group, it is also, in many ways, the work in which the author is the most exposed, speaking to us directly without the intervening medium of a narrator. Just as it is true for Le Clézio on Rodrigues that, “Maintenant, je ne peux guère cacher ce que je suis venu chercher” (V 41), nor can he hide it from his readers. The final text considered will be *La quarantaine*, a novel that portrays both the willingness and the refusal to revise one’s assumptions, ways of living, and sense of history. Here, we meet the author’s maternal grandparents, a great-uncle, and a great-aunt, along with a fictionalized

²³ Bruno Thibault, “La Métaphore exotique” l’écriture du processus d’individuation dans *Le chercheur d'or* et *La quarantaine* de J. M. G. Le Clézio,” *The French Review*, Vol. 73, No.5, 2000 845

version of the author, who, like the narrator of *Voyages à Rodrigues*, is in search of the past. The story is told by two narrators, a fictionalized “je” of the author and his great-uncle, at moments that are ninety years apart in time. This text magnifies the subjective nature of story-telling. It also diminishes the effect of the familial rupture in the novel, which, though definitive for those who experienced it in the 1890s, is mollified by a 1980s narrator who can say, “Je reviendrai.... Ce sera pour réunir les deux frères... et à nouveau en moi, les deux ancêtres indissociables, l’Indien et le Breton” (Q 532). Ultimately, the characters who accept the risk of transformation are the author/ modern narrator’s great-uncle and the woman he met on Flat Island, Suryavati, while his own grandparents are those who reject it. The complication of that position is furthered by the fact that the author/ narrator’s grandmother was the source of the story and that the author never even knew the people whose story he tells most sympathetically, demonstrating a willingness to truly re-open the story, and explore his own past in a truthful, if somewhat painful, way.

These texts show encounters with cultures, in which westerners find themselves in contact with people whose civilizations and concepts of life are radically different from their own. Some of the characters accept the risk of opening themselves to different possibilities, to the potential loss of their former identity, and some stagnate in their own fears and nostalgic dreams. Le Clézio discovered that the Emberas of Panama do not build walls and that time may be trusted rather than feared. It seems these texts are also “without walls,” constructed in such a way that the stories of his and his family’s life are open to

our participation, which is both a risk and an act of trust. If we, in turn, accept the risk of entering the disconcerting worlds of *Onitsha*, *Le chercheur d'or*, *Voyages à Rodrigues*, and *La quarantaine*, we may find, through our own participation, that the adventure of renewal in the texts, in ourselves, and in our world can be “un voyage sans fin.”

Chapter 1

Narrative Structure as a Model for Transformation: Renewal of the Text by the Reader

In *Voyages à Rodrigues*, *Le chercheur d'or*, *Onitsha*, and *La quarantaine*, the author and re-created versions of himself fill the related roles of character, reader, re- constructor, and writer. What emerges is a series of models of relationships among readers, writers, and texts. The four texts reflect in structure and theme the author's conception of creating stories and adventures. The fact that they are autobiographically inspired means that the creative process behind the text is much more accessible than would be the case for a piece of fiction taken less directly from the author's own life and family history. In addition, in the cases of *Le chercheur d'or* and *La quarantaine*, we have not only tales resurrected from the past but also the accounts of the author/ narrator's search for them. The quest for the real life story that inspired *Le chercheur d'or* is documented in the non-fiction journal *Voyages à Rodrigues*, and in *La quarantaine*, the modern narrator's search for the nineteenth- century story frames the narrative of the older story.

As mentioned previously, each story is framed and/ or interspersed with pieces of other stories - often those that serve as essential background to the principal story being narrated. The stories may be told in full or, in the case of

widely- known myths and legends, may simply be alluded to, calling on the reader's prior knowledge to enrich and inform the text in hand. The latter category of story, those that implicitly echo and resonate in a text, Bruno Thibault calls the "intertexte."²⁴

The reader sees the characters reading, writing, dancing, hearing, re-imagining and dreaming stories and adventures. In the activity of the characters, the structures of all four texts lead the reader into processes similar to those that the characters have experienced. Structural and thematic constructions in the text, which will be discussed in detail, operate in such a way as to create levels of uncertainty, not only about what the characters will do after the text ends, but also about what is happening *during* the narrative. The reader is faced with the necessity to participate in the construction, by questioning and possibly continuing the narratives.

Songs and poems in languages other than French such as Italian, Creole, and English, along with drawings and diagrams, are all part of the reader's direct experience, allowing him to experience the full variety of texts that are part of the characters' lives. The reader is not dependent upon the narrator to describe everything that the characters see and do. The reader also encounters these texts first- hand. The presence of Longfellow's "City of Sea" (*Q* 370), reproduced in English at the close of one of the chapters of *La Quarantaine*, changes the rhythm of the narrative and lets the reader *hear* the words, in all their materiality. The

²⁴ Bruno Thibault, "Du stéréotype au mythe: l'écriture du fait divers dans les nouvelles de J. M. G. Le Clézio," *The French Review*, No. 68, May 1995 971

reader's experience is parallel to that of the character Suzanne to whom Léon reads the poem. Jean Grosjean has commented on the importance that Le Clézio places on awareness of the sights, sounds, and smells of the material world: "Lorsqu'on se rencontre, il me parle de ce qu'il vient de voir. Ce peut être un nuage merveilleux, ou un arbre qui perd ses feuilles. Il parle immédiatement de quelque chose de concret, de son expérience immédiate, des choses qui existent autour de nous."²⁵ With the inclusion of stories and poems from the many cultures that populate the texts, our experience mirrors that of the characters in an affective way. We hear and see what they hear and see, and, like them, we may become disoriented by the foreignness of what we encounter.

Geoffroy Allen of *Onitsha* is fascinated by the myths and legends of ancient Africa in part because of their exotic appeal. When, as part of his obsession, he desires to have etched into his own cheeks the symbol of Eternity, the *chi*, of eagle feathers and falcon tail, that symbol is presented in full in the text:



(O 123).

We also see the constellation map that Alexis of *Le chercheur d'or* draws in the dirt as a child, a model of the map his father used to show him:

²⁵ Grosjean, 52



(C 62).

Finally, in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, we are shown the symbol on the magic ring bearing the divine symbol of two inverted triangles and the name of Allah, which, for Le Clézio's grandfather, constituted a potential key to the secret of the corsair:

(V 112).

In addition to the presence of materially varied texts, there are elements of the narratives that sometimes undermine themselves and the very adventures on which they are based. I will discuss the elements producing this effect, including 1) dueling narratives in a given text, 2) inconsistent single narration, and 3) conflicts between narrators and the sources of their stories. In all cases, the reader must take an active role in negotiating meaning from the text in her hands. The act of creating is played out simultaneously on several levels, from the most textually internal to the most external - the reader herself.

How does this occur? Let us first consider narrative structures. Rhetorician Seymour Chatman provides much of the needed vocabulary to discuss narrative structure in his book on the subject, *Story and Discourse*. One

distinction fundamental to our discussion of the structure of the novels is that made between the *fabula*, "the set of events tied together which are communicated to us in the work" or, alternatively phrased, "what has, in fact, happened" and the "plot (*sjuzhet*)... how the reader becomes aware of what has happened... the order of the appearance of events in the work itself."²⁶ The plot may reveal -- or hide -- the *fabula* to/ from the reader, in any sequential order imaginable. This distinction is essential in discussing the three novels. In each work, which, in principle is "un produit particulier, fini,"²⁷ the reader finds, as Le Clézio says of his own family history, "une histoire qui n'est pas achevée" (*V* 113). "L'histoire inachevée" is revealed in a number of ways. For example, although the first- person narrator of *Le chercheur d'or*, Alexis, remains constant throughout the text, his ability to tell the whole *fabula* -- "what in fact happened" -- is undermined in a number of ways. Not only is the narrator telling his own story: "il interprète ses origines,"²⁸ as Taris Dey emphasizes, but Alexis makes it clear that he is relying on his memory to tell the story: "Je me souviens de mon premier voyage en mer. C'était en janvier, je crois..." (*C* 52). The phrases "Je me souviens," and "Je crois" give the reader permission -- even encouragement -- to ask why the events which are related were remembered, and those not related

²⁶ Seymour Chatman cites Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine*, 2d ed. (The Hague, 1965) 240- 241 and Boris Tomasshevsky, *Teorija literatury* (Poetika) (Leningrad, 1925). Chatman notes, "The relevant section, 'Thématique,' appears in Todorov, ed., *Théorie de la littérature*, pp. 263- 307 and in Lemon and Reis, eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism*, pp. 61- 98.... The distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzet* appears on page 68 on Lemon and Reis." Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1978) 20

²⁷ Jean Milly, *Poétique des Textes* (Paris: Nathan, 1992) 20

²⁸ Taris Dey, "Le roman: *Le chercheur d'or*," *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, Vol. 388, mai 1985 77

were forgotten. The novel begins with the sentence, "Du plus loin que je me souviens, j'ai entendu la mer" (C 11). This opening statement defines the text as one of memory; continued linguistic clues such as those mentioned reinforce that definition. The text is neither more nor less than Alexis' memory.

Alexis' memory makes great leaps of space and time that separate the different parts of the text: from Boucan to Rodrigues to Ypres, from 1892 to 1910, and from 1919 to 1922. The reader becomes intimately acquainted with characters in a particular place, such as Mam and Laure in Forest Side, only to leave their stories for most of the text. The memory of a first person narrator as the text limits the narrative to the places and situations which that character experiences. Yet, once again *because* the text is memory, the text never completely ignores Laure, and therefore, neither can the reader. As Alexis makes his voyage to Rodrigues, we encounter the sentence, "C'est pour elle [Laure] que je suis sur ce bateau, avançant toujours plus loin sur la mer" (C 138). This sentence opens the narrative both structurally and morally. The narrative is opened structurally in that the narrative of Alexis' journey is interrupted. With memory as the medium of the text, neither narrator nor reader has the luxury of forgetting about Laure, however much Alexis may appear to be, as Max Alhau says, "oublieux de ceux qu'il a quittés et de Laure en particulier."²⁹ We know that Laure was as intrigued by the adventure stories the siblings read together as was her brother, and yet, because of her gender, had to stay behind, give up her education, and help their mother while Alexis left to pursue the treasure. The

²⁹ Max Alhau, "Le chercheur d'or," *Europe*, Vol. 674- 675, juin- juillet 1985 202

reader is reminded that the complete *fabula* includes her as well, and because the narrative is not following her at this point, the reader is left to imagine what she must be doing and thinking. On a larger scale, the text is a reminder to us that in events on the world stage both in history and in the present, those about whom the stories are written and those who tell the stories, are often only a small part of the *fabula*, the whole story. For every Alexis' story of a blissful ride on the crystal blue sea, we must be attentive to the subtext and consider the Laure whose story might not be quite as pretty, but may be at least as important.

The paragraphs concerning Mam and Laure inserted into Alexis' memory aboard the *Zeta* open the narrative morally. In the previous pages, the reader had been lulled into the delight of following Alexis' voyage, in which one reads, "La voix du timonier est douce quand il parle de Saint Brandon. Il me semble que c'est pour l'entendre que je suis sur ce navire qui avance au milieu de la mer" (C 137). The reader and the narrator are in a dream- like world, watching the declining sun from the boat: "Chaque après- midi, quand le jour décline, je suis à la poupe du navire.... C'est l'instant que je préfère, quand tout est paisible et le pont désert, à part le timonier et un marin qui surveillent la mer" (C 137). The serenity of that world is then suddenly shattered by thoughts of those left behind: "Alors je pense à la terre, à Mam et à Laure si lointaines dans leur solitude de Forest Side" (C 137). The boundless peace and beauty of the sea is juxtaposed against the unpleasant realization that the journey about which we are reading was

taken at a price. Bruno Thibault states that Alexis left Mauritius “sans regrets,”³⁰ but Alexis’ memory betrays a different truth: he may be on the *Zeta*, sailing towards Rodrigues, but his mind keeps looking back towards those he left behind. Laure and Mam are even more isolated in Alexis’ absence than the three of them would have been had he stayed with them. In two consecutive pages, the text undermines itself, and therefore the narrator also undermines his own story. He states that he is on the boat for the purpose of hearing the gentle voice of the helmsman and on the following page states that it is for Laure that he is there. Which does he believe? At which point is the narrator deluding himself? These are questions with which the reader must wrestle. The text is an open one, calling its readers into active participation through structural and thematic ambiguities.

At that moment in the text, the narrator gives no linguistic clues as to the direction in which he wants to incline the sympathies of the reader. Both statements are made in the present tense: “Il me semble que c’est pour l’entendre [the voice of the timonier] que je suis sur ce bateau” (C 137) and “C’est pour elle [Laure]...” (C 138). If the narrator had said, “Il me semblait,” employing the imperfect tense, it would have indicated a revision of the perception that he had had on the boat, implying, “It seemed to me at the time...[but now I know better].” On the other hand, putting the second sentence in the imperfect, “C’était pour elle,” would greatly strengthen the sense that a narrative “truth” was being conveyed. The implication would then be, “From the older and wiser perspective

³⁰ Thibault, “La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio,” 846

that experience has brought me, I now judge that it was for Laure that I was on the boat."³¹

The narrator's use of the present tense in both cases leaves the narrative -- and therefore the reader -- in ambiguity. There is no attempt on the part of the narrator to evaluate or prioritize the conflicting impressions of his own motivations. Rather, they are presented directly, as *direct free thought*.³² The reader must decide which narrative perspective, if either, is the one with which she will identify. Which is the *fabula* that *Le chercheur d'or* recounts? Is it that of the voyage of Alexis, as seductively attractive for the reader as it is for Alexis himself? Is the *fabula* comprised of the broken stories of different people, the overlapping stories of Laure, Mam, Alexis, and Ouma? Perhaps the *fabula* includes some kind of reconciliation of these seemingly contradictory perceptions. It is not the narrator who will seek the answers to those questions, but the reader.

While the open structure of *Le chercheur d'or* may be relatively subtle, those of *La quarantaine* and *Onitsha* have blatantly open structures. Each of the latter novels exhibits a technique that makes the construction of the *fabula* of the text an overtly subjective and shifting undertaking: the changing of the narrator. In defining a narrative, Chatman states that a narrative must entail self-regulation, meaning that "the structure maintains and *closes* itself" (my emphasis). He then cites structuralist Jean Piaget's statement: "transformations within a structure

³¹ Chatman discusses the "older and wiser" tone often used by the first-person narrator in autobiography, 158.

³² See Chatman, 182- 186, for a discussion of direct free thought.

never lead beyond the system but always engender elements that belong to it and preserve its laws.... In adding or subtracting any two whole numbers, another whole number is obtained, and one which satisfies the law of 'additive group' of whole numbers. It is in this sense that a structure is closed."³³ When, in *La quarantaine*, the first- person narrator alternates between the great- nephew and namesake of Léon, who can say, "Je pense à Léon," and Léon- Je, another first person narrator who lived ninety years earlier, the law of a structure is broken and new laws are created, and therefore a new narrative. There are then, in *La quarantaine*, at least two narratives. First, there is the story of that which Léon, Jacques, and Suzanne lived in the 1890s. Framing that story is the one told by the 20th century Léon, whose quest is largely for the story that the older Léon has just told the reader. The reader then constructs "what actually took place" by filling in the gaps left by the two narratives, to create the *fabula*, which includes, but is not limited to, the entire written text and each narrative therein. Chatman discusses this process, "interpretation":

Whether the narrative is experienced through a performance or through a text, the members of the audience must respond through an interpretation: they cannot avoid participating in the transaction. They must fill in the gaps with essential or likely events, traits, and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned. If in one sentence we are told that John got dressed and in the next that he rushed to an airport ticket counter, we surmise that in the interval occurred a number of artistically inessential yet

³³ Chatman cites Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. Chaninah Machler (New York, 1970) 14. *Story and Discourse*, 21

logically necessary events: grabbing his suitcase, walking from the bedroom to the living room....³⁴

The reader of the four texts in this study, and particularly of *La quarantaine*, must do much more than fill in inessential yet logical gaps. Léon's narrative ends as he and Suryavati part ways with Suzanne and Jacques, choosing to stay on Flat Island as Suzanne and Jacques go on to Mauritius. The narrator who opens and closes the text is wondering and speculating about what became of Léon and Suryavati, although he teases the reader with his certainty that their child was the young girl who later became the secret friend of his great- aunt Anna. There are just enough puzzle pieces of the complete construction of the *fabula*, of "what, in fact, happened," to give the reader ample material to imagine many different possibilities as outgrowths of the narrative. The result of this is that the reader cannot be passive. The text's ambiguity imposes itself, like Léon's dilemma between the worlds of the Archambau family and of Suryavati, again, requiring the reader's participation.

Onitsha, similarly, is a text related by three different narrative perspectives. Two of those narrative perspectives are in the third- person, thus giving the impression of being *extra- diégétique*,³⁵ exterior to the story, and omniscient. Each of the perspectives gives access to the thoughts and perceptions of one of the three main characters in the novel: Fintan, Maou, and Geoffroy. In the sections in which a third person narrator gives access to Geoffroy's thoughts,

³⁴ Chatman, 28- 29

³⁵ Jean Milly cites the work and terminology of Gérard Genette from Genette's *Figures III*. (Milly 40)

it is to the exclusion of the thoughts of the other characters. These sections, “littéralement marginalisé[es]”³⁶ do appear in a different format from the rest of the narrative. They appear at regular intervals throughout the text and tell a story related to the primary narrative in two ways: through the presence of Geoffroy Allen and the geographical location. Fintan’s father Geoffroy is haunted night and day by the legends of ancient Africa related to him by local Englishman Sabine Rodes, and by the dreams that he, Geoffroy, constructs to continue the legends. The story of the people of Meroë is at once *intertexte* and uniquely in the literary domain of *Onitsha*. The Meroë people did in fact live in what is now Sudan from about 600 B. C. to about 350 A. D.³⁷, but the saga recounted in the novel through Geoffroy’s dreams is the product of his imagination.

Access to the thoughts of Fintan and of Maou is achieved via another layer of narrative unpredictability. What appears to be a single narrative voice first has access to Fintan’s thoughts, and in the following paragraph, exclusively to the thoughts of Maou, with no textual indication that the narrative perspective is about to shift. This occurs in a passage describing their voyage to Onitsha. We read, “C’étaient les soirées que Maou préférait.... Jamais Maou n’avait connue de telles gens. Elle n’avait jamais pensé qu’elle pourrait un jour être avec eux, partager leur aventure” (O 21). The following paragraph then reveals: “Fintan écoutait la voix chantante de Maou. Il aimait son accent italien, une musique” (O

³⁶ Borgomano, 243

³⁷ Peter Shinnie, *Meroë, A Civilization of the Sudan* (New York: Praeger, 1967) 29- 61

21). Fintan's and Maou's perspectives slip in and out of the forefront of the narrative, trading the dominant voice almost imperceptibly.

Finally, a fourth narrative perspective appears briefly near the very end of the text, in the form of a letter written by Fintan to his sister Marima. This piece of the *fabula* of the Allen family's life is presented to the reader by a first person narrator. For much of the text, the reader must negotiate the unsettling situation in which one narrator (the one who encourages sympathy with and for Fintan, through access to Fintan's thoughts) is telling a story against that told by another narrator (the one with access to Geoffroy's dreams). Immediately after one narrator suggests that we see Geoffroy as "poko ingezi" (O 175), we are confronted with another narrative that leads us deep into Geoffroy's thoughts and dreams. It is only through Geoffroy's dreams that we have access to the legend of the people of Meroë, their queen Arsinoë, and their long journey in search of the land the queen saw in a vision, which will be her people's new home. This aspect of the text as a whole is what gives it its qualities of mystery and of universal importance and timelessness. The narrative of Geoffroy's dreams ties together the physical place and the long history recalled by that place: "La magie d'*Onitsha* tient beaucoup à une étroite fusion entre l'espace et le temps."³⁸ The text's largesse, the sense that it is a story not merely of one family, but of a people, of a continent, and of humanity, is endowed by the narrative of Geoffroy's dreams. It is this aspect of the text that comes to the reader through "le père

³⁸ Ibid, 244

détesté.”³⁹ To an extent, to embrace this narrative is also to accept its source, Geoffroy -- or at least to not detest him. The reader, whose sympathies are heavily pulled to Fintan and away from Geoffroy, must once more struggle with the text and make choices.

The open character of the novel is again affirmed through the characters Okeke, child of Onitsha natives Oya and Okawho, and Fintan's sister Marima. These two young people, respectively born and conceived in Onitsha shortly before the Allen family leaves to return to France, are not developed in the text, although their positions in relation to the other characters are quite significant. Okeke is born to Oya, whom Geoffroy imagines to be the last descendant of the queen of Meroë. As Okeke is her child, the implicit suggestion is that the ancient people could be renewed and continued through him. Also, it is during the scene of Okeke's birth that Fintan is called into active participation, as we are by this and the other texts in question. For both of these reasons, we have cause to continue the unfinished story of Okeke, the child whom we last see in his mother's arms, being propelled down the river by his father, where the young family will soon unknowingly enter the territory of Gulf and British Petroleum.

Marima is equally undeveloped and equally important. We never meet Fintan's younger sister, but we read of her conception, and fifteen years later we see a sleeping image of her at the close of the text, we read Maou's thoughts about her, and we read the letter that Fintan addresses to her. As it seems that Fintan has abdicated personal involvement in the crisis in which Onitsha is

³⁹ Ibid, 244

embroiled in 1968, any continued link between the Allen family and Onitsha seems to rest with Marima, whose response we will never know. Much as we are introduced to Mam and to Laure in *Le chercheur d'or* and then leave them for most of the narrative, in *Onitsha*, we know enough about Okeke and Marima to care about what happens to them, but it is left to us to imagine what that might be. Along with the seemingly conflicting narratives in the novel, the presence of these two undeveloped yet compelling characters serves to draw the active participation of the reader into the construction of the story.

As a non-fiction text, *Voyages à Rodrigues* functions as a model for the creative process involved in finding, continuing, and transforming stories. The text recounts the author's own re-enactment of and search for his grandfather's adventure on Rodrigues; the author's quest is something of a *quête en abyme*. The journal documents the author's search for his grandfather, and, in the process, himself. The openness of the journal is created not by the kinds of narrative tension found in the novels considered in this study, but rather by the fact that this text is of an inherently inquisitive nature. Questions permeate its pages. We may read the questions as rhetorical or as asked directly to us. Regardless of how we choose to read the questions, the absence of a plot in this text means that we do not simply read over the questions on our way to find out "what happens." The "journal de voyage" is "what happens." The questions are integral to the journey, *are* part of the journey, just as the documents that guided Le Clézio's grandfather and to which he added are part of the treasure (V 42). Some of the author's questions are specific to the quest undertaken by his grandfather. The author

wonders, “Que cherchait-il, en vérité? Que fuyait-il?” (V 26) and “Comment a-t-il pu vivre là, près du ravin, sans penser à la réussite, sans croire à l’avenir?” (V 95).

Le Clézio also raises generalized questions and observations, the sort that most human beings ask at some point in our existence. The question, “Comment partager le temps?” (V 122), is not limited to the problem the author faces -- the difficulty of establishing a connection with someone from a different *time*. It applies to other divisions as well, such as separations of physical space, experience, or situation. In asking, “Comment partager le temps?”, the text implicitly asks, “Comment partager... quoique ce soit?”. How can we know the experience of another?

The author later asks a question that each of us must answer at the beginning of every day and each new experience: “Et maintenant?” (V 130). The brief question is its own paragraph in the text, the white space a reminder of a future whose uncertainty is at once fearsome and exhilarating. This paradox of the unknown is explicitly articulated in Longfellow’s “City of the Sea,” an ode to the simultaneously life- giving and death- bringing power of the sea. Léon reads the poem to Suzanne at a moment in *La quarantaine* when all of their lives, and hers in particular, hang in the balance of time, at once surrounded by the sea and looking to it for deliverance. The question in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, “Et maintenant?” is followed by no speculation, no attempt at comforting solutions, only a new paragraph in which the author tells us, “Je marche... j’avance” (V 130), which may be all that any of us can do.

Each of the four texts considered in this study is structured and written in a way that invites and requires our participation. Through attempting to reconcile the conflicting messages of a single narrator in *Le chercheur d'or*, negotiating the tension between the two narratives of *Onitsha*, completing the untold story of *La quarantaine*, and seeking answers to the questions posed by *Voyages à Rodrigues*, we become actively involved in the texts we are reading. Asked by Jean- Louis Ezine in an interview for *Ailleurs* if he was conscious of offering his readers something more than literature in his work, Le Clézio responded,

En effet, les livres que j'aime, ce sont ceux qui me donnent l'impression qu'ils possèdent quelque chose d'un peu magique. Pas seulement les mots, pas seulement l'histoire du livre, mais aussi tout ce qui est entre les lignes, ce qu'on devine.... Il échange des non-dits, des silences, un regard, quelque chose qu'on fait ensemble, qu'on ne peut pas faire tout seul.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ J. M. G. Le Clézio, *Ailleurs* (Paris: arléa, 1995) 117

Chapter 2

Onitsha:

Shadow and Hope of Transformation

“[C’est] un livre qui nous bouleverse, nous touche, nous paraît encore plus beau que les autres,”⁴¹ proclaims Nicole Casanova, in describing *Onitsha*, this most personal of Le Clézio’s autobiographically inspired works. While *Voyages à Rodrigues* and *Le Chercheur d’or* search for and recreate, respectively, the author’s grandfather, and *La Quarantaine* represents a similar project, with the great-uncle “disparu” and other grandparents as subject and object, no text of Le Clézio’s is more intimately personal to its author than is *Onitsha*, where, as Casanova suggests, we find “Le Clézio en rendez-vous avec lui-même.”⁴² Why might this particular experience in Le Clézio’s life be the inspiration for the only specifically autobiographical text he has written?

The journey to Onitsha constituted, for 8-year-old J. M. G. Le Clézio, a definitive rupture with the reassuring comfort of “une période facile, sans douleur.”⁴³ It is the moment of “l’Europe abandonnée... aussi l’enfance, la mère et la grande-mère Aurélia, Saint-Martin Vésubie et la vallée de la Stura, Marseille et la musique de la langue italienne.”⁴⁴ The boy Fintan wonders, in the emotional good-bye with his grandmother, “Qu’est-ce que ça voulait dire, ‘au

⁴¹ Casanova, 14

⁴² Ibid, 14

⁴³ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 21

⁴⁴ Borgomano, 248

revoir', quand on ne se reverrait jamais?" (*O* 67). Yet, it is during the "long voyage" to Onitsha that the writer in Le Clézio and in Fintan emerges, with Fintan writing the "roman en abyme,"⁴⁵ *UN LONG VOYAGE* (*O* 47), also the first novel that the young Le Clézio wrote. It is in this moment of profound rupture, an experience in which "tout change,"⁴⁶ that Fintan's creativity materializes. His act of creating on the boat is but the first in this novel that portrays characters writing, re-telling stories, creating life, and, at times refusing to create anything at all.

As Fintan and Maou make their way across the sea to Onitsha on the *Surabaya*, we see each of them engaged in the act of writing. For Fintan, writing is that to which he turns when he sees Maou seemingly at ease with the Englishmen on the boat who give Fintan less than good feelings. Maou, on the other hand, is experiencing the adventure of a lifetime: "Maou n'avait jamais connu un tel bonheur. ...Jamais Maou n'avait connu de telles gens. Elle n'avait jamais pensé qu'elle pourrait un jour être avec eux, partager leur aventure" (*O* 21). As a child, however, Fintan is decidedly not in control of the situation. Le Clézio recalls, "Il est difficile d'imaginer plus grande inquiétude que de prendre un bateau au lendemain de la guerre pour se rendre dans un pays qu'on ne connaît pas, retrouver un homme qu'on ne connaît pas et qui se dit votre père."⁴⁷

As Maou enjoys the new- found delight of socializing with people with whom she had never been able to associate, Fintan closes himself off in the cabin to create his own story: "[Maou] donnait le bras à l'Anglais, elle écoutait pérorer

⁴⁵ Ibid, 247

⁴⁶ Casanova, 14

⁴⁷ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 23

sur l'Afrique, sur les noirs, sur la jungle. C'était insupportable. Alors il s'enfermait dans la cabine sans fenêtre, il allumait la veilleuse, et il commençait à écrire une histoire. C'était bien, d'écrire cette histoire, enfermé dans la cabine, sans un bruit" (O 49). The main character of Fintan's story *UN LONG VOYAGE*, Esther, arrives in Africa, as he soon will. Rather than facing the nerve-wracking prospect of meeting an English father whom she has never seen, Esther's adventures include the far more interesting leopards and crocodiles. The boy recreates the reality of the voyage, transforming it into the kind of adventure that he would like to have, rather than the one he is in reality experiencing.

For Maou, the act of writing is a transforming activity in which she delights as much as she does in the social interaction. We read, "Maou restait dans la salle à manger, après le petit déjeuner, devant la vitre grasse qui troublait la couleur de la mer. Elle écrivait" (O 26). The importance of writing *for the sake of writing* is underscored by the simplicity of the sentence. "La feuille de papier blanc bien à plat sur la table d'acajou, l'encrier calé dans le creux réservé au verre, la tête un peu inclinée, elle écrivait." The content of her writing -- even the language and the genre - are all less important than the process of creating itself: "C'était des histoires, ou des lettres, elle ne savait pas où ça irait, en français, en italien, parfois même en anglais, ça n'avait pas d'importance. Simplement elle aimait faire cela, rêver en regardant la mer, avec la fumée douce qui serpentait..." (O 26). It seems that what Maou creates through writing is not the alternate reality of the present that Fintan creates through his, but rather a new version of herself -- one who writes. She is renewing herself, rather than any particular story

or text, through the act of writing. For her, to write is an act of liberation. The important object of her creativity is, in this instance, not the content that she writes, but the new person she is defining, the new self. On the fluid, open sea, Maou finds the liberty to define herself in a way that she could not in Europe. Unlike Alexis, however, who also revels in freedom from boundaries while on the sea, Maou is able to live this *temporary passage* as just that, to develop a new aspect of her being, and, upon arriving in Onitsha, to again take on the responsibilities of living in community with other people. In her letters to Geoffroy, Maou uses writing to create images of the future that awaits them: "Écrire, c'était rêver. Là- bas, quand on arriverait à Onitsha, tout serait différent, tout serait facile. Il y aurait les grandes plaines d'herbes que Geoffroy avait décrites, les arbres si hauts, et le fleuve si large qu'on pourrait croire la mer..." (O 27- 28).

In contrast with his mother, when Fintan goes into his cabin with no windows and closes the door to write, he is clearly conscious of creating a reality which to him would be preferable to the one in which he is living. Maou, on the other hand, is not conscious, at this point in the narrative, of preferring the dreams of her own imagination to the reality of the life that awaits them in Onitsha. She is earnestly looking forward to what is to come. It is possible, however, that her writing of their anticipated life in Onitsha represents a defense against her fears of what it might be, as well as to the life that she has known up until this point.

Maou's need and capacity to create continue to reveal themselves after their arrival in Onitsha. Her creating on the *Surabaya* had consisted of solitary

writing; in Onitsha, we see Maou develop two important friendships, both of which nurture creating that is cooperative rather than solitary. Before becoming friends with Marima and with the deaf and dumb Oya, both of whom are Onitsha natives rather than other Europeans, Maou had been rather isolated in Onitsha, where she made no attempt to conceal her contempt for the exploitation of the local people by the English (*O* 74- 76). Shortly before the development of these two friendships, we are told that Maou was disheartened, "Elle n'avait plus envie d'écrire, ni même de lire" (*O* 146). Depression is thus equated with the loss of creative inspiration. In *La quarantaine*, we are told that Lil, the friend of Suryavati's grandmother Girbala who becomes distraught over the death of her son, can no longer dance the story of the queen who fought to defend her people: "Elle ne pouvait plus danser la légende de la belle Lakshmibay" (*Q* 274). The strong impression presented by both texts is that loss of the interest or capacity to create is equivalent to lack of enthusiasm for living.

Maou's friendships with Oya and with Marima, for whom her future daughter would be named, are not merely friendships which cheer her up and give her company: the cooperative creation that occurs in each of these friendships restores to Maou her creative power. Maou shows Marima magazines and journals, and Marima teaches Maou words in her language. Here, language-based texts are not the object of creation but the means by which a bond of friendships is created. The relationship between the women is reciprocal; each shares something of her language and her culture with the other one: "Maou apprenait des mots dans sa langue... Elle écrivait les mots dans son cahier de

poésies, puis les lisait à voix haute, et Marima éclatait de rire” (*O* 149). The text specifies that Maou includes some of the newly- learned words in her book of poetry and later reads them aloud. Through those acts, the musical and material quality of the words themselves are emphasized; the words are more than signifiers of concepts. The text further affirms the status of the language by including several words: “*Ulo*, la maison. *Mmiri*, de l’eau. *Umu*, les enfant” (*O* 149). This is another example of the inclusion in *Onitsha*, as well as in the other three texts in question, of the actual words, stories, songs, and symbols that the characters encounter, bringing the reader’s experience as close as possible to that of the characters.

Maou and Oya’s friendship is also one of give and take. Each is able to teach and to learn from the other. In Oya’s inability to communicate with spoken language, Maou sees not an absolute barrier to friendship, but a need that she is able to meet: “Maou cherchait à lui parler avec le langage des geste.... Quand elle était enfant, à Fiesole, elle croisait des enfants sourds- muets d’un hospice, elle les regardait avec fascination.... Pour d’autres gestes [dont elle ne souvenait pas] elle inventait” (*O* 151). We see Maou drawing upon the lessons learned in the past as well as upon the enthusiasm and needs of the person with her in the present to remember, as well as to create something with another person. Both women are enriched and empowered in this example of renewal in which the past provides useful knowledge rather than the demobilizing nostalgia that cripples many of Le Clézio’s protagonists, including Fintan and Alexis.

Oya teaches Maou as well: “Oya avait montré à Maou toutes sortes de gestes” (*O* 151). Again, in depicting a relationship of mutual teaching and enjoyment, the text also valorizes different ways of communicating. Oya and Marima both have different “languages” from Maou’s own, and Maou welcomes the opportunity to learn them, and in so doing, to be privileged to see well past the superficial exteriors of both women. We read of Oya’s illumination in Maou’s presence: “Son visage [Oya’s] alors s’animait, ses yeux brillaient” (*O* 151), very different from the subdued “folle à qui les enfants jetaient des noyaux” (*O* 94). The gestures that Oya teaches Maou, which include the words for joy and for fear, suggest that their friendship is one of relative emotional intimacy. Maou’s two friendships reveal the creative and teaching capacities of all three women, restore to each her vitality, and demonstrate the transforming power that genuine renewal can have.

Geoffroy is no less engaged in the act of creating than is Maou or Fintan, but his creating is essentially the reviving and continuing of the story of the people of Meroë and their voyage. It is for the purpose of pursuing this story and the place where it is based that he first hungered to come to Africa. Since that time, the images of the people on their journey have filled his mind and imagination. For him, the story is not merely a legend found in old books, told to him by reclusive Englishman Sabine Rodes. It is a living, continuing legend, and his deepest desire is to see the queen who is the descendant of the queen Amanirenas, to personally retrace the steps that the people of Meroë took. If Fintan imagines a story in reaction to the reality around him and Maou writes for

the transformative power of writing, Geoffroy's creating is the continuation of a legend begun long ago. His is an act of renewal of a story. In his dreams, a legend of the past is resuscitated.

Bruno Thibault calls to our attention the many resonances of myths and legends as *intertexte* in the short stories of Le Clézio's *La Ronde et autres faits divers*.⁴⁸ In discussing the short story "Moloch," Thibault points out the echo of the Israelites' flight from Egypt in the flight of young mother Liana from her mobile home.⁴⁹ I believe that the same *intertexte* resonates in *Onitsha*'s description of the flight of the Meroë people from a land surrounded by enemy warriors. "Mais à present, il est trop tard. Les guerriers d'Axoum ont occupé la voie vers le sud, les Ethiopiens occupent la rive droite" (*O* 128). The book of Exodus tells of the parallel plight of the Israelites, who, like the people of Meroë, are essentially trapped, needing to escape the grasp of the Egyptians who enslave them. "[A]nd the people of Israel groaned under their bondage and cried out for help."⁵⁰ For the Israelites, help comes from God, appearing to Moses in a burning bush: "and their cry under bondage came up to God... Then the Lord said [to Moses], 'I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt... and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.'"⁵¹ For the people of Meroë, hope for deliverance comes not from a divine appearance, but rather in the form of a dream that appeared to their queen Amanirenas: "Alors, une nuit, la reine noire a reçu un songe" (*O* 128). The word "reçu" endows the dream with a

⁴⁸ Thibault, "Du stéréotype au mythe," 971

⁴⁹ Ibid, 970

⁵⁰ Exodus 3, vs. 23, Revised Standard Version

⁵¹ Ibid, vs. 23 and 7-8

mystical aspect and the sense that her dream was *given* to her purposefully, much as the appearance of God in the burning bush was intentionally *given* to Moses. For the people of Israel, the hope for the future will lie in the land which God promises: “I have come...to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”⁵² The people of Meroë will also hope in a promised, faraway land: “Dans son rêve, [la reine] a vu une autre terre, un autre royaume, si lointain qu’aucun homme ne pourrait l’atteindre de son vivant.... Un royaume au- delà du désert et des montagnes, un royaume tout près des racines du monde, là où le soleil finit sa course” (*O* 128).

The narrative in the *Onitsha* text fuses the historical and the biblical, drawing upon two stories, each fundamental to the collective self- definition of different cultures. As Germaine Brée emphasizes concerning the role of myths and legends in the formation of collective identity, “Les mythes constituent selon les mythologies une ‘mémoire collective’....”⁵³ Alternately put, every culture has its own concept of, to use Seymour Chatman’s term, a *fabula*, *what has happened*, of the history of the human race. For Africans, one of the “mythes fondateurs”⁵⁴ is the story of the people of Meroë; it is a “mythique que l’Afrique entière partage.”⁵⁵ The story of the Hebrew people plays a similar role in the collective memory of Western cultures.

Geoffroy’s dream builds upon the historical existence of a people, the people of Meroë, ruled by a matriarchal line, which included a queen named

⁵² Ibid, vs. 8

⁵³ Brée, 123

⁵⁴ Borgomano, 250

⁵⁵ Ibid, 249

Amanirenas, and continues it, infusing the ancient legend with resonances of the story of the flight from Egypt. In the new, hybrid story, the flight from oppression and towards the promised land is led by and inspired by a vision given to the queen Amanirenas rather than to the prophet Moses. The leader and visionary is female. Although the existence of the matriarchal dynasty of the Meroë people is in fact historical, the flight to a new and better land, promised to the leader in a mystical fashion, is Geoffroy's invention and unique to the *Onitsha* text. The feminine visionary/ leader is transposed on one of the fundamental myths of the collective memory of western culture. Also, the use of the legend of ancient Africa in the transformation of the story represents an acknowledgement through the text that African culture has something ancient, literary, and historical to contribute to the creation of the new story.

The relationship between the two cultures that evolves in the story is in stark contrast to the relationship of exploitation that exists in the real Onitsha in which Geoffroy lives and works. Prisoners are lined up in chains and shackles to build Mr. Simpson's swimming pool, a metaphor of the absurdity that characterizes the English presence in Onitsha. Both the people and the land of Africa are seen by the English as mere material resources, bodies to perform unpleasant work and land from which to draw oil. When Maou, seeing the mistreatment of the prisoners while a guest at the Simpsons' home, speaks up on their behalf, Geoffroy immediately leads her away from the gathering in shame and anger: "Alors Geoffroy prit Maou par le bras, et il la ramena dans la V8, en

roulant à toute vitesse sur la piste déserte” (*O* 76). Geoffroy’s actions are in sad contrast to the cultural humility and openness of his dreams.

Despite their cultural openness, however, Geoffroy’s dreams will not inspire him to greater humility in his daily interactions with others, but rather, will continue to haunt him, and will eventually destroy him. Consumed by the desire to find the end of the journey of the Meroë people, Geoffroy convinces Okawho to guide him to the heart of the river. It seems that Geoffroy believes that if he can physically be in the same place that the last queen herself was, he will somehow connect with “la raison de tous les voyages” (*O* 179). We at first read that Okawho tells Geoffroy, “C’est Ite Brinyan, le lac de vie,” but the illusory aspect of the moment is then betrayed by the narrator’s speculation, “Ou peut-être que Geoffroy a cru l’entendre” (*O* 194). Geoffroy washes himself in the water and drinks deeply of it; “il pense au baptême, il ne sera plus jamais le même homme” (*O* 194- 195). Indeed, Geoffroy has so deluded himself with his dreams that he believes that this place is the “lac de vie,” and declares that all obstacles and problems can be overcome in that place. “C’est ici qu’il faut venir... pour fuir Onitsha, pour échapper à la trahison,” he thinks before going to sleep that night. He believes, “C’est ici qu’il pourra écrire son livre, achever sa recherche” (*O* 195).

The next day, Geoffroy’s body reveals the illusory aspect of his attempt to escape the present by retreating into a legend. He is stricken with blackwater fever. Although he does recover enough to live for seventeen more years, during which time he and Maou conceive a second child, Marima, in Onitsha, his

strength is never what it was before his ill-fated pursuit of the center of his dreams. As Okawho carries him back to the pirogue, Geoffroy concludes, "tout est terminé. Il n'y a pas de paradis" (*O* 196). His experience underscores a theme that is present in all four texts in this study, particularly in *Le chercheur d'or*: the danger of running from life in the present, and seeking refuge in nostalgia, dreams, and/or memory. For Fintan, for Alexis of *Le chercheur d'or*, and for Jacques and Suzanne of *La quarantaine*, an unwillingness to move forward in the present blocks their respective abilities to be transformed. For Geoffroy, it eventually leads to his physical death.

Although Geoffroy himself was literally consumed by his dreams, the dreams do offer to the reader many powerful images of renewal. One image that appears both in the principal story and in Geoffroy's dream is that of one person transferring his or her vision or memories to another. In Geoffroy's dream, when the queen Amanirenas is near death, she gives her vision to her daughter: "À sa fille Arsinoë, elle a donné sa vision." We are then told, "Le peuple de Meroë s'est remis en marche, et à présent, c'est la jeune reine Arsinoë qui précède la route" (*O* 139). Certainly, not every detail of a story can be told; the legend could simply say that the queen died along the way, and her daughter led the people the rest of the way. However, the specific moment where the vision is transferred from one person to another is related as part of the narrative; the story is not merely one of a people's physical movement from one place to another. The transfer of the vision that guides them from one person to another is an essential part of the story of their survival. The queen willingly undertook a journey that she knew she

herself would never be able to complete but which would be completed by the next generation: "Dans son rêve, elle a vu une autre terre, un autre royaume, si lointain qu'aucun homme ne pourrait l'atteindre de son vivant, et que seuls les enfants pourraient voir" (*O* 128). The journey of the people is renewed, begun again, when the queen's vision is passed on to her daughter. The queen lives out her role as leader, guiding her people until her life comes to an end; then and only then does she give her vision to her daughter. Amanirenas has "confiance dans le renouvellement des generations."⁵⁶

However, the queen's vision will not be fulfilled. As Karen Levy points out, although the Meroë people do reach the river, whose banks are lush with vegetation, and it seems that the promised land may have been reached, Arsinoë's advisor Gerberatu, "neither a true high priest not a Meroite by birth,"⁵⁷ insists on continuing. Gerberatu is "a member of the group which, as historical sources suggest, infiltrated and undermined the Meroitic civilization from within."⁵⁸ The queen Amanirenas faithfully lived out her obligation to her people, entrusted her vision to her daughter, who did lead the people to the dream's fruition, but it did not last. Renewal is so fleeting that it lasts no longer than the dream in which Geoffroy sees it come and go.

The act of the transfer of Amanirenas' vision to her daughter is mirrored in one of *Onitsha's* later narratives, with a very different motivation, in the adult

⁵⁶ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 24

⁵⁷ Levy, Karen "Intersected Pasts and Problematic Futures: Oedipal Conflicts and Legendary Catastrophe in J. M. G. Le Clézio's *Onitsha* and *Étoile errante*," *The International Fiction Review*, Vol. 25, 1 and 2, 1998 41

⁵⁸ Ibid, 41. Levy cites Peter Shinnie.

Fintan's 1968 letter to the young Marima, his sister who was conceived in Onitsha but who has never actually seen Africa. He tells her both of the tranquility that he nostalgically⁵⁹ recalls: "les grands arbres où se perchaient les vautours, les limonettiers cousus par les fourmis" (*O* 241) and of the destruction that the town has suffered in the 1960s: "Les bombes, les villages rasés, les enfants qui meurent de faim sur les champs de bataille..." (*O* 243). Amanirenas passed on her vision to another because her natural life had run its course, and, knowing that she soon would die, she gave her vision to her daughter in order to ensure its usefulness for her people. Fintan, however, has no such excuse for the manner in which he transfers his memories, his thoughts, and above all, his guilt, to his sister. He tells her, "Même ce que j'avais oublié est revenu au moment de la destruction, comme ce train d'images qu'on dit que les noyés entrevoient au moment de sombrer. C'est à toi, Marima, que je le donne, à toi qui n'a rien su, à toi qui est née sur cette terre rouge où le sang coule maintenant" (*O* 244). Fintan's allusion to the images seen by a drowning person is a dramatic comparison to his own revitalized memory, but it does not change the fact that he is *not* dying and that this transfer of his memories, and along with it, his responsibility, has no real justification. When 1986 Nobel Laureate of the Prize for Literature, Nigerian Wole Soyinka, was asked recently by a young Nigerian man studying in the United States what he, the young man, could do to help his country, Soyinka answered, "Finish your studies, and come back. I think that you will find that there are many things to be

⁵⁹ Madeleine Borgomano points out the quality of *Onitsha* as "nostalgia writing," 243.

done.”⁶⁰ What is true in 2002 was perhaps even more so in 1968; for Fintan, there were many things that could have been done, had he been interested in doing more than mourning Onitsha’s losses and declaring “de toute façon c’était trop tard” (*O* 243). His letter to Marima makes it clear that he has already decided, as he tells her, that Onitsha is a place “que je *sais* que je ne reverrai plus” (*O* 244; my emphasis). Renewal can be deceptive when passing on knowledge, stories, visions, or experiences is not a sign of trust in the recipient but rather an abdication of one’s own role or potential role, a conscious choice to be a passive observer rather than an active participant.

Although Fintan can indeed decline an active role in Onitsha from the safe distance of his room in England, he does not have that option on the occasion of the birth of Oya's child, Okeke. Fintan and Bony come to the shipwreck in Bony’s pirogue, and when the boys discover Oya there, in labor, Bony slips out, leaving Fintan alone with Oya at the moment of birth. “Fintan était seul dans le ventre de l'épave avec Oya qui accouchait. Le moment était venu” (*O* 200). Then, as the queen Amanirenas called her daughter into action by giving her the vision from her dream, and as this and the other texts call us into participation, Oya calls Fintan into action with her eyes and body language: “Tout d'un coup elle s'était tournée vers lui, elle l'avait regardé, et il s'était approché d'elle. Elle serrait la main de Fintan à la broyer. Lui aussi *devait faire quelque chose*, participer à la naissance” (*O* 200; my emphasis). Oya’s gaze transforms Fintan

⁶⁰ *Charlotte Talks*, interview with Wole Soyinka. WFAE, Natl. Public Radio affiliate, Charlotte, NC, 19 Feb., 2002.

from a passive spectator to one who is not only able, but required, as the force of the word *devrait* suggests, to assume an active role. He offers his hand, his comfort and support, and he accepts the role of witness: “Il écoutait, il regardait cet événement extraordinaire” (*O* 200). It is a cooperative act, and as such, the role of witness is privileged as necessary to bring about the event. This incident emphasizes the vitality and authenticity of the participation of one who bears witness. Oya’s calling Fintan into action shows him that, despite his own self-doubt, he is capable of meaningful participation. By extension, the text suggests that we are as well. The reader’s status as an essential participant is affirmed in this passage that highlights the power and importance of witness and demonstrates our own capacity for contribution, albeit sometimes as reluctant as that of a stunned 12 year- old boy watching a woman give birth.

How does *Onitsha* leave us? In this story, we see people and relationships transformed, we see what makes transformation impossible, and we see what makes it possible. I believe that Madeleine Borgomano’s conclusion, “Ainsi s’achève le roman, dans la destruction et la mort,”⁶¹ does not sufficiently acknowledge the narrative openness and uncertainty inherent in the unseen lives of the two young people conceived or born in Onitsha shortly before the Allen family leaves Africa, Oya’s son Okeke, to whose birth Fintan bore witness, and Fintan’s sister Marima. The reader gets to know neither of them.

Seymour Chatman explains the concept of a “character manqué,” a “potential character,” using Beckett’s *Godot* as an example: “He’s as human as a

⁶¹ Borgomano, 250

Beckett character can be, and he [is] something that the characters care about...

What is missing is his presence.”⁶² Marima and Okeke may be considered

“characters manqués.” Marima’s presence in the narrative consists of her: 1)

unborn (*O* 225- 226), 2) as the silent intended recipient of Fintan's letter (*O* 240-

244), 3) as part of remembered interactions in Maou's mind (*O* 248- 249), and 4)

asleep (*O* 251). She is certainly more than a device to move the plot along⁶³. At

the close of the text, we are confronted with a series of images that evoke peace

and then devastation. Of Geoffroy's death, we read, “Le visage de Geoffroy est

très blanc, très froid, avec une expression de douceur et de paix que Fintan n’a

encore jamais vue” (*O* 250). Immediately after that description, the focus turns to

images of spring, of renewal and of the sleeping Marima:

C'est une nuit comme les autres, belle et calme. On sent déjà le printemps. Dehors, les
insectes crissent avec folie, les crapauds ont *recommencé* leur chant dans la citerne.

Dans la chambre voisine, allongée sur le lit étroit, Marima dort profondément, la tête de
côté, ses cheveux bruns ont glissé sur son épaule. Elle est belle (*O* 251; my emphasis).

The narrator begins, but does not complete, her physical appearance, leaving her in the reader’s mind with more than just her symbolic value, but not with the fully developed flesh- and-bones presence of characters like Maou and Fintan, whom we leave listening to the joyous springtime cries of the insects. We know her hair color and have an image of her sleeping position, making it nearly impossible not

⁶² Chatman, 140- 141

⁶³ Ibid, 140. Chatman draws upon *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. Albert J. La Valley (New York, 1972) 43. The book discusses “MacGuffins,” which are devices, be they objects or people, which have no real inherent value to the story, but whose presence is necessary to move the plot along.

to continue the process of imagining and thus participate in the continuation of the story.

We are then jolted from those soothing images with the declaration, “Tout est fini. A Umahia, à Aba, à Owerri, les enfants affamés n’ont plus de force de tenir des armes” (O 251). Although this final paragraph does in fact give the sense that, as Madeleine Borgomano believes, the novel ends in only death and destruction,⁶⁴ the complex structure of the narrative is such that we cannot look only to the last words written in the text for the outcome, which is a continuation, rather than an end, of the *fabula*. The existence of Marima and Okeke, laced into the narrative, leaves it open to them to continue, and we are left to imagine.

Of Okeke, we know even less than we do of Marima. He leaves the reader’s world as an infant, traveling southward down the river with his parents Oya and Okawho. His world coincides with that of the reader just long enough for us to know that he has been born. However, as is true of Marima, the text bestows on him a force and an importance that far outweigh his actual participation in the narrative. It is at the moment of Okeke’s birth that Fintan is transformed by the power of Oya’s gaze from a passive observer to an active presence, witness, and participant. Oya is profoundly other⁶⁵ to Fintan; her

⁶⁴ Borgomano, 250

⁶⁵ Karen Levy discusses Suryavati of *La quarantaine*, in relation to Jacques and Suzanne, protagonist Léon’s brother and sister-in-law, using Emmanuel Lévinas’ concept of the Other: Suryavati is “someone absolutely Other ... to their being.” (Karen Levy, “Elsewhere and Otherwise: Lévinasian Eros and Ethics in Le Clézio’s *La quarantaine*,” *Orbis Litterarum* 56, 2001 271)

gender, her culture, her race, and even her means of communication are completely differently from his. In this transformative event, she assumes a quiet leadership role and calls him into cooperation with her, “dans le ventre de l’épave” (*O* 200). Cooperation characterizes Maou’s friendships with Oya and with Marima, and in the converging myths of Geoffroy’s dreams, different cultural sources function in a way that demonstrate the richness that each offers. The general nature of the English presence in Onitsha, however, was of course exploitative. The setting for Okeke’s birth provides a metaphor for the state of Onitsha both at that moment in history as well as twenty years later when Fintan declares in his letter to Marima, “de toute façon, c’était trop tard” (*O* 243). Okeke is born in a shipwreck, a reminder of death, loss, and the end of things, but the text’s insistence on *ventre*, stomach, alludes to Oya’s body which is about to bring forth life. With Fintan’s cooperation, life is brought forth in that place of both destruction and potential.

When Okeke, Oya, and Okawho leave us, they do not know that they will soon come into the territory of the oil companies Gulf and British Petroleum, but we do. The young family’s exit from the narrative is not a reassuring image. However, we see them pass through the storm (*O* 211), we have seen them survive the culture of exploitation of colonial Onitsha, and we know that it is they

who presented the wily and controlling Sabine Rodes with “la première fois que quelque chose, quelqu’un lui échappait” (*O* 210). They may survive.

As for Marima, she becomes Fintan’s designated witness. How will she respond to her brother’s letter, telling her, “C’est à toi, Marima, que je donne [ce train d’images], à toi qui n’en as rien su” (*O* 244)? Her response is as uncertain as Okeke’s fate. As is true in the other texts in question, we will be left to imagine. Hope is a possibility in *Onitsha*. It is, however, unborn, unheard, and sleeping.

Chapter 3

Le chercheur d'or:

The Refusal of Transformation and the Quest for a Lost Paradise

The psychologically and geographically circular configuration of *Le chercheur d'or* has been both noted and praised by critics such as Odette Denommée, who seem to see harmony in the idea that “le rétablissement de l'équilibre initial suppose un lent retour à l'origine.”⁶⁶ At the end of the novel, we find Alexis in the same physical location in which his story begins: “Me voici de nouveau à l'endroit même où j'ai vu venir le grand ouragan, l'année de mes huit ans...” (C 374). Psychologically, he leaves the narrative in a state of contemplation and remembrance that reveals his desire to be in three different mutually exclusive situations at once, all of which are firmly situated in the past. It is true that this ending constitutes in many ways, “a return to the origin,” but I see in it no sense of equilibrium. It is, rather, a refusal of transformation.

Le chercheur d'or is unique among the three novels for the consistency of the narrator. It is “un récit rétrospectif – entièrement assumé par un narrateur à la première personne... raconté par un narrateur présent qui est également le sujet (actant) de l'histoire.”⁶⁷ Also, there are no leaps in time, such as we experience in

⁶⁶ Odette Denommée, “Vision et Narration dans *Le chercheur d'or*,” *Sud*, no.85/ 86, 1989 74

⁶⁷ Ibid, 70

Onitsha and in *La quarantaine*. Ninety years elapsed between the 1890s quarantine and the 1980s search for those who lived it, and fifteen years are missing from the narrative of *Onitsha*, from the time of Marima's conception to Geoffroy's death. Years do pass in *Le chercheur d'or*, but the nature of time passage in the novel differs from that in the other two; the narrator experiences it and relates it to the reader as part of the narrative. The reader does not have the feeling of narrative discontinuity, of having missed something. Discontinuity is, however, a strong presence. It results from the sense that, despite the fact that there is one single narrator, he seems to lead himself and us through three parallel, simultaneous stories. There are essentially three mutually exclusive paths, each of which the narrator convincingly paints as the image of his "true" journey and destiny for himself and the reader. They are his identity 1) as Laure's brother, 2) as Ouma's partner and companion, and 3) as a solitary adventurer, forever on the open sea, headed towards an adventure whose conclusion he never wishes to see, much less experience. Alexis' inability to choose and claim an identity means that this novel, like *Onitsha*, may be considered as "nostalgia writing;"⁶⁸ Alexis is nostalgic for all the moments of his past because it is only in nostalgia that he can enjoy the indulgence of not having to choose among them.

The first of Alexis' paradises is Boucan, the home he shared with his parents and his sister Laure until the age of eight, when his father's bankruptcy coincided with a cyclone that destroyed their home, forcing the family to leave. Alexis' memory (our text) recalls an earthly paradise; he is "convaincu d'avoir vécu huit

⁶⁸ Borgomano, 243

années paradisiaques....”⁶⁹ In this idyllic description, as Taris Dey points out, there are heavy “résonances de Genèse”⁷⁰ as part of the *intertexte*.⁷¹ The idyllic Boucan is not only situated in a garden, but one of the trees, “Laure’s tree,” is designated as the “tree of good and evil.”

Puis je vais jusqu’à l’arbre de Laure, au bout du jardin, le grand arbre chalta du bien et du mal. Tout ce que je sens, tout ce que je vois alors me semble *éternel*. Je ne sais pas que tout cela va bientôt disparaître (C 23; my emphasis).

Nevertheless, it is clear that, even before the cyclone “qui... évoque le déluge”⁷² destroys the family home, all was not perfect in Alexis’ “Eden” (C 99).⁷³ His relationship with his sister Laure, “à la fois son double et l’autre... qui porte le nom symbolique de sa quête”⁷⁴ emerges from the beginning as deeply conflicted. On the very first page of text in the novel, in which Alexis speaks of slipping outside at night to listen to the sea, we read of how the joy that he experiences while outside gazing at the full moon is diminished by the thought of Laure, whom he has left behind: “Pourtant, je sais que Laure ne dort pas, je sais qu’elle a les yeux ouverts dans le noir et qu’elle retient le souffle” (C 11- 12). Alexis’ professed regret at having left Laure behind, “je regrette d’être sorti pour entendre

⁶⁹ Dey, 77

⁷⁰ Ibid, 78

⁷¹ As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, Bruno Thibault uses this term to refer to stories, myths, and legends whose echoes resonate in the primary text, but may not be explicitly mentioned. (Thibault, “Du stéréotype au mythe,” 971)

⁷² Jean- Nesmy, 687

⁷³ Jean- Nesmy compares the family home in Boucan to “Éden” in his review of *Le chercheur d’or*, 687, as does Alexis in the novel: “ce jardin touffu comme l’Éden” (C 99).

⁷⁴ Jean Montalbetti, “Un Modèle Dix- Huits Carats: *Le chercheur d’or*,” *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 216, mars 1985 100. Karen Levy also points out the connection between “Laure” et “l’or” in “The Elusive Gold of J. M. G. Le Clézio: The Problematic of the Self Protrait in *Le chercheur d’or* and *Voyages à Rodrigues*,” *The French Novel: from Lafayette to Desvignes : Collected Essays to Mark the 60th Birthday of Patrick Brady*, ed. Patrick Brady, Sharon Diane Nell, Bernadette C. Lintz, and George Poe (Knoxville, TN: New Paradigm Press, 1995) 188

la mer” (C 13), does not prevent his doing so again on many subsequent occasions, including the first time to he goes out to sea (C 52- 59), and both of his departures on the *Zeta* for Rodrigues (C 123 and 319).

The image of Laure as both *the same* and *the other* for Alexis -- one who is, as the gold later will be, both sought and rejected by him -- prefigures his acts of abandonment to come. Also, the fact that he is willing to leave Laure behind even during the allegedly idyllic years in Boucan reveals his lack of good faith in his relationship with her and in his memory’s narration of the story. The justification for his departure upon which he will insist throughout the narrative, that he is pursuing the treasure for his family’s sake, is undermined by the actions he takes and the thoughts he reveals in the time before the family is menaced either by financial problems or by natural disaster. During Alexis’ initiation to the sea in the pirogue of native Mauritian boy Denis, Alexis thinks of his family and then implicitly rejects them by wishing that the adventure would never end: “Je pense à Laure qui doit guetter dans l’arbre chalta, je pense à Mam et à mon père, et je voudrais que cet instant ne finisse pas” (C 57).⁷⁵

In addition to what is exposed in the primary text, the secondary stories of *Le checheur d’or* reveal much of what is to come. Alexis and Laure discover tales from the *Illustrated London News*, from *Robinsons marseillais*, from the *Journal des voyages* and from *Nada the Lily*, and their mother, “Mam,” often reads to them from the Bible. Three stories in particular made a strong

⁷⁵ Alexis’ narrative use of the verb “devoir,” as a way to speculate about that which he does not know is also used frequently to similar effect by the narrators of *La quarantaine* and *Voyages à Rodrigues* to imagine the past.

impression on Alexis as a child; two of them prefigure his future actions, and one of them stands in stark contrast to them, reminding us of the kinds of things that he could have undertaken, had he so chosen.

The stories of King Solomon and of Nada the Lily both help lay the foundation for the justification that will continually reappear in Alexis' adult life. The story of Solomon and the queen of Sheba illustrates the great fallibility of the human heart. Alexis expresses the childlike disappointment that he and his sister felt in reaction to this story:

Laure et moi nous aimons beaucoup le roi Salomon, même si nous ne comprenons pas pourquoi, à la fin de sa vie, il a renié Dieu pour adorer les idoles. Mam dit que c'est ainsi; même les plus justes et les plus puissants des hommes peuvent commettre des péchés. Nous ne comprenons pas comment cela est possible... (C 32).

This is a single, unified narrative, told in the first person. The narrator who recalls and includes these particular stories from childhood in the text and who comments, "Nous ne comprenons pas comment cela est possible," is the same narrator who is conscious of all the events in the text that he will eventually relate. His specific recollection, that he and Laure could not understand how such a wise and powerful man could sin, must be placed into the context of the whole narrative and the events that the narrator will later relate. The effect of the recollection is, "We were so young and inexperienced that we could not understand how a wise and powerful man could sin." Further, the recollection, of course, is aimed at an implied reader about whom the narrator has made certain assumptions. The implied reader has enough life experience to read the

disappointment that Laure and Alexis experience as childlike, rather than as disappointment experienced by the adult narrator telling the story. The narrator's commentary on the reaction of his former self is made in the context of a tacit understanding between himself and the implied reader, which assumes that he and the implied reader share certain understandings as adults. Thus, we can take the effect of his statement one step further: "We were so young and inexperienced that we could not understand, *as you and I do, reader*, how a wise and powerful man could sin." Of course, if the narrator actually spoke in such overt terms, the text would be completely altered from its present form, but the nuances of meaning mentioned are present in the sentence in question, as part of the *non-dit*. The adult narrator uses the child's reaction to the story to highlight the fact that even the best of people with the best of intentions can fail.

It seems that Alexis sees himself as something of a Solomon. At certain moments, he understands his previous mistakes, such as when he accepts Ouma's reproach for his incessant quest for gold: "Je suis devenu comme les autres, comme les hommes de la côte que les manafs surveillent de loin, en attendant qu'ils laissent le passage" (C 273). After the war and a repeated attempt to search for the treasure, he has the insight to ask himself, "Comment ai-je osé vivre sans prendre garde à ce qui m'entourait, ne cherchant ici que de l'or, pour m'enfuir quand je l'aurais trouvé...? Maintenant, dans la solitude et l'abandon, je comprends, je vois" (C 322). However, much like Solomon, even after Alexis exhibits moments of understanding, he is still unable to follow these insights to their conclusion. In saying, "Nous ne comprenons pas comment cela est

possible,” with the subtext, “as an experienced adult would,” Alexis seeks, in implicitly comparing himself to the great but flawed Hebrew king, an excuse for his own failures. In addition, an aspect of the Solomon story not related in Alexis’ narrative but which is nevertheless part of the *intertexte* further strengthens the Solomon allusion as an excuse for Alexis. As Solomon’s story is related in the first book of Kings, the blame for the weakness that Alexis laments, the worshipping of idols, is placed on the women the king loved, specifically on *foreign* women:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women... from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods;” Solomon clung to these in love... and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God....⁷⁶

Alexis’ recollection of this story has the effect that it seems to seek a justification of his fear of the influence women in general and specifically of “foreign women,” creating a sort of alibi in the narrative for his inconstancy with Laure, with Mam, and with Ouma.

The Nada the Lily story recounted in the text concerns Umslopogas, the son of Chaka, “qu'elle croit son frère, [et qui] l'aime à la folie” (C 72). Immediately after this information, the narrator Alexis tells the story of Nada and Umslopogas, saying, “Je me souviens du jour où Nada demande au jeune homme de lui rapporter un lionceau” (C 72). Alexis’ narrative use of “Je me souviens” in recounting a story that he has read underscores the power of the story in his

⁷⁶ I Kings, 11, vs. 1-4, Revised Standard Version

memory as comparable to something that he actually witnessed. "Je me souviens" is the same formula that he uses to recount events that he actually lived, as in, "Je me souviens de mon premier voyage en mer" (C 52). Linguistically, that which occurred between Nada and Umslopogas is given the same treatment as Alexis' own first encounter with the sea.

Not too surprisingly, Umslopogas' quest to retrieve a lion cub does not have a happy ending: "mais la lionne emporte Umslopogas dans la gueule, et Nada pleure la mort de son frère" (C 72). For Umslopogas, as for King Solomon, the sway that he permitted a woman's influence to have over him led to his ruin. If the inclusion of the Solomon story reveals Alexis' fears related to the power of foreign women, that is to say, of Ouma and her potential effect on him and his life, the story of Umslopogas and Nada the Lily demonstrates his latent fear of his affection, which may very well be "à la folie" for his sister.

The story that Alexis recalls from childhood which, rather than foreshadowing his own future actions, contrasts with them, is that of the baby Moses' being saved by Pharaoh's daughter. He tells us, "Nous récitons par coeur l'histoire, et nous nous arrêtons toujours là où la fille de Pharaon adopte l'enfant et lui donne le nom de Moïse, parce qu'elle l'avait sauvé des eaux" (C 31). Biblical scholar Megan McKenna discusses this story moment, the action of Pharaoh's daughter, as one in which a member of the culture in power risks her own position in order to save the life of a child in the marginalized culture. McKenna quotes the language of Latin Americans who describe such acts as "pushing your

privilege."⁷⁷ It is essentially a refusal to accept the hierarchical stratification of a society; "it will usually get a person in trouble with his or her own culture, economic class, and familial group, but a person can usually do it for a good while before anybody finds out."⁷⁸ Alexis has the opportunity to do just that at the end of the text: "Je comprends qu'on les emmène, qu'on emmène Ouma, n'importe où, ailleurs, pour les embarquer dans les cales d'un bateau, vers leurs pays, pour qu'ils ne mettent plus le feu aux champs des Blancs" (C 370). As the nephew of his powerful uncle Ludovic, Alexis is able to obtain a job as an overseer, and has been decorated as a World War I hero. Although he and Laure believe that because of his relationship with Ouma, "jamais il n'y aura de place pour nous ici" (C 317), he certainly has far more access to power than does Ouma or her brother. However, unlike the young Egyptian woman in the story he loved as a child, Alexis does not "push his privilege," and exploit his social position for the benefit of the marginalized. Instead, he stands and watches the boat taking away the immigrants, including the woman who risked everything to find him again, "vers... l'autre côté de l'horizon" (C 372).

Concerning his grandfather's choice to pursue the treasure, Le Clézio compares it to his eighteenth-century ancestor François' decision to leave Brittany (refusing the army's edict to cut his hair).

Ainsi, au défi de mon lointain ancêtre François qui quitte la Bretagne... pour fonder une nouvelle famille au bout du monde, répond, comme un écho d'amertume, le geste de

⁷⁷ Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (New York: Orbis, 1995) 49

⁷⁸ Ibid, 49

refus de mon grand- père qui *abandonne* sa maison et retrouve avec sa descendance le chemin de l'errance (V 122; my emphases).

There is potential for judgment in Le Clézio's word choices of "abandonne" and "refus." It is the raising of an unresolved question, an issue into which the reader's opinion is invited. Neither author nor reader is allowed to ignore the fact that in order to pursue the adventure, it was first necessary to leave family -- to, in a sense, "refuse" them -- just as Alexis "refused" to stay in Forest Side with Mam and Laure. Both in the nonfiction journal and in the novel, a question about whether the adventure on which the narrative is based can be "justified" is raised and not resolved. In *Voyages à Rodrigues*, Le Clézio writes that "Sa quête, [the grandfather's] c'est celle du bonheur perdu, désormais illusoire" (V 122). A reader may choose to assume that the lost happiness being pursued is not merely the seeker's own happiness, but that of the rest of the family as well. Certainly, that is what Alexis tells Laure: "Là- bas, à Rodrigues, nous pourrions commencer une vie nouvelle, nous aurons une grande maison, des chevaux, des arbres" (C 122). However, even Alexis is aware enough to ask, "Est-ce qu'elle pouvait me croire?". It seems that Laure is closer to the truth when she tells him, "*Tu* dois aller au bout de ce que *tu* cherches" (C 124; my emphases).

Even if we believed that Alexis' quest was undertaken for the benefit of the rest of his family, rather than an adventure that allowed him to escape the poverty and boredom he would otherwise endure with the others, we must ask, "Does one person have the right, privilege, or responsibility to seek out lost happiness for others?". This question cuts to the very purpose of both narratives.

If we conclude that one cannot or should not in some sense seek happiness on behalf others, how does that affect our interest in a tale in which the motivation for the action is undermined? The reader of either *Voyages à Rodrigues* or *Le chercheur d'or* is not allowed the luxury of limiting her imagination to those who are present in the narrative; she must also in some way deal with the absent.

Alexis' reluctance to do that becomes apparent in the way in which he relates his departure to us. He tells us of the parting scene with Laure as a memory within a memory; we read of his seeing the *Zeta* and his immediate conclusion: "Je crois que je l'ai su tout de suite: je partirais sur le *Zeta*" (C 119). In the next scene, he is already aboard the boat. It is only on it and far away from Laure and Mam that the narrator's memory returns to the scene of leaving Laure. He confides, "Elle n'a pas voulu que je la rassure. Tu pars, tu t'en vas, peut-être pour toujours. Tu dois aller au bout de ce que tu cherches, au bout du monde. C'est cela qu'elle voulait me dire, quand elle me regardait, mais moi je ne pouvais pas la comprendre" (C 124). Laure obviously knew that it would be her brother, and not she, who would pursue his dreams and passions. Alexis fails to respond when Laure expresses the desire to go on an adventure of her own: "'Tu sais, j'aimerais beaucoup cela, moi, partir n'importe où, sur un bateau... Mais c'est tellement impossible!' ... Elle s'est arrêtée de parler, et nous avons continué à regarder les bateaux amarrés du quai, et moi, j'étais heureux..." (C 115). Alexis reveals that he has neither intention of making it feasible for her to come with him nor a response to the statement that it is "tellement impossible" for her to do so. His own desire for the adventure is so strong that he speaks of his own plans as

though they were predestined by a force over which he has no control: "je l'ai *su* tout de suite: je partirais" (C 119; my emphasis).

Even Alexis, however, is not consistently convinced that gold is really the object of his quests. He reveals uncertainty about his destination in the repeated question in the narrative describing the first trip to Rodrigues, "Où allon-nous?" (C 126, 132). The uncertain nature of his future seems to be one of the few things of which he is sure as the *Zeta* crosses the sea: "Je vais vers l'espace, vers l'inconnu, je glisse au milieu du ciel, vers une fin que je ne connais pas" (C 142). He seems to be more enchanted with the limitlessness of the possibilities before him than with the specific hope of finding the treasure: "L'avenir c'est la mer, le vent, le ciel, la lumière" (C 146). Alexis' deception of self and others concerning the reasons for his quest lead us to wonder how he might have been transformed had he chosen to stay with Laure and Mam. If we agree with Odette Denommée's assessment, "Le but du chercheur d'or est de se trouver lui-même,"⁷⁹ do we believe he must cross 350 miles of the Indian Ocean to find himself?

On the *Zeta*, the text of Alexis' memory continues to serve as justification for actions in the form of the stories that are included in the narrative. The helmsman tells Alexis about the island of Saint Brandon, to which women do not have the right to go. In the story, a young girl wanted to accompany her sailor/fisherman fiancé, and persuaded him to take her along in disguise, saying that she was his little brother. When she is swept away by the waves, he mourns her but continues the charade that she is the little brother: "Alors on a entendu une voix

⁷⁹ Denommée, 74

qui pleurait, qui disait: ayoo, ayoo, petit frère! C'était le jeune pêcheur qui avait désobéi en amenant une femme dans les îles, *il avait peur* d'être puni par le capitaine, et il pleurait en disant: ayoo, petit frère!" (C 149; my emphasis). Contemplating this story, Alexis addresses himself in the narrative directly to Laure: "Je pense que j'aimerais que tu sois ici, Laure, à côté de moi, toi qui aimes tant le chant du muezzin qui résonne dans les collines de Forst Side.... J'aurais aimé t'emmener avec moi comme le pêcheur de Saint Brandon, moi aussi j'aurais pu dire que tu étais 'petit frère!'" (C 150). The function of the story about the young fiancée is double. The fact that the young girl dies makes it "safe" in Alexis' memory for him to say in his narrative that he would have liked to have brought Laure along. The reader knows that this is false, but the young girl's death in the story gives Alexis' memory (our text) a justification for his failure to even consider asking her to come with him. Just as the fiancé's grief for his "brother" is carried out as a charade, so is Alexis' alleged "wish" to be able to bring Laure with him. The second function of the story is to keep the unresolved problem of Laure and her unfulfilled adventures ever in the forefront of the reader's mind. Alexis' guilt-ridden memory will not allow him to completely erase his sister from his thoughts, and the reader will not enjoy that luxury either.

The problem of those left behind while a *chercheur d'or* pursues his quest is alluded to more than once by Le Clézio in *Voyages à Rodrigues*. The author says, concerning the loss of the family sugar plantation and the consequent effect of the lack of a sense of place: "Les garçons voyagent, vont au bout du monde.... Les filles sont vouées à la pauvreté" (V 122). He seems to acknowledge that the

same loss of security for his family that opened the door to adventure for men and boys led only to poverty for women and girls. In both the fictional narrative of *Le chercheur d'or* and the non-fiction work of *Voyages à Rodrigues*, this unpleasant fact is not swept under the proverbial rug, but rather, the memory of those left behind is woven into the narrative.

It is no coincidence that the place associated with the sailor's and Alexis' psychological charades is the island of St. Brandon. This island, whose lore represents another example of Le Clézio's use of myths and legends from various cultures as *intertexte*, is at once a sterile new Eden and a place of senseless death. Bruno Thibault explains, "La légende de Saint Brandon, mélange de folklore celtique et de légende chrétienne, raconte la navigation du moine irlandais et de ses compagnons vers l'île de Promission, c'est à dire le Paradis."⁸⁰ In other words, it is a story of a group of men, specifically monks, in search of a new earthly paradise, "un jardin d'Éden."⁸¹ This image of the island in the text is reinforced by the references to the island as a "paradis" (C 136, 177) and thoughts like Alexis' that being on the island is "comme s'il n'y avait pas d'autre terre au monde, que tout allait commencer"⁸² (C 178). The crucial difference, of course, is that St. Brandon is forbidden to women. That does not change the fact that for

⁸⁰ Thibault, "La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio," 848. After the statement cited, Thibault includes the following note: "La légende de Saint Brandon a été transcrite en vers français par Benedeit, un poète normand du douzième siècle. Concernant la structure initiatique du voyage de Saint Brandon, voir l'essai très éclairant de Glyn S. Burgess."

⁸¹ Ibid, 848

⁸² In an article on Le Clézio's *Désert*, Simone Domange highlights the author's use of the "comme si" formula as a way to suggest possibilities without affirming them: "l'emploi systématique de 'comme si,' véritable formule magique... introduit le lecteur au Coeur du mystère, lui donne à voir, sans rien affirmer, l'immense champ des possibles." (Simone Domange, "La quête du désert," *Magazine Littéraire*, Vol. 364, février 1998 46.)

Captain Bradmer, the helmsman, and the rest of the male crew of the *Zeta*, it is a place of singular beauty and natural prestige: “Est-ce qu’il y a un endroit plus beau dans le monde?” (C 179), asks the helmsman. The fact that the island is forbidden to women makes it the perfect substitute for the lost paradise: their hope seems to be that, without an Eve, perhaps they will be safe from the forbidden fruit. Of course, the lack of the female gender means that the island is a fundamentally sterile place, a place where human life cannot continue. In seeking an Eden without an Eve, Captain Bradmer, the helmsman, and ultimately, Alexis, eliminate the very risk that constitutes life rather than death. Captain Bradmer and the helmsman, whose boat, the *Zeta*, carries the name from the Greek alphabet that connotes “end,”⁸³ wish to return to St. Brandon as their final resting place (C 183). Their primary reason for coming to the island is to massacre the sea turtles that live there (C 179- 180). The island is “un lieu où viennent mourir les créatures de la mer” (C 180). By inscribing the island as at once a place of death and as a place forbidden to women, the text reaffirms Agnès Vaquin’s conclusion: “Le Clézio garde sa confiance aux femmes, aux amoureuses, aux mères... il fait confiance à l’utérus, à l’élan vital, au besoin de perpétuer l’espèce.”⁸⁴ The text presents a concept of life as communal adventure, rather than an individualized one. The absence of women denies the possibility of the life of a community. When Alexis sees Captain Bradmer, the helmsman, and the rest of the crew massacre the sea turtles, he at first is revolted by what he sees,

⁸³ Dey, 80.

⁸⁴ Agnès Vaquin, “Le Clézio fait confiance aux femmes, J. M. G. Le Clézio: *Étoile Errante*,” *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, Vol. 602, juin 1992 10

describing the scene in horror and saying, “je ne peux pas oublier ce qui s’est passé, et ce soir là, je refuse de manger” (C 180). Later, his prediction, “le *Zeta* m’emporte vers une aventure *sans retour*” (C 181; my emphasis), proves to be more accurate than even he might have imagined. At the end of the text, we will find him, having effectively rejected the presence of both Laure and Ouma in his life, longing to, like the helmsman and Captain Bradmer, find “refuge” on St. Brandon (C 375).

Posing as the polar opposite in the text to Captain Bradmer’s death-pursuing desires, stands Ouma. Alexis’ initial encounter with her on Rodrigues is emblematic of all that she offers him, which is, simply put, life. Alexis admits that he is no longer in control but has become the victim of his own obsession with the gold, “en proie à une fièvre qui allait par instants jusqu’au délire.” The basic human needs that he has tried to ignore begin to overpower him: “La soif, la faim, la solitude tourbillonnent en moi” (C 205). This admission, followed immediately by his fainting from heat exhaustion, underscores the life- draining nature of his search for the treasure. As he tells us, he is suffering from lack of social contact, as well as from physical deprivation of nourishment. In removing himself from any community and interdependence with others, he has lost all sense of time and has literally endangered his life.

To the hungry, thirsty, and exhausted mound of a young man lying on the ground, come steady drops of life- restoring water, patiently squeezed onto his forehead by a young woman whom Alexis has never seen before, whom he will come to know as Ouma. Her response to his need is unquestioning, anonymous

restoration of life. She neither offers nor asks for an introduction, nor does she lecture him for his foolishness in overexposing himself to the sun. She simply offers water and food and disappears. As is true of the stories from Alexis' childhood and on the *Zeta*, the text's description of this encounter prefigures the relationship that the two will share. Alexis describes the revitalizing drops of water she lets fall on his face: "Chaque goutte réveille mon corps, réveille une douleur, mais c'est bien" (C 205). Indeed, she will awaken his body, in sexual discovery as well as by teaching him to fish and swim in the island's waters and to walk barefooted over its rocks. She will also awaken in him a sadness, for she will see in him and say to him things that he does not want to face. It is also true concerning all that she offers him in their relationship, that, as he says here, "mais c'est bien." However, unlike the water that resuscitated Alexis from unconsciousness to a painful awakening, which he gratefully accepted as necessary to restore his life from danger, not all of the awakenings offered by Ouma will be received so readily.

One of the first gifts that Ouma offers Alexis, after his restored health, is that of a completely new perspective on the treasure he has come to Rodrigues to pursue. He supposedly left Mauritius in order to restore his family to the level of economic comfort that they had enjoyed the first eight years of his life; in other words, he believes that his reason for being in Rodrigues is the poverty that his family now endures. Ouma's first words to him question, in a spirit of great amusement, the idea that anyone would come to Rodrigues looking for gold: "'C'est vrai que vous cherchez de l'or?'". She then tells him, "'Tout le monde est

si pauvre ici” (C 212). She reveals to him the great irony of his situation: most of the people on Rodrigues suffer greater poverty than that which he has come there to escape.

Nevertheless, the ironic and morally questionable nature of Alexis’ quest does not prevent Ouma from accepting him as he is and enjoying a relationship with him. During this time, as Bruno Thibault points out, Ouma initiates Alexis to life on Rodrigues.⁸⁵ In assuming the role of initiator, she is offering Alexis an opportunity for profound transformation. His experience has been that the outdoors is the domain of males, the indoors that of females. Laure was never allowed to accompany Alexis and Denis in their explorations while the family lived in Boucan “parce qu’elle est une fille”⁸⁶ (C 15). It is because of the siblings’ gender difference that Alexis is on Rodrigues, experiencing adventure, freedom, and sexual awakening, while Laure is “prisonnière de la maison de Forest Side” (C 209). Yet the limits that Alexis so willingly places on Laure are all defied by Ouma, who initiates the less competent young man in life on the island, much as Denis did for him as a child. She contrasts with a dominant nineteenth-century stereotype of women in her ability not only to prepare food, but also to provide it. Thibault writes, concerning Suryavati of *La quarantaine*, “cette pêche au harpoon correspond à un rite fondateur; elle évoque le combat des héros et des dieux d’autrefois contre le monstre du chaos: le Dragon primitif.”⁸⁷

Ouma, too, furnishes an image of the female as hero and initiator, of power and

⁸⁵ Thibault, “La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio,” 855

⁸⁶ Karen Levy discusses this aspect of Laure and Alexis’ unequal relationship in “The Elusive Gold of J. M. G. Le Clézio,” 188-189.

⁸⁷ Thibault, “La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio,” 855

ability in the physical sense: “C’est elle qui saisit le harpoon, puis qui tue le poisson en l’assommant sur la roche noire. À bout de souffle, je reste assis, grelottant de froid. Ouma me tire pas le bras. ‘Viens, il faut marcher!’” (C 222).

Very simply, Ouma shows Alexis how to live. She leads him into and out of the water, shows him how to dry off in the sun, and when to leave the sun. The text reveals the development of their relationship through the accomplishment of routine, daily activities. Gabrielle Althen speaks of the role of these activities in the narration: “Quand rien ne passe de majeur, demeure la possibilité d’occuper le roman aux menus actes du jour: dormir, se nourrir, pêcher, se baigner.... Actes élémentaires, mais actes sacrés, pris entre sensation et nécessité....”⁸⁸ These daily activities are indeed inscribed in the text as sacred acts. Rather than seeing them as activities that occur in the narrative when “nothing major” is happening, however, I believe that the text offers an alternative vision of *what constitutes* a major, or important event. Are the daily acts of living merely distractions, obligations that slow our pace in achieving something “important”? Do the daily rituals of life have in themselves a greater value than modern societies tend to place on them? The text implicitly raises these questions in juxtaposing Ouma, who quietly and skillfully carries out the acts of living, with Alexis, whose obsessive dreams propel him to euphoric heights and then plunge him to nihilistic depths. Ouma demonstrates a rhythmic and self-sufficient way of living, which contrasts totally with Alexis’ mindset when he came to Rodrigues, so neglecting his own basic needs that he barely escaped death. This is one of the significant

⁸⁸ Althen, 139

ways in which she offers Alexis, and the text offers us through her, a different way to live, an opportunity for genuine renewal and transformation.

For a brief time, it seems that Alexis *is* transformed. After two idyllic days spent on a nearby island, watching the shore birds, swimming, and fishing, as he lies awake holding the sleeping Ouma in his arms, his contemplation suggests that he at least believes that they have indeed been transformed: “Après cette journée si longue, pleine de lumière, nous sommes dans une nuit profonde et lente qui nous pénètre et nous transforme. C’est pour cela que nous sommes ici, pour vivre ce jour et cette nuit” (C 244). During this time, their relationship appears to be a reciprocal one; each of them shares his or her story with the other. It is clear from the text, however, that Alexis’ attitude towards Ouma, despite his enjoyment of and attraction to her, is tainted by condescendence. He repeatedly describes her as “sauvage” and is “amused” that she could be so interested in, and perhaps even jealous of Laure, whom he sees as “une jeune fille de la bourgeoisie” (C 253). Despite his own family’s poverty and their rejection from the actual bourgeois circle in Mauritius, and despite the fact that Ouma was educated in the convents of France and did not learn to live as a *manaf* until she returned to Rodrigues from France at the age of 14, Alexis still clings to the image of his family as the “bourgeoisie” and Ouma as “cette fille sauvage” (C 253).

When Ouma answers Alexis’ injudicious offer to go away with him with a harshly realistic statement of the racism that she would encounter away from Rodrigues and the demand that he then leave, he does not know how to respond (C 257). He tells us, “C’est cette nuit-là que j’ai décidé de partir pour la guerre”

(C 258). It seems that her brutally honest comprehension of the world of which they are both a part is more than he is willing to hear. Seemingly preferring the horror of Ypres and the Somme to the gaze of a woman who sees and names truths that overwhelm him, he will be “engagé sans trop savoir pourquoi,” and “au paradis va succéder l’enfer.”⁸⁹

Before he leaves for the war, however, Alexis is given one more opportunity for transformation. Ouma tells him, “L’or ne vaut rien, il ne faut pas avoir peur de lui, il est comme les scorpions qui ne piquent que celui qui a peur” (C 269), and Alexis seems to understand the truth of what she has said. Fritz, the young man who is helping him search for the treasure, shocks him by telling him, “Si les manafs trouvaient l’or, ils le jetteraient à la mer!”, and forces Alexis to ask himself, “Et s’il disait vrai?” (C 262). Shortly after the comment just cited, Alexis disavows himself from the search for the treasure: “Je marche fièvreusement dans la vallée... je froisse les papiers dans mes mains, les cartes. Plus rien de tout cela ne m’importe!” (C 273). This denouncement, however, will prove to be as ephemeral as Alexis’ and Ouma’s bliss.

When, after the war, we again find Alexis on the sea on his way back to Mauritius, his intention to almost immediately return to Rodrigues is announced by the very title of the section, “Vers Rodrigues, été 1918- 1919” (C 305). Before even arriving in Mauritius and being reunited with Laure and Mam after the war, Alexis is already psychologically moving “towards Rodrigues.” He portrays this second departure for Rodrigues, as he did the first, as though it were something

⁸⁹ Alhau, 202

beyond his control: "Je sais que je dois retourner à Rodrigues" (C 309), reminiscent of Fintan's fatalistic statement about Onitsha, that it is a place "que je sais que je ne reverrai plus" (O 244).

He does not cite to us or to his family, a desire to be reunited with Ouma as the reason for a return to Rodrigues, but rather, once again, the gold. Even after living through the tragedy of the war, he returns to his original position that the treasure is, after all, the only hope that the family has. When Laure accuses him of having abdicated the family's social standing by entering into a relationship with Ouma: "Jamais nous ne pourrons être comme avant, plus jamais il n'y aura de place pour nous ici," Alexis does not contest Laure's conclusion, but responds to her, "'Mais c'est pour cela qu'il faut que je parte. C'est pour cela que je dois réussir'" (C 317). It is clear that the gold is neither a solution capable of bringing happiness nor something which he has the right to take away from Rodrigues where, as Ouma tells him, "Tout le monde est si pauvre" (C 212). Yet, even after all that he has experienced, all that Ouma has shown and told him, he returns to the physical and psychological position he held when he first left for Rodrigues: he is on the *Zeta*, believing that he must go and find the treasure. The description of his feelings when he finds himself once again on the *Zeta* reveal to what extent his relationships and roles in others' lives are insignificant to him, relative to the intoxicating absolute liberty of being on the open sea. He admits that his goal continually eludes him, and although he gives no reason to think that this time is different, the movement across the open sea, headed towards the unknown brings him such transcendent satisfaction that everything and everyone

else are, in comparison, of no more significance than dreams: “Je crois que je n’ai jamais quitté cette place, à la barre du *Zeta*, poursuivant une croisière dont le but sans cesse recule, et que tout le reste n’a été qu’un rêve” (C 319- 320). It seems that it is neither Ouma nor even the gold that drives him eastward once more, but rather the feeling of being out on the sea, heading towards an unknown and, most importantly, away from the imperfections, compromises, and monotony of life on land, where he must function in community with other people. Alexis refuses transformation in order to repeat a quest to reestablish a lost “Eden.” However, it is clear that in truth, his ideal has shifted and that what he now most prizes is not, as he claims, his family’s security or prestige, but his own absolute liberty.

Alexis’ thoughts on this second voyage on the *Zeta* and later on Rodrigues only underscore his lack of transformation and his immobility. He has failed to see all that Ouma tried to show him about himself and to hear what she had to say. His attraction to her is limited to the image of the beautiful savage, and his recollections of her tend to be of things they did and saw together, rather than of what she said to him. Because the text is the obviously biased memory of Alexis, both *actant* and *sujet*, the image of Ouma that is repeatedly given to the reader is dreamy and visually- oriented, silencing her voice. Through the prism of Alexis’ memory, we do not hear her; rather, we only see her. She is literally “seen and not heard.”⁹⁰ Of course *through Alexis’ narration*, we have heard Ouma’s stories

⁹⁰ Edward Said discusses this problem in *Orientalism*, using Flaubert’s written account of an encounter with an Egyptian courtesan as an example: “she never spoke for herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she

and thoughts. He is, nonetheless, in a position of relative power in many ways. As far as the reader's perception of Ouma is concerned, the most significant aspect of Alexis' power is that he controls the narrative and therefore the lens through which we see her. In thinking of Ouma, Alexis' references are almost exclusively corporal, referring to her body usually within one phrase of every mention of her name (C 309, 315, 320, 327). His inability to see her as a cerebral being is clear in his question to himself "Est-ce qu'on écrit aux manafs?" (C 321).

Just as on Mauritius, Alexis found that "L'ivresse du retour est bien vite passé" (C 314), on Rodrigues, he soon finds himself asking, "Pourquoi suis-je revenu?" (C 325). As he did at home, he loses himself in recollections of an idyllically recalled past. He confesses the profundity of his demobilization, "Je ne veux pas bouger" (C 325), and the futility of his actions, "J'écris des lettres pour Ouma, pour Laure, des lettres qu'elles ne liront pas" (C 331).

After several more seasons have passed, we see what seems to be a true moment of transformation for Alexis. He renounces the quest for the gold, but on this occasion, it is not merely because it no longer interests him, as was previously the case (C 273), but because he realizes that his coming to Rodrigues merely to search for gold, in the same exploitative spirit that the English came to Onitsha, was outrageous: "Comment ai-je osé vivre sans prendre garde à ce qui m'entourait, ne cherchant ici que de l'or?" (C 332). I believe it is here that the

was 'typically Oriental'..... Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated incident." (Edward Said, from *Orientalism*, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994) 133)

text speaks most directly to us and that this is the moral climax of the text. Alexis' realization and articulation of this truth represents a transformation for him, but he will in no way act upon it. He will continue to repeat his pursuits of the utopias in his memory. Nevertheless, this fleeting moment of understanding on Alexis' part defines the moral position of the text and transforms all that we have read until this point. To the extent that we have been seduced by the flowing prose that has carried us back and forth across the sea with Alexis and led us to believe and/ or accept his justifications for his actions, that is no longer possible. The text emphasizes, through Alexis' realization, that all individuals possess the potential for both exploitation and responsibility, and that each of us can and does choose which of the two will be developed.

The limits of Alexis' transformation are exposed after his second and final return to Mauritius. After seeing Ouma working among the other immigrants in the fields of his powerful uncle Ludovic, Alexis demonstrates that he has learned just enough to go through the motions that he needs to, in order to make contact with her. Again, his account in the narrative suggests a more dramatic transformation than has in truth occurred. He tells us:

C'est ainsi que je prends la décision de tout abandonner, de tout jeter hors de moi. Ouma m'a montré ce que je dois faire, elle me l'a dit, à sa façon, sans parole, simplement en apparaissant devant moi comme un mirage, parmi tous ces gens qui viennent travailler sur ces terres qui ne seront jamais à eux: Noirs, Indiens, métis, chaque jour, centaines d'hommes et de femmes.... Alors, je suis venu près du tombereau et j'ai commencé moi aussi à déterrer les pierres et à les jeter avec les autres (C 348).

Alexis' act of temporary social demotion does win him a brief reunification with Ouma, if only, as Taris Dey proposes, a "redite."⁹¹ His obsession with the past and with Laure in particular reappears in his choice of Mananava, to which he and Laure always talked of going together, as the destination for him and Ouma. As Alexis idealizes the sister whom he has again abandoned, this time to a convent, insisting, "Sa vie est parmi les religieuses... là où errent les femmes sans argent, sans foyer" (C 360), Ouma sadly concludes, "'Tu dois retourner avec elle'" (C 366). Before Ouma leaves Alexis' and the reader's world, however, her voice, previously somewhat overpowered by Alexis' reminiscences about her graceful body, makes an indelible political and moral mark on the text: "Elle parle du malheur, et de la guerre qui doivent revenir encore une fois, de la mort de sa mère, des manafs que l'on chasse de partout, qui doivent repartir maintenant" (C 367). Alexis will remain only "un veilleur inutile" (C 367). He again functions as the disturbing mirror in the text, showing the reader our potential to see only the charming exotic qualities of the Other and to retreat from the harsh realities of prejudice and exploitation that assault her. Alexis does not take responsibility for his own inaction, which leads to Ouma's departure, as indicated by his verb choice for her presence in the prison camp: "J'ai le Coeur serré en pensant à Ouma dans la prison du camp, où elle a *choisi* de rejoindre son frère" (C 370; my emphasis).

Again, although Alexis fails to act in an effective way, the realizations that he articulates define the moral position of the text: "Je comprends qu'on les

⁹¹ Dey, 82

emmène, qu'on emmène Ouma, n'importe où, ailleurs, pour les embarquer dans les cales d'un bateau, vers leurs pays, pour qu'ils ne mettent plus le feu aux champs des Blancs" (C 370). The immigrants, Ouma included, have been brought to Mauritius to work after the war and are now being deported; they are one of what Jean- Xavier Ridon describes as "ces populations d'immigrés dont les États essayent de se défendre."⁹² Certainly, the practice of welcoming immigrant workers across borders when a great deal of agricultural, manufacturing, or infrastructure- enhancing work needs to be done, only to tighten restrictions and/or deny benefits when immigrants' needs begin to compete with a state's needs, is not unique to post- World War I Mauritius. For as long as populations have been mobile enough to migrate, the problem exposed in the text has been an enduring one in every part of the world, including in contemporary France, where the text was composed. As Ridon emphasizes, "l'écriture de Le Clézio tente de déchirer les silences."⁹³

Alone at the end of the novel, Alexis revisits every significant event and person in the text. He speaks of them in the future, conditional, and present tenses, but never in the past tense. Because this is a reverie and not a report of interaction with other people, Alexis does not have to make the difficult choices that, throughout the narrative, prevented him from ever being truly happy in one place. His dreaming takes him easily through all the situations and identities that he loves, letting none exclude any of the others. He goes from wanting to speak

⁹² Jean- Xavier Ridon, "Écrire les marginalités," *Magazine Littéraire*, Vol. 364, février 1998 39

⁹³ Ibid, 39

to Mam "de ces choses qui ne finissent pas" (C 374) to wanting to talk to Laure about Ouma, as he never could in their relationship as recorded in the text, combining memories of an adult relationship with the stories he had read as a child. He muses, "Je voudrais parler à Laure de Nada the Lily, que j'ai trouvé au lieu du trésor, et qui est retournée dans son île" (C 374). By superimposing the storybook character of Nada the Lily on Ouma, Alexis' preference for the exotic, fantasy image over the real woman is accentuated. The language "retournée dans son île" implies that Rodrigues is "where she belongs," as though her returning there is somehow in the "natural order of things." Alexis then easily leaves the identity as son and brother to explore that of the adventurer on the open sea who needs no one else so much as the sea, the wind, and the limitless possibilities: "Je suis sur le pont, à la poupe, enveloppé de vent.... Le timonier chante *pour lui seul...*" (C 374; my emphasis). Bruno Thibault suggests that the helmsman serves as a sort of spiritual guide for our narrator: "Le timonier devient le guide spirituel d'Alexis: il apparaît dans le texte comme la première ébauche de l'archetype du Soi."⁹⁴ Certainly, Alexis' recurring desire to pursue his own adventures, utterly oblivious of any other needs around him, indicates that the helmsman's song, sung for his pleasure alone, has indeed become Alexis' model. No sooner has he affirmed that the helmsman sings for himself alone, however, than the "je" on the boat becomes "nous," with Ouma being the other part of the "nous." The destination that he chooses for them in this reverie is St. Brandon (C 375), both a place of death and a place forbidden to women, underscoring what

⁹⁴ Thibault, "La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio," 848

Alexis sees as the impossibility of any real future together. The reverie then ends with the arrival of that ever-present symbol of the unknown and absolute freedom, that with which the adventure begins, "j'entends au fond de moi le bruit vivant de la mer qui arrive" (C 375).

Throughout the novel, language reinforces the repetitiveness of Alexis' actions. This is accomplished in two ways. First, there are certain words and phrases that appear again and again like refrains, producing a repetition that gives this work of prose a strong sense of poetry. "La mer" is omnipresent as a word and as an image, so much so that it would be more efficient to enumerate the pages from which it is missing than those on which it is present. The sense of the sea is so strong that the effect is one of being verbally surrounded by it, much as one is when on an island. Along with the omnipresence of the sea, we encounter frequent mention of the color, feeling, and position of sun, wind, light, and heat. Not only do the elements reappear, but the specific language used to describe them is so similar as to create a true feeling of refrain. Perhaps the most striking such example is the collection of passages describing the position of the sun. I believe that Alexis' use in the narrative of the archetypal image of repetition, the continual movement of the earth, places his own repetitive cycle of actions in a deceptively natural light, as though, just as the earth is destined to rotate on its axis, so are human beings fated to live their lives in cycles.

Le soleil descend vers les collines (C 195).

Le soleil est déjà haut dans le ciel (C 206).

Le soleil est déjà haut (C 222).

...le soleil monte dans le ciel... (C 254).

Le soleil est bas dans le ciel (C 271).

Le soleil redescend (C 320).

Le soleil est tout près de l'horizon (C 349).

Le soleil se lève... (C 354).

...le soleil descend vers la mer... (C 365).

The images of the sun rising, being at its zenith, and setting again, create a visual pattern of perpetual rotation. This is the tableau against which Alexis tells his own story of continual rising and falling. The described position of the sun often reflects Alexis' psychological state at that point in the narrative: the rising sun suggests hope and renewal emerging as possibilities, the sun at its zenith is often the backdrop of intense limit experiences, and the descending sun connotes the descent of hope. At the close of the text, the sun is descending towards the sea, that fluid place where Alexis can exist with neither boundaries nor obligations. For Alexis, the moment that is beautiful, the moment for which he lives, is that in which he is headed towards an adventure, in the process of creating something. The fact of *having* created something is virtually meaningless. It is the possibility of things that might occur in an imagined future and the memories of an idealized past that Alexis treasures. It is in the contemplation of these two unrealities that we leave him.

Alexis' paralysis gives us as readers a disturbing image of what our mirrored reflection could look like. As we find in *La quarantaine* and in *Onitsha*, the author's courage to re-open the difficult stories of his family's past is strongly evident in *Le chercheur d'or*. The author's grandfather, in search of whose

memory Le Clézio made a pilgrimage to Rodrigues, is the person who inspired the Alexis character. Although the story is told in Alexis' voice, we have seen how its inconsistencies, contradictions, and hypocrisies result in a text that eventually creates empathy for Ouma, for Laure, for Mam, and for the immigrant worker population as a whole, but very little for its narrator/ protagonist. Alexis refuses renewal, preferring his own dreams and fantasies. Le Clézio, in contrast, by exposing this honest and demanding story, enters into a genuine renewal process that, like Alexis' recovery from heat exhaustion, "réveille... réveille une douleur, mais c'est bien" (C 205).

As the structure of this novel plays with our conflicted empathy by taking us abruptly into and out of different worlds, our participation is required. Again, participation is required of the reader in order to determine which statements made by the Alexis narrator to believe and which to discount. In writing this story, Le Clézio employed the unflinching gaze of that which he speaks in explaining the process of writing: "[Celui qui écrit] ne regarde pas en arrière. Il voyage très vite à travers l'espace de la pensée possible, sans connaître les limites."⁹⁵ The author speaks of writing as merely recording what exists: "[La main de l'écrivain] n'est que le sismographe qui enregistre les tremblements venus de loin, et l'écriture n'est qu'un signal."⁹⁶ Will we, like Alexis, ignore our

⁹⁵ J. M. G. Le Clézio, "Le sismographe," *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, No. 214, 1990 17

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 18

own moments of clarity? Or will we allow ourselves to see, *ne regardant pas en arrière*, and to react?

Chapter 4:
Voyages à Rodrigues:
An Archeology of Time

In the “archéologie personnelle”⁹⁷ that is *Voyages à Rodrigues*, “le romancier a repris sa quête, non de l’or, mais de l’homme, le grand- père possédé par son rêve.”⁹⁸ In this brief, intense nonfiction text, J. M. G. Le Clézio makes his own pilgrimage to the fabled island of Rodrigues, where ninety years previously, his paternal grandfather Léon Le Clézio first began the series of quests for treasure on the island, the adventures which would later inspire the author to write *Le chercheur d’or*. Between 1902 and 1926, Léon Le Clézio made a series of trips to Rodrigues, leaving his wife and children in Mauritius as he searched relentlessly for a treasure, that, according to lore, had been buried on Rodrigues by 18th-century privateer Nageon de l’Estang, to whom the narrators of both *Le chercheur d’or* and *Voyages à Rodrigues* refer as “le Corsair inconnu.” Indeed, the author’s quest, like Laure in relation to Alexis, is “à la fois ... double et ...autre.”⁹⁹ The physical steps, and at times, the goal, of the author’s quest, mirror those of his grandfather. He writes of the fact that he was not even surprised when Fritz Castel, the young man who had helped his grandfather search for gold and who

⁹⁷ Borgomano, 243

⁹⁸ Brée, 112

⁹⁹ Montalbetti, 100

also appears in that role in *Le chercheur d'or*¹⁰⁰, recognized the author right away, because, “Ne savait-il pas que je devais *revenir*?” (V 144). Yet, the author’s quest is also *for* his grandfather and his grandfather’s adventure; the desire is one to understand, to revisit, and to, in some way, connect with the past. The first quest is both the model for, and object of, the second. This adventure into legend, in a place which holds such significance for Le Clézio but to which he had not yet been, holds, for this much- celebrated author, the “prestige d’un retour qu’aucune fortune n’offusque.”¹⁰¹

In this text, written and published in the form of a journal, we see the author at his most vulnerable yet. Gone is the shield of fiction that permits a certain protection even in the other autobiographically- inspired works considered in this study. The work is presented to us as readers in the form of a documentary, rather than as a text conceived and structured in a particular order by its narrator. The result is that we witness the conflicting, uncertain path of the protagonist’s quest. For, in this case, the protagonist is the author himself, and the quest is the text in our hands, constructed and experienced through the act of writing. An example of the obvious ambiguity that the author/ narrator feels concerning the quest that he has come there to re-live, find, and also to question, is his reflection, “Tant de travail inutile me surprend and m’émeut,” followed by the self- reproach, “Travail inutile? Mais qui suis- je pour juger de cela?” (V 33). The narrative style of the text as a journal results in a thematic openness similar to

¹⁰⁰ As mentioned in Chapter 3, it is Fritz Castel who informs Alexis, much to the latter’s astonishment, that “Si les manafs trouvaient l’or, ils le jetteraient à la mer!” (C 262).

¹⁰¹ René Char, “Biens Égaux,” *Fureur et mystère* (Paris, Gallimard, 1967) 173

that created in *Onitsha* and in *La quarantaine* by the multiplicity of narrators and in *Le chercheur d'or* by the simultaneous stories of Alexis and Laure, Alexis and Ouma, and Alexis alone. This journal is written by a single narrator and confines itself to a specific experience in a particular place and time. However, the documentary- like style, in which the narrator tells us what he is thinking at a series of specific moments, without reconciling seeming contradictions, creates an openness that, as in the novels in question, invites the involvement of the reader to consider issues that the narrative raises and does not resolve.

Madeleine Borgomano describes *Onitsha* as a “nouvelle recherche du temps perdu,”¹⁰² and the same may be said of *Voyages à Rodrigues*, with the difference being that the former seeks to resuscitate the narrator’s own past, “pour que vive et revive Onitsha,”¹⁰³ while the latter documents a quest to discover and explore someone else’s past, that of the author’s grandfather: “Pourquoi suis- je venu à Rodrigues? N’est-ce pas... pour chercher à remonter le temps?” (V 40). As we, through reading, witness the narrator/ author’s quest to revisit the past, we encounter two of the issues faced and explored by the text: “Is it possible to reconnect with/ renew the past?” and “If so, how?”. The text seems to present different perspectives on the first question, as will be discussed. In response to the latter problem, the narrator draws upon three types of sources in his quest to understand “ce rêve fixe qui était le sien [his grandfather’s]... que je veux

¹⁰² Borgomano, 243

¹⁰³ Ibid, 251

comprendre” (V 60). They are written texts, texts of physical place, and the immediate presence of live human beings.

The written documents, derisively labeled by the author’s aunt as “Papiers sans valeur” (V 124), are those that belonged to his grandfather, “tout ce qui a alimenté mon [the author’s] rêve” (V 124). They are described as “la liasse de documents... lettres, cartes, plans, schémas, messages codés et cryptogrammes, et, plus mystérieux encore, [and perhaps most importantly] ces graffiti et ces calculs que mon grand-père a ajoutés en marge” (V 79). The journal presents a tapestry of overlapping and intertwining reader/ adventurer, adventurer/ writer, and reader/ writer relationships of seemingly infinite complexity; as the author marvels, “je suis étonné par tous les êtres et les actes que sa quête implique” (V 79). The author’s grandfather had amassed a vast collection of documents, which are no less texts than is a novel, written by other adventurers, and to those texts, the grandfather reacted and continued the process of writing “ces calculs... ajoutés en marge.” As a reader, the grandfather renewed the texts he read by actively responding to them, transforming them, and continuing them with his own *calculs en marge* along with his actual search for the treasure. The author, in turn, followed that model. He was the reader of his grandfather’s journal and documents, and became inspired to undertake his own journey. Then, through the act of writing, he renews the written texts of his grandfather and transforms the older man’s quest. The first act of transformation carried out by the author is to re- open the question of *why* his grandfather continued to come to Rodrigues and search for the treasure. The simple answer, “to search for gold and buy back the

family property,” is not accepted as such. Rather, as the author walks in the same places his grandfather walked, feels the same heat of the sun, sits upon the same rocks, he looks to those physical sources, different but equally valid and informative texts, for clues about what his grandfather *must have* thought and felt. Just as Maou renewed herself by discovering a new aspect of her being through writing on the *Surabaya*, Le Clézio renews both himself and his grandfather’s written texts through *the act of writing*. We see that renewal between reader and text can be reciprocal.

The transformation from writer to reader to adventurer is not merely linear. The reader of *Voyages à Rodrigues* is not simply *told* that Le Clézio read his grandfather's documents. As mentioned in Chapter 1 concerning the drawings and the songs and poems in different languages that appear in all four texts in this study, many of the grandfather’s documents are reproduced directly in the text, giving the reader access not only to the text of the author's own adventure, but also to the texts which inspired it. For example, we are given access to some of the "calculs ajoutés en marge,” with the reproduction of annotations made to the map: "Au sommet du plan, au sud, une autre annotation:

'Août 1918. Point. o O N = 85°

O o O N = 20° 30" (*V* 74).

Nonfiction texts such as maps and letters are not the only sources for the grandfather's inspiration. Legends, told and written, of other adventurers, who sought the treasure, inspired him greatly and were, according to the author, *part of the treasure itself*:

N'était-ce pas cela aussi que cherchait mon grand-père, dans ce décor de broussailles et de lave, ici, dans l'un des endroits les plus pauvres et les plus isolés de la terre? Car le trésor, c'était tout cela, c'était l'aventure fabuleuse du *Privateer* [sic], la légende du Grand Moghol et de ses vassaux, Nizam et Moluk au Deccan, Anaverdi Khan à Arcot, la capitale du fameux Carnatic (appelé aussi Coromandel), gardée par ses deux forteresses de Gingi et de Trichinopoly (V 42).

Once again, the legends are mentioned, not as a group, devoid of specific names, but are listed, in all the colorful glory of the names themselves and some of the places associated with them. The reader is given access to the notes taken by the grandfather (two levels of adventurer / writer removed from the reader of *Voyages à Rodrigues*). Thus, she too may pronounce the names of the adventurers, look up and read the tales that inspired the grandfather, who in turn inspired the author. It is in this way that the tapestry of readers, writers, and adventurers, is constructed: the reader of *Voyages à Rodrigues* has direct access to each text that was one of its inspirational parents. In the grandfather and the author, the reader had two models of interconnected reader/ text relationships. Each began as a reader and then became an adventurer and writer, transforming and renewing the texts that inspired him.

One of the ways in which the author transforms his grandfather's quest is to question and explore *why* the latter kept going back to Rodrigues. The judgment of the quest for gold as a refusal to stay with the family left behind in Mauritius and/ or as unacceptable in light of the poverty of the Rodrigues people so strongly implied in *Le chercheur d'or*, is almost entirely absent in *Voyages à Rodrigues*. The character development of Laure and of Ouma, the great amount

of time devoted first to Laure and Alexis' childhood and then to Ouma and Alexis' relationship, all put the search for gold in a context that is not part of the *Voyages à Rodrigues* narrative. The family for whom the quest was undertaken is mentioned only as a sort of vague background, and the author admits that, "J'ai du mal à imaginer cet homme... avec tout le poids de ses responsabilités de bon citoyen (britannique) et de père de famille" (V 98). The grandfather whom he is there to discover is the *chercheur d'or*, and it is only in the context of this "île volcanique... milieu primitif et authentique,"¹⁰⁴ immersed in "son rêve, sa passion, son obsession" (V 94), that the author can imagine him. Le Clézio does, however, muse that "La seule déchirure qu'il a dû ressentir, c'est chaque fois qu'il a laissé la femme qu'il aimait, et ses enfants, pour partir vers ce désert" (V 63), attributing to his grandfather a substantially different position from that of Alexis. A family resentful of their father and husband's absence might be inferred from the title "Papiers sans valeur," "vengeur et drôle" (V 124), that the author's aunt places on the documents, but the subject of the family's reaction to the quest is not even alluded to elsewhere, and the aunt is so anonymous in her labeling of the documents that she has neither face nor name, only a hand. As is indicated in the questions, "Travail inutile? Mais qui suis- je pour juger de cela?" (V 33), this text seeks not to explore whether or not the quest was worthwhile, but rather what motivated the author's grandfather to maintain such persistence in it. Secondly, this text is self- reflecting; the quest whose validity and efficacy are called into question is the author's own. While the author searches for traces of his

¹⁰⁴ Thibault, "La Métaphore exotique," 845

grandfather, his journal also asks to what extent it is possible to connect with the past, which I will discuss further.

As mentioned, in addition to the collection of written documents associated with the search for the treasure, another important kind of source that guided the author's quest for the past, and which he imagines guided that of his grandfather, are texts of nature -- the land, the sky, and the sea. They are described in *Voyages à Rodrigues* as providing a link between the past and the present, allowing the author a tangible, material link not only to his grandfather, but also to the one who had come before both of them, the corsair Nageon de l'Estang:

C'est cette illusion qui m'a fait venir ici, à Rodrigues, pour toucher le sol qu'il avait tellement regardé, aimé, où il avait tant espéré. Curieusement, ce qui m'a attiré vers l'Anse aux Anglais, c'est cela même qui, je crois, l'avait attiré : être sur les lieux où était venu autrefois le *Corsaire inconnu*, [sic] pour sentir ce qu'il avait senti, toucher, voir, comprendre ce qui avait existé pour lui (V 123).

Again, we see the pattern that the author seeks a connection not only with his grandfather, but also with the corsair, just as the books and other written texts that inspired his grandfather are also important. His own quest is not limited to that which directly inspired him, but also seeks the sources of that inspiration.

Physical places are established as another kind of text in the reader/ adventurer/ writer relationships described in the narrative. In this case, the link among the adventurers the corsair, J. M. G. Le Clézio, and his grandfather is not language-based text, but the natural world. For Le Clézio, being in that place gives him the possibility of being witness to events from which he would otherwise be

excluded: “Comme s'il n'y avait d'autre passé que ce dont nous pouvons recevoir témoignage, ce qui parle par les êtres, par les plantes, les pierres, la couleur du ciel et de la mer, l'odeur de l'air” (*V* 123). The physical places that act as texts in *Voyages à Rodrigues* are not only natural elements, but also markings made by the corsair, which were keys for the grandfather's search, as well as for that of the author. A capital “M,” inscribed into the rocks, supposed mark of the corsair, informs the author that he has found one of the signs that guided his grandfather (*V* 11), just as, for Alexis, this same finding represented the first sign of the corsair (*C* 201). Markings such as this in the material rock of the island constitute a type of text which is both written and of physical place, incorporating two of the major kinds of sources which guide the author's quest.

Continuing to think of *Voyage à Rodrigues* as a model for relationships among readers, writers, and texts and for the potential for renewal that may lie therein, we have thus far discussed four elements of that model. First, we have established that language- based texts can provide inspiration for their readers to continue to create new adventures. Secondly, we have established that, in Le Clézio's model, the pattern of inspiration is not linear; it is not limited to a transmission from one text to another, but a reader may be inspired by a given text as well as by all that has contributed to its creation. Also, we have seen that renewal can be reciprocal between a reader and a text. Finally, it is clear that inspirational texts are not limited to language- based ones but often include texts of place and nature.

In addition to written texts and texts of place, the third source that guides and assists the adventures of the narrator/ author of *Voyages à Rodrigues* and of the characters in all three novels comes in the forms of live human beings, specifically those whom the protagonists encounter when they go, “vers leurs ailleurs.”¹⁰⁵ In the novels, the people encountered “ailleurs,” the people who are *other* to the European protagonists, are central to the plots, and it is through them that opportunities for renewal are presented. Marima, Oya, and Bony of *Onitsha*, Denis and Ouma of *Le chercheur d’or*, and Suryavati of *La quarantaine* all act in this role. Although *Voyages à Rodrigues*, as a journal rather than a novel, has neither the plot nor character development of the three novels, the participation of people whom the author encounters in Rodrigues is critical to his quest, and the privileged language used in the text to describe those people is equally significant. One such person appears on the first page of the narrative. The author, writing in the present tense, describes his movements along the Roseaux River. He has his map, but nonetheless, he appears to have gone too far. He asks the first question in the narrative, the first of many. This one, however, is not of the introspective nature that we will read later, such as, “Pourquoi suis- je venu à Rodrigues?” (V 40) and later, “Que suis- je?” (V 134). Rather, this first question is a practical one: “Mais où est le ravin en cul- de- sac, et la source tarie?” (V 9). It will be in this same ravine that the author will find answers to some of the more philosophical questions, but first, he must locate the ravine. How will he find it?

¹⁰⁵ Althen, 138

He recalls that a little while ago, a young girl passed by him, and he asked her for help.

After at first not understanding the terms he used to ask about what he was trying to find, she did understand an inquiry about the fountain and pointed him in the correct direction. His willingness to bridge communication barriers, as Maou did in her friendships with Oya and Marima, to put forth the effort to speak in a way that the girl will understand, permits the exchange that will lead him to the heart of his grandfather's adventure. The next event in the narrative is the discovery of the ravine. In the narrative, therefore, the encounter is presented after the narrator tells us that he is disoriented. Therefore, the narrative sequence is as follows: 1) the narrator cannot find the ravine, 2) the encounter with the young girl is related, 3) the narrator retraces his steps, and 4) he finds the ravine. The chronological order of events differs from the presented order in the narrative in that the conversation with the young girl actually occurred before the narrator became disoriented. The reversal of the two events in the narrative has the effect of emphasizing the importance of the young girl's help in the author's search. The reader encounters: 1) the difficulty that the narrator is facing, then 2) help from another person, and immediately thereafter, 3) the success of the narrator.

In the reader's mind, there is a very strong link established between the help of the young girl and the success of the narrator. The implication is that despite the plethora of documents that the author has brought to guide him on his quest, the help of an anonymous live human being at that very moment was critical to the continuation of his quest.

A second encounter with a young rodrigaise underscores the importance of the author's willingness to modify his means of communication. He asks a young girl named Sheila, "'Est-ce qu'il y a une source par ici?' and then tells us, "Je rectifie en créole: 'une fontaine?'" (V 19). It is immediately after this effort has been made that the little girl's fears are completely allayed: "Elle n'a plus peur maintenant" (V 19). This transformation is similar to the one that we see in *Onitsha*'s Marima, who, after hearing Maou speak several words in Marima's own language, laughed out loud.

The importance of the local people is also highlighted through the privileging language of the narrative. The observation about the topography of the island made by a young girl from Mauritius merits being cited in the text, as a worthy addition to the author's own impassioned and poetic descriptions: "La jeune Mauricienne qui parcourt l'île disait cela, après avoir aperçu le chaos volcanique de la baie malgache : 'Cela ressemble à la lune'" (V 16). Later, the author encounters a group of children, to whom he poses questions about the people and places of the area. Again, the significance is double. In practical terms, we again see the author's dependence on the local children to find what he has come looking for. The decades' worth of documents that were left by the author's grandfather are not sufficient sources; he must also ask those who live there in the present. Secondly, in the way that the children are described, we see an attention to the details of what they look and sound like, how they behave, and what seems to frighten them. This is not the stereotyping narration of Alexis; the children are presented as real people, with the characteristics that distinguish

them: "Une petite fille de huit ou neuf ans, très mince, au visage sculptural de Noire, mais dont la peau est de la couleur cuivrée des metis, est assise juste derrière nous" (*V* 18). We don't simply read "Une petite fille est assise derrière nous." The gaze of the narration is attentive and very human: "Sheïla parle bien le français, presque sans accent, ses yeux sont lumineux, son visage est sérieux pour son âge" (*V* 19).

The inclusion of detailed, if brief, descriptions of the children who helped guide the narrator to his goal underscore not only the impossibility, but also the undesirability, of removing one's self "loin du monde," of trying to live within a "refuge" (*V* 127), an insulated earthly paradise. That was exactly what Le Clézio's twice great grandfather Eugène was seeking in the house which he would name Euréka (*V* 127), and it is that house, symbol of idyllic refuge, that occupies the privileged place of "lieu le plus important de [la] famille" (*V* 125), in the memories of those, including the author, for whom it was never home, but rather a "maison... mythique [et] perdue" (*V* 125). Karen Levy calls to our attention the problematic position of this house as "a spacious and very comfortable colonial property... emblem of a cultural past that was not innocent, and, in many ways... represents the kind of society Le Clézio... has repeatedly condemned."¹⁰⁶

Through the conversations with the children and in the invaluable help that they give the author, the text underscores that there is no separation from context. Le Clézio came to Rodrigues to find traces of his grandfather, to recall the mythical

¹⁰⁶ Karen Levy, "The Elusive Gold of J. M. G. Le Clézio," 196. It should be noted that Levy prefaces the observations cited with the clarification that her comments do not constitute an accusation against the family: "I am not suggesting that the Le Clézio family members were oppressors..." (196).

past of his family, and to walk where the great adventurers of the eighteenth century had walked. However, none of those people existed in a vacuum. Just as there are people living on Rodrigues today, those whom the author describes as “ceux qui n’ont rien à perdre” (V 36), there were people there during his grandfather’s time and during that of the corsair. The children who help Le Clézio and whose presence is inscribed in the text in a way that is, though brief, “plein de pitié,”¹⁰⁷ are living reminders of the population of Rodrigues, without whose occasional help and compassion, or at minimum, lack of hostility, any quest for gold, for identity, or for the past, would be impossible. The subtle but vivid presence of the children reminds us of the native population among whom perhaps someone, as Ouma did for Alexis, offered help of some kind to Le Clézio’s grandfather. It is a population who certainly bore witness to that ongoing quest, and, as is so clearly stated in *Le chercheur d’or*, from whose island the grandfather ultimately intended to take away a very valuable treasure. These issues are not an explicit focus of *Voyages à Rodrigues*, nor am I suggesting that they should be. The children are simply *there*, reminding us of a reality that was the context for the fabulous adventures that Le Clézio and, he imagines his grandfather (V 53), so yearned to re-capture.

As Madeleine Borgomano says of *Onitsha*, *Voyages à Rodrigues* is in many ways an “alchimie verbale tendant à resusciter un espace-temps révolu.”¹⁰⁸ The author has never known his grandfather. Through writing, he re-creates and

¹⁰⁷ Casanova, 14

¹⁰⁸ Borgomano, 243

imagines the thoughts and feelings of a man who had been, for the author, “qu’un personnage de roman, si l’on veut, une idée” (V 39). By walking on the land where his grandfather walked and breathing the air that he breathed, Le Clézio seeks clues that he could not find in the documents alone: “Je peux imaginer... tout ce que mon grand-père ne dit pas” (V 93). He writes of what he learns from the contours of the land: “comment ne pas voir dans ce paysage ... l’expression d’une volonté?” (V 46). As Bruno Thibault emphasizes concerning the role of place in *Le chercheur d’or* and in *La quarantaine*, “La géologie est la métaphore de la psychologie.”¹⁰⁹ Le Clézio tells us how the island speaks to him: “l’île me dit autre chose... Elle m’annonce quelque chose...” (V 77- 78), but what it is, he admits, “je ne sais” (V 78). The author’s uncertainty largely concerns the question of to what extent it is possible to give life to the hopes and dreams of the past. In the ravine, his grandfather had discovered the empty hiding places for treasure, simultaneously confirming the accuracy of the documents and maps he had been following but also ending any possibility of finding the treasure (V 90-91). In this place of both consolation and “semi- échec” (V 91), the author writes that at last, he feels a unity with his grandfather: “peut- être enfin je ne fais qu’un avec mon grand-père.” However, this affirmation is tempered by the use of the conditional verb tense: “comme deux homes qui *auraient* la même ombre” (V 102; my emphasis). This is the closest that the author seems to come in the journal to realizing his goal of establishing a connection with his grandfather, and yet, the thought seems unfinished, leaving us essentially with, “They *would* have

¹⁰⁹ Thibault, “La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio,” 845

the same shadow if....” Later in the text, in discussing his experience on Rodrigues, the author writes, “Je croyais entendre le son du pic, la respiration rapide de son souffle.... C’est cette *illusion* qui m’a fait venir ici...” (V 123; my emphasis). In the illusory, speculative nature of his own writing, the author recognizes the problem, “Comment partager le temps?” (V 122), and then concludes, “On ne partage pas les rêves” (V 135).

While Le Clézio’s dream and adventure is not the same as his grandfather’s, he sees his act of writing as one of renewal. Although he cannot replicate his grandfather’s quest, he can continue it. It seems that to Goethe’s opening question of *Faust*, “Once more, dim wavering figures from the past, you come... shall I attempt this time to hold you fast?”,¹¹⁰ Le Clézio answers in the negative. He sees his contribution in *Voyage à Rodrigues* as “l’effacement d’une trace” (V 142), and indicates that his accomplishment, essentially, has been “laisser le champ libre, et comme vierge et intact, à d’autres chercheurs qui recommenceront sa quête.”¹¹¹ Indeed, the last image of the text is a prediction that the tree in whose shade the author imagines his grandfather found comfort will not survive the next cyclone. The disappearance of this tree, one of the clues of nature which “spoke” to the author about his grandfather’s life there, accentuates the brevity of human life and the limits of the possibilities of calling

¹¹⁰ Goethe, *Faust* 1-3, translated by Charles E. Passage.

¹¹¹ Alain Buisine “Effacement,” *Sud*, No. 85/86, 1990 99

the past to life again. To our “siècle de consommation et de fuite” (*V* 137), the text offers a dream, the memory and the possibility of an adventure, albeit presented to us with the preface that to try to recapture it may be only to pursue an illusion.

Chapter 5
La quarantaine
The Shape of Renewal

“Ce que j’ai aimé dans mon existence jusqu’à présent,” J.-M. G. Le Clézio specifies in a 1997 interview, “c’est de m’installer dans un pays avec ma famille, chercher une école, apprivoiser mes voisins, bref apprendre à vivre de mieux en être humain.”¹¹² In *La quarantaine*, “l’ouvrage majeur de la production récente de [l’auteur]”¹¹³, I believe that we see an excellent model for doing just that: learning to better live as human beings. In this structurally complex, multiply-narrated novel, we see stories both being renewed and giving renewal, a strong presence of language that speaks of renewal and liberation, and a focus on life in the present. We also witness an individual’s successful struggle with the question, “Que suis-je?”, a relinquishing of the desire for vengeance, and a model for how a society can move from an exploitative past to a sustainable future. This novel, though not without loss, reveals hope materialized and life renewed. Asked to talk about the “leclézien character,” the author responds, “C’est quelqu’un de passage; quelqu’un à qui... on a prêté la vie et qui va pouvoir la rendre.”¹¹⁴ This is what we see in *La quarantaine*.

¹¹² Payot, 25

¹¹³ Thibault, “La Métaphore exotique,” 845

¹¹⁴ Le Clézio, *Ailleurs*, 60

La quarantaine is, in essence, two stories, one of which is in search of the other. Chronologically, the first story recounts what happened when the travelers on the boat the *Ava*, en route to Mauritius in 1891, are forced to disembark on Flat Island because of the fear of an outbreak of smallpox, and the second story is that of a middle-aged Frenchman, “Le Clézio’s alter ego,”¹¹⁵ who, in 1980, went to Mauritius and to Flat Island, in search of the traces of his family members’ past lives, much as Le Clézio searched for his grandfather’s story in *Voyages à Rodrigues*. Brothers Jacques and Léon Archambau, respectively twenty- eight and twenty years old, leave Paris with Jacques’ wife Suzanne, on a long hoped for return to Mauritius. Two decades earlier, the brothers’ pitiless and controlling uncle, the “Patriarch,” had effectively banished Léon, Jacques, and their parents from the island, as Léon insists later in the text, “parce que [maman] n’était pas du grand monde, parce qu’elle était eurasienne!” (*Q* 415). At the time that the young threesome sets out on their idyllically imagined voyage, Jacques has finished medical school, and he and Suzanne hope to set up a medical clinic to ameliorate the precarious lives of the workers on the Mauritius sugar plantations. When the *Ava* passengers are obliged to stay on Flat Island for several months, everything changes. The brothers, who previously had been “unis, deux frères inséparables... seuls survivants d’une époque disparue, se retrouvant à chaque congé, année après année” (*Q* 25), find that their radically different adaptations to the situation on Flat Island separate them “pour toujours” (*Q* 25).

¹¹⁵ Karen Levy, “From Mauritius to Cawnpore: The Permutations of Myth and Memory in Le Clézio’s Fiction from *Le chercheur d’or* to *La quarantaine*,” International Society for the Study of European Ideas, Conference August, 1998, Israel; published MIT, summer, 2001

As Bruno Thibault stresses, “*La quarantaine* décrit une île paradisiaque sur laquelle se met en place un système ségrégationniste.”¹¹⁶ Two of the passengers from the *Ava*, Vêran and Bertoli, impose themselves as authority figures and attempt to protect the Europeans on the island from the disease, by forbidding contact between the European compound and the immigrants who live in a village on the other side of the island, and by sending word to Mauritius requesting rescue only for the *Ava* passengers. In the context of this “microcosme colonial,”¹¹⁷ as Jacques and Suzanne concentrate their energy on trying to save themselves and getting to Mauritius, Léon’s explorations of the island bring him into contact with a woman who, as Ouma did for Alexis, cares for Léon when she encounters him after he has injured himself on the potentially lethal coral of the island’s reef (*Q* 91). Again, as was true of Ouma and Alexis’ initial acquaintance, Suryavati and Léon’s meeting also in many ways prefigures the relationship that will develop between them over the course of the months ahead. Suryavati offers unquestioning care to the unknown, injured young man. Her unassuming way of living contrasts so strongly with the positions of Jacques and Suzanne that, despite Léon’s continued love for his brother and for his sister-in-law, it will lead him progressively deeper into her world, her life, and her gaze on everything around them. Bruno Thibault’s assertion that both Alexis et Léon “rompent avec leurs racines européens et... se convertissent à la pensée indienne,”¹¹⁸ although certainly not applicable to Alexis, is indeed true of Léon. Eventually faced with

¹¹⁶ Thibault, “La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio,” 853

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 853

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 846

the necessity to choose between his brother and the woman he loves, Léon tells Jacques during the definitive scene of their rupture, “Nous n’avons plus rien en commun. Nous ne serons plus jamais comme avant. Toi et Suzanne, vous irez d’un côté, moi de l’autre” (Q 414). Léon will determine, “Moi je reste avec Surya, je serai toujours avec elle, elle est ma famille maintenant” (Q 415).

This novel is largely a story of creating, and, as it is very structurally complex, it plays with the concept of narrative in many ways. Questions are raised concerning where a story comes from (its source) and how it is accessed. The act of story-telling is portrayed many times; its inherent inventiveness, its potential as a source for renewal, and its cooperative nature are all highlighted. The problematic question of source in *La quarantaine* arises from the fact that the modern narrator who begins and ends the story was born a half century after the quarantine on Flat Island that constitutes the bulk of the novel. The modern narrator is dependant upon the people present in 1891 to be his witnesses and sources. The story of the quarantine is also narrated in the first person, by Léon, the great uncle and namesake of the modern narrator. The two narrators have never met, as the family ties to the great uncle Léon were broken when he chose to stay with Suryavati, while Jacques and Suzanne went on to Mauritius. Nevertheless, the modern narrator is able to relate the thoughts of the man whom he seeks, through much the same process employed in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, in which what is imagined becomes narrative truth.

In the first section, “Le voyageur sans fin,” the modern narrator tells us, “C’est bien à Léon Archambau que je pense. Le Disparu, celui qui s’est rebellé

contre l'Ordre moral et la Synarchie, puis est parti avec la femme qu'il aimait, pour ne jamais revenir" (Q 30). The second section, "L'empoisonneur," is also narrated by the modern narrator, but the action no longer focuses on him and his thoughts. Rather, it describes Léon and Jacques' encounter with Rimbaud, in a hospital in Aden, Yemen, at the end of Rimbaud's life. This section marks the transition of the narrative focus. The modern narrator makes use of the verb "devoir" as does the narrator of *Voyages à Rodrigues*, to express speculation about what people in the past *must have* been doing, thinking, and feeling, as in, "Suzanne doit s'impatienter" (Q 49), and relates the action and description in terms of what he, the narrator imagines: "Je peux imaginer cet après- midi lourd, étouffant..." (Q 53). He then increases his narrative authority to relate events that he is imagining, based on what he has been told, by suggesting, "Il me semble que je porte en moi la mémoire de cette journée..." (Q 53). The effect of the phrase "Il me semble" is similar to that of the "comme si," formula that the author often uses to suggest possibilities without affirming them.¹¹⁹ By proposing that it "seems to him" that he personally recalls the events in question, the modern narrator creates a bridge between his own reality and that of Léon Archambau, le Disparu. He will use that bridge to lead us from his mind and time into those of the man he never knew.

Not only is it the case that the modern narrator who sets out in search of his family history when he leaves, "pour l'autre bout du monde" (Q 33), has never met the man whose identity he will assume to tell the story of the quarantine, but

¹¹⁹ Domange, 46

his source and witness from this time, his grandmother Suzanne, doubtlessly has a rather different perspective from that of Léon, her disappeared brother-in-law.

As the modern narrator's reference to Léon, "celui qui s'est rebellé contre l'Ordre moral et la Synarchie" suggests, Léon's choice was not only an acceptance of Suryavati and a life with her, but also a rejection of his identity as an Archambau, an identity that Suzanne and Jacques both desired and kept. The modern narrator tells us, "C'est ma grand-mère Suzanne qui m'a tout raconté" (Q 19). Suzanne is the source of the story, but the perspective presented is certainly not hers. The distinction between Suzanne's perspective and that of the narrative is particularly evident in the passages describing the mounting panic on Flat Island as more and more people fall ill. Léon tells us that at the time, Suzanne "n'attend que le bateau, elle ne cesse pas d'y penser, c'est la seule chose qui compte pour elle, s'enfuir, se sauver. C'est cela qui brille dans son regard, une fièvre, une folie" (Q 251). This conflict between the person responsible for providing the roots of a story and the narrative that we read is similar to the narrative conflict in *Onitsha* between a perspective sympathetic to Fintan for whom Geoffroy was "poko inglese" and the narration of Geoffroy's dreams. In *La quarantaine*, Suzanne's grandson, the modern narrator, uses his imagination to elaborate upon the stories he has heard to create a new one *through the act of writing*, as do characters and narrators in other texts in this study. Like Le Clézio's grandfather in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, this narrator has added his own "calculs en marge," and transformed what was passed on to him into something new. This text explores in depth the question of how a story is accessed and renewed.

The inventive aspect of creating a story is underscored in the modern narrator's attempts to reconstruct an image of a man he had never known. As he imagines the young threesome docked overnight in the Aden harbor, he muses, "Avec ses cheveux bouclés, [Léon] doit ressembler à un jeune mousse indien. Lui aussi est impatient d'arriver, de toucher la terre où il est né. C'est comme ça que je l'imagine..." (Q 39). By explicitly telling us in the narrative that the story being told is "imagined," the narrator implicitly invites us to do the same, implying a potential, "Mais vous pouvez l'imaginer autrement." Phrases such as "J'imagine" (Q 39), "Il me semble" (Q 53), "J'invente" (Q 137), and "Tout est inventé" (Q 531) open the text, involving the reader in the creation of the story and making transparent the process of inventing the narrative. We see another such example when Suryavati is introduced. At this point, Léon the great uncle, the Disparu, has taken over the narrative. He tells us, "j'ai vu pour la première fois celle que j'ai appelée ensuite Suryavati, force du soleil. Est-ce vraiment son nom? Ou est-ce le nom que je lui ai trouvé... dans le livre de Somadeva... que je lisais à Londres, l'été qui a précédé notre départ?" (Q 87). By allowing us to witness the development of a story as it is heard, transformed, and imagined, the text gives us, as in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, a model for creating stories, while inviting our participation in inventing the narrative.

In addition to introducing readers to the process by which stories can be transformed, *La quarantaine* also highlights ways in which stories can themselves be sources of renewal. The first occasion on which Suryavati takes Léon to her home and her village occurs after she had told him of how her mother Ananta was

named by her grandmother Giribala, of Ananta's fatal illness, and of Suryavati's choice to come to Flat Island with her mother, who wants to die there in order to rejoin Giribala's spirit (*Q* 255- 258). As Léon emphasizes, "Pour la première fois nous sommes entrés dans la ville ensemble" (*Q* 257), and "Ce soir, pour la première fois aussi, Surya m'a fait entrer dans leur maison" (*Q* 258). The power of telling and listening to these significant stories is such that doing so constitutes access to the intimate spaces of Suryavati's domain.

During the time on Flat Island, Léon continues to come to Suryavati's home, and spends time talking to Ananta, telling her about his past and family. Léon and Ananta's touching hands affirm the connection being established as he tells the story (*Q* 284- 285). Again, through the act of telling and listening to a story, a human connection is strengthened. Before dying, Ananta gives Suryavati and Léon her blessing.

Another example of the renewing power of narratives may be found in Giribala's story, which is interwoven with Léon's narrative and, like Geoffroy's dreams in *Onitsha*, dramatically enriches and deepens the story with the sense of a living past. Soon after rescuing Ananta, Giribala is befriended by a woman named Lil: "Giribala était... épuisée... Mais une autre femme...s'est interposée et l'a aidée à s'asseoir.... 'Moi, je m'appelle Lil' a dit la femme" (*Q* 200). Lil's life- imparting gift lies not only in her friendship but also in her vibrant story-telling. Her stories constitute at once a unifying and inspiring source for their community, as well as a means to bear witness: "Lil a raconté ensuite pour les gens assemblés l'histoire de la belle Lakshmibay qui était morte pour défendre sa

ville contre l'ennemi... (Q 233). Lil acts out the story for the group, emphasizing the visual and auditory aspects of story-telling. The role of the witness, which we saw validated in *Onitsha* through Fintan's role in the birth of Oya's child Okeke, is again accentuated. Later, when Lil loses her mind following the death of her son, we are told that she can no longer tell the story. Like Maou, who, when depressed, "did not even want to write," Lil's loss of mental abilities is expressed through the statement in the text, "Elle ne pouvait plus danser la légende de la belle Lakshmibay" (Q 274).

In revealing narratives as both potential objects and sources of renewal, the novel's self-commentary underscores the importance of both creators (writers and tellers) and witnesses (readers and listeners). The permeation of story-telling in all kinds of situations in the text, by and among people of both genders, and in different cultural settings, confirms its status as a basic human act and solidifier of relationships. Again, our participation as witnesses is confirmed and our contribution is implicitly invited. We too can create stories, either by continuing a story begun by another, as Le Clézio did with his grandfather's quest for the corsair, or by radically transforming one, as the modern narrator of *La quarantaine* does with the tale told to him by his grandmother Suzanne. Concerning the process of writing, Le Clézio's comments, "ce serait bien d'écrire comme on vole; décoller, perdre le contact avec cette réalité... inventer une autre

vie, une autre dimension, et puis revenir sur terre avec, comme Saint- Exupéry disait, une vision différente.”¹²⁰

When, at the end of the quarantine, the schooner the *Dalhousie* comes to Flat Island to rescue the last remaining people there, Léon Archambau certainly has a different vision from that with which he boarded the *Ava* months earlier. Paradoxically, during the time that the quarantine isolated the passengers of the *Ava* from the world outside of Flat Island, Léon traveled farther psychologically in the limited confines of the island than he had in coming from France to the southern extreme of the Indian Ocean. The relationship with Surya (the shortened name most frequently used for her in the text) that began as an exhilarating adventure evolved into a re- definition of what he was -- a change that, not surprisingly -- was not an easy one.

One night, after spending the evening with Surya and her mother in their home, Léon hesitatingly progresses from an enamored young lover to a human being in solidarity with an Other. It is a choice that will eventually separate him irrevocably from his past and his family. Intoxicated with the night air, the stars, and the heat of Surya’s body close to his, Léon is overwhelmed with desire, but Surya’s sense of responsibility to her mother will not permit her to stay away for long: “Pas maintenant.... Il faut que j’aile auprès de ma mère, elle est mal. Elle m’attend.” Faced with this increased presense of reality, Léon acknowledges, “J’hésitais. J’étais tout près de la frontière, à quelques pas du chemin qui me ramenait vers la Quarantaine, vers Jacques et Suzanne.... J’avais peur de choisir”

¹²⁰ Le Clézio, *Ailleurs*, 114 - 115

(*Q* 264). At this moment, Léon feels a desperate uncertainty about his answer to the question, “Que suis- je?”. Is he an Archambau; are Jacques and Suzanne his family? Or will he align himself with Suryavati, Ananta, and the other immigrants? Much as Oya activates the reluctant Fintan with her insistent gaze, Surya calls Léon into participation, saying to him: ““Viens! Qu’est-ce que tu attends?”” (*Q* 264). He admits that, to a certain extent, the shared adventure with Suryavati has been appealing because of its quality as a means of rebellion against Véran and his arbitrarily imposed edict against crossing to the immigrants’ side of the island: “J’aimais bien rôder la nuit à travers les broussailles, défier l’édit de l’autocrate Véran ...” (*Q* 264). At this point, however, Léon seems to understand that the relationship must surpass adventure, excitement, and rebellion, if it is to continue. He confides, “j’avais peur que tout ne devienne indéfectible, trop réel. Comme s’il y avait vraiment une frontière, que j’avais à la franchir sans retour” (*Q* 264- 265). Despite his trepidation, Léon does cross the invisible boundary and spends that night outside of Surya and Ananta’s dwelling, demonstrating that he is capable of being, “solitaire, et pourant solidaire.”¹²¹ Although he will not articulate the change that has occurred until much later, it is true that he has crossed a border that is “sans retour.”

In an interview with Gérard de Cortanze, Le Clézio specified, “Les livres qui m’intéressaient, alors que j’étais adolescent, étaient ceux qui, au fond, racontaient cette histoire: ...comment d’intellectuel devient-on moraliste?”¹²². In

¹²¹ Brée, 122

¹²² Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 20

the text's portrayal of the relationship that evolves between Suryavati and Léon, there seems to be an effort to answer that question. Again, much as Oya pulls Fintan into active participation and Ouma attempts to do with Alexis, Surya assumes a leadership role, forcing Léon to see the injustice in which his family, and, to an extent, he as well, have been complicit. She speaks of the plans that the self-imposed leaders Véran and Bartoli are formulating to get the passengers of the *Ava* rescued from Flat Island, with no regard for the immigrants. When Léon mentions the lack of food in the compound in a feeble attempt at a defense, her outrage explodes: “Mais vous ne pensez qu'à manger! Vous voulez tout le temps à manger!’ Elle avait la gorge serrée, elle était au bord des larmes. ‘Ma mère, est-ce que tu sais depuis combien de temps elle ne mange plus? ... C’est vous qui nous mangez. C’est vous qui mangez notre pauvreté’” (Q 288- 289). He confirms, “J’ai compris d’un coup combien elle les détestait, tous, ces grands mounes égoïstes et cruels, pour qui sa mère avait travaillé toute sa vie et qui l’avaient abandonnée” (Q 288). Surya forces Léon to see the hypocrisy in which his apparent indifference up until this point has made him complicit. Essentially, she makes it clear that his acknowledgement of that hypocrisy and a response to it are prerequisite to any continuation of their relationship. At this point in the text, we do not yet know how he will respond. He could, like Alexis, flee from the uncompromising gaze of the Other. Although Léon and Surya’s personal drama contains much yet to unfold, this moment is, I believe, the one that defines the moral position of the text, as was the moment in *Le chercheur d’or* when Alexis admits the injustice of taking a treasure from Rodrigues (C 332). Regardless of

what the characters do or fail to do, the reader can have no doubt of the justice and truth of Suryavati's words. As Jean- Xavier Ridon maintains, "Le parti pris de Le Clézio pour ces exclus est... choix politique, il veut dénoncer des situations inacceptables et instituer un dialogue par rapport au silence où on les cantonne."¹²³

Léon does choose to see and to hear Suryavati. In so doing, he painfully sheds the former skin of the Same and becomes an Other,¹²⁴ as he tells his brother: "Toi et Suzanne, vous irez d'un côté, moi de l'autre" (Q 414). So definitive is the this moment that Léon later speaks of his family name as an identity which he *could have* had: "J'aurais pu devenir un Archambau" (Q 321). Instead, as he and Suryavati make love, he immerses himself not only in her identity, but also in that of her family, assuming the memory of her grandmother, proclaiming, "Je n'étais plus le même. J'étais un autre, j'étais elle et avant elle, j'étais Giribala qui fuyait le long du fleuve, emportant l'enfant Ananta à travers la campagne..." (Q 322). The absolute renewal of this moment is signified both by the language overtly speaking of renewal and by the symbolism of Léon's and Suryavati's baptismal- like immersion in the sea later that night. As Léon announces, "Nous étions redevenus des enfants. Nés à nouveau, dans l'eau courante du lagon, sans passé et sans avenir" (Q 326). This scene constitutes, in many ways, "la création d'un monde nouveau."¹²⁵ Léon's re-birth and new identity is not limited to the context of his relationship with Suryavati, but rather,

¹²³ Ridon, 39

¹²⁴ Karen Levy frames the dichotomy of Same vs. Other, in reference to Lévinasian ethics, in "Elsewhere and Otherwise," 270.

¹²⁵ Thibault, "La Métaphore exotique chez Le Clézio," 846

as he indicates concerning the transformation he experienced as the two made love, he also claims the identity and history of her family, relying upon the stories Ananta and Suryavati told him to construct a new “memory.” His comment that they are “sans passé” seems to be less accurate than saying that they have *chosen* “un nouveau passé.” Léon’s act has been to live out one of the dreams articulated by Le Clézio in *Voyages à Rodrigues*: “choisir son passé” (V 124).

At the beginning of *La quarantaine*, the modern narrator laments the split that forever separated his grandfather and great-uncle’s immediate family from the rest of their family: “sans la rupture avec le Patriarch, les choses se seraient sans doute passées autrement. Amalia serait restée à Anna, et nous aurions gardé une terre, une origine, une patrie” (Q 17). The sad irony is that the same prejudice that Jacques cites to Léon as a reason for why it would be impossible for Léon to bring Suryavati, “cette jeune fille” (Q 413) with him to be a part of the Archambau family is the prejudice which was at the root of their eviction from the elite of Mauritius in the first place. Jacques’ and Léon’s mother Amalia was Eurasian. Similar to Maou, who refused to accept the treatment of the prisoners working on the Simpsons’ swimming pool (O 75) and to Le Clézio, who accepted the personal risk of publicly denouncing the child prostitution trade in Thailand,¹²⁶ Amalia also refused to accept the rigid code of social separation imposed by and among the Mauritius bourgeois. She found friends among the servants, igniting the ire of her husband and his family: “Elle aimait beaucoup rire avec les domestiques, elle avait appris à parler créole très vite. Papa n’était pas

¹²⁶ de Cortanze, 27

très content, il disait que ça ne se faisait pas, mais elle ne pouvait pas résister” (*Q* 215). By nostalgically seeking to be reunited with the perceived paradise of the Mauritius elite, Jacques naively seems to forget that his own mother was subject to the same prejudice with which he assures Léon that Suryavati will be treated. For loving non- white women, Léon and his father will both have paid the price of losing ties to the rest of their families. Jacques ignores this problem, so much wanting to belong to the prestigious family that gives him his only sense of identity, so longing to answer the question, “Que suis- je?” with a resounding, “un Archambau,” that he cannot see that he is not only a perpetrator, but also a victim, of the prejudice that that name implies.

Léon finds in Suryavati not only a partner and a radically different gaze and way of living, but also a new family. As Flat Island disappears behind the horizon while Léon and Suryavati travel toward Mauritius on the *Dalhousie*, not to be a part of the Archambau clan but to begin a new life together, Suryavati places around Léon’s neck the necklace bearing the registration plaque that her grandmother had given her mother, before leaving Bhowanipore. Léon now knows, “j’ai un nom, une famille. Je peux entrer à Maurice” (*Q* 483). In his answer to the question, “Que suis- je?”, he has moved from certainty of one identity, to a crisis of uncertainty, to a completely new identity. He and his relationship with the past have been entirely renewed.

As in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, a high narrative attentiveness to the people and creatures living where the story takes place marks *La quarantaine*, affirming the life of the present in a novel in which the characters of both 1891 and 1980

look to the past to derive their sense of identity. Suryavati's and Léon's observation of the ocean birds who nest in the rugged cliffs that line the shore, the *pailles- en-queue*, is in a spirit of delight and profound respect for the life around them: "Suryavati s'est arrêtée, elle chuchote à mon oreille, comme un secret: 'Regarde, *bhai*, ['frère,' as she often calls Léon, underscoring her acceptance of him as family] c'est leur maison.' [Suryavati] s'est allongée par terre, son visage exprime un émerveillement enfantin" (Q 361 and 362). Germaine Brée notes the importance in Le Clézio's work of "le sens d'un monde équilibré où se nouent naturellement les liens entre les êtres humains, les bêtes, et les choses."¹²⁷ Le Clézio speculates to Gérard de Cortanze, "Notre rôle consiste peut- être à ne pas abîmer le milieu dans lequel nous vivons, afin que nos enfants en héritent, tel qu'il est...."¹²⁸ There is a sense of balance and respect for life in its many forms, suggesting the perpetual renewal of life. It is Suryavati, a member of one of "les sociétés qui ont échappé à l'emprise moderne,"¹²⁹ who teaches Léon, showing him how to behave around the birds without frightening them and sharing with him her delight in watching them.

There is also a high degree of importance placed on those humans living in the present, particularly those encountered unexpectedly, underscoring the integral position of the anonymous human Other in *La quarantaine*. Near the close of the narrative section recounted by the great- uncle Léon, "La quarantaine," many people, including Suryavati and Léon, have gathered on the

¹²⁷ Brée, 119

¹²⁸ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 24

¹²⁹ Brée, 119

beach to await the schooner that will take them to Mauritius. As they wait, Léon relates, “D’autres gens sont venus s’asseoir près de notre feu, un couple d’immigrants. La femme est si jeune, presque une enfant.... Quand elle se lève, à notre arrivée, je vois qu’elle est enceinte, bien près d’accoucher. Surya est très douce avec elle, elle lui porte du thé, elle l’aide à s’accommoder sur la terre...” (Q 472). As she did for Léon upon first meeting him (Q 91), and, repeatedly for him, for Jacques, and, most critically, for Suzanne, Surya offers practical help and care that is, like the prose of the text itself, “toujours généreux.”¹³⁰ The following morning, all who had gathered on the beach are on board the schooner the *Dalhousie*, leaving Flat Island as well as our text. The young couple makes another appearance in the narrative, on the last page of the story of the quarantine and of the 19th century narrator’s voice: “Nous avons trouvé une place, à côté du jeune couple qui a partagé notre feu cette nuit” (Q 484). As is true in *Voyages à Rodrigues* of the description of the local children on that island, the inscription of the young couple in this text is deeply sympathetic and human. We again see an example of Suryavati and Léon’s unquestioning acceptance and offering of practical help, as well as the relevance of these anonymous humans whose presence, like that of Okeke and Fintan’s sister Marima in *Onitsha*, suggests the beginning of a whole new story, even as the one that we have been reading is ending.

When the modern narrator again assumes control of the text for the final section of the novel, “Anna,” the initial portrait in this last section is of another

¹³⁰ Payot, 25, concerning Le Clézio’s *Poisson d’or*

young couple. They are so strikingly similar to the couple who had shared Léon and Suryavati's fire ninety years earlier as to seem almost a mirror image of them. The couple whom the modern narrator encounters is also quite young, appears to be poor, without a fixed home, and the woman is carrying an infant. They are both Indians. Despite their poverty and rain-drenched clothing, the narrator sees a striking beauty in the young woman, a brilliant light in her eyes, and a strong and determined gait whose description is reminiscent of that of Suryavati's confident and graceful movements. The narrator's stated purpose in coming to Mauritius is to "retrouver leur [that of Léon and Suryavati] trace... mettre mes pas sur leur route, sentir leur passé, voir ce que leurs yeux ont vu, entrer dans leurs rêves" (Q 492). However, as he watches the striking young Indian couple with their child make their way wordlessly along the road, he is struck by a sudden urge to call out to them, feeling inexplicably that, "il me semblait que c'était pour eux que j'étais venu à Maurice, après tant de temps, des générations d'exil" (Q 489). It seems that the narrator has unknowingly stumbled upon exactly that which he came to find. For in seeing, with a gaze that is both respectful and tender, the beauty, the determination, the poverty, and above all, the humanity, of the anonymous young family on the side of the road, he *is* "seeing as Léon and Suryavati saw" and "entering their dreams." It may be that he establishes in this shared gaze an even more significant connection than he does in going to Flat Island and standing in the physical places where they stood.

Indeed, when the narrator, accompanied by fisherman Denis and Denis' teenage daughter Lili, makes his pilgrimage to Flat Island, his discovery is, once

again, not of physical traces of those whom he has come to find, but rather the ability to see and hear as they did. He hears (and deems worth mentioning) the cries of the *pailles-en-queue* that so enchanted Suryavati and Léon (Q 509), and he notices the same grave of a seventeen- year- old who died of smallpox (Q 509) that his namesake had noticed before him (Q 163). Later, as he takes souvenir photographs, he admits that they are less for the physical ruins he has crossed the world to see, and more for the young girl Lili, with whom he has become smitten over the course of the summer and whom he knows he will not see again (Q 511). Like Léon and Suryavati, he is seeing and hearing all that is around him attentively, with interest and compassion. This gaze is the opposite of Alexis' admitted obliviousness, focused entirely on a search for gold, "sans prendre garde à ce qui m'entourait" (C 332). The text affirms that, "On ne s'évade pas de la vie."¹³¹

We have seen several ways in which *La quarantaine* reveals the shape of renewal. They include a re- examination of how stories are constructed, portraits of how stories can be sources of renewal, the presence of liberation and renewal language, a transformation of the answer to "Que suis-je?", and an emphasis on life in the present. Other significant ways in which we see the possibility of renewal include the questioning and redefining of power and privilege in societies, as well as images of those frequently perceived as unimportant and/ or unable to make contributions to society, as vital members of a mutually dependent and supportive community.

¹³¹ J. M. G. Le Clézio, "Comment j'écris," *Les Cahiers du Chemin*, Vol. 1, oct. 1967 85

One example of the questioning of privilege and a call to a more supportive community comes in Léon's challenge to his brother to offer medical care to the immigrants, whose needs are at least as desperate as those of the Europeans to whom Jacques tends on a daily basis. In so doing, Léon responds to Surya's "ethical summons"¹³² by in turn extending one of his own to his brother. "Il faut que tu viennes avec moi à Palissades," he informs Jacques. "Ils ont besoin de toi. Tu es le seul médecin, il y a beaucoup de malades, ils n'ont pas de médicaments, ils n'ont rien" (*Q* 246). However, unlike Docteur Rieux, whose position is simply, "Pour le moment, il y a des malades, et il faut les guérir,"¹³³ Jacques at first makes no reply at all to his brother's directive, and then slowly says, "Oui, je suppose que je devrais y aller." Then, "Il s'est levé, il a repris les seaux, il a continué à marché vers la Quarantaine" (*Q* 246) that is in the opposite direction of the immigrants' village.

Léon's summons to his brother is essentially an imperative to respond to those around them based not on who they are, but on what they need. As discussed earlier, this is precisely the kind of guiding ethic that Le Clézio discovered among the Emberas, and it is similar to the guiding principle of mutual support that, according to Léopold Senghor, tends to characterize African societies:

Ethnologists have often praised the unity, the balance, and the harmony of African civilization, of black society, which was based on the community and on the person, and

¹³² Karen Levy, "Elsewhere and Otherwise," 273

¹³³ Albert Camus, *La peste*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) 120

in which, because it was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person.¹³⁴

The simple ethic of giving in response to need is lived out by the prostitute Rasamah, and by Suryavati. After Sarah Metcalfe, *Ava* passenger and Englishwoman, loses her mind following her husband John's death from smallpox, she can no longer care for herself. In response, first Rasamah, and then Suryavati (Q 405), wordlessly leave food outside of Sarah's tent, "comme une offrande" (Q 426), asking and expecting nothing in return.¹³⁵ By putting Rasamah, "la prostituée que les gens ont violée et battue" (Q 194), in the role of giver to the Englishwoman, who, under different circumstances, would be in a position of power over Rasamah, the text underscores that all human beings, regardless of social standing, are at times vulnerable and dependent, and at times able to give and to provide.

The text renews our vision of human beings by underscoring the capacity for meaningful contribution to their communities by those who may be perceived as unimportant. In particular, *La quarantaine* forces the attention of the reader on three different women whose position in their respective societies is nothing more than "la folle," but who nevertheless play critical roles. The first such figure is a mythical, speculative one, composed by the narrator's imagination, using "peut-être" as the literary device that conjures up an image in the same way that

¹³⁴ Léopold Sédor Senghor, "Négritude: a Humanism of the 20th Century," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 32

¹³⁵ Rasamah's and Suryavati's behavior essentially embodies the "being for the Other," with no expectation of reciprocity, that Karen Levy discusses, through Lévinasian ethics, in "Elsewhere and Otherwise...."

“comme si,” “j’imagine,” and the verb “devoir” have preformed that function elsewhere in this text and in others. In this case, the narrator rhetorically asks, then answers, when and how Giribala came to know the story of the immigrants who, in 1856, had been abandoned on Flat Island with neither food nor medical supplies by the Mauritius elite, due to their fear of a smallpox outbreak.¹³⁶ He wonders, “Quand Giribala a-t-elle compris ce qui s’était passé? Peut-être y avait sur l’île un *témoin*, une vieille folle qu’on avait oubliée, qui s’était cachée dans les fourrés quand le bateau était venu chercher les survivants? ... Un soir, quelqu’un a parlé de l’Hydaree. Une femme, qui avait rencontré la folle, qui *l’avait écoutée*. Elle a raconté ce qui s’était passé il y a trois ans, les gens que le bateau avait abandonnés sur l’île (*Q* 431; my emphases). Through the narrator’s solution to the problem of how Giribala learned about something to which she did not bear witness, we see an insistence upon many of the themes that figure prominently in this and the other texts in question: the critical and potentially transformative role of storytelling, the importance of the witness, the significance of those who choose to listen to the witness, and finally, the capability of *anyone* -- especially one easily overlooked and forgotten -- to be the witness. In the scenario suggested, it is precisely because the woman is old and considered incompetent that she is forgotten and is able to hide, to bear witness, and to establish a link to those who would come to Flat Island after her. Without her testimony, the story could go untold, the atrocity unknown, and the past repeated.

¹³⁶ Levy discusses this tragedy in “Elsewhere and Otherwise...” (Levy, 270).

The next instance in which the text affirms the potential of the “folle” for meaningful contribution occurs when Léon and Suryavati are searching for Sarah Metcalfe. The rescue boat for Mauritius has arrived, and they are trying desperately to find her, but she is nowhere in sight. Léon’s comment, “*Sarah doit avoir raison*, nous devrions retourner dans notre faille, à l’abri, vivre le reste de notre vie avec les pailles-en-queue. Oublier Maurice, comme Maurice nous avait oubliés” (Q 449; my emphasis), plays on the two meanings of “avoir raison” in French: not only to be correct, but also to be in possession of reason. The singular, blind desire to flee the island, with no concern for the immigrants, that characterizes the position of the allegedly sane, such as Suzanne, is described as “une folie” (Q 251), while the narrator decides that it is “la folle.... [qui]...doit avoir raison” (Q 449).

The third time that the image of “la folle” figures in the text, it is again as witness. Our story of Mauritius closes when the modern narrator learns that his great- aunt Anna, last survivor of the Archambau dynasty and source of the childhood journal that provides him with a clue about what became of Suryavati and Léon, has fallen and broken her hip. He learns, “C’est la folle qui l’a trouvée, qui a donné l’alerte” (Q 536- 537). Just as *Voyages à Rodrigues* insists on the importance of the children as easily- overlooked sources of information, *La quarantaine* perseveres in its presentation of the unlikely and the marginalized in crucial roles.

Another way to “relativiser”¹³⁷ power hierarchies in society is to have, as Le Clézio believes the Emberas have, “confiance dans le temps.”¹³⁸ Shortly before leaving Flat Island, Léon finds, “Je n’ai plus de désir de vengeance” (*Q* 472). The life that he and Suryavati are beginning is truly renewed, unencumbered by anger for the sense of lost origin and stability that both he and Jacques had mourned for so long. Léon is able to relinquish the need for vengeance because he realizes the brevity of any human enterprise. He states, concerning the power of the Patriarchs over Mauritius, “Maintenant je l’ai compris: ils ne sont là que pour un bref instant, déjà le vent qui vient de l’autre bout de la terre souffle sur eux et les efface, le grondement de l’Océan recouvre leur voix” (*Q* 473). There is a striking resemblance between the image of the disappearance of the Patriarch power system and the image, in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, of the foreseen disappearance of the tree under which Le Clézio imagines his grandfather rested (*V* 146). Both images, one of an admired grandfather and the other of a scorned power system, reinforce the same theme, the ephemeral nature of human life. This fact increases Léon’s credibility in his assertion that he has lost the desire for vengeance and discounts any possibility that his vision of the Patriarchs’ disappearance might be interpreted as a vengeful thought, after all. We see in both texts a simple acceptance of the passage of time.

¹³⁷ As cited in the introduction to this study, in “Sentiment et rêve de la politique,” François Marotin states, concerning Le Clézio’s time in Panama, “Les conceptions sur la propriété venues de l’Europe s’en trouvent relativisées” (Marotin, 60).

¹³⁸ Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 24

Léon's conviction that the Archambau power structure is only "pour un bref instant," is confirmed by the discovery made by the modern narrator who finds, "pas... la moindre trace de la maison d'Anna [the fabled Archambau home]" (*Q* 494). He observes, "Il n'y a même pas un tas de cailloux!" and concludes, "Les habitants de la région ont dû se servir des pierres pour construire les petites maisons qu j'ai vues à Médine, à l'entrée de la route" (*Q* 494). The image of the local inhabitants making use of the physical ruins of the Archambau establishment to construct their own homes is at once reminiscent of the practicality demonstrated by Suryavati and others elsewhere in the text, and also confirms Léon's conclusion about the brevity of the Archambau's grip on power. The image serves a metaphor, showing the local inhabitants literally taking back some of the material of their island.

The modern narrator's great-aunt Anna gives him a notebook from her youth, the story of a secret friendship with a young girl whose name appears on the notebook cover, "SITA." He imagines that Anna's friend in the notebook, the one with whom she could talk for hours, "comme si elles avaient grandi ensemble" (*Q* 523), was Léon and Suryavati's daughter, the child they conceived at the end of the quarantine before leaving for Mauritius (*Q* 441). This speculation represents a desire on the part of the narrator, inscribed in the text, for some kind of reconciliation between the Archambau family and the Disparu. Both girls imparted life to one another, as Suryavati did for Suzanne when she was ill, and as Suryavati and Léon did for each other. Yet, it was Sita who married and ended the friendship with Anna, crushing the young Archambau girl,

again emphasizing that powerful social positions are no immunity to vulnerability. Before leaving Mauritius to return to France, the modern narrator again expresses a desire for a sort of reconciliation between the two alienated sides of his family as he declares,

Un jour je reviendrai, et tout sera un *à nouveau*, comme si le temps n'était pas passé. Je reviendrai, et ce ne sera pas pour posséder la fortune des sucriers, ni la terre. Ce sera pour réunir ce qui a été séparé, les deux frères, Jacques et Léon, et à nouveau en moi, les deux ancêtres indissociables... mes alliés vivant dans mon sang, toute la force et tout l'amour dont ils étaient capables (*Q* 532; my emphasis).

The narrator's desire for reunification does not imply a forgetting of, or hiding from, the exploitation that his great uncle Léon rejected years before. Rather, it is a re- affirmation of the first Léon's relinquishing of the need for vengeance. The text shows us not only Suzanne's capacity for selfishness, but also the light-hearted graciousness with which she transformed the scene of Jacques' cutting her hair from something "vaguement tragique," to "[une] scène... gaie, un peu folle" (*Q* 307). Anna, the last of the Archambau, is identified as one who "pushes her privilege," helping local Indian women resolve occasional problems with the Mauritius administration by exploiting the powerful family name: "'Qu'au moins il serve à quelque chose, ce nom, après tout'" (*Q* 520). The text underscores the complexity of human beings and their relationships and does not allow us to create simplistic images of the characters and what they represent as merely "good" or "bad."

In Mauritius and in every part of the world, we as human beings are faced with the problem of how to live in the present and move toward the future, in light

of the horrors of the past.¹³⁹ Nobel Laureate of the 1986 Prize for Literature and Nigerian native Wole Soyinka discussed this problem in a recent interview, specifically concerning ongoing efforts in South Africa to address and move past the history of apartheid. Soyinka's thoughts on the process, of which the guiding principles are truth and reconciliation, were,

What is happening in South Africa is an example for the whole world and makes you think in a far more cogent way about the whole issue of crime and punishment, about rupture in society and persecuted feelings, particularly in a much beleaguered continent like the African continent where the violence is really unmatched. So, the South African reconciliation experiment really stands as a signpost from which others can draw lessons.¹⁴⁰

La quarantaine, too, stands as model for a process based on both truth and reconciliation, emphasizing that truth is imperative, but that reconciliation is both possible and necessary for the continued life of a society. The privileged position of the witness in the text emphasizes the essential nature of truth, and the doubly inscribed relinquishing of vengeance suggests the possibility of reconciliation. This is renewal whose effects are not limited to a particular individual or family, but which can eventually transform a society. Those who lived through the 1891 quarantine on Flat Island were neither the first nor the last to find that their only hope for survival was to live in mutual support with those around them: "'Oran!

¹³⁹ This problem has been of perennial concern to Le Clézio, as noted by Gabrielle Althen: "l'histoire... n'intervient [chez Le Clézio] que sous le signe de la guerre, du malheur, de l'exploitation sociale et du meurtre" (Althen, 132).

¹⁴⁰ Fannie Flora, interview with Wole Soyinka, "Nobel Prize winner puts spotlight on misery, hope in Africa," *The Charlotte Observer*, 10 Feb., 2002

Oran!’ En vain, l’appel traversait les mers.... ‘Oran! oui, Oran!’ Mais non...
aimer ou mourir ensemble, il n’y a pas d’autre ressource.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Camus, *La peste* 130

Conclusion

As we have seen characters and narrators do in these four texts, we too can respond to the past in a number of ways. *Onitsha*'s Geoffroy attempts to re-enter it, and eventually loses his life as a result. Fintan is demobilized by the horrors of humanity's potential for cruelty and impotently declares that it is "trop tard" (*O* 243) to do anything, while Maou looks to the past for useful knowledge that allows her to build revitalizing friendships in the present. The two young people in *Onitsha* whose futures we do not know leave us with a reserved hope for how they may respond to the past. Alexis of *Le chercheur d'or*, like Fintan, stagnates in nostalgia and contemplation. The author in search of his grandfather's traces on Rodrigues draws inspiration from the past, recognizes the limitations of an attempt to "partager le temps" (*V* 122), and renews his grandfather's adventure by creating and writing one of his own. In *La quarantaine*, while Jacques desperately clings to a past that has rejected him, Léon undergoes a painful separation with his past, his family, and his former identity to embrace a new life with Suryavati. Both Léons and the author/ narrator in *Voyages à Rodrigues* display a peaceful acceptance of the passage of time that reaffirms the author's

statement, "Le temps apporte la mort, et le temps, c'est le renouvellement des générations."¹⁴²

In their acknowledgement of the passage of time, however, these three narrators do not ignore, but affirm, as do the texts of *Onitsha* and *Le chercheur d'or*, the essential quality of remembering. To accept that our places on this earth will eventually be filled by others is not at all to suggest that what happens while we are here is not important. On the contrary, the "confiance dans le temps,"¹⁴³ demonstrated by the Emberas people, by the two Léon narrators, by the native people of Rodrigues and Mauritius, and by these four texts, shows us that those who trust and accept the passage of time may be free from guilt or anger related to the past. They may more fully live in the present and for the future.

Some in these four texts who are able to create renewal do so through listening to and reading the sources of people, places, and written documents that tell them of the past, and then transforming those stories to create new ones. We see Lil in *La quarantaine*, Maou in *Onitsha*, the author in *Voyages à Rodrigues*, and both narrators of *La quarantaine*, do this successfully. In each case, we find that a key ingredient for renewal is listening to the witnesses who testify to what has happened in the past. In order for Lil to dance the story of Lakshmibay, she had to first listen to it herself, and before the author could undertake to retrace the steps of his grandfather, he first had to read his grandfather's documents. Other figures in these texts, such as Suryavati, Ouma, the children on Rodrigues, and the

¹⁴² Le Clézio to de Cortanze, 24

¹⁴³ Ibid, 24

local inhabitants of Mauritius, display images of practical renewal, such as care, food, information, and rebuilt homes.

Just as these four texts affirm the role of the witness as essential through their content, they also do so through their form. Our participation is repeatedly invited in numerous ways, accentuating the fact that the process of transformation is both active and cooperative. Perhaps at times, we feel overwhelmed by all that is happening in the world around us, as does Fintan, and would prefer to sit with Alexis, watching the sea roll in and contemplating a happiness that is relegated to the past. However, we may also hear the voice of Ouma, urging us, as she did Alexis, ““Viens, il faut marcher!”” (C 222). We can bear witness to the events of the past and listen to others who bear witness, and we can create new stories from the old. We can offer practical help and care when needed, not with regard to who needs it, but with regard only for the need. From the hurts of the past, we can move forward, and, like the narrator of *Voyages à Rodrigues* who does not know the specific answer to the question, “Et maintenant?”, we can say simply, “Je marche... j’avance...” (V 130). Perhaps we wonder “Why move forward? Why create?”. One possible answer may be that given by the author of these texts as an explanation for why he writes: “Un peu comme à vélo, j’écris avec l’idée qu’il faut avancer pour ne pas tomber.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Le Clézio, *Ailleurs*, 125

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