

## **Continual Morphing**

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In the cultures of the Southwest Indian Ocean, oral tradition is carried on by all groups but acknowledged by only some. For example, in Mauritius, the Franco-Mauritians, descendants of colonists living unto themselves on the sugar estates, imagine themselves to have no identifiable oral tradition, attributing it instead to the descendants of African and Malagasy slaves (referred to in the census as the “General Population”). Traditions of these people, called Kreol, are part of a common stock shared among their counterparts in Seychelles, Réunion, Madagascar, and even the Comoros (see Haring 2002). Where cultural policy encourages the writing of oral narratives in Kreol, as in Seychelles, the boundary between oral and non-oral is really a territory where oral and written are fighting it out (as the Russian critic M. M. Bakhtin said in a different context). In those islands, oral tradition studies are dormant. The most interesting new direction is the growth of writing in Kreol (and Malagasy too, in Madagascar). Folktales in the islands characteristically are mixtures; nowadays, their overlapping channels of communication are mixtures too. So oral tradition studies will become, instead, studies of boundary-crossing, channel-switching, and code-switching, to descry the manufacturing of traditions.

Moving among these mixtures, the oral will still be privileged. “Readers always want—it’s a Romantic preoccupation, never existed before the nineteenth century—authenticity. They somehow believe that if someone signs a text, that text was secreted by that body” (Serge Gavronsky, interviewed in Wechsler 1998:83). Seekers of the oral have a similar belief. For them, orality is the mark of authenticity. They believe that if someone has spoken a text, it has Benjamin’s aura, the “presence in time and space,” the “unique existence” of the poem or epic (Benjamin 1968:220). Yet “oral” is a crude word for the channel through which communication occurs. Performance-oriented observers must attend not only to a physical medium, but also to psychological elements, such as rapport or self-presentation, to sociolinguistic rules restricting communication, and to the continual circulation of money, people, technology, information, ideologies, and

images around the world (see Appadurai 1990). The world we imagine ourselves to remember as “oral tradition” undergoes continual morphing.

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### References

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