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Insular Arcadias: Islands in the Great War Fiction of J.-M. G. Le Clézio and Pat Barker

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ABSTRACT: The aim of my article is to explore the representation of the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues in *The Prospector* (1985) by French writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio and of the Solomon Islands in the *Regeneration* trilogy (1991—1995) by a British writer Pat Barker. Both Le Clézio and Barker use and challenge the pastoral recourses belonging to the tradition of Great War writing and the convention of idealising remote Arcadian lands. Several insular myths are thus undermined by the two writers, who thus resituate remote islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans as integral parts of European modernity.

KEY WORDS: island, Mauritius, Rodrigues, Solomon Islands, Eddystone Island, Great War, pastoral, modernity

The aim of my article is to explore the representation of the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues in *The Prospector* [*Le Chercheur d'or*] (1985) by French Nobel Prize winner Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio and of the Solomon Islands in the *Regeneration* trilogy (1991—1995), in particular *The Ghost Road*, winner of the 1995 Booker Prize, by British writer Pat Barker. In both Le Clézio and Barker's texts, the island functions as an elsewhere, a tropical paradise in the Indian (Le Clézio) and Pacific (Barker) Oceans. The First World War represents in both *The Prospector* and the *Regeneration* trilogy the collapse of European culture. By contrasting the native populations of isolated islands with a militaristic and aggressive European civilization, both authors undermine the concepts of European cultural superiority. However, in my view, Barker and Le Clézio at the same time approach the First World War as a catalyst of change, a global catastrophe that makes their central protagonists realise their delusions about their respective insular Arcadias' idyllic isolation and purity.

The pastoral has an important function in the tradition of Great War writing. The First World War is often seen as the first industrialized conflict, providing a paradigm for other twentieth-century wars. The Great War thus becomes a “modernizing experience,” as Eric J. Leed contends, “in which men who knew that they were living in an ‘industrial age’ learned what that meant in military terms” (LEED, 2009: 193). This view is shared by Paul Fussell in his seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in which the First World War represents a symbolic entry into modernity for an entire “innocent” generation (FUSSELL, 1975: 3—35). Moreover, as Fussell suggests, “Since war takes place outdoors and always within nature, its symbolic status is that of the ultimate anti-pastoral” (FUSSELL, 1975: 231). By means of pastoral references to literary convention or geographical localities, war writers have explored the horrors of the front and have simultaneously sought to protect themselves against them (FUSSELL, 1975: 235). According to Fussell, the pre-industrial and the pre-modern are a “repository of criteria for measuring fully the otherwise unspeakable grossness of the war” (FUSSELL, 1975: 268). The traditional pastoral dichotomy between culture and nature is usually located in Great War fiction in the binary contrast between the front and the rear, or the front line and the idyllic countryside. Le Clézio and Barker refer to and simultaneously dismantle this tradition of “Arcadian recourses” by imagining tropical islands as antitheses of European civilization at war.

Islands are conceived as mythical, unreal places, often associated with concepts of utopia, Eden/Arcadia, and the pastoral. According to Françoise Lionnet, the myth of insularity has fuelled

a sense of imaginary realities, fictive and utopian geographies that remain outside of history and rational discourse. Early colonial settlers, writers, and artists have dreamt of islands as utopian places protected from the corrupting influence of civilization [...] these insular myths enable a nostalgic, soul-searching inquiry into the primeval and prelapsarian nature of man.

LIONNET, 2012: 201

Located in the European imagination outside of modernity, islands have been perceived as closed systems, unchanging and frozen in a vague pre-modern past. Yet, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley contend, “tropical island colonies were crucial laboratories of empire, as garden incubators for the transplantation of peoples and plants and for generating the European revival of Edenic discourse” (DELOUGHLEY, HANDLEY, 2011: 12). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, European anthropologists began to travel to remote islands, trying to salvage for Western archives records of these cultures, which were doomed to extinction. Particularly in the Pacific and the Caribbean, islands were approached as “perfect preserves of the ‘primitive,’ offering the greatest possible contrast for the ‘modern’” (FERENS, 2010: 15). Consequently,

as Dominika Ferens suggests, “the island is the locus of essential difference, sedimented with layers of western cultural associations. Separate and clearly bounded, it once seemed to be all of one thing, graspable, legible, stable, and unchanging” (FERENS, 2010: 16). Significantly, anthropological fieldwork in insular locations helped Euro-American scientists to conceptualise Western civilization by contrast with isolated lands which, in their view, remained untouched by progress and change. In this sense, remote islands all over the globe have been paradoxically central to European modernity, as “laboratories” of scientific and social experimentation. They have also been vital, as Richard Grove demonstrates, for the development of European environmental approaches and conservation policies. Nevertheless, islands have remained “hideaways onto which an infinite number of desires can be projected. They do not appear to have any cultural integrity of their own, unlike older civilizations. They are seen as the residues of Europe’s dream of empire, *tabulae rasae*, which need not be taken very seriously” (LIONNET, 2012: 167). An island should therefore be approached as an important structure of the European imagination (Poirier and Clappier-Valladon in JEDRUSIK, 2001: 28) and/or “as a theoretical environmental and cultural paradigm” (GROVE, 2000).

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio’s *The Prospector* is set between 1892 and 1922 on the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues in the Mascarene Archipelago in the Indian Ocean. In the figure of Alexis L’Estang, Le Clézio uses the trope of insular isolation but also undermines it by highlighting, paradoxically, creolization and connection on several levels. Alexis’s childhood is a time of perfect happiness, spent in the remote Boucan on the west coast of Mauritius. His mother’s tender love and readings of the Bible, his father’s lessons about the paths of the stars, the wonderful adventures the boy imagines with his beloved sister Laure, all contribute to an atmosphere of paradise. A central element in the construction of Arcadia is Alexis’s interaction with nature, the forest, the beaches and dunes, the coral reefs and the lagoons. It is the Indian Ocean in particular that has a vital function in the protagonist’s development. Sailing with his Black friend Denis, Alexis has an impression of infinity and immensity:

I will never forget that day when I went to sea for the first time, a day that seemed to last months, or years. I wanted it never to end, I wanted it to go on forever. I would have liked the canoe to go on racing over the waves in the bursting spray until it got to India, even to Oceania, going from island to island, lit by a sun that never set.

LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 47

The Indian Ocean thus becomes a space of opening up to other islands, other continents; it triggers the protagonist’s imagination. As an adolescent boy, he reads stories and explorers’ accounts of various islands, thus connecting the

present with the past.¹ However, Le Clézio does not idealise the island. His protagonist is a witness to the violence of plantocracy, when he sees the Black, Indian and mixed-blood labourers burn a cruel field manager in a furnace (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 57). Most importantly, tropical nature, which has often been represented as subdued by colonial power (see WALCOTT, 1992), is a furious force in *The Prospector*, an agent independent of human control. When a terrible cyclone destroys the family's house and the father's power station on Rivière Noire, the family are ruined and have to leave Boucan, a rupture that will haunt Alexis throughout his life. Forced to work at his Uncle Ludovic's company after his father's death, he keeps dreaming about the ocean and his Corsair ancestor, who allegedly hid a treasure on the island of Rodrigues. He is embittered by the materialistic concerns of the white upper-class society, from which his impoverished family is excluded, and loses any interest in his work. In *The Prospector*, the island thus becomes a topos of dreams, the embodiment of the protagonist's internal quest for happiness, embedded in pristine nature and the unlimited connections of ocean voyages, as contrasted with the alienating mechanisms of social life.

Alexis's spontaneous voyage on the schooner *Zeta* to Rodrigues, situated 560 kilometres to the east of Mauritius, is represented as a wonderful, mythical journey, during which the protagonist discovers island after island. On Rodrigues, at English Cove, he becomes, however, so obsessed by his search for gold that he almost dies of exposure. He is saved by Ouma, a nomadic Manaf, born of a Maroon father and an Indian mother. In depicting Alexis's relationship with Ouma, Le Clézio plays with the myth of insularity as femininity. Ouma, a female equivalent of Robinson Crusoe's Friday,² seems entirely devoted to Alexis; she cooks for him, takes care of him during his illness, and provides guidance to the idyllic world of nature, hidden lagoons and small islands. With Ouma, Alexis loses the notion of the passage of time (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 175); they become "the only people on earth [...] brought together by a chance shipwreck" (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 197). Nevertheless, Ouma is not the "emblem of a pastoral possibility," "the receptive native woman who welcomes the Western outsider" (HANDLEY, 2011: 127). Her personality is not static and she ceaselessly surprises the reader. Educated by nuns in a convent in France, Ouma, both a Creole and a cosmopolitan, had to come back to Rodrigues as an adolescent girl and learned the nomadic rules of the Manafs' life. Her wisdom is therefore based on cultural syncretism and a knowledge of the European world that Alexis obviously does not possess. Both protagonists are marginalised figures (SUZUKI, 2007: 250), yet

¹ LIONNET emphasises that in contrast to Caribbean authors' conception of the ocean as tomb, the sea is vital in the writings of Francophone Mauritian writers: "elle est ouverte sur le monde ; elle porte l'île et la relie aux temps et aux espaces autres ; elle est vecteur de rencontres, possibilité de multiples carrefours ; et enfin, elle relie plutôt qu'elle ne sépare des continents fort éloignés" (2012: 15—16).

² The first-person narrator of Le Clézio's novel mentions several times the canonical island story by Daniel Defoe.

for crucially different reasons, which Alexis fails to understand but Ouma is perfectly aware of. It is significant that when she refuses to travel with him to Mauritius, thus putting into question their future together, Alexis decides to volunteer for the army. His dream of reconnecting with another being, and thus regaining his childhood happiness, is shattered. He experiences a profound sense of desolation, and does not share the naive joy of the Rodriguan volunteers.

Alexis's experience at the front is fundamental to understanding his ultimate metamorphosis. His decision to join the army might be seen as a desperate attempt to enter a meaningful community³ and forego his insular isolation. As Leed explains, the volunteer

was the individual who voluntarily submerged his private ego into a national persona. [...] Many experienced the beginning of the war as a dismantling of private egos, the transcendence of privacy, the tearing down of barriers that had preserved discrete social selves.

LEED, 2009: 205

The narrative shift from the pronoun "I" to the pronoun "we" in the part of *The Prospector* focusing on the Great War is typical of war fiction; however, it has also a special significance for the protagonist, so far removed from any form of communal life. Nevertheless, in a way characteristic of Great War writings, Le Clézio's enthusiastic volunteers, dreaming of a glorious death, are quickly transformed into desperate and traumatised "prisoners of the rain and mud" (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 269), experiencing a "diminution of status from the 'armed representative of the nation' to a 'day laborer of death'" (LEED, 2009: 206). With time, Alexis understands the illusory "conception of himself and his comrades as national personas, armed defenders of a unified community" (LEED, 2009: 112). Here Le Clézio uses interesting inversions, depicting his protagonist's experience at the front through a lens similar to his experience of utopian happiness with Ouma on the island(s). Alexis loses the sense of the passage of time (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 255) and believes that he and his fellow soldiers are the only people left at the end of the world (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 256, 277). Yet in the context of their isolation in the trenches, and by contrast with the earlier romanticised insular disruption of time and identities, these elements acquire a dystopian and Apocalyptic meaning. Although the protagonist is able to appreciate the beauty of nature around him, he is also overwhelmed by the wasteland of No Man's Land. It is of Boucan that he thinks in moments of despair and about which he talks to his friends and himself in the "hell" of the subterranean shelters (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 260).

³ Leed claims that in 1914 many volunteers believed that the concept of society, with its materialistic and alienating mechanisms, will be replaced, by sharing the war effort, by a sense of community (see LEED, 2009: 39—72).

Alexis's return to the Mascarene Archipelago is represented in the novel as a series of — ephemeral — Arcadian rediscoveries. First, sailing on the sea, the protagonist is overwhelmed by a feeling of freedom and profound happiness: “We have slept in the mud for so long that the wooden deck with the star-filled sky above us feels like paradise” (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 275). Reunited with his mother and sister, he also experiences a transitory feeling of belonging. Yet, having discovered that their old house in Boucan has been destroyed, he realises that the past is beyond his reach and decides to go back to Rodrigues, an island free from the meanness and hypocrisy of “high society” (283). When he sees Rodrigues rise above the horizon, Alexis confesses:

I stand in the bow with everyone else, and with a pounding heart stare at the deceptively blue line as if it is a mirage.

This is how I imagined arriving all the time I was in the hellish war, stuck in the trenches, ankle deep in mud and waste. My dream comes true as the *Zeta* races like a skiff over the dark sphere of water, amid bursts of spray, toward the transparent mountains on the island.

LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 289

Nevertheless, on Rodrigues, the protagonist grows restless and depressed again, a condition that I would attribute to the devastating trauma of war, which makes the veteran unable “to ever again feel at ease in the prelapsarian surroundings of home” (PAUL, 2005: 150). His search for gold appears futile to him: “Can I really still hope for something from this place, after how the world has been destroyed?” (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 291). He realises that he is not any longer the innocent young man he was before he left for the war. The conflict has changed him radically, for “the knowledge of war is lived knowledge, a part of the individual's body, that sets the boundaries between his present and past, between himself and others” (LEED, 2009: 75). His anxiety makes him unable to sleep alone in the valley at English Cove. His view of the Corsair changes radically too: he does not see him as an adventurer any longer but as an exhausted, exiled old man (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 298). The configuration of English Cove, which he had read as a map to the hidden treasure, appears to him now as a map of the universe. And this leads him to understand the true treasure of his ancestor, which consisted of peace and harmony with the universe and the beauty of the natural world (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 300). Ouma must be part of his new harmonious vision of existence. Alexis finally understands his lover's lesson, the derision with which she spoke about gold and war. When, as had been Boucan in the past, English Cove is destroyed by a hurricane, the island becomes in his eyes a place of desolation, surrounded by “the sea that keeps us prisoner [and] glitters harshly in the sun” (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 295). Obsessed with the desire to find his treasure, Ouma, Alexis goes back to Mauritius.

The encounter with Ouma is significant for Alexis's disillusionment with occidental values, epitomised by this search for the privateer's treasure, and the reorientation of his quest within. Loss of Arcadia in *The Prospector*, according to Eileen Lohka (LOHKA, 2011: 130), results in connecting with the other, as *métissage* has a profoundly transformative potential in the novel. Looking for Ouma, who keeps evading him, the protagonist joins the coloured workers in the field, sharing their labour, which no white has ever done before. When he is finally reunited with Ouma, he learns that the Manafs have suffered from typhoid and hunger and, because of the riots and fires that resulted from privations and famine during the war, they are now incarcerated at the Rivière Noire refugee camp. Although the two lovers spend a few idyllic months together — living “like primitives,” “far from other people, is like an exquisite dream” (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 328) — Ouma finally leaves Alexis to join her brother in the refugee camp. She is probably later deported “somewhere, so long as it's somewhere else” (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 334). Ultimately, Alexis remains a liminal figure (a condition reinforced by his veteran status) who lacks agency; he passively lets Ouma disappear from his life, having “reached an impasse in terms of his moral development” (MOSER, 2013: 69). He has managed to recover from an ontological alienation, but remains exiled on the social level (SUZUKI, 2007: 255). At the end of the novel, immersed in his dreams, he has evaded his obsession about the reversal of time — the Boucan is now within him, not behind him. According to Suzuki, Le Clézio's protagonist finds another paradise in the cosmic ecstasy, a transcendental dimension in which all human reality is denied (SUZUKI, 2007: 270).

However, the Great War *and* the relationship with Ouma are fundamental, in my view, to Le Clézio's reconceptualisation of the relationship between the island and modernity. During his second voyage to Rodrigues, Alexis becomes aware of the fact that all the Rodriguans who left with him have disappeared and he might be the only one to have survived the war. In contrast to the war paradigm elaborated by Fussell and other scholars, Alexis does not share much with his generation and his war experience does not have any larger cultural implications.⁴ However, he becomes aware of the forces of history, which he had ignored before, because of his fixation on the past. He realises that the global war has affected the islands that he had wrongly imagined as pastoral Arcadias: “Now I understand how deluded I was: history happened here just as it did everywhere else; the world is not the same anywhere. There have been crimes, transgressions, a war, and because of it our lives have come apart” (LE CLÉZIO, 1993: 288). Significantly, however, the fate of Ouma and the other Manafs makes him realise that the Great War, and the disasters that it caused on the islands, represents only an uncontrollable explosion of the violence of modernity, which, through the system of planocracy, has scarred the two Mascarene islands and the history of their peoples.

⁴ This reflection was inspired by my reading of Ty Hawkins's article (HAWKINS, 2014).

Thus, though for an ephemeral moment, by sympathizing with the Black, Indian and mixed-blood plantation workers, Alexis is transformed into a person who is sensitive to the labouring human presence that his pastoral and romantic dreams allowed him to overlook in the past. In this regard, to consider the First World War as having caused the island's entry into modernity would be a misconception, as it would produce a thorough misunderstanding of "the alternative forms of modernity that were ushered in by colonization, the slave trade, creolization" (LIONNET, 2012: 294). In *The Prospector*, Le Clézio conceives a complex postcolonial ecology,⁵ depicting the dislocation of people and economies, and the ravaging of nature, caused by the economic crisis after the Great War.

In Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, one of the central protagonists, Dr. W.H. Rivers, working at Craiglockhart hospital for shell-shocked officers during the First World War, is haunted by flashbacks and dreams of his fieldwork in Oceania, on the Solomon Islands, Eddystone Island (today's Simbo) in particular. The character (who is based on the historical figure of Dr. William Halse Rivers (1864—1922), a famous anthropologist, neurologist and psychiatrist⁶) becomes profoundly disillusioned in the course of the trilogy about his work as a therapist, for he realises that his function is to heal the soldiers' minds in order for them to be sent back to the front. Europe in his eyes appears to be a civilization of death. His memories about the Pacific Islands gain "an eerie resonance when revisited amidst the carnage of the First World War" (YOUSAF, MONTEITH, 2005: viii); they help him understand the mechanisms of social control in England during the war but also, by contrasting the European culture with the insular one, lead him to interesting conclusions about Pacific Islands culture and the effects of modernity.

Already in *Regeneration*, the first volume of the trilogy, Rivers realises that there is something fundamentally similar between his work with the traumatised officers at Craiglockhart and his fieldwork on the Solomon Islands. He comes to the conclusion that the lesson of cultural relativism that he learned in Melanesia, repressed after his return to England, has been reinforced by his contact with soldiers who have been psychologically maimed by the war. In depicting Rivers's encounter with the natives of the Solomon Islands, Barker uses in both *Regeneration* and the last volume of the trilogy, *The Ghost Road*, what Mary L. Pratt refers to as the *mystique of reciprocity* — a "reversal of Eurocentered power relations and cultural norms, especially norms about seeing and being seen" (PRATT, 2008: 80). When he interrogates the indigenous population about their culture, Rivers suddenly realises that he is also being subjected to the scrutiny of the islanders, who are overwhelmed by laughter when they listen to his descriptions of European culture, which is "too bizarre" (BARKER, 1991: 243).

⁵ According to DELOUGHREY and HANDLEY, the concept of postcolonial ecology "reflects a complex epistemology that recuperates the alterity of both history *and* nature, without reducing either to the other" (2011: 4).

⁶ For more information about Rivers, see F.J. ROBINSON (2014).

This is a moment of absolute freedom, for it opens the anthropologist's eyes to the arrogance of European culture, the orientalisng foundations of imperialism positing the coloured others as inferior to the whites, and the relativity of any value system (BARKER, 1991: 242). Rivers's contact with the traumatised officers, whose horrible experiences make them question the validity of propaganda and the necessity of the war, echoes Rivers's encounters in Melanesia, as both relativize European cultural foundations. While in the first volume of the trilogy European ideologies are radically destabilized, in *The Ghost Road*, both the European and the Melanesian cultures are seriously interrogated. Rivers's memories of the time he spent on Eddystone Island are juxtaposed with the letters of his most insightful and violent patient, Billy Prior⁷; as a result, both the Melanesian fragments and the accounts of battles on the European front can be seen as records of anthropological fieldwork meant to salvage the remains of two civilizations doomed to extinction.

The island in *The Ghost Road* is a beautiful, peaceful paradise, an "idyllic" space of "absolute magic," though frightening, especially at night (BARKER, 1995: 132, 188). However, in Rivers's recollections, the island is not an Arcadia; the protagonist is aware of the fatal effects of missionary work, for the indigenous population has been decimated by "the diseases of European nursery" (BARKER, 1995: 125). As anthropologists, Rivers and his companion do not carry weapons and, struggling constantly with overwhelming guilt, try to believe that they are perceived as a friendly presence on the island, different from the violent intrusion of conquerors and missionaries. Barker applies here the strategy of *anti-conquest*, typical, according to Pratt, of European travel literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a "Utopian, innocent vision of European global authority" (PRATT, 2008: 38), "whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (PRATT, 2008: 9). Rivers's profound longing "for a way of taking possession without subjugation and violence" (PRATT, 2008: 56) is constantly challenged on the island, as he registers, unwillingly, various signs of fake servility, hostility, and open threat; he thus realises that "anthropology is implicated in the suppression of the cultural difference that is its object" (JOLLY, 2005: 238). Moreover, Rivers's anthropological studies in Melanesia are constantly juxtaposed with his work as a psychiatrist in England, both being the products and the means of European power structures.

⁷ The perspective of Billy Prior, a working-class officer, also serves to undermine the myth of pastoral England in the trilogy. In this respect Ronald Paul notes the crucial aesthetic difference between Barker and classical Great War authors, such as Graves, Aldington, Sassoon and Barbusse, in the treatment of pastoral: Billy Prior's "image of Britain, socially and economically divided along class lines, is in complete contrast to the patriotic concept of a nation at one with itself, epitomised by the romantic idea of a rural English retreat far from the rigors of war" (PAUL, 2005: 149).

The island in *The Ghost Road* seems a *contact zone*, as Barker highlights “the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters [...] within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (PRATT, 2008: 8). The “contact” perspective and the fluidity of exchanges and understandings are particularly visible in Rivers’s relationship with Njiru, the most powerful shaman on the island and Rivers’s best interpreter and informant, who, though he chooses to share some of the most secret of the islanders’ rituals with the European anthropologist, also condemns with contempt his desire to record them. A problematic instance of “colonial homosociality” (EMBERLEY, 2007: 145),⁸ the relationship seems to transform both Njiru and Rivers. Yet it is only during the Great War that Rivers fully understands his island experience.

Crucial in *The Ghost Road* is the juxtaposition of the practice of head-hunting with the brutality of the First World War. As Ronald Paul suggests, Barker avoids the Arcadian trap

by turning the thematic focus of Rivers’s flashbacks onto the patriarchal power structure of [the island] communities themselves, torn between the decline of their own primitive head-hunting culture and the imposition of an encroaching imperialism that is set upon its own brutally exploitive mission.

PAUL, 2005: 152

A form of ritual violence and a rite of manhood popular on the Pacific Islands, head-hunting was prohibited by the British administration at the end of the nineteenth century. The result of the ban is the deterioration of the islanders’ population, a dramatic decline in the birth-rate, idleness and apathy:

Head-hunting had to be banned, and yet the effects of banning it were everywhere apparent in the listlessness and lethargy of the people’s lives. Head-hunting was what they had lived for. Though it might seem callous or frivolous to say so, head-hunting had been the most tremendous *fun* and without it life lost almost all of its zeal.

This was a people perishing from the absence of war.

BARKER, 1995: 207

Significantly, however, in *The Ghost Road*, Rivers’s haunting memories of head-hunting in the midst of the European war “provide the narrative basis for a profound exposure of the patriarchal cult of violence that is promoted by both the headhunters of the South Seas and the Chiefs of Staff in London” (PAUL, 2005: 159). By bringing the two worlds together, Barker seems to suggest that violence lies at the core of masculinity in a transcultural perspective. The apparent difference between savagery and civilization, epitomised in European culture by the story of Abraham, ready to slay his son yet stopped by a God who forbids the

⁸ AS EMBERLEY points out, such alliances between men have been “falsely viewed across cultures and time as the kinship equivalent of a shared social contract” (2007: 151).

sacrifice, is undermined in the novel (BARKER, 1995: 103—104). While the concept of deliberate cruelty seemed alien to the people of the Solomon Islands and sacrificial rituals represented a controlled caesura of social coexistence (BARKER, 1995: 238), the Great War appears to be an excess of violence, a carefully designed explosion of brutality, fathers sending their sons *en masse* to cruel death. The pathological degeneration of European values and the tenuousness of the concept of civilization is foregrounded by Billy Prior, writing about the patients returned to the front by Rivers: “We don’t remember, we don’t feel, we don’t think — at least not beyond the confines of what’s needed to do the job. By any proper civilized standard (but what does *that* mean *now*?) we are objects of horror” (BARKER, 1995: 200). Consequently, the “vacuum of values” (LEED, 2009: 69) suffered by the Europeans during the First World War might not be after all so remote from the “condition of absolute free-fall” of the “drifting, dispossessed,” missionarized populations of Solomon Islands (BARKER, 1995: 120).

The island in *The Ghost Road* serves therefore as an imaginary trigger for making disturbing cross-cultural comparisons. As John Brannigan suggests, “the geographical ‘otherness’ of Melanesia refuses to remain in its place — it continually appears to haunt and disrupt Rivers’s sense of ‘home’” (BRANNIGAN, 2005: 113). Rivers is also struck by the similarity of mourning rites in the apparently divergent cultures of Europe and Melanesia. The shrines erected in private English homes after the death of young people during the war do not seem so remote to Rivers from the houses where the islanders stored the skulls of dead warriors. Most importantly, communication with the dead, deemed irrational in European culture, is a vital part of everyday life for Njiru and his people. Reflecting about it during the war in Europe and thinking about one of his patients, a fictional Siegfried Sassoon, who is haunted by the ghosts of his dead comrades in arms, Rivers comes to the conclusion that “The ghosts were not an attempt at evasion [...] by Siegfried or the islanders. Rather, the questions became more insistent, more powerful, for being projected into the mouths of the dead” (BARKER, 1995: 212). On the final pages of the novel, exhausted after a night shift at the hospital, Rivers sees Njiru walking down the ward. The mysterious words uttered by the shaman are part of the *mate* ceremony, performed for the men on the island whose agony lasted too long: “*Mate* did not mean dead, it designated a state of which death was the appropriate outcome” (BARKER, 1995: 134). Occurring in the novel after a dramatic scene in which a chorus of Rivers’s mentally-damaged patients denies any sense to the suffering caused by armed combat, *mate* seems to refer here to Rivers and his maimed soldiers, “the fingerless, the crippled, the broken” (BARKER, 1995: 276), but also European civilization, which, like that of Eddystone Island, is on the verge of extinction, as a result of the same logic of violence that was fundamental to both colonisation and the First World War.

Both Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio and Pat Barker use and challenge the pastoral recourses belonging to the tradition of Great War writing and the con-

vention of idealising remote Arcadian lands. The “island perspective” enriches our vision of the First World War, reconfiguring global conflict at the margins of the empires, an approach relatively new in Great War studies (see DAS, 2013). For both Le Clézio and Barker it would have been easy to simply fall into the Arcadian trap by contrasting the brutal carnage on the battlefield of Europe with idyllic, pastoral islands, unaffected by the violence of war. Significantly, however, in the texts analysed above, islands, which, in the traditional Euro-American view, were “part of a sparsely populated, insignificant and asocial ocean ‘space’” (EL DESSOUKY, 2011: 261), are involved in global social and economic processes. *The Prospector*, *Regeneration* and *The Ghost Road* ask troubling questions about European modernity. The Great War does not represent the islanders’ entry into the modern world but opens the white protagonists’ eyes to earlier processes of European exploitation and genocide. Le Clézio’s *The Prospector* foregrounds the abuses of plantocracy, illustrating the dramatic effects of the first global war on the economy of Mauritius and Rodrigues. The island thus becomes “a metaphor of global vulnerability to human economic demands” (GROVE, 2000). In Barker’s novels, the island also loses its status as an unchanging indigenous microcosm untransformed by global human activity. The fact that Njiru controls the last scene in the trilogy not only undermines the claim to superiority of European civilization, but also shows disturbing similarities between cultures usually considered in terms of binary difference. Several insular myths are thus undermined by the two writers, who in their Great War fictions break with the tradition of isolated Arcadias and resituate remote islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans as integral parts of European modernity.

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