

# *Textual Communities For Oral Literature*

LEE HARING

Sak kabri nana son bann.

Every goat has his band (Carayol, 1980, p. 27).

The *Réunionnais* proverb points to a characteristic attitude among ethnic groups in the Indian Ocean, as in most places. From the beginning of their history, as the goats cling to their own band, the French, African, Malagasy, Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani inhabitants of the Ile de la Réunion have resisted the erosion of boundaries. With little success: they continually borrow symbols and values from neighboring groups. Linguistic and cultural interchange goes on all the time in Réunion, as it does in Mauritius and Madagascar, where communities exist side by side in continual contact. Characteristic of this region is Mayotte, which chose one sort of boundary over another when it refused to join the Comoros independence movement in 1975, electing instead to remain a dependency of France (Vérin : 1994, 233-239). Innumerable people there are bilingual in Comoran and a creolized version of Malagasy (Gueunier : 1990). It is no surprise that the definitive book by the pre-eminent linguist of this region bears the subtitle "Essai sur la créolisation linguistique et culturelle" (Chaudenson 1992, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Cultural creolization pervades the Southwest Indian Ocean.

Lee Haring is Professor Emeritus of English, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. This article originally appeared in *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* 50 (2001) 185-205.

Members of intellectual communities too, whether they study island cultures, literature, philosophy, or linguistics, have their own “bands”; they observe and follow certain values, priorities, and conventions that maintain their membership in the band. Their disciplinary edifice has been challenged by poststructuralist and post-modern thought, as well as the rise of gender, race, ethnic, and postcolonial studies. Maintaining one’s discipline increasingly means becoming an interdisciplinary translator among discourses. Quite understandably, scholars poach on each other’s terrain, in hopes of good hunting. Nothing is wrong with poaching, but a conversation would be healthier.

In hopes of opening a conversation, I focus on one chapter of this important book, which analyzes oral literatures in Indian Ocean and Caribbean societies. Editor of the *Encyclopédie de la Réunion*, founder of the journal *Études Créoles*, this author writes with utmost authority as a linguist about French-based creole languages. By simultaneously respecting and transgressing disciplinary boundaries, he encourages my exploration of interdisciplinarity. He and I shall disagree about comparative formal analysis and the movement of particular tales; on the importance of cultural creolization and on ways to understand it we shall emphatically agree.

#### Terms

What terms shall the conversation use? One is “interpretive community.” This term was hurled into currency in the 1980s by the notorious, brilliant American literary critic Stanley Fish. For him, the community is the agency that makes possible all acts of reading and interpretation and gives them force (Fish, 1980; Said, 1983). To an oral literature scholar the conception is obvious: the experience of a reader, critic, or listener to a folktale is conditioned by his or her membership in an interpretive community. Fish’s example, a community of ex-convicts, could be augmented many times from the researches of oral literature scholars, whose analyses of content and context look past the moment of narration to discover the underlying facts, images, memories, concepts and symbols. It can be augmented too from intellectual history. A group of scholars who develop and accept a set of theories, and who interpret folklore in the light of them, constitute a “school,” not necessarily face to face, sometimes distributed over the globe, conversing through publication and correspondence. Such schools, or interpretive communities, are the creators of “oral literature,” “folklore,” or indeed any other intellectual activity.

Or one could use a modified version of Fish's term, proposed by the anthropologist George Marcus: "textual community." In literate societies, Marcus points out, "oral forms of communication are at least as important as reading" (1992 : 110). Again the oral literature scholar confirms the definition. In Réunion or Madagascar, a person will have absorbed the ways of hearing or reading imparted by at least one group, will know how to speak and understand the jargon of that group, and will be ready to interpret their narratives (Beaujard, 1991). A third, looser term is the naïve American one, "folk group" (Dundes, 1965, pp. 2-3).

The literary critic, the anthropologist, and the folklorist are pointing at the same thing, more or less, but their different terminologies help to maintain the boundary of the bann of kabri. Here I shall use Marcus's term, "textual community," abbreviating it to TC. By "TC" I mean to lump together both the groups that ethnographers of expressive culture study and the ethnographers themselves. All of us are groups of persons sharing values, priorities, and conventions that enable us to interpret written and oral literature and comment on it. Some of us produce our comments as essays and books, others by telling another story. So I and my reader belong to the "oral literature TC." In a real-life TC, the roles of sender and receiver, which linguists so love to separate, are continually exchanged. No proscenium separates the performer from his or her audience (Roulon-Doko, 2001).

As distinct as psychoanalytic literary critics or Réunionnais pe-tits blancs are schools of folklorists and ethnographers. But as a field of intellectual inquiry, oral literature studies are so incoherent, so fragmented by national traditions, assumptions, languages, and institutional barriers--not to mention the rival claims on the material of folktales--that they look as diverse as the multilingual islands Robert Chaudenson writes about. Progress in the study of oral literature is impeded by persistent and outdated mutual ignorance, at a time when interdisciplinarity is called for. The factors blocking publication and correspondence need to be unmasked.

What is taken for granted by one school is perceived as being the question by another. Acceptable proof is another tricky point: demonstration by analysis of a crucial case appears 'anecdotal' to those who adhere to a different tradition; what to some is an elegant proof will

be criticized by others as 'empty formalism.' (Sankoff, 1973 : 10)

In the years since these words were written, anthropology has been even more on the defensive. Is the term literature any less problematic than le folklore? Here is Michel Foucault:

The word is of recent date, as is also, in our culture, the isolation of a particular language whose peculiar mode of being is "literary."

If, as Foucault declares, "literature is the contestation of philology," *le folklore* or *la littérature orale* is the contestation of literature (1973 : 300). If the oral literature TC were a postcolonial island, we would recognize it as a creolized society, where converging TCs are exerting claims on expressive culture. Inevitably in these situations there is a burgeoning of creativity, as Robert Chaudenson's chapters on music, magic, and cookery show.

### *Formal considerations*

To begin with something unimportant, a petty difference between the linguist's TC and mine appears when M. Chaudenson defines "oral literature" as limited to folktales. Proverbs and riddles, which most oral literature scholars classify as part of the definition, are left to one side, as are the words of folksongs.<sup>2</sup>

A second, less petty difference appears in his formal analysis of folktales. To facilitate comparison between tales of western France, Madagascar, and the creolized societies of the Caribbean and Indian Ocean, he relies on opening and closing formulas. To an oral literature scholar, such formulas--far from being "l'élément formel le plus pertinent pour notre étude" (Chaudenson, 1992 : 261; 2001 : 281)--are the least stable elements of a tale's form. They are highly portable, but also disposable, elements of performance (Dundes, 1964 : 67). Their utility in studying the region's oral literature is that they demonstrate the common stock of features of folktale performance. Regional formal patterns that organize whole tales, such as the making and breaking of friendship (Dundes, 1971), give fuller information than formulas to the comparatist, who explains their occurrence historically (Haring, 1982). The catalogue of Malagasy tales (which includes a large number of the animal tales the author thinks Madagascar lacks) facilitates the classifying of tales from Mauritius, Seychelles, and the other islands (in progress).<sup>3</sup> The

“oral literature TC” finds structural principles and characters derived from Africa, India, Europe, and Madagascar continually asserting themselves in Indian Ocean tales.

### *The Sociohistorical*

A weightier disagreement arises when I apply to folktales the author’s admirable standards for reconstructing creole history. Through many years of studying languages, Robert Chaudenson has insisted on the need for “sociohistorical and sociolinguistic grounding” for hypotheses (1992 : 176; 2001 : 191). Existing documents tell us much (though never enough) about immigration and peopling; therefore they tell us about the transmission, translation, and movement of tales. A great deal is known about settlement, slavery, forced immigration, and the cultural contacts of diverse groups in island societies (Hall, 1996; Teelock, 1998; Vérin, 1986; Haring, 1991; Whitten & Torres, 1998). Storytellers there participate in their own TCs, yes, but they also take from others. Beginning from sensibilities inherited from abroad, they remodel their inherited and borrowed materials within the everyday habitat of power relations. Consequently, the folktales are a mix of traditions; they are creolized.

A typically creole character is Ti Zan, protagonist of many Indian Ocean tales. About him, Robert Chaudenson states,

Son origine française ne fait aucun doute, mais son importance hors de France est plus étonnante; rien n’indique si cela s’explique par un rôle central que Petit Jean aurait eu dans les littératures régionales, ‘exportées’ par la colonisation ou par une évolution interne propre à ces traditions orales d’outre-mer (1992 : 268; 2001 : 291)

Here we agree: comparatism, as the “oral literature TC” practices it, confirms the author’s second alternative with additional information. The only thing that stays the same from tale to tale and TC to TC is Ti Zan’s name, which probably did immigrate from France. Otherwise he is continually remodeled. In one tale where he outwits Gran Dyab’s attempts to capture him, thus defeating his mother’s attempts to get rid of him, he is tirelessly ingenious

(Carayol, 1978 : 94-99; Carayol, 1979 : 97-99). In another, he begins as the despised, mangy brother of the "fille difficile," who refuses eligible suitors in favor of a monster husband, and ends heroically as her rescuer (Barat, 1977 : 35-37; Carayol, 1978 : 68-79; Carayol, 1979 : 63-74). In a dragon-slayer story from Rodrigues, he marries the princess after using the dragon's tongues to prove his identity (Carayol, 1978 : 102-113; Carayol, 1979 : 103-108) <sup>4</sup>. Ti Zan resembles himself from island to island much less than he resembles his equally protean New World counterpart, Jack (Lindahl, 2001).

Another folktale character, Tarbaby, is well known enough to debate about<sup>5</sup>. Tarbaby originated in Africa. Hottentot, Henga, Nyanja, Nyika and other Eastern and Southern African examples, collected early in the history of African folklore, show it was ready for adaptation when slaves were being captured and brought to Mauritius and Réunion (Klipple, 1938 : 213-233). An Ila version, from what is now Zambia, contains an episode found also in Mauritius (Smith and Dale 1968 : 2:396-398), which shares it with the Comoros, Réunion, and Seychelles, though not always in the form the author uses (1992 : 270-274; 2001 : 294-296). Africa's contribution to Mauritian storytelling was already obvious to Charles Baisac, its first collector (1888). Innumerable versions and variants of Tarbaby have been found in the Caribbean and United States (Crowley, 1966 : 148). The leading authority on Louisiana folklore calls it "the best known animal tale in Louisiana" (Ancelet, 1994 : 6). What is known about the New World slaves who told this story also describes those who carried it to the Indian Ocean: "how [they] mended their clothes, furnished their houses, cooked their meals, fell in love, courted, married, bore and socialized their children, worshipped their deities, organized their 'plays' and other recreation and buried their dead," all were practices shaped within the existing distribution of power, yet separate from the practices of others (Mintz and Price, 1976 : 20). Yet Robert Chaudenson proposes to take Tarbaby away from the overwhelming number of African-derived peoples in the islands, and credit it to European settlers. The elaborate, Eurocentric theory of its Indian origin has long been discredited (Hattingh 1944). Since the tale is hardly known in India, Arabic-speaking countries, or Europe, and is found in nearly every place to which African slaves were sold, Tarbaby's grip on the imagination of oppressed people is stronger than ever (Duffy, 1995; Bremond, 1984). Generally, in contrast to the creole languages of the region as Robert Chaudenson has analyzed them, eight-

eenth-century tales from Ile Bourbon (now Réunion) do not provide the basis for Mauritian creole tales.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond a popular plot like *Tarbaby*, Africa contributed performance styles all over the region. The central storytellers, we know, were women. It is far from absurd to imagine that Southwest Indian Ocean women could have been factors for social and linguistic resistance to assimilation (1992 : 97; 2001 : 100). By telling stories like the “*fille difficile*” or *Tarbaby*, which deal with the favorite African subject of power relations, they asserted their own important social role and revived symbols of resistance (Haring, 1999).

As linguist, Robert Chaudenson has made a strong case for the shaping role of Bourbonnais creole in the surrounding islands. In the cultural realm, though, denying African influence is more ominous. It too closely resembles those discredited arguments that black English in the New World is a corruption of standard English (Turner, 1949) and that African-American spirituals are a corruption of white hymnody (Wilgus, 1959 : 344-364). Until scholars begin looking for source materials at African languages, ways of speaking, and cultural styles, as New World scholars have done (Abrahams, 1975, 1983; Szwed, 1969), Indian Ocean and Caribbean studies will not be able to assess the African contributions to culture. Here is a promising area for conversation and collaboration among several TCs: linguists, ethnographers, historians, and scholars of oral literature.

### *Comparaison, est-ce raison?*

Fortunately or unfortunately, the key term of the oral literature TC is shared among several textual communities. A conversation in which various TCs would answer the question, “What is comparatism?” would last a long time and involve many speakers. All people, and all TCs, “are continually confronted with phenomena labeled ‘different’ which they see as the ‘same’; and, correspondingly, they are confused by attributions of sameness to things they want to call different . . .” (Lessa & Vogt, 1972 : 179). So oral literature scholars had to confront stories that are simultaneously the “same” and “different,” and discover or invent the principles of sameness (Ben-Amos : 1976). What is to be compared, to what end?

Starting from linguistics, Robert Chaudenson sets up a model to solve this anthropological problem of the “cross-creole comparison of cultural features” (1992 : 245; 2001 : 265). The grid maps ten hypothetical cases against five cultural systems: the French

pothetical cases against five cultural systems: the French Caribbean, the (French) Indian Ocean, "système(s) culturel(s) français," "système(s) culturel(s) non français," and "systèmes culturels non français à prendre en compte dans l'OI" (1992 : 246; 2001 : 265). The formal abstractness of the grid, and its omission of facts about the distribution of specific tales like Tarbaby, betray its linguistic parentage. Nor, being a formal device, does it attempt to keep cultural phenomena embedded in their sociohistorical context, as the author so emphatically does elsewhere (1979, 1983, 1985, 1989). Recalling its history, the "oral literature TC" sees its principles for comparison entailing a particular way of segmenting the material.

One principle examines content for all items of one genre. The Finnish TC's Linnaean method took care of the threat that scholars might not be able to tell sameness from difference. Certain folktales were declared to have common elements, at least in the Indo-European areas. When Kaarle Krohn systematizes this "historic-geographic" method of folktale study, he declares that "the content of any Märchen structure can be determined in its basic components from the very onset" (1971 : 2, my emphasis). The gross elements that can be compared are plots, or "types." Major divisions, labeled 'episodes'; their subdivisions, labeled 'factors' (momente); motifs, "the basic or motivating element of the plot" (Krohn, 1971, p. 31; Thompson, 1955-1958), and even subdivisions of these are available for comparison. The result grouped narratives together, preparing for the formal and structural studies that later TCs would produce.

Eurocentric though it is, the Finnish method makes possible far-ranging comparatism for narratives, riddles, proverbs and other genres. Its background in comparative evolutionism enables comparison between societies relatively remote in space and time, so long as they perform tales that the scholar can recognize as the same. By the middle of the twentieth century, the irrelevance of such evolutionism to cultural studies was clear: "There are no fixed genres comparable to biological science which can serve as substrata of evolution. There is no inevitable growth and decay, no transformation of one genre into another, no actual struggle for life among genres" (Wellek, 1963 : 51). But the tools of historic-geographic comparatism were already in place, relied upon by the TC of oral literature scholars and ignored by others (though not by Robert Chaudenson).

At the same time as the Finnish scholars developed their kind of comparatism to show the world's common language, Franz Boas was giving emphasis to the individuality of cultures and developing the concept of the "culture area," within and between which comparisons could be made (Boas, 1938). Boas laid a new foundation for comparatist anthropology. Continually he cautioned readers and students against looking for similarities among cultural phenomena that were too distant; the lack of adequate evidence made such a search unpromising. As a result, anthropologists agreed to look at differences, fieldwork began (though not in the Indian Ocean), and oral literature scholars stopped exaggerating the number and importance of similarities in world folktales. The weakness of culture-area ethnography could be avoided, because tale features are less subjectively defined and smaller in dimension than the traits "which a culture-bound observer found to be conspicuous to him rather than demonstrably central in a sociocultural system" (Jacobs, 1964 : 16). Tales within a recognizable culture area could be studied in what a historian calls "neighbourly" comparison (Burke, 1994 : 85).

By the mid-twentieth century, the oral literature TC agreed on the post-Boasian position:

Éléments et structures des contes peuvent présenter une étonnante similitude formelle à travers des sociétés fort éloignées; mais à l'analyse on constate que la signification qui en résulte est très différente, car ils sont utilisés pour des motifs et dans une perspective propres à chacun des milieux dans lesquels ils s'intègrent (Paulme, 1972 : 161)

This great Africanist stresses the significance of tales to the people who tell them, rather than their significance to people trying to create a world mythological scheme like Joseph Campbell (1956).

Another sort of comparatism selects another sort of datum, still within a single genre. V. Propp hammers out a definition of the *Märchen* on the basis of one hundred Russian tales. He analyzes tales "in accordance with the characters' actions," which he called "functions" (Propp, 1984 : 69). His analyses engender a TC whose

members carry out comparisons far beyond the Russian tales he analyzed, even into the realm of cinema and *bandes dessinées*. They open the possibility of comparisons of cultural features belonging to quite distinct genres (Bremond, 1973; Meletinsky, 1974; Dundes, 1964a; Dundes, 1964b). But Propp's key term is a sort of reverse translation, since *function* has totally different definitions for mathematicians, chemists, logicians, and the Malinowski who founded functionalist anthropology. The conversation had not begun.

With Propp's example before him, Claude Lévi-Strauss casts an even broader comparative net, seeking an unchanging structure of thought behind diverse plots (1964, 1966, 1968, 1971). His narratives include more genres than Krohn's or Propp's, and his analysis takes in larger units, namely the relations between the characters and incidents, which earlier TCs catalogued. All the stories merit comparison with one another. His assumption that the symbol language of folktale and myth is openended allows his structural analysis to consider underlying relations without reference to the structure of individual narratives.

Here Robert Chaudenson agrees. Comparatism for cultural elements means "la mise en relation d'ensembles de faits plutôt que sur le rapprochements d'éléments isolés" (1992 : 258; 2001 : 278). To define the *ensemble*, however, is the crucial decision. Origin does not define anything. The author acknowledges that assigning an origin for cultural elements is far more difficult than for linguistic elements (1992 : 252; 2001 : 272). For their part, oral literature scholars long ago gave up trying to assign origins to tales. He acknowledges too the effect of immigration in transmitting tales to colonized islands, where local subtypes (the "oikotypes" conceived by von Sydow, 1948)) can be created. His comparatism, deriving from linguistics, assumes that because the Caribbean and Indian Ocean were colonized by Europeans, their folktales will be comparable. The history of their peopling makes this hypothesis too simple.

### *Modern approaches*

For understanding folk narration in the present, other topics of comparison would be needed. "Modern approaches," which the author calls for (1992 : 250; 2001 : 269), would move away from text and study the production of tales (1992 : 255; 2001 : 275). This approach is advanced by a fledgling TC of Canadian scholars, whose

model “privileges the teller-audience relation” by means of techniques of transcription embracing all aspects of performance (Demers, Gauvin & Lefebvre, 1985). In the United States since 1971, performance has been the central topic of folklore study among a larger TC (Paredes & Bauman, 1972; Briggs & Shuman, 1993; Limón & Young, 1986). Another topic for scrutiny and comparison would be the structure of the hearer’s experience of a tale. In literature, this was the approach advocated at one time by Stanley Fish. The experience of a reader, said Fish, is conditioned by his or her membership in an interpretive community. The comparative study of folklore performance, if it ever comes into existence, will identify constants and variants in the TC of hearers, perhaps on the model of Norman Holland’s experiments with the reception of literature (Holland, 1968).

Meanwhile, the study of texts in the library brings about a fascinating conversation amongst collaborators, whose work could become a model for the international oral literature TC (Görög-Karady & Seydou, 2001). Their topic is a tale I have already mentioned, the “defiant girl” story, most popular of all African and Indian Ocean plots, which manifests the same sort of remodeling Karl Reisman found in the Caribbean (1970). The “fille difficile” refuses eligible suitors in favor of a murderous, man-eating ogre-husband. From him she must be rescued; often he is punished. I collected the tale almost accidentally in Kenya in January 1968. This tale is more than a mere “oikotype,” more than the local or regional form of an international type: it is an African (re)creation. Attempts to classify it as an Indo-European type have failed. Such research into African storytelling has shown Denise Paulme to be right: the stability and recurrence of the “same” plot incidents in any tale is dwarfed in importance by the transformation of the meaning of that tale in the value systems of TCs.

The oral literature TC finds the defiant girl in all the Indian Ocean islands (Baissac, 1888 : 146-161; Barat, 1977 : 35-37; Carayol, 1978 : 68-79; Carayol, 1980 : 15-16). Behind her popularity in Mauritius and Réunion is their history: the clash of cultures, insularity, colonization, dominance, and oppression. In Mauritius, the veteran *séga* singer Nelzir Ventre performed it on national television in January 1983 and subsequently recorded it for me and Claudie Ricaud (27 February 1990). In Réunion, a version of the “fille difficile” was collected in Réunionnais creole by the poet Boris Gamaleya (1977), who receives harsh criticism for it from Robert Chaudenson

(1992 : 257-258; 2001 : 277). The teller was Dejar Zoïle, nicknamed Ti Pierre Delpeche, of Fleurimont, Saint-Paul. M. Gamaleya, who knows how popular the story is (1977 : 18 n.), has, in his time, published tale texts that were rewritten, "inauthentic," or from sources other than oral performance (1974), but this is not one of them. He is one of the writers who have tried to promote Réunionnais creole, a tendency Robert Chaudenson evidently disapproves (Gauvin, 1977; Chaudenson, 1974 : xxviii). Réunionnais scholars recently have moved away from an attention to and respect for kreol language, into an exploration of francophonie, which forestalls folklore fieldwork (Robillard and Beniamino 1993).

### *A new form of comparatism*

Some day, after more fieldwork<sup>7</sup>, a "super-TC" comprising anthropologists, linguists, folklorists, and historians will assemble enough texts and contexts to interpret Indian Ocean tales properly. They might use the structuralist approach that historian Peter Burke uses with legends and folktales in early modern Europe, treating them as "a corpus of stories which are transformations of one another" (Burke, 1994 : 116-148). They could begin from Propp's short list of spheres of action in fictional tales--villain, donor, helper, princess, her father, dispatcher, hero, false hero--and see whether those roles show up in their materials (Propp, 1968 : 79-80). Or they could use the approach of anthropologist Brenda E. F. Beck in her far-reaching study of dyads in Indian tales (Beck, 1986). Here I will suggest but one bit of conversation, between the TCs of oral and comparative literature.

For example, comparative literature scholars conceive their topic of study as much larger than it used to be. Many other TCs agree. After the movement "from work to text" (Barthes, 1986), there was a movement in both disciplines from text to communicative event. What was formerly treated as mere circumstance or "context" they now embrace as data. A literary comparatist writes, "Textually precise readings should take account . . . of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which their meanings are produced" (Bernheimer, 1995 : 43). Perhaps a post-Malinowskian anthropologist would smile from the height of superior knowledge; an ethnolinguist would already have taken account of such contexts (Calame-Griaule et al., 1984). It is as true of Irish or Afghan oral narratives as of literary texts that they "are now being approached

as one discursive practice among others in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production" (Bernheimer, 1995 : 42; Glassie, 1982; Mills, 1991). The existence of artistic verbal communication, whether written or oral, is explained by nonliterary, nonfolkloric facts. Verbal art is always situated. Poetics is a situated interactional practice (Bauman & Briggs, 1990).

There are other topics for the conversation. Like comparatists of written literature, oral literature scholars "now have expanded opportunities to theorize the nature of the boundaries to be crossed and to participate in their remapping" (Bernheimer, 1995 : 43). The first such boundary is the one between the oral and the written. Here, the sociolinguistics TC contributes an external viewpoint from which to notice the different channels through which verbal art comes to its receivers (Hymes, 1974). The second boundary to be crossed is the one between the interpretive strategies of different TCs. Then, in a triumph of comparatism, "the production of 'literature' [whether oral or written] could . . . be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems," without abandoning "the close analysis of rhetorical, prosodic, and other formal features" (Bernheimer, 1995 : 43). The third boundary is ethnocentrism, which unfortunately never quite goes away, and which obscures the common concern of both oral and comparative literature scholars: "how literary values are created and maintained in a particular culture," a culture not one's own (Bernheimer, 1995 : 44). To discover the preferences implied in oikotypes like the "fille difficile," "one must examine the folkloric conventions (or formulas, clichés, and commonplaces) and the cultural biases and imperative[s] operative in that community or tradition" (Abrahams 1970 : 174). Also, at this time in their history, anthropologists, literary critics, and oral literature scholars are historicizing their own disciplines (Ellis, 1983; Tatar, 1987; Zipes, 1988).

The most vital topic of conversation between the comparative and oral literature TCs is surely translation. Human beings are continually engaged in interpreting a range of codes--not merely the languages around them, as in the Indian Ocean islands, but also gesture, music, painting, jargon, small talk, literature, scripture, and oratory. To interpret codes, we translate. The student of comparative literature, like the student of oral literature, depends on translations. Without it, he or she would have to master many codes and languages--and there will always be some who declare that mastery indispensable. With it, humanistic scholars and professors have the

capacity to communicate meaningful knowledge across the vast distances between their established disciplinary specializations, and to meet the growing need for dialogue and interdisciplinary understanding.

The history of folklore study, indeed of all the human sciences, is inseparable from translation. The German romantics who inaugurated folklore study were passionate about Erweiterung, the acquisition of culture, and Treue, fidelity. The same impulses animated their interest in both literary translation and oral literature. True to these impulses, the Grimms proclaimed their fidelity to the words of their informants. Both translation and folklore were necessary agents of Bildung (culture, formation), which in turn is “the experience of the alterity of the world . . .” (Berman, 1992, p. 45). Thomas Percy’s unearthing of ancient folk ballads, James Macpherson’s pseudotranslations from Gaelic, and Chateaubriand’s American Indians were all translations of some kind. American cultural anthropology came into existence through translations of Native American texts. Then a later generation, inspired by comparative literature, accused its predecessors of obscuring the artistic qualities of American Indian poetry (Tedlock, 1983). The criticism is central to the discovery of what has been lost and gained “in translations between the distinct value systems of different cultures, media, disciplines, and institutions” (Bernheimer, 1995 : 44). The conversation I advocate is such a translation between sets of terms and assumptions. Without it, TCs are caught in the “closed book” of the Réunionnais proverb, Koz kom in liv fermé, in langaz li konpran pa in gazon, He talks like a closed book, in a language you can’t understand a bit (Baggioni, 1990: 174).

#### Notes

1. Citations to this book appear as ‘1992’ for the first, French edition and ‘2001’ for the English translation. I am grateful to Robert Chaudenson for many kindnesses. He is not responsible for the length of my list of bibliographic references, necessitated by moving amongst several prolific scholarly communities.
2. Though this author has little respect for generative linguistics, proverbs in the Southwest Indian Ocean repay generative study. Oral literature can profitably poach on linguistics (Haring : 1984-85).
3. Unfortunately the author did not see my Malagasy Tale Index (1984) before publishing his book. He kindly credits to me a catalogue of folktale tricks neither he nor I have seen, compiled in the 1980s by Claude Bremond, the late Denise Paulme, and Catherine Vallantin (Bremond : 1984).
4. Type 300 in Aarne and Thompson 1961.
5. The Tarbaby and the Rabbit is Type 175 in Aarne and Thompson 1961.

6. I discuss such tales in "African Folktales and Creolization in the Indian Ocean Islands," forthcoming in *Research in African Literatures*.
7. A history of oral literature studies will reveal the partiality, distortions, and selectivity of folktale collectors. In the Indian Ocean they give us creole and white tales but almost no Indian or Chinese ones (Baissac, 1888; Barat, 1977; Carayol, 1980). Fieldwork in these islands has been so fragmentary and so unfairly divided among the ethnic groups as to mislead any reader. I sketch some of the history in an article forthcoming in Fabula.

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Lee Haring is Professor Emeritus of English, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. This article originally appeared in *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* 50 (2001) 185-205.

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