

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Literary Geographies in Virtual Space: The Multiple Lives of a Creole Veranda

Luca Raimondi

CISA, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

luca.raimondi@wits.ac.za

As blossoming trees and chirping birds began to paint and populate the sunlit skies of Europe in the heyday of the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic, the largely urban, flat-dwelling population of the continent found itself swiftly cooped up following the implementation of national lockdowns and shielding measures. During the first days of a confinement that promised to only be temporary, many discovered the unexpected pleasures of working from home and took an early delight in bread-making, Netflix binge-watching, and catching up on the latest book arrivals. But with lockdowns extended, whether locally or more widely, and social distancing becoming the new normal, it didn't take long for a new relationship with 'home' to develop. Forget Ithaca, a place of *nostos* – in Covid-19 times, home is no longer a fixed abode to return to after one's grand adventures or petty errands, but a safe haven where to stay, day in day out, and preferably not to leave. Under these new circumstances, two sets of spaces have risen to prominence over the past months: the physical space of balconies, verandas, and other such outdoor appendages to houses and apartments; and the virtual space of video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. From impromptu balcony concerts and front porch socialising, to live-streamed workouts and virtual hangouts, both sets of spaces have become central in the public narrative of lockdown, since in their own different ways, they have allowed people to find relief from homebound isolation and reconnect to the social world beyond the walls of their homes. It therefore seems apposite that these 'threshold spaces' (Iampolski 2020), blurring the boundaries of the house and the street, private and public, would provide symbolic form and a technological platform to a pioneering cultural initiative launched during the pandemic.

This is the case of *Le Thinnai Kreyol*, a collaborative multimedia project co-founded by Ananya Jahanara Kabir, Professor of English Literature at King's College London, and Franco-Tamilian writer Ari Gautier. *Le Thinnai Kreyol* is structured in the form of a 'virtual veranda' where the hosts and a series of invited guests periodically gather to engage in dialogue on pre-selected topics, with the interaction of a live video audience. The project was born out of the need to re-connect among distant collaborators (Kabir is based in the UK and Gautier in Norway), as well as the urgency, after a couple of cancelled events due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, to initiate a wider transnational conversation on creolised cultures in spite of the restrictions to travel and in-person meetings. But while the social media environment where the project resides is clearly symptomatic of the virtual spaces made salient by the pandemic, the prime and primary inspiration behind the symbolic architecture of this space are not the verandas of quarantined households, but the main 'spatial frame' (to use Marie-Laure Ryan's terminology (2012)) of Gautier's second novel, *Le Thinnai* (2018), from which the project also derives its name. It is precisely the transposition of a narrative location (the *thinnai* of the title) into an online environment suited for the pandemic age, and the spatial resignification that follows (from local value to global relevance), that I see as an emblematic case study of the fate of literary geographies in time of isolation.

Verandas in literature: *Le Thinnai*

A *thinnai* is a traditional architectural element of Tamil houses: a raised platform overlooking the road at the front of the house, shaded by a sloped roof on top, and with stone slabs to create an in-built casual seating space. This veranda-like outdoor room has now almost disappeared from Southern Indian city houses due to urban space shortages, new construction techniques, and a modern preoccupation with privacy (Kabilan 2020). At one time, however, it used to function as an important multipurpose place where naps would be taken, friends would be met, peddlers would be received, and travellers would be offered shelter from the heat or rain, and even fed and lodged. Even schools, in villages, would find a place under large verandas, and would then be known as *thinnai pallikoodam* (literally, veranda schools). A *thinnai* was, in other words, a 'transition space [...] between inside and outside,' between the cosiness and privateness of domesticity and the pleasures and complexities of sociability (Sadanand and Nagarajan 2020: 194).

Clearly, the *thinnai* is a pivotal narrative site and a key motif in Gautier's eponymous book. Set in the former French enclave of Pondicherry after the demise of colonial rule in 1962, the novel is a first-person account of the arrival, on the day of the Fête du Roi of an unspecified year, of an enigmatic individual named Gilbert Tata in Kurusukuppam, a poor residential area where the narrator used to live during his childhood. Reminiscing about Gilbert Tata's extended sojourn under the *thinnai* of his family home, the narrator registers life as it unfolds in the neighbourhood, tracing the movements of numerous local and roving characters within and beyond the boulevards that separate the old town of Pondicherry from the outlying peripheral hamlets. In this sense, *Le Thinnai* is an interesting text for literary geographers, who will take pleasure in charting the narrative space of the novel against

colonial and contemporary maps of the city, as well as in unpacking the evolving spatial politics, the cognitive mappings of different characters, and the layers of meanings embedded in different locations. One could, for example, look at the polarities between White and Black Towns (as the historic French and Indian quarters were respectively called); the conditions of life on one or the other side of the boulevards that flank the old town; the spatial identities of the two distinct creole communities (the Hauts and Bas Créoles); and, especially, at how the supposedly rigid boundaries that divide all of these binaries are in fact porous, as the characters' changing fortunes show. Even the *thinnai* at the heart of the novel has a counterpart: that of the narrator's former house, an imposing construction rented from a Chettiar merchant and located in an 'orderly, calm and clean' street in the old town, whose 'richly adorned [...] red cement' veranda was covered by a roof modelled on Chinese imperial palaces (Gautier 2018: 53-54; translations from French are mine). In contrast, the one in Kurusukuppam is a 'clay building with a coconut-leaf roof,' 'ideally located at the entrance of the hamlet,' and for this reason never empty of neighbours or passers-by (31). Leaving these differences aside, which would surely merit consideration in a longer study of Gautier's book, let us now look at the three functions that *thinnais* fulfil in the economy of the novel.

Firstly, the *thinnai* is the single point of observation on life in Kurusukuppam, the 'hostile, vulgar and scrappy' (194) neighbourhood where the young narrator and his well-to-do, Franco-Indian family live amidst an impoverished Tamil-speaking community of hawkers and menial workers. 'Like a water lily growing in a muddy swamp' (40), the narrator spends his time reading Asterix comics and doing his homework under the front veranda, while at the same time watching the activity in the street and listening to the sound of Carnatic music played in one of the neighbouring houses, participating to some degree in the social world surrounding him. The *thinnai* does not therefore mark a boundary, but a place from which to contemplate a horizon of experiences and possibilities, and where 'inside' and 'outside' meet and interact.

The potentiality of verandas to become agents of transculturation and "'contact zone[s]" where inhabitants and strangers may meet with ease' (Ashcroft 2001: 195) is captured by the second function that *thinnais* have in Gautier's novel: being a place of meeting and refuge. In the palatial *thinnai* of the Chettiar house in Pondicherry's old town, the narrator's father and his friends would often congregate for an aperitif after enjoying a game of pétanque at the nearby bowling pitch. The more modest *thinnai* in Kurusukuppam is similarly a frequent hangout for friends and neighbours, but above all, it has 'the particularity of being a refuge for all the destitute people who crisscrossed the nebulous roads of existence' (Gautier 2018: 31). Gilbert Tata's stay of many months is therefore the last one in a series of arrivals and departures: before him was the turbulent Jean-Pierre Nagalingam, and earlier still, a miscellany of 'vagabonds, homeless, penniless, sick, lonely, dotards, helpless, mad and saints' who had found in the *thinnai* a safe haven where 'no distinction of race, caste, class, or religion' (129) had any place.

In exchange for the food, shelter and lodging received, these curious individuals reward the narrator's father with a story, for he, like king Shahryar of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, would always spoil and provide for his guests as long as they continued narrating. This way,

‘each wandering soul left behind immutable eternal memories which reminded us of their ordeals. Our *thinnai* had inhaled their pains, absorbed their distresses, and had drunk the bitter chalice that splashed its groaning wall and had accompanied the long descent into hell of these wretched people’ (131). Hence, in Gautier’s novel, the *thinnai* is also a site of storytelling and a repository of memories, inclusive of a variety of languages, places, and experiences. Mixing French, Creole, and Tamil, and telling tales of doubtful veracity where facts and fiction intertwine and which connect Pondicherry’s littoral with many other shorelines on the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, these nomadic characters are able to temporarily turn the space of the *thinnai* into the stage of their adventures. The *thinnai*, in turn, traps the ‘dusty memories’ of their narratives in the crevices of its wall, ‘preserving the mystery of temporality’ (14), and invites for many more stories to be told under the shade of its thatched roof.

Virtual verandas: *Le Thinnai Kreyol*

‘Le thinnai is now le thinnai kreyol!’ With these words, published at the end of May 2020 on Gautier’s novel’s Facebook page, the virtual veranda of Kabir and Gautier’s project opened up to the world, proclaiming from the start the continuity with its literary precursor, and disclosing in a successive post the broader cultural and political agenda of this new collaborative work: ‘We reclaim kreyol for India, South Asia, and the world.’ As the two explain in their first video on 31 May 2020, streamed one week ahead of the official virtual vernissage, Gautier’s attempt with his novel was from the start to appropriate the disappearing architectural space of the *thinnai* and transform it into the symbol of an intellectual arena where experiences, knowledge and ideas can be freely exchanged and the vision of a new world may arise. Kabir’s wide-ranging interests in the textual, material and embodied archives of the Afro-Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, and her interdisciplinary and multilingual research methods, have brought to it an understanding of the complexities and the heuristic of ‘transoceanic creolisation’ (Kabir 2020a), as well as the ‘fractal archipelagic logic’ (Kabir 2020b: 137) by which creolised cultural forms and products are incorporated within a larger, transoceanic frame. As a result of this felicitous encounter of visions and intellectual affinities, the Pondicherrian *thinnai* of the novel spilled out of the pages of the book, augmented its scope to become *kreyol*, and found a new virtual home in light of the circumstances triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic and the intensifying shift to online environments.

In a way, the *Thinnai Kreyol* project could be seen as a case of ‘transmedia extension’ (Jenkins 2007) that allows for certain aspects of the fictional world to be fleshed out, and for the events narrated under the *thinnai* by Gilbert Tata and the other unreliable visitors that came before him, to be contextualised and to accrue a greater sense of authenticity. For example, the discrete spatial practices of the Hauts and Bas creole communities of Pondicherry, mentioned in the novel in the episode of Lourdes, the family’s domestic help, are discussed in more detail in a post on 31 May 2020, which also portrays a picture of the first club for bas-créoles, the Société Mutuelle des Créoles founded in 1883. Similarly, the fictional voyage of Gilbert Tata’s ancestors to Guadeloupe as indentured labourers is indirectly given historical depth through a series of posts, such as the one presenting the lyrics

of a *sillarai paattu*, a song composed by Tamil coolies about the predicaments of their transportation to a new land (13 June 2020), or the longer piece on the settlement of the Seychelles archipelago and the freebooters who ruled its waves and shores beforehand, which broadens the context of the history of indenture to its Western Indian Ocean dimension (1 September 2020). It would be wrong, however, to think of *Le Thinnai Kreyol* as a mere platform for a top-down, coordinated dispersal of narrative information over multiple media, or as an online critical apparatus of Gautier's novel compiled by Kabir. As a matter of fact, we should rather consider it a form of 'transmedia worldmaking', given the commitment of its creators not only to unearthing forgotten histories of transoceanic encounters, but also to signalling the political possibility of reactivating these entangled pasts and generating a new lexicon for understanding and celebrating now-marginalised cultural forms and practices as a product of 'transoceanic creolisation'.

To conjure up this vision for a possible future, Kabir and Gautier re-inhabit the *thinnai* of the novel and multiply its functional flexibility by taking advantage of the pandemic-induced shift towards virtual space. The fictional *thinnai*, I have argued, was a place from which to observe the surrounding scenes, an outdoor room in which to meet friends and shelter vagrants, a site for storytelling, and a memory shrine. The *Thinnai Kreyol* is all that and more: it is not only a platform for looking out, but an intellectual frame for looking through; not just a threshold space for receiving visitors, but a public forum that catalyses connections; it is a stage that is not simply open to storytellers, but also to singers, musicians, dancers, and visual artists; it not only gathers broken pieces of creole pasts, but strives to bring their creative energy back into action. Facebook, the social media environment where the project is based, supports the multimodal and participatory architecture of the project, since users can easily integrate different semiotic channels in one single post (languages, images, sounds, videos, etc.), create live streams, and keep up with followers and visitors via likes, public comments, and private messages. Furthermore, the resignification of the fictional *thinnai* as a virtual *thinnai kreyol* enables the unmooring of the somehow centripetal narrative world, a continuous oceanic space that converges on the tiny enclave of Pondicherry, towards a centrifugal, decentred geography of relations: 'an archipelago of fragments,' as the project's manifesto states.

The virtual veranda of *Le Thinnai Kreyol* contains many types of spaces at once. The shorter and relaxed live streams where Kabir and Gautier introduce the themes for the longer broadcasts, pitch new ideas, and chat with the audience by responding to their live comments and questions, transform the *thinnai* into *thinnai addas* – a lexical compound created ad hoc by the two collaborators by combining the Tamil word for veranda with the Bengali term *adda*, which denotes a quintessentially Bengali social practice of 'convivial ratiocination' (Kabir 2018: 900) as well as the site where these 'long, informal, and unrigorous conversations' take place (Chakrabarty 1999: 110). Then there are *thinnai katcheris*, a programme of feature-length, carefully designed live events where the two home guests weave a web of intricately connected memories, stories and anecdotes around a central theme, in dialogue with various invited interlocutors who are up on the screen with them. Here too, the space of the *thinnai* gets multiplied by the semantic thickness of the compounded word. As Kabir and Gautier explain

in their first broadcasted *thinnai katcheri* (26 June 2020), the word *katcheri* is used in Tamil to designate concerts or musical nights, but etymologically it derives from Persian and it is used in Hindi, Bengali, and other Indian languages to mean assembly or court of law. The polysemy of the term ensures that the *thinnai* can now accommodate a range of artists and intellectuals who, through their work and performances, delve into the material, textual, and affective vestiges of creolised pasts across the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and preserve their memories. The virtual *thinnai* has also become a *thinnai keucini*, a kitchen-like space where food is celebrated as heritage, and in the second series of live broadcasts, running from September to December 2020, it has reappeared in several new incarnations: *thinnai pasifika*, *thinnai atelier*, and more.

In a time of global pandemic and periodic lockdowns, people have taken to verandas to mitigate their sense of solitude and confinement. Metaphorically, this architectural element represents an interstitial region of discovery and transformation, the site where ‘the horizontality of home and the transculturality of place are most clearly realised’ (Ashcroft 2001: 196). Taking a fictional veranda and transforming it into a virtual *thinnai*, Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Ari Gautier have been able to bridge the place-bound narrative with the archipelagic empirical, to create a community in the face of isolation, and to embrace the possibility of a new creolised world.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, B. (2001) *Post-Colonial Transformation*. London: Routledge.
- Chakrabarty, D. (1999) ‘Adda, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity.’ *Public Culture*, 11(1), pp. 109-145.
- Gautier, A. (2018) *Le Thinnai*. Paris: Le Lys Bleu.
- Iampolski, R. (2020) ‘Life on the edges: How ‘threshold spaces’ keep us connected despite COVID-19.’ *Foreground*. [Online] [Accessed 25 August 2020] <https://www.foreground.com.au/planning-policy/threshold-spaces-keep-us-connected-despite-covid-19/>.
- Jenkins, H. (2007) ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101.’ *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. [Online] [Accessed 15 September 2020] http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html#sthash.Wh32fFRk.dpuf.
- Kabilan, K. (2020) ‘Chennai's historians give thinnai a chance of revival.’ *The New Indian Express*. [Online] [Accessed 23 September 2020] <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2020/sep/13/chennais-historians-give-thinnai-a-chance-of-revival-2196385.html>.
- Kabir, A. J. (2018) ‘Utopias Eroded and Recalled: Intellectual Legacies of East Pakistan.’ *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 41(4), pp. 892-910.
- Kabir, A. J. (2020a) ‘Elmina and Postcolonial Spatiality: Transoceanic Creolization and the Fabric of Memory.’ *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*.

- Kabir, A. J. (2020b) 'Creolization as Balancing Act in the Transoceanic Quadrille: Choreogenesis, Incorporation, Memory, Market.' *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents*, 17(1), pp. 135-157.
- Le Thinnai Kreyol (2020) *Le Thinnai Kreyol*. [Facebook] [Accessed 05 October 2020] <https://www.facebook.com/lethinnaiKreyol/>.
- Ryan, ML. (2012) 'Space.' In Hühn, P. et al. (eds) *The living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg University. [Online] [Accessed 12 June 2012] <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/space>.
- Sadanand, A. and Nagarajan, R.V. (2020) 'Transition Spaces in an Indian Context.' *Athens Journal of Architecture*, 6(3), pp. 193-224.