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## **Amaranth, the Caribbean and the Gen(i)us of Diversity**

Judith Misrahi-Barak

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# Identité et diversité : créations, discours, représentations

Coordonné par  
Anne-Marie MOTARD



Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée





Identité et diversité :  
créations, discours,  
représentations

Collection « Horizons anglophones »

Série *Politiques et Sociétés*

La série *Politiques et Sociétés*, dirigée par Anne-Marie Motard, se propose d'observer les évolutions récentes des sociétés contemporaines en suivant une démarche pluridisciplinaire. La série vise à étudier les phénomènes sociétaux dans les pays anglophones en les insérant dans une perspective comparative internationale élargie.

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# Amaranth, the Caribbean and the Gen(i)us of Diversity<sup>1</sup>

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Rather than broaching directly the issue of diversity as a concept or as a practice I aim to introduce the topic obliquely, using a few detours and metaphors and hoping to reach my goal eventually, even if in a delayed fashion and in a playful mode. I would like to refer to a particular plant, amaranth, which lends me its name for the title of this chapter. My interest in amaranth was born during a teaching and research stay at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. The Caribbean writer of Guyanese origin Jan Carew has been living in Louisville for ten years now. Some of his papers have already been deposited at the University Library, in the Rare Books Department, and I chanced upon a project that was initiated in 1979 by the Caribbean Society for Culture and Science in the St Paul's and Mardi Gras area and later in the Westerhall and Bacolet regions of Grenada in the Caribbean. Jan Carew was instrumental in launching the project and defining its scope and ethos. It was entitled 'The Reconstruction of Tropical Civilizations: the Bacolet Experiment', and was organised around the reintroduction of indigenous crops that belonged to the pre-Columbian era. Amaranth was the main crop, and the star, of the project. In the Aztec and Inca pre-Columbian worlds, it used to be as important as corn and beans, and was the staple food of most of the populations of Central and South America, and of the Caribbean basin.<sup>2</sup>

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1. I would like to thank Matthew Kopka for his insights into agricultural and food matters in Grenada and generally speaking in the Caribbean, as well as Rita Christian, for the fruitful electronic and phone conversations we had about amaranth and callaloo.

2. I found other reports published in the same period or a few years later, one for instance whose title is significant, *Modern Prospects for an Ancient Crop*, Report of an Ad Hoc Panel of

Amaranth is a broad-leafed plant which can be consumed as a vegetable for its leaves, but also produces cereal-like grain, just like quinoa or buck-wheat.<sup>1</sup> There are some sixty or seventy different species, all belonging to the same genus *amaranthus*. These species are extremely vigorous, resistant to drought and all kinds of pests, they adapt quickly to difficult soils and yield rapidly abundant crops. The seeds can be harvested after six weeks, and a continuing supply is ensured by the fact that there is fresh growth very soon after the harvest of the stalks. This explains why it was a plant that was promoted in the 1950s and 1960s as ‘an ideal quick food crop to plant after the devastation of hurricanes’ (Higman: 356). Resilient indeed. Another feature that makes amaranth attractive is its high-protein content: with its 16%, it towers above rye (13%), oats (12%), barley (10%), wheat (10%), corn (10%) and rice (7%).

Amaranth is entirely connected to the places it was indigenous to in the Americas, and as such it is closely associated to the Amerindian usages of it, but it has also traveled far and wide: its post-Columbian migration to Asia is quite remarkable, and it gained rapid popularity in the Himalayas and in the hills of Northwest India, in Pakistan, China, Nepal, Tibet. Finally, one can underline that amaranth is also known for being used as an ornament as well as as a powerful dye. The flowers were used as colour pigments (purplish red). As is revealed by its Greek etymology (*a-marainein*), meaning the ‘everlasting one’, it is said to be a plant that ‘does not wither’, with a colour that never fades, and in literature and imagination, it is also the plant that never withers, never dies.

Amaranth is entirely place-bound, and yet it entirely crosses bounds.<sup>2</sup> The different varieties of amaranth can be found all over south America, western and southern USA, Africa and the Far East. In spite of its many qualities, its importance has long been overshadowed by larger grains (wheat, corn and rice). It is only in the past three decades that amaranth has received the scientists’

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the Advisory Committee on Technology Innovation Board on Science and Technology for International Development; Office of International Affairs, National Research Council (Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press, 1984).

1. In the webliography at the end of the chapter one will find a selection of websites that can be of interest.

2. See Report (*op. cit.* 1984): 5–7. Web.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=0D4rAAAYAAJ&pg=PA8&lpg=PA8&dq=Amaranth+%2B+caribbean&source=bl&ots=XBT\\_KV87Qg&sig=Z6gMWVm0gYMikp42shWr3CWqPHE&hl=en&ei=PHd9TMzSMcKI4QaxltiIBg&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBEQ6AEwADge#v=onepage&q=Amaranth+%20%2B%20caribbean&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=0D4rAAAYAAJ&pg=PA8&lpg=PA8&dq=Amaranth+%2B+caribbean&source=bl&ots=XBT_KV87Qg&sig=Z6gMWVm0gYMikp42shWr3CWqPHE&hl=en&ei=PHd9TMzSMcKI4QaxltiIBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBEQ6AEwADge#v=onepage&q=Amaranth+%20%2B%20caribbean&f=false) Accessed September 5, 2010.

attention and has moved away from its reputation as a primitive crop, or even as a weed, more despised than praised if one listens to the popular idiom that says ‘not worth an amaranth’. It is now to be found in trendy organic food shops and lends its name to posh restaurants across the world.

Many scientific and agricultural reports were published throughout the 1980s and 1990s on the development of amaranth, noting how underexploited it was and underscoring its strong potential to improve nutrition. I came to see amaranth as a crop which would offer farmers a promising alternative to the global crops, introducing diversity into homogeneity.

It so happens that after spending June 2010 in Louisville, KY, I went to China for a couple of weeks that same summer and ate what is referred to there as Chinese spinach. Doing some additional research on amaranth, I realized a few weeks later that in fact the vegetable I had been eating in China was nothing but amaranth—if I had gone to Africa, I would have eaten the same vegetable under the name of African spinach. I also came to realize that Chinese spinach and amaranth were in fact the same plant that I had already tasted in Caribbean cuisine under the name of callaloo, or callaloo leaves, and which is one of the most prominent and symbolical elements in Caribbean cuisine and culture . . . The species within the same genus are so numerous and varied that it is not always easy to wrap one’s mind around the differences and similarities between callaloo, Chinese spinach and amaranth. Let us not forget however that it is not the taxonomy itself that I am interested in here, but the metaphorical implications of such diversity.

The Bacolet project in Grenada was based on the ‘unassailable assumption that agriculture is a culture, a way of life and being, a symbiotic relationship between people on the one hand, and the earth and the seasons on the other’. It was hoped the grain would provide a high-protein diet, and one that is rich in essential amino-acids, to millions of poor and rural people of the Americas and that the ancillary usages to which amaranth can be put would contribute to strengthening impoverished local economies, challenging global crops produced by corporate agro-industrial groups. But while trying to resist genetically-modified crops that force the rural workers to buy new seeds every year, it has become connected to the global planet: as researchers and agronomists from Pennsylvania to California to Uttar Pradesh have been working on improving the quality of the grain and the yield since the early 1980s, one of the paradoxes is that it has become global in the very process of endeavouring to lend more strength to the local . . .

Since the diversions we have been following to amaranth have taken us to China and the Caribbean, if not quite to Africa, let us follow the callaloo route as well and see how it is connected to our purpose here. According to the islands or the people, the same thing can be called different names in the Caribbean, and of course the same thing *will* be called different names across the world . . . Callaloo, written with many different spellings, generally refers to a popular Caribbean dish whose main ingredient is traditionally a leaf vegetable, called either callaloo, or amaranth (*Amaranthus viridis*), or even dasheen leaf, which is sometimes defined as identical to callaloo, and sometimes only as similar or related. So, callaloo is metonymy incarnate, referring to either an element of the dish or the dish itself. The identification of callaloo as belonging to the genus of amaranth took some two hundred years, gradually taking hold from the 1960s onwards and was confirmed in Adams' *Flowering Plants of Jamaica* (1972).

Many people will agree that callaloo is a kind of soup eaten across the Caribbean, and made of many different ingredients such as crabmeat, or pork, and greens, like okra, or the leaves mentioned above, callaloo/amaranth. This would be the case in Guyana and in the rest of the Eastern Caribbean. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, calalou reminds people of crab *calalou* that is eaten on Easter Sunday on the beaches. It is eaten as a *fricassée* and is more a sauce than a soup . . . In Haiti, some people associate callaloo with crab but most people will tell you it is in fact okra, or gumbo, as in the south of the USA. Jamaicans seem to prefer to eat callaloo leaf with salted cod, and sometimes call the callaloo *pepperpot*, a soup thickened with okra. Barry Higman, in an article entitled 'Jamaican Versions of Callaloo' in the 30th anniversary volume of *Callaloo* I have been drawing from, confirms that callaloo is first and foremost the green leafy plant (354). But he also reminds his readers that only in Trinidad does callaloo refer to the process of creolization that has become synonymous with the cross-cultural society the Caribbean has become.

Richard Allsopp in the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (1996) gives as the first meaning for callaloo: 'Any of a number of plants with edible, succulent leaves which are cooked as green vegetables, esp those of the *amaranthus spp*, but also Dasheen and other leaves.' The second meaning refers to a thick soup made of callaloo or dasheen leaves, okra, roots, dumplings, crabs, salt meat, green peppers, and seasonings, and often served as a main meal on Sundays. The third meaning refers to a 'general mixture', a 'cultural callaloo' or a 'callaloo society'. It is this last meaning which is used in the title of the journal *Callaloo*.

Still, there is a missing link that I have been much intrigued by. Many people know about callaloo, and many people know about amaranth. But not many people know that amaranth and callaloo are one and the same vegetable. What is behind the fact that callaloo is mentioned in all the recipes and literary essays you can possibly dream of browsing through, while amaranth is only mentioned in scientific papers, agricultural experiments and reports? Is it only because, well, they just use a different name for the same thing . . . ? But why is the connection hardly ever made linguistically and culturally, while it is admitted scientifically? What kind of split is this? Is it possible that the (agri)cultural, historical and linguistic complexities at stake in amaranth and callaloo should provide a number of insights about the kind of world we are living in, and even about the kind of ideology that is being woven around the very notion of ‘diversity’?

It is interesting it should be a Trinidadian, Angela Ramlachan, interviewed about callaloo as a dish, who should make the connection with the Amerindians, *i.e.* Caribs, or Kalinagos, as they prefer to be called:

As far as I know, it originally came from Africa with the slave populations who then adapted it with local ingredients from the indigenous Amerindian populations in Trinidad at the time. It eventually spread to the Spanish and French Creole, . . . then eventually to the rest of the population. Now it is purely thought as a Trinidadian dish that has changed from its original form to reflect the mixed society it represents. (Ramlachan: 349)

The question of origins is as fraught and complex as the question of terminology. The fact that hardly anyone knows about amaranth and callaloo being the same plant, is probably linked to the fact that amaranth is not used as a grain in the Caribbean but only as a leaf vegetable. Still. Amaranth is historically and culturally connected to the South American continent, to Amerindian history and, in the Caribbean basin, to Kalinagos who were the first ones to use the plant. But then, if amaranth has disappeared from the Caribbean lexicon and recipe books in favour of callaloo, could it be precisely *because* of its Amerindian connection? Foregrounding callaloo instead of amaranth seems to insist on the *African* connection instead of the *Amerindian* connection which would then be swept under the carpet. Was this, at a certain period, instrumental to the definition of a Caribbean that would choose to define itself as primarily African-Caribbean?

Several scholars, poets and writers have already highlighted how vital it is to foreground the Amerindian history, culture and presence in the Caribbean today.

Since the 1980s Peter Hulme has endeavoured to draw attention to Amerindian people in the Caribbean. Stuart Hall quotes Hulme when he, too, wants to bring the emphasis on the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean:

Peter Hulme, in his essay on 'Islands of Enchantment' reminds us that the word 'Jamaica' is the Hispanic form of the indigenous Arawak name—'land of wood and water'—which Columbus's renaming ('Santiago') never replaced. The Arawak presence remains a ghostly one, visible in the islands mainly in museums and archeological sites, part of the barely knowable or usable 'past'. Hulme . . . [recounts] the story of how Prime Minister Edward Seaga tried to alter the Jamaican coat-of-arms, which consists of two Arawak figures holding a shield with five pineapples, surmounted by an alligator. 'Can the crushed and extinct Arawaks represent the dauntless character of Jamaicans. Does the low-slung, near extinct crocodile, a cold-blooded reptile, symbolise the warm, soaring spirit of Jamaicans?' Prime Minister Seaga asked rhetorically. There can be few political statements which so eloquently testify to the complexities entailed in the process of trying to represent a diverse people with a diverse history through a single, hegemonic 'identity'. Fortunately, Mr Seaga's invitation to the Jamaican people, who are overwhelmingly of African descent, to start their 'remembering' by first 'forgetting' something else, got the comeuppance it so richly deserved. (Hall: 401)

David Dabydeen also formulated the same idea more than ten years ago when he spoke of the indigenous Amerindians as 'the most invisible of the West Indian peoples', and complained of the 'wilful neglect of Amerindian cultures' (Dabydeen: 145), but the idea somehow takes time to register. The focus has been narrowed down thanks to the work of more historians and anthropologists like Maximilian Forte, or Samuel Wilson, among others. The tendency in the scholarship of the past decades has been to devote most of the attention to the Caribbean as it was shaped by the Middle Passage, slavery and plantation culture. I have argued elsewhere that in many ways, the Amerindians are the blind spot of the Caribbean at large, and of Caribbean literature more specifically, a blind spot that has been swept under the ocean for too long.<sup>1</sup> The trauma of the Middle Passage has gathered, justifiably, a lot of scrutiny. The other migration waves, the forced ones and the more willing although no less traumatic ones, the other crossings from India and China, have recently been highlighted, but what about the original trauma linked to the first European migration and settlement

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1. See 'Amerindian *Ante-Coloniality* in Contemporary Caribbean Writing: Crossing Borders in the Caribbean with Jan Carew, Cyril Dabydeen and Pauline Melville', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47-3 (2011): 309-319.

that led to the annihilation of the native populations? Why should one trauma erase an earlier one? Are the dispossessed doomed to replicate dispossession onto another people?

The Caribbean is hardly a diversion, rather a *detour* in the Glissantian meaning of the term, since it sat for such a long time, along with India, at the centre of British imperial and colonial expansion and routes, and it is now an unavoidable facet of British diversity at home. Many thinkers and theoreticians over the past few decades have foregrounded the Caribbean as the space where the pluralization of identities, globalization and creolization have been shaped up, and are still being shaped up. The Plantation is considered by Edouard Glissant as the matrix of the Caribbean, 'le ventre de la Caraïbe'. He interprets the Plantation as a 'Lieu Clos' (*Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*) just as much as a *locus* that opened up the Caribbean to the diversity of the world and the multiplicity of the Tout-Monde. The Caribbean is often considered as the crucible for a certain praxis of identity *as* diversity, be it through metaphors of the rhizome (Glissant, through Deleuze and Guattari), or of the polyrhythm (Antonio Benitez-Rojo), both paradigms going against the vision of the Caribbean as being simply the product of the slave trade, or colonisation. With Stuart Hall putting the stress on identity as process, and Benitez-Rojo and Glissant debunking the notion that it is possible to identify and isolate the precise roots of identity, the Caribbean not only gives us an illustration of diversity but also encourages us to explore questions related to diversity. The societies that foreground diversity as a social and political model should integrate *all* the aspects of their diversity, not only the ones that come to mind first, not only the ones that fit easily within the ready-made patterns of what can be *claimed* as a pluralized identity. I don't think it is simply because amaranth is not used as a grain in the Caribbean, or simply because the same thing can be called different names in different places, that callaloo has been favoured over amaranth in the Caribbean. I don't think it is enough to be aware of Amerindian elements in the landscape and history to acknowledge it fully in the culture. Rather, diversity needs *all* its elements to be fully diverse.

I would like to insist a little more on the necessity to integrate *all* the elements of diversity, and on the implications. The adjectives repeatedly used to describe amaranth/callaloo are 'adaptable', 'resilient' and 'versatile', but also 'changeable' and 'unstable'. It is such adaptability and versatility that have made it possible for amaranth to develop everywhere. Yet, changeability and instability introduce another dimension, which reinforces the paradigm of diversity and could help avoid what Valérie Loichot calls the 'entrapments' of

‘the assimilating and annihilating forces of globalization’ (Loichot: 125). The botanical as well as orthographic and lexicographic instability of amaranth and callaloo produces a multiplicity that prevents it from being encompassed in one single, global, homogeneous model and mould. Instead, it emphasizes diversity and its infinite and multiform possibilities.

In her article about Glissant’s choice of masala over callaloo, Loichot very astutely analyzes the complexities of a type of globalization that would not *have to* be globalizing, insisting on Glissant’s creation of a totality that would not *have to* be totalizing. Her emphasis on how Glissant exemplifies his concept of Tout-Monde through masala bears some resemblance to the emphasis I am trying to put here on amaranth, particularly when she says that ‘Glissant’s Tout-Monde . . . is a non-totalitarian totality, in which the particular place is in constant interaction and transaction with the world’ (124). Loichot argues that, in order to extract Martinique from the totalizing model of the French colony, or what she calls ‘the atavistic relationship to the French *métropole* and from desires of territorialization and provincialism’ (132), he constructs a relational world model by using the paradigm of masala, opening up the Caribbean to the Indian, Asian and, ultimately, cosmopolitan space. Glissant’s “‘Tout-Monde” offers a constant interaction, an oscillating model of self-creation, between the particular place and the global world on the one hand, and among the fragments of “‘Tout-Monde” on the other’ (130).

The paradigm of amaranth is precisely one that could incite us towards a symbolical construction that would articulate diversity on the local and the global levels, putting the emphasis on the local without idealizing it, highlighting the relationships it entertains with what Meyrowitz, in ‘The Rise of Glocality’, calls the ‘generalized elsewhere’ without disowning itself. Amaranth and callaloo are constantly shifting categories, steeped as they are in heterogeneity, multiplicity, diversity and difference, constantly to be redefined and reassessed from different angles and points of view, highlighting a type of diversity that shimmers differently according to the local place from which it is looked at.

The Caribbean can be a crucible for this very particular type of diversity. But in order to put that recipe into practice, one has to mix *all* the ingredients of the callaloo, not only the ones that emphasise one side of the history of the Caribbean over another one, the African one over the Amerindian one for instance, as the case has been for many generations. Survival and resilience should come first, before erasure and extinction, and in the Caribbean context, the Amerindian element should be reintegrated as one of the essential com-

ponents of the Caribbean. Kwame Dawes' plea almost ten years ago for the Caribbean to be, effectively, a 'tapestry of peoples' still resonates as urgent:

The unfortunate thing . . . is that it's up to the different ethnic groups to write their own history and culture. To me, that's outrageous, because that reveals a kind of a self-apartheid. . . . I speak objectively in view of the massive ignorance that we entertain about our Amerindian, and our Indian, and our Chinese and Portuguese heritages. Obviously, we have to correct that, otherwise how can we boast about being a tapestry of peoples and cultures? That can just be rhetoric, and basically, what it would mean is that we are still offspring of Britain. We don't talk about Indianness or Amerindianness because we don't make the effort to understand those languages and concepts. (Dawes: 199-200)

Amaranth could help in the process as a symbol of the kind of diversity at work in the Caribbean, as well as the paradigm of how a culture doomed to extinction can be saved by its own resilience. I have been using amaranth as a *détour* to foreground the Amerindian culture and history, and speak of the Caribbean as a whole. My intention is of course to go beyond amaranth and bring forth a plea for a diversity that would not be constructed around the exclusion of one of its elements. In the Caribbean context, one hopes that, through a cross-cultural pollination of the mind and sensitivity, a trans-national cohesion will be strengthened through the awareness of the Caribbean's vivid and multiple legacies, but it is true of other countries too. The paradigm of that almost-extinguished-but-always-resilient-and-ever-developing plant has been the axis of the musing reflection I have been pursuing here. My reverie about amaranth has finally not been about resurrection as I initially thought it would be but about the constant reinvention, the endless fluidity, the ultimate inter-connectedness of the same and the different, in a world which is threatening to close off such liberating openings.

The Caribbean is bound by its discrepancies, differences and multiplicities as much as it is by its similarities. Amaranth and callaloo are 'healthily slippery' concepts (Khan: 66), full of gaps and discrepancies, or *décalages*, to borrow the word Brent Edwards uses about diaspora. The Arawak figures in the Jamaican coat-of-arms can also lend us a shield against the evils of an identity whose origin would only be perceived as post-Columbian. Local and global, unique and multiple, unstable and diverse, such could be the template that the Caribbean could offer the world, a 'non-totalitarian totality' which integrates gaps and discrepancies, and in which differences and multiplicities are not only destabilizing but also constitutive and defining.

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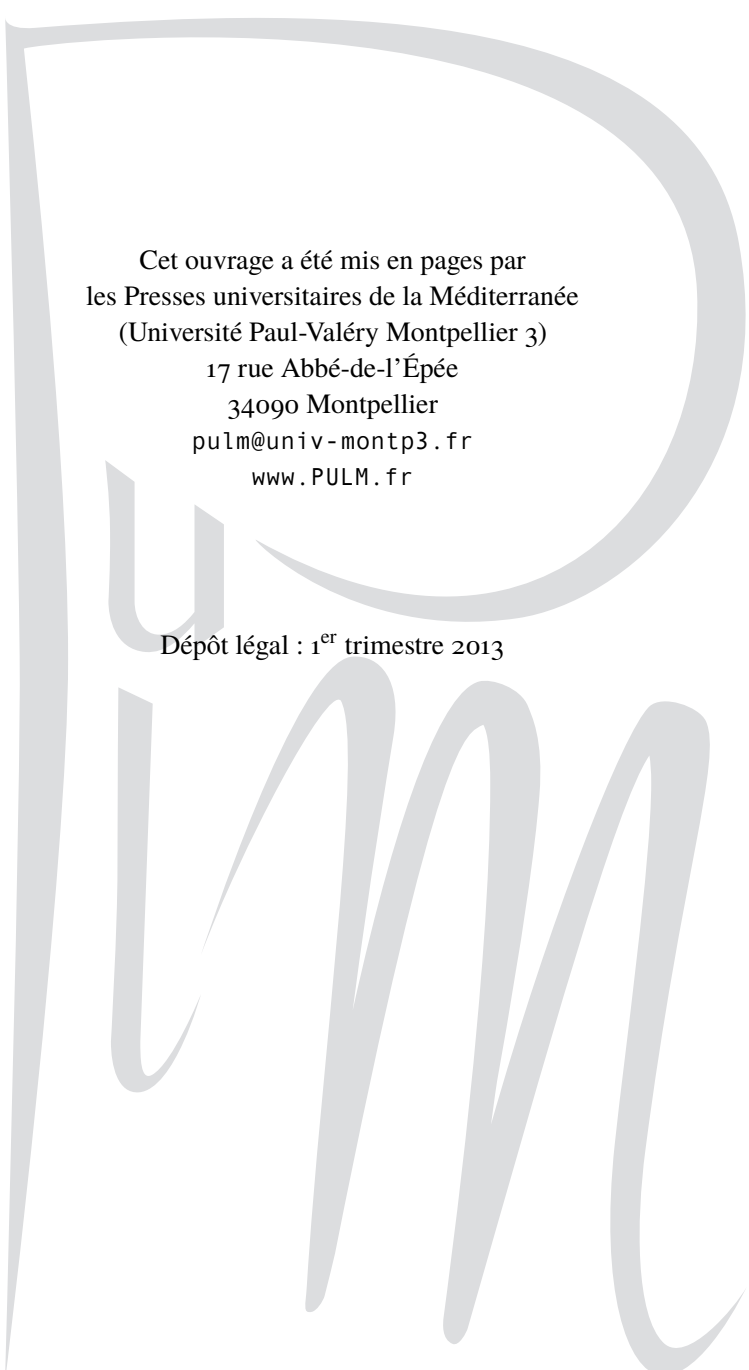
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