C'est l'endroit qui nous a faits ainsi: place, gender and belonging in Nathacha Appanah's 'Blue Bay Palace' and Ananda Devi's 'Eve de ses décombres'

***C'est l'endroit qui nous a faits ainsi*: Place, Gender and Belonging in Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* and Ananda Devi's *Ève de ses décombres*.**

In Ananda Devi's 2006 novel, *Ève de ses décombres*,[1] the eponymous protagonist provocatively asks, 'C'est l'endroit qui nous a faits ainsi, ou le contraire?' (p. 108) ['Did the place make us this way, or is it the other way around? (p. 108)]: an ultimately unanswered question on which the novel hinges. This narrative preoccupation with the mutually formative relationship between people and place - how people influence place, and how place influences people - resonates with the concerns of geographers and theorists of the urban environment. As Doreen Massey famously asserts, 'social relations always have a spatial form and a spatial content':[2] that is, not only are man-made spaces constructed to reflect the social norms of their inhabitants, but social relations between inhabitants are also conditioned by the spaces they occupy. This interrelation can be positive, creating an individual and collective feeling of 'being at home' in a place. Or, as feminist geographers May Friedman and Silvia Schutermandl poignantly recognise, and as the novels discussed in the current chapter reflect, 'locations can also confine, interfere with and contradict individual projects of selfhood',[3] particularly when those individuals are women.

This article aims to explore the complex interrelations between place, gender and belonging, as elaborated in two recent novels by female Mauritian novelists: Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* (2004) and Ananda Devi's *Ève de ses décombres* (2006).[4] In so doing, it is important to bear in mind the fictionalised nature of Appanah's and Devi's respective depictions of contemporary Mauritian geography. Both *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres* are explicitly set in a recognisable Mauritian context, and deploy the place-names of real towns, villages and geological features. Nonetheless, the novels' uses of these places,

and of the spatial relations between them, are far from directly representational or accurate. The description of central Port Louis in *Ève de ses décombres,* for instance, is instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with the Mauritian capital. There are also impoverished districts on the outskirts of the capital whose inhabitants, like those of Devi's Troumaron, have not benefitted from the economic development of the centre. Yet, as the fictitious name of Devi's setting implicitly signals, in reality these *quartiers* tend to be sprawling agglomerations of poor-quality, single-storey structures, rather than decrepit tower-blocks like those inhabited by Devi's characters. As in Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, there is a real-life seaside village at the southern-most tip of Mauritius called Blue Bay, with beautiful villas lining the sea-facing side of its main access road. While houses on the other side of the road are certainly less grand than their ocean-facing counterparts, the social and spatial contrast between different parts of the village is, in reality, nowhere near as stark as in Appanah's binary topography. There is no luxury, five-star hotel complex in the village, like the fictional Blue Bay Palace in which Maya and Dave work. Although rural Mauritius is dotted with ethnically-delineated Hindu villages like the one where Maya's parents had previously lived, the symbolically eloquent name of Fond du Sac is also of the author's creation.

By highlighting the many creative liberties that Appanah and Devi take in their respective constructions of an imaginary Mauritian geography, I do not mean to suggest that the kinds of social, spatial and economic contrasts that their novels expose do not exist in real-life, modern-day Mauritius. On the contrary: by exploiting the socio-cultural symbolism of the French metropolitan *banlieue* in her depiction of Port Louis's Troumaron, for instance, Devi is able to expose very real Mauritian issues of poverty, gender inequality and violence, in a literary and spatial form that has instant associative resonance for her novel's francophone readership. Luxurious hotels with private beaches barred to locals do, regrettably, abound in

Mauritius, as do squalid *bidonvilles*, and much of Mauritius, both rural and urban, continues to be organised along ethnic, communal lines, like those that regulate Fond du Sac. By concentrating such jarring, physical manifestations of inequality and exclusion into the same location, and by exaggerating the geographic and associated social distance between the real-life locations of Blue Bay and nearby Mahébourg, Appanah is similarly able to foreground the very real socio-economic disparities that exist, albeit in more diffuse form, across Mauritius's small, densely-populated island.

Blue Bay Palace and *Ève de ses décombres* both critique the ways in which Mauritian society and space continue to be structured along ethnic, religious and, often, gender lines that previously underpinned the island's hierarchical plantation economy. Both novels are set in multi-ethnic, peripheral, urban locations – a *bidonville* and a *cité*, respectively – which, at first glance, appear to offer the kinds of non-ethnic and inclusive community-making so often celebrated by postcolonial writers and critics. Yet, as the novels progress towards their violent climaxes, these peripheral locations become sites of estrangement, alienation and even danger for the female protagonists, inhibiting their individual projects of selfhood. In the first section, this chapter will examine the different spatial configurations of the novels' urban geographies, both communalist and multi-ethnic, and the social relations that these configurations reflect. Secondly, it will explore the ways in which the female characters seek to express their own senses of affirmative belonging to Mauritius outside such man-made, urban configurations, by means of a utopian identification with the natural, non-human and pre-human, landscape of the broader island. Throughout, my comparative analyses will respond to the central question posed by feminist geographer Tovi Fenster: 'How is space culturally constructed as an entity in which women and men feel a sense of belonging or dis-belonging?'[5] It is, I contend, by positing an emotionally compelling but utopian connection

between female characters and their natural, elemental island-space, that literature is able to imagine forms of belonging that are not generally theorised in the realist, applied approaches of sociologists, anthropologists or geographers.

Blue Bay Palace tells the story of a doomed, adolescent love affair between a poor, low-caste girl, Maya, and her rich, high-caste boyfriend, Dave, and of Maya's violent, murderous revenge when Dave marries someone else. On a broader symbolic level, as Maya remarks, hers is also 'une histoire de ce pays' (p. 10) [a story of this country][6], with the different, fictionalised spaces of the island reflecting the social hierarchies and divisions that influence her personal story. Devi's *Ève de ses décombres* recounts the experiences of a group of young, multi-ethnic inhabitants of a decrepit sink estate on the outskirts of the Mauritian capital. Narrated in turn by the four central protagonists (two female and two male), Ève, Savita, Sad and Clélio, the novel plots Ève's descent into prostitution and, following the murder of her close friend Savita, her violent revenge on her abuser-turned-murderer. As in *Blue Bay Palace*, the formative and culturally constructed links between place and inhabitants constitute a central theme of Devi's novel. Although all the inhabitants of Troumaron and Blue Bay, male and female, young and old, are depicted as living in a mutually formative relation with their immediate environment, there are, as we shall explore, marked gender differences – of inclusion or exclusion − between the characters' respective responses to this place.

A *bidonville* and a *cité*, Blue Bay and Troumaron are quintessentially peripheral spaces, geographically and socially excluded from the affluent urban centres of nearby Mahébourg and Port Louis, respectively. In contrast to the typical, ethnically delineated village of Fond

du Sac where Maya's parents had previously lived,[7] Blue Bay and Troumaron are populated by a multi-ethnic mix of internally and externally displaced people, with only their poverty, uprootedness and disaffection in common. So, do these marginal, multi-ethnic sites thus represent – as in the post-colonial paradigms of the metropolitan *banlieue* novel[8] or Caribbean literary depictions of *quartiers* like Texaco or Morne Pichevin[9] – 'contact zones' of productive, social and cultural, *créolisation* or *métissage*? Do their 'interstitial spaces' offer, as Ritu Tyagi argues, alternative sites of emotional attachment and positive, non-ethnic self-affirmation for the novels' female characters?[10] Or, if they do not, which places – if any – within Mauritius's fictional landscape are portrayed as actual or potential sites for the articulation of specifically female senses of belonging?

Blue Bay Palace opens with a quasi-cinematic bird's eye view of Mauritius's landscape, geographic position and geological origins (to which we shall return later), before zooming in ever closer to the small, isolated village of Blue Bay and to the individual narrating subject, in particular:

> Mais ne vous y perdez pas, pas vous. Prenez la route du Sud. Sud-sud-est, pour être tout à fait exacte. C'est au village de Blue Bay que notre histoire commence. Mon histoire. […C]'est de moi et de moi seule qu'il s'agit, ici. (pp. 10–11)
>
> [But make sure you don't get lost. Take the road to the South. South-south-east, to be absolutely precise. It's in the village of Blue Bay that our story begins. My story. It's about me and me alone, here.]

Here, as elsewhere, the profound, formative interrelation between a very specific (*tout à fait exacte*) location and the character's personal story is foregrounded. In the description of Blue Bay that follows, the spatial configuration of the village is portrayed as reflecting the social relations between its inhabitants:

> Blue Bay, c'est la toute dernière localité de la pointe, celle après quoi il n'y a que mers et océans. Une maigre route asphaltée mais piégée de nids-de-poule traverse Blue Bay de part en part et la divise aussi. À gauche, des haies régulières de bambous verts cachent de belles résidences aux couleurs chaudes. À droite, là où la route penche légèrement, comme si elle s'affaissait, des rangées de roquette, ces cactus à la sève mortelle, plantées en pointillé, laissent voir des cabanes en tôle rouillée ou de friables constructions en brique. À gauche, les riches qui ont vue sur l'océan. À droite, les pauvres qui n'ont vue sur rien du tout excepté leurs semblables. (p. 11)
>
> [Blue Bay is the very last place on the headland, after which there is only sea and ocean. A narrow, tarmacked road, pitted with potholes, runs right through Blue Bay, dividing it in two. On the left, neat bamboo hedges hide beautiful, warmly coloured residences from sight. On the right, where the road slopes slightly, as though it were collapsing, shacks made from rusty corrugated iron and crumbling breeze-block can be seen through scraggy lines of poisonous cacti. On the left, the rich with a view of the ocean. On the right, the poor with a view of absolutely nothing except one another.]

Reflecting the social relations of its inhabitants, the village is characterised both by its geographic isolation from the rest of the island ('la toute dernière localité de la pointe') and by its own internal divisions. In contrast to the simultaneous seclusion (*cachent*) and openness (*vue sur l'océan*) of the rich quarter on the left of the narrow road, the shanty-town on the right, where Maya lives, is characterised by its visibility (*laissent voir*) but also by its lack of geographic and social horizons ('n'ont vue sur rien du tout excepté leurs semblables'). Whilst the description of Maya's story of star-crossed love, lost dreams and violent jealousy as 'une histoire de ce pays', arguably implies an identification with the broader island-nation, it is also a story that has to be understood within the specific context of the island's internal, highly segregated geography. As such, Maya's story is inextricably linked to the internal structures of her locality and birthplace, Blue Bay. As her story progresses, Maya feels increasingly restrained by, and hence hostile to, 'ce quartier pauvre' (p. 25) with which she is, by birth, inextricably associated – so undermining the location's original role, for her parents, as a place of refuge and liberation. When Dave first walks her home through the narrow alleyways of her own *quartier*, Maya sees it through the eyes of a rich outsider and thus states that: 'Jamais je n'ai eu si honte d'habiter ici.' (p.25) [I've never been so ashamed to live here.]

As a poor, low-caste inhabitant of Blue Bay's impoverished shanty-town and as a woman, Maya's spatial and social world is portrayed as entirely separate, and actively excluded, from that of Dave's family. The internal, rich-poor division of Blue Bay is repeated, on a broader scale, in the division between Blue Bay and the geographically close but socially distant town of Mahébourg, where Dave and his family live. As Maya exclaims: 'Ah, Mahébourg! Ce n'est qu'à une petite demi-heure de Blue Bay mais c'est un autre monde' (p. 24) [Oh, Mahébourg ! It's only half an hour from Blue Bay, but it's another world]. When Maya first

visits the affluent *quartier résidentiel* of Mahébourg, with its 'haies de bambous géants' [hedges of giant bamboo], 'grilles en forme de harpons', 'gardes' and 'guérites' [harpoon-like railings, guards and sentry boxes], and sees the Rajsings' opulent house, she cynically decodes the social significance of the area's spatial form and content, which represents 'un étalage d'argent, une verrue de fric jetée à la face de la pauvreté. À cette image, se superposait celle de la maison de mes parents. La comparaison était ridicule.' (p. 65) [a flaunting of money, an ugly wart of cash thrown in the face of poverty. Superimposed on this was the image of my parents' house. The comparison was risible.]

Although, as Hindu Mauritians, Maya and Dave are of broadly the same religious and ethnic origins, their radically contrasting neighbourhoods spatially mirror the divergent positions that they occupy in their society's internal class and caste hierarchies – positions that are further compounded by traditional gender inequalities which dictate Maya's passive, limited role (in marriage, education, career). Class, caste and gender perform the same, socially delineating function in Maya's situation as did ethnicity and religion in Fond du Sac. As a result, Maya is deemed an 'outsider' from the Rajsings' social circles and hence not a suitable match for Dave's arranged marriage. When Maya repeatedly asserts that she was *née ici*, she is not therefore asserting a positive sense of empowering identification with, or attachment to, place. She is, instead, acknowledging the crucial, negative impact that her specific, geographic and hence social location, combined with her gender, have upon her life choices and experiences as a poor, low-caste Hindu woman.

The opening description of the setting of *Ève de ses décombres* similarly establishes a strong symbolic link between the specific geographic location and configuration of Troumaron, on

the one hand, and the social relations of its inhabitants, on the other. As Sad, one of the four young narrators and a would-be poet, writes:

> Je suis dans un lieu gris. Ou plutôt jaunâtre, qui mérite bien son nom : Troumaron. Troumaron, c'est une sorte d'entonnoir ; le dernier goulet où viennent se déverser les eaux de tout un pays. Ici, on recase les réfugiés des cyclones […].
>
> Moi, j'y vis depuis toujours. Je suis un réfugié de naissance. […] Je ne voyais pas les fissures, nées à nos pieds, qui nous séparaient du monde. […]
>
> Nous sommes accolés à la montagne des Signaux. Port Louis s'accroche à nos pieds mais ne nous entraîne pas. La ville nous tourne le dos. […] La montagne nous obstrue la vision d'autre chose. (pp. 13−14)
>
> [I'm in a gray place. Or rather, yellowish brown, which better suits its name: Troumaron. Troumaron, a sort of funnel; where all the island's wastewaters ultimately flow. Here is where the cyclone refugees are rehomed.
>
> I've always lived here. I was born a refugee. I never saw the gaps born beneath our feet, separating us from the world.
>
> We are at the bottom of Signal Mountain. Port Louis grabs our feet but we are stuck here. The city turns its back on us. The mountain blocks our view of other things. (pp. 5-6)]

As its name − a combination of *trou* (hole) and *maron* (a corruption of the French *marron*, meaning either 'brown' or 'fugitive slave') – reflects, Troumaron is a squalid dumping-

ground for the country's literal and human detritus, the claustrophobic, end-of-the-world nature of which is underlined by its description as an *entonnoir* or a *goulet*. Despite their geographic proximity to Port Louis, Troumaron and its inhabitants are both spatially and socially marginalised from the capital's centre, squeezed between the mountains on one side, and the personified city, on the other. Just as the inhabitants of Blue Bay 'n'ont vue sur rien du tout excepté leurs semblables', so too in Troumaron 'la montagne nous obstrue la vision d'autre chose', the characters' social horizons reflected in the geographically-inflected lexis of visibility and (lack of) view.

Just as the shanty-town of Blue Bay is shown as segregated from the better-off area just across the road and hence also from Mahébourg, so too is Troumaron portrayed as definitively separated from nearby central Port Louis. Rejected by, and hence rejecting, the spatial and social configurations of Port Louis's affluent, fast-changing centre, the peripheral *quartier* of Troumaron becomes defined, in symbiosis with its inhabitants, by its self-defensive and increasingly self-assertive insularity. As Sad notes:

> Notre cité est notre royaume. Notre cité dans la cité, notre ville dans la ville. Port Louis a changé de figure, il lui est poussé des dents longues et des immeubles plus hauts que ses montagnes. Mais notre quartier, lui, n'a pas changé. C'est le dernier retranchement. Ici, on se construit une identité par défaut: celle des non-appartenants. (p. 17)
>
> [Our *cite* is our kingdom. Our city in the city, our town in the town. Port Louis has changed shape; it has grown long teeth and buildings taller than its mountains. But

> our neighbourhood hasn't changed. It's the last bastion. Here, we let our identities happen: we are those who do not belong. (p. 9)]

As a defiant riposte to broader society's proliferation of ethnic communities and of the patterns of belonging that underpin them, the residents of Troumaron assert instead a paradoxical group identity, based on their common exclusion. This non-ethnic, default identity reflects Clélio's claim elsewhere that: 'nous les enfants de Troumaron, nous sommes d'une seule communauté, qui est universelle, celle des pauvres et des paumés'. (p. 104) [we the children of Troumaron, we're a single community, and it's a universal one, this community of the poor and the lost. (p. 104)] In both cases, a paradoxical, mutually formative relationship between place and people is asserted – a community of non-belonging which consciously answers back to the 'centre' using the latter's own identitarian terms (of *communauté*, *identité* and *appartenance*).

If we pay close attention to the narrative viewpoint of the above assertions, a marked gender difference emerges. The kinds of communal identity 'by default' that are postulated are not ones with which the female inhabitants identify, despite their common poverty and disaffection. In Troumaron, as Sad asserts, 'l'autorité, c'est nous, les garçons. […] Les règles, c'est nous qui les dictons.' (pp. 15–16) [Authority, that's us, the boys. We make the rules. (pp. 7-8)] The gang members assert their authority by using the same kinds of spatially divisive, exclusionary tactics as those of the traditional 'ethnic' communities that they seek to reject and deride: that is, by privileging group over individual identity; by dictating and policing the rules of appropriate conduct of its members; and by building symbolic and physical barriers between 'us' and 'them', between 'inside' and 'outside'. As a result, 'Le monde est clos.

Nous ne pouvons plus sortir des cercles tracés par nos propres soins. Ces cercles disaient au reste du monde, nous ne sommes pas comme vous, notre monde n'est pas pareil au vôtre', p. 142. [The world is closed off. We can't escape the circles etched by our needs. These circles that tell the rest of the world, we're not like you, our world isn't like yours. (p. 142)] When Ève is seen to contravene the rules of the Troumaron 'community' – by ignoring the attentions of gang members; by flaunting the intimacy of her non-heteronormative relationship with Savita; or by returning to the *cité* with a police inspector – she is socially cast out, becoming the target of both her father's and the gang members' violence.

The two female narrator-characters, Ève and Savita, have a very different relationship with their neighbourhood from that of the male gang members. Far from identifying, even *par défaut*, with the common, negative characteristics of the *cité*, both Ève and Savita repeatedly assert their wish to escape Troumaron: 'Sortir de tout cela' (p. 53) [Escaping all that. (p. 46)]; 'Je devais partir […] Je devais prendre un petit sac et partir tout droit' (p. 63) [I was going to leave. I was going to take a little bag and go straight out. (p. 57)]. Indeed, Ève defiantly singles herself out from the other residents of Troumaron by denying or actively refusing any identification with the place where she was born and raised: 'Je n'appartenais pas à Troumaron. Le quartier ne m'a pas volé l'âme comme aux autres robots qui l'habitent' (p. 21) [I don't belong to Troumaron. The neighbourhood didn't steal my soul like the other drones that live there. (p. 13)]; 'Ma place n'est pas ici. Mais je n'ai pas de place.' (p. 94) [I don't belong here. But I don't belong anywhere. (p. 93)] Although recognising the formative influence of Troumaron on all of its inhabitants, Ève identifies a fundamental, gender difference between the ways in which male and female inhabitants respond to this environment when she states: 'Les garçons font des pactes, établissent des règles, forment des allégeances: l'esprit de la horde. Si tu tiens à ta vie, à ton corps, si tu es une fille (…) tu as

intérêt à faire un grand détour.' (pp. 29–30) [The boys swear oaths, declare rules, make alliances: a pack mentality. If you care about your life, your body, if you're a girl, you'd do best to give them a wide berth. (p. 22)] As the novel progresses and tensions rise, this essentially male 'esprit de la horde' becomes more directly linked to Ève's and Savita's wish to flee the spatial and social constraints of their neighbourhood – both through the intimacy of their relationship with one another and through their dreams of physical escape. As they recognise: 'Nous devons partir, nous échapper. Les garçons de la cité deviennent des hommes, avec des haines d'homme. Bientôt, ils s'en prendront à nous.' (pp. 84–85) [We need to leave, to escape. The guys from the neighbourhood are becoming men, with all their hatred. Soon they'll take it out on us. (pp. 82-83)]

Ève and Maya both feel emotionally 'out of place' in, and even actively excluded from, their local neighbourhoods and communities: Maya by poverty and lack of opportunity; Ève also by physical violence. So where else, in Appanah's or Devi's imaginary geographies, might they feel they belong? Notwithstanding the many parallels between the two novels' representations of Mauritius's man-made social and spatial relations, it is in their portrayal of the female protagonists' fleeting moments of positive, affective attachment to their natural environment that they bear the most striking and, in gender terms, most interesting similarities. Both novels culminate with the central character's violent revenge on the system that had curtailed her personal freedom and destroyed her dreams of love and happiness. *Blue Bay Palace* climaxes with Maya's brutal murder of Dave's new wife, and *Ève de ses décombres* with Ève's murder of the schoolteacher who had abused her and murdered Savita. In both novels, this latent propensity to destructive violence is reflected in repeated symbolic associations between the female body and Mauritius's natural, volcanic origins. The human spatial configurations of the island are, as we have seen, largely gendered masculine. The

mutual interrelation between female characters and the island's natural space, on the other hand, is repeatedly evoked both in the feminising imagery used to describe the landscape and in the geological imagery used to describe the young women.[11] In the opening paragraphs of *Blue Bay Palace*, for instance, Mauritius's natural landscape and geological origins are described in highly feminised terms:

> Au début, il y a le pays. […] Ici la rondeur d'une femme enceinte, là la cambrure d'une jeune fille, plus loin l'aridité d'une vieille. C'est un pays né du crachat brûlant d'un volcan et dont le profil a été dessiné par les tempêtes et le soleil cardinal. (p. 9)
>
> [In the beginning is the land. Here, the curve of a pregnant woman, there the small of a young girl's back, over there the dry expanse of an old woman. It's a land born from the burning sputum of a volcano, whose profile has been sketched by storms and by the sun in its zenith.]

The formative origins of the island, portrayed as the offspring of a life-giving mother-volcano, are starkly contrasted with an explicitly male narrative of human discovery, conquest and exploitation of its land, flora and fauna:

> Les premiers hommes l'ont accosté sur leur route des Indes […]. Ces premiers hommes ont chassé tous les oiseaux sans ailes, d'autres marins sont venus, des batailles ont élevé le pays en trophée. (p. 9)

> [The first men dropped anchor there on their trading routes to and from India. The same first men hunted all the flightless birds, then other sailors came, and battles were fought with the land held up as the prize.]

Despite the devastation and destruction wrought by man, glimpses of Mauritius's Edenic, pre-human, pre-male origins can, however, still occasionally be glimpsed in the island's natural landscape:

> Parfois, au détour d'une route, jaillissent de nulle part une fleur jamais vue auparavant, (…) une motte de terre sculptée en femme dont les seins et l'entre-jambe sont pudiquement cachés par fougères et mousse. (…) Et devant ces traces qui racontent une genèse, on soupire. Parce que la beauté et le mystère, m'a-t-on dit, ça fait soupirer. (pp. 9–10)
>
> [Sometimes, at a bend in the road, there appears from nowhere a flower that has never previously been seen, or a mound of earth sculpted like in the form of a woman whose breasts and sex are modestly hidden by ferns and moss. And when confronted with these traces that tell of the island's genesis, we sigh. Because, as I've been told, beauty and mystery make us sigh.]

It is with such beautiful, mysterious and female features of the natural environment that Maya feels a profound but fleeting sense of visceral attachment, as manifested in the ambivalent, bitter-sweet, extra-linguistic response of the sigh.

Throughout *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya's intense love of the often-personified sea offers, in the purifying potential of swimming, a symbolic and literal release from the claustrophobia of Blue Bay: 'Moi, je cours toujours vers la mer' (p. 13) [I always run towards the sea.]; 'je plonge comme si je sautais dans les bras de quelqu'un que je n'aurais pas vu depuis des années' (p. 18). [I dive in as if I was jumping into the arms of someone I hadn't seen for many years.] The novel's repeated marine and volcanic imagery insistently links the female protagonist's powerful but repressed – and therefore, potentially explosive – character with the elemental forces from which the island was formed. As well as referring negatively to the social configurations that seek to constrain her, Maya's enigmatic claim that hers is 'une histoire de ce pays' can thus be seen, more positively, to encompass the powerful, elemental forces of its natural landscape, with which Maya identifies.

In *Ève de ses décombres*, a similar identification of the female protagonist with the island's natural geology – particularly with the latent, destructive power of the volcano – is underlined in the geological and seismic imagery repeatedly used to describe Ève's body: 'Le silence d'Ève, c'est celui qui gronde tout au fond du volcan' (p. 63) [Ève's silence is the rumble deep within a volcano (p. 57)]; 'ce sang de femme, cette coulure du volcan enfoui' (p. 134) [this woman's blood, this flow from a buried volcano (p. 139)]; 'Elle a été sculptée comme une roche basaltique' (p. 155) [She is sculpted like volcanic rock. (p. 164)] By identifying with the elemental forces of the volcano and the sea, Ève and Maya are able to assert a form of affective belonging to their island that seeks not only to escape but actively to destroy the island's repressive, man-made, social and spatial structures. Nonetheless, one cannot overlook the arguably problematic, essentialist nature of such postulations of a female

form of belonging, based on formative parallels between woman and island – parallels which bring to mind the erotic, exotic tropes of the untamed creole woman or of the sexualised, female island ripe for conquest pedalled in male-authored, colonial-era literature. Such qualms illustrate the difficulty, especially for women writers, of ever truly evading male-constructed discourses in which, like the physical environment that they portray, even seemingly wild and natural terrain is so often already well-trodden and exploited. More positively, one could argue, however, that in exposing entrenched social, spatial and discursive gender inequalities, Appanah and Devi do at least attempt, imaginatively, to reclaim this territory as their own.

In such a contested physical and discursive space, and despite society's attempts to regulate women's behaviour and bodies, both Maya and Ève experience, however briefly, the empowering, self-affirming possibilities of a love that is freely chosen, rather than imposed by social convention. This fragile and doomed love in each case provides the protagonist with a glimpse of alternative forms of affective belonging or community-making that might – just – be possible outside the island's existing, highly-regulated, social and spatial structures. Reflecting on her past happiness with Dave in terms which liken the liberating experience of being in love with that of swimming in the sea, Maya suggests that:

> Peut-être parce que j'ai connu un fugace bonheur avant, peut-être parce qu'il m'est arrivé de rire aux larmes, de pleurer d'amour ou de bonheur, de nager et d'avoir l'impression d'être la mer même, peut-être que c'est pour ça que je ne me tue pas. (p. 81)

> [Perhaps it's because I have experienced fleeting happiness, perhaps it's because I have cried with laughter, shed tears of love or happiness, because I have swum and felt as though I was the sea itself, perhaps that's why I don't kill myself.]

In turn, the life-affirming and even life-saving nature of Ève's fleeting happiness with Savita is underlined when she states, as a rebuke to Sad's mimicry of male social and poetic models, that:

> La poésie des femmes, c'est quand Savita et moi, on marche ensemble en synchronisant nos pas. (…) La poésie des femmes, c'est le rire, dans ce coin perdu, qui ouvre un bout de paradis pour ne pas nous laisser nous noyer. (p. 30)
>
> [The poetry of women is when Savita and I walk together step by step. The poetry of women is laughter in this lost place, laughter that opens up a small part of paradise so that we don't drown ourselves. (pp. 22-23)]

The notion of an essentially female mode of friendship, offering glimpses of 'un bout de paradis' that is entirely outside the explicitly masculine domains of gang, community, neighbourhood or town, is again emphasised in Ève's assertion that: 'Hors de l'emprise des hommes, nous sommes devenues joyeuses, joueuses, pour quelques instants.' (p. 49) [Outside the purview of men, we became happy, playful, for a few minutes. (p. 43)] Although both of these spontaneous, chosen, loving relationships are ultimately forestalled within the dominant, highly-regulated, male structures of their respective communities, they do

nonetheless offer the female characters tentative hope of alternative, emotionally fulfilling forms of affective belonging outside existing social and spatial structures.

In such a context of glimpsed but as yet unrealisable happiness, extreme female violence is portrayed as a natural and potentially cathartic force for bringing about positive social change. As the momentum builds towards each novel's violent climax, however, Maya and Ève dream of harnessing the latent, elemental forces of the volcano or the sea, with which they feel a profound affinity, in order to obliterate the island's artificial, man-made, social and spatial structures. When Maya learns of Dave's recent marriage, she seeks escape from her emotional torment by imagining a time 'quand la mer aura déjà rogné tout Blue Bay et qu'il ne restera de ce pays qu'une langue de sable' (p. 40); [when the sea will have washed all of Blue Bay away and all that will remain of this land is a spit of sand]. Shortly after, as her suicidal and murderous thoughts intensify, Maya feels that: 'la terre menaçait de s'ouvrir à nouveau sur un noyau de lave et que, comme il y a des milliers d'années, cette lave recouvrirait tout et dessinerait une terre plus clémente.' (p. 42) [the earth was about to open up again to reveal a core of lava and that, like thousands of years ago, this lava would once again cover everything and form a kinder land.]

Maya's dreams here of a catastrophic, purifying return to the island's pre-human origins - brought about either by the erosion of the sea or by a volcanic eruption - are linked more explicitly to her own 'histoire de ce pays' when, preceding her own would-be cathartic, violent act, she asserts:

> Je voudrais pouvoir marcher longtemps dans un endroit où l'horizon ne serait fait ni de mer, ni de montagne et encore moins d'homme. Je voudrais à moi seule repeupler toute une terre. Y arriver la première, sentir qu'ici ne porte aucune trace avant moi, qu'ici il ne faut pas se marier selon les règles, qu'ici on peut aimer qui on veut… (p. 85)
>
> [I'd like to be able to walk for a long time in a place where the horizon wasn't made of sea or mountain or, especially, of men. I'd like to repopulate the whole land on my own. To be the first to arrive here, to feel that there was no human trace here before me, and that here you don't have to marry according to the rules, that here you can love who you want…]

In this reworking of the novel's opening depiction of Mauritius's pre-human origins, Maya's dream of a denuded, elemental, entirely unpopulated landscape where she could, from scratch, create a more just and natural society, is linked to a desire to obliterate and rewrite her island's unjust history of (male) human habitation.

In *Ève de ses décombres*, Ève expresses her desire for escape from the oppressive, patriarchal, social structures of Troumaron and her family in strikingly similar geographic terms:

> Je voudrais une terre inconnue, et la mer qui la lèche tout au bout, et un unique filao (…), et moi assise sous le filao, ne faisant et ne disant rien. Parfois, je monte sur les plus hautes branches du filao et je regarde au loin. Au loin, il n'y a rien. Que la mer, et encore la mer. (p. 61)

> [I'd like an unknown land, with the sea lapping at the far shore, and a single filao tree, with me sitting under the filao, doing and saying nothing. Sometimes, I climb up to the highest branches of the filao and look far out to sea. In the distance, there's nothing. Just the sea, and again the sea. Just sea and more sea.]

As in Appanah's novel, Mauritius's island topography is here re-imagined as an almost entirely depopulated, since undiscovered, virginal space, stripped of all imposed and oppressive, social and spatial configurations. Reacting against the claustrophobic promiscuity and gender inequalities of their respective urban environments, both Maya and Ève dream, not of a fully-formed, alternative social utopia, but of an elemental, geographic blank canvas, on which they can create a new society on radically different, female terms. The very starkness of their imagined reconfigurations of the island-space reflects the intensity of their psychological yearnings for escape, for justice, and for a seemingly impossible 'place of their own'.

Despite the many similarities identified above in the two novels' portrayal of their female protagonists' highly gendered relations with Mauritius's original island-space, there are significant differences in their respective representations of the consequences of the characters' would-be purgative, natural violence. As a chosen, rather than choosing partner in her arranged marriage, Dave's wife, like Maya herself, is a pawn − albeit a socially advantaged pawn − rather than an active perpetrator in the communal caste and gender system that excludes and oppresses Maya. As a result, her murder offers Maya only temporary release from psychological torment and, as the novel's ending implies, only an 'illusion' of communion with her *pays* (p. 95). Leaving society's oppressive communal and

gender structures in place, Maya's individual act of vengeful destruction leads also to her own self-destruction, in that her yearning for liberation results, ultimately, in her incarceration.

In *Ève de ses décombres*, on the other hand, the schoolteacher whom Ève shoots dead had indeed murdered Savita and abused his position of power to groom and abuse Ève. He is, therefore, not only representative of the repressive system against which Ève wreaks revenge, but also the perpetrator of the kinds of male domination, exploitation and brutality that, at the most extreme, underpin it. Despite the novel's bleak portrayal of the dystopian, social relations in the *cité* of Troumaron and beyond, the ending of *Ève de ses décombres* offers a faint glimmer of hope for the future. This hope is not embodied, as Tyagi and others have argued, in the non-heteronormative relationship between Ève and Savita, but in the promise of an enduring transformation of the novel's young, *male* characters. As the novel draws to a close, Clélio – the archetypal 'angry young man' wrongly accused of Savita's murder – sees in his female lawyer a positive role model who, though born in Troumaron, has been able to escape both its spatial confines and its social legacy. Contrary to the seemingly inevitable downward trajectory of his plot-line, Clélio thus starts to make plans for an alternative future outside Troumaron if released from prison – plans that are made possible with the discovery of the schoolteacher's confession note. In a similar avoidance of the pessimistic logic of the narrative, the riots that the Troumaron gang have been fomenting are averted when, in order to protect Ève from the gang's anger, Sad informs the police of their plans. His reason for contravening the gang's rules in this way is expressed in terms that are strikingly resonant of those previously associated with Ève's quintessentially female relation to the island: 'Je ne veux pas faire partie de ceux qui réveilleront le volcan. Cette île est née d'un volcan. Une éruption, cela suffit.' (p. 143) [I don't want to be one of those waking up the volcano. This

island was born from a volcano. One eruption is enough. (p. 149)] Sad's (male) discourse thus becomes inflected, and his actions affected, by his acceptance of an alternative, female perspective. The novel does not end with Ève's act of natural, destructive violence, for which she would be made to bear the social and legal consequences: instead, it concludes as Sad prepares to hand himself in to the police in her place. Ève's solitary act of violence thus becomes a shared and unifying one, the affirmative, reconciliatory potential of which is, in the novel's closing line, literally and symbolically sealed with a kiss.

In both Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* and Ananda Devi's *Ève de ses décombres*, the man-made spatial configurations of the Mauritian fictionalised urban environment are depicted as sites of estrangement and even danger for the novels' female characters, reflecting and constructing the uneven social and gender relations of their inhabitants. In contrast, both novels postulate alternative forms of female identification with, and attachment to, the island's natural, non-human and pre-human geography, that offer a powerful critique of existing, man-made, social and spatial inequalities. Despite their arguable recourse to traditional, male literary stereotypes - of wild, untamed femininity and of a feminised island ripe for conquest - there also emerges in both novels a common sense of female affective belonging to the island's natural space that is strongly future-orientated. By revealing the entrenched, man-made, social and urban structures to which it is seen to be an inevitable, natural response, female violence is portrayed as opening up the possibility - and the hope – of a more just and inclusive sense of collective belonging to the island-space in the future.

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[1] Ananda Devi, *Ève de ses décombres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). Ananda Devi, Eve out of Her Ruins, translated by Jeffrey Zuckermann (London: Les Fugitives, 2016)
[2] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 186.
[3] May Friedman and Silvia Schutermandl, *Growing Up Transnational: Identity and Kinship in a Global Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 13.
[4] Nathacha Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).
[5] T. Fenster, 'Gender and the City: The Different Formations of Belonging', in L. Nelson and J. Seager, *A Companion to Feminist Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 242−56; p. 253.
[6] All translations of Appanah's novel are by Julia Waters.
[7] 'Fond du Sac est un village quasiment introuvable pour celui qui y va pour la première fois. […] Les premiers immigrants indiens y avaient fait leur camp, loin des Blancs et à l'écart des

esclaves affranchis.' (p. 15) [The village of Fond du Sac is almost impossible to find for first-time visitors. […] The first Indian immigrants set up their camp there, far from the Whites and the newly-freed slaves.]

[8] See, for instance: Mehdi Charef, *Le Thé* au harem d'Archi Ahmed (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983); Medhi,Lalaloui, Les Beurs de Seine (Paris: Arcantère, 1986); Faïza Guène, *Kiffe Kiffe demain* (Paris: Hachette, 2004); or Azouz Begag, *Le Gône du Chaaba* (Paris: Points, 1986).

[9] See, for instance: Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Ti Jean L'horizon* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Edouard Glissant, *La Lézarde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Patrick Chamoiseau, *Antan d'enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) or *Texaco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); Raphaël Confiant, *Mamzelle Libellule* (Paris: Serpent à Plumes, 1994).

[10] In a Bhabha-informed analysis of 'hybridity' in three of Devi's novels, Tyagi argues that *Ève de ses décombres* 'exposes interstitial spaces – particularly those spaces where notions of female identity are played out.' R. Tyagi, 'Rethinking Identity and Belonging: "Mauritianness" in the Work of Ananda Devi', in M. McCusker and A. Soares (eds), *Islanded Identities: Constructions of Postcolonial Cultural Insularity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 91−108; p. 93. As we shall explore, I take issue with this reading of Devi's novel. Whilst Troumaron is indeed portrayed as an 'interstitial' or, more accurately, a marginal space, and whilst the male members of the Troumaron gang construct an alternative, group identity in relation to this space, it is categorically not a space with which female characters positively identify.

[11] Ailbhe O'Flaherty notes the way in which Appanah changes 'the typical perspective of the "island-as-woman" metaphor in favour of a "woman-as-island" imagery.' A. O'Flaherty, 'Every Woman is an Island? The Island as an Embodiment of Female Alterity in Mauritian Women's Writing,' in V. Bragard and S. Ravi (eds), *Écritures mauriciennes au féminin: penser l'altérité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), pp. 43−59; p. 45.