

Everyday Belonging : Bertrand de Robillard's L'Homme qui penche and Une interminable distraction au monde

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CHAPTER FOUR

Everyday Belonging

Bertrand de Robillard's *L'Homme qui penche* and *Une interminable distraction au monde*

Despite their many differences, the novels discussed in the preceding chapters all deal with the problems of belonging in multicultural Mauritius as experienced by impoverished, disadvantaged sections of society.¹ In contrast, Bertrand de Robillard, whose *L'Homme qui penche* (2003) and *Une interminable distraction au monde* (2011) will be the focus of this chapter,² hails, like the characters of his novels, from the socially advantaged, 'isolated but dominant'³ Franco-Mauritian community.⁴ Robillard's work is particularly interesting for our examination of the diverse forms of belonging articulated in contemporary Mauritian fiction since, as Srilata Ravi points out, 'Mauritian narratives rarely touch on what could now be a thorny political issue: the identity of a financially empowered Franco-Mauritian minority'.⁵

1 It should be noted that the authors themselves tend to speak for, rather than as, members of such disadvantaged groups.

2 Both novels were published by Paris-based Éditions de l'Olivier.

3 Ravi, *Rainbow Colors*, p. 103.

4 Tracing its ancestry back to French settlers and plantation owners, the Franco-Mauritian minority today constitutes approximately two per cent of the island's population but nonetheless continues to control over 65 per cent of its land and wealth. See Percy Maistry, 'Commentary: Mauritius, Quo Vadis', *African Affairs*, vol. 98, no. 393 (1999), pp. 551–69 (p. 553). For an anthropological and ethnographic study of the Franco-Mauritian elite today, see also: Salverda, *The Franco-Mauritian Elite*.

5 Ravi, *Rainbow Colors*, p. 104. Other than Robillard's works, rare examples of contemporary novels which touch on this issue include Carl de Souza's *Les Jours*



L'Homme qui penche and *Une interminable distraction au monde* both portray the seemingly vain 'quête spirituelle' of a middle-class male Franco-Mauritian protagonist who, like the author himself, feels like 'un Occidental égaré sous les tropiques'. Robillard's works depict 'un personnage qui [est] mal à l'aise dans son environnement, [...] un personnage en quête de lui-même'⁶ whose existential identity crisis is compounded, in multi-ethnic Mauritius, by the stereotypical associations that accrue to his white skin. Indeed, it could be argued that the critical neglect of Robillard's work to date is due in part to the author's ethnicity but also, as we shall explore, to the traditionally metropolitan intellectual concern with *le quotidien* with which his novels engage – neither of which fits easily within conventional perceptions of francophone postcolonial literature.⁷

Kaya which, as discussed in Chapter 1, features a Franco-Mauritian character, Robert de Noir, whose social and mental descent can be seen as symbolic of the decline of the rarefied, moribund Franco-Mauritian community within contemporary Mauritian society. In contrast, Alain Gordon-Gentil's novel *Devina* (Paris: Julliard, 2009) portrays the Franco-Mauritian elite as continuing to exert a powerful, corrupt and even murderous hold over all aspects of Mauritian society. *Le Bal du dodo* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), by metropolitan French writer Geneviève Dormann, depicts the Franco-Mauritian community, seen from the slightly marginal point of view of one of its members, as a privileged but shrinking, in-bred minority, seemingly destined to suffer the same fate as the eponymous bird.

6 Bertrand de Robillard in interview with Thomas Spear, 'Cinq Questions pour Île en Île' (2009), <http://ile-en-ile.org/bertrand-de-robillard-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/> (accessed 10 July 2013). This interview was recorded in 2009, two years before the publication of *Une interminable distraction au monde*. Whilst applicable to the later novel, this statement was made only in relation to *L'Homme qui penche*.

7 As Markus Arnold argues, in a comparative study of the representation of Franco-Mauritian characters in a range of recent novels, Robillard's depiction of his Franco-Mauritian protagonist's 'entre-deux identitaire conflictuel' is 'en décalage total avec les célébrations d'une appartenance multiple et hybride chères à la pensée cosmopolite et diasporique'. See Markus Arnold, 'Les Hiérarchies socio-économiques et ethnique à l'île Maurice: Homogénéités et ruptures dans l'identité des Franco-Mauriciens', *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2011), pp. 125–41 (p. 138). In his recent study, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, Arnold makes a similar point when arguing that Robillard's experimental forms of writing 'bouleversent les attentes d'un public occidental qui connaît l'espace insulaire par le prisme exotisant et la marque identitaire' (p. 506). Arnold explores the 'paradoxes identitaires' of 'le Blanc raté' in *L'Homme qui penche* who, he argues, embodies 'une figure hybride ambivalente, un genre de métis conceptuel' (p. 281).

Although *Une interminable distraction au monde* is not a sequel to *L'Homme qui penche*, they can together be seen to constitute a literary diptych examining the same fraught issue of Franco-Mauritian belonging from different but complementary perspectives. The interrelation between the two works is implicitly suggested by both similarities and differences between their epigraphs: 'Enfonce-toi dans l'inconnu qui creuse. Oblige-toi à tourner' in *L'Homme qui penche*, and 'La maturité est aussi la chose suivante: ne plus chercher au dehors mais laisser parler la vie intime, avec son rythme qui seul compte' in *Une interminable distraction au monde*.⁸ Both epigraphs prefigure the novels' common focus on an individual quest for belonging and self-knowledge, and on the gradual shift from a wide, external search to a narrow, internal process of introspection and self-examination. The emphasis on personal maturity and on the internal rhythms and language of 'la vie intime' in the epigraph to *Une interminable distraction au monde* also signals the underlying difference of perspective between the two novels. Where the unnamed protagonist of *L'Homme qui penche* is young and single, François – the first-person narrator of *Une interminable distraction au monde* – is in late middle age and living with a long-term partner. So his individual quest for belonging is intimately tied up with the everyday compromises of cohabitation.

As well as the evident similarities between Robillard's epigraphs, they are both also strongly reminiscent of the epigraph to Georges Perec's *Un homme qui dort*, a novel with which Robillard's work bears many striking affinities of style and subject matter:

Il n'est pas nécessaire que tu sortes de ta maison. Reste à ta table et écoute. N'écoute même pas, attends seulement. N'attends même pas, sois absolument silencieux et seul. Le monde viendra s'offrir à toi pour que tu le démasques, il ne peut faire autrement, extasié, il se tordra devant toi.⁹

As in *Un homme qui dort*, to which its title doubtless pays intertextual homage, *L'Homme qui penche* is a study of a mental crisis as the protagonist withdraws into his tiny room and increasingly into himself and thereby transforms his understanding of his relationship with the outside world. Similarly, *Une interminable distraction au monde* could

8 These are quotations from René Char and Cesare Pavese, respectively.

9 Georges Perec, *Un homme qui dort* (Paris: Denoël, 1967). The quotation is taken from 'Méditations sur le péché, la souffrance, l'espoir et le vrai chemin' by Franz Kafka.

in many ways be read as a middle-aged, Franco-Mauritian reply to Perec's bestselling novel *Les Choses*: like Perec's young couple Jérôme and Sylvie, François and Claire try to escape the banal routine of everyday life in the drab town of Hauteville by acquiring, furnishing and decorating a new home and so, they hope, adopting an entirely new lifestyle. As these and other intertextual similarities reflect, Bertrand de Robillard's novels share Perec's central fascination with exploring the experiences of everyday life.

Indeed, as this chapter will show, Bertrand de Robillard's literary investigation of a Franco-Mauritian quest for belonging has much in common with recent metropolitan French thought around the question of *le quotidien* in general – far more in common, in fact, than it does with the postcolonial theoretical paradigms (of creolisation, hybridity or *métissage*) that are more usually applied to francophone texts. A coherent intellectual tradition of thinking about the patterns and practices of everyday life has emerged at the heart of French culture in recent decades, spearheaded by figures such as Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, as well as Georges Perec – and yet this is a tradition that has so far had little purchase on other French-speaking contexts. Robillard's novels display a central concern with what Michael Sheringham describes, in his seminal study of metropolitan French theorists and writers of *le quotidien*, as 'the complex imbrication of the positive and the negative, alienation and freedom, within the weave of everyday life itself'.¹⁰ This chapter will explore how Robillard's Franco-Mauritian literary diptych reflects and recontextualises traditionally metropolitan intellectual concerns with the nature of everyday belonging. By examining the protagonists' physical and spiritual journeys in *L'Homme qui penche* and *Une interminable distraction au monde* – from alienation, through appropriation, to belonging – I shall consider how belonging and the practices of everyday life interact within a specifically Mauritian context. Reflecting the different stages of the protagonists' quests for belonging, this chapter will consider: How is everyday belonging expressed in the fictional Mauritius and, more specifically, within the Franco-Mauritian society of Robillard's novels? How do Robillard's Franco-Mauritian protagonists seek to create alternative forms and objects of belonging either in Mauritius or elsewhere? How do they

¹⁰ Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 12.

create a sense of belonging to place within Mauritius, but outside the 'monde exécré' of their own ethnic community, through the generic practices of daily life and human interaction? By finally creating a self-affirming sense of belonging to place and to others by means of such everyday practices, Robillard's Franco-Mauritian characters seem to confirm Henri Lefebvre's would-be universalist belief that 'l'homme sera quotidien ou ne sera pas'.¹¹ This chapter's analyses will, however, consider how Robillard's fictional representations of Franco-Mauritian characters' expressions of everyday belonging nonetheless diverge from, and reveal the limitations of, metropolitan theorisations on the subject.

Like the young male protagonist of Perec's *Un homme qui dort*, the central character of *L'Homme qui penche* feels profoundly alienated from his physical environment and social milieu at the start of his quest. This alienation is reflected in both texts by the use of the self-designating second-person pronoun throughout: the singular, familiar 'tu' form in Perec's novel, and the plural or formal 'vous' form in Robillard's.¹² In *L'Homme qui penche*, the protagonist's feelings of social and existential unease are not rooted solely in the general absurdity of everyday existence, however. Instead, they are prompted by a visceral rejection of a very particular dominant social order: that of Curepipe's middle-class, Franco-Mauritian elite in which he was raised. Despite – or, conversely, owing to – its familiarity, this is not an environment or social group in which *vous* feels at ease. Indeed, the repulsion that this community inspires in him is first evoked, indirectly and symbolically, in a passage early in the novel, in which the protagonist describes a shop window display depicting a scene from everyday Franco-Mauritian life. In *vous*'s own terms, this supposedly 'everyday' scene evokes a form of social 'maladie', against which he attempts to 'vaccinate' himself:¹³

11 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Paris: L'Arche, 1947), p. 140.

12 Robillard's protagonist remains unnamed throughout *L'Homme qui penche*. Despite its inevitable grammatical infelicities, I shall therefore refer to him in this chapter as *vous*, the pronoun by which he is consistently identified. Robillard's use of the *vous* form recalls Michel Butor's famous use of the same pronoun in his now canonical novel *La Modification* (Paris: Minuit, 1957) – a feature which was seen at the time as characteristic of the Nouveau Roman group, with which he was connected. Perec consistently distanced himself from the Nouveau Roman group, insisting that he was a 'realist' writer. Despite their claimed theoretical differences, Perec and Butor nonetheless shared an intellectual concern with the expression of everyday existence.

13 Bertrand de Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche* (Paris: L'Olivier, 2003), p. 23.

Cette maladie vous apparaît sous la forme d'une de ces rares devantures éclairées *a giorno* dans le centre ville, et exposées à la vue des passants; réplique des varangues et autres salons du quartier résidentiel de Curepipe, elle vous rejette dès l'abord hors de son champ magnétique. Ces vitrines donnent à voir, dirait-on, le spectacle étrange d'une assemblée silencieuse se jouant éternellement une même scène de sa vie quotidienne.¹⁴

The necessarily unchanging and artificial quality of the window display is seen ironically to reflect the very nature of the society that it depicts. The harsh lighting draws attention to the repetitive ('éternellement', 'même') but nonetheless strange ('étrange') and repellent ('vous rejette') nature both of the particular tableau represented and also, by extension, of everyday Franco-Mauritian life in general – a way of life which is characterised by its 'assurance', 'arrogance' and by its members' 'surestimation naïve de leur importance'.¹⁵ The reference to 'une même scène de la vie quotidienne' clearly indicates the overwhelmingly negative associations for *vous* of the 'everyday' within the context of Franco-Mauritian society: associations with habit, repetition, sterility and, for the now externally positioned protagonist, alienation. The window display's tableau in turn reminds the protagonist of portraits of dead family members which, like the fixed and anachronistic scene the tableau depicts, function to 'perpétuer l'essence d'une civilisation ayant de moins en moins de prise sur les choses d'aujourd'hui'.¹⁶ By force of complacent, self-perpetuating repetition and habit, *le quotidien* is thus portrayed, in these rarefied circles, as having lost any vital, regenerative association with *aujourd'hui*.

As underlined by references to 'des scènes de la vie quotidienne', 'portraits de famille', 'l'univers d'Épinal de votre enfance'¹⁷ and to the artificial 'spectacles' staged by 'intelligentsia Francophile blanche de Curepipe',¹⁸ the novel depicts the Franco-Mauritian elite's way of life as being predicated on display, surface, show and performance – that is, the *mise en scène* of a certain, purportedly 'everyday' lifestyle, rather than on an engagement with the banal realities of *la vie quotidienne* itself. *Vous*'s growing sense of alienation from his familial, social and ethnic community is not, therefore, solely a response to the potentially

14 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 24.

15 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 25.

16 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 25.

17 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 116.

18 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 116.

dehumanising repetition and banality of everyday life *per se*, as is predominantly the case in the situations analysed by metropolitan theorists of *le quotidien*. Instead, the protagonist's alienation constitutes an increasingly active rejection of a very specific kind of outmoded and morally unsustainable 'vie quotidienne' – a life which is only 'everyday', if at all, within the very limited and limiting confines of an exclusive, self-perpetuating, 'isolated and dominant' social elite.

Given *vous*'s alienation from and visceral rejection of the 'monde exécré'¹⁹ of his ethnic and class community, where else might he seek a sense of self-affirming belonging? Having first failed to make a living as a musician on La Réunion, *vous* leaves Mauritius for the 'autre monde' of France – the ancestral and spiritual homeland of Franco-Mauritians – where he hopes to find communion with other like-minded, white-skinned 'French' people. Significantly for the purposes of the current analysis, *vous* goes to study in Paris: the experimental testing ground of choice for metropolitan theorists of *le quotidien*. Despite their superficial similarities of 'Frenchness' and white skin colour, however, *vous* finds himself isolated from other students in Paris and excluded from their easily improvised community by 'votre gros accent créole'.²⁰ Unable to find a place for himself in Mauritius outside his own socio-ethnic group 'à cause de la blancheur de votre peau',²¹ he finds himself cut off in Paris by his non-French accent. In much the same way as Frantz Fanon discovered his essential blackness in Paris when seen through the eyes of white French,²² so too is *vous* forced there to recognise his foreign, non-French identity as seen – or, rather, as heard – by the community of metropolitan French students and bar-goers. Unable and increasingly unwilling to engage others in conversation, *vous* becomes increasingly isolated, left to ponder the crucial, imponderable question: 'Était-ce le fait de s'habiller, de penser, de parler de la même manière qui faisait d'eux une sorte de communauté?'²³

Rejected as 'other' by the people of Paris, *vous* embarks on endless wanderings around its physical city space, both by *métro* and on foot, in search of an elusive sense of affective connection to place. The depiction of these peregrinations around the city bears many striking

19 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 117.

20 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 94.

21 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 18.

22 Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952).

23 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 91.

stylistic and thematic parallels with the work of metropolitan theorists of *le quotidien*, for whom Paris was privileged observational territory. Robillard's following evocation of the protagonist's interaction with the *métro*, for instance, recalls Certeau's or Augé's earlier studies of human interactions with the Paris underground:

Les noms des stations évoquaient, dans une chronologie chaotique, l'histoire de la ville qui se confondait parfois avec celle du monde, en un amalgame de personnages, de lieux, de batailles dont la confusion, dans son ensemble, n'était pas sans analogie avec votre état d'esprit d'alors. Le métro, c'était la conscience enfouie de Paris, qui divulguait en dessous ce qui, en surface, était noyé dans le paysage, le brouhaha et le fourmillement urbain – son âme? – et que vous parcouriez, comme si vous vouliez vous pénétrer de son essence. Dont le contact aurait peut-être, à la longue, sur votre vie, un effet miraculeux, et qui opérerait en vous une ...²⁴

Michael Sheringham's description of Augé's project in *Un Ethnologue dans le métro*²⁵ – 'observations, disclosed by the example of the metro, on the imbrications of the social and the individual, the private and the historical, in everyday life, and the way these may be articulated with questions of identity, difference and community'²⁶ – could readily be applied to *vous*'s depiction here of his use of, and relationship to, the Paris *métro*. *Vous* recognises in the confused amalgam of historical references offered by the names of *métro* stations a symbolic parallel between his own confused and composite state of mind and the palimpsestic essence or 'âme' of the city. Yet, unlike Augé's *habitué* of the *métro*, *vous* ultimately fails to make a self-affirming connection with the city's 'essence' by means of his individual, idiosyncratic use of the *métro* system – a fact that is reflected in the above extract's suspended final punctuation. The parallel between the individual and the social, the private and the historical dimensions of the *métro*'s common space does not lead to a liberating opening up of the city's spaces that would render them more habitable, as in Michel de Certeau's famous discussion of individual users' appropriation of the official function of 'noms et symboles' in *L'Invention du quotidien*.²⁷ In contrast, the act of

24 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, pp. 92–93.

25 Marc Augé, *Un Ethnologue dans le métro* (Paris: Hachette, 1986).

26 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 308.

27 Michel de Certeau, 'Marches dans la ville', in *L'Invention du quotidien, I: arts de faire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1980), pp. 171–98; especially 'Noms et symboles', pp. 189–92.

paying attention to his daily interactions with the *métro* system – and hence with the official structures, history and ‘âme’ of the city that it represents – only serves to emphasise *vous*’s feelings of estrangement and existential angst. Whilst going through the physical and mental motions of appropriation via his use of the *métro*, *vous* ultimately fails to make the kinds of affective connection with the city as a place of belonging that he so consciously – and thus artificially – seeks.

Like taking the *métro*, walking in the city also fails to result in any self-affirming identification with the city space or with its community of users. Contrary to Certeau’s assertion that walking constitutes ‘un style d’appréhension tactile et d’appropriation kinésique’,²⁸ *vous*’s concerted, tactical attempts to make an embodied connection with place result, as the following extract underlines, only in his further alienation and physical exhaustion:

Vous étiez comme usé de l’intérieur, vous vous sentiez très vieux. Vous aviez la sensation de ne vous être jamais assis durant toute cette époque. Que pesaient sur vos jambes le poids de kilomètres de marche et le temps passé debout. [...] L’impression aussi d’avoir dans la tête toutes les images récurrentes d’une interminable errance où vous cherchiez en vain une issue.²⁹

Walking does not constitute an empowering form of ‘énonciation piétonnière’ or ‘rhétorique cheminatoire’ for *vous*.³⁰ Instead, his obsessive but grammarless ‘errance’ in the city reflects Certeau’s ambivalent assertion that ‘Marcher, c’est manquer de lieu. C’est le procès indéfini d’être absent et en quête d’un propre’ in only the most negative and alienating senses.³¹ As Certeau recognises: ‘L’errance que multiplie et rassemble la ville en fait une immense expérience sociale de la privation de lieu – une expérience, il est vrai, effritée en déportations innombrables et informes (déplacements et marches)’. Nonetheless, as Certeau continues, such an ‘expérience’ (connoting ‘experience’ and/or ‘experiment’) should ultimately be ‘compensée par les relations et les croisements de ces exodes qui font entrelacs, créant un tissu urbain’.³² In *vous*’s case, however, his ‘errance’ does not result in the second, connective part of this process. He fails to create ‘un tissu urbain’ of

28 Certeau, ‘Marches dans la ville’, p. 179.

29 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 95.

30 Certeau, ‘Marches dans la ville’, pp. 180, 183.

31 Certeau, ‘Marches dans la ville’, p. 188.

32 Certeau, ‘Marches dans la ville’, p. 188.

individually meaningful criss-crossings and interrelations. He fails to turn his aimless and disorientating ‘errance’ into affirmative ‘pratiques de l’espace’.³³ In attempting, but failing, to form affective connections with Paris’s city space through the would-be appropriative tactics of walking and of taking the *métro*, *vous* merely succeeds in compounding his sense of restlessness, and of being eternally out of place. Unlike Augé’s *habitué* or Certeau’s *praticien*, *vous* remains forever a foreigner in Paris, set apart by his accent and his lack of attachment. As he believes after his Parisian ‘expérience’: ‘Il vous avait fallu cette plongée dans une grande métropole pour vous rendre compte de votre inaptitude à vous créer des liens’.³⁴

Within the cyclical, non-chronological and associative structure of the novel, *L’Homme qui penche* begins – almost – as it ends, in the protagonist’s home town of Curepipe, with the hung-over, disorientated and largely amnesiac *vous* awaking in the disorder of his small studio flat and trying to put his thoughts, and his life, in order. The novel then recounts *vous*’s nihilistic downward spiral into alcoholism and social withdrawal following his repeated ‘retours au pays natal’, his recollections of past events and his retrospective reflections on the implications of these events for his current sense of misanthropic disconnection. Yet when, towards the end of the novel, the protagonist’s thoughts and narration return to this opening moment of crisis, a perceptible change in his relationship to place and to others can be discerned. Having hit rock-bottom in his self-destructive ‘entrée en souillure’³⁵ and having retreated into the increasingly opaque ‘bocal’³⁶ of

33 Certeau, ‘Marches dans la ville’, p. 189. As his assertion that ‘*l’espace est un lieu pratiqué*’ demonstrates, Certeau rather confusingly reverses the conventional connotations of ‘espace’ (space) as empty and impersonal and of ‘lieu’ (place) as personal and inhabitable. Since I am not seeking to conduct a Certeausian analysis of Robillard’s novels, I use the terms ‘space’ and ‘place’ throughout in their more standard senses.

34 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 91.

35 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 97.

36 The recurrent imagery of an increasingly opaque goldfish bowl separating the protagonist from the outside world, is used for the first time in the following passage, chronologically following *vous*’s return from Paris: ‘L’agréable désordre plus ou moins organisé des premiers temps qui ont suivi votre retour au pays et où vous vous sentiez comme un poisson dans l’eau s’est peu à peu transformé en une sorte de capharnaüm dans un bocal dont les parois se sont opacifiées au fil des années’ (p. 34).

his room and of his mind, *vous* now begins hesitantly to reconnect with the outside world and hence with others.

When *vous* returns to Curepipe, he does not return to the geographic and social circles of the Franco-Mauritian elite he had previously fled. Instead, his quest for belonging – and his incipient alcoholism – leads him, first, to become an ‘habitué’³⁷ of a series of working-class Creole bars around the town’s central crossroads. Despite Curepipe’s small size, entrenched class and ethnic divisions divide the town into discrete, mutually exclusive spaces. The lack of overlap or ‘contact zones’ between these socio-ethnic areas means that Curepipe’s shady, insalubrious bars represent ‘un autre monde’ that is just as foreign to the Franco-Mauritian protagonist as were Paris or La Réunion. They represent a world that is ‘à l’opposé des vitrines éclairées’³⁸ which, as discussed above, symbolise the anachronistic, artificial world of Franco-Mauritian society. Yet, despite his visceral and intellectual rejection of the milieu of his childhood, the abiding negative associations that accrue to his ethnic heritage in Mauritian society are seen to hamper his quest for integration into the improvised communities of these alternative spaces. Pondering the reason for his unease in locations that he has actively chosen as ‘votre havre’,³⁹ *vous* reflects: ‘Est-ce à cause de la blancheur de votre peau, d’habitude assimilée dans cette île à des lieux autrement respectables?’⁴⁰ As Arnold states, in a Kristevan reading of the protagonist’s abject *errance* and alienation, ‘les solidarités interethniques ne peuvent pas se défaire des stéréotypes culturels’.⁴¹ Just as his accent had set him apart as an ‘étranger’ in Paris, so too does his skin colour mark his difference – and hence his lack of belonging – in the working-class Creole sites of his hometown. As a result, the extent of his acceptance into the internally alien, Mauritian but ‘other’ milieu of the local bar is limited to a Creole customer’s offer to buy him a drink – a gesture which, the protagonist interprets, ‘[signifiait] à votre égard une manière d’intégration à ce milieu’.⁴² The fact that this gesture is described as being a ‘surprise agréable’,⁴³ and that it signifies only ‘une manière d’intégration’, underlines once again

37 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 28.

38 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 67.

39 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 28.

40 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 18.

41 Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 283.

42 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 20.

43 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, p. 20.

the misplaced and futile nature of the protagonist's quest to belong here. In any case, as *vous*'s self-destructive and alienating engagement with Curepipe's bars leads him eventually to realise, these locations are not, by definition or by ethnic and class association, ones to which an individual can ever belong, or with which he can positively identify – particularly if that individual also happens to be white and, almost inevitably therefore, middle-class. As the terminology of *vous*'s following observation underlines, such locations constitute what Marc Augé terms 'non-lieux':⁴⁴ interchangeable and essentially uninhabitable spaces whose users are also entirely anonymous: 'Les accros des bars [...] se retrouvent dans une sorte de nulle part, dont une figuration populaire pourrait être une espèce de purgatoire terrestre et définitif'.⁴⁵

In response both to his failure to integrate into the 'non-lieux' or 'nulle part' of Curepipe's bars and also to the realisation of his own loneliness,⁴⁶ the novel plots *vous*'s literal and figurative retreat into the confines of his room and of his mind. As with the protagonist of Perec's *Un homme qui dort*, this physical withdrawal from the world represents a psychological response to a growing sense of existential absurdity, difference and alienation. *Vous* believes: 'Au fond, vous ne partagez rien avec personne, et votre lieu véritable était nulle part'.⁴⁷ Yet, having withdrawn from the world into the symbolic 'nulle part' of his room, it is, as Henri Lefebvre paradoxically postulates, through a realisation of his own alienation and lack of attachment that *vous* finally begins to affirm – and actively to create – a place of his own and, with it, an affirmative sense of self.⁴⁸ Rather than continue to experience his sense of belonging 'nulle part' negatively in terms of absence, *vous* begins to

44 According to Augé, 'Si un lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu'. See Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992), p. 100.

45 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 124.

46 Contradicting stereotypical associations of Mauritius's island society with conviviality, proximity and (over)familiarity, *vous* realises that: 'Il avait suffi du départ à l'étranger de quelques proches pour vous rendre compte qu'il était possible, dans cette île où « tout le monde se connaît », de ne plus trouver quelqu'un avec qui aller prendre un verre, écouter des disques, ou discuter d'un film' (Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 46).

47 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 59.

48 Lefebvre asserts that a human being 'se réalise à travers son aliénation' (*Critique de la vie quotidienne*, p. 180).

transform the ‘nulle part’ of his room and of his immediate *quartier* – the ‘microscopic’ area between his flat and the crossroads at the centre of town – into a personally meaningful ‘quelque part’.

In a move that is reminiscent of Perec’s various observational experiments in response to the question ‘comment regarder le quotidien’, the protagonist begins the process of reappropriation by paying close attention to the minute details of the various bars that he frequents and of his poorly furnished flat.⁴⁹ He creates an inventory of the banal and eccentric features that normally pass unnoticed: the form and use of ‘les petits verres’ in the Santiago bar; the play of light from the traffic lights on table tops; the seemingly random position of objects against walls in his flat. By remarking, and remarking upon, the unremarkable details of his immediate surroundings, *vous* gradually becomes a participant in, rather than a passive recipient of, everyday life. In this, Robillard’s text reflects metropolitan theorists’ recognition that, as Sheringham puts it, ‘everyday life harbours within itself the possibility of its own existential or ontological transformation’.⁵⁰ Turning his attention from the interior of his studio flat and of local bars, *vous* then begins to engage, existentially and ontologically, with his broader surroundings, asking:

Mais comment expliquer alors que, malgré le nombre d’années passées à l’arpenter dans les deux sens et de chaque côté, la rue Chasteauneuf, l’une des deux artères principales de la ville coupant l’autre – la route Royale – en son milieu, ne vous soit jamais, jusqu’à présent, apparue avec précision.⁵¹

Robillard’s text here reflects Sheringham’s assertion, drawing on the findings of theorists of *le quotidien*, that ‘the decision to look itself introduces difference’ and that, if one pays sufficient attention, ‘sameness is actually ever-changing’.⁵²

As well as actively observing, listing, describing and so engaging with his familiar, previously unnoticed everyday surroundings, *vous* begins to invest the public space of the street and of the local Café de Colombo, with his own private memories from different moments of his life:

À différentes époques de votre vie, vous n’avez perçu cette rue qu’à travers certaines de vos préoccupations du moment. Ainsi la fenêtre

49 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, pp. 27–32, 33–34.

50 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 12.

51 Robillard, *L’Homme qui penche*, pp. 62–63.

52 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, pp. 263, 267.

semi-circulaire en bois du Café de Colombo a-t-elle été successivement associée, de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, aux chocolats, milk-shakes et autres friandises que l'on pouvait y trouver, puis à l'obstacle que constituait le trafic de l'après-midi à vos footings quotidiens, avant qu'au début de l'âge adulte elle n'ait été associée à rien de très particulier, si ce n'est aux paquets de gauloises que vous y achetiez régulièrement; et plus tard enfin, à la présence imposante de son bar et son brouhaha des fins d'après-midi dominicains, porté de plus en plus haut au fil des heures par le flux continu des boissons ...⁵³

This active engagement with the memories evoked by a place resembles the practice that Certeau calls 'l'implantation de la mémoire dans un lieu'.⁵⁴ Indeed, the transformative potential of such active 'pratiques de l'espace' is explicitly underlined when *vous* remarks upon 'cette évolution apparente – quoique très lente – de votre paysage quotidien'⁵⁵ thereby brought about.

The striking contrast between the small-scale, mental and largely sedentary nature of *vous*'s current appropriation of Curepipe's public space, on the one hand, and the wide-ranging, physical and exhausting nature of his previous *errance* in Paris, on the other, is foregrounded when *vous* reflects that:

En ce qui vous concerne, vous avez mis des années à vous résigner à cet espace qui, au début, et pendant longtemps, vous est apparu microscopique. Contrairement à Paris, où une solitude obstinée vous avait poussé dans l'infinité de la ville, en une errance qui ne devait jamais s'achever ...⁵⁶

By using, moving between, thinking about and so connecting with the 'microscopic' space between the private realm of his flat and the public space of the bars and cafés of central Curepipe,⁵⁷ *vous* succeeds in turning what had formerly seemed to be an anonymous 'nulle part' into a habitable place of attachment and belonging.

The many overlapping stages of *vous*'s gradual self-definition through a reconnection with place culminate, in the later stages of the novel,

53 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, pp. 63–64.

54 Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 130.

55 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 64.

56 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 71.

57 The limited scope of *vous*'s newly appropriated personal space is underlined, for instance, when he notes that, from his flat, 'en quelques enjambées vous vous retrouvez au carrefour du centre ville' (*L'Homme qui penche*, p. 36).

in his coming to writing. As Arnold states, Robillard's *Blanc raté* 'ne s'affranchit de ses aliénations qu'à travers l'écriture'.⁵⁸ In a self-reflexive conceit reminiscent of Marcel's readiness, at the end of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, to begin to write the story that we have just read, the protagonist refers, at various points throughout *L'Homme qui penche*, to his plan to write 'une histoire entre un type et une ville'.⁵⁹ As the novel and the central character's quest progress, the self-reflexive, auto-fictional nature of this writing project becomes increasingly clear. The love-hate relationship that *vous* himself has with his hometown and which has been the main subject of the novel thus far, is mirrored in the following *mise en abyme* reference to the subject of *vous*'s proposed (and so supposedly as yet unwritten) novel. *Vous* plans:

l'écriture d'une histoire qui vous taraude depuis un certain temps, celle d'un type et d'une ville qui lui colle à la peau, et dont il est incapable de s'échapper. Cette ville qu'il aime et déteste à la fois est la seule qu'il connaisse dans tous les recoins. Par endroits et par moments, elle lui apparaît très laide; mais s'il l'aime, d'une certaine manière, c'est qu'il la connaît depuis toujours. Et il ne peut faire autrement que l'arpenter. Une fois rentré chez lui, elle se met, à son tour, à le hanter. Est-ce que c'est une histoire racontable? Est-ce une histoire tout court?⁶⁰

Given the double sense of the French word 'histoire' – meaning both story and history – the questions with which this extract ends could be interpreted as referring either to the proposed book's unconventional (since everyday) subject matter or, within the diegesis of *L'Homme qui penche*, to the fact that this 'histoire' is increasingly signalled as autobiographical rather than fictional. In either case, *vous*'s act of reflecting on, and putting into writing, the nature of his evolving relationship with his hometown, succeeds in turning the everyday into a source of creativity. Writing about the everyday becomes, for *vous*, an empowering manifestation of Lefebvre's concept of 'l'art de vivre'.

Towards the end of *L'Homme qui penche*, the transformative effect on his sense of self of *vous*'s interrelated physical and intellectual 'pratiques de l'espace' is highlighted as he reflects: 'Vous avez poursuivi votre chemin. Et la vie a recommencé, probablement pas tout à fait comme avant'.⁶¹ By using, paying attention to and finally writing about

58 Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 285.

59 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 35.

60 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, pp. 41–42.

61 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 112.

his everyday surroundings, *vous* manages to transform an overfamiliar, geographically limited part of his hometown into a habitable place rich in empowering personal associations. As the following extract shows, *vous*'s retrospective reconciliation with, and feeling of belonging to, this transformed place also leads him to overcome his sense of existential alienation and to affirm a positive sense of self:

Sur un certain territoire que vous reconnaissez aujourd'hui comme ayant été le vôtre, une ombre s'est mise à se densifier, se limitant à peu de chose: votre studio, les quelques bars agglutinés autour du Santiago et cette route menant à Port-Louis, où vous vous rendez tous les jours. Un territoire qui ne pouvait avoir de cohérence, prendre de sens, mais dont le centre coagulait. Un centre qui n'était autre que votre présence – et votre volonté que ce territoire existe.⁶²

Rather than seeking an elusive sense of belonging in far-flung locations, and rather than simply returning to the dominant social order of the Franco-Mauritian elite that he had previously shunned, *vous* creates a new and highly personalised territory out of the 'chaos du quotidien'.⁶³ Just as he creates his own territory through his particular use of private and common space, so too does the territory that is so created symbiotically reflect, and give coherence to, the person around whom it takes shape. Far from being a passive and even alienated user of common space, *vous* thus becomes, through an act of 'volonté', an active creator of the highly personal place of affective belonging – and of himself.

As Sheringham observes in his study of metropolitan theorists of everyday life, 'quotidienneté implies community'.⁶⁴ As we have seen, the highly artificial, staged *quotidienneté* of *vous*'s original, familial and ethnic Franco-Mauritian community is one from which he feels profoundly alienated. Much of *L'Homme qui penche*, in contrast, plots the protagonist's gradual retreat not just from this community, but from the world and from others in general. Whilst this retreat seems to conclude, on the last page of the novel, with *vous*'s total isolation, as he is left 'seul de votre espèce',⁶⁵ the circular, non-chronological structure of the novel means that this apparent conclusion in fact precedes, in the chronology of his life, *vous*'s tentative re-engagement

62 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 125.

63 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 126.

64 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 360.

65 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 138.

with his environment. Having pursued his self-destructive experiment with isolation to its conclusion, Robillard's protagonist, like the hero of Perec's *Un homme qui dort*, ends the novel ready to start over and hence, in particular, to re-engage with the other *habitués* of his common space. That is, he is ready to build community from his reclaimed *quotidienneté*. The later stages of the novel focus more insistently on *vous*'s past but unresolved relationship with Anna – a partner who, like the protagonist himself, was born and raised in a bourgeois Franco-Mauritian milieu and also rejects its stifling, outdated social structures. In the closing lines of the novel, the haunting presence of an enigmatic, ill-defined 'inconnue'⁶⁶ catches the protagonist's attention. Whether this 'inconnue' is Anna or another woman – such as the one briefly glimpsed but not approached earlier in the narrative⁶⁷ – remains unclear. Yet this concluding emphasis on the possibility of future, new or rekindled romantic relations signals a hopeful end to the protagonist's withdrawal from society. His reconciliation with his everyday surroundings also signals an end to *vous*'s quest for a place of belonging and the start of a new, forward-looking project. *Vous* is symbolically reborn into society through his self-affirming engagement with everyday life, so confirming that, even – or, arguably, especially – within Mauritius's highly divided and hierarchical society, 'l'homme sera quotidien ou ne sera pas'.⁶⁸

Robillard's second novel, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, essentially tells the same central story as *L'Homme qui penche*, albeit from the point of view of an older, first-person narrator-protagonist, François, and his long-term partner, Claire. Like the earlier novel, *Une interminable distraction au monde* plots the protagonist's quest for belonging – to place and to others – first, in a retreat from society and, second, in a return to, and appropriative reconnection with, the immediate, familiar surroundings and everyday life that he had previously shunned. One reviewer described *Une interminable distraction au monde* as 'une histoire où il ne se passe rien'⁶⁹ and, to a large extent, this lack of discernible 'action' is the very point of Robillard's short novel. While very little happens in terms of conventional plot, the

66 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, p. 137.

67 Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche*, pp. 36–37.

68 Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, p. 140.

69 Jean-Baptiste Harang, *TV5Monde* (15 March 2011): http://www.tv5monde.com/cms/chaine-francophone/lf/Litterature/p-7173-critique-Bertrand-de-Robillard-Une-interminable-distraction-au-monde-.htm?id_critique=445 (accessed 18 July 2013).

novel's interest lies instead, and arguably to an even greater degree than in *L'Homme qui penche*, in its detailed investigation of the mundane and generally unnoticed details of everyday life and their associated anxieties, as played out within a Mauritian context.

In *L'Homme qui penche*, as explored above, the island's hierarchical and ethnically divided social structures form the specifically Mauritian setting for the protagonist's quest for everyday belonging. In *Une interminable distraction au monde*, it is the island's geographic and climatic contrasts which perform a similar contextualising function for the novel's thematic and intellectual investigations of *le quotidien*. Yet the particular form that the late middle-aged couple's quest for belonging and their retreat from society take – early retirement to a quiet coastal village – is immediately familiar, in all its banal predictability, to Western readers. Likewise, the alienating world that François and Claire seek to escape by moving to Varechs is not that of a rarefied Franco-Mauritian social elite but, instead, the recognisable – since traditionally metropolitan – *quotidien* of office politics, commuting and the routine pressures of 'la vie urbaine et des contraintes professionnelles'.⁷⁰ As François states at the start of the novel, 'notre préoccupation première [était] d'en finir et de nous retrouver enfin chez nous'.⁷¹

Where *vous* initially sought an alternative place of belonging in Paris, far from his hometown, François and Claire seek, and attempt to create, a new home ('chez nous') in the remote village of Varechs at the southern tip of Mauritius. Anticipating the kind of lifestyle that they hope to have bought along with the physical structure of their new home, François states that: 'Cette maison, simple et rustique, était à l'image de la vie que Claire et moi voulions mener'.⁷² Just as *vous* sought, ultimately in vain, to connect with Paris's 'essence' through his would-be appropriative 'pratiques de l'espace', so too do François and Claire seek to make a home, and to feel at home, in their new house through their everyday uses of its space. The novel depicts in minute, intimate detail such mundane activities as cooking, cleaning, gardening and decorating. The narrator explicitly recognises, for instance, the psychological and appropriative, as well as the purely practical, benefits of Claire's everyday cleaning: 'elle avait besoin de s'accrocher à ces

⁷⁰ Bertrand de Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde* (Paris: L'Olivier, 2011), p. 12.

⁷¹ Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 11.

⁷² Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 19.

petits gestes de tous les jours qui étaient aussi bénéfiques à son moral que nécessaires au maintien de la maison'.⁷³ Similarly, as the following extract underlines, the act of gardening is seen to be far more effective in asserting Claire's growing sense of belonging – or 'adhésion' – to her new location than it is in transforming the wild, wind-swept land into the domesticated garden of its new owner's dreams:

Depuis notre arrivée à Varechs, elle n'était plus tout à fait la même. Physiquement déjà, sa peau laiteuse d'Eurasienne avait pris un teint hâlé qui, sans me déplaire, semblait néanmoins la rendre, je ne saurais vraiment dire pourquoi, étrangère, moins accessible. J'avais l'impression non pas qu'elle me trahissait, mais qu'une distance s'établissait entre nous ... Probablement cette douce coloration de sa peau m'apparaissait-elle comme une manifestation muette de son adhésion à cette nouvelle vie dont je me sentais encore exclu.⁷⁴

As Claire's attempts to appropriate the spaces of her new home and garden begin to bear fruit, her growing physical and emotional connection with this new environment is seen, by the narrator, as the physical manifestation of a growing psychological distance between them. Claire's individual 'adhésion' to their new location and to the new way of life that they had both sought there, has the unexpected adverse effect of making her, like the environment with which she feels connected, seem 'étrangère, moins accessible' to François.

In contrast to Claire's active and successful efforts to create a positive sense of belonging through her everyday 'pratiques de l'espace', François vainly tries, both actively and, as in the following quotation, passively, to feel at home in their new house and locality: 'J'attendais un quelconque signe – venant d'où? – qui m'éclairerait, me mettrait en phase avec ce lieu qui pour l'instant se refusait à moi'.⁷⁵ Just as *vous's* would-be appropriative use of Paris's common space in fact increases his sense of alienation, so too do François's daily walks – 'mes randonnées quotidiennes au village'⁷⁶ – and his plans to read, write and listen to music at home only serve to emphasise his growing feeling of estrangement from his new and irredeemably alien environment. As François comes to recognise, his profound unease and Claire's connective 'adhésion' are both the direct result of contrasting responses to the particular nature of this

73 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 84.

74 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 43.

75 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 22.

76 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 34.

environment: 'Varechs n'est pas vraiment un lieu propice au farniente. Ceux qui ne s'y sentent pas à leur aise savent qu'ils ne s'y plairont jamais. Le lieu ne laisse en effet jamais indifférent'.⁷⁷ Contrary to the couple's joint plan to create an alternative 'chez nous' in their new house by the sea, François realises that, 'À mesure que prenait forme l'intérieur de la maison, mon impression d'y être de moins en moins à l'aise se précisait'.⁷⁸

Attempts actively to appropriate and inhabit their new home in fact have completely the opposite effect for François: they simply serve to underline a deep and growing sense of unease. The main reason that emerges for this physical and psychological discomfort is Varechs's unfamiliar and harsh climate – particularly the incessant wind, which François perceives as 'une vague menace, me donnant un sentiment de précarité'.⁷⁹ Despite the relatively short distance travelled, the dramatic change in climate – from the familiar 'humidité' and 'froid' of Hauteville⁸⁰ to the harsh sun and relentless wind of Varechs – has the effect of rendering seemingly familiar everyday activities unfamiliar and profoundly alienating. Such climatic or pigmentational senses of belonging or exclusion are rarely, if ever, considered by the predominantly urban, Paris-focused theorists of *le quotidien*. Yet, conscious that '[le] soleil [...] pouvait brûler en une heure les peaux délicates comme la mienne' and with 'les nerfs à vif' from the noise and effects of the wind, François is portrayed as physically and temperamentally unable to belong to his new adopted place.⁸¹ In contrast, Claire's Eurasian origins and Reunionese upbringing – biographical facts that had not previously been viewed as insurmountable differences in the couple's relationship – are cited as reasons for her more ready adaptation to her new, but for her already more familiar, environment. By dint of heritage and upbringing, Claire is temperamentally and pigmentationally predisposed to be able to create a sense of affirmative belonging to Varechs. François's white skin and formative upbringing in a place which '[donnait] l'impression d'être davantage sous les latitudes de l'hémisphère Nord que sous les tropiques',⁸² on the other hand, mean that no amount of

77 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 21.

78 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 53.

79 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 23.

80 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 12.

81 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, pp. 21, 34.

82 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 70. This description of Hauteville is reminiscent of Robillard's description of himself as 'un Occidental égaré sous les tropiques', discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

‘tactical’, everyday use of Varechs’s space will ever be able to overcome his feeling of an alienating and interminable ‘distraction au monde’. Contrary to Certeau’s influential postulation that one actively produces a personal, habitable space by means of individual, everyday uses of a common system – that is, by the way in which one uses and so appropriates space – Robillard’s novels suggest, rather tautologically, that one only feels at home in a place in which one *can* feel at home.

In the novel’s fictionalised Mauritian setting, the climatic and geological variations between different regions of the island suffice to thwart François and Claire’s well-laid plans to create an alternative place of belonging away from the drizzle and mundane pressures of working life on the Plaines Wilhems. Fleeing the sound of the wind and the effects of the sun on his fair skin, François initially takes refuge in the study of their Varechs home – ‘seule pièce de la maison où je ne me sentais pas étranger’⁸³ – a withdrawal which in many ways mirrors *vous*’s retreat into his studio flat in *L’Homme qui penche*. Like Roland Barthes’s *chambre*, François’s study represents an individually affirmative ‘espace du quant-à-soi’ that, according to Barthes, simultaneously protects the occupant from the outside world and delineates his own ‘idiorrhymic’ territory.⁸⁴ François’s retreat into the sanctuary of his study reflects, in extreme form, Barthes’s recognition that everyday living – and with it, a sense of belonging – is experienced at the level of the private room as well as at the wider level of the street, neighbourhood or city. Indeed, it is from within the confines of his small room that François is, paradoxically, finally able to reconnect with the wider world and with a community of like-minded individuals, by means of the internet: ‘L’informatique [...] m’offrait la possibilité [...] d’apprécier cette manière de vivre à la fois confiné dans ce village perdu de Varechs et de disposer, par le biais de la toile, d’une fenêtre ouverte sur des lieux très éloignés et très différents du mien’.⁸⁵ The highly personalised ‘interactive network’ that François is able to create, based on shared tastes in music and literature, offers him a reprieve from his alienating immediate surroundings. The internet thus represents an alternative form of everyday sociability not theorised by, since not yet imaginable to, Lefebvre, Certeau, Barthes or Perce. It also represents a rather different, very practical, twenty-first-century

83 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 31.

84 See Roland Barthes, *Comment vivre ensemble: cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1976–1977)* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

85 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 35.

response to the challenge posed in the epigraph to Perec's 1967 novel *Un homme qui dort*, already cited above as an intertextual precursor of Robillard's novel:

Il n'est pas nécessaire que tu sortes de ta maison. Reste à ta table et écoute. N'écoute même pas, attends seulement. N'attends même pas, sois absolument silencieux et seul. Le monde viendra s'offrir à toi pour que tu le démasques, il ne peut faire autrement, extasié, il se tordra devant toi.

Yet, as in *Un homme qui dort* and *L'Homme qui penche*, the act of retreating into the confines of a highly personal 'espace approprié' offers François only temporary respite from the overriding sense of alienation provoked by his immediate surroundings. His creation of a virtual rather than physical connection with others via the internet has the effect of further destabilising the already precarious equilibrium of his 'vie intime' with Claire.

Despite the couple's expectations and François's efforts, his repetition of everyday activities (such as walking, cooking, reading, listening to music, surfing the internet) does not create the kind of affective attachment to place that François seeks and Claire appears to have achieved. Both had underestimated the impact that the change of climate which accompanied their change of location would have on François's sense of well-being and on their life as a couple. As François later recognises, 'je n'avais pas de goût pour les climats et les environnements par trop violents à force de présence, au point d'envahir mon espace intérieur'.⁸⁶ As Claire finally concedes, 'ce n'était pas la peine de s'obstiner à vivre dans un lieu qui ne [lui] convenait pas'.⁸⁷ As in Robillard's earlier novel, therefore, the protagonist's quest for belonging in *Une interminable distraction au monde* ultimately leads him back to his starting point and to his much-maligned hometown of Hauteville.

At the start of the novel – and of François and Claire's quest for an alternative place of belonging – the climate of Hauteville was explicitly but ambiguously cited as a factor that François sought to flee but to which he had, nonetheless, always been deeply attached: 'C'en était fini, désormais, de l'humidité et du froid de Hauteville dont je pensais pourtant ne jamais pouvoir me passer bien longtemps'.⁸⁸ On his journey back to Hauteville, François's immediate, profound and

86 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 106.

87 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 61.

88 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 12.

enduring attachment to its cold and damp climate is evoked in the following highly sensual terms: ‘Une brise froide me caressa la joue; spontanément je tirai un bras dehors et, paume grande ouverte, laissai filer entre mes doigts l’air humide’.⁸⁹ In a move that spontaneously rather than deliberately echoes *vous*’s ‘implantation de la mémoire dans un lieu’ discussed above, François is reminded of the ‘agréable sensation de fraîcheur’ that he had experienced as a child on his return home from his family’s annual holidays by the sea. The quasi-Proustian qualities of his reconnection with, and rediscovery of, the house that he had left just three months earlier are underlined in the following evocation of his interwoven affective, visceral and memorial response to familiar sensory stimuli:

À peine avais-je mis le nez à l’intérieur que j’avais été happé par l’odeur de moisissure froide. Je me mis à fureter d’une pièce à l’autre, à humer l’air comme un animal de retour dans sa tanière, n’en croyant pas mes narines de retrouver des décennies plus tard ces odeurs qui faisaient au fond partie de moi-même. J’avais l’impression de revenir d’un long exil.⁹⁰

The imagery of an animal sniffing with pleasure the familiar scents of his lair emphasises the deep-rooted, comforting and seemingly instinctive sense of belonging that François experiences on returning ‘home’. Having left Hauteville at the start of the novel, with the explicit project of creating a ‘chez nous’ in a new, entirely adopted location, François immediately recognises, on his return, that, in a much deeper and more meaningful, physical and emotional sense: ‘je retournais vivre chez nous’.⁹¹ Rather than voluntarily seeking a house elsewhere which would match an imagined but ultimately illusory lifestyle, François rediscovers, on his return to Hauteville, a ‘chez nous’ that is already endowed with the kinds of multilayered and involuntary, emotional, physical and familial associations that make a house a ‘home’. Long unnoticed, since familiar, habitual and banal, these truly ‘everyday’ and comforting associations collectively contribute to François’s immediate sense of belonging. As Sara Ahmed asserts, ‘it takes time to feel at home’.⁹² The lengthy process of investing a place with personal memories, stories and

89 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 63.

90 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 65.

91 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, pp. 11, 68.

92 Sara Ahmed, ‘Introduction’, in Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller (eds), *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 9.

associations that constitute a home, through the accumulated everyday use of space, was already achieved long ago in the house in Hauteville. François simply needed the defamiliarising experience of attempting to make a home in the alien environment of Varechs in order to realise this. Although one can potentially buy a house wherever one choses, one cannot, as François instantly recognises, always chose where one feels at home:

À peine arrivé à Hauteville, j'eus le sentiment infaillible de renouer le cordon ombilical avec ce lieu de froid et d'humidité [...] je n'avais jamais attaché grande importance à l'apparence très quelconque du centre-ville, à laquelle j'étais d'ailleurs si habitué que je l'avais intériorisée comme s'il s'agissait de la mienne.⁹³

Prior to his temporary move to Varechs, François had, as he reflects, always assumed that he was 'un homme incapable de trouver sa place dans ce monde',⁹⁴ echoing the sense of existential disjuncture from his environment that *vous* experiences in *L'Homme qui penche*. Yet, on his return to the familiar environment of Hauteville, François begins to lose 'cette impression d'à peu près qui n'en finissait pas de brouiller ma perception du quotidien'⁹⁵ and to realise that he had simply been searching in the wrong place. He could not see where his 'place dans ce monde' was, because he was there already.

As the terminology of the above quotation implies, it is through an appropriative re-engagement with *le quotidien* – with the practices of everyday life and with his everyday environment – that François is finally able to assert a positive, self-affirming sense of belonging to place. In addition to the immediate, visceral sense of connection that François feels with Hauteville and with his house, Robillard also depicts the protagonist's more tactical 'pratiques de l'espace' there. For instance, as François notes, 'Quand je sortais pour mes courses quotidiennes, j'empruntais un chemin détourné, afin de faire durer la sensation de la brise et de la pluie fine qui picote le visage et les mains'.⁹⁶ The affirmative benefits of the deliberately appropriative way in which François engages with the everyday – taking a longer route in order to prolong and savour the experience – are evident when he reflects:

93 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 69.

94 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 105.

95 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 92.

96 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 70.

'J'étais insouciant, j'avais l'impression que la vie commençait pour moi'.⁹⁷ As with the protagonist of *L'Homme qui penche*, François's personal 'home' territory, delineated by his daily use of common space, is extremely limited geographically: 'Je sortais peu de la ville et ne m'aventurais guère au-delà de la région des Plaines Wilhems. Mes incursions journalières dans le centre-ville duraient rarement plus d'une vingtaine de minutes'.⁹⁸ Avoiding past acquaintances and the difficult questions they might pose about his relationship with Claire, François asserts his preference for generic, everyday interactions: 'En matière de rencontres, je préférais [...] mes échanges quotidiens, quoique assez brefs, avec les commerçants lorsque je faisais mes courses'.⁹⁹ It is precisely through a re-engagement with, and a revalorisation of, the minutiae of everyday existence that François ultimately finds a place of belonging and, with it, a sense of self – right back in the very place from which he and Claire had departed at the beginning of the novel. Indeed, the evident pleasure or 'insouciance' that François experiences in his engagement with mundane daily chores, such as shopping and cooking, reflects Barthes's fundamental belief that 'la marque de l'utopie, c'est le quotidien; ou encore: tout ce qui est quotidien est utopique'.¹⁰⁰ Like *vous* in *L'Homme qui penche*, it is by re-engaging with, paying attention to and positively relishing the previously ignored or derided minutiae of everyday life in a seemingly overfamiliar place that François finds an answer to his quest for belonging.

As in *L'Homme qui penche*, the attainment of a sense of belonging through engagement with the everyday is also achieved, as we shall now explore, by means of a coming to writing. At the start of *Une interminable distraction au monde*, François imagines that his early retirement and move to Varechs would allow him to 'me consacrer à un projet que j'avais en tête depuis quelque temps'.¹⁰¹ This project, the equivalent of *vous*'s 'histoire d'un type et d'une ville', is to capture in writing a scene that he had witnessed as a child – of a fisherman guiding a simple pirogue across the unbroken surface of a lagoon – and the impression of 'éternité' it had inspired in him.¹⁰² As François continues:

97 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 20.

98 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 93.

99 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 88.

100 Roland Barthes, *Ceuvres complètes II* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p. 1052.

101 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 14.

102 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 15.

Ce tableau se démultipliant sur le mode des « scènes de la vie quotidienne » [...] m'apparaissait, plusieurs décennies plus tard, comme la révélation silencieuse de ce vers quoi je devais tendre un jour. Et il me semblait que ce jour était arrivé. De même le moment d'écrire le livre qui naîtrait de cette scène.¹⁰³

Yet this plan is thwarted both because, as we have already seen, François's unease means that he is unable to write in Varechs and also because, as he recalls only after his return to Hauteville, the sublime impression of 'infini', 'éternité', 'résistance' and 'fierté'¹⁰⁴ that the scene had originally inspired had already been entirely dispelled by an intervening experience:

Il me revint alors à l'esprit qu'une dizaine de jours après cette scène, j'avais emprunté une embarcation, afin de vérifier ce que j'imaginai être une expérience particulière: la sensation de glissement sur l'eau qu'aurait eue le pêcheur. Ma déception cependant fut de taille lorsque je me rendis à l'évidence que la sensation relevant de mon imagination était aux antipodes de celle qui fut la mienne lorsque je poussai sur la perche pour faire avancer la pirogue, dont j'avais largement sous-estimé le poids.¹⁰⁵

As a result, in a move that mirrors both protagonists' eventual reconciliation with their everyday, personal surroundings, François gradually realises that the object of his writing project should not be someone else's imagined 'scène de la vie quotidienne', but instead 'les événements de ma vie passée à me répéter et à interpréter'.¹⁰⁶ Just as François learns to savour the simple pleasures of his own everyday life on his return to Hauteville, the subject and focus of his writing project shift imperceptibly to become what he calls 'cet exercice « de mémoire permanente » – au sens de « révolution permanente » –, et qui fait de soi son propre historiographe'.¹⁰⁷ This description of the exercise of paying attention to, and writing about, one's own everyday experience is reminiscent of Perec's proposition that intellectual light be shone upon the long neglected 'infra-ordinaire': 'Peut-être s'agit-il de fonder enfin notre propre anthropologie, celle qui parlera de nous'.¹⁰⁸ Like Perec and other metropolitan theorists of *le quotidien*, François comes to realise that the everyday is an essential means of asserting the fundamental

103 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 16.

104 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, pp. 15–16.

105 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 71.

106 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 93.

107 Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 71.

108 Georges Perec, *L'Infra-Ordinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 12.

human need to belong, and as such constitutes an important but often neglected object of intellectual and creative investigation.

L'Homme qui penche and *Une interminable distraction au monde* tell essentially the same story: that of a Franco-Mauritian's quest for a place of belonging, and his gradual shift from alienation to appropriation by means of a reconnection with the everyday. *L'Homme qui penche* concludes, as we have seen, with the bachelor protagonist's readiness to re-engage, on potentially romantic terms, with the human others who share his everyday space, so affirming the basic assertion that 'quotidieneté implies community'. *Une interminable distraction au monde* similarly ends with François and Claire's decision to recommence life together as a couple, back in the everyday surroundings and everyday routines of their rediscovered 'chez nous' in Hauteville. Echoing Pavese's injunction, in the novel's epigraph, that one should 'laisser parler la vie intime, avec son rythme qui seul compte', Claire's concluding letter to François hopefully affirms that: 'notre aventure [...] ne sera pas celle que nous sommes, à tort, allés chercher dans un ailleurs étranger à nous, mais plutôt ce cheminement intérieur dont tu me parles'.¹⁰⁹ This shared 'cheminement intérieur' constitutes a far more prosaic and contented – since fundamentally *everyday* – form of forward momentum than the frenetic quest or aimless *errance* that had previously driven the protagonists' interactions with their various, alien or familiar, surroundings.

In their engagement with the issues of everyday belonging and, conversely, everyday alienation, Bertrand de Robillard's two novels draw on largely metropolitan French intellectual and literary models – a fact which, as I have suggested, may well have contributed to their critical neglect to date. The novels' emphasis on an interior, mental world, and on the gaps between expectation and reality, as between experience and expression, follows in the archetypal footsteps of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The protagonists' alienating and often nauseous confrontations with the fundamental absurdity of existence are reminiscent of Sartrean existentialism. The novels' self-reflexive, non-chronological form and ontologically problematic narrators echo concerns of the Nouveau Roman group. In particular, as we have explored, Robillard's literary investigations of the minutiae of everyday, middle-class life owe much to the theoretical and literary works of metropolitan thinkers such as Lefebvre, Certeau, Barthes, Augé and Perec. In many ways, then, Robillard's novels reflect the author's claim

¹⁰⁹ Robillard, *Une interminable distraction au monde*, p. 110.

to be himself ‘un Occidental égaré sous les tropiques’. The ‘tropical’ location of Robillard’s literary investigations of the everyday is, however, crucial to the portrayal of his Franco-Mauritian protagonists’ quests for belonging. The feelings of alienation that *vous* and François experience are linked, in Paris or La Réunion, to the characters’ real or perceived foreignness in these locations and, in Mauritius itself, to the island’s internal socio-ethnic divisions and climatic diversity. These particular, Mauritian circumstances, which have such a profound impact upon the success or failure of the protagonists’ quests for belonging, implicitly reveal blind spots in the largely metropolitan, Parisian bias of much critical thinking on the purportedly universal notion of *le quotidien*.¹¹⁰

Bertrand de Robillard’s novels are interesting for this book’s exploration of the diverse forms of belonging articulated in contemporary Mauritian fiction because, contrary to conventional expectations as to the nature of postcolonial literature, they portray Mauritius as a place where recognisably ‘ordinary’ people – to Western readers, at least – lead recognisably ‘ordinary’ lives. The central characters of *L’Homme qui penche* and *Une interminable distraction au monde* are bankers, lawyers, teachers, publishers and aspiring writers who live in anonymous flats in drab, damp towns, hold dinner parties, go on family holidays, take early retirement and buy second homes by the coast. They are also cynical, disabused, apolitical and profoundly self-obsessed. The intellectual identity crisis that *vous* or François experiences – provoked, variously, by the alienating routine of white-collar work, the anachronistic artificiality of Franco-Mauritian social events, the adverse effects of climate on pale skin or the idleness of early retirement – is a world away from the brutal, politically sanctioned forms of exclusion and disaffection depicted, for instance, in Patel’s *Le Silence des Chagos*, and discussed in the previous chapter. The protagonists of Robillard’s novels do not feel that they belong to the Franco-Mauritian ‘community’ into which they were born. They are unable to find or create alternative places of belonging either abroad, in the neighbouring French *département-d’outre-mer*, La Réunion, in the former colonial capital, Paris or in Mauritian locations outside their familiar home

110 After all, to spend three days sitting in a café, observing the banal comings and goings of a Parisian square – the project behind one of Perce’s everyday experiments – is not an activity that many working-class Parisians, let alone many Mauritians, would readily identify as ‘everyday’. See Georges Perec, *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1982 [1974]).



towns. Even the small island of Mauritius is shown to be too big, too varied and too segregated to be itself a place of either individual or collective identification. Instead, both *vous* and François come to realise that they belong to a ‘microscopic’ geographic and associative territory, to the ‘vie intime’ of a couple, to their own personal tastes, habits and mundane interactions: that is, to the everyday practices and spaces of ‘home’. They belong, tautologically, where they have always belonged. Robillard’s fascinating and unjustly neglected novels are important in that they portray Mauritius as an everyday place where everyday people work and live everyday lives. They are anti-exotic, not because they depict a contemporary Mauritian society riven by unemployment, violence and inequality, as do other authors, but because they portray banal, materially comfortable, middle-class, middle-aged *ennui* in drab, drizzly towns. Nonetheless, Robillard’s works could also be seen implicitly to depict Mauritius as a place in which it is still predominantly white, male, middle-class, Franco-Mauritians who have the opportunity – or the luxury – of harbouring such purportedly ‘everyday’ anxieties and of asserting such ‘everyday’ forms of belonging.

