

## *Over the rainbow*

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## Conclusion

### Over the Rainbow

As the preceding chapters have individually and jointly demonstrated, belonging is a central concern in twenty-first-century Mauritian literature. This long-standing concern, renewed and exacerbated by the violent unrest of 1999, is commonly expressed in the novels studied as a conundrum, a longing, an ambition or an impossible dream, rather than as a shared, lived reality. The Kaya riots forced an urgent reconsideration, by writers, commentators and politicians, of the successes and limitations of Mauritius's postcolonial, multicultural model of 'unity in diversity' and, crucially, of what it means to be 'Mauritian' today. As all recognise, the island is too small and the nation too young to be able to accommodate the threat posed by communalist unrest to the largely peaceful cohabitation of its multi-ethnic population, or to be able to ignore its underlying causes. All of these novels are haunted by the spectre of violence and by the ever-present danger of its resurgence. None of the novels analysed attempts to re-establish the pre-riots *status quo*, by bolstering the fractured edifice of Mauritius's 'community system' or repeating the discourses of ethnic belonging that underpin it. In contrast to the celebratory rhetoric of a convivial, harmonious 'rainbow nation' promoted in externally facing political discourse, the twenty-first-century novels of my corpus portray Mauritius as a profoundly unequal, ethnically segregated place in which those who do not 'belong' are relegated to the geographic and social margins. The prevalent communalist model of belonging, based on discourses and practices of ancestral, diasporic allegiance, is criticised in all of the novels studied for contributing to deep economic and social divisions between different ethnic groups – divisions that contributed to the Kaya unrest. These dominant forms of ethnic, diasporic belonging are commonly portrayed



as inhibiting broader social cohesion and preventing the development of more inclusive forms of belonging, such as those previously postulated, but ultimately abandoned, by mid-twentieth-century proponents of *mauricianisme*.

The focus of my investigation has been on literary texts. Although the novels of my corpus do engage with the real-life social, geographic and political realities of modern-day Mauritius, they do so in highly exaggerated, selective and non-realist ways. My aim has not been to examine interethnic tensions or social cohesion in reality, but rather to analyse the images of contemporary Mauritian society and of Mauritius's imagined future that emerge from my literary corpus. My primary aim in this project was thus to examine how diverse articulations of belonging – or, conversely, of exclusion – are imagined in contemporary francophone Mauritian fiction. Each of the preceding chapters has explored the literary treatment of the problem of belonging in a different novel or pair of novels. In this conclusion, I shall now draw out some of the main areas of similarity and divergence between them, and so sketch the potential fictional bases of their literary 'unity in diversity'. My broad findings can be summarised as follows. First, a deep-seated anxiety about the problem of belonging in multi-ethnic Mauritius is central to the twenty-first-century Mauritian literary imaginary, of which my corpus is representative. Second, the prevalent communalist model of belonging, based on internally cohesive ethnic, religious and diasporic allegiances, is universally critiqued and rejected. Third, nearly 20 years after William Miles made his provocative observation about the enigmatic nature of Mauritian nationhood, still no single, 'overarching sense of national unity' emerges from the novels of our corpus to replace the divisive communalist, multicultural model that they critique.<sup>1</sup> Instead, fourth, a diverse range of models of affective belonging, both individual and collective, is tentatively imagined. These alternative forms of belonging are, however, also consistently deconstructed by the characteristically self-reflexive forms taken by the novels, revealing, fifth, a common resistance to overarching grand narratives of national identity. Finally, despite the many differences – of scale, form, perspective and content – between the different kinds of belonging imagined, there also emerge several striking areas of convergence: the trope of the journey or quest; moments of epiphany, when characters connect with the island's fragile natural beauty; the haunting presence of the stateless migrant or

1 Miles, 'The Mauritius Enigma', p. 103.

internal pariah as the physical, human embodiment of exclusion; and an insistent desire to connect with Creole characters and, through them, with an elusive, occluded or lost, locally grounded Mauritian culture. As we shall explore, these convergences, combined with a common resistance to prescriptive identitarian models, betray a strong underlying commitment, in contemporary francophone Mauritian fiction, to the ongoing project of Mauritian nationhood and to the always evolving, future-orientated process of belonging to place and people.

As depicted in fiction, Mauritius's dominant social structures – whereby different ethnic groups live alongside one another in discrete geographic spaces but rarely meet or interact, each maintaining its own internally cohesive, religious, linguistic and cultural practices – share many striking features with the fragmented 'plural societies' analysed by John Furnivall.<sup>2</sup> In these colonial-era multi-ethnic models, Furnivall argues, society is held together by force and coercion, rather than by a shared 'social will'. The outbreak of violent interethnic unrest in 1999 – and, indeed, the force required to contain it – might, when combined with other obvious neocolonial parallels explored by this book (notably in Chapter 1), support a similarly negative view of Mauritius's 'plural society'. As such, the various component colours of the 'rainbow nation' could be seen to exist side by side, without coalescing into a national 'people'. According to such a 'plural' vision, the Mauritian nation would, like the segregated colonial situations of Furnivall's original study or the 'monde compartimenté' of Fanon's vision, be characterised more by its diversity than by its purported unity. Nonetheless, for all the many faults and inequalities that the novels undoubtedly foreground in their fictionalised representations of modern-day Mauritius, the young island nation is still portrayed, contrary to Furnivall, as a place to which the various characters feel a profound sense of gratitude, commitment and love. Although a sense of nationhood is portrayed as still a work in progress, Mauritius is also portrayed as a place – and an idea – to which the authors' diverse characters all fervently long to belong. Contrary to Furnivall's dystopian vision of plural societies, the novels studied in this book thus amply demonstrate that a strong 'social will' does in fact motivate both the authors' common rejection of Mauritius's divisive community system and, more positively, their common desire to

<sup>2</sup> John S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), cited in David Nicholls, *Three Varieties of Pluralism* (London: MacMillan, 1974).

create more just and inclusive senses of belonging to Mauritius. It is this compelling, unifying desire or longing to belong that ultimately prevails over the various, diverse models of belonging and exclusion that are imagined.

A common longing to belong – identified by Probyn, Bell, Hedetoff and Hjort as an inherent characteristic of the affective dimensions of belonging<sup>3</sup> – underlies all of the novels of my corpus. This longing is expressed in very different ways, however, confirming certain key observations in studies of belonging from a range of disciplines, as discussed in this volume’s introduction. As geographer Marco Antonsich observes, for instance, ‘belonging can be conceptualised at multiple scales’<sup>4</sup> – an observation that is reflected in our corpus, at one extreme, by the microscopic, intimate, everyday spaces appropriated by the protagonists of Robillard’s *L’Homme qui penche* and *Une interminable distraction au monde* and, at the other, by the depiction of the island as a formative staging post on vast transgenerational journeys of global migration in Amal Sewtohul’s *Made in Mauritius*. While the female protagonists of Nathacha Appanah’s *Blue Bay Palace* and Ananda Devi’s *Ève de ses décombres* feel actively excluded by the masculinist politics of belonging that prevail at the levels of home, town or neighbourhood, they imagine instead a self-affirming female identification with elemental natural forces at the broader level of the island.

The diverse forms of belonging imagined in contemporary Mauritian fiction illustrate political scientist Nira Yuval-Davis’s twofold recognition that ‘people can “belong” in many different ways and to many different objects of attachment’<sup>5</sup> – and this even within an island nation as geographically small as Mauritius. Such diverse objects of attachment include: a fleeting moment of unifying violence (in *Les Jours Kaya*); the natural, prehuman environment of the island (*Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*); local climate and daily habits (*L’Homme qui penche*, *Une interminable distraction au monde* and *Le Silence des Chagos*); a particular colour or image (*Histoire d’Ashok*); a common characteristic of collective memory (*Histoire d’Ashok*); or, paradoxically, a state of perpetual mobility and rootlessness (*Made in Mauritius*). Correspondingly, the different ways in which belonging to these diverse

3 Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, p. 8; Bell, *Performativity and Belonging*, p. 1; Hedetoff and Hjort, *The Postnational Self*, p. ix.

4 Antonsich, ‘Searching for Belonging’, p. 646.

5 Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging*, p. 12.

objects is expressed include: the cathartic, unifying potential of violence; the harnessing of natural elemental forces; political activism and legal battles against injustice and exclusion; the strategic use and reappropriation of everyday space; artistic expression; or a physical, spiritual or psychological journey. Although expressed in often very different ways, the same concerns – with the problem of belonging and with what it means to be Mauritian – underlie all of the novels studied.

In identifying the different ways in which a common desire to belong is expressed in contemporary Mauritian fiction, my analyses concur with Antonsich's assertion that 'contemporary societies [are] characterised by the co-presence of a plurality of forms of belonging'<sup>6</sup> – an assertion which goes against more traditional models of nationhood based on (imagined) ethnic homogeneity, shared origins, ancient ties and cultural traditions. Reflecting Antonsich's assertion, our findings also suggest that, contrary to the puzzlement induced by Miles' observation that there is 'no overriding sense of national unity' in Mauritius, a plurality of forms of belonging is, in fact, a normal, even a common, response to shifting contemporary realities. 'Within any particular population from a given country', as Vertovec observes, 'there will be important distinctions with reference to ethnicity, religious affiliation and practice, regional and local identities [...], political parties and movements, and other criteria of collective belonging'.<sup>7</sup> While characteristic of many contemporary situations, therefore, such a plurality of forms of belonging is nonetheless a particularly pronounced – even an exceptional – characteristic of the young multi-ethnic, non-indigenous nation of Mauritius. In exploring the diverse forms of belonging and, indeed, of exclusion articulated in contemporary Mauritian fiction, the close textual analyses of this book's chapters have explored the 'coalescence of factors' – ethnicity, class, gender, 'race', geographic location, legal status, historical experience, social and economic capital – 'that condition people's lives'<sup>8</sup> within the small multi-ethnic nation of Mauritius. In exploring the fraught interrelation between expressions of affective belonging, on the one hand, and the local or global 'politics of belonging' on the other, my study has interrogated the 'many contingencies' and 'ethical imperatives'<sup>9</sup> that condition, or inhibit, people's ability to 'feel at home' in Mauritius.

6 Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging', p. 653.

7 Vertovec, 'Super-diversity and its implications', p. 1031.

8 Vertovec, 'Super-diversity and its implications', p. 1026.

9 Jones, 'Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics', pp. 221, 223.

Despite the evident divergences between the different forms of belonging imagined in contemporary Mauritian fiction, they do share certain recurrent tropes which are particular to the Mauritian situation rather than being characteristic of contemporary societies more generally. These specific Mauritian areas of convergence could, indeed, be seen to sketch out areas of putative common ground – or, to use Thomas Eriksen’s term, ‘common denominators’<sup>10</sup> – on the basis of which a genuinely more inclusive and unifying form of national belonging might eventually, if not imminently, be imagined. As such, recent francophone Mauritian fiction displays a renewed and reinvigorated interest, half a century after independence, in exploring the putative bases for a locally grown, inclusive sense of Mauritian culture or *mauricianisme* transcending ethnic differences.

One of the most striking of these common recurrent tropes is that of the journey. In contrast to the sedentary processes of *emplacement* and settlement that characterise certain national narratives of the immediate post-independence period, and contrary to retrospective reconstructions of communal identity based on ancestral origins, the journey repeatedly serves as a physical and metaphorical reflection of the ongoing, future-orientated processes that characterise the common search for belonging in twenty-first-century Mauritian fiction. The journey gives fictional form to the movement fortuitously implied in belonging’s *-ing* form, as discussed in this volume’s introduction. Metaphorically, the various journeys reflect the protagonists’ searches for answers to recurrent, existential and ontological questions: about their purpose in life, their place in Mauritian society and what it means to be ‘Mauritian’. In physical, spatial terms, journeys also provide characters with the means to discover previously unknown places and people of Mauritius, outside the ethnic and class delineations of their home communities. In both metaphorical and physical senses, the journey is thus essential to the process by which characters cast off their hyphenated ethnic identities (as Indo-Mauritian, Franco-Mauritian or Sino-Mauritian) and begin to become ‘Mauritian’ in a broader, more inclusive sense.

In Souza’s *Les Jours Kaya*, for instance, Santee’s journey starts, realistically, when she takes the bus from her Hindu village of Bienvenue to Rose Hill. As the riots gather apace, however, her journey takes on increasingly fantastic qualities, as Santee is swept along by the internal

<sup>10</sup> See Eriksen, *Common Denominators*.



momentum of the unrest, discovering previously unknown districts of Mauritius and so becoming part of the briefly unified, multi-ethnic community of rioters. In Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya's bus trips from Blue Bay to Mahébourg reveal to her, in physical form, the deep social and economic inequalities that mark island society and limit her own opportunities. Yet it is also on these journeys that she glimpses, and comes self-assertively to identify with, traces of the island's elemental, prehuman nature. In Devi's *Ève de ses décombres*, rides into the mountains on borrowed bicycles also allow Sad and Ève to glimpse other worlds and possibilities outside the narrow confines of Troumaron and Port Louis, and so to connect more positively with the broader island and with each other. In Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, the brutal one-way journey of Chagossian islanders to Mauritius thenceforth structures their post-traumatic responses both to their location of involuntary residence (*ici*) and to their irredeemably lost place of affective belonging (*là-bas*). An imagined but forbidden journey of return, denied by the profoundly unequal international politics of belonging, becomes the object of the Chagossian refugees' affective longing and of their long legal struggle for justice. In Robillard's *L'Homme qui penche* and *Une interminable distraction au monde*, the protagonists' wide-ranging but frustrated *errances* in far-flung locations prefigure, in contrastive scale, their later journeys of internal self-discovery and reconciliation with the 'microscopic' places of home. In Sewtohul's *Histoire d'Ashok* and *Made in Mauritius* all of the characters embark upon journeys of different lengths and durations – Ashok's aimless scooter rides; Vassou's fantastic 'course fantôme'; André's island-crossing political campaigning; Laval's incremental journeys outside Chinatown, Port Louis, Mauritius, and then within Australia – in order to understand their own place in their island home and in the world. In all of the novels studied, the central trope of the journey is thus motivated by the very real need to break out of entrenched and divisive ethnic social structures, and by a concomitant desire to belong to a more broadly conceived, more just and inclusive Mauritius beyond.

Another recurrent trope, which takes place while on a journey, is that of a defining moment of epiphany, when characters suddenly experience a sense of profound connection with the natural beauty of their island home outside the immediate confines of their familiar environment. In *Blue Bay Palace*, as discussed in Chapter 2, Maya experiences moments of affective, sigh-inducing love for her 'pays' when she glimpses a beautiful flower or a feature of the natural landscape,

untouched by man<sup>11</sup> – moments of rapture which offer her aesthetic and emotional relief from the repressive social proscriptions of her immediate surroundings. In *Une interminable distraction au monde*, François recalls the powerful impression of ‘infini’, ‘éternité’, ‘résistance’ and ‘fierté’<sup>12</sup> that he experienced as a child when he saw a fisherman pushing a *pirogue* across the unbroken surface of a lagoon. This scene thenceforth represents for him ‘la révélation silencieuse de ce vers quoi je devais tendre un jour’.<sup>13</sup>

In several novels, this recurrent scene of epiphany takes place on a mountaintop – a symbolically significant vantage point from which the protagonists gain a broad and encompassing view of the island outside the confines of their more usual *milieu*. In *Ève de ses décombres*, for instance, Sad takes Ève on a rare trip into the mountains behind Troumaron, from where they witness the unexpected beauty of Port Louis at dawn:

Très tôt, un matin, [...] je l’emmène au monument de Marie, Reine de la Paix, au flanc de la montagne. De là-haut, le ciel semble rosir de timidité sous nos regards. Ce ciel qui a tout vu joue au jeu de la séduction. C’est tout ce que j’ai trouvé, pour lui montrer autre chose que notre quartier [...] A l’ouest, il y a la rade, si calme au matin qu’on ne voit pas le moindre remous dans l’eau. Une eau sur laquelle on pourrait marcher, c’est le premier miracle [...] Voici ta ville, lui dis-je en silence.<sup>14</sup>

The pivotal importance of this scene is underlined when Sad later recalls the love and loyalty – both for Ève but also for Mauritius – that its moment of appropriative rapture had inspired in him: ‘La ville me disait: s’il y a des instants comme celui-ci et des visages comme le sien, alors, tu devrais m’aimer, rien que pour cela’.<sup>15</sup> In Sewtohul’s *Histoire d’Ashok*, Vassou’s self-affirming connection with Mauritius’s ‘esprit marron’, discussed in Chapter 5, also starts ‘sur le sommet d’une montagne’, from where ‘l’on voyait la ville de Port-Louis, et à leur droite, le croissant de montagnes culminant en Pieter Both’.<sup>16</sup> In *Made in Mauritius*, as discussed previously, Laval and Feisal also experience a similar moment of discovery, rapture and attachment to place when

11 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, pp. 9–10.

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

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

14 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, pp. 45–46.

15 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 67.

16 Sewtohul, *Histoire d’Ashok*, p. 159.

they climb to the top of Le Pouce mountain and see the island beyond for the very first time:

C'était un beau paysage, une ondulation de champs de canne d'un vert très foncé, montant vers une élévation tremblante, loin à notre gauche – le plateau central de l'île [...]. Nous voyions loin à notre droite le Corps de Garde, comme une grosse bête allongée sur son ventre au milieu du tapis continu des champs. Devant nous, à l'horizon, le trident bizarre des Trois Mamelles. C'était comme le paysage d'un vaste pays, et nous fûmes surpris par l'élégance des champs de canne, bien découpés en carreaux par leurs sentiers. Nous qui avons passé toute notre vie parmi les immeubles croupissants et les routes défoncées de Port Louis, nous avons toujours cru que le reste de l'île serait encore plus laid.<sup>17</sup>

These recurrent scenes are remarkable not only for their frequency, but also for the striking similarities of form and function that underlie them: as an escape from the oppressive structures of everyday life; as opportunities for widening geographic and psychological horizons; as moments of epiphany in which views of unimagined beauty are glimpsed; and as alternative perspectives from which to imagine more inclusive, loving connections with broader Mauritius. What is also significant for our discussion of belonging, as we shall discuss in a slightly different context later, is how these moments of epiphany, liberation and appropriation from atop a mountain all follow – either implicitly or, in the case of Vassou's discovery of 'l'esprit marron', explicitly – in the long-occluded tracks of fugitive slaves who fled into the mountains and *mornes* in a

17 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 156. Similar scenes of visual appropriation and connection from a mountaintop occur at key moments elsewhere in *Made in Mauritius*. First, when Laval, his father, Feisal and Ayesha escape the chaos and violence of the pre-independence riots in Port Louis by heading into the mountains where, in contrast, 'Nos soirées étaient paisibles: à la tombée de la nuit, nous allions à Marie-Reine-de-la-Paix, où nous avions vue sur toute la ville, et nous mangions là-bas, sous les étoiles, en regardant flamber les maisons' (p. 119). Second, when 'Feisal et moi étions sur le sommet de la Montagne des Signaux, et nous regardions le soleil se coucher sur la mer, loin à l'ouest' (p. 217). And later, in Australia, on top of Mount Wollumbin, when Laval 'voyait devant lui un paysage de champs de canne, avec au loin, à l'horizon, des montagnes au relief escarpé, dont la silhouette ressemblait exactement à celle qu'il avait vu la première fois de sa vie qu'il avait contemplé des champs de cannes, lorsque Feisal et lui avaient escaladé la montagne du Pouce' (p. 265). All of these scenes correspond to a moment of revelation in Laval's lifelong quest for an understanding of what it means to be 'made in Mauritius'.

desperate bid for freedom. In many ways, the recurrent scene of flight to a mountaintop can be viewed as a form of palimpsestic, symbolic *marronage* whereby authors and characters retrace the erased but haunting footsteps of their Afro-Malagasy predecessors – predecessors whose prior claims to belonging have been largely eclipsed in the competitive identity politics of post-independence Mauritius.

A wide variety of destinations are reached and objects of attachment claimed at the end of the various characters' journeys of (self-)discovery. Yet, in none of the novels are these destinations or objects of attachment ultimately allowed to prevail. As we have seen in the various chapters of this study, all of the alternative forms of belonging imagined – to the moment, to the island's geology, to a lost homeland, to the everyday, to an elusive 'soul', to collective history or to a state of perpetual nomadism – are repeatedly undermined by the novels' self-reflexivity and narrative uncertainty. This formal and thematic uncertainty is an important common characteristic of our twenty-first-century Mauritian corpus. In *Les Jours Kaya*, the cathartic and unifying potential of the riots, like the inter-ethnic communion between Santee and Ronaldo, is ultimately presented as a temporary illusion offering no enduring direction for characters or society. Both the riots and the romantic encounter peter out before the novel reaches its ambiguous conclusion, in which a young and frightened Ram sits alone amidst the post-riots rubble. Maya's self-affirming identification with the elemental forces that formed the island in *Blue Bay Palace* ultimately leads not to the destruction of the man-made structures that had oppressed her, but to her own incarceration. Indeed, as the novel progresses, Maya's violent thoughts and actions are portrayed as those of an increasingly unstable mind, rather than of someone with a justifiable desire to right social wrongs. A misanthropic alcoholic, the *vous* of *L'Homme qui penche* is profoundly self-obsessed: characteristics that also make him a highly unreliable narrator. While no doubt individually self-affirming, the microscopic and intimate forms of everyday belonging that he and François, Robillard's other Franco-Mauritian protagonist, both claim at the end of their respective quests would, if extended, result not in the potential unification of broader society, but in its further fragmentation. Indeed, as Arnold recognises, for Robillard, 'c'est l'individu qui l'intéresse, l'homme non pas inscrit dans un quelconque combat collectif, mais dans sa singularité, son intimité, sa poéticité'.<sup>18</sup> Although *Histoire*

18 Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 284.

*d'Ashok* and *Made in Mauritius* appear to postulate creative, composite images of postcolonial national communion, sudden shifts in perspective and the juxtaposition of quasi-mythical and prosaic narrative elements repeatedly deconstruct the very models of collective belonging – to the country's 'soul', to an 'esprit marron' or to the island-as-container – that the novels had previously seemed to construct, so leaving their conclusions highly ambivalent and open to interpretation. The open-endedness of *Le Silence de Chagos*, on the other hand, is poignantly linked to the very real unresolved situation of the Chagossian refugees whose experiences the novel recounts. In reflecting reality, Patel's novel cannot offer answers to the many questions that it poses. Nor can it imagine a happy ending to the Chagossians' long legal struggle for the right to return to the land to which they rightly belong. As this brief summary of the preceding chapters' findings shows, all of the Mauritian novels studied here are marked by an underlying resistance to would-be fixed and stable 'grand narratives' of any kind – even, as we have seen, to those that the novels themselves seem, however provisionally, to postulate.

A resistance to fixed answers to the question of what it means to be Mauritian is linked, in all of the novels, to a recognition of the high human costs of the competitive, exclusionary forms of ethnic belonging that dominate in modern-day Mauritius. The figure of the stateless migrant or of the internal social pariah haunts the hinterland of the contemporary Mauritian imaginary geography. In Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, the ongoing plight of Chagossian refugees in Mauritius – victims of historical and contemporary racial prejudice, poverty and disaffection, living on the geographic and social margins – serves as an urgent reminder of the insidious patterns of inclusion and exclusion that still lurk behind the harmonious façade of Mauritius's multicultural 'rainbow nation'. In Patel's earlier novel *Sensitive*, the elderly Chagossian character Ton Faël explicitly likens the plight of his people to the historical displacement and inhumane treatment of enslaved Africans and Indian 'coolies'.<sup>19</sup> He also draws a parallel between the common historical plight of all Mauritians and the current-day exploitation of 'disposable' Chinese workers in Mauritius's sweatshops and sex industry. The lot of modern-day Chinese migrants is also touched upon in *Made in Mauritius*, *Les Jours Kaya*, *Ève de ses décombres* and, most centrally, in Carl de Souza's *Ceux qu'on jette à la mer*,<sup>20</sup> a novel inspired

19 Shenaz Patel, *Sensitive* (Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier, 2003).

20 Carl de Souza, *Ceux qu'on jette à la mer* (Paris: L'Olivier, 2001).

by the real-life plight of trafficked Chinese migrants who languished for several weeks in Port Louis harbour without being allowed to move on or disembark. Displaced Chagossians and Chinese, uprooted from their countries of origin but unwelcome in their country of arrival, recur in contemporary Mauritian fiction as haunting reminders of all Mauritians' common immigrant condition, of the precariousness of the country's recent social stability and, crucially, of the high human costs of exclusionary politics of belonging. As a response, the novels all highlight the very pressing need to uphold the common human values of empathy, tolerance, solidarity and inclusion – and with them, a mobile and open conception of Mauritian nationhood.

In this context, it is worth returning to the point made in Chapter 3 that Chagossians have been doubly marginalised in Mauritian society, as displaced 'Îlois' and as dark-skinned 'Creoles' of African and slave descent. This connection between external and internal 'outsiders' brings us to another important recurrent trope in contemporary Mauritian fiction: that of a desired engagement with Creole (that is, Afro-Mauritian) characters and, through them, with a residual Creole culture that has been largely eclipsed by the dominance of later, diasporic forms of belonging. Obviously, the social relations that existed between Creoles and Franco-Muritians prior to the radical demographic changes brought about by the 'great experiment' of indenture, can in no way be viewed as some golden age of intercultural harmony to which any contemporary Mauritians wish to return. This earlier society was based on often brutal, profoundly unequal relations between white masters and black slaves. Nonetheless, as historians Megan Vaughan, Arno and Orian, and others have postulated, without the arrival of large numbers of Indian immigrants, Mauritian society might well have gradually evolved in a very different way, with Creoles playing a far more central part. As Vaughan poignantly argues, the development of the Creoles' own putative sense of belonging to Mauritius was dramatically forestalled by a particular series of historical events that were to have enduring consequences for the composition of Mauritian society at large:

Emancipation [...] marked an attempt to eradicate the memory of slavery [...]. But slavery and the struggles against it constituted the only common history binding together gens de couleur and ex-apprentices – all those who would later come to be known as 'Creoles.' This might not have mattered but for the fact that, simultaneously, members of the heterogeneous community of Indians were successfully building new identities on the basis of real or reimagined common origins. The game of

multiculturalism had begun, and the Creole population, dispossessed by the twin processes of enslavement and emancipation, would lose.<sup>21</sup>

As discussed in the Introduction, the emigration of large numbers of well-educated middle-class *gens de couleur* at the time of independence further weakened the already fragile and fragmented Creole community.<sup>22</sup> The fictional depiction of attempted interethnic relations with Creole characters in contemporary Mauritian fiction reveals a common, long-suppressed recognition of these historical injustices and of their consequences for Mauritius's 'rainbow nation'.

Recent anthropological, ethnographic and political science studies have highlighted the marginalisation of the Creole population within contemporary Mauritian society and the concomitant absence of references to Mauritius's pre-Indian, African past in public discourses of all kinds. Rosabelle Boswell notes, in her study of Creole ethnic identity in contemporary Mauritius, that the so-called *malaise créole* is linked to the fact that 'the contributions of their ancestors [are] absent from official Mauritian history and that [Creoles] are presently victimised in Mauritian society'.<sup>23</sup> In her interdisciplinary study of 'hybridity' in the Mauritian context, Anjali Prabhu evokes 'the difficulty of articulating Africanness' in political discourse and links this to a broader 'inability of Mauritian society to come to terms with the issue of slavery and its historical ties to the African continent and Madagascar'.<sup>24</sup> Whilst still diffuse and implicit, a rather different picture emerges from an analysis of the depiction of interethnic relations in our twenty-first-century literary works. Throughout my corpus, the various protagonists' searches for a sense of belonging to Mauritius repeatedly betray their – and their authors' – recognition that those with the most compelling claims to a locally grounded Mauritian identity may well be Creoles: the descendants (along with Franco-Mauritians) of the island's first inhabitants, whose slave labour literally formed the physical and economic bases of island society, whose ties with ancestral homelands elsewhere were from the

21 Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, p. 276. On this subject, see also: Toni Arno and Claude Orian, *Ile Maurice: une société multiraciale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986); Chazan-Gillig, 'Les fondements du pluriculturalisme mauricien'.

22 This large-scale emigration prior to independence is depicted in Sewtohol's *Made in Mauritius* and, more centrally, in Alain Gordon-Gentil's *J'attendrai la fin du monde* (Paris: Julliard, 2016).

23 Boswell, *Le Malaise Créole*, p. 170.

24 Prabhu, *Hybridity*, pp. 151, 52.



outset irredeemably severed, and who could, on the basis of precedence if not autochthony, arguably be classed as Mauritius's 'first people'.

It is striking that almost all of the various (Indo-Mauritian, Franco-Mauritian and Sino-Mauritian) characters' quests for a sense of belonging to Mauritius entail, at some point, an attempt to connect with Creole characters and, through them, with what they believe to be the elusive 'real' Mauritius outside the ethnically delineated diasporic structures of the dominant 'community system'. In *Les Jours Kaya*, Santee's discovery of broader Mauritian society beyond the confines of her Hindu village is embodied in her sexual union with the Creole youth Ronaldo. In *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya seeks relief from – and revenge upon – Hindu social conventions in a sexual relationship with the Rajsings' Creole gardener, Julien. In *L'Homme qui penche*, the Franco-Mauritian narrator vainly attempts to escape his own ethnic and social circles by associating with the Creole *habitués* of neighbourhood bars. Though not explicitly stated, the fisherman at the heart of François's moment of rapturous connection with the island in *Une interminable distraction au monde* is also almost certainly Creole. In *Histoire d'Ashok*, André attempts to give meaningful form to his 'vague élan de mauricianisme'<sup>25</sup> by becoming involved in working-class politics in Creole neighbourhoods, Faisal sets out to find the authentic 'âme du pays' by renting a house in the predominantly Creole city of Port Louis and, most obviously, Vassou's quest for an answer to his existential identity crisis takes him on a mystical journey into the 'esprit marron' of Mauritian collective memory. More obliquely, in *Made in Mauritius*, Laval's final reconnection with an imagined 'Mauritius' in the Australian outback entails first his physical and spiritual encounter with the 'dreamtime' of the dispossessed Aboriginal population. Although Sewtohol's approach is more indirect here, the parallel that is implicitly drawn with the situation of Mauritius's own internally displaced 'first people' is particularly powerful and poignant.

Encounters with Creole characters in twenty-first-century Mauritian literature do not, I contend, represent examples of postcolonial, boundary-crossing, interethnic transgression *per se*. Nor do they represent attempts to draw marginalised Creole figures into the multicultural, Hindu-dominated 'centre'. Instead, such encounters serve as the means by which characters of different ethnic backgrounds attempt to connect, however fleetingly, with a residual, locally grounded Creole (in the sense of both Afro-Mauritian and 'island-born') culture

25 Sewtohol, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 147.



that, they believe, appears to hold the key to an elusive sense of belonging to Mauritius. Contrary to critical readings that see the depiction of Hindu-Creole relations in Mauritian fiction as reflecting a mutually transformative ‘creolisation’ of Mauritian society, it is significant that none of these interethnic relations, sexual or otherwise, is represented as being either enduring or (re)productive. Rather, the recurrent trope of a brief interethnic connection with Creole characters represents a ‘tenacious and fleeting desire’<sup>26</sup> for more inclusive, non-diasporic, locally grounded forms of belonging to place and people that are simultaneously cognisant of the competitive history of losses and gains of different ethnic groups. Much fruitful research remains to be done, in this context, into what Suzanne Chazan-Gillig has called ‘la créolité perdue’ or ‘la créolisation inachevée’ of Mauritian society.<sup>27</sup>

As discussed in the introduction to this study, all of the novels analysed are written in French, the dominant language of literary expression and the global language of choice in Mauritius. Given the number of different languages spoken, written or studied in Mauritius, I am very conscious of the compromises and limitations entailed in choosing to focus only on francophone novels – even if these do in fact constitute the majority of literary works emanating from Mauritius. In order to explore, for instance, the terms in which the Creole community might express its own sense of belonging to (or exclusion from) Mauritius, it would no doubt be necessary to conduct comparative research into other, non-literary creative forms produced in the vernacular language, Kreol. Other forms of belonging may well also find expression in Mauritius’s many other ancestral and vernacular languages – Hindi, English, Bhojpuri, Telegu, Urdu, Marathi, Mandarin or Arabic – and/or in other media, such as song, theatre, poetry, *bande dessinée*, television, dance or the visual arts. Nonetheless, it is likely that the forms of belonging expressed in the island’s many ‘ancestral’ languages would be linked to internally cohesive forms of ethnic, communalist group identity, rather than to

26 Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, p. 8.

27 Chazan-Gillig, ‘Les fondements du pluriculturalisme mauricien’. Chazan-Gillig’s analysis draws on the works of Richard Allen and of Arno and Orian, which emphasise the important historical and demographic differences between Mauritius and other island societies – differences that have resulted in very different degrees of ‘creolisation’. See Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Arno and Orian, *Ile Maurice*.

broader, more inclusive forms of collective coexistence of the kind that have been the focus of the current study.

All of the novels of my corpus are centrally concerned with the problem of belonging in contemporary Mauritian society; with the underlying, communalist and political causes behind this perceived problem; and with imagining alternative, more inclusive forms of attachment to place and people. All of the novels depict their protagonists' longing to belong and the journeys of (self-)discovery on which they embark in order to find answers to this longing. As we have seen, these journeys – and the moments of rapturous connection with the island's unexpected natural beauty which they entail – provide characters with the opportunity to break out of their ethnically delineated social and spatial communities, and so to begin the ongoing process of becoming Mauritian in a broader, more inclusive sense. All of the novelists studied vehemently reject the models of ethnic and communal belonging that have traditionally dominated Mauritian society and that continue to divide the multi-ethnic population's constituent parts. Underlying this rejection is a shared consciousness of the inequalities and exclusions that underlie official discourses of Mauritius's harmonious 'rainbow nation': the exclusion of Chagossian refugees, of Chinese migrants and, indeed, of Creoles, Mauritius's own disaffected 'first people'.

As scholarly studies of the notion of belonging in a range of disciplines have observed, there are many different ways in which people can assert a sense of belonging, even within the same geographic space. Despite Mauritius's small surface area, the exceptional diversity of its population is reflected in the many differences – of form, content and scale – between the novels' various postulations of alternative, non-ethnic forms of belonging. As I argued in the introduction to this study, the inherently vague and protean notion of belonging nicely encompasses – in its fortuitous combination of being and longing, and in its seemingly continuous *-ing* form – the diverse forms of Mauritian characters' attachment to place and to each other, without presupposing the nature of these forms of attachment. The common longing to belong expressed in the novels is not presented predominantly in terms of absence or deficiency. Rather, it reflects the fact that the project of Mauritian nationhood is still a work in progress and, as such, remains strongly future-orientated.

Although belonging is a central concern in contemporary Mauritian literature, it has not previously been the focus of critical studies. In choosing to focus on the notion of belonging in recent Mauritian

novels, I have therefore responded to the call of scholars such as Hedetoft and Hjort, who argue that ‘there is a great need for detailed scholarly work on the different processes that are instrumental in reconfiguring the contexts, meanings and objects of belonging in the contemporary world’.<sup>28</sup> Although belonging is generally recognised to be a fundamental human need, to date relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the different forms that belonging can take, or to the numerous constraints that can be placed upon its expression. The simultaneous ubiquity and vagueness of the term ‘belonging’ nonetheless make it particularly useful, since versatile, for analysing the ‘diverse cultural materials’<sup>29</sup> and ‘distinct but overlapping social models’<sup>30</sup> that characterise Mauritius’s multi-ethnic situation. Just as there is no single form of belonging (in general or to Mauritius), nor is there one single theoretical model that can encompass its diverse configurations. Hence my own approach to the diversity of forms of affective belonging imagined in Mauritian fiction has involved the application of a variety of different, but interrelated theoretical models – multidisciplinary theories of belonging, Fanon’s dissection of anti-colonial violence, feminist geographers’ interrogations of gendered relations to place, legal and political definitions of belonging, metropolitan theories of the everyday, Braidotti’s conceptualisation of a nomadic subjectivity – as prompted by the subject matter of individual novels or pairs of novels. Close textual analysis of these has allowed me to tease out both thematic and formal aspects of the various quests for belonging depicted and to draw out similarities and differences between texts. My application of an eclectic range of theoretical approaches to the diverse expressions of belonging articulated in my study’s corpus also answers Vertovec’s call for new qualitative approaches to the ‘plurality of affiliations’<sup>31</sup> that condition people’s lives in super-diverse societies such as Mauritius. It is hoped that the eclectic analytical framework developed in this book to explore the central issue of belonging might also be extrapolated to help recalibrate our broader understanding of the dynamics of belonging and exclusion in other (super-)diverse, multi-ethnic societies.

Recurrent in the contemporary Mauritian literary imaginary is a commitment to the common human values of solidarity and inclusion,

28 Hedetoft and Hjort. *The Postnational Self*, p. xx.

29 Eriksen, *Common Denominators*, p. 139.

30 Ravi, *Rainbow Colors*, p. 9.

31 Vertovec, ‘Super-diversity and its implications’, p. 1048.

beyond the pragmatic practices of tolerance and ‘compromise’ that Eriksen identifies as being the primary bases of Mauritius’s post-independence multicultural model. The novels analysed in this volume betray a common consciousness of the high human costs of the competitive ‘politics of belonging’ that underpin Mauritius’s multi-ethnic society and of the inequalities which threaten to undermine its foundations. They are therefore mindful of the need to give meaningful substance to the national slogans of ‘unity in diversity’ or ‘rainbow nation’ and to revisit more inclusive, locally based visions of *mauricianisme*. As mentioned in this book’s introduction, Françoise Lionnet argues that nationalism is a ‘*willed* affirmation of solidarity in spite of linguistic, racial or religious differences’.<sup>32</sup> Where Lionnet’s focus is on ‘political will and the discourses that shape nationalist ideology’,<sup>33</sup> the focus of my study has, in contrast, been on the ways in which literature gives voice to a counter-discursive *social* will that often contests official ideology. My analyses have therefore explored the fraught interface between often opposing affective and political conceptions of belonging. When creatively imagining the possible bases of a national community, or of diverse senses of belonging within such a community, contemporary Mauritian novels amply demonstrate that it is neither deep roots, ancient ties and shared origins, nor a nationalist political ideology that affectively attach a people to a place and to each other. Instead, what unites Mauritius’s diverse population, as depicted in its contemporary literature, is a shared longing to belong or, to use Furnivall’s term, a strong ‘social will’. This will is expressed in the contemporary literary imaginary as a common commitment to the values of solidarity and inclusion, to the ongoing project of Mauritian nationhood and to the ever-adaptive, future-orientated *fiction* of belonging that still lies, tantalisingly, somewhere over the rainbow.

32 Lionnet, ‘Introduction: Mauritius in/and global culture’, p. 375.

33 Lionnet, ‘Introduction: Mauritius in/and global culture’, p. 375.