

Belonging nowhere: Shenaz Patel's Le Silence des Chagos

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CHAPTER TWO

Belonging to the Island

Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* and Ananda Devi's *Ève de ses décombres*

In Ananda Devi's 2006 novel *Ève de ses décombres*, the eponymous protagonist provocatively asks, 'C'est l'endroit qui nous a faits ainsi, ou le contraire?':¹ an ultimately unanswered question on which the novel hinges. This narrative preoccupation with the mutually formative relationship between people, place and belonging reflects the concerns of contemporary geographers and theorists of the built environment. It is generally recognised that individual and group belonging is intimately intertwined with the ways in which people interact and identify with a particular place, and with the other individuals who inhabit that place. Neil Leach claims, for instance, that, 'as individuals identify with an environment, so their identity comes to be constituted through that environment'.² As a consequence, as Doreen Massey famously asserts, 'social relations always have a spatial form and a spatial content':³ that is, not only are man-made spaces constructed to reflect the social norms of their inhabitants, but social relations between these inhabitants, both positive and negative, are also conditioned by the spaces they occupy. In this context, as discussed in this book's introduction, Marco Antonich distinguishes between the broadly positive notion of

1 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 108.

2 Neil Leach, 'Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space', in Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds), *Habitus: A Sense of Place* (2nd edition) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 297–309 (p. 308).

3 Doreen Massey, 'A Place Called Home?', in *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 157–73 (p. 186).



‘place-belongingness’ – defined as ‘a personal, intimate, feeling of being “at home” in a place’ – and the more negative and normative ‘politics of belonging’: ‘a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion’.⁴ As Antonsich and others recognise, however, individual ‘place-belongingness’ and collective ‘politics of belonging’ can rarely be separated: an individual’s personal and intimate ability to ‘feel at home’ in a place is fundamentally conditioned by the ways and the extent to which a prevailing ‘politics of belonging’ seeks to dictate the terms of his or – as is the case in this chapter – her inclusion or exclusion.

In addition to such broad formative links between people and place, the subfield of feminist geography focuses on the ways in which space is experienced differentially by men and by women. Feminist geographers are concerned with how the prevailing ‘politics of belonging’ within a particular environment may inhibit women’s ability to connect, and self-assertively identify, with that place. As Tovi Fenster argues, ‘a gendered sense of belonging is about power relations and control’.⁵ That is, in order to feel a sense of belonging to a particular location, one must first feel that one has a degree of power and control within it. All too often, public space is constructed and controlled in ways that, consciously or inadvertently, inhibit the movement and behaviour of female inhabitants. In the most extreme manifestations of an exclusive, masculinist ‘politics of belonging’, in societies such as Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan, women are quite literally excluded from public space and, therefore, from power. In contemporary Mauritian society, women are not socially or spatially excluded in any literal, legal sense: they are not confined to the private space of the home; they have a legal right to education, suffrage and employment. Yet this does not mean that, here or elsewhere, sexual equality is always experienced or represented as a social or spatial reality. As in the majority of societies, women still tend to be disproportionately affected by broader social phenomena such as poverty, unemployment or domestic violence. While, as Antonsich comments, ‘it is generally agreed that feelings of belonging to a place and processes of Self-formation are mutually implicated’,⁶ the formative

4 Antonsich, ‘Searching for Belonging’, p. 644.

5 Tovi Fenster, ‘Gender and the City: The Different Formations of Belonging’, in Lise Nelson and Joni Seager (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 242–56 (p. 253).

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

interrelation between place and individual is not universally positive. As feminist geographers May Friedman and Silvia Schutermundl poignantly recognise, and as the novels of this chapter reflect, ‘locations [can also] confine, interfere with and contradict individual projects of selfhood’.⁷

This chapter aims to explore the complex interrelations between place, gender and belonging as elaborated in two recent novels by female Mauritian novelists: Nathacha Appanah’s *Blue Bay Palace* (2004)⁸ and Ananda Devi’s *Ève de ses décombres* (2006). Both novels, like *Les Jours Kaya* before them, reject and critique Mauritius’s dominant communalist system, which continues to structure social as well as spatial relations along ethnic and religious lines. As in *Les Jours Kaya*, both novels portray violence as an inevitable, would-be purgative response to the inequalities and injustices maintained by existing geographic and social divisions: between ethnic groups; between different castes; between rich and poor; and, as in these novels, between men and women. Both *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres* are set in impoverished, disaffected, peripheral locations – a *bidonville* and a *cit *, respectively – which, at first glance, appear to offer the kinds of locally improvised, non-ethnic and inclusive community-making so often celebrated by postcolonial writers and critics. Yet, as the novels progress towards their violent climaxes, these peripheral locations become sites of estrangement, alienation and even danger for the female protagonists, inhibiting their individual projects of selfhood and preventing them, in the most extreme form, from feeling ‘at home’. In both novels, as Arnold argues in his study of the depiction of sexualised violence in Mauritian women’s writing, the text ‘fait l’autopsie d’un univers marginal [...] o  r gne l’inexorable loi du plus fort’ and where ‘la sexualit  se pr sente clairement comme l’espace masculine d’une soci t  patriarcale’.⁹

This chapter will examine the different spatial configurations of the novels’ imaginary Mauritian geography, both communalist and multi-ethnic, and the gendered social relations that these configurations reflect. In his study of the interrelated notions of home, belonging and nostalgia, Jan Willem Duyvendak identifies the three main levels at which individuals tend to assert a sense of affective belonging to place: ‘the micro level of the household, meso level of the community

7 May Friedman and Silvia Schutermundl, *Growing Up Transnational: Identity and Kinship in a Global Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 13.

8 Nathacha Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

9 Arnold, *La Litt rature mauricienne contemporaine*, pp. 328, 343.

and macro level of the nation'¹⁰ – a three-tiered model which reflects Antonsich's recognition that 'belonging can indeed be conceptualized at multiple scales'.¹¹ In exploring the interrelation of place, gender and belonging in *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*, this chapter will analyse the ways in which the protagonists' gendered senses of belonging or, conversely, of dis-belonging and exclusion, interrelate with societal constructions of space and collective identity at different geographic scales: from the dominant, macro-level national constructions of belonging along ethnic and religious lines, to the meso-level urban configurations of the neighbourhood (*bidonville* or *cit *) and town, to the putatively 'intimate', micro-level space of the familial home. Throughout my comparative analyses, I shall bear in mind the central question posed by Fenster: 'How is space culturally constructed as an entity in which women and men feel a sense of belonging or dis-belonging?'¹² Rather than focus solely on the novels' more realist representations of Mauritius's urban environments, I shall also, importantly, explore the more imaginative, non-realist ways in which the female characters of Appanah's and Devi's novels seek to express their own sense of affirmative belonging to Mauritius outside such man-made spatial configurations. We shall explore the imagined and even impossible forms of affective female belonging that are postulated in the two novels by means of a utopian identification, at an alternative macro level, with the natural, non-human or prehuman, landscape of the broader island. It is, I contend, by positing such an emotionally compelling but utopian connection between female characters and their island space that literature is able to imagine deep and enduring forms of place-belongingness that are not generally theorised in the realist, applied approaches of sociologists, anthropologists or geographers. Indeed, as I shall argue, such imaginative forms of female belonging to place offer, in their very utopian fictionality, a powerful critique of real-life social and spatial injustices and exclusions in contemporary Mauritius.

When considering the central relationship between place, gender and belonging depicted in *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*, it is important, as I have indicated, to bear in mind the fictionalised nature of Appanah's and Devi's respective depictions of contemporary Mauritian geography. Both *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*

10 Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home*, p. 111.

11 Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging', p. 646.

12 Fenster, 'Gender and the City', p. 246.

are explicitly set in a recognisable Mauritian context, and deploy the place names of real towns, villages and geological features, locatable on a map of the island. Nonetheless, the novels' uses of these places, and of the spatial relations between them, are far from directly representational or accurate. The setting, landmarks and layout of central Port Louis in *Ève de ses décombres*, for instance, are instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with the Mauritian capital. There are also impoverished districts on the outskirts of the capital whose inhabitants, like those of Devi's Troumaron, have not benefited from the rapid economic development of the city centre. Yet, as the fictional name of Devi's setting already implicitly signals, in reality these *quartiers* tend to be sprawling agglomerations of poor-quality, single-storey structures rather than *cités* of decrepit tower blocks like those inhabited by Devi's characters. As in Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, there is a real-life seaside village at the southernmost tip of Mauritius called Blue Bay, with beautiful villas and holiday residences lining the sea-facing side of its main access road. While houses on the other side of the road are certainly less grand than their ocean-facing counterparts, the social and spatial contrast between different parts of the village is, in reality, nowhere near as stark as in Appanah's binary fictional topography. There is no shanty town area in real-life Blue Bay and very few, if any, poorly constructed shacks of the kind inhabited by Maya's family and neighbours. Nor is there a luxury, five-star hotel complex in the village like the fictional Blue Bay Palace in which Maya and Dave work.

By highlighting the many creative liberties that Appanah and Devi take in their respective constructions of an imaginary Mauritian geography, I do not mean to suggest that the kinds of social, spatial and economic contrasts exposed by their novels do not exist in real-life, modern-day Mauritius. On the contrary: by exploiting the sociocultural symbolism of the French metropolitan *banlieue* in her depiction of Port Louis's Troumaron, for instance, Devi is able to expose very real Mauritian issues of poverty, disaffection, gender inequality and violence, in a literary and spatial form that has instant associative resonance for her novel's francophone readership. Luxurious hotels with private beaches do, regrettably, abound in Mauritius, as do squalid *bidonvilles* of poorly assembled squatter shacks. By concentrating such jarring, physical manifestations of inequality and exclusion into the same, evocatively named location, and by exaggerating the geographic and associated social distance between the real-life locations of Blue Bay and nearby Mahébourg, Appanah is similarly able, in her imaginary Mauritian

geography, to foreground the very real socio-economic disparities which still exist, albeit in more diffuse form, in modern-day Mauritius.

On a straightforward diegetic level, *Blue Bay Palace* tells the story of a doomed adolescent love affair between a poor, low-caste girl, Maya, and her rich, high-caste boyfriend, Dave, and of Maya's violent, murderous revenge when Dave has an arranged, intra-caste marriage with someone else. On a broader symbolic level, as Maya remarks, hers is also 'une histoire de ce pays',¹³ with the different fictionalised spaces of the island reflecting the social hierarchies and divisions (of class and caste, as well as ethnicity) that profoundly influence her personal story. Where Appanah's novel is set mainly in an isolated village in the south of the island, Devi's *Ève de ses décombres* recounts the experiences of a multi-ethnic group of young inhabitants of a decrepit sink estate on the outskirts of the Mauritian capital. Narrated in turn by four central protagonists (two female and two male), Ève, Savita, Sad and Clélio, the novel plots Ève's descent into prostitution and, following the murder of her close friend Savita, her violent revenge on the abuser-turned-murderer. As in *Blue Bay Palace*, the formative and culturally constructed links between place and inhabitants constitute a central theme in Devi's novel. Although all the inhabitants of the peripheral sites of Troumaron and Blue Bay, male and female, young and old, are depicted as living in mutually formative, symbiotic relation with their immediate environment, there are, as we shall see, marked gender differences – of inclusion and exclusion – between the characters' respective responses to this environment. For, as Ève remarks, 'l'héritage des sexes n'est pas le même. Nous ne naissons pas avec la même charge'.¹⁴ We shall now examine the ways in which the often contrasting, gendered relations between place and belonging are articulated in the imaginary Mauritian geographies of these two female-authored and female-centred novels: first, at the more realist levels of community, neighbourhood and home; and then, more imaginatively, at the broader level of the island.

Despite the greater geographic mobility brought about by modern flows of global capitalism, electronic communications and migration (all of which have had a profound impact on Mauritius's post-independence economic development), belonging is still predominantly defined in literature on the subject in terms of attachment to 'community': that is, to the people and place of one's immediate neighbourhood. As

¹³ Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 79.

John Crowley asserts, for instance, “belonging” in ordinary language and in political discourse has positive connotations that express a kind of common-sense communitarianism.¹⁵ Similarly, Adrian Favell exposes the pervasive link between belonging and ‘social constructions of culture, community and identity closed to outsiders’,¹⁶ although his study does not specifically consider the complexities of a postcolonial, multicultural society such as Mauritius, in which several, potentially competing, constructions of ‘community’ coexist. Throughout critical studies from a range of disciplines, the idea of belonging, in both its private and its official, national conceptions, is seen as intimately tied up with the idea of ‘community’ in the sense of both geographic proximity and of ethno-cultural homogeneity. In Mauritius’s multiply diasporic society, where ‘community’ is largely synonymous with the dominant ethnic and religious community system, however, such a ‘common-sense’ correlation between belonging and community is in fact highly problematic, as Appanah’s and Devi’s narratives reflect.

In both *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*, as in other contemporary novels, Mauritius’s dominant community system – the social and spatial manifestation of official, national discourses of ethnic distinctiveness – is rejected and its divisive effects critiqued. In Appanah’s *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya’s parents’ familial village – from which they fled prior to the novel’s diegesis – is depicted as an archetypal communal village. As the following description underlines, the aptly named Fond du Sac’s geographic location was deliberately chosen by its first inhabitants in order to create a social and spatial separation between its own ethnically

15 Crowley, ‘The Politics of Belonging’, p. 18. For Fenster, a private, intimate sense of belonging is expressed, first and foremost, at the level of ‘street, neighbourhood, or even city center’, whereas, on a national level, ‘the idea of citizenship [...] is also used normatively to determine how a society [...] should incorporate its individuals and communities into normative frameworks of belonging’ (Fenster, ‘Gender and the City’, pp. 246, 244). In her Butlerian analysis, Bell similarly recognises that ‘the performativity of belonging “cites” the norms that constitute or make present the “community” or group as such’: whilst conscious of the performative, non-given nature of belonging, Bell nonetheless takes as given that belonging necessarily connotes membership of a community or group. See Bell, *Performativity and Belonging*, p. 3.

16 Adrian Favell, ‘To Belong or Not to Belong: The Postnational Question’, in Andrew Geddes and Adrian Favell (eds), *The Politics of Belonging: Migrants and Minorities in Contemporary Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 209–23 (p. 215).

homogeneous Hindu inhabitants and other ethnic groups: 'Fond du Sac est un village quasiment introuvable pour celui qui y va pour la première fois. [...] Les premiers immigrants [*sic*] indiens y avaient fait leur camp, loin des Blancs et à l'écart des esclaves affranchis'.¹⁷ The community's internally cohesive identity is shown to be maintained through a strategic 'politics of belonging', by the establishment of social and spatial boundaries between 'us' ('immigrants indiens') and 'them' ('Blancs' and 'esclaves affranchis'). As Maya's parents' experience illustrates, the ethnic community's collective identity is also maintained by the internal policing of its own members' behaviours and life choices. When Maya's mother was unable to conceive and her father refused to take a second wife, as Hindu custom in the village dictated, the young couple became social outcasts. Finally fleeing their ethnic community, and so becoming literal, spatial outcasts, Maya's parents sought refuge in multi-ethnic Blue Bay, where Maya was later born and raised. Rejecting any nostalgic identification with her ancestral and ethnic community, Maya thenceforth defiantly asserts instead that 'je suis née ici et c'est aussi bien ainsi'¹⁸ – an affirmation which, at this stage of the narration, appears to establish a positive sense of identification between character and place.

The socially and spatially divisive effects of ethnic definitions of 'community' are also insistently denounced in Devi's *Ève de ses décombres*. Reflecting on broader society's perceptions of the residents of his *cit *, for instance, Sad mockingly remarks that: 'On nous appelle *bann Troumaron* – les Troumaron –, comme s'il s'agissait d'une nouvelle communauté dans cette île qui en a déjà tellement'.¹⁹ When Savita is murdered, Cl lio similarly predicts that ' a deviendra une histoire communale', asserting that, in contrast, 'nous, les enfants de Troumaron, nous nous en fichons des religions, des races, des couleurs, des castes, de tout ce qui divise le reste des gens de ce foutu pays'.²⁰ Far from offering the protagonists a positive model of reassuring, cohesive, collective belonging, Mauritius's dominant, ethnic conception of 'community' is attacked, in both *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses d combres*, as in *Les Jours Kaya* before them, for maintaining internal, outdated traditional practices that police individual members' behaviours and impede broader social cohesion.

¹⁷ Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 15.

¹⁸ Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 17.

¹⁹ Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 17.

²⁰ Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 104.

In contrast to the typical, ethnically homogeneous kinds of ‘community’ found in villages like Fond du Sac, the neighbourhoods where the protagonists of Appanah’s and Devi’s novels live, in Blue Bay and Troumaron, are populated by a multi-ethnic mix of internally and externally displaced people, who have only their poverty, uprootedness and disaffection in common. A semi-rural seaside *bidonville* and an urban *cit * respectively, Blue Bay and Troumaron are quintessentially peripheral spaces, geographically and socially excluded from the affluent urban centres of Mah bourg and Port Louis, respectively. So, do these marginal, multi-ethnic sites thus represent – as in the postcolonial paradigms of the metropolitan *banlieue* novel²¹ or Caribbean literary depictions of *quartiers* like Texaco or Morne Pichevin²² – ‘contact zones’ of productive social and cultural creolisation or *m tissage*? Are Blue Bay or Troumaron portrayed as fertile sites for the elaboration of forms of affective belonging and community-building based on geographic proximity rather than on ethnic origins or a shared cultural heritage? Do their ‘interstitial spaces’ offer, as Ritu Tyagi argues, alternative sites of emotional attachment and positive, non-ethnic self-affirmation for the novels’ female characters?²³ Or, if they do not, which places – if any – within Mauritius’s fictional landscape are portrayed as actual or potential sites for the articulation of alternative, female senses of belonging?

21 See, for instance: Mehdi Charef, *Le Th  au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983); Medhi Lallaoui, *Les Beurs de Seine* (Paris: Arcant re, 1986); Fa za Gu ne, *Kiffe kiffe demain* (Paris: Hachette, 2004); Azouz Begag, *Le G ne du Chaaba* (Paris: Points, 1986).

22 See, for instance: Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Ti Jean L’horizon* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Edouard Glissant, *La L zarde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Patrick Chamoiseau, *Antan d’enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) and *Texaco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); Rapha l Confiant, *Mamzelle Libellule* (Paris: Serpent   Plumes, 1994).

23 In a Bhabha-informed analysis of ‘hybridity’ in three of Devi’s novels, Tyagi argues that * ve de ses d combres* ‘exposes interstitial spaces – particularly those spaces where notions of female identity are played out’. See Ritu Tyagi, ‘Rethinking Identity and Belonging: “Mauritianness” in the Work of Ananda Devi’, in Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares (eds), *Islanded Identities: Constructions of Postcolonial Cultural Insularity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 91–108 (p. 93). As we shall explore, I take issue with this reading of Devi’s novel. Whilst Troumaron is indeed portrayed as an ‘interstitial’ or marginal space, and whilst the male members of the Troumaron gang construct an alternative group identity in relation to this space, it is categorically not a space with which female characters identify positively.

Blue Bay Palace opens with a quasi-cinematic bird's-eye view of Mauritius's landscape, geographic position and geological origins (to which we shall return later), before zooming in ever closer to the small, isolated village of Blue Bay: 'Mais ne vous y perdez pas, pas vous. Prenez la route du Sud. Sud-sud-est, pour être tout à fait exact. C'est au village de Blue Bay que notre histoire commence. Mon histoire [...] c'est de moi et de moi seule qu'il s'agit, ici'.²⁴ Here, the profound and formative interrelation between a very specific ('tout à fait exacte') location and the character's personal story is foregrounded. In the description of Blue Bay that follows, the spatial configuration of the village is portrayed as reflecting the social relations between its inhabitants:

Blue Bay, c'est la toute dernière localité de la pointe, celle après quoi il n'y a que mers et océans. Une maigre route asphaltée mais piégée de nids-de-poule traverse Blue Bay de part en part et la divise aussi. À gauche, des haies régulières de bambous verts cachent de belles résidences aux couleurs chaudes. À droite, là où la route penche légèrement, comme si elle s'affaissait, des rangées de roquette, ces cactus à la sève mortelle, plantées en pointillé, laissent voir des cabanes en tôle rouillée ou de friables constructions en brique. À gauche, les riches qui ont vue sur l'océan. À droite, les pauvres qui n'ont vue sur rien du tout excepté leurs semblables.²⁵

Reflecting the social relations of its inhabitants, the village is characterised both by its geographic isolation from the rest of the island ('la toute dernière localité de la pointe') and by its own internal divisions. In contrast to the simultaneous seclusion ('cachent') and openness ('vue sur l'océan') of the rich quarter on the left of the narrow road, the impoverished shanty town on the right, where Maya and her family live, is characterised by its visibility ('laissent voir') but also by its lack of geographic and social horizons ('n'ont vue sur rien du tout excepté leurs semblables'). Whilst the description of Maya's story of star-crossed love, lost dreams and violent jealousy as 'une histoire de ce pays' arguably implies an identification with the broader island nation, it is also a story which has to be understood within the specific context of the island's internal, highly segregated geography. As such, Maya's story is inextricably linked to the internal structures of her locality and birthplace, Blue Bay. As her story progresses, Maya feels increasingly

²⁴ Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, pp. 10–11.

²⁵ Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 11.

restrained by, and hence hostile to, ‘ce quartier pauvre’²⁶ with which she is, by birth, inextricably associated – so undermining the location’s original role, for her parents, as a place of refuge and liberation from the repressive norms of their Hindu village. When Dave first walks her home through the narrow, noisy alleyways of her *quartier*, Maya sees it through the eyes of a rich outsider and so states that ‘Jamais je n’ai eu si honte d’habiter ici’²⁷ – a realisation that foreshadows the intra-ethnic class and caste distinctions that will later divide them.

As a poor, low-caste inhabitant of Blue Bay’s impoverished shanty town and as a woman, Maya’s spatial and social world is portrayed as entirely separate, and actively excluded, from that of Dave’s family. The internal rich-poor division of Blue Bay is repeated, on a broader scale, in the division between Blue Bay and the geographically close but socially distant town of Mahébourg, where Dave and his family live. Maya exclaims: ‘Ah, Mahébourg! Ce n’est qu’à une petite demi-heure de Blue Bay mais c’est un autre monde’.²⁸ When Maya first visits the affluent *quartier résidentiel* of Mahébourg, with its ‘haies de bambous géants’, ‘grilles en forme de harpons’, ‘gardes’ and ‘guérites’, and sees the Rajsings’ opulent house, she cynically decodes the social significance of the area’s spatial form and content, which represents ‘un étalage d’argent, une verrue de fric jetée à la face de la pauvreté. À cette image, se superposait celle de la maison de mes parents. La comparaison était ridicule’.²⁹ Although, as Hindu Mauritians, Maya and Dave are of broadly the same religious and ethnic background, their radically contrasting neighbourhoods spatially mirror the divergent positions they occupy in their society’s internal class and caste hierarchies – positions that are further compounded by traditional gender inequalities which dictate Maya’s passive, limited role (in marriage, education or career). Class, gender and caste perform the same, socially delineating function in Maya’s situation as did ethnicity and religion in Fond du Sac. Despite her parents’ attempts to escape the ‘politics of belonging’ that governed their Hindu village, Maya finds herself constrained by similarly exclusionary social conventions in her family’s new adopted location. As a result, Maya is deemed an ‘outsider’ from the Rajsings’ social circles and hence not a suitable match for Dave’s arranged

26 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 25.

27 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 25.

28 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 24.

29 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 65.

marriage. When Maya repeatedly asserts that she was ‘née ici’, therefore, she is not asserting a positive sense of empowering identification with, or attachment to, place. She is, instead, acknowledging the crucial, negative impact that her specific geographic and hence social location, combined with her female gender, has upon her life choices and experiences as a poor, low-caste Hindu woman.

The opening description, by Sad, of the setting of *Ève de ses décombres* similarly establishes a strong symbolic link between the specific geographic location and configuration of Troumaron, on the one hand, and the social relations of its inhabitants on the other:

Je suis dans un lieu gris. Ou plutôt jaunâtre, qui mérite bien son nom: Troumaron. Troumaron, c’est une sorte d’entonnoir; le dernier goulet où viennent se déverser les eaux de tout un pays. Ici, on recase les réfugiés des cyclones [...] Moi, j’y vis depuis toujours. Je suis un réfugié de naissance. [...] Je ne voyais pas les fissures, nées à nos pieds, qui nous séparaient du monde [...] Nous sommes accolés à la montagne des Signaux. Port Louis s’accroche à nos pieds mais ne nous entraîne pas. La ville nous tourne le dos. [...] La montagne nous obstrue la vision d’autre chose. Entre la ville et la pierre, nos immeubles, nos gravats, nos ordures.³⁰

As its name – a combination of ‘trou’ (hole) and ‘maron’ (a corruption of the French *marron*, meaning ‘brown’ or ‘fugitive slave’) – reflects, Troumaron is a squalid dumping ground for the country’s literal and human detritus whose claustrophobic, end-of-the-world nature is underlined by its description as an ‘entonnoir’ and a ‘goulet’. Indeed, as Jeffrey Zuckerman points out, in the notes to his translation of Devi’s novel, in Mauritian Kreol the connotations of the *quartier*’s name are ‘much dirtier’.³¹ Despite their geographic proximity to Port Louis, Troumaron and its inhabitants are both spatially and socially marginalised from the capital’s centre, squeezed between the mountains, on one side, and the personified city, which turns its back on them, on the other. Just as the inhabitants of Blue Bay ‘n’ont vue sur rien du tout excepté leurs semblables’, so too in Troumaron ‘la montagne nous obstrue la vision d’autre chose’. As in the description of Blue Bay, the natural geography of the site conspires with man-made structures to repel Troumaron to the spatial and social margins and there to turn it in

³⁰ Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, pp. 13–14.

³¹ Jeffrey Zuckerman, ‘Translator’s Note’, in Ananda Devi, *Eve out of her Ruins*, translated by Jeffrey Zuckerman (London: Les Fugitives, 2016), pp. 166–68 (p. 167).

upon itself. In both novels, as in both locations depicted, the characters' limited social horizons are reflected in a geographically inflected lexis of visibility, horizon and (lack of) view.

Just as the shanty town of Blue Bay is depicted as segregated from the better-off area just across the road and hence also from Mahébourg, so too is Troumaron portrayed as definitively separated from nearby central Port Louis. When Clélio attempts to flee the confines of Troumaron, for instance, he becomes disorientated by the urban structures and the crowds of the city's affluent commercial district: 'Les choses tourbillonnent dans ma tête. Port Louis vole quelque chose en moi. Trop de gens, trop de voitures, trop de buildings, trop de verre fumé, trop de nouveaux riches [...] Je ne sais pas où aller. Je poursuis ma course circulaire. Je me mords la queue'.³² In contrast to the muted tones and the lexis of decay that characterise Troumaron, the imagery used in this and other descriptions of downtown Port Louis emphasises the dizzying, self-perpetuating cycle of dehumanising artificiality and excess. Rejected by, and hence rejecting, the spatial and social configurations of Port Louis's affluent, fast-changing centre, the peripheral *quartier* of Troumaron becomes defined, in symbiosis with its inhabitants, by its self-defensive and increasingly self-assertive insularity. Sad notes that:

Notre cité est notre royaume. Notre cité dans la cité, notre ville dans la ville. Port Louis a changé de figure, il lui est poussé des dents longues et des immeubles plus hauts que ses montagnes. Mais notre quartier, lui, n'a pas changé. C'est le dernier retranchement. Ici, on se construit une identité par défaut: celle des non-appartenants.³³

As a defiant riposte to broader society's proliferation of ethnic communities and to the patterns of self-interested exclusion that underpin them, Sad asserts instead 'une identité par défaut: celle des non-appartenants' for the residents of Troumaron. Later in the novel, Clélio claims a similarly defiant group identity 'by default' for the youths of Troumaron, based on their shared social condition and on a profoundly formative association with their local environment: 'nous les enfants de Troumaron, nous sommes d'une seule communauté, qui est universelle, celle des pauvres et des paumés'.³⁴ In both of the above examples, a paradoxical, mutually formative relationship of dis-belonging between

32 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 39.

33 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 17.

34 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 104.

place and inhabitants (or ‘non-appartenants’), is aggressively asserted in opposition to prevalent communal constructions of collective belonging on ethnic and religious lines.³⁵ Troumaron’s negative associations with poverty, hopelessness and disaffection are thus claimed as the basis for an alternative, marginal, countercultural ‘communauté par défaut’ which consciously answers back to the centre on and with the latter’s own identitarian terms – of ‘communauté’, ‘identité’ and ‘appartenance’.

If we pay close attention to the narrative viewpoint of the above assertions, a marked gender difference emerges. The kinds of identity ‘by default’ or of community of non-belonging that are postulated are not ones with which the female inhabitants identify, despite their common poverty and disaffection. In Troumaron, as Clélio asserts, ‘l’autorité, c’est nous, les garçons [...] Les règles, c’est nous qui les dictons’.³⁶ The adolescent boys of the estate create a collective identity for themselves through membership of an all-male gang, *bann Troumaron*, whose internal rules are a defiant response to external stereotypes imposed by broader society: ‘ils vont dire qu’on est tous pareils, on est tous des tueurs, on mérite rien de plus qu’un mur autour du quartier, un mur sans issue’.³⁷ Ironically, despite their assertion of a collective identity that is based on a common lack, or rejection, of dominant communalist belonging, the gang members ultimately assert their own default identity by using the same kinds of spatially divisive, exclusionary tactics as those of the traditional ‘ethnic’ communities they explicitly claim to reject and deride: that is, by privileging group over individual identity (‘quand tu es en bande, il faut oublier que tu es une personne, il faut faire partie de ce corps chaud, mobile, puissant’);³⁸ by dictating the rules of appropriate conduct and policing its members, if necessary, with physical violence (‘Le monde [...] fait la guerre à tout ce qui titube, à tout ce qui ne marche pas du pas du conquérant’);³⁹ and by building symbolic and, potentially, physical barriers between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. As a result, ‘Le monde est clos. Nous ne pouvons plus sortir des cercles tracés par nos propres soins. Ces cercles disaient

35 Although emerging from different national contexts, such an ‘identité par défaut’ is highly reminiscent of the much-analysed forms of creative counter-discursive youth culture emanating from France’s *banlieues*.

36 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, pp. 15–16.

37 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 128.

38 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 81.

39 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 79.

au reste du monde, nous ne sommes pas comme vous, notre monde n'est pas pareil au vôtre'.⁴⁰ When Ève is seen to contravene the rules of the Troumaron 'community' – by ignoring the attentions of gang members; by flaunting the intimacy of her non-heteronormative relationship with Savita; or by returning to the *cit * with a police inspector – she is socially cast out, becoming the target of both her father's and the gang members' violence. As she recognises, 'J'ai pactis  avec l'ennemi. Comme toujours, je fais ce qu'il ne faut pas faire. J'entends la pens e collective qui jaillit des fen tres furieuses: cette fois, elle a  t  trop loin'.⁴¹

The two female narrator-characters, Ève and Savita, have very different relationships with their neighbourhood from the male gang members. Far from identifying, even 'par d faut', with the common, negative characteristics of the *cit *, both Ève and Savita repeatedly assert their wish to escape Troumaron: 'Sortir de tout cela';⁴² 'Je devais partir [...]. Je devais prendre un petit sac et partir tout droit'.⁴³ Indeed, Ève defiantly singles herself out from the other residents of Troumaron by denying or actively refusing any identification with the place where she was born and raised: 'Je n'appartenais pas   Troumaron. Le quartier ne m'a pas vol  l' me comme aux autres robots qui l'habitent';⁴⁴ 'Ma place n'est pas ici. Mais je n'ai pas de place'.⁴⁵ Although she recognises the formative influence which Troumaron has on all of its inhabitants when she claims that 'tout le monde na t condamn ',⁴⁶ Ève nonetheless identifies a fundamental, gendered difference between the ways in which male and female inhabitants respond to their environment: 'Les gar ons font des pactes,  tablissent des r gles, forment des all geances: l'esprit de la horde. Si tu tiens   ta vie,   ton corps, si tu es une fille [...] tu as int r t   faire un grand d tour'.⁴⁷ As the novel progresses and tensions rise, this essentially male 'esprit de la horde' becomes more directly linked to Ève and Savita's wish to flee the spatial and social constraints of their neighbourhood – both through the intimacy of their relationship and through their dreams of physical escape: 'Nous devons partir,

40 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 142.

41 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 124.

42 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 53.

43 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 63.

44 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 21.

45 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 94.

46 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, p. 29.

47 Devi, *Ève de ses d combres*, pp. 29–30.

nous échapper. Les garçons de la cité deviennent des hommes, avec des haines d'homme. Bientôt, ils s'en prendront à nous'.⁴⁸ By rooting their own sense of collective identity in an attachment to Troumaron and in the negative, brutal characteristics with which the place is associated, the male members of *bann Troumaron* end up replicating the same highly gendered politics of belonging and exclusion that underpin the very community system they explicitly reject. Replicating the outdated, inherited social structures of preceding generations, the young men thus turn the improvised multi-ethnic *cité* into an oppressive masculine space in which women's behaviour is just as aggressively policed, and from which the female characters feel equally alienated and even literally excluded.

The notions of 'community' or neighbourhood are not associated, for the female protagonists of either *Blue Bay Palace* or *Ève de ses décombres*, with positive feelings of affective, self-affirming 'place-belongingness', as articulated by Antonsich. In both novels – whether associated with a traditional, ethnic community like that of Fond du Sac or with alternative, non-ethnic communities 'par défaut', like those of Troumaron or Blue Bay's shanty town – the notion of 'community' is portrayed as inextricably linked to an oppressive, exclusionary and even brutal 'politics of belonging'. As largely male constructs, policed by masculine violence, local communities are portrayed as places of dis-belonging which, to echo Friedman and Schuterman's words, 'confine, interfere with and [violently] contradict the individual projects of selfhood' of the female characters of Appanah's and Devi's novels and so inhibit their ability to form positive connections with place.

If Ève and Maya both feel emotionally 'out of place' in, and even actively excluded from, their local neighbourhoods or communities, where else in Appanah's or Devi's imaginary geographies of Mauritius might they feel that they belong? Do they, for instance, feel 'at home' at home? The focus of this chapter will now turn to the representation of 'home', in the literal sense of familial dwelling or household, in *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*, and will explore the relationship constructed between the purportedly intimate, feminine, home space and the female protagonists' feelings of belonging or, conversely, of alienation and exclusion. As discussed in this study's general introduction, both scholarly and popular understandings of 'belonging' are closely tied up with the concept of 'home', in both

48 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, pp. 84–85.

literal and, more commonly, metaphorical senses. Thus, for instance, when reviewing common academic definitions, Yuval-Davis states that ‘belonging is about an emotional (or even ontological) attachment, about feeling at home’.⁴⁹ Similarly, as we have seen, Antonsich defines his notion of ‘place-belongingness’ as ‘being “at home” in a place’.⁵⁰ Such generally received but loose definitions are, in turn, reliant on dominant views of home as a ‘safe’ place. bell hooks, for instance, typically associates ‘home’ with feelings of familiarity, comfort, security and emotional attachment.⁵¹ In the face of rapid external change, as Duyvendak states, home is seen to represent ‘a safe and familiar space, be it a haven or shelter, where people can relax, retreat and care’.⁵²

As feminist geographers have recognised and critiqued, the dominant construction of ‘home’ as a source of stability, reliability and caregiving is strongly associated with traditional constructions of the house or home as an essentially female space. Whilst public space, in diverse cultures, is seen as progressive, modern and essentially masculine, private space is viewed – and constructed – as fixed, ‘authentic’ and feminine. As Massey mockingly quips, ‘home is where the heart [...] is and where the woman [...] is also’.⁵³ If belonging is predominantly associated with ‘home’, and ‘home’ is associated with women (and with the traditional ‘feminine’ characteristics of stability, familiarity and safety), then, according to such gendered, spatial logic, the ‘natural’ place for the creation of a female sense of belonging – in opposition to a hostile or exclusionary male environment outside – should be the family home. The stereotypical, arguably misogynist and reactionary nature of this kind of logic has already been widely exposed and critiqued both by feminist scholars working in a range of disciplines and often, as we shall see, in the fiction of women writers. Highlighting the ironic poignancy, in many circumstances, of associations of home with ‘safety’, Yuval-Davis acknowledges that ‘feeling “at home” does not necessarily only generate positive and warm feelings’.⁵⁴ Refuting

49 Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging*, p. 10.

50 Antonsich, ‘Searching for Belonging’, p. 644.

51 bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

52 Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home*, p. 27.

53 Doreen Massey, ‘Space, Place and Gender: Introduction’, in *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 177–84 (p. 180).

54 Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging*, p. 10.

traditional, sentimental conceptions of home, Sara Ahmed argues that homes can also be ‘sites of estrangement’, alienation or violence.⁵⁵ ‘The fact is’, Massey recognises, ‘that the home may be as much a place of conflict [...] as of repose’.⁵⁶ In neither Appanah’s *Blue Bay Palace* nor Devi’s *Ève de ses décombres* is the familial home presented as a safe and reassuring space to which the central female character is able to form a positive sense of self-affirming attachment. For different reasons and to differing degrees, as we shall now explore, the physical space of the home, in reflecting the social relations of the family within it and of the broader society outside it, represents a place of alienation and even, in Devi’s novel, of danger.

Maya’s home, which she shares with her parents, is a small, poorly constructed hut in the shanty town district of the village of Blue Bay. Both internally and externally, the house is characterised by its precariousness, proximity and lack of privacy. Maya’s bedroom is only notionally divided from the rest of the single-room dwelling, and hence from the sight and sounds of her parents, by a flimsy cotton curtain. In turn, the house is separated from neighbouring, equally decrepit properties by an unruly and unsightly line of cacti. Both the patched-up curtain and the gap-ridden cactus hedge – the impoverished equivalents of the walls, grills and bamboo barriers erected around the more well-to-do properties across the road and in Mahébourg – offer only an appearance of division between internal and external spaces, between the would-be intimate sphere of the bedroom or home, on the one hand, and the unruly public spheres of the shanty town and broader society beyond, on the other.

Given their inherent openness and porosity, the flimsy screens of curtain and cactus hedge are unable to provide any meaningful protection from the putative ‘outside’ and so they symbolically prevent the establishment of one of the defining attributes of home: safety. The simultaneously open but oppressive physical space of Maya’s family home is depicted as reflecting, and contributing to, her family’s inability to keep their daughter safe. In the following extract, from the later stages of the novel, as Maya’s jealousy is building to its violent climax, the family home’s physical configuration – particularly, its ‘promiscuous’

55 Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller (eds), *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 6–7.

56 Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p. 11.

lack of privacy – is seen actively to contribute to Maya's feelings of alienation, claustrophobia and desire for escape:

Quand je rentre le soir, la télé emplît ma maison et mon père se marre à haute voix. Ma mère est affairée dans la cuisine et le rideau qui tient lieu de porte à ma chambre est tombé ce matin [...] Tout à coup, cette promiscuité, cette télé, le rire gras de mon père, le bruit des casseroles dans la cuisine et l'odeur d'huile lourde me prennent à la gorge. J'étouffe. Je voudrais sortir de là, m'échapper, fuir ces murs [...], cette absence d'espace.⁵⁷

Just as the shanty town beyond the dwelling's flimsy walls is characterised, in the description discussed above, by its paradoxical openness and lack of horizon, so too does the internal configuration of Maya's familial dwelling – at once both claustrophobic and open – contribute to Maya's sense of alienation. Lacking the privacy and personal space associated with the home as refuge or haven, Maya feels repelled by the very place and people with which she should feel psychologically closest. The family's flimsy, cramped dwelling is unable to provide Maya with internal shelter from the mental anguish caused by external social structures.

The familial home's failure to serve as a place of refuge for Maya is not the result of active malice or harm on the part of her parents, as it is in *Ève de ses décombres*, but rather stems from their own poverty, passivity and social naivety. Indeed, on a superficial level, Maya's mother's behaviour within the home seems to conform to the stereotypical construction of the home as a feminine, domestic space: she is repeatedly depicted in the kitchen, where she prepares and provides meals for the family. The ritualised nature of these meals could, moreover, be seen to constitute the kind of repeated behaviour which, according to Pierre Bourdieu, helps over time to construct positive associations of the home with 'familiarity'.⁵⁸ Yet, as the following extract underlines, the mother's habitual domestic activities constitute more a *semblance* of care than caregiving in any meaningful sense. The obsessive-compulsive enactment of these tasks is, as Maya recognises, an attempt to exorcise, or at least mask, her mother's own underlying instability:

Ma mère ne me parle jamais le matin. Elle obéit à un rituel immuable: faire le thé, poser ma tasse [...], anse à droite, installer de quoi manger

57 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 85.

58 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Geneva: Droz, 1972).

à gauche, en général une tartine beurrée, et ensuite me regarder prendre mon petit déjeuner en silence. Elle reste là en triturant ses cheveux, et si parfois je dis une banalité, elle hoche la tête en faisant hm, hm ... Dès que j'ai fini mon thé, elle se dépêche de débarrasser et, avant même que je ne quitte la table, elle ramène soigneusement les miettes sur une éponge. Je me lève ensuite et l'embrasse vite parce qu'elle fait déjà la vaisselle et ne me regarde pas. Elle dit ok et je ne sais jamais si c'est une question ou une affirmation de sa part. Elle parle toujours avec le même ton, en vitesse, et c'est difficile de savoir. Elle est toujours comme ça ma mère, toujours pressée de faire avancer les minutes et les heures, inquiète de remplir l'espace et le temps avec du mouvement et du bruit.⁵⁹

Despite the mother's performance of domestic, maternal duties, there is no emotionally nurturing communication between her and her daughter to give weight and meaning to her hollow gestures – a fact recognised in Maya's observation that it is 'difficile de savoir' what her mother is thinking. In going through the domestic motions, the mother attempts to construct an image of maternal caregiving and homemaking that will fill the void of her life. Preoccupied with her own psychological trauma at having mothered only one child, she is unable to give any emotional depth to her habitual interactions with her child or their shared home.

Maya's father, in turn, is repeatedly portrayed, in a parody of the paternal, protective role, as vainly attempting to construct a manageable and effective barrier out of the wayward assemblage of cacti that surrounds the family's house and yard. As Maya leaves home for the last time, she passes her father as he attempts to eradicate the cacti with poison. Once they are dead, he says, 'il achètera quelques briques et il fera construire une vraie barrière pour protéger la maison'.⁶⁰ The irony, given the timing of his actions and those of his daughter – who is about to go to Mahébourg to murder Dave's wife – is that such defensive, protective measures are already too late. When Maya returns to Blue Bay later the same morning, having committed the murder, it is significant that she does not return 'home', to her parents' house: 'Arrivée au village, je ne descends pas la venelle qui me mène à ma mère et à ses ok, à mon père et à ses cactus qu'il assassine, à ma maison et à ses grincements'.⁶¹ Equating both the spatial and the interpersonal dimensions of home with meaningless, alienating habit and stifling

59 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 35.

60 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 86.

61 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, pp. 93–94.

claustrophobia, Maya finds solace and a more enriching emotional attachment instead in the embrace of the sea: ‘Je cours vers la mer. J’ai une envie folle d’elle, un désir déraisonné de me jeter dans ses bras’.⁶² The putatively maternal space of the familial home and her *mère* is thus superseded by the homophonic, anthropomorphic *mer* as object of Maya’s ultimately vain affective attachment. Far from offering a safe haven from the dangers of the outside world, or a place to which Maya feels an emotional attachment, the familial home becomes, in Appanah’s novel, an oppressive place of estrangement and alienation, which actively repels the female protagonist and contributes to the destructive and self-destructive downward spiral into which she is propelled.

In *Ève de ses décombres*, the family’s cramped, damp apartment in a run-down tower block on the Troumaron estate is seen, in a much more active sense, as a site of danger and violence for the female protagonist. In a Mauritian reworking of the stereotypical components of the metropolitan *banlieue* novel, Ève’s family are portrayed as highly dysfunctional, reflecting their, and the broader estate’s, social and geographic marginalisation. Ève’s father is an unemployed alcoholic who, in a vain attempt to reassert his dwindling paternal authority, beats both his wife and daughter. When, following Savita’s murder, Ève is perceived to have contravened the broader community’s rules by leading her friend fatally astray, Ève’s father finds a social justification for his violence:

Mon père ne sort plus de sa fureur. D’un seul coup, il a le beau rôle. Il n’est plus le père qui bat sa fille, mais celui qui « corrige » sa fille. Ça fait toute la différence. Je dois me glisser hors de chez moi quand il y a moins de gens dehors.⁶³

In an extreme embodiment of Massey’s assertion of the spatial form and content of social relations, Ève here finds herself both literally and psychologically trapped between her father’s violence at home (‘chez moi’) and the hostile retribution of *bann Troumaron* and of the broader neighbourhood ‘dehors’.

A victim of domestic violence herself, Ève’s mother has, much like Maya’s, retreated into a state of self-protective passivity, cauterised from all emotion, including towards her neglected daughter. In the following extract, the lack of communication between mother and

62 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 94.

63 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 109.

daughter is symbolically mirrored in their spatial relations, on either side of a closed door: ‘Ma mère, quand elle viendra dans ma chambre après avoir longtemps hésité devant la porte fermée, ne dira rien, ne sentira rien. Elle s’est délibérément insonorisé la chair pour ne pas avoir à ressentir la vie et à la regretter’.⁶⁴ Ève’s mother – described as a ‘mère en noyade’⁶⁵ – is too brutalised, by her husband, by poverty, and by her squalid surroundings, to be able to protect her daughter from the very same threats to her safety and well-being. Towards the end of the novel, Ève’s mother admits that, through ‘lâcheté’ and ‘démission’, she had neglected her. In an uncharacteristic display of tenderness, she helps her daughter to cut her hair which, as ‘la partie la plus visible de [sa] féminité’,⁶⁶ has become the privileged target of the father’s aggression. Yet there is no belated reconciliation between mother and daughter. Ève notes: ‘Ce contact me semble étrange, cette proximité de ma mère, après tant d’années. J’essaie de me souvenir quand nous avons été aussi proches. Mais c’est trop loin’.⁶⁷ As in the earlier evocation of a lack of communication between mother and daughter, this ‘strange’ or ‘foreign’ (‘étrange’) moment of tenderness is depicted in metaphorical, spatial terms: ‘proximité’, ‘proches’ and ‘trop loin’.

The mother’s neglect of her domestic and maternal role as caregiver, food-provider and homemaker is most evident in the following description of the traditionally ‘female’ space of the kitchen, where, as Ève describes, ‘il n’y avait pratiquement jamais que des boîtes de corned-beef ou de *glenrick*, du pain rassis, du macaroni, des sardines. Elle ne cuisine pas pour la famille. Chacun fait son propre truc. Moi, je ne mange presque pas’.⁶⁸ Rather than representing a place of attachment and belonging, the familial dwelling is a place from which Ève feels profoundly alienated and which, as a result, she actively rejects. This active, social and spatial rejection of her putative home space is underlined by Ève’s terminological self-correction in the following quotation: ‘Chaque jour je compte mes pas avant de rentrer chez moi. Ou plutôt, chez eux, car ce lieu n’est pas le mien. Je n’ai pas choisi d’y vivre’.⁶⁹ Throughout *Ève de ses décombres*, the depiction of the family ‘home’ consistently debunks and negates

64 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 41.

65 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 114.

66 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 131.

67 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 132.

68 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 42.

69 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 60.

the term's traditionally positive associations with familiarity, safety, stability and self-affirming belonging, and a purportedly feminine space. The familial home is categorically not a place where Ève and Maya feel 'at home'.

Ève and Maya both feel emotionally 'out of place' in, and even actively excluded from the dominant community system, their local neighbourhoods and their familial homes: Maya by poverty and lack of opportunity, Ève also by physical violence. So where else, in Appannah's or Devi's imaginary geographies, might they feel they belong? Notwithstanding the many parallels so far identified between the two novels' representations of Mauritius's man-made social and spatial relations – at the levels of community, neighbourhood or home – it is in their portrayal of the female protagonists' self-affirming, 'woman-made', affective attachment to their natural environment that Appannah's and Devi's novels bear the most striking and most interesting similarities. Indeed, as Arnold points out, there are 'd'étonnantes convergences dans leur représentation [...] de la communion avec la nature'.⁷⁰

Both novels culminate with the central character's violent revenge on the system that had curtailed her personal freedom and destroyed her dreams of love and happiness. *Blue Bay Palace* climaxes with Maya's brutal murder of Dave's new wife, and *Ève de ses décombres* ends with Ève's murder of the schoolteacher who had abused her and murdered Savita. In both novels, the protagonist's latent propensity to destructive violence is reflected in repeated symbolic associations between the female body and Mauritius's natural landscape and volcanic origins. The human spatial configurations of the island – towns, streets and *quartiers* – are, as we have seen, largely gendered masculine. The mutual interrelation between female characters and the island's natural space, on the other hand, is repeatedly evoked both in the feminising imagery used to describe the landscape and in the geological imagery used to describe the young women.⁷¹ In the opening paragraphs of *Blue*

⁷⁰ Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 360. In addition to *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*, Arnold also includes the anglophone Lindsey Collen's *Getting Rid of It* in his comparative analysis of sexualised violence against the female body and, as here, of the female characters' identification with the natural environment. See Lindsey Collen, *Getting Rid of It* (London: Granta, 1997).

⁷¹ O'Flaherty notes the way in which Appannah changes 'the typical perspective of the "island-as-woman" metaphor in favour of "woman-as-island" imagery'. See Ailbhe O'Flaherty, 'Every Woman is an Island? The Island as an Embodiment

Bay Palace, for instance, Mauritius's natural landscape and geological origins are described in highly feminised terms:

Au début, il y a le pays. Un bout de terre à la surface irrégulière, aux contours incertains. Ici la rondeur d'une femme enceinte, là la cambrure d'une jeune fille, plus loin l'aridité d'une vieille. C'est un pays né du crachat brûlant d'un volcan et dont le profil a été dessiné par les tempêtes et le soleil cardinal.⁷²

The formative origins of the island, portrayed as the offspring of a life-giving mother-volcano, are starkly contrasted with an explicitly male narrative of human discovery, conquest and exploitation of its land, flora and fauna: 'Les premiers hommes l'ont accosté sur leur route des Indes [...]. Ces premiers hommes ont chassé tous les oiseaux sans ailes, d'autres marins sont venus, des batailles ont élevé le pays en trophée'.⁷³ Despite the devastation and destruction wrought by man, glimpses of Mauritius's Edenic prehuman (i.e. pre-male) origins can still occasionally be glimpsed in the contemporary island's natural landscape:

Parfois, au détour d'une route, jaillissent de nulle part une fleur jamais vue auparavant, [...] une motte de terre sculptée en femme dont les seins et l'entre-jambe sont pudiquement cachés par fougères et mousse. [...] Et devant ces traces qui racontent une genèse, on soupire. Parce que la beauté et le mystère, m'a-t-on dit, ça fait soupirer.⁷⁴

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

Throughout *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya's intense love of the often-personified sea offers, in the purifying potential of swimming, a symbolic

of Female Alterity in Mauritian Women's Writing', in Véronique Bragard and Srilata Ravi (eds), *Écritures mauriciennes au féminin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), pp. 43–59 (p. 45). Gillian Beer famously warns that such 'identification of women with nature has sometimes empowered women but also acts as a restricting metaphor'. See Gillian Beer, 'Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past' (1987), in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds), *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 77–90 (p. 83). Cited also in Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 360.

72 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 9.

73 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 9.

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

and literal release from the claustrophobia of Blue Bay: ‘Moi, je cours toujours vers la mer’;⁷⁵ ‘je plonge comme si je sautais dans les bras de quelqu’un que je n’aurais pas vu depuis des années’.⁷⁶ Unable to find socially permitted emotional fulfilment with Dave, Maya transfers her desire for interpersonal connection to the sensory embrace of the sea. The novel’s repeated marine and volcanic imagery insistently links the female protagonist’s powerful but repressed – and therefore, potentially explosive – character with the elemental forces from which the island was formed. As well as referring, negatively, to the social configurations that seek to constrain her, Maya’s enigmatic assertion that hers is ‘une histoire de ce pays’ can thus be seen, more positively, to encompass the powerful, elemental forces of its natural landscape with which she assertively identifies.

In *Ève de ses décombres*, a similar identification of the female protagonist with the island’s natural geology – particularly with the latent, destructive power of the volcano – is underlined in the geological and seismic imagery repeatedly used to describe Ève’s body: ‘Le silence d’Ève, c’est celui qui gronde tout au fond du volcan’;⁷⁷ ‘ce sang de femme, cette coulure du volcan enfoui’;⁷⁸ ‘Elle a été sculptée comme une roche basaltique’.⁷⁹ A broader parallel between the exploitation of Ève’s female body and the colonisation of the island, reminiscent of the passage from *Blue Bay Palace* discussed above, is made in Ève’s own description of her abused body: ‘Je suis en négociation permanente. Mon corps est une escale. Des pans entiers sont navigués. Avec le temps, ils fleurissent de brûlures, de gerçures. Chacun y laisse sa marque, délimite son territoire’.⁸⁰ By identifying with the elemental forces of the volcano and the sea, Ève and Maya assert a form of affective belonging to their island that seeks not only to escape, but actively to destroy, the island’s repressive, man-made social and spatial structures.

One cannot overlook the arguably problematic, essentialist nature of such postulations of a female form of place-belongingness based on formative parallels between woman and island – parallels which bring to mind the erotic, exotic tropes of the untamed Creole woman or the

75 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 13.

76 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 18.

77 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 63.

78 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 134.

79 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 155.

80 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 20.

sexualised female island ripe for conquest pedalled in male-authored colonial-era literature.⁸¹ Such qualms illustrate the difficulty, especially for women writers, of ever truly evading male-constructed discourses in which, like the physical environment that they portray, even seemingly wild and natural terrain is so often already well-trodden and exploited. More positively, however, one could argue that in exposing entrenched social, spatial and discursive gender inequalities, Appanah and Devi do at least attempt, imaginatively, to reclaim this territory, both physical and discursive, as their own.

In such a contested physical and discursive space, and despite society's attempts to regulate women's behaviour and bodies, both Maya and Ève experience, however briefly, the empowering, self-affirming possibilities of a love that is freely chosen, rather than dictated by the social conventions of ethnic community, caste or family. These freely chosen but fleeting relationships are transgressive – and therefore forcibly curtailed – for very different reasons. In the case of the relationship between Maya and Dave, their love is regarded as transgressive because of intra-ethnic differences of class and caste – differences that are symbolically and spatially mirrored in their contrasting family homes and *quartiers*. In the case of Ève and Savita, in contrast, their relationship transgresses the social and sexual rules of their immediate community because of its non-heteronormative self-sufficiency and exclusivity. Their self-affirming, erotic and emotional friendship is based on recognition of fundamental similarities between the two of them – ‘on joue à être jumelles parce qu'on se ressemble’;⁸² ‘j'avais l'impression qu'elle était moi’;⁸³ ‘elles sont comme les deux mains d'un corps’⁸⁴ – and of their common difference from, and rejection of, others around them (male members of *bann Troumaron*, family, community). As such, as Ève recognises, they pose a threat to the social, spatial and gender norms of Troumaron: ‘C'est moi qui ai enfreint les lois. C'est moi qui ai dérangé les motifs, modifié les espaces, fracturé les portes closes. Je sème le désordre’.⁸⁵

81 Baudelaire's many poems inspired by his visit to Mauritius, such as ‘A une dame créole’, singing the praises of the undiscovered charms of the island and one of its female inhabitants, are archetypes of the male-authored exotic genre. See Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 2015 [1861]).

82 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 30.

83 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 64.

84 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 80.

85 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 101.

In each case, this fragile and doomed love provides the protagonist with a glimpse of alternative forms of affective belonging or community-making that might – just – be possible outside or between the island's existing, highly regulated social and spatial structures. Reflecting on her past happiness with Dave, in terms which liken the liberating experience of being in love with that of swimming in the sea, Maya suggests that: 'Peut-être parce que j'ai connu un fugace bonheur avant, peut-être parce qu'il m'est arrivé de rire aux larmes, de pleurer d'amour ou de bonheur, de nager et d'avoir l'impression d'être la mer même, peut-être que c'est pour ça que je ne me tue pas'.⁸⁶ In turn, the escapist, life-affirming and even life-saving nature of Ève's fleeting happiness with Savita is underlined when she states, as a rebuke to Sad's mimicry of male social and poetic models, that: 'La poésie des femmes, c'est quand Savita et moi, on marche ensemble en synchronisant nos pas pour éviter les ornières. [...] La poésie des femmes, c'est le rire, dans ce coin perdu, qui ouvre un bout de paradis pour ne pas nous laisser nous noyer'.⁸⁷ The notion of an essentially female mode of friendship, offering glimpses of 'un bout de paradis' that is entirely outside the explicitly masculine domains of home, gang, community, neighbourhood or town is again emphasised in Ève's assertion that: 'Hors de l'emprise des hommes, nous sommes devenues joyeuses, joueuses, pour quelques instants'.⁸⁸ Although both of these spontaneous, chosen, loving relationships are ultimately forestalled within their respective communities, they do nonetheless offer the female characters tentative hope of alternative, emotionally fulfilling forms of affective belonging outside existing social and spatial structures.

In such a context of glimpsed but as yet unrealisable happiness, violence is portrayed – as it is in *Les Jours Kaya*, discussed in the previous chapter – as a natural and potentially cathartic force, necessary for bringing about positive social change. In both *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres*, as discussed above, the female protagonists dream of a physical escape from the spatial confines of family, community and even country. As the momentum builds towards each novel's violent climax, both Maya and Ève also dream of harnessing the latent, elemental forces of the volcano or the sea – with which, as we have seen, they feel a profound affinity – in order to obliterate the

86 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 81.

87 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 30.

88 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 49.

island's artificial social and spatial structures.⁸⁹ When Maya learns of Dave's marriage, she seeks escape from her emotional torment by imagining a time 'quand la mer aura déjà rogné tout Blue Bay et qu'il ne restera de ce pays qu'une langue de sable'.⁹⁰ Shortly after, as her suicidal and murderous thoughts intensify, Maya feels that: 'le temps ralentissait et que la terre menaçait de s'ouvrir à nouveau sur un noyau de lave et que, comme il y a des milliers d'années, cette lave recouvrirait tout et dessinerait une terre plus clémente'.⁹¹

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

Je voudrais pouvoir marcher longtemps dans un endroit où l'horizon ne serait fait ni de mer, ni de montagne et encore moins d'homme. Je voudrais à moi seule repeupler toute une terre. Y arriver la première, sentir qu'ici ne porte aucune trace avant moi, qu'ici il ne faut pas se marier selon les règles, qu'ici on peut aimer qui on veut ...⁹²

In this reworking of the novel's opening depiction of Mauritius's prehuman origins, Maya's dream of a denuded, elemental, entirely unpopulated landscape where she could create a more just and natural society from scratch, is linked to her desire to rewrite her island's unjust history of (male) human habitation. So entrenched are the existing social structures (of class, ethnicity, caste and gender) perceived to be that, in Maya's apocalyptic view, it is only by achieving a complete *tabula rasa*, through the annihilation of all traces of human presence, that her dream of a more 'natural' society, where 'on peut aimer qui on veut', can be achieved.

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

89 A similar scenario is imagined in the closing pages of Devi's novel *Pagli*, in which the imprisoned protagonist Daya calls down the elemental force of the cyclone to wash away all traces of the society that had branded her mad ('pagli') and forbidden her adulterous love for the Creole fisherman Zil. See Ananda Devi, *Pagli* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

90 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 40.

91 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 42.

92 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 85.

Je voudrais une terre inconnue, et la mer qui la lèche tout au bout, et un unique filao [...], et moi assise sous le filao, ne faisant et ne disant rien. Parfois, je monte sur les plus hautes branches du filao et je regarde au loin. Au loin, il n'y a rien. Que la mer, et encore la mer. Le mouvement incessant, au son très doux, de la mer.⁹³

As in Appanah's novel, Mauritius's island topography is here reimagined as an almost entirely depopulated, since undiscovered, virginal space, stripped of all imposed and oppressive social and spatial configurations. Reacting against the claustrophobic promiscuity and gender inequalities of their respective environments, both Maya and Ève dream, not of a fully formed alternative social utopia, but of an elemental, geographic blank canvas on which they can create a new society on radically different, female terms. The very starkness of their imagined reconfigurations of the island space reflects the intensity of their psychological yearning for escape, for justice and for a seemingly impossible 'place of their own'. A causal, psychological link between Ève's fantastical dream of a deserted island paradise and her own seemingly realisable act of purifying, since avenging, violence is implied in the spatial terminology of Ève's realisation, on being handed a gun by the police inspector, to protect herself from members of *bann Troumaron*, that: 'Il m'a donné la possibilité de tout inverser. De tout reprendre depuis le début en faisant table rase. J'ai trop attendu. Il y a un monde, en dehors des interdits'.⁹⁴

Despite the many similarities identified in the two novels' portrayals of their female protagonists' highly gendered relations with Mauritius's original island space, there are significant differences in their respective representations of the consequences of the characters' would-be purgative, natural violence. As a chosen, rather than choosing, partner in her arranged marriage, Dave's wife, like Maya herself, is also a pawn – albeit a socially advantaged pawn – rather than an active perpetrator in the communal caste and gender system that excludes and oppresses Maya. Although Dave, in going along with the marriage arranged by his parents, is complicit in perpetuating his ethnic community's exclusive politics of belonging and so in causing her suffering, Maya never considers murdering him. The murder of Dave's wife offers Maya only temporary release from psychological torment and, as the novel's ending implies, only an 'illusion' of affective communion with her 'pays'.⁹⁵

93 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 61.

94 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 145.

95 Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace*, p. 95.

Leaving society's oppressive communal and gender hierarchies in place, Maya's individual, misplaced act of vengeful destruction leads to her own self-destruction. Her yearning for liberation will result, instead, in her incarceration.⁹⁶

In *Ève de ses décombres*, on the other hand, the schoolteacher whom Ève shoots dead had murdered Savita and abused his position of power to groom and abuse Ève. He is, therefore, not only representative of the repressive system against which Ève seeks revenge, but also the perpetrator of the kinds of male domination, exploitation and brutality that, in the most extreme form, underpin it. When she forces the teacher to kneel and to open his mouth to receive the phallic gun, Ève thus takes vengeful pleasure from her inversion of traditional power and gender relations when she tauntingly states: 'Tu acceptes ces rôles inversés'.⁹⁷ As Fenster argues (cited above), 'a gendered sense of belonging is about power relations and control'.⁹⁸ In redressing the traditional balance of power relations through a self-affirming harnessing of the island's natural elemental power, Ève here (re)asserts her own control and, with it, a powerful sense of female belonging to the island.

Despite the novel's bleak portrayal of the dystopian social relations in the *cit  * of Troumaron and beyond, the ending of *Ève de ses d  combres* offers a faint glimmer of hope for the future, in the promise of an enduring transformation of the novel's young male characters and a dismantling of dominant social and spatial gender relations. As the novel draws to a close, Cl  lio – the archetypal 'angry young man' wrongly accused of Savita's murder – sees in his female lawyer a positive role model who, though born in Troumaron, had been able to escape both its spatial confines and its social legacy: 'Je cherche sur sa peau la marque qui d  signe les losers que nous sommes, la preuve que ses espoirs ont d  j   commenc      sentir le pourri, mais je ne vois rien de tout cela en elle'.⁹⁹ Contrary to the seemingly inevitable downward trajectory of his plot line, Cl  lio thus starts to make plans

96 Arnold asserts that in both *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses d  combres*, 'force est de constater l'  chec de la solidarit   f  minine et interhumaine et un d  nouement pour les protagonistes dans la solitude et l'ali  nation' (*La Litt  rature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 371). While this is certainly true for Maya at the end of Appanah's novel, I argue that a more circumspect and positive reading of the concluding scene of Devi's novel is possible.

97 Devi, *Ève de ses d  combres*, p. 152.

98 Fenster, 'Gender and the City', p. 253.

99 Devi, *Ève de ses d  combres*, p. 137.

for an alternative future outside Troumaron if released from prison – plans that are made possible with the discovery of the schoolteacher’s confession note.¹⁰⁰ In a similar avoidance of the pessimistic logic of the narrative, the riots that the Troumaron gang have been fomenting are averted when, in order to protect Ève from the gang’s anger, Sad informs the police of their plans and prepares to hand himself over in her place. His reason for contravening the gang’s rules in this way is expressed in terms which are strikingly resonant of those elsewhere associated with Ève’s female-gendered relationship to the island: ‘Je ne veux pas faire partie de ceux qui réveilleront le volcan. Cette île est née d’un volcan. Une éruption, cela suffit’.¹⁰¹ Sad’s previously derivative male discourse becomes inflected, and his actions affected, by his acceptance of an alternative, female perspective. In the closing lines of the novel, his previously sterile mimicry of Rimbaud takes on potentially transformative power as it is linked to Ève’s female agency: ‘pour elle, avec elle, pour une saison ou plusieurs, je suis prêt à aller en enfer’.¹⁰² The novel does not end with Ève’s solitary act of violent retribution on abusive male authority, but with a moment of female-male reconciliation and solidarity. While Ève’s words to Sad – ‘Je n’ai pas besoin de toi’¹⁰³ – defiantly assert the primacy of her own female agency, the symbolism of their kiss, in the novel’s closing line, nonetheless signals the broader reconciliatory and transformative potential of her individual act of violent retribution.

In both Nathacha Appanah’s *Blue Bay Palace* and Ananda Devi’s *Ève de ses décombres*, the spatial configurations of Mauritius’s fictionalised urban environments are depicted as sites of estrangement and even danger for the novels’ female characters, reflecting the uneven social and gender relations of their inhabitants. Any positive sense of female place-belongingness is shown as being inhibited within internally cohesive ethnic communities of the kind supported by the official multicultural political system and national discourse. Yet the peripheral multi-ethnic

100 I disagree with Arnold’s pessimistic reading of ‘l’absence totale d’agency’ in Devi’s novel, particularly when he argues that, ‘incapable de dépasser le déterminisme social [...], Clélio finit en prison où hallucinations et visions moribondes l’envahissent’ (Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 155).

101 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 143.

102 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 155. Devi is here implicitly alluding to Rimbaud’s famous prose poem *Une Saison en enfer* (Brussels: Poot, 1873).

103 Devi, *Ève de ses décombres*, p. 155.

quartiers of Appanah's and Devi's fiction are not portrayed as sites of creative self-expression and affirmative connection either, as their young male inhabitants ultimately replicate the same masculinist 'politics of belonging' that structured social and spatial relations in the ethnic communities they explicitly claim to reject. All of the places traditionally most associated in the critical literature with affirmative, affective belonging – community, neighbourhood, home – become, in Appanah's and Devi's imaginary Mauritian geographies, places of exclusion and dis-belonging for female characters, whose behaviours are policed and life choices inhibited. In contrast, as we have explored, both novels postulate alternative forms of female identification with, and attachment to, the island's natural, non-human and prehuman geography. The female protagonists' murderous violence is both a reaction against repressive social configurations of the island's man-made urban spaces and a self-affirming reaction to the powerful elemental forces that formed and continue to shape its natural landscape. While this affirmative connection between individual and place is imagined as being an essentially female (and even, arguably, an essentialist) one, Devi's narrative in particular opens up the possibility – and the hope – of its forming the basis of a more inclusive, 'woman-made' sense of belonging to a shared island space in the future. Such a possibility adamantly rejects the traditional forms of ethnic belonging based on links with diasporic homelands elsewhere and on the patriarchal 'politics of belonging' that continue to structure Mauritius's dominant 'community system'. Reclaiming the discursive and geographic territory formerly claimed by men, and used by them to keep women in their societally dictated place, Appanah's and Devi's fictional postulation of a powerful, deep and enduring female connection to the island's natural, elemental foundations offers fruitful grounds for imagining an alternative, locally grounded sense of female-centred belonging to Mauritius for all her people in the future.