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CHAPTER FIVE

Nomadic Belonging

Amal Sewtohul's *Histoire d'Ashok et d'autres personnages de moindre importance* and *Made in Mauritius*

At the opposite extreme from the 'microscopic', intimate and individual forms of belonging depicted in Robillard's works, the novels of Amal Sewtohul portray the epic, transnational, intergenerational quests to belong of a multi-ethnic cast of Mauritian protagonists. To a far greater extent than his contemporaries so far discussed, Sewtohul is concerned with questions of collective, national belonging and of imagining what it means to be 'Mauritian' today. In many ways, these concerns echo those of earlier proponents of *mauricianisme* (discussed in the Introduction) who, during the independence period, sought to promote an inclusive sense of national belonging to Mauritius rather than to discrete ethnic communities with ancestral origins elsewhere. Like these precursors, Sewtohul seems to offer a vision – or, in fact, a range of possible visions – of an inclusive, locally grounded sense of Mauritian nationhood, transcending the population's ethnic differences and diverse histories of displacement and immigration. In returning to these abiding concerns, however, Sewtohul's novels also acknowledge the important contemporary forces of economic migration, mobility and global capitalism that have increasingly made Mauritius a place of emigration (definitive, temporary or seasonal) as well as of multiple immigrations: forces which problematise traditional, rooted and homogenous conceptions of national identity and collective belonging.

In his influential theorisation of the nation as an 'imagined political community', Benedict Anderson famously asserts that '[the nation] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never

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know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.[1] The 'images of communion' that underpin traditional models of national identity are predominantly based on ethnic homogeneity and on the fixed, deep-rooted relationship of people to place. As Kumari Issur argues in her study of nationalism, transnationalism and postnationalism in Sewtohul's *Made in Mauritius*, however, 'le discours ambiant à Maurice, visiblement influencé par les modèles européens visant à promouvoir l'homogénéité d'une nation, ne peut être entretenu'.[2] As Sewtohul's novels amply reflect, the multi-ethnic, multilingual, multifaith composition of Mauritius's population, like the complex, multi-diasporic history from which it springs, radically challenge homogenous, fixed models of national communion, as proposed by Anderson. Sewtohul's novels show that national belonging need not – indeed, in the case of Mauritius, cannot – be imagined on such terms. Taking the essential lack of a fixed and overarching 'image of national communion' as their starting point, *Histoire d'Ashok et d'autres personnages de moindre importance* (2001) and *Made in Mauritius* (2012) imagine the possible grounds for a unifying sense of collective belonging that might emerge from the diverse and shifting constituent parts of Mauritius's multi-diasporic past and its multi-ethnic, globally mobile present. The composite and iconoclastic 'images of communion' that Sewtohul proposes are characterised by both a thematic and a formal resistance to the homogeneity and fixity that traditionally underpin boundary-constrained models of national identity – a resistance which, as we shall explore, motivates instead a seemingly paradoxical form of nomadic belonging to place.

Histoire d'Ashok, Sewtohul's first novel, follows the loosely interwoven lives of four main characters – the Hindu-Mauritian failed accountant, Ashok; the dreadlocked 'petit musulman artiste bourgeois',[3] Faisal; the devout Hindu Tamil student, Vassou; and the middle-class, ethnically ambiguous, French-educated would-be politician, André[4] –

1 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.

2 Kumari Issur, 'Nationalisme, transnationalisme et postnationalisme dans *Made in Mauritius* d'Amal Sewtohul', Loxias-Colloques (2013), n. pag., http://revel.unice.fr/symposia/actel/index.html?id=449. Accessed 8 November 2015.

3 Amal Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok et d'autres personnages de moindre importance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 201. For ease, I shall use the abbreviated *Histoire d'Ashok* henceforth.

4 Arnold asserts that André in fact belongs to 'la bourgeoisie créole' and, as such, 'incarne les phénomènes classiques d'imitation qui se cristallisent dans la

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as they attempt to find a place for themselves, and a purpose to their 'unimportant' lives, within contemporary Mauritius. On one level, the characters' quests for artistic or spiritual connection with place and people could be seen to echo Chazal's earlier mythical vision of a locally grounded sense of *mauricianisme*, transcending ethnic difference. On another level, however, these quests intersect with, and are undermined by, the disenchantment, materialism and prosaic self-interest of the novel's late twentieth-century setting, as well as by the entrenched ethnic identities of Mauritius's community system. Sewtohul's third novel, *Made in Mauritius*, focuses on the recollected life story of Sino-Mauritian protagonist Laval, interwoven with the stories of his parents' and other characters' multi-staged migrations.[5] As the novel's epigraph – 'À tous les Mauriciens de la génération de l'Indépendance' – underlines, Laval's personal story is also intertwined with the turbulent historical events of Mauritius's accession to independence in 1968 – a time of violent unrest, mass emigration, unemployment, disillusionment and doubt – as the new nation, like the young protagonist, struggles to find its bearings and to define a distinctive sense of postcolonial identity for itself. Laval reflects: 'Pendant ces fameuses années de braise, au fond tout le monde se cherchait'.[6]

This chapter will explore the ways in which Sewtohul's novels playfully undermine traditional notions of national identity based on ethnic homogeneity and deep roots, and suggest forms of collective belonging that are characterised instead by displacement, mobility and rootlessness. Contrary to other critical readings which focus predominantly on the content of Sewtohul's proposed 'images of communion', this chapter will also interrogate the ways in which these images are repeatedly undermined by their self-reflexive form and ironic narrative

dynamique des relations coloniales: orientation exclusive vers la langue française et la culture occidentale, élitisme par rapport au créole, refoulement de sa propre culture insulaire' (Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, pp. 274–75). While this assumption is certainly compelling, André's ethnic background is never categorically stated in the novel.

5 As Kumari Issur points out in 'Nationalisme, transnationalisme et postnationalisme', Sewtohul's novel is the first to feature a Sino-Mauritian as a fully rounded main character. Previously, Sino-Mauritians had tended to occupy secondary, stereotypical roles as shopkeepers. Feisal and Ayesha, other main characters, are Muslim Mauritians – another minority group which is little represented in Mauritian literature.

6 Amal Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 197.

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framing. First, I shall discuss how Rosi Braidotti's theorisation of a nomadic subjectivity, based on Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between sedentary and nomadic relations to place, provides a fruitful model for analysing both the thematic and the formal complexities of Sewtohul's highly mobile Mauritian novels, and the iconoclastic 'images of communion' that they appear to postulate. Second, I shall examine how a sedentary and ethnically compartmentalised relationship to place underlies Mauritius's dominant community system, as portrayed and critiqued in *Histoire d'Ashok* and *Made in Mauritius*, hindering a more inclusive sense of national belonging. Third, I shall analyse the diverse 'images of communion' proposed in Sewtohul's novels – Faisal's composite painting of 'l'âme du pays'; Vassou's discovery of a spiritual 'esprit marron' running through Mauritius's collective history; Laval's well-travelled shipping container full of international bric-a-brac – and explore how they simultaneously construct and deconstruct alternative forms (or processes) of belonging to Mauritius that are based, seemingly paradoxically, on an essentially *nomadic* relationship to place.[7]

Rosi Braidotti's metaphorical theorisation of the notion of nomadism, and in particular her reflections on the nature of the European Union, offer a useful analytical frame for our reading of imagined forms of collective belonging to the nation and to the people of Mauritius in Sewtohul's novels.[8] Indeed, the symbolic parallels between the

7 Jean-François has already used 'nomadism' as one of his key terms of analysis in a reading of 'ethnicity' in Sewtohul's novels, associating 'nomadism' with other forms of mobility and migration, such as Glissant's theory of rhizomatic 'Relation'. Jean-François does not deploy nomadism specifically as theorised by Braidotti or Deleuze and Guattari, however. Instead, he argues that, in keeping with postcolonial literature more generally, Sewtohul's novels question the static conceptions of ethnicity that underpin Mauritius's multicultural national model. He shows how the 'popular' (as opposed to bourgeois) and nomadic (as opposed to fixed) forms of ethnicity represented in Sewtohul's novels challenge official constructions of ethnicity. In contrast to my own readings, Jean-François's use of the notion of nomadism maintains ethnicity – albeit a qualified and contested conception of ethnicity – as the central criterion of *mauricianité* in Sewtohul's work, as in Mauritian society. See Emmanuel Bruno Jean-François, 'De l'ethnicité populaire à l'ethnicité nomade: Amal Sewtohul ou la "fabrique" d'une nouvelle mauricianité', *Loxias-Colloques* (2013), n. pag., http://revel.unice.fr/symposia/actel/index.html?id=411. Accessed 8 November 2015.

8 See, inter alia, Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) or *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia

multi-ethnic situations of Europe and of Mauritius have already been highlighted by Thomas Eriksen, when he claims that:

> Mauritius contains, in a very visible and compact way, the same ambiguities and problems of social identity as the much larger and much more complex European continent does. The very project of building Mauritian nationhood since 1968 brings out the same tensions, and the same opportunities as that negotiation over social identities which is taking place all over Europe today.[9]

As Braidotti argues, the existence of the European Union – a willed project of political communion across linguistic, ethnic and geographic boundaries, premised on the free movement of goods and people across national borders – stands in stark contrast, and hence is perceived by many as a threat, to the models of 'limited and sovereign'[10] nationhood traditionally imagined by its member states. The central opposition at the heart of debates on the EU project, Braidotti argues, is one between what Deleuze and Guattari term, in their seminal *Mille Plateaux*, 'sedentary' and 'nomadic' relations to place.[11] Similarly, one of the main tensions underpinning competing visions of Mauritian nationhood – notably between *mauricianisme* and 'unity in diversity', as outlined in the Introduction – is, I contend and as we shall explore in Sewtohul's work, a tension between sedentary and nomadic relations to the island-space.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the traditional model of the nation state (as famously explored by Anderson) is predicated on a sedentary notion of belonging to place, undergirded by myths of linguistic and ethnic homogeneity, shared roots, clear boundaries and geographic fixity. The sedentary model of national belonging is exemplified, in *Mille Plateaux*, by the literal and metaphorical image of agricultural land, parcels of which are divided, delineated and allotted to distinct groups of

University Press, 1994), particularly 'United States of Europe or United Colours of Benetton?', pp. 245–57.

9 Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'Fragmentation and Unification in Europe Seen through Mauritius', *L'Express: Culture and Research*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1992), pp. 1–12 (p. 3). Both Braidotti's and Eriksen's studies cited here predate the most striking examples of such tensions between the EU project and individual nation states, most notably manifested in Brexit and the recent rise of populist, nationalist politics.

10 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.

11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux: capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1980).

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people – in the case of the nation state, its citizens – who thenceforth own and inhabit that land. A sedentary notion of national belonging is thus tied up with issues of division, demarcation and ownership of land: the land belongs to the people and hence the people belong to the land. As a result, access to or movement across the land is controlled by boundaries and borders, and by an associated regulation of inclusion and exclusion. The default relationship of people to place in such a sedentary model is a static one, with national citizens or 'belongers' owning, staying put on and claiming ancient ties to their land. In such a sedentary order, people who move across borders, from one place to another, are seen as outsiders and exceptions to the norm. These abnormal, mobile, boundary-crossing people are called 'migrants', in order to distinguish them from the normal, sedentary, non-migrant citizens of that land or nation. This is not to suggest, however, that migrants are perpetually on the move. The desire of migrants is ultimately to settle in the place of destination, rather than to keep moving, meaning that the underlying relationship of the migrant to land is also predominantly a sedentary one: the migrant leaves an original homeland with the aim of settling, and setting up home, in another. The migrant's most characteristic response to the experience of being displaced, whether willingly or not, is thus one of regrounding and resettlement, rather than of constant, onward mobility.[12]

In the Mauritian context, the most explicit and literal manifestation of former migrant populations' sedentary, regrounding relationship to land is exemplified by the so-called *grand morcellement* of the late nineteenth century, previously discussed in the introduction to the present book. During this time, vast swathes of agricultural, plantation land, previously owned by the Franco-Mauritian planter elite, were divided up and sold to the former indentured labourers who had worked it, so creating the basis of a landowning Indo-Mauritian planter class.[13]

12 Practices associated with migrants' 'regrounding' response to their country of adoption are explored in the various case studies in Sara Ahmed et al., *Uprootings/Regroundings*.

13 See, on this subject, Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indian Labourers*. In similar vein, the wholesale leasing of strips of coastal crown land to boost the country's struggling post-war economy would later give rise to the phenomenon of the *campement* – as the name suggests, a notionally temporary structure on rented land which, nonetheless, has become a visible, physical sign of the (predominantly Franco-Mauritian) owners' privileged belonging to the island. See Salverda, *The Franco-Mauritian Elite*. The social ascension of Ayesha's cousins in *Made in Mauritius* is reflected, notably, in their possession of a *campement* at Belle Mare.

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The ownership and working of the land has thenceforth been heralded, in both post-independence political discourse and corresponding national narratives of *emplacement*,[14] as evidence of the Indo-Mauritian community's accession to full Mauritian citizenship. In modern-day parlance, and as reflected in numerous Mauritian place names, the term *morcellement* has come to designate 'une zone autrefois agricole convertie en quartier résidentiel (donc "morcelée" en lots) habité par la classe moyenne', as Sewtohul notes in the glossary to *Histoire d'Ashok*.[15] The term's etymological and historical origins in the literal division and redistribution of land eloquently underlie, and coexist with, its subsequent, metaphorical connotations of bourgeois stability and social ascension – an ascension brought about by people's shift from uprooted migrant to sedentary 'belonger' status. It is thus revealing that, at the start of his restless, artistic quest to find the authentic 'âme du pays' (to which we shall return shortly), the rebellious Faisal of *Histoire d'Ashok* expresses his desire to flee his middle-class Indo-Mauritian community and its bourgeois social conventions in the following spatial terms: 'Je voulais me sauver du Morcellement'.[16]

The effects of the dominant, sedentary relationship of former migrants to land in Mauritius is further reflected in Sewtohul's novels in the representation of the discrete and mutually exclusive geographic areas inhabited by different ethnic groups and, prior to their own transformational journeys of discovery, by the main protagonists themselves: the second-generation Sino-Mauritian Laval lives with his extended family in Port Louis's Chinatown; his working-class Muslim friend, Feisal, lives in the largely Muslim district of Tranquebar; the various middle-class Indo-Mauritians of *Histoire d'Ashok* live in *morcellements* in the interior Plaines Willhems region. Despite Mauritius's small size, the sedentary relationship of different communities to their own ethnically delineated *quartier*, village or *morcellement*, means that most of the island, and even different districts of the capital city, remain unknown and out of bounds to others, compounding the various characters' feelings of being 'étrangers', 'touristes' and 'observateurs' in their own country.[17]

In opposition to hegemonic national narratives of sedentary attachment and landownership, a nomadic consciousness is, according to Braidotti,

14 See Ravi, 'Indo-Mauritians', discussed in the Introduction.
15 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 221.
16 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 201.
17 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 58, 95, 96.

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characterised by a 'desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity'[18] – a statement that presents an interesting corollary to official discourses of Mauritian 'unity in diversity'. In a nomadic order, people wander across expanses of non-demarcated land without any sense of enduring attachment to that land. Such a nomadic relationship to land is exemplified, in Deleuzian theory, by the image of the desert: a vast, open, uncultivated and non-demarcated expanse of no man's land. In the nomadic order, people are distributed across land, rather than vice versa, and hence the journey itself takes precedence over places of either departure or arrival as the privileged object of belonging. Without borders to delineate or stake a proprietary claim over the expanses of land crossed, travel and movement are the normal modes of relating to place for the nomad. Characterised by mobility and diversity, the nomad's identity is therefore, according to Braidotti, variously imagined as a journey, as 'a map of where s/he has been', as 'a set of steps in an itinerary' or an 'inventory of traces', without a defining point of departure, destination, origin or settlement.[19]

Reflecting just such a nascent nomadic identity, it is striking that, in order to search for an 'image of communion' with their Mauritian homeland and with their fellow Mauritians, all of the main characters of Sewtohul's novels must first leave their stable, familiar home and ethnic environment and set out into the unknown, on boundary-crossing journeys of geographic and social discovery. Some of these journeys are short, in terms of distance and duration, but they are nonetheless transformational in broadening characters' horizons and changing their perceptions of their homeland, of their fellow Mauritians and of themselves. Other journeys – of emigration as well as immigration – transport the previously sedentary characters far across the globe and so profoundly recalibrate the nature of their relationship with their now-distant homeland(s). As Braidotti is keen to emphasise, however, a nomadic relationship to space is not uniquely the domain of those who are constantly or even literally on the move. What distinguishes a nomadic from a sedentary consciousness is, rather, the nomad's attitudinal refusal to be defined by attachment to a place. In resisting any single, sovereign vision of fixed identity, the nomad is thus 'a figuration of the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity'.[20]

18 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 22.
19 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 14.
20 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 22.

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On a thematic level, literal journeys of different forms, motivations and duration abound in Sewtohul's fiction: from Ashok's aimless scooter rides around Mauritius's byroads to André's forays into disaffected working-class neighbourhoods; from Laval and Feisal's eye-opening bus trip across the island to the duo's emigration to Australia, mirroring Laval's parents' earlier flight from Maoist China. A particularly revealing example of such a literal, geographic journey, for our discussion of sedentary versus nomadic relations to space, occurs in *Made in Mauritius*, when Laval and Feisal set out from their familiar home territory of Port Louis to join Ayesha in Belle Mare on the east coast. As a result of this relatively short journey,[21] the pair discover their broader island for the very first time: 'C'était la première fois que nous voyions à quoi ressemblait l'île, en dehors de Port Louis. […] Nous qui avions passé toute notre vie parmi les immeubles croupissants et les routes défoncées de Port Louis, nous avions toujours cru que le reste de l'île serait encore plus laid'.[22] Not only does this journey destabilise their previously fixed and homogeneous conception of their country's geography but, as a first step in their ongoing wanderings, it lays the grounds for a sense of connection with their broader island nation and with their fellow Mauritians beyond the social and spatial boundaries of their immediate ethnic communities.

When they arrive on the east coast, Laval and Feisal are asked (in English): 'So, if you keep moving on East from here, what's there, off the coast?' Opening an atlas at the map of Mauritius, Feisal's response – 'Ben y a rien, y a que la flotte' – is indicative of his sedentary relationship to place, limited by the island's geographic and natural borders.[23] For him, at this point in the narrative, Mauritius is the entirety of his imaginable universe and Belle Mare the furthest known point on his only journey beyond Port Louis's city limits. Ayesha, on the other hand, opens the atlas at the map of the world, and the itinerary that she traces indicates, in contrast, her nascent nomadic consciousness: 'Elle a mis le doigt sur l'île Maurice – le bout de son ongle couvrait toute l'île – et son doigt se déplaça ensuite lentement vers l'est, sur une immense étendue bleue, comme les navires à voiles d'autrefois, avant d'atteindre finalement la côte ouest de l'Australie'.[24] As Kumari Issur comments,

21 Belle Mare is less than 40 kilometres from Port Louis, on the opposite coast.
22 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, pp. 155–56.
23 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 169.
24 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 169.

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in a reading of this scene that productively combines Homi Bhabha's notion of 'dissemiNation'[25] with Lionnet and Shi's concept of 'minor transnationalism':[26] 'Le pays n'est plus pensé comme une entité en soi, mais le monde comme un tout. […] Ayesha découvre des horizons plus grands et pose dorénavant un nouveau regard sur son espace local'.[27] According to the latter, interrelated vision of Mauritius's position in the world, the Indian Ocean, like the Deleuzian desert, represents not a barrier or a nation-delineating geopolitical border, but a means of connection with, and of transportation on to other as yet undiscovered locations. In visualising this interconnection, Ayesha's relationship to place, both local and global, shifts from sedentary to nomadic, from a perspective of insularity to one of openness and mobility. On such a scale, Mauritius is reduced to a tiny dot, belittlingly obscured, in Sewtohul's parodic narrative, by the tip of Ayesha's free-sailing fingernail.

In common with the other novels of our twenty-first-century corpus, Sewtohul's narratives mockingly critique the limited and limiting sedentary relation of people to place that underlies Mauritius's dominant ethnically delineated community system and signals the urgent need for more open and inclusive forms of interaction and coexistence. So, what alternative 'images of Mauritian communion' does he propose in his novels, and how do they, in their content and form, resist the fixity and homogeneity that underpin both the intra-communal discourses of Mauritius's community system and traditional, would-be sedentary models of national identity? How, in short, is a nomadic resistance to fixity expressed in the alternative forms of collective belonging that Sewtohul imagines in *Histoire d'Ashok* and *Made in Mauritius*? We shall consider first the two 'images of communion' that Amal Sewtohul proposes in *Histoire d'Ashok* – an artistic 'âme du pays' and a spiritual 'esprit marron' – both of which are imagined within the geographic limits of the island nation. We shall then explore the many overlapping metaphorical associations, both national and global, suggested by the quintessentially nomadic trope of the shipping container in *Made*

25 Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 139–70.

26 Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih (eds), *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

27 Issur, 'Nationalisme, transnationalisme et postnationalisme', n. pag.

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in Mauritius. Finally, we shall consider how Sewtohul's characteristically humorous, iconoclastic treatment of even his own 'images of communion' in both novels reflects, in form as well as content, a seemingly paradoxical, nomadic conception of national belonging.

Unlike the rest of the novel, which is narrated in French and in the third person, the three chapters of *Histoire d'Ashok* which tell of Faisal's quest for 'l'âme de son pays' and for a suitable artistic subject with which to convey that soul, are written in the first person and in Kreol, with French translations offered in an appendix.[28] The choice of the Mauritian vernacular underlines Faisal's avowed desire to eschew both externally imposed creative models and the sedentary, bourgeois conventions of his familiar home environment, in favour of a purportedly more authentic, local form of expression of Mauritius's 'soul'. A similar intention to escape the familiar, the bourgeois and the artificial motivates Faisal's decision to rent a dilapidated colonial-era house facing the mosque on the edge of Chinatown in Mauritius's predominantly Creole, working-class capital city. Much of Faisal's narrative is taken up by an account of his vain search for a particular image or colour with which to convey the elusive 'âme du pays' and, with it, a sense of personal connection with the 'real' Mauritius. That is, in a characteristically nomadic move, the majority of his narrative depicts his ongoing quest or journey, rather than the conclusion or destination thereof. While unsure of the artistic form that his painting of the country's 'âme' will take, Faisal is clear about the kinds of 'belle[s] image[s] typique[s]' he wishes to avoid:

> L'establishment statu quo produit éternellement des images de terroir […] Dans tous les lieux chic […] on trouve vous fixant depuis les murs cette île Maurice typique, folklorique, exotique, touristique. Il n'y a aucun tourment chez les gens qui produisent ces tableaux: ça ne les gêne pas de produire ad nauseam des cartes postales. Non, je ne ferai pas comme eux: Faisal, petit artiste bourgeois en rébellion, cherche l'âme de son pays, et il ne se laissera pas tenter par des solutions faciles.[29]

28 Although conscious of the linguistic and symbolic compromises entailed, I shall, for the sake of accessibility, cite Sewtohul's translated French version throughout the body of my analysis, with the Kreol originals included in footnotes.

29 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 203–04. The Kreol original reads: 'L'establishment artistique conservator li eternelman pé produire banne zimaze typique. […] Dans tou lendroit chic cotte ou allé […] ou trouve sa lile Maurice typik, foklorik, exotik, touristik la ine acrossé lor miraye li pé gette ou. Péna

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As the lexis of the above quotation – 'establishment', 'statu quo', 'éternellement', 'fixant' – underlines, the postcard-like 'solutions faciles' churned out by the artistic establishment are essentially static and sedentary in both form and content, and hence fail to capture the mobile, fleeting 'âme' that Faisal seeks and which, he believes, will provide him with a sense of affective connection to Mauritius and other Mauritians. The length and repeated frustrations of Faisal's search nonetheless emphasise the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of escaping such exotic, derivative and superficial clichés and so of glimpsing Mauritius's real soul beneath: 'Malgré toutes [ses] critiques contre les tableaux à vocation purement décorative', Faisal realises, he is fearful that he might in fact be 'incapable de faire autre chose que ça'.[30] The frustrated nature of Faisal's quest for meaningful connection in many ways thus reflects Elspeth Probyn's contention, discussed in earlier chapters, that 'the desire that individuals have to belong [is …] performed in the knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging'.[31]

The 'image of communion' that is finally revealed comes to Faisal not as the result of his tenacious efforts to find artistic inspiration, but by accident. Abandoning his cerebral, artistic quest, Faisal decides instead to engage with his fellow Mauritians on an emotional, interpersonal level as he attempts to rescue the vulnerable schoolgirl, Dirshaad, from exploitation and abuse at the hands of her pimp cousin. In revenge for this well-intentioned but inept intervention, the cousin sets fire to Faisal's rented house. And it is in the flames of the burning colonial house that Faisal finally glimpses an image that, he believes, avoids stereotypical 'solutions faciles' and encapsulates Mauritius's elusive soul:

> En haut il y a une lune tordue, comme la tête du cheval dans Guernica, qui se tourne vers une vieille maison coloniale ouverte par les flammes. Son toit de bardeaux monte vers le ciel, suspendu en l'air ainsi que les sorcières de Goya. Au milieu d'une drôle de flamme cannelée, le visage d'une vieille femme blanche qui a pris la forme d'une langue de feu – et autour du feu, à l'envers, comme les valets d'un jeu de cartes, un domestique indien avec un turban sur la tête, et un jardinier aux vieux vêtements déchirés, qui

aucène tourment intérière dans lâme bane dimoune ki peine sa bane tableau la: sa pas zeine zotte pou produire ad nauseam bane cartes postales. Non, mo pa pou fère couma zotte: Faisal, ti artiste bourzwa en rebelyon pé rolde l'âme so pays, et li pa pou laisse li tenté par bane solition fassile' (p. 24).

30 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 207.

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

> transporte un seau pour éteindre le feu. Autour d'eux, la couleur noire: Port-Louis et son noir moite et collant, gras et pourri.[32]

In mixing realism and fantasy, past and present, the subject of Faisal's planned painting seems, at first sight at least, to succeed in avoiding the exotic clichés produced *ad nauseam* by the Mauritian art establishment. The diversity of Mauritius's multi-ethnic population is represented in this artistically unified, composite image that confronts the enduring, uneven power relations between different ethnic groups – the white mistress, the Indian servant, the Creole gardener – whilst simultaneously portraying these colonial-era social relations as doomed to imminent destruction. Both the 'real' flames of the novel's diegesis and the imagined flames of the proposed painting thus appear to offer a form of liberation from the social and artistic stereotypes of the past and, through this artistic liberation, an apparently 'authentic', local, composite and mobile image of Mauritian communion.

In a study of the shifting, counter-discursive forms of ethnicity depicted in Sewtohul's works, Emmanuel Bruno Jean-François argues that the subject of Faisal's painting 'marque bien, non seulement le désir de rupture, mais le travail que l'art peut faire dans la construction d'un nouveau regard porté sur l'île'.[33] As a result, he continues, 'l'imaginaire artistique devient ici source et forme de libération, et ce n'est ainsi que par l'art que Faisal peut enfin être mauricien'. Julie Peghini argues similarly that, by avoiding the 'normes stéréotypées' of the art establishment and creating a work of art which '[lie] dans un tableau les aspects fragmentés d'un pays désuni', Faisal 'peut par l'art être mauricien'.[34] In their broadly positive postcolonial interpretations of Faisal's proposed painting of Mauritius's soul and of the unifying potential of art, however, Jean-François and Peghini both underplay more pessimistic and ironic

32 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 215–16. The Kreol text reads: 'Lahaut ena enn la linn cabosse, couma figir souval dans Picasso so *Guernica*, ki pe gett enn vye lacaz colonyal ki pe ouvert par la flam. So twa en bardo pe mont dan lesyel, pe envole, pe tini dan ler couma Goya so bann sorcyer. Ek o milye enn drol dife caboss cabosse ena figir enn vye madam blanc kinn pran form laflam – ek otour ife la, an lanver, parey cuma bann valet dan pake carte, ena enn domestik indyen ek so tok lor so latet, ek enn zardinye ek so linz desire, ki pe sarye seo pu teign dife. Autour tou sala, partu, ena kuler nwar: Port Louis so nwar mwatt ek kolan, gra ek puri' (p. 78).

33 Jean-François, 'De l'ethnicité populaire à l'ethnicité nomade', n. pag.

34 Peghini, 'Narrations de l'altérité à l'île Maurice', pp. 447, 446, 447.

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elements that are present in both the painting's subject matter and its formal interrelation with the broader novel – elements which suggest a more circumscribed interpretation of the image. On closer inspection, as Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo observes, it is evident that Faisal does not entirely achieve his desire to escape the 'solutions faciles' of bourgeois artistic convention.[35] The purportedly authentic (since entirely Mauritian) nature of the national soul represented is undermined by the European models, Picasso and Goya, whom Faisal derivatively cites. Whilst attempting to avoid clichéd 'belles images typiques', Faisal's own 'image of Mauritian communion' nonetheless remains indebted to just the kind of European 'imaginaire autre'[36] that he so adamantly seeks to reject. Furthermore, in their common focus on the multi-ethnic trio represented in Faisal's image of Mauritius's 'âme', critics have also overlooked the revealing last line of the would-be artist's description of his proposed painting: 'Autour d'eux, la couleur noire: Port-Louis et son noir moite et collant, gras et pourri'[37] – a line which undermines the seeming answer to Faisal's quest embodied in the preceding image.[38]

At various moments during Faisal's search for artistic inspiration, he refers to his repeated attempts to capture a particular shade of blue which, he believes, embodies 'l'âme du pays'. Early in his quest, for instance, he thinks he glimpses this soul in 'le bleu du ciel [qui] se reflète sur l'asphalte de la rue Joseph-Rivière par une matinée de pluie'.[39] On another occasion, Faisal scans the skyline in search of the elusive blue:

> J'ai regardé du côté de la Citadelle, allongée sur la colline comme un matou noir qui s'apprête à bondir sur la ville, et derrière elle les nuages gris de l'autre côté du Pouce. Les grosses nuées d'orage étaient sombres; au milieu de cette noirceur se trouve le bleu que je cherche.[40]

35 Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, 'Une mise en scène de la diversité linguistique: comment la littérature francophone mauricienne se dissocie-t-elle des nouvelles normes antillaises?', *Glottopol*, no. 3 (January 2004), pp. 142–65, esp. pp. 160–61, http://www.univ-rouen.fr/dyalang/glottopol. Accessed 17 September 2012.

36 Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, 'Une mise en scène de la diversité linguistique', p. 161.

37 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 216.

38 Although Arnold does not otherwise analyse Faisal's artistic quest, he does also recognise that the artist ultimately finds his country's elusive soul 'dans la nuit de Port-Louis après l'incendie criminel', rather than in the preceding image. See Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, p. 396.

39 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 202.

40 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 206. The Kreol text reads: 'Mo gette di coté

Elsewhere, when evoking 'le lac bleu' of a childhood memory, Faisal's frustration at failing to grasp the essence of the recalled scene is described in the following terms: 'nous n'arrivons pas à toucher le centre, là où coulent ces flots bleus'.[41] In all of these instances, Faisal tries but ultimately fails to capture the particular shade of blue which he believes holds the secret to Mauritius's soul, and hence to his own affirmative connection with his homeland. What he fails to realise, right up until his final revelation as he watches the burning house, however, is that Mauritius's soul lies not in the brief, elusive glimpses of blue in these various scenes but, instead, in the surrounding, all-pervasive blackness: of the wet asphalt road; of the shadowy Citadelle; of the storm clouds; of the lake's 'mare répugnante';[42] of the shady underworld inhabited by the schoolgirl-prostitute, Dilshaad; or, as at the end of his quest, of the oppressive squalor of the Port Louis night. If Faisal's proposed painting does succeed in eschewing stereotypical, postcard 'images de terroir' of Mauritius, such a reading suggests that it is not so much because it represents an alternative, overtly postcolonial image of multicultural Mauritian identity. Rather, the proposed image succeeds because it finally manages to grasp the insidious, rotten blackness – or fundamental lack – that, in Sewtohul's literary articulation, lies at the core of Mauritius's soul. As such, both the composite, imagined but unrealised image and, importantly, its destabilising narrative framing can be seen to reflect Braidotti's postulation, quoted above, of an essentially nomadic 'desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity'.

Even this more circumscribed reading of Faisal's composite, shifting image does not capture the full extent of Sewtohul's nomadic resistance to fixity and to would-be grand narratives, however. Faisal's three-part

Citadelle, ki kouma ène satte nwar ki pé yam la ville, et après sa bann nyaz gris lotte coté Pouce. Bann gros nyaz loraz la nwar nett: dans milye sa nwar la éna blé ki mo pé rode' (p. 42).

41 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 210. The Kreol text reads: 'Nou pas approsse cente, cotte ena sa zoli zoli dilo blé la' (p. 46). Faisal's evocation of an elusive, indefinable but longed-for object of enquiry which always lies, tantalisingly, just out of reach, but which disappears when subjected to direct scrutiny, is reminiscent of, and described in similar terms to, François's attempts to investigate 'l'impression d'éternité' provoked by a particular fleeting scene in Robillard's *Une interminable distraction au monde*, as discussed in the previous chapter.

42 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 209. The Kreol text reads: 'Éna zisse enn lamar laboue' (p. 46).

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narrative does not conclude with the artist's discovery of Mauritius's elusive soul, whether encapsulated in the image of the multi-ethnic trio and the burning colonial house, or in the blackness that surrounds and pervades it. Instead, Faisal's narrative strand abruptly peters out, long before the novel ends, with his highly ambiguous, anticlimactic line: 'Maintenant je crois que je peux rentrer à la maison'.[43] Faisal's decision to return to the same bourgeois family home that he had previously fled signals the resigned curtailment, rather than the actualisation, of his artistic ambition – and, with it, a return to a sedentary, complacent mode of interaction with people and place. Having glimpsed, rather than truly connected with, the black void at the heart of Mauritius's soul, and having imagined rather than executed, an artistic image of interethnic national communion, Faisal ultimately flees the alien world of multi-ethnic, working-class Port Louis, and returns to the comfort, security and sedentary 'solutions faciles' of his own bourgeois environment. Such a return serves to confirm Faisal's own anxiety from the outset that his quest might, after all, like his Rasta hairstyle, be just 'un autre concept bourgeois'.[44] With such pre-emptive asides and ironic, self-deconstructive narrative intrusions, Sewtohul implicitly undermines and destabilises the potential certainty of even his own already composite, contested and mobile image in ways that are, according to Braidotti, characteristic of nomadic writing's resistance to fixity and to dominant modes of representation.[45]

Soon after Faisal's strand of the narrative comes to an ambiguous end, the quest of another, equally 'unimportant' character begins, as Vassou sets out to find answers to a series of recurrent existential questions: 'Comment peut-on être libre?'; 'Lui n'avait personne. Serait-ce toujours ainsi?'; and, especially, 'Qui suis-je?'.[46] At the height of his soul searching, Vassou is described as being 'comme hypnotisé par une seule importante question ("Qui suis-je?") qui […] se brisait en de petites questions: Pourquoi était-il lui? Pourquoi était-il né dans cette famille et pas une autre? Que venait-il faire parmi ces gens?'[47] All of these

43 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 216. The Kreol text reads: 'Aster la mo crwar mo capav al lacaz' (p. 78).

44 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 206. The Kreol text reads: 'Kikefois li zisse ène lotte concept bourzwa encore' (p. 42).

45 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 25.

46 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 121, 124, 125.

47 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 126.

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questions underline the ontological problem that Vassou experiences when attempting to comprehend his current sense of disconnection from place and people, and to find a meaningful sense of belonging.

Just as Faisal's artistic quest for 'l'âme du pays' stretches over three separate chapters, interwoven with sections of Ashok's narrative, so too is Vassou's search for answers recounted in two distinct chapters, 'L'Esprit Marron' I and II,[48] interrupted by chapters recounting Ashok's more mundane, self-serving wanderings. In the second of the two chapters recounting his quest, Vassou is taken by the ghost of his grandfather Manikom on a fantastic 'course fantôme'[49] through unwritten, occluded episodes from Mauritius's collective history. Although this second, more fantastic section of Vassou's quest has received more critical attention, it is significant that Vassou's various, seemingly existential questions are in fact posed in the first, far more realist and banal chapter and are originally prompted by a fairly typical teenage rebellion against his stable middle-class Indo-Mauritian upbringing. Such juxtaposition of the prosaic and the fantastic, literal and figurative, is characteristic of Sewtohul's ironic and iconoclastic approach to his subject matter, as he constantly and pre-emptively debunks even his own narratives of national identity and collective belonging. Even before Vassou is taken on his fantastic 'course fantôme' – the context of Sewtohul's second 'image of communion' – the attentive reader is thus forewarned to approach its narrative message with a degree of cautious scepticism.

Guided by the spirit of his dead grandfather, in 'L'Esprit Marron II' Vassou embarks upon a fantastical spiritual journey through time and space and, most disconcertingly for our modern-day 'hero', through other people's bodies, thoughts and feelings: 'Vassou sentait affluer des souvenirs qui ne lui appartenaient pas'.[50] Inhabiting the body of an escaped slave as he is pursued by a pack of dogs, for instance, Vassou remarks that: 'Pas seulement qu'ils m'ont donné l'esprit marron, ils m'ont aussi fait avoir le corps'.[51] This realisation casts his recurrent question, 'Qui suis-je?', in a new and supernatural, but also a humorous, light. Whilst inhabiting the body of a *marron* from Mauritius's past, Vassou's flippant remark on his situation remains that of a spoilt, modern-day teenager – a humorous, jarring duality which destabilises and debunks

48 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 109–27 and 154–69, respectively.
49 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 159.
50 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 160.
51 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 161.

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the potentially traumatic experience portrayed, as it does the broader import of Vassou's experience. As his flight continues, Vassou meets and briefly inhabits the bodies of a series of 'copains d'il y a très longtemps'[52] from Mauritian history – Cossack, Chinese, Malgache, French, Hungarian Jewish, Gurkha, African – all of whom, it transpires, are characterised by and united in a common rebellion against different forms of oppression and servitude:

> Et ainsi, Vassou vogua d'esprit rebelle en esprit rebelle, butinant chez chacun un trait, un regard particulier. Il devint un Makondé chassant le sanglier puis revenant dans son village perché sur un ravin dans le sud de l'île – avec quelle joie triomphante il transportait la bête morte sur ses épaules, sentant le sang chaud dégouliner sur son torse –, puis un Juif hongrois mourant de la typhoïde dans un camp de prisonniers à Saint-Martin, pleurant car il ne pourrait jamais poser les pieds sur la Terre sainte, puis un soldat révolutionnaire français qui, avec ses camarades, voulait mener les esclaves de l'île de France à la révolte, puis un Gurkha en fuite de l'Inde après l'échec de la mutinerie de 1857 qui, ravalant sa fierté, acceptait docilement un métier de laboureur en subissant les insultes des sirdars, alors qu'avec ses camarades il avait tranché la gorge des soldats anglais aussi facilement qu'il coupait maintenant la canne. En chacun il sentait un souffle, un élan, un rêve.[53]

Vassou's encounter with the legendary fugitive slave boy Diamamouve explicitly acknowledges the original African and slave roots of the term *marron*. The lesson imparted by Manikom, however, and imbibed during Vassou's fantastic flight through many, multi-ethnic episodes from Mauritius's collective history, is that: 'Ce n'est pas seulement parmi les créoles qu'on devenait marron. Il y avait des Indiens marrons, aussi. Des Blancs marrons, des Chinois marrons, toutes sortes de marron, qu'il y a. Tous ceux qui cherchent leur liberté sont marrons'.[54]

Rejecting his earlier, realist 'rêves' and plans for 'évasion' (by becoming a professional footballer), Vassou seems at the end of his flight to have found an alternative, mystical answer – a unifying 'esprit marron' that he shares with 'tous ceux qui cherchent leur liberté' – to the many

52 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 168.

53 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 164–65.

54 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 160. In 'Ethnicisation ou créolisation?', Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo thoughtfully considers the ethical, as well as the theoretical, implications of such literary use and, arguably, appropriation of the historical experience of slavery.

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interrelated, existential questions with which he set out and, hence, to his quest for belonging: 'Il ne se sentait plus seul. Mille rêves, mille évasions l'habitaient. Il en avait la tête qui tournait. À d'autres, s'ils le désiraient, le froid réalisme et les sourires narquois. Il chercherait sa propre voie'.[55]

As critics have generally concurred, Sewtohul's literary postulation of a magical 'esprit marron', uniting socially and ethnically diverse but attitudinally similar individuals from different periods of Mauritius's turbulent history, seems to provide a particularly fruitful allegorical 'image of Mauritian national communion' that is born from the diverse components of Mauritius's traumatic history of displacement, exploitation and resistance. Peghini argues that 'l'esprit marron' reflects 'une créolisation qui conduit à l'avènement d'un monde unifié où les barrières sociales, géographiques et historiques ne sont plus significatives' and as such represents 'un nouvel imaginaire national'.[56] Jean-François similarly asserts that: 'Cette poétique du marronage […] rappelle en effet que la créolisation est d'abord le fait de l'expérience commune, de la rencontre et de la Relation dont parle Édouard Glissant, puisqu'ici le marronage est transculturel'.[57] Arnold variously sees Sewtohul's use of the metaphor of *marronage* as a form of 'chaos-monde glissantien', as a 'mémoire multiple', 'hybridité et résistance', 'subjectivité subalterne universelle' and, as such, as 'un lieu de mémoire interculturel'.[58] Highlighting fundamental differences between Mauritian and Caribbean contexts, however, Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo cautions against too readily interpreting Sewtohul's imagined 'esprit marron' as a Mauritian form of creolisation. Instead, Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo proposes, the image of a common *esprit marron* running through collective memory should be understood as 'la constitution d'un récit qui met en place un nouveau lien social'.[59] Rather than blending or 'creolising' the respective histories of suffering of the various discrete constituencies of Mauritius's population, Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo suggests that the metaphor of a collective

55 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 169.
56 Peghini, 'Narrations de l'altérité à l'île Maurice', p. 449.
57 Jean-François, 'De l'ethnicité populaire à l'ethnicité nomade', n. pag.
58 Arnold, *La Littérature mauricienne contemporaine*, pp. 207–09.
59 Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, 'Histoire et mémoire: variations autour de l'ancestralité et de la filiation dans les romans francophones réunionnais et mauriciens', *Revue de la littérature comparée*, vol. 318 (2006), pp. 195–212 (p. 210).

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'esprit marron' instead represents 'un partage métonymique de l'histoire'[60] – one that acknowledges the common suffering and resistance of all groups, whilst respecting the historical distinctiveness of each. Reflecting the island's 'unity in diversity', the notion of a metonymic rather than a unified relationship to history offers, by means of 'une mémoire exemplaire', an alternative reading of Sewtohul's image of Mauritian 'marron' communion that is conscious of both local specificities and enduring, internal differences.

Compelling though these various broadly postcolonial interpretations of Sewtohul's 'esprit marron' image are, critics have nonetheless largely neglected to examine the many ways in which the author repeatedly undermines the validity of his own alternative 'image of communion' in a destabilising, iconoclastic move that, I argue, is again characteristic of a nomadic resistance to all forms of fixity. As discussed above, the possibility that the quasi-mythical grand narrative of *marronage* could serve as an answer to Vassou's quest for belonging – let alone serve as grounds for an imagined Mauritian community – is pre-emptively undermined by the prosaic context of teenage angst and rebellion in which Vassou's many existential questions are originally posed. More significantly, given his role as guide on Vassou's fantastic journey into Mauritius's collective memory, Manikom's credentials as an imparter of intergenerational wisdom are also brought into question when Vassou remarks that: 'Nous croyons toujours qu'autrefois les choses étaient simples et que les gens étaient animés d'une force élémentaire [… et] d'une sagesse supérieure, […] alors qu'en fait leurs vies avaient été autant guidées par le hasard et l'erreur que les nôtres'.[61] As Vassou later recognises, 'Il ne faut pas surestimer la sagesse des anciens. Ils ont leurs limites comme nous'.[62] Such statements not only undermine the emphasis placed upon notions of origins, ancestry and intergenerational transmission that characterise the diasporic discourses of Mauritius's various ethnic communities, but they also serve to debunk the alternative, inclusive 'image of *marron* communion' that, through the mouthpiece of Manikom, Sewtohul's novel seems to propose.

Moreover, it is significant that none of the many other 'personnages de moindre importance' of Sewtohul's novel is even remotely affected by Vassou's fantastic journey through Mauritius's collective memory or by

60 Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, 'Histoire et mémoire', p. 210.
61 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 119–20.
62 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 122.

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the image of *marron* communion that it reveals. When Ashok overhears part of one of Vassou's exchanges with Manikom's ghost, in a scene which humorously juxtaposes realist and fantastic strands of the novel, he presumes that Vassou must be either mad or drunk.[63] Whilst Vassou's encounters with his various 'copains d'il y a très longtemps'[64] allow him to uncover and connect with a common 'esprit marron' running vertically through different periods of Mauritius's unwritten history, no such connection is established horizontally, with any of his contemporaries. The 'image of communion' that Vassou discovers exists only fantastically in and with the past: a fact which runs counter to critical readings of this passage of the novel as reflecting 'l'avènement d'un monde unifié'.[65] It remains unclear, at the end of Vassou's experience, how or if Vassou's 'course fantôme' will have a bearing on even his most immediate life choices. Renouncing the 'froid réalisme et les sourires narquois'[66] of his contemporaries, Vassou asserts that instead 'il chercherait sa propre voie' – an assertion which is immediately undermined as the text continues: 'mais quelle était-elle, cette voie? Il le saurait bien un jour – et il l'emprunterait, quoi qu'il arrive'.[67] Although Vassou seems now to have found a mystical and mythical answer to his recurrent question, 'Qui suis-je?', it proves to be of little help in guiding him through the prosaic realities of contemporary life. Vassou's narrative strand draws to an ambivalent non-conclusion as he returns home without an answer to a new question – 'quelle était-elle, cette voie?' – which his mystical experience has now provoked.

Although Faisal's and Vassou's quests, and the answers they appear to gain, have been the focus of most of the critical attention paid to *L'Histoire d'Ashok*, these narrative strands in fact constitute less than half of the narrative. The three chapters depicting Faisal's search for 'l'âme du pays' draw to a close less than halfway through Sewtohul's novel, before the two chapters recounting Vassou's quest for 'l'esprit marron' even begin. As a result, no interconnection is established between their two, quite different, quests for collective belonging. In turn, very little connection is made between either of these artistic or spiritual quests and 'le froid réalisme' of the six Ashok chapters, which

63 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 30.
64 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 168.
65 Peghini, 'Narrations de l'altérité à l'île Maurice', p. 448.
66 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, pp. 168–69.
67 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 169.

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make up over half of the novel.[68] As its title suggests, Sewtohul's novel both begins and ends with the story of Ashok, and each alternate chapter recounts the self-serving, materialistic quests of the eponymous anti-hero and his much-envied rival, André, played out in the banal, realist spheres of love and marriage, political ambition, careerism and a desire for social and financial advancement.[69] While Faisal and Vassou ponder the meaning of life and the nature of Mauritianness, Ashok and his cronies discuss schemes to sell knock-off lighters or pens, try to chat up female office interns, get drunk and worry about failing their accountancy exams. In the final chapter of the novel, Ashok and André meet for the first time after several years and, like Frédéric and Deslauriers at the end of Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*, reflect on their lives and on their respective failures to achieve their youthful dreams and ambitions.[70] Despite the *Bildungsroman* format of Sewtohul's novel, neither André nor Ashok has ultimately achieved or learnt anything from his quest. Just as Faisal's painting remains an unrealised 'work in progress', and just as Vassou is left still searching for his 'propre voie', so too does Ashok's story (and the novel) finish open-endedly and anticlimactically, with the words: 'J'ai des choses à faire'[71] – a concluding statement that is all the more ironic given Ashok's characteristic apathy. Although their paths cross briefly, the various characters of Sewtohul's novel ultimately remain both 'différents et indifférents'.[72] In a characteristically parodic, nomadic evasion of all forms of fixity, the metaphorical images of national communion that *Histoire d'Ashok* appears to propose are ultimately portrayed as the elusive stuff of fiction, and as such irrelevant to the vast majority of the 'personnages de moindre importance' who populate the banal, materialistic, middle-class Mauritius of Sewtohul's literary imagination.

68 Both Faisal and Vassou appear only briefly as 'bizarre' misfit, background figures in Ashok's narrative (pp. 18, 88, 129 and 30, 107–08, respectively). What is more, it is unclear whether the latter two references to 'Faisal' refer to him or to another person with the same name, a possibility which further undermines both his status as protagonist and the broader validity of his image of 'l'âme du pays'.

69 Indeed, it is the rivalrous adventures of Ashok and André, rather than those of Faisal or Vassou, that are reprised in Sewtohul's Madagascan-based sequel, *A la dérive* (Pamplemousses: Pamplemousses Éditions, 2014).

70 Gustave Flaubert, *L'Education sentimentale* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1869).

71 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 197.

72 Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok*, p. 60.

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We shall now turn our attention to Sewtohul's later novel, *Made in Mauritius*, in which the nomadic consciousness of the author is given even more exuberant, creative form, before bringing our readings of the 'images of communion' in both novels together in conclusion. As suggested by its English title, evoking the multifarious tacky products of globalisation, *Made in Mauritius* explores the question of what it means to be Mauritian within a context of global mobility and migration. Central to Sewtohul's characteristically humorous treatment of these issues is the omnipresent trope of the shipping container – an inherently mobile and protean 'image of communion' that is endowed with an ever-shifting, cumulative mix of personal, national and transnational metaphorical associations. Throughout *Made in Mauritius*, this quintessentially nomadic object becomes symbolically intertwined, in various overlapping ways, with the central protagonist's personal life story; with Mauritius's accession to independence; and with the search for a collective sense of Mauritian national identity transcending the geographic boundaries of the island nation.

The container makes its first appearance in the novel as it is used to transport the stock of Chinese bric-a-brac that will form the basis of Laval's future parents' livelihood when they emigrate from Hong Kong to Mauritius. Subsequently, Laval is born and lives in the container in the courtyard of an uncle's shop in Port Louis's Chinatown. On a personal level, the container thus comes to symbolise the impoverished and limited scope of Laval's early life, in both socio-economic and geographic senses: as he reflects, 'C'était ma matrice et mon monde tout à la fois'.[73] Later in the novel, the metaphorical significance of the container and its contents is expanded to encompass the broader trajectory of Laval's life journey as a second-generation Sino-Mauritian who emigrates to Australia, and so to define his sense of essential rootlessness: 'cette boîte en métal faisait partie de moi depuis si longtemps, avait été pendant toute ma vie le symbole de ma pauvreté, de mon manque de racines'.[74]

The interrelation between Laval's personal search for a sense of belonging in Mauritius, on the one hand, and the new island nation's search for an image of cohesive national identity, on the other, is also brought about, both diegetically and symbolically, by means of the shipping container, as Sewtohul's narrative blends fiction with historical reality. In a series of preposterous, fantastical coincidences, the container

73 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 109.
74 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 260.

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and its occupants (non-human and human) are present at, and, Laval superstitiously believes, instrumental in, key moments in Mauritius's independence struggles. By association with the metaphorical container-as-nation, Laval becomes, like a Mauritian Saleem Sinai, 'handcuffed' to the history of his newly independent nation.[75] When Laval's father transports the container to the Champ-de-Mars to sell off its contents, therefore, it becomes the site of a fictional race-fixing scam which, when a gangster is shot, leads to an outbreak of interethnic rioting and civil unrest of the kind that marked the reality of the pre-independence period. Later, the container becomes the podium on which the official handover of power from the British colonial governor to the first Mauritian Prime Minister takes place, the bullet hole in its roof used to insert the pole on which the new Mauritian national flag is raised. As Laval and his friends hide amongst the bric-a-brac inside the container, directly beneath the feet of the dignitaries, Laval reflects that: 'Ces rejets d'usine, que mon père avait apportés de Hong Kong tant d'années auparavant, c'étaient eux qui recevaient ce jour-là le don de l'indépendance'.[76] The symbolic analogy between the container's eclectic, international contents and the newly independent Mauritian people is further developed, as Laval continues:

> Ces rejets [devaient] se trouver à cet endroit précis, le 12 mars 1968, pour recevoir l'indépendance. Pourquoi? Parce que ces rejets, c'était le peuple mauricien. Car qu'étions-nous d'autre que des produits ratés de la grande usine de l'histoire? Canaille venue des tripots de Bretagne, coolies du Bihar, prisonniers des guerres tribales du Mozambique et de Madagascar, hakkas fuyant les guerres et les impôts de l'empereur de Chine. Nous étions les rebuts de l'humanité, venus à Maurice dans des cales de bateau pour être achetés ou pour pourrir à tout jamais sur les étagères de boutiques misérables.[77]

This broad brushstroke depiction of the various waves of immigration which have contributed to the composition of the new Mauritian nation over the centuries echoes, in even more iconoclastic, self-deprecating fashion, Sewtohul's earlier depiction in *Histoire d'Ashok* of a common 'esprit marron' running through Mauritius's history and seemingly

75 I am referring, of course, to the protagonist of Salman Rushdie's canonical postcolonial work, *Midnight's Children*, with which *Made in Mauritius* bears many, no doubt intentional, intertextual similarities. See Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

76 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 126.

77 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 126.

uniting its diverse and desperate people. The description of the Mauritian population as a tacky, international bric-a-brac of warehouse rejects also reflects, in its hyperbolic form, the earlier description of the container's absurd, non-human contents: 'Les gommes Great Wall, les lampes à huile, les volants de badminton, les poupées en plastique, les bocaux pour mettre des fruits confits, les draps de lit aux gros motifs floraux, les moustiquaires, le poison pour rats, les pinceaux, les flasques thermos, tout un inventaire étourdissant'.[78] By stressing the desperation, poverty, coercion and chance that drove Mauritians' forebears (and the international bric-a-brac) to the island, Sewtohul's imagery debunks traditional sedentary 'grand narratives' of national identity and historic destiny, offering an alternative, self-deprecating 'inventaire étourdissant' of their entirely arbitrary, improvised and pragmatic coexistence.

Even an event as portentous as the official independence ceremony is denied historic, nation-forming validity by the novel's iconoclastic, destabilising relation to its own subject matter. Unmoved by the ceremony that takes place above his head, Laval reflects, in characteristically bathetic style, that: 'L'Histoire était venue au Champ-de-Mars, s'y était posée un instant, puis s'était envolée vers d'autres pays, aux événements plus importants, nous laissant là, Feisal, Ayesha et moi, à nous chamailler dans l'obscurité du conteneur comme des clochards se disputant les restes d'un festin'.[79] This counter-discursive image of a personified 'History' who only briefly condescends to visit Mauritius, before leaving the island and its ragbag of 'unimportant' inhabitants to squabble in the dark, is reminiscent in tone of the scene, discussed above, in which the entire island is belittlingly obscured, on a map of the world, by Ayesha's fingertip. Contrary to the kinds of self-aggrandising myths that are traditionally told about a nation's foundation, Mauritius is repeatedly portrayed as just 'une petite île au milieu de nulle part', inhabited by 'les rebuts de l'humanité'.[80]

The intertwined metaphors of Mauritius as an empty, functional container devoid of intrinsic depth or importance, and of the Mauritian population as the rootless 'produits ratés de la grande usine de l'histoire', are again reworked in an allegorical *mise en abyme* when Laval creates an installation artwork, itself entitled 'Made in Mauritius', in and from the container and its multifarious contents. The following, first-person

78 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 23.
79 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 127.
80 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 85.

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description of the improvised method and tacky materials used in the production of 'Made in Mauritius' humorously encapsulates Laval's (and Sewtohul's) imaginary conception of the island nation's defining 'unity' as being the sum of its diverse, heterogeneous parts. Most of these diverse parts originate elsewhere and, like Laval, are destined to move on, reconfigured, to other locations:

> J'ai dessiné sur le sol une araignée. […] Cette araignée, me suis-je dit, c'est l'île tapie dans son coin de l'océan Indien. Sur elle, j'ai empilé des boîtes en carton et des sacs en toile de jute jusqu'à en faire comme une petite colline, aux pentes irrégulières. Près de son sommet, j'ai placé dos à dos la photo de Chacha[81] et celle du mariage de mes parents. Sur le versant que dominait la photo de Chacha, j'ai dispersé de petites poupées, allongées sur le ventre comme des soldats prenant d'assaut la colline, avec dans leurs mains de petits drapeaux du MMM.[82] […] Certaines des poupées se cachaient derrière de petites pagodes en porcelaine, de gros bouddhas joviaux et des bustes du père Laval.[83] Les idées me venaient à l'esprit à mesure que je m'activais et, trouvant l'installation trop statique, j'ai alors vidé les boîtes et les sacs en toile de jute, puis je les ai agrafés ensemble. Ensuite, j'ai recouvert la colline de pages de chroniques de courses arrachées de *Turf Magazine*, de pages de *La Chine se reconstruit*, de photos de Hema Malini et de Zeenat Aman,[84] et je l'ai de nouveau ornée de pagodes, de statuettes de bouddhas et du père Laval, derrière lesquelles s'abritaient les poupées MMM, et je l'ai coiffée des deux photos encadrées. Puis j'ai délicatement placé toute la colline dans un baquet géant rempli d'eau.[85]

This iconoclastic image of Mauritian national communion – improvised pell-mell from the chance, international detritus to hand and remodelled,

81 In Indian and Indo-Mauritian usage, the Hindi term *chacha*, roughly equivalent to 'uncle', is used to denote not just family members, but older male figures who are the object of both affection and respect. In this instance, Laval is referring to Mauritius's founding father, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, commonly called 'Chacha', and whose image and name are still ubiquitous in Mauritius.

82 The left-wing Mouvement militant mauricien, led by Paul Bérenger, was originally founded soon after independence as a student protest movement inspired by the events of May 1968 in France.

83 Jacques Désiré Laval (1803–1864) was a French Roman Catholic priest who worked as a missionary amongst the most destitute in Mauritius and strove to improve the conditions of former slaves. His tomb, in the suburbs of Port Louis, is a place of pilgrimage for the island's Creole population, who consider him a saint.

84 Popular Bollywood actresses of the 1960s and 1970s.

85 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 223.

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with the addition of locally significant historical figures and family members, to form the makings of an island society, adrift in the vast bath tub of the Indian Ocean – attempts to capture the many stages of onward, as well as inward, migration that shape the Mauritian nation and, in turn, its members' elusive sense of belonging to it. In striking contrast to traditional conceptions of the nation as homogeneous, fixed and geographically limited, the improvised composition of 'Made in Mauritius' explicitly avoids being 'trop statique' and hence seeks to capture the island nation's heterogeneity, mobility and permeable, free-floating borders.

Even this improvised, composite and mobile image of national community is denied potential, regrounded fixity and durability by the novel's diegesis, however: entered into a national competition, Laval's artwork secures him a government scholarship to go to art school in Australia, so setting in motion a further onward stage in his (typically Mauritian) journey of rootless migration. As well as metaphorically encapsulating the multiple, shifting, transnational influences that Laval conceives as comprising the Mauritian nation, his 'diverse yet unified' image also offers him a pragmatic, literal way of escaping the 'île bourrée de chômeurs' of the post-independence period.[86] As Laval and Faisal travel to Australia with and within the portable shipping container, on a journey prefigured in their youthful imaginings with an atlas (discussed above), their mode of travel gives ironic, fictional form to Braidotti's assertion that 'Nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries her/his essential belongings with her/him wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere'.[87] Having left the fixed, geographic boundaries of the island nation behind, Laval, as archetypal

86 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 214. In the immediate post-independence period, emigration was seen, and officially promoted, as a solution to Mauritius's problems of overcrowding and economic precariousness. State scholarships for study abroad, such as those awarded to Ayesha and Laval, were offered with the aim not only of reducing the island's population, but also of encouraging the well-qualified recipients to send money home to their families. Coming soon after the mass exodus of Franco-Mauritians and middle-class Creoles, who feared the 'Indianisation' of Mauritius, this additional emigration contributed to the creation of an outward 'Mauritian Diaspora' *from* Mauritius (to Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom in particular) that has been the subject, for instance, of a recent conference at the Mahatma Ghandi Institute, Mauritius, in December 2015.

87 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 16.

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Mauritian, literally carries his belongings and, metaphorically, his sense of belonging – encapsulated in the uprooted form of his composite installation artwork – with him in the shipping container.

Both Kumari Issur and Bruno Jean-François have analysed the motif of the shipping container in *Made in Mauritius* in relation to theories of nation and migration. Jean-François sees the container as a symbol of 'l'ensemble des identités accumulées' in a process of ethnic deterritorialisation: that is, rather than being contained by original homeland or the geographic limits of the island, Laval's ethnic identity 's'adapte et change de visage d'une destination à une autre'.[88] Issur sees the container as a symbol of Laval's mobility and transnationalism – forces which have, moreover, always shaped Mauritian society. As Issur argues, the constantly changing installation artwork that Laval constructs from the container's diverse contents metaphorically reflects the fact that 'Maurice ne représente au final qu'un moment transitoire, une étape dans un parcours beaucoup plus vaste […] et non la destination finale de toutes les vagues d'immigration qu'a connues l'île depuis son peuplement premier'. As a result, 'La nation mauricienne – tout comme l'individu mauricien – est aujourd'hui définitivement postmoderne, composée d'éléments hétéroclites puisés au gré de son parcours et de ses penchants et qui si mélangent en permanence'.[89] Reading *Made in Mauritius* in relation to Bhabha's notion of 'dissemiNation', Issur underlines the inherent 'movement and mutation' that characterise but also problematise Mauritians' sense of attachment to nation. In reading Sewtohul's novels through the lens of Braidotti's theorisation of nomadic subjectivity, my own analyses take this logic of transitory, mobile attachment to nation even further.

Like the desert of Deleuzian theory, Mauritius itself becomes, in Sewtohul's imaginary landscape, a nomadic space over and onward from which its dispersed, nomadic citizens travel. Sewtohul's multilayered, constantly destabilising approach, in which an image of national communion is imagined in order constantly to be deconstructed, reflects Braidotti's theorisation of a nomadic sensibility which 'entails a total dissolution of the notion of a center and consequently of originary sites or authentic identities of any kind'.[90] In both its content (as an empty, adaptable and portable receptacle for miscellaneous contents) and its

88 Jean-François, 'De l'ethnicité populaire à l'ethnicité nomade', n. pag.
89 Issur, 'Nationalisme, transnationalisme et postnationalisme', n. pag.
90 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 5.

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form (as polyvalent, unstable, iconoclastic and constantly reimagined), the image of the nation as shipping container offers Sewtohul a quintessentially nomadic metaphor with which to resist the 'settled and conventional nature of theoretical [...] thinking',[91] including, notably, traditional thinking about nation, identity and belonging.

The image of a national community whose members are unified only by their common mobility and by a temporary, pragmatic connection to a provisionally shared land, confounds traditional sedentary models of nationhood based on ancient ties, deep roots and ethnic homogeneity. Although unproblematically satisfying the essential criteria for nationhood identified by Benedict Anderson, in its being 'both limited and sovereign',[92] the young, post-independence Mauritian nation, as portrayed by Sewtohul, is not and never has been a land of sedentary attachment – and this despite the efforts of its various diasporic communities to reground their sense of transplanted, collective ethnic belonging in their adopted land. Instead, as the itinerant plot of *Made in Mauritius* reflects, 'Mauritius' is increasingly represented as a condition or a state of mind, unbound by the fixed geographical and geological boundaries of its 'limited and sovereign' island-space. The son of clandestine immigrants, raised in a shipping container, living most of his adult life in Australia, Laval is portrayed as being 'Made in Mauritius' as a direct result of his mobility, lack of attachment and 'manque de racines'. Therein lies the paradox of the 'nomadic belonging' of this chapter's title: the young nation's dispersed, bric-a-brac members are portrayed as being Mauritian not despite their mobility but precisely because of it. They form a 'diverse but unified' national community not because of any imagined homogeneity or fixed relationship to place, however tenuous this might be, but because of their common historical displacement and their ongoing mobility. According to such a nomadic conception of nationhood, Mauritius becomes a homeland, paradoxically, when those who have moved on from it view Mauritius – rather than their country of adoption or of ancestral origin – as 'home'.[93]

91 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 4.

92 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.

93 This point was echoed by Ananda Devi at a round-table discussion at the recent 'Indenture Abolition Centenary Conference' held at Senate House, London, 6–7 October 2017, when she stated that 'Mauritians define themselves as "Mauritian" when they leave'. In Mauritius, in contrast, she added, people tend to define themselves primarily according to entrenched ethnic and racial identities.

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When Laval nears death at the end of the novel, he seeks refuge in the shipping container, rediscovered in Australia in the hills above the newly founded community of Port Louis – a squatter camp which bears many geological and demographic similarities with its Mauritian namesake. When Laval dies, his body is cremated on the roof of the container, in a move which appears to confirm Michael Dash's contention that 'Where we bury our dead is usually the surest indication of belonging and community'. For, as Dash goes on to remind us, 'carefree nomadism is always haunted by the need for the individual to be buried somewhere'.[94] Laval is cremated rather than buried, his ashes are scattered to the wind rather than interred on either Australian or Mauritian soil. Laval's funerary reconnection with the shipping container which has metaphorically handcuffed his own life story to that of his young island nation throughout the novel thus represents an affective return to an entirely imagined Mauritian community transcending the island nation's fixed geographic limits. In characteristically humorous and iconoclastic fashion, however, even this highly playful, postmodern vision of the Mauritian nation – as a free-floating, provisional and entirely *imagined* community that can be recreated anywhere but to which members return, at least in thought, to die – is further debunked when, in the novel's final line, Feisal says of Laval: 'C'est bizarre, tout de même, au fond, ce type, je ne l'ai jamais vraiment connu'.[95] As with the bathetic, destabilising non-conclusions of Faisal's and Vassou's quests for belonging in *Histoire d'Ashok*, this playful final line – spoken not by the narrator, the traditional voice of authority, but by his long-estranged clandestine friend – serves retrospectively to cast doubt on the already tentative and improvised 'image of communion' that Sewtohul's novel has apparently just created. That is, paradoxically, only an 'image of communion' that constantly refuses to grant itself legitimacy as an image of communion can begin to reflect the inherent diversity, mobility and rootlessness that characterise Sewtohul's vision of Mauritian national belonging.

94 J. Michael Dash, 'Postcolonial Thought and the Francophone Caribbean', in Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (eds), *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 231–41 (p. 236). Dash makes this point in relation to the very different context of the borderland between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Nonetheless, the symbolic significance of a burial site – the ultimate reflection of a static relation to land – is relevant to our discussion of the closing pages of Sewtohul's novel and the final stages of Laval's typically Mauritian, since nomadic, life.

95 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 307.

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As Issur argues, and as both the form and the content of Sewtohul's novels amply demonstrate, 'le discours ambiant à Maurice […] visant à promouvoir l'homogénéité d'une nation, ne peut être entretenu'.[96] Contrary to the situation in other national contexts studied by Anderson, in multi-ethnic Mauritius the mobility of migration is the norm, not the exception – indeed, with no original, indigenous population, immigration is the *sine qua non* of the island society's very foundation. Mobility and migration, whether historical or ongoing, are conditions common to all Mauritians. In Sewtohul's literary imaginary, therefore, characters become Mauritian not by staying put and staking a claim to land – as per the traditional model promoted in political or literary nationalist narratives – but by uprooting, travelling and moving, whether their travels take them to other, previously unknown parts of the island or, as in the case of Laval's emigration, to other, far-flung destinations around the globe. As the recurrent trope of the journey reflects, travel and movement – rather than origin or destination – become, as Braidotti formulates, the Mauritian protagonists' normal modes of relating to place. Sewtohul's Mauritian characters do not so much relinquish all ideas of attachment to place, however, as come to discover and assert their sense of Mauritianness by embracing their essential rootlessness and mobility.

Whilst the metaphor of the nomadic container and its tacky contents equates Mauritius and Mauritians with ubiquitous banality, hollowness and pragmatism, these characteristics are not portrayed as cause for puzzlement or concern.[97] The container's inherent portability and durability are also exploited to underline the Mauritian people's qualities of strength, resilience and adaptability. When the container resurfaces, with its contents intact, several weeks after falling into a river, for instance, Laval sardonically remarks: 'C'est là le caprice du temps […] qui détruit tout, mais épargne les plus singuliers objets, ou peut-être est-ce l'invincibilité du mauvais goût'.[98] Similarly, when Laval is reunited with the container in the Australian outback after many years, he ponders: 'Et le conteneur, combien de temps pouvaient-elles

96 Issur, 'Nationalisme, transnationalisme et postnationalisme', n. pag.

97 These were, famously, the responses of Miles on observing that there is 'no overriding sense of national unity' in Mauritius, as discussed in the introduction. William F.S. Miles, 'The Mauritius Enigma', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1999), pp. 91–104 (p. 103).

98 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 221.

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exister, ces boîtes en métal, sans s'écrouler en un tas de rouille?'[99] The utilitarian and adaptable characteristics of the container – and, by metaphorical extension, of the Mauritian people – echo the depiction, in *Histoire d'Ashok*, of the 'froid réalisme', materialism and pragmatism of 'des gens creux' like Ashok and André. As both novels' repeatedly destabilising structures and bathetic conclusions seem to suggest, the lack of a passionate, visceral or even physical relationship between citizens and nation is not depicted as cause for national soul searching or angst. In a context of rapid globalisation, modernisation and migration, Mauritius's lack of a strong, fixed and 'sedentary' national identity is instead portrayed as a compelling strength. Taken to an iconoclastic, self-deconstructive extreme, Sewtohul's fictions of nomadic Mauritian belonging embody a 'desire to suspend all attachment to established discourses',[100] including those of communion, community and nation. Like the extended metaphor of an inherently nomadic shipping container with which it is likened, Mauritius is portrayed as dynamic, flexible, open and resilient – characteristics which, in contrast to the fixed, rooted and sedentary forms of national identity that are more traditionally imagined, make it and its members ideally equipped to withstand, and to benefit from, the demands of our ever more rapidly globalised and unstable world.

99 Sewtohul, *Made in Mauritius*, p. 291.
100 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 18.