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Julia Waters, *The Mauritian Novel: Fictions of Belonging*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. 248 pp. Bibliography and index. £25.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-786-94149-7. £0.00 (eb). ISBN 978-1-786-94949-3.

Review by Maya Boutaghou, University of Virginia.

Julia Waters analyzes contemporary fictions representative of “alternative forms of affective belonging” and imagines them as a tentative answer to “the *problem* of belonging” (p. 1). *Fictions of Belonging* are a sophisticated way to think about novels set in Mauritius because the question of “belonging” cannot be asked in just any context. Studying the history of identity formation results in a complex collective narrative shaping the national formation of the island. Julia Waters presents the context in depth in her introduction. She shows how “belonging” defines the core of Mauritian novels, almost as a constant *theme*—or perhaps, as it is strongly suggested, as a subgenre per se. She shows how it is both about “those excluded and those who ‘belong’ and how it allows for a constant and necessary renegotiation of the relationship between self and other, between individual and group” (p. 27). The Mauritian literary context exemplifies how individuals, mainly fictional characters, question the paths to belonging. The book is divided into five chapters. Each chapter gives an in-depth analysis of novels that represent formal and aesthetic modalities of “belonging”: “Belonging to the Moment,” “Belonging to the Island,” “Belonging Nowhere,” “Everyday Belonging,” and “Nomadic Belonging.” As in a genre, the novels are grouped to reveal specific critical orientations, forms of affective belonging, and consequently representative modes of exclusion. Mauritian novels written after the Kaya riots (1999), which figure as a sort of literary turning point, suggest a new understanding of belonging. In 1999, the death in police custody of the popular Creole singer, Kaya, revealed the violence and visible failure of what is commonly described as the rainbow nation: the social malaise of the multicultural island, its divisiveness and inequalities (racial, social, gender, and economic). The end of a successful national narrative is interpreted by the author—as it has been by other scholars working on Mauritius, such as Françoise Lionnet, Kumari Issur, Anjali Prabhu, and Emmanuel Bruno Jean-François—as a fictional and narrative turn (my expression). Novels then promoted a vision of “mauricianisme” or what it means to be Mauritian.[1] Twenty-first century novelists are as concerned with questions of ethnicity as they are with diverse forms of attachments and affiliations. The eight novels analyzed represent their reflections: Natasha Appanah’s *Blue Bay Palace* (2004), Ananda Devi’s *Ève de ses décombres* (2006), Shenaz Patel’s *Le Silence des Chagos* (2005), Bertrand de Robillard’s *L’Homme qui pense* (2003) and *Une interminable distraction au monde* (2011), Amal Sewtohol’s *Histoire d’Ashok et d’autres personnages de moindre importance* (2001) and *Made in Mauritius* (2012), and, finally, Carl de Souza’s *Les Jours Kaya* (2000). Following other critics such as Kumari Issur, Waters broadens the sense of belonging, not to limit its

understanding exclusively to ethnicity, but to suggest an intersectional reading.[2] While Waters' definition of "creolization" is restricted to Mauritius, and she refrains from a possible comparison with other similar contexts of creolization such as the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, the reader understands perfectly the differences in ethnic and historical roots, and how it is important not to essentialize the island process of cultural and ethnic, economic and linguistic consolidation. Indeed, from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean there are common schemes of cultural mixing, and "creolization" can be used in a broader sense. Édouard Glissant can certainly pretend to universalization. The mention of Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's successful extension of the concept indicates its applicability outside of the Caribbean context.

Chapter one, "Belonging to the Moment," focuses on *Les Jours Kaya* as probably also the original inspiration for the book. This moment made visible the power of belonging and the reality of the rainbow nation beyond the construction of its ideal photographic representations. The title reveals how the riots represent the "break with the ethnic structures, stereotypes and inequalities of the past" (p. 67), projecting the participants to new ways of belonging, outside of spatial and social boundaries. The novel represents this shift between a communal, closed, but locally grounded sense of belonging to an open, non-ethnic, global sense of identity. *Les Jours Kaya*, written after the violent upheaval, denounces the unsustainable violence of a profoundly pathogenic social construction. Transforming violence into words, the novel addresses the need for a more sustainable way of belonging.

In chapter two, "Belonging to the Island," the author examines an understanding of belonging through space and landscape. Ananda Devi's *Ève de ses décombres* and Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* represent gender dynamics intersecting with social dimensions of space.[3] The chapter develops imagined gendered geographies of urban space and its production of violence. The affective belonging to the space is not naïvely happy as depicted by the tourist industry picturing the island. "Troumaron" and "Blue Bay," presented as peripheral spaces, "a semi-rural seaside *bidonville* and an urban *cité*" (p. 85), prevent any sense of female belonging to the space. In this chapter, the author develops a comparison with the Caribbean literary production of imagined spaces as in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*. The village of Blue Bay and the urban city of Troumaron are both characterized by feelings of geographic isolation and social desolation. The end-of-the-world nature of Troumaron, like Blue Bay, is the dysphoric absence of vision and perspective that became essential to the characters. Ève and Maya, the respective female protagonists of the novels, do not associate feelings of belonging with the space. There is no home or possibility of home while the island is a male exclusionary space, where they feel out-of-place; maybe such a text needs an added layer of interpretation to go beyond the binary dead-end of symbolic representation of space and gender. Gendered geography of space emerges in the context of Mauritius with a terminology that projects the reader onto the well-known situation of "cité," "banlieues," and "bidonvilles" of the French urban social geography. Without ignoring that the terminology is commonly used in francophone urban geography, it is still worth noticing that the same terminology reveals commonalities that are productive but might be misleading in the Mauritian urban context, adding meanings primarily associated with the French social context.

Chapter three, "Belonging Nowhere," analyzes one novel, Shenaz Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, which is about the forced deportation of Chagossian islanders between 1967 and 1973 to serve the interest of Great Britain. The long contextualization is important to understand the social and political layers unfolded in the novel. The complex narrative and poetic claims reinforce the

unique answer literature offers to dysphoria of belonging. Chapter four, “Everyday Belonging,” is certainly the most creative alternative to narratives of belonging. The everyday can be carried everywhere as the author argues. Robillard’s work as a new version of “cultivons notre jardin,” Voltaire’s conclusion to *Candide*, elaborates the limits of spatial and social belonging. It translates the *hic et nunc* of the everyday. Robillard’s *L’Homme qui penche* and *Une interminable distraction au monde* reveal the quintessentially literary quality of the Mauritian contemporary literary landscape beyond any form of miserabilism, without ignoring the violence of everyday belonging. It shows the nuances of what literature can do. The reference to both Lefebvre and Perec’s novel *Un homme qui dort* reinforces the intertextuality central to a form of spatial and rhizomatic belonging. Through novels of the everyday, are we not experiencing, as readers, a new dimension of francophone literary production, strongly exemplified by Mauritian novels? They depart from the collective to depict the growth of individual space and ontological strategies of belonging.

Finally, chapter five explores “Nomadic Belonging,” the long-lasting effect of “l’esprit marron running through collective memory” (p. 186), as it is depicted in Amal Sewtohol’s *Histoire d’Ashok et d’autres personnages de moindre importance*. It is regrettable that the author did not mention the intertextual *clin d’œil* to eighteenth-century French narrative form. The title evokes Denis Diderot’s metafictional novel *Jacques Le Fataliste* (1796), a useful reminder that Mauritian authors are nurtured on French classics and forge new intertextualities, displaced to other lands to invent new textual genealogies of belonging. As such, they recover the essence of literature: its process of creation based on differentiation from, and imitation of, literary canons. The conclusion of the book implies a sort of resolution through the means of literature. Social representations of violence and its symbolic dimension cannot be reduced only to a social description: while novels stage violence, they give the reader a space to question safely the symbolic dimension of violence. The poetics and aesthetic of the novel offer both alternative ways of belonging and a symbolic space for healing. This return to literature, per se, can be a strong example for thinking societal violence in other francophone spaces. The paradigm of “Belonging” as for creolization of theory can be transferred and applied to francophone areas where exile and social violence are central to literary production. The lack of attention to language and languages is the visible missing dimension of the book; after all, one first belongs through language, as the symbolic death of the creole singer Kaya tragically confirms. Do we, as critics, perpetuate other forms of exclusion by isolating productions from the same space but written in other languages? How is literary criticism a way to consolidate ties or perpetuate symbolic forms of exclusion? The question of belonging as it is presented is worth transferring to the growing field of literature and migration.

NOTES

[1] See Julie Peghini, *Île rêvée, île réelle* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2016).

[2] Kumari Issur, “Mapping ocean-state Mauritius and its unlaidd ghosts: Hydropolitics and literature in the Indian Ocean,” *Cultural Dynamics*, Volume: 32, no. 1-2 (2020): 117-131.

[3] See Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

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