



CHAPTER THREE

Belonging Nowhere

Shenaz Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*

In an interview given following the publication of her third novel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, in 2005,¹ author-journalist Shenaz Patel made the following statement about the role of the writer – and of the novel – in relation to real-life ‘stories’:²

Si l'écrivain a un rôle quelconque à jouer [...], c'est peut-être pas seulement d'inventer des histoires mais aussi de ne pas laisser mourir les histoires qui existent autour de lui, et qui demandent à être racontées pour ne pas sombrer dans l'oubli et le silence. Et le romanesque me semble, au fond, un moyen privilégié de rendre plus réel, plus vivant, de donner une chair, un sang, des yeux, une respiration, une incarnation à une histoire qui pourrait autrement rester uniquement une affaire de dates et d'événements.³

The long-occluded real-life story to which Patel is referring here, and which is the inspiration for her novel, is that of the forced deportation of 2,000 Chagossian islanders from their homes, between 1967 and 1973, in order to make way for the construction of a US military base on Diego Garcia, the largest island of the Chagos archipelago. Based largely on the testimonies of Charlesia, Raymonde and Désiré, three Chagossian refugees to Mauritius, the interwoven ‘histoires romancées’⁴ of *Le*

1 Shenaz Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos* (Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier, 2005).

2 The French word *histoire*, with its dual meaning of both ‘story’ and ‘history’, is far more potent than ‘story’ for describing Patel’s fictionalised treatment of the Chagossians’ situation.

3 Patel, ‘Pourquoi ce livre’ (2006), n. pag., http://kiltir.com/francais/boo33/silence_chagos_pourquoi.shtml (accessed 23 May 2013).

4 Patel, ‘Pourquoi ce livre’, n. pag.



Silence des Chagos recount the circumstances of the Chagossian people's expulsion from their homeland, the terrible hardships they continue to suffer in their country of involuntary exile and their abiding yearning to return home.

Central to all aspects of the Chagos islanders' story – to their original expulsion, to their ongoing legal battles for the right to return and to their continued exclusion from Mauritian society – is the notion of belonging, in both politico-legal and emotional senses. At the heart of the Chagossians' recent history lies a brutal and profoundly uneven clash between the 'politics of belonging' as cynically deployed by US and British governments, on the one hand, and the affective and embodied sense of belonging to, and longing for, an annexed homeland experienced by the displaced Chagossian population, on the other. As I shall explore, Patel's novel seeks both to convey the Chagossians' feelings – and lived realities – of *déracinement* and exclusion in their country of involuntary residence, and also, by depicting memories of life in the Chagos before their expulsion, to assert their moral and legal right to belong – and thus to return – to their islands. That is, *Le Silence des Chagos* implicitly but powerfully demonstrates that the grounds of the Chagossians' deep sense of *emotional* belonging to their islands are, in fact, inextricable from those of their *legal* right to belong there. The novel is not, therefore, solely an effective means of telling, or bringing to life ('donner une chair à'), a largely untold story of inhumane brutality and suffering: it is also, in itself, an act of ethical and political solidarity on the part of its Mauritian author. As Patel is keen to stress, *Le Silence des Chagos* is not a conventional 'livre-document' but is instead a 'livre du ressenti, qui tente de faire vivre de l'intérieur ce que peut être l'épreuve du déracinement'.⁵ Before exploring Patel's literary ('romanesque') engagement with the Chagossians' story – particularly its thematic and formal treatment of the interrelated notions of *déracinement* and belonging – I shall first outline some of the historical 'dates et événements' of their real-life history most pertinent to *Le Silence des Chagos*, highlighting how legal and political conceptions of 'belonging' have been used – and largely abused – in order to justify both the Chagossians' original expulsion and their continued displacement.⁶

5 Patel, 'Pourquoi ce livre', n. pag.

6 For a fuller historical account, see: Sandra Evers and Marry Kooy, *Eviction from the Chagos* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

The roots of the Chagossians' forced displacement can be traced back to the late 1950s when, at the height of the Cold War, the United States decided to establish a military base in the Indian Ocean, in order to protect access to the Arabian Gulf from possible Russian or Chinese threats. Diego Garcia was chosen as the preferred site for such an installation for a number of reasons: its strategic position at the centre of the Indian Ocean; its horseshoe-shaped natural harbour; the absence of protected species of flora or fauna;⁷ its relatively small, non-Western population;⁸ and the fact that it was still a colony of the US's strongest ally, Great Britain.⁹ The Chagos Islands were then a dependency of the British colony of Mauritius, which was at the time seeking independence. In order to be able to lease Diego Garcia to the Americans, Britain had to separate the Chagos archipelago from the jurisdiction of Mauritius. In 1965, by a secretive Order in Council, Britain therefore created a new colony, the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) which encompassed the Chagos archipelago, so detaching it from Mauritius. This move knowingly violated the 1960 United Nations Declaration (1514) on Decolonisation, which insisted that a country's 'territorial integrity' had to be safeguarded prior to decolonisation. The detachment of Chagos from the territory of Mauritius was presented to the future Mauritian prime minister, along with a £3 million bribe, as a non-negotiable condition of his country's independence. In 1966, the British government then secretly granted the United States a 50-year lease of Diego Garcia, with the option of an (automatic) extension of 20 years, in exchange for an equally secretive discount on an order of Polaris nuclear submarines.

7 The island of Aldabra in the Seychelles was initially selected, but ultimately rejected because of the existence there of rare and protected turtle and seabird species. The human population of the Chagos had no such protection.

8 The disturbing racism underlying the treatment of the Chagossians, most of whom were of African origin, is particularly flagrant when compared with Britain's attitude towards the numerically comparable white population of the Falkland Islands. See Madeley's report to the United Nations on this subject: John Madeley, *Diego Garcia: A Contrast to the Falklands*, Minority Rights Group, Report no. 54, 1982. Cited in John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time* (London: Transworld Publishing, 2006), pp. 37–90 (p. 68).

9 As David Vine comments, in his eloquently titled book, *Island of Shame*, 'in the British Government, the US had a partner willing to ignore British law and international human rights guarantees'. See David Vine, *Island of Shame: The Secret History of the US Military Base on Diego Garcia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 79.

A key condition of the US's lease of Diego Garcia was that the Chagos had to be entirely uninhabited prior to the establishment of their base: the UK therefore had to clear the islands of their inhabitants. Article 73 of the United Nations Charter, regarding the treatment of permanent inhabitants of colonial territories, insists that 'the interests of the inhabitants of the territory are paramount'. In order to get around this stipulation and so to justify the expulsion, British officials decided to claim, 'more or less fraudulently',¹⁰ that 'there were no permanent inhabitants in the archipelago'.¹¹ An official telegram of 1966 cynically suggested that 'The legal position of the inhabitants would be greatly simplified from our point of view – though not necessarily from theirs – if we decided to treat them as a floating population'.¹² As Vine notes, citing recently released US and UK government documents, 'This step was crucial because, in classic Orwellian logic, "to recognise that there are permanent inhabitants will imply that there is a population whose democratic rights have to be safeguarded"'.¹³ On Foreign Office legal advice, it was decided 'to maintain the fiction that the inhabitants of Chagos [were] not a permanent or semi-permanent population', and thenceforth to claim that the Chagossians were 'a floating population' alternately described in official communications as 'migrant workers', 'copra workers', 'transient contract workers' or 'contract labourers'.¹⁴ In

¹⁰ These were the terms used in a handwritten Foreign Office internal minute: 'This is all fairly unsatisfactory. We detach these islands – in itself a matter which is criticised. We then find, apart from the transients, up to 240 "ilois" whom we propose either to resettle (with how much vigour of persuasion?) or to certify, more or less fraudulently, as belonging somewhere else. This all seems difficult to reconcile with the "sacred trust" of Art. 73, however convenient we or the US might find it from the viewpoint of defence. It is one thing to use "empty real estate"; another to find squatters in it and to make it empty' (H.G. Darwin, Foreign Office internal minute, 4/2020 ND, 24 May 1973). Cited in Pilger, *Stealing a Nation*, p. 61 and Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 91.

¹¹ Alan Brooke-Turner, 'British Indian Ocean Territory', memorandum, 18 March 1966, UKTB. Cited in Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 91.

¹² Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 91.

¹³ Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 79, again citing Brooke-Turner, 'BIOT'. The Orwellian nature of such bureaucratic logic is also noted by Pilger: 'Winston Smith in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* could not have put it better'. Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, p. 42.

¹⁴ These and other terms are variously and interchangeably used in official UK and US communications of the period. See Vine, *Island of Shame*, especially pp. 78–80 and 89–92.

a move cynically devised to dupe UN officials, the Chagossians – many of whose families had lived on the islands for five generations and whose ancestors were buried in long-established cemeteries there¹⁵ – were thenceforth classified as “‘belongers” of Mauritius or the Seychelles and only temporary residents in the BIOT’.¹⁶ Classified as a ‘floating population’ who ‘belonged’ elsewhere, the islanders’ democratic rights as ‘belongers’ of the Chagos could thus be bureaucratically ignored. As Stephanie Jones points out, the notion of ‘belonging’ was deployed from the start ‘as a means not so much to allow [the Chagossians] to belong to Mauritius and the Seychelles as to exclude them from the Chagos islands’.¹⁷ The governments and military officials of two of the most powerful nations on earth thus plotted to deny the Chagossian people their democratic rights as inhabitants or ‘belongers’ of their native islands. Crucially, these included the right – enshrined in Magna Carta and United Nations declarations – not to be deported. From the very start of the Chagossians’ tragic story, the international ‘politics of belonging’ were deployed and knowingly manipulated in order to justify the expulsion of the islanders from their homeland.

In preparation for the mass expulsion of the islanders, in 1967 the UK government compulsorily purchased the Chagos Islands from the Seychellois plantation owners, Chagos-Agalega Ltd., for whom all the Chagossians worked, and began systematically to wind down operations. In stages, all Chagossians were then either tricked or forced into exile. First, from 1967 onwards, any Chagossians who ‘temporarily’ left the islands to visit Mauritius were refused re-entry, left stranded with only the possessions they had taken with them. At the same time, essential supplies to the islands were progressively restricted and medical and teaching staff withdrawn, making living conditions so intolerable that many islanders were forced to leave, planning to return when conditions improved. They were subsequently also refused re-entry. Finally, any islanders still remaining were rounded up, given only an hour to gather what possessions they could fit into one bag, and forcibly

15 The Chagos Islands were first inhabited in the eighteenth century, when French plantation owners from Île de France established coconut plantations there and imported enslaved Africans to work on them. Many of the Chagos population of the late 1960s could trace their ancestry back to these first slave inhabitants.

16 Brooke-Turner, ‘BIOT’ memo, cited in Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 91.

17 Stephanie Jones, ‘Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics: Indian Ocean “Belongers”, 1668–2008’, *Interventions*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2009), pp. 212–34 (p. 221).

deported on board overcrowded cargo ships. The islanders' homes and domestic animals were destroyed, often before their eyes.¹⁸ The last such ship left Diego Garcia in 1973. After a gruelling six-day journey in appalling conditions, the Chagossian deportees on these ships were unceremoniously dumped on the dockside in Port Louis and left to fend for themselves, in a country beset by post-independence unrest and high unemployment.¹⁹

The Chagossians' previous life – as largely illiterate, poorly educated, narrowly skilled plantation labourers with little experience of a cash economy – left them woefully ill-prepared for adaptation to post-independence Mauritius' rapidly modernising economy. In an already ethnically divided society dominated by the Indo-Mauritian majority, they found themselves doubly disadvantaged – as Chagossians and as 'Creoles' of African and slave descent. With virtually no financial or other support from UK or Mauritian governments,²⁰ the Chagossians suffered – and continue to suffer – the characteristic fate of displaced peoples: high mortality, morbidity and suicide rates, rapid downward social mobility, high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, marginalisation, deprivation and widespread despair.²¹

Despite the Chagossians' seemingly insurmountable individual and structural disadvantages in Mauritius, activist groups, headed by electrician Olivier Bancoult, have managed to wage a series of legal battles through the British courts to have their expulsion declared

18 John Pilger asserts that killing their dogs, 'with its unsubtle implication that humans might be next', was just one of the coercive methods employed to frighten the islanders into leaving. Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, p. 45.

19 While most Chagossians were deported to Mauritius, a small number were taken to the Seychelles. In some cases, family groups were definitively separated.

20 No official plan was in place for their resettlement and no compensation offered. When finally, in 1978, £650,000 compensation was eventually paid by Britain to the new Mauritian government, most of it was used to pay off the debts that the Chagossians had incurred since their deportation and so did little to improve their conditions.

21 See, on this subject: Michael Cernea and Scott Guggenheim (eds), *Anthropological Approaches to Resettlement: Policy, Practice and Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993). One of the most moving sections of Vine's study compares the mental and physical health of Chagossian refugees with that of other displaced peoples. He likens the Chagossian malady of 'chagrin' with other officially recognised disorders – such as 'root shock', 'nervos', 'Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome' or 'grieving for a lost home syndrome' – caused by the trauma of forced displacement. See Vine, *Island of Shame*, pp. 149–63.

illegal and hence to win both compensation and the right to return. In her probing analysis of the various UK judgements on the Chagos case, Stephanie Jones explores how legal decisions both in favour of (2000, 2006, 2007) and against (2008) the Chagossians²² all hinged on a ‘half-subdued but at times lyrical, legally open and provocative evocation of what it means to be a “belonger” of a place’.²³ Just as the exclusionary and fraudulent use of the ‘politics of belonging’ was central to the Chagossians’ original expulsion, so too is ‘belonging’, in its many protean forms, crucial to their ongoing legal fight for the right to return and to the maintenance of their involuntary exile.

Given the timing of the Chagossians’ expulsion, on the cusp of Mauritian independence, their legal case is reliant, as Jones examines, on the interpretation of different colonial and postcolonial legislative frameworks and thus of different understandings of the notion of ‘belonging’. Prior to their deportation, the Chagossians’ legal status as inhabitants of ‘a colony of a colony, a dependency of a dependency’,²⁴ was as British colonial subjects. As labourers within a highly patriarchal plantation system, which provided them with free housing but not ownership of the land on which this was built, the islanders had no formal employment or land-ownership rights.²⁵ With no legal rights

22 The Chagossians’ has been a long legal battle, but in 2000 they achieved their first victory when the British High Court ruled that their expulsion had been illegal. The then Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, committed to investigate the feasibility of their return. In 2004, however, the Blair government effectively overturned the 2000 ruling by means of a secretive Order in Council, forbidding the islanders from ever returning. In 2007, the High Court found that the 2004 Order in Council had been an ‘abuse of power’, so potentially reasserting, in principle, the Chagossians’ right to return. The government appealed against this ruling and, in 2008, the Law Lords found in the government’s favour, by a majority of three to two, so exhausting the Chagossians’ channels of appeal through the British legal system. The Chagossians subsequently took their case to the European Court of Human Rights, which found in the UK government’s favour, on the grounds that the Chagossians had already received compensation, preventing them from making any further challenges. This finding was then challenged in the Supreme Court in 2016. Although the judges found against the Chagossians by a margin of 3:2, they were highly critical of the UK government and conceded that this was ‘not the end of the road’. See www.chagossupport.org.uk for updates on this ongoing ‘David and Goliath’ struggle.

23 Jones, ‘Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics’, p. 212.

24 Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 26.

25 In 1949, a representative of the Mauritian Labour Office commented on the

as either citizens, employees or landowners, the Chagossians' legal appeals and the rulings thereon rested on what Jones calls 'the quaintly evocative but barely defined notion of a *belonger*' – a term which, she concludes from comparative analysis of its various uses in legal arguments, 'basically describes a person with close ties to the land through ancestry [...] who has the right to live and work without any immigration restrictions and who cannot be deported'.²⁶ The concept of a '*belonger*' is not defined in British law: nonetheless, as Jones points out, it is repeatedly deployed by various of the High Court judges and Law Lords ruling on the Chagos case, as if its meaning were self-evident. In his 2000 ruling that the islanders' expulsion had been illegal, Laws LJ uses the word '*belongers*' no less than 14 times in his summing up without ever defining its meaning: an 'easy reliance' on a central but nebulous term that Jones describes as '*curious*'.²⁷

Rather than debating, in legal discourse or via legal precedent, the precise meaning of the terms '*belonging*' and '*belonger*' on which their arguments centre, the various judges repeatedly have recourse to highly emotive language and to examples from memoir, literature or legend, in order to give the terms – and hence their rulings – 'correct affective weight and ethical nuance'.²⁸ As Sedley LJ movingly affirms, in his 2007 ruling, for instance: 'Few things are more important to a social group than its sense of belonging, not only to each other, but to a place. What has sustained peoples in exile, from Babylon onwards, has been the possibility of one day returning home'.²⁹ Despite the evident centrality

'patriarchal' relations between plantation managers and labourers in Chagos, 'a system of benevolent rule with privileges and no rights [...] dating back to [...] the slave days'. The system that he describes had changed little by the late 1960s. See G. Meyer, 'Report on Visit to Chagos Archipelago', Mauritius Labour Office, 23 May 1949. Cited in Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 28.

²⁶ Jones, 'Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics', pp. 220, 222.

²⁷ Jones, 'Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics', p. 220.

²⁸ Jones notes: 'Devoting space in his judgement to [...] quotations [from memoir], Hooper LJ indicates that the sense of belonging at stake in the case is something that must be acknowledged by the law, but that proper recognition requires the inclusion of extra-legal narrative. He implies that to give correct affective weight and ethical nuance, this sensibility needs a language of testimony and memory that cannot – at least within the current state of the law – be devolved into a hard legal parameter or by mere reference to territory'. See 'Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics', p. 225.

²⁹ Sedley 2007, para. 58; cited in Jones, 'Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics', p. 227.

of the notions of ‘belonger’ and ‘belonging’ to legal rulings on the Chagossians’ case, these terms ultimately remain ill-defined and open to (mis)interpretation.

It is striking to note that, throughout the long and complex legal debates on their case, the fundamental legal and ethical status of the Chagossians as ‘belongers’ of the Chagos Islands is itself never doubted. The twenty-first-century representatives of the British legal system unquestioningly agree that the Chagossians had been permanent inhabitants of their islands. At no point do they attempt legally to justify the islanders’ expulsion on the same grounds as were used in the 1960s and 1970s: namely, that the Chagossians were only transient labourers on the islands, that they belonged elsewhere and so did not have the democratic right to remain there. Nonetheless, the inability of the Chagossians to secure their right to return on the grounds of their incontrovertible ‘belonger’ status ultimately illustrates the nebulous, definitional weakness of the terms ‘belonger’ or ‘belonging’ in British law, rather than any inherent weakness in the Chagossians’ case. As Jones notes, the various judges seem to be ‘pushing for the recognition of a concept of belonging within public law’ and for ‘more inclusive and coherent narratives of belonging and citizenship’.³⁰ Such a hypothetical recognition would, however, inevitably come too late to help the Chagossians. As Jones acknowledges, ‘it is hard to imagine a legally and culturally workable meaning for belonger and belonging that always takes account of all ethical imperatives’³¹ – a statement which, whilst recognising the undoubted strength of the Chagossians’ ethical and affective sense of belonging, nonetheless concedes that it is, for the time being at least, legally inadequate. In 2008, the Law Lords ultimately found that, although the Chagossians did have a ‘fundamental’ legal right to abide as belongers of the Chagos Islands, the government’s 2004 decision to remove this right would not be reversed, since the Chagossians did not have the resources, or the government the will or obligation, to resettle.

Half a century ago, the Chagossians were expelled from their homeland because they were deemed, bureaucratically and expediently, not to belong there. Although their legal status as ‘belongers’ of the Chagos Islands is no longer in doubt, this has not, to date, proved to be a sufficiently compelling basis for assuring, even in principle, their

30 Jones, ‘Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics’, pp. 227, 228.

31 Jones, ‘Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics’, p. 233.

legal right to return to the land to which they undoubtedly belong.³² As belongers of an irredeemably ‘closed’ homeland, socially excluded from their country of involuntary residence, the Chagossians continue to be caught in an emotional and legal ‘Catch 22’ situation – an ‘unpeople’³³ belonging to a ‘non-place’.

In her analysis of *Le Silence des Chagos*, Véronique Bragard explores this enduring but impossible yearning for an irredeemably lost homeland:

The Chagossian identity remains difficult to locate: it is not in the Chagos, which are empty, nor in the sea [...]. It is to be found in the dreams and hopes of an imaginary community that is struggling to reconnect with the physicality of its nation which has, in turn, been turned into a non-place deprived of any sense of belonging.³⁴

While the struggles of Chagossian refugees to (re)create in Mauritius an entirely ‘imaginary’ community through processes of collective memory are, as Bragard explores, very poignantly conveyed in Patel’s novel, I take a rather different approach to the problematic issue of belonging depicted from that of Bragard in the above statement. Rather than being ‘deprived of any sense of belonging’, I argue, memories of the ‘non-place’ of their closed islands can be seen to continue to structure

32 Although Patel’s novel and Jones’s article do not cover more recent developments, the Chagossians’ legal battle continues – as do the UK and US governments’ legally and morally dubious attempts to block their right to return. The small number of increasingly elderly island-born Chagossians and their offspring continue to fight for compensation and/or the right to return. The Mauritian government too has pursued action over the UK’s illegal annexation of the Chagos archipelago from the territory of Mauritius at the time of independence. In the meantime, many second-generation Chagossians, particularly those now living in the UK since being granted British citizenship (in 2002), are opposed to the idea of ‘returning’ to the Chagos Islands and are campaigning instead for better compensation and integration. For information on the various Chagos action groups and their often competing claims, see: Laura Jeffery, *Chagos Islanders in Mauritius and the UK: Forced Displacement and Onward Migration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

33 ‘Unpeople’ is a term coined by Mark Curtis to describe the exiled Chagossians in the booklet he wrote to accompany John Pilger’s documentary, *Stealing a Nation* (Granada Television, 2005), p. 4. See also on this subject: Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role in the World* (London: Vintage, 2003).

34 Véronique Bragard, ‘Murmuring Vessels: Relocating Chagossian Memory and Testimony in Shenaz Patel’s *Le Silence des Chagos*’, in *e-france: An Online Journal of French Studies* (2008), pp. 132–47 (p. 144).

the exiled community's intense and enduring sense of belonging in multiple physical, emotional and politico-legal senses.

The contextualisation above serves both to outline the chronology and salient facts of the Chagossians' still largely unknown (since occluded) displacement, but also to highlight the paradoxical centrality of the idea of 'belonging' to both their historical and their contemporary (that is, contemporary to the publication of Patel's novel) situations. In turning our attention now to Shenaz Patel's literary engagement with the Chagossians' story, I shall explore how the central issue of belonging is reflected in both the content and the form of *Le Silence des Chagos*. I shall examine the ways in which the novel's portrayal of the Chagossians' profound sense of affective belonging to a lost place and way of life also grapples with – and contests – legal and political uses and abuses of the term. What kind of relation is depicted in Patel's novel between the seemingly opposing affective and political-judicial senses of belonging? How does 'belonging' (to place and people) interact with the exclusionary 'politics of belonging'? How does the Chagossians' abiding, but as yet impossible, longing to return 'home' come into play with, or impede the development of a sense of belonging to their country of residence, Mauritius? As 'un moyen privilégié de rendre plus réel, plus vivant, de donner une chair, un sang, des yeux, une respiration, une incarnation à une histoire', what, if anything, can literature add to our understanding of the Chagos islanders' all-too-real story, or of the nature of belonging in situations of brutal displacement?

Reflecting its emphasis on the personal and emotional rather than historical dimensions of the Chagossians' story, *Le Silence des Chagos* does not adopt a unified, linear approach to its subject matter. Indeed, one of the novel's most striking features is its multi-narrated, dual-located, non-chronological structure, which repeatedly shifts spatially and temporally, between and within chapters, between Mauritius (in 1968, 1973 and 1993) and Diego Garcia (in 1963 and 1967). This structure is effective in a number of different but interconnected ways in conveying both the complex nature of historical events and, importantly, the psychological and lived consequences of these events. By weaving together and elaborating on the testimonies of three different 'characters', Charlesia, Raymonde and Désiré, each of whom had quite different experiences of displacement, Patel is able to construct a composite, highly personal narrative of the Chagossians' collective history, as lived and remembered by its victims. Charlesia is one of the many Chagossians who, early in the British expulsion plans,

were left stranded abroad and unable to return home.³⁵ In 1967, she was persuaded to accompany her sick husband to Mauritius for hospital treatment. When, after his recovery, she went to enquire about the next boat back to Diego Garcia, she was informed that, ‘Zil inn fermé’ (‘les îles sont fermées’)³⁶ and left to fend for herself in an unwelcoming foreign land. The second ‘character’, Raymonde, was one of the very last islanders to be forcibly deported on board the overcrowded supply boat *Nordvaer* in 1973. As the novel depicts, forewarned of the plight of previous deportees, the Chagossians on this gruelling crossing staged a sit-in when they arrived in Port Louis, refusing to disembark until they were guaranteed basic housing and financial assistance. The third ‘character’, Désiré, is Raymonde’s son who was born at sea during the voyage from Diego Garcia to Mauritius and so, to an even starker degree than the other displaced Chagossians, effectively ‘belongs’ nowhere. Désiré has never seen the island that should have been his place of birth, but nor is he bureaucratically considered a citizen of Mauritius or, for that matter, of the Seychelles, where his birth was hastily and incorrectly registered. In addition to the fictionalised testimonies of the three Chagossians which form the main body of the novel, additional external perspectives – of the plantation administrator on Diego Garcia, of the *Nordvaer*’s captain, of a security guard at Port Louis docks and, most strikingly, of the personified *Nordvaer* itself – are also interwoven, both to corroborate the victims’ potentially biased, internal accounts and also to suggest different, actual or potential responses to the Chagossians’ plight. These external perspectives show how non-Chagossians’ attitudes contributed, either actively or passively, to the Chagossians’ expulsion and suffering but also, conversely, how the curative power of human kindness might gradually help to facilitate the Chagossians’ difficult process of integration into Mauritian society.

The fact that the three main characters of *Le Silence des Chagos* are of different generations allows, as the characters meet, interact and

35 Charlesia’s story is based on that of Marie Charlesia Alexis, who was born on Diego Garcia in 1934 and died in Crawley, England, in 2012, having been granted British citizenship in 2002. Despite her humble beginnings, she became well-known as a singer and political activist. In 1978, Alexis famously went on hunger strike along with a small group of Chagossian women, including Lisette Talate and Rita Bancoult, protesting at their treatment in Mauritius and demanding the right to return. She died without ever seeing her native island again.

36 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 31.

their stories intertwine, for the elaboration of some of the book's central themes: collective memory, cultural transmission, silencing, concealment and forgetting.³⁷ Raymonde has long withheld from her son all but the most minimal information about their family's and their people's forced expulsion, in an attempt to shield both him and herself from the trauma of remembering. She only reluctantly and belatedly tells her 20-year-old son of the circumstances of his birth. It is Charlesia, whom Désiré meets by chance on the quayside, who ultimately fills in the gaps in his mother's narrative, telling Désiré about his lost homeland, and about the broader political machinations that led to his people's expulsion. Where his mother had long sought to break the intergenerational transfer of collective memory that underpins the displaced Chagossians' sense of belonging to their denied homeland, the grandmother-figure Charlesia provides the rootless Désiré – and the reader – with the cultural and historical knowledge necessary to begin to create and reground a sense of individual and communal identity.

A further effect of the novel's non-chronological, associative structure is that it allows Patel subtly but powerfully to highlight the profound interconnectedness of the Chagossians' forgotten history with the better-known histories of other, seemingly unrelated nations.³⁸ Developed as a military base during the Cold War, the tiny isolated island of Diego Garcia has since played a role in the Vietnamese War, the Arab-Israeli War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War and, most recently, the American War in Afghanistan. The role of the Chagossians' stolen homeland in this last international conflict is highlighted by the poignant vignettes with which *Le Silence des Chagos* begins – juxtaposing a boy in war-torn

37 Bragard explores the theme of the Chagossians' 'collective memory of displacement' in her reading of *Le Silence des Chagos* as testimonial literature. See Bragard, 'Murmuring Vessels', p. 144. In a wide-ranging essay mapping interconnected histories and geopolitics in the Indian Ocean region, Françoise Lionnet argues, with reference to Patel's novel, that the Chagossians' 'lingering memory of catastrophe' can be seen as an example of Hovanessian's notion of the 'foundational event', originally developed in relation to the Armenian genocide. See Françoise Lionnet, 'Cosmopolitan or Creole Lives? Globalized Oceans and Insular Identities', *Profession* (2011), pp. 23–43 (p. 36). Lionnet cites Martine Hovanessian, 'La Notion de diaspora: usages et champ sémantique', *Journal des Anthropologues*, vol. 72–73 (1998), pp. 11–29 (p. 17).

38 Jones comments that: 'this archipelago has a history that is remarkable for both its Arcadian obscurity and its strategic importance' ('Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics', p. 216).

Afghanistan with a hungry Chagossian boy in Mauritius³⁹ – both of whose lives have, in different ways, been shattered by the military base on Diego Garcia.

The most sustained and contrastive example of such historical interconnectedness depicted in *Le Silence des Chagos* is, however, that between the silenced and occluded deportation of the Chagossians, on the one hand, and the loudly celebrated proclamation of Mauritian independence, on the other. The implications of this silenced interconnectedness for the Chagossians' sense of traumatic dis-belonging is withheld until late in the narrative. At two points in the novel, and at two different historical moments, Mauritian independence is viewed from the marginal perspective of Chagossian characters in a way that casts an ironic, debunking light on the triumphalist pomp and ceremony of official history. First, early in the novel, in a section set in Mauritius in 1968, Charlesia is depicted as overhearing the sound of the independence cannons, fired to mark the handover of power from the British to the new Mauritian government, from the squalor of her slum dwelling on the geographic and social outskirts of Port Louis. As Charlesia flees the claustrophobia of this slum and makes her way to the port, the 'historic' independence celebrations continue only fleetingly to intrude on her consciousness. Coverage of the celebrations is conveyed, as if off-stage, via the radio commentary to which the security guard Toni – himself only an oblique, auditory participant in events – is listening: 'Historique, ce mot revenait sans cesse dans cette retransmission, il n'allait pas rater ça, pour une fois qu'il était dans l'Histoire, il voulait en savoir un maximum, pour en parler un jour à ses petits-enfants. Oui, j'étais là, enfin presque, je peux tout vous raconter'.⁴⁰

Second, in the closing pages of the novel, the full, ironic significance of the Chagossians' paradoxically marginal but central experience of a defining moment in Mauritius's history is revealed as Charlesia tells Désiré that, 'Ce n'est que longtemps après que nous avons appris le troc qui s'était effectué sur notre dos. Anglais et Américains avaient arrangé leur affaire. Et Maurice n'a rien fait pour nous défendre. Trop contente d'avoir son indépendance'.⁴¹ Charlesia's revelation in turn forces Désiré

39 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 10–11.

40 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 22.

41 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 144. Charlesia's words – and sentiments – here echo David Vine's cutting assertion that the 'Chagossians [...] gave up their

to reconsider, with both an adult's and also, increasingly, a Chagossian's disillusioned eyes, the national and personal symbolism of the annual Independence Day celebrations in which he had blithely participated as a schoolchild. He is forced to rethink his own position in relation to the (now absurd) nationalist rhetoric of the Mauritian anthem, proclaiming 'Gloire à toi Ile Mauriiiiiiiiice, ô ma mère patriie'.⁴² Where he had previously participated, with playful childish ignorance, in his 'fellow' Mauritians' celebrations, Désiré now retrospectively and self-assertively distinguishes between 'Son pays. Leur indépendance'.⁴³ With Charlesia's help, Désiré begins to affirm a non-Mauritian, distinctly Chagossian identity and to develop a sense of belonging to an alternative, previously obscure 'mère patrie', outside his country of residence.

The final and, for the purposes of this study, the most important effect of the novel's non-linear structure is in its formal reflection of the constant spatial and temporal shifts that shape the displaced Chagossians' emotional and psychological sense of belonging. In any diasporic situation, as Paul Gilroy recognises, there is 'a historical and experiential rift between the locations of residence and the locations of belonging'.⁴⁴ Given the fact that their expulsion is so recent, that for many the memory of their homeland is a living one and that they continue to suffer individual and structural exclusion in their country of involuntary residence, the 'rift' at the heart of the Chagossians' sense of belonging is a far more fundamental and traumatic one than necessarily envisaged in Gilroy's formulation. The Chagossians' diasporic sensibility cannot, for instance, be equated with that of the Hindu-Mauritian community. The Chagossians are evidently not affirming a collective affiliation to a historical motherland as a means of asserting a coherent community identity and, with it, social advantage in their contemporary, diasporic situation. The Chagossians are not, like Hindu-Mauritians, strategically creating a cohesive identity *here* (in Mauritius) by means of an assertion of cultural, historical belonging to another location *elsewhere* (India or the Chagos). Forcibly and recently deported from their location of residence and belonging, the 'experiential rift' in the Chagossians'

homeland so the rest of Mauritius could have its independence' (*Island of Shame*, p. 143).

⁴² Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 145.

⁴³ Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 146.

⁴⁴ Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Routledge, 2004 [2000]), pp. 97–133 (p. 124).

sense of belonging is a very real, ever-present and existential one. The novel's constant structural shifts – between the location of residence, Mauritius, and the location of affective belonging, Diego Garcia, and between key moments before, during and after their expulsion – thus reflect, in their very form, the physical, enforced wrenching of the people from their homeland and their consequent ongoing yearning for that homeland. The Chagossians' profound but disrupted sense of belonging to a tantalisingly vivid, remembered but foreclosed location of belonging thus epitomises, in the most excruciating form imaginable, the inherent tug between 'being' and 'longing' that Probyn and others identify as characteristic of the very notion of belonging.⁴⁵

Charlesia's 'histoire romancée' starts in Mauritius in 1968, as the nation celebrates its independence, before jumping chronologically and associatively backwards to 1967, when she was first told that the islands had been closed. The narrative then moves further back, to 1963 and memories of daily life on Diego Garcia, before finally jumping forward to the unspecified present-day of the narrative, as Charlesia meets Désiré and tells him of his people's plight and of their fight for the right to return. The regressive, often repetitive form given to Charlesia's story reflects her obsessive psychological yearning to return and the abiding feeling that 'elle a tant de choses là-bas qui sont restées en suspens'.⁴⁶ In a constant revisiting of the past that is characteristic of trauma victims,⁴⁷ the novel's repeated flashbacks mirror Charlesia's own haunting flashbacks to and longing for an earlier time and, with it, a lost place and way of life. Via the novel's repeated associative shifts between past and present, the past is thus experienced – by reader, as by

45 See Probyn, *Outside Belongings*.

46 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 32–33.

47 While trauma theory is a useful lens for analysing the literary depiction of the Chagossians' psychic and physical responses to their displacement, and so for framing the reader's empathetic stance in relation to their plight, my own approach only tangentially alludes to such theories as it focuses, instead, on political and legal uses (and abuses) of 'belonging' as relevant to the Chagossians' situation. My approach is nonetheless inevitably influenced by seminal works on trauma theory, such as: Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka (eds), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

character – not just in opposition to the present, but also as an ongoing, experiential part of that present.

Raymonde's story is similarly recounted in non-chronological, fragmented form, reflecting her feeling of being in one place whilst longing for, and affectively belonging to, another. Unlike Charlesia, Raymonde is not introduced until more than half way through the novel, as she is first glimpsed, with a new-born baby in her arms, on board the *Nordvaer* after its arrival in Port Louis harbour in 1973. The novel then jumps forward, first several years and then approximately 20 years, to scenes in which the now-widowed Raymonde is depicted living in a squalid slum on the outskirts of Port Louis. It is only as a result of Désiré's persistent questioning that Raymonde eventually reveals her – and hence his – long-suppressed story, so shifting the narrative back to Diego Garcia in 1973. From then on, the events of their expulsion and of Désiré's birth are plotted in relentless chronological order. The form that Raymonde's 'histoire romancée' takes thus reflects the nature of her psychological response to the trauma of displacement: silence, occlusion, concealment and 'fausse résignation'.⁴⁸ Raymonde's self-protective reluctance to revisit the past and her attempt thereby to sever the painful legacy of knowledge, is reflected in Désiré's observation of his mother's habitual response to his questions: 'De grands pans de silence se posaient sur ses lèvres et ses yeux. Plus il insistait, plus elle se détachait'.⁴⁹ Where Charlesia's response to the trauma of displacement is constantly and obsessively to return to her past life 'là-bas', Raymonde's is, equally obsessively, to repress it. It is only when Désiré's questioning eventually manages to erode Raymonde's psychological barriers of silence and detachment that the long-repressed details of their familial and collective trauma can finally return – a 'return of the repressed' that is then reflected in the lengthy, unbroken flow of this section of the novel.⁵⁰

The structure of Désiré's strand of the narrative reflects his position as a second-generation Chagossian-Mauritian born in transit between Diego Garcia and Mauritius, and hence between his people's location of belonging and their location of involuntary residence. His story is introduced, along with his mother's with which his is so intimately entwined, in the later stages of Patel's novel. By means of his constant questioning of his mother, and his broader quest for answers on the

48 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 88.

49 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 87.

50 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 84–113.

circumstances of his birth and his sense of rootlessness, Désiré acts as a catalyst both for the revelation of Raymonde's story and also for the interwoven, stylistically striking, fictionalised testimony of the personified *Nordvaer*, the ship on which Désiré was born.⁵¹ As a witness to Désiré's birth and to the suffering of its human cargo, the *Nordvaer* ironically displays more empathy towards the Chagossians than do the purportedly human officials who collude in their deportation, as is reflected in the first-person perspective of the following extract: 'Un bébé. Un bébé est né dans mes entrailles. Dans mon ventre. J'ai aidé à lui donner le jour, je l'ai abrité, je l'ai bercé. Mais ils l'avaient emporté, lui et tous les autres'.⁵²

Where Charlesia's and Raymonde's stories are typographically divided into clearly delineated sections, with headers indicating location and year of the different stages, Désiré's story takes place in an undifferentiated, since psychologically endless, Mauritian present – a present which, if one pays close attention to narrative details, spans a period of more than 20 years. Désiré's 'histoire romancée', like his experience, is not marked by the same brutal dichotomy – between here and there, before and after – as characterises the older characters' lived and fictionalised stories. Instead, Désiré's emotional 'in-betweenness' and his all-too-real civil and political statelessness⁵³ are reflected formally in the large proportion of his narrative that is set at sea: first, in the section recounting his birth on board the *Nordvaer*, and then, on learning of these circumstances, in the section in which he takes a job on a fishing trawler in a thwarted attempt to form a symbolic filial attachment with the sea on which he was born. Setting out with the lofty intention that 'il pourra enfin établir avec la mer la communion qu'il recherche',⁵⁴ violent and prosaic seasickness ultimately means that Désiré returns disillusioned: 'Cette mer ne peut être sa patrie, elle ne veut pas de lui, une patrie ne rejette pas ainsi son enfant [...] Il ne connaît pas cette mer. Elle ne le reconnaît pas. Elle ne le veut pas'.⁵⁵

51 In 'Murmuring Vessels', Bragard explores Patel's striking use of prosopopoeia in the central ship metaphor as a creative means of conveying the traumatic experiences of the Chagossian 'wretched of the sea' (p. 122).

52 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 138.

53 With no identity card and an error-ridden birth certificate, Désiré finds that: 'Il ne pouvait pas avoir de carte d'identité nationale. Il n'était pas mauricien'. Eventually, after complicated legal wranglings, he is granted a symbolically resonant 'carte d'identité provisoire' (Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 131).

54 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 123.

55 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 126–27.

Denied official, political belonging as a Mauritian citizen, denied physical, affective belonging to his 'closed' Chagossian homeland, and denied symbolic belonging to a life-giving sea-mother, Désiré feels a limbo-like rootlessness:

Désiré ne savait plus où il en était. Mauricien? Il avait toujours vécu ici, mais n'en avait pas la nationalité. Seychellois? Il n'avait jamais vu ce pays. Britannique? On ne voudrait pas de lui là-bas. Chagossien? Il ne connaissait pas ces îles où il aurait dû voir le jour. Son lieu de naissance était un bateau, qui avait disparu.⁵⁶

As these questions underline, in both their content and their form, Désiré's life story is characterised by a fruitless quest for a rooted identity and, in response, an abiding sense of belonging nowhere. Although he has no direct experience of the physical displacement that so brutally structures Charlesia's and Raymonde's sense of uprooted belonging, Désiré is nonetheless profoundly psychologically affected by it. As a result of his mother's silencing of the past, he has long been denied a sense of belonging through collective memory. It is not until Charlesia fills in the gaps in Raymonde's belated, fragmented account that an intergenerational transmission of knowledge and thus of collective, affective connection can be established. As Bragard argues, Patel's novel depicts the poignant efforts of the dispossessed Chagossians to create through memory an 'imagined community forged from the trauma of exile'.⁵⁷ At the very end of the novel, Désiré thus finally begins to (re)create an imagined sense of belonging to a people and a homeland, 'Chez eux. Là-bas, aux Chagos'.⁵⁸

The non-chronological, dual-located structure of *Le Silence des Chagos* reflects, on a broad formal level, the fundamental 'historical and experiential rift' that characterises the Chagossians' sense of belonging in, but not to, their location of residence. As I shall now explore, such oscillation between different locations and temporalities is also a striking feature, at the level of language and imagery, of the sections of the narrative that are set entirely in Mauritius. In both Charlesia's and Raymonde's narratives, a fundamental contrast is created between their physical location of residence, Mauritius, and their emotional location of belonging, Chagos, by means of repeated linguistic and

56 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 131.

57 Bragard, 'Murmuring Vessels', p. 141.

58 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 151.

symbolic oppositions between *ici* and *maintenant*, on the one hand, and *là-bas* and *avant*, on the other. Such an opposition is characteristic of Chagossian testimony in general: as David Vine notes from his many fieldwork interviews, ‘Chagossians living in exile immediately know that *laba* means one thing: Chagos’.⁵⁹ Whilst they may physically reside in present-day Mauritius, the constant spatial and temporal oscillation between locations in their narratives and the contrasting imagery associated with each location, illustrate Chagossian refugees’ common feeling that they belong, impossibly, somewhere that is both *là-bas* and *avant*.

A particularly sustained example of such contrastive oppositions between the geographic and psychological poles of *ici* and *là-bas* comes in the scene (discussed above) set in Mauritius in 1968 at the moment of the country’s independence, and which evokes Charlesia’s struggles to adapt to her new environment and to come to terms with the trauma of displacement. The scene is preceded by an epigraph, taken from the song ‘Pays natal’ composed by exiled Chagossians, in which a fundamental opposition between a remembered Diego Garcia and current-day Mauritius is introduced in highly lyrical, Chagossian-Kreol terms: ‘Létan mo ti viv dan Diégo / Mo ti kouma payanké dan lézer / Dépi mo apé viv dan Moris / Mo amenn lavi kotomidor’.⁶⁰ Where the simile of a bird flying associates life on Diego Garcia with freedom, nature and self-expression, life on Mauritius is described, incongruously, as being like a chair leg: rigid, inanimate and faintly ridiculous.⁶¹ By selecting this particular extract as an epigraph – a device which, as Genette has analysed, serves paratextually to frame and prefigure the thematic content of the chapter to come⁶² – Patel pre-emptively draws the reader’s attention to the interrelated geographic and psychological oppositions

59 Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 20.

60 The French translation offered by Patel runs as follows: ‘Quand je vivais à Diego / J’étais comme un paille-en-queue dans les cieux / Depuis que je vis à Maurice / Je mène une vie de bâton de chaise’ (*Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 13).

61 The song’s title, ‘Pays natal’, contains an evident allusion to Aimé Césaire’s seminal *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1939), in which a similarly ridiculous contrast – between the natural and the displaced – underlies Césaire’s intertextual borrowing of a phrase from Baudelaire’s poem ‘L’Albatros’, to describe a ‘comique et laid’ black man on a Paris tram. This intertextual parallel is rendered all the more poignant given the Chagossians’ inability ever to return to their native land. See Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

62 Gérard Genette, ‘Les Épigraphe’, in *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), pp. 134–49.

(between *ici* and *là-bas*, and between exclusion and belonging) that structure the Chagossians' collective experience of displacement. The Chagossian refugees of Patel's narrative do not seek to 'reground' a sense of individual or collective belonging in the 'here and now' of their location of residence.⁶³ Instead, they continue to be tormented by visceral memories of the 'then and there' of a location of belonging from which they were forcibly uprooted, and to which they still vainly long to return.

In just six pages of Charlesia's fictionalised testimony, the binary opposition between *ici* and *là-bas* is used no less than seven times, not only to contrast her life in Mauritius with the one she led before her displacement, but also to convey the essentially rootless, liminal and limbo-like nature of her current sense of dis-belonging. The *ici* of Mauritius is repeatedly associated with noise, heat, over-crowding and claustrophobia, with the result that even the seemingly simple act of walking down to the sea is experienced as a profoundly disorientating assault on the senses, conveyed by free indirect speech:

Charlesia marche d'un pas traînant. L'asphalte surchauffé lui colle aux semelles en une bouillie noirâtre. Elle marche, droit devant, le nez en alerte, attendant qu'il la renseigne, qu'il l'aimante vers cette mer qu'elle a besoin de voir. Mais sa boussole est inopérante ici. Trop d'odeurs comme autant d'obstacles [...] Rien ne va ici. Des rues aux contours braques, des culs-de-sac vous arrêtent soudain en pleine descente. Marcher ici n'a pas de sens.⁶⁴

In striking contrast to Michel de Certeau's famous postulation that walking in a city constitutes a form of appropriation,⁶⁵ walking here acts to underline Charlesia's profound sense of physical and emotional estrangement. This embodied experience of alienation and disori-

63 The contributors to the collective volume *Uprootings/Regroundings* repeatedly focus upon the 'regrounding' practices of immigrant groups who have been 'uprooted' from their original location of belonging. Only Ankori's chapter, which discusses the situation of displaced Palestinian artists, explores the possibility that, in some cases, a people's sense of collective belonging may not become 'regrounded' at all. See Gannit Ankori, "Dis-Orientalisms": Displaced Bodies/Embodied Displacements in Contemporary Palestinian Art', in Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller (eds), *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 59–90.

64 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 20–21.

65 Michel de Certeau, 'Marches dans la ville', in *L'Invention du quotidien* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1980), pp. 171–98.

entation *ici* is immediately contrasted with the following memory of performing the same habitual action *là-bas*: ‘Là-bas, les yeux fermés, elle glissait ses pas dans l’inclinaison naturelle du sable, la mer devant, la mer derrière, calme et belle, pour caresser et faire frissonner leur terre comme un corps alangui au creux d’un corps amoureux’.⁶⁶ While *ici*, Charlesia feels constrained by both the built and natural features of her surrounding environment,⁶⁷ her memories of her lost homeland *là-bas* repeatedly underline the harmonious coexistence between people and environment. Such a visceral, natural attachment to place is emphasised, not just in the portrayed ease of Charlesia’s actions – ‘les yeux fermés’, ‘elle glissait’ – as she follows ‘l’inclinaison naturelle’ of the land, but also in the lexis and imagery of love used to describe the personified object of attachment, Diego Garcia (‘calme et belle’, ‘caresser’, ‘comme un corps alangui au creux d’un corps amoureux’). By personifying the Chagossians’ place of attachment in this way, and by emphasising the harmonious, symbiotic, loving relationship between place and inhabitants, Patel directly appeals to the reader’s capacity for human empathy in comprehending their profoundly traumatic experience of radical displacement.

Charlesia’s ‘histoire romancée’ is marked by a continual, spatial *va-et-vient* between *ici* and *là-bas*, reflecting the fundamental *geographic* rift that characterises her sense of belonging in exile. Raymonde’s narrative strand pivots on a similarly contrastive but *temporal* opposition between the Mauritian present and a haunting, repetitively evoked *avant*. The temporal and psychological divide that defines Raymonde’s life story is most strikingly emphasised by the incantatory repetition of the word ‘avant’ in the following extract, in which Raymonde ponders how best to tell her son the truth about his origins:

Comment lui expliquer? Par où commencer? Sa naissance, le bateau, la terre, l’autre terre. La vraie. Celle qui s’étend dans sa tête et dans son cœur, dans son ventre et ses entrailles, toutes les nuits. La terre d’avant.

D’avant la peur, l’incompréhension.

D’avant la solitude et l’angoisse folle de la mer.

⁶⁶ Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 21.

⁶⁷ The squalid, overcrowded shanty town where Charlesia and other Chagossians are housed is depicted as being squeezed between the tall buildings of Port Louis’s commercial centre, on the one hand, and the high arc of mountains, on the other. The symbolic spatial configuration of this location is reminiscent of the *cit * of Troumaron in Devi’s * ve des ses d combres*, as explored in the previous chapter.

D'avant le bateau voleur qui avait fait douleur ce qui aurait dû être grande joie.

D'avant cette nouvelle terre aux montagnes hautaines et indifférentes, aux habitants distants et méprisants.

D'avant la colère.

D'avant la fausse résignation, pour empêcher que l'incompréhension et la rage impuissante explosent en folie.⁶⁸

Despite her long suppression of the past, Raymonde's sense of belonging to an ever more temporally distant Chagossian homeland is, like Charlesia's, depicted as a profoundly embodied and enduring one. Far from being buried or forgotten, Raymonde's lost homeland lives on psychologically and viscerally: 'dans sa tête et dans son cœur, dans son ventre et ses entrailles'. The coincidence of the purportedly joyous moment of Désiré's birth with the profoundly traumatic moment of her people's forced expulsion from their homeland exacerbates symptoms that are typical of post-traumatic shock.⁶⁹ Raymonde remains obsessively and unresolvedly haunted by this defining moment of brutal, irrevocable uprooting, and by the incomprehensible shift from a too-painful-to- evoke and hence long-repressed *avant* to the ongoing suffering of *après* that it represents. The constant spatial and temporal shifts – between *ici* and *là-bas*, between *avant* and *après* – within *Le Silence des Chagos* do not simply offer an effective literary device for telling the Chagossians' collective story in a compelling, non-chronological fashion. They also dramatically reflect, in form as well as content, the Chagossians' lived, relived, remembered and retold experiences of radical displacement and, with them, their abiding sense of belonging elsewhere, to a vividly recalled but irrevocably denied 'non-place' in the past which continues to haunt their psychological present.

Patel's novel portrays how, socially excluded in their location of residence ('Ici, nous ne sommes pas les bienvenus'),⁷⁰ Chagossian refugees in Mauritius continue to cling to a nostalgic, disrupted but no less enduring sense of attachment to a location of belonging ('là-bas') that is, for now at least, unattainable in spatial, temporal and psychological terms. In her study of Patel's fiction, Guillemette Jeudi de Grissac highlights the arguably problematic, since unverifiable, tendency of

68 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 87–88.

69 See, on this subject: Stephen Regel and Stephen Joseph, *Post-Traumatic Stress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

70 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 115.

displaced Chagossians to construct ‘une utopie à rebours’ and a ‘mythe du paradis perdu’.⁷¹ As Jones warns, this nostalgic view ‘is characteristic of peoples in exile’ and fails to address the problematically colonial and paternalistic nature of their previous plantation life.⁷² Patel does not, however, unquestioningly accept the highly idealised retrospective view of their lost homeland presented by the displaced Chagossians whose testimonials form the basis of her novel. Instead, the author is careful to introduce an element of doubt in the framing of her novel’s depictions of life in the Chagos prior to the people’s mass expulsion. On two separate occasions, Désiré questions the veracity of the older Chagossians’ depictions of their ‘simple’ communal life on their beautiful island ‘paradise’. First, he wonders to himself: ‘La vie là-bas était-elle vraiment aussi simple et agréable? Ou bien racontaient-ils une réalité que l’exil et le regret avaient enjolivée?’⁷³ By casting retrospective doubt upon the recollections of his elders, Désiré’s questions in turn cast doubt upon the novel’s necessarily second-hand and doubly fictionalised representations of Chagossian life. Désiré’s own answer to his questions – ‘Le seul moyen de le savoir était d’y aller’⁷⁴ – ironically underlines the fundamental impossibility of ever being able to verify their accounts. Not only are the islands ‘closed’ and access to them denied (especially to Chagossians), but the already anachronistic, colonial way of life that islanders led there was itself irreversibly destroyed with the people’s expulsion, the construction of a military base and Mauritian independence.

On a second occasion, Désiré asks the same question of Charlesia: ‘Grand-mère, à moi vous pouvez le dire. Est-ce que c’était vraiment

71 Guillemette Jeudi de Grissac, ‘Figures féminines et construction identitaire dans les romans de Shenaz Patel’, *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3–4 (2010), pp. 489–511 (p. 507). See also on this subject: Laura Jeffery, ‘How a Plantation Became Paradise: Changing Representations of the Homeland among Displaced Chagos Islanders’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2007), pp. 951–68.

72 Criticising Pilger’s unproblematised depiction of the Chagossians’ seemingly ‘utopian’ plantation life in his film *Stealing a Nation*, Jones comments that: ‘It is characteristic of peoples in exile to remember a lost homeland in idealised ways. And Pilger does not seem to want to complicate his scathing presentation of postcolonial British administrations with an investigation of colonial history’ (‘Colonial to Postcolonial Ethics’, p. 218).

73 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 115.

74 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 115.

aussi bien que ça là-bas? Vraiment?⁷⁵ Again, her answer is both highly poignant and ultimately inconclusive: ‘C’est comme ça dans notre souvenir. Et le souvenir, c’est tout ce qui nous reste’.⁷⁶ Given their definitive displacement and the impossibility of ever returning to their past way of life on their ‘pays natal’, the Chagossians’ sense of belonging is inevitably one that is based solely on memory and on the evocation, sharing and passing on of that memory. Yet, as emphasised by the powerful bodily imagery that Charlesia uses to describe her experience of remembering, the fact that their lost homeland exists only in memory does not mean that their sense of belonging is, as a consequence, any less profoundly and viscerally felt:

Le souvenir, c’est un hameçon qui se fiche sous la peau. Plus tu tires dessus, plus il te cisaille les tissus et s’enfonce profondément. Impossible de le faire sortir sans inciser la chair. Et la cicatrice qui restera sera toujours là pour te rappeler la crudité de cette douleur. Mais tu n’arrêteras pas pour autant d’y revenir. Sans cesse. Car c’est là que pulse toute ta vie. Vois-tu, petit, c’est plus vivant encore que le souvenir. On appelle ça la souvenance.⁷⁷

Although, inevitably, the exiled Chagossians’ sense of belonging to their native islands exists in memory alone, such memory is still experienced in the form of relentless physical and living pain, as the imagery of the fish hook and the scar powerfully underlines. Comparing this depiction of the visceral experience of memory with Toni Morrison’s notion of ‘re-memory’, Bragard argues that ‘souvenance’ represents ‘a kind of psychic haunting in which the specifics of a traumatic incident are told and retold to confront a painful experience in the past, in order eventually to locate one’s place in one’s community, nation, family’.⁷⁸ Displacement and exile are seen to have compounded, rather than attenuated, the vitality of memory on which the Chagossians’ affective attachment to their homeland – and thence to an imagined community – is based. In this sense, memory becomes an active, ongoing process of ‘souvenance’ rather than the more passive, cerebral ‘souvenir’.

Rather than seeking to integrate into broader Mauritian society or adopt a hybrid Chagossian-Mauritian identity, Chagossian refugees

75 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 149.

76 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 149.

77 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 150.

78 Bragard, ‘Murmuring Vessels’, pp. 142–43.

in Mauritius are portrayed as actively maintaining and (re)creating a distinct Chagossian community identity in exile through collective memory of, and visceral attachment to, their lost homeland. A collective sense of belonging *là-bas* is kept alive through the direct living memory of older Chagossian refugees, through the indirect intergenerational transmission of this memory and, in a very real sense, through the different generations' long legal fight. The legal stakes of the Chagossians' sense of belonging are high: if legal rulings on their appeal for the right to return to the Chagos Islands have hinged upon their fundamental right as 'belongers' not to be deported, then it becomes legally, as well as psychologically or culturally, imperative that the Chagossian community in exile continue to feel that they belong to their homeland. To lose this sense of affective belonging through collective memory would be tantamount to renouncing their legal right to belong – and hence to return – to their stolen homeland. Rather than primarily providing solace and social cohesion in a traumatic, fragmented, displaced situation – as was the case of Indo-Mauritian indentured immigrants, for instance, as discussed in the Introduction – memory and belonging therefore become essential weapons in the Chagossians' ongoing fight for justice.

When Désiré meets Charlesia towards the end of *Le Silence des Chagos*, the reader witnesses the intergenerational transmission of collective memory, of a sense of belonging and, crucially, of a political consciousness, in process. Although Désiré has never seen his country of origin and only belatedly learnt of the circumstances of his people's expulsion, he is nonetheless depicted alongside Charlesia, at the very end of the novel, symbolically turning his back on Mauritius and dreaming of returning 'home':

Fermés au bruit de la ville qui s'épuise dans leur dos, ils dessinent, du regard, ce bateau qui les emmènera, qui les ramènera, là-bas, de l'autre côté de l'horizon, là où le soleil se lève sur une pluie d'îles, posées sur la mer comme une prière. Chez eux. Là-bas, aux Chagos.⁷⁹

By keeping alive and passing on the memory of the Chagos, and so maintaining and creating an active sense of belonging to an unjustly stolen homeland *là-bas*, Charlesia and other Chagossians of her generation seek to ensure that the dream of return and, with it, the legal battle for the right to return, will continue.

79 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 150.

As already discussed, the main narrative setting of *Le Silence des Chagos* is present-day Mauritius, interspersed with repeated flashbacks recounting the circumstances of the Chagossians' expulsion and depicting their life on the islands prior to this defining rupture. Within these flashbacks, lengthy quasi-anthropological descriptions of daily life on Diego Garcia serve to emphasise the radically different ways of life before and after expulsion, and so to convey the profound 'choc du dépaysement'⁸⁰ that the sudden, irreversible move to Mauritius represented to the uprooted Chagossians. As the following summary of their daily routine reflects, the Chagossians' recalled former life on Diego Garcia is portrayed as healthy, natural and spacious, in striking contrast to their impoverished existence in overcrowded, insanitary slums in Mauritius:

Une vie simple, tranquille, rythmée par la mer, un réveil matinal, des demi-journées consacrées au travail dans les cocoteraies ou au calorifère pour produire le coprah, des après-midi passés à pêcher, le poisson en abondance, les tortues qui venaient pondre sur la plage, le partage de tout ce qu'ils produisaient ou récoltaient, le séga le samedi soir, chez l'un ou chez l'autre, jusqu'au dimanche matin.⁸¹

The relatively large proportion of the novel that Patel gives over to the depiction of the daily routines of this lost way of life prompted one puzzled journalist to lament 'une trop abondante description des choses d'à côté et une concentration des menus détails', arguing that the narrative interest of the novel was lost in 'des détails futiles' or 'inutiles'.⁸² This criticism misses the point: the undoubtedly lengthy descriptions of daily Chagossian life serve to emphasise not only the grounds for the Chagossians' profound affective sense of belonging to their homeland but also their legal rights as 'belongers' not to be deported and, thus, to be allowed to return to Chagos. Whilst representations of the traditions of ancestor worship⁸³ or of burying a new-born's umbilical cord beneath a tree⁸⁴ underline the Chagossians' sense of affective belonging to their islands, based on ancestral ties and birth, they also provide quasi-legal

80 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 134.

81 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 115.

82 Vèle Putschay, 'Pour un engagement littéraire', *L'Express*, 19 January 2005, n. pag. Reproduced at http://kiltir.com/francais/bo033/silence_chagos_pourquoi.shtml (accessed 12 June 2013).

83 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 48, 102–03, 143–44.

84 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 34, 148.

‘proof’ of their status as permanent inhabitants or ‘belongers’, rather than purportedly ‘transient contract labourers’, and thus of their democratic and legal rights. Depictions of weekly *séga* sessions,⁸⁵ traditional musical instruments,⁸⁶ local drink and cuisine,⁸⁷ poetry and song⁸⁸ or of the Chagossian Kreol language⁸⁹ all emphasise the existence a distinct indigenous (since locally grown, naturally evolving and long-established) ‘culture des îles’.⁹⁰ This culture, like its practitioners, is shown to be specific to the Chagos Islands, and not, as lawyers and Foreign Office bureaucrats originally tried to claim, a recent import from Mauritius or the Seychelles. The Chagossians’ daily routine, dictated by the rhythms of the *coprah* plantation and of the island’s natural environment, underlines not only the people’s ‘natural ties’⁹¹ to their homeland but also the moral and legal obligations of the plantation owners and colonial authorities towards their employees. Throughout Patel’s lengthy and nostalgic descriptions of the Chagossians’ ‘simple’ life before their deportation, inextricable links are drawn between the islanders’ affective and embodied sense of belonging to their homeland, on the one hand, and their legal, political and ethical rights to belong there, on the other. In the context of the Chagossians’ ongoing legal battle for the right to return, the novel’s detailed descriptions of their way of life before their forced deportation are thus, I contend, far from ‘futiles’ or ‘inutiles’.

In his sometimes scathing review, Putchay goes so far as to suggest that, instead of lengthy passages of anthropological description and reminiscence, ‘l’histoire racontée aurait sans doute pu servir de fond

85 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 61–69.

86 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 33–35, 49.

87 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 47–50, 57, 67.

88 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 13, 34, 66, 77, 139.

89 Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, pp. 13, 34, 42–45, 61–63, 66. Although Anderson was evidently not thinking of the relatively recent linguistic phenomena of Kreols when emphasising the primacy of languages in the imagined construction of nations, his assertion that ‘once one starts thinking about nationality in terms of continuity, few things seem as historically deep-rooted as languages’ is particularly pertinent to the Chagossians’ claim to be a permanent ‘people’. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006 [1983]), p. 196.

90 I borrow this term from Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 28.

91 Anderson discusses the idea of ‘natural ties’ as the basis of national identity in the chapter on ‘Patriotism and Racism’, in *Imagined Communities*, p. 143.

à la démonstration d'un passage à l'acte'.⁹² Again, this criticism rather misses the point, since writing the book – and thereby making the Chagossians' long-silenced story better known – can itself be seen as an act of political and ethical solidarity. In the most practical sense, all proceeds from the sale of *Le Silence des Chagos* are donated to the Îlois Welfare Fund. In addition, as we have explored, the depiction of the Chagossians' way of life prior to their expulsion underlines their legal, as well as emotional, status as permanent inhabitants of the Chagos Islands and, therefore, the legal as well as ethical injustice of their expulsion. As an act of political solidarity, *Le Silence des Chagos* does not only support the exiled Chagossians' call for the right to return, however. It also implicitly appeals for greater integration of the displaced Chagossian community into broader Mauritian society. By recounting the Chagossian characters' feelings and lived experiences of marginalisation, discrimination, bureaucratic disenfranchisement, unemployment and impoverishment in Mauritius, Patel exposes and critiques injustices that have been committed by her own government and people. By representing Mauritian independence, a foundational moment in her own country's recent history, from the marginal perspective of those whose own country was stolen from them in order to secure that independence, Patel highlights her own people's enormous unacknowledged debt to the Chagossians. By comparing and contrasting elements of Chagossian culture (Kreol language, *séga*, musical instruments) with similar features of Mauritian culture, Patel stresses the many areas of potential common ground between Mauritians and their Chagossian 'others' and the role that the latter have played in reviving purportedly 'Mauritian' culture. Indeed, in a very real and recent sense, the Chagossians' plight is typical of the Mauritian condition in general: all sections of Mauritius's multicultural society were, at some point in history, more or less forcibly displaced from their country of origin, coming to Mauritius as impoverished immigrants and obliged to forge new senses of belonging in their country of residence. Hope for the future cohesion of all sections of Mauritius's multi-ethnic population, Patel's novel seems to suggest, depends on recognition of their common condition, their common history of transportation, exile and uprooting and on a common, ongoing process of accommodation and regrounding. In this context, the human kindness shown to Charlesia by the humble Mauritian security guard Toni and the friendship that subsequently grows between

92 Putchay, 'Pour un enseignement littéraire'.

them, acts as an example of the kind of everyday empathetic relations that could and should lead to greater acceptance and integration of the Chagossians into Mauritius's multicultural mix.

Le Silence des Chagos draws its political potential not from the communication of a didactic political message, but from its ability to make known, in an affective and effective human form, a shamefully neglected and suppressed story. It may be difficult for people who lead very mobile lives, and who may choose to move many times in their lifetime, fully to comprehend the Chagossians' deep sense of visceral belonging to their islands and hence the traumatic impact of their uprooting. 'Still', as David Vine urges, 'we can and we must try to imagine what being forcibly uprooted and torn from Chagos felt like for the Chagossians'.⁹³ By focusing on the human, emotional and psychological consequences of displacement on real-life Chagossian refugees, *Le Silence des Chagos* helps us to imagine just that. Despite the evident political potential of such imagining, *Le Silence des Chagos* ultimately remains open-ended. It remains undecided, in Patel's novel, whether the Chagossians' longing to return *là-bas* will ever become a reality, or whether and on what grounds they might eventually feel they belong, and be accepted as belonging, *ici* in Mauritius. Patel does not address the thorny issue of the kind of island, or the kind of life, to which the Chagossians might return should their legal appeal ever be granted. Patel cannot, of course, provide easy fictional solutions to real-life questions or to a collective longing to belong that have remained traumatically unresolved for half a century. As the Chagossians' decades of suffering and legal battles amply demonstrate, not all stories have happy endings – especially when they are not 'stories' at all.

93 Vine, *Island of Shame*, p. 161.