

Julia Waters. *The Mauritian Novel: Fictions of Belonging*. Liverpool UP, 2018. x + 236 pp.

Despite a façade of multiculturalism and inclusion, encapsulated in its moniker “rainbow nation,” Mauritius has been plagued by alarming patterns of exclusion. One might well approach the violence of the 1999 interethnic uprisings known as the “Kaya riots” as revealing this truth about the island while exposing the underlying challenge of belonging within this multi-ethnic society. Unsurprisingly, this social context has profoundly influenced Mauritian writers and has led to a surge of a literature that engages this overarching reality. Their works not only tell the enduring stories of exclusion in their country, but also promote inclusion by (re)imagining new ways of belonging for their fellow citizens. Hence, Julia Waters’s title, “fictions of belonging.” With this phrase, Waters introduces belonging—a sense of attachment to, and identification with, a place or people—as a new but valid theoretical lens by which to approach postcolonial Mauritian society and appraise its recent fictional discourses.

Her fundamental assertion is that Mauritius’s multicultural politics of “unity in diversity,” which structured relations along ethnic and religious lines, neither guaranteed justice for its citizens nor fostered a shared sense of nationhood and unity among its people. Instead, it was unsettling in many ways, alienating individuals and groups while cementing socio-historic divisions in society. Thus, for Waters, several actions that Mauritians initiated, as well as the thorny issues that often shook the island, should be seen as problematizing a longing to belong. Building on this framework, she offers a detailed literary and cultural analysis of eight novels in French published after 1999 by six Mauritian authors. Her goal is to investigate how these artistic productions interrogate and respond to the core issue of belonging in Mauritius. In doing so, she establishes that these fictional discourses do not represent belonging in a positive light, or provide a sense of stability, identification or rootedness. Rather, they demonstrate the ambivalence and flaws in Mauritian representations of belonging. Thus, the significance of Waters’s study lies in her clear articulation of five facets exemplifying the difficult history of belonging on the island. Each of the five chapters of her book offers an analysis of one or two novels, providing insight into the marginalization of an individual or a group and describing their struggle to belong.

The first chapter, for example, proposes a rereading of Carl de Souza’s *Les jours Kaya* (‘The Kaya Days’), partly based on events surrounding the real-life Mauritian reggae singer Kaya, born Joseph Réginald Topize, who died while in police custody. Drawing heavily on Fanon’s analyses of violence, Waters argues that de Souza portrays the riots resulting from the musician’s death as a cathartic force that aimed for positive social change, which included a shared commitment to destroy the compartmentalized society that Mauritius had become. These riots

provide the framework that allows Waters to define the first facet of belonging in Mauritius, which she terms “belonging to the moment.” Her view is that the riots illustrate how Mauritians from various backgrounds can mobilize quickly around a common cause, which testifies to the people’s capacity to break free from the rigid barriers of ethnicity, class, gender, education and geographical locations that had long divided them.

Waters also considers other sources of violence and marginalization, most notably gender inequality. In chapter 2, the author examines Nathacha Appanah’s *Blue Bay Palace* and Ananda Devi’s *Ève de ses décombres* (*Eve Out of Her Ruins*). She describes how the female characters in these novels construct a sense of belonging from their sites of estrangement. Taking up the theme of gender inequality and focusing on geographical space, Waters claims that the physical spaces traditionally associated with a sense of emotional attachment such as the home, the local community and the neighborhood are portrayed in both novels as places of exclusion, oppression and dis-belonging for female characters. The reason is that these physical areas including streets and urban agglomerations are culturally constructed as a man’s world and used by men to restrain women. One can then understand the growing disaffection of women, their hostility against these spaces and the violent conflicts involving them. Waters sees the violence in these two fictions as remarkably similar to the outcomes in *Les jours de Kaya* as they both appear inevitable and necessary for bringing about positive social change. This change sought by the female protagonists, which is a desire to belong, will then be achieved only by means of a utopian identification with the natural landscape of the broader island.

Waters, in the remaining chapters, introduces and discusses other groups whose stories are perhaps less well-known than the ones cited above. In focusing on the largely untold story of the Chagossians— a group that in real life was deported to Mauritius from the Chagos islands— Waters explores their painful experience of displacement and re-grounding in order to reveal their existential plight of “belonging nowhere.” One may find parallels between the misfortune of the Chagossians and a group of “free-floating” Mauritians whom Waters describes as those living in perpetual displacement. According to Waters, the experience of these people connotes a “nomadic belonging” evocative of a call for all Mauritians to view their island not as the place of origin or adoption, but as a “homeland” (196). Lastly, she investigates the Franco-Mauritians, highlighting the luxury and privileges of their white male middle class, which are another example in Waters’s study of a group enacting and living everyday belonging.

Although the non-speaker of French could arguably find the many quotations in French disorienting, I must admit that Waters convincingly elucidates the importance of placing Mauritian narratives in the framework of belonging. More importantly, perhaps, she provides a lens that scholars and students in

postcolonial studies, as well as those in African, Francophone or cultural studies, can constructively apply to read other fictions.

Patrick Moneyang
Pacific Lutheran University