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**“Righting” the Expulsion of Diego Garcia’s “Unpeople”:
The Island Space as Heterotopia in Literary Texts
about the Chagos Islands**

Ils dirent que nous n'étions que des passagers,
des ouvriers en transit
des pêcheurs en transat.
C'est ainsi que nous entrâmes dans la fiction
Des nations de celles qui édictent les dictons.

They said we were only passengers
transient workers
fishermen in deckchairs.
That is how we entered the fiction
Of nations that impose sayings. (Torabully 12)

Decades ago, the most famous strategy game was probably *Risk*, in which the roll of the dice led armies to battle for the right to dominate the world. More recent games include the highly successful *Settlers of Catan*, which instantiates the island's status as a historical space. As players try to be the dominant force on the island of Catan by building settlements, cities, and roads, they struggle for resource production as determined by the dice. Players collect and exchange raw materials to build their “colonies,” corroborating Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith's point in their introduction to *Islands in History and Representation* that islands, “unlike continents, look like property” (1). Many other trendy games have adopted island topology (*Kanaloa*, *Dragons of the Mekong*), and even include real names of islands such as *Jamaica*, indirectly revealing how insular spaces, because they are self-contained, are alleged to be easily controlled, demarcated, and conquerable. Furthermore, “deemed ahistorical” (DeLoughrey 2), insular spaces are conceived as *terra nullius*, topoi often deprived of any enemy faction or even population. More recently appropriated by the tourist industry, insular geography has also for centuries served “an aesthetically rather than functionally driven cartographic rhetoric” (Balasopoulos 10), inspiring Western utopias, Robinsonades, experiments in governance, metaphysical abstractions and ethnography.¹

A strategic location on the route to India, the Indian Ocean region exemplifies Françoise Vergès's observation that “If we look at the ocean as

a cultural space, we observe layers of maps of power and resistance, which have created and still create identities, narratives, and territories" (250). The history of the eviction of Chagossian islanders² (called "Ilois"—meaning "islanders") from their homes, "widely seen as one of the most shameful episodes in British colonial history" (Attewill), illustrates how insular space "recurs as a figure of postcolonial space" that "encapsulates ideas of enclosure and control" (Lane 1) as well as resistance to appropriation from the outside. First retained by the British government in 1968 "to get some rocks which will remain ours" (Gore-Booth qtd. in Pilger), then loaned for fifty years to the United States for military purposes, the Chagos archipelago, a group of sixty-five islands 1,400 miles from Mauritius, was declared uninhabited. Yet some 2000 people, mainly descendants of slaves working on coconut and copra plantations, were expelled and placed in Mauritius and the Seychelles to allow the American government to invest \$19 million in a base on the chief of its islands, Diego Garcia, which has since become a major strategic military staging post that has served the Iraq war. Parked in slums, most of these displaced people suffered unemployment and rejection in a Mauritian society where African identities are severely stigmatised and marginalised. As journalist John Pilger explains of the Chagossians, "Not only was their homeland stolen from them, they were taken out of history" (21):

Today six thousand Chagossian descendants arguably remain the "pariahs of Mauritius" (Decloitre) and belong to "the poorest segments of the population" (Eriksen 11). In 1983, the Chagos Refugee Group initiated legal action in the London High Court. Following demonstrations and hunger strikes, the Chagossian people obtained British passports but few successfully made a new life in the United Kingdom. In 2000, the court ruled that the expulsions were illegal according to international law and Chagossians won the right to return, but with the 2001 attacks on the NY World Trade Center, Prime Minister Blair invoked an Order in Council, signed by the queen, to overturn the verdict. In April 2005, Chagossians won permission to bring a High Court challenge for financial compensation. One year later, in April 2006, one hundred Chagossians were given the right and opportunity to embark on a "pilgrimage to the land of their homeland" (*L'Express*) for a brief visit organised by the British Foreign Office. Moved by shocking moments of discovery and communion with the land, this poignant trip has reanimated the dream of a permanent return to their homeland. However, Chagossians are divided regarding their claims:

compensation or return, Mauritian or British sovereignty or independence? A recent reconstruction plan confirms a profound wish to resettle on two islands of the archipelago to make a living through ecotourism and fishing, a plan rejected as "a precarious and costly operation" (Campbell). Thanks to the release of secret documents testifying to the British-US Chagossian deal and revelations of "an imperious brutality and contempt," (Pilger 38) in May 2007, Chagossians won a new victory. Two British judges held that the orders made by the UK government to deny the Chagos Islanders return to their islands were illegal. It remains to be seen whether these denunciations will lead to the homecoming of the islanders to their native soil.

Most traumatic of all was that the eviction of hundreds of Chagossians was sustained by the long-established colonial fallacy that islands are *terra nullius*, and that Ilois were supposedly temporary labourers on the Chagos islands. This is evident in Diplomat Denis Greenhill's shocking remark in 1966 that "Unfortunately along with the birds go some few Tarzans or Man Fridays whose origins are obscure and who are being hopefully wished on to Mauritius" (Pilger, 38). This statement not only unveils the fact that the British government recognized there was a human presence they intended to remove, it also highlights the fiction of *terra nullius* to justify the forced removal of the islands' population. As interviews with Ilois testify, "the lie that we didn't exist" (Pilger 35) remains the most upsetting element of their memory.

While there is not yet an Ilois literary voice (to my knowledge), an inquiry into *sega*³ lyrics, the dance music of the slave population, and storytelling unearths the oral voice of Chagossian people. For instance, the songs of Charlesia, a famous Chagossian matriarch and activist who was uprooted from Diego Garcia in the 1970s, laments the loss of her "Pei natal" (Motherland). *Sega* dance forms, although now exploited for tourists, have survived, like Chagossian memories, in marginal forms because of their link with Africa. Other writers like the British author Peter Benson, the playwright Anita Sullivan, the Mauritian novelist Shenaz Patel, and the poet Khal Torabully have, in the last decade, taken pen to paper to publicly write/right the fate of the Chagossians. What is central to their creative works is the struggle/will to unsettle and challenge the discourses that have associated the island topoi with "unpeople."⁴

Through a close analysis of several literary works I argue, in concert with Srilata Ravi and Leo Spitzer's analysis of refugees' discourse, that

"critical memories and nostalgic memories alternate in the reconstruction of the past" (Ravi 9). Pondering the way in which nostalgic memory creates a sense of community and continuity, I investigate how this type of memory is enhanced by strains of utopia which results from past displacement and the Chagossians' impossible return home. In his 1967 essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault makes a distinction between utopias (idealised societies that cannot be found in real sites) and heterotopias (sites for otherness that constitute "real" spaces). In his writing about the Austrian Jewish refugees in Bolivia, Spitzer highlights how the nostalgic re-creation of aspects of the past can strengthen the refugees' sense of cultural and historical continuity.

Connecting Foucault's concept and Spitzer's approach, I here examine the complex entanglements of nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos*, to return home, and *algia*, a painful feeling), utopia (a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions) and trauma/critical memory (memory incorporating the bitter aspects of the past) in the context of island narratives about the Chagos. I examine how utopia, a concept associated with islands and riven by temporal contradictions as it can move between past and future, works in the context of narratives about the Chagos. The ejection of Chagossians from their homeland likens an apocalyptic fall from Eden. Yet, their idealisation of their past society and their utopia-tinged projects for the future both echo and interrogate the connection between utopia and colonial representation of islands as Edens. If islands and ships are considered by Foucault as heterotopias, I here want to emphasise how they can be read as countersites of modernity: they indict its violence and raise critical debates concerning man's future relationship with his/her environment.

Peter Benson's 1989 elegiac novel *A Lesser Dependency* (winner of the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1990) constitutes the first fictional recording of the forced removal of Ilois inhabitants from their homes. While it opens with a 1964 image of Ilois Leonard and Odette wandering across the ruins of a British aerodrome on Diego Garcia—an allusion to the later military invasion of the island—the novel closes with Leonard's suicide in the sea after his traumatic eviction from his home and a distressed stay in Mauritius. The novel offers a fictionalised account of how "By 1975, the Chagossians in exile began to die from their imposed poverty" (Pilger 30). In a nostalgic tone, the beginning of the novel captures the "rhythms of tiny island life," the un-commodified life of Chagossians who "had never seen a napkin" (2) on an island where "everyone was happy" (10). The narrative

quickly moves away from this idyllic image and follows their fate and the strategies used by the British to evict them. Starting from "the supply ships [that] had stopped sailing to the Chagos" (34), it depicts the closing of the copra company, the desertion of homes (34) and the final violent expulsion of Chagossians "dumped" on Peros Banhos, the Seychelles and Mauritius.

Interrogating the island trope in fiction turns out to be a complex undertaking. In attempting to dismantle the myth of the island as untouched space, Benson as author and myself as critic run the risk of reinvigorating the image of the island myth in the mind of the reader. Following Chris Bongie's idea that "the island can be viewed in either a negative or positive light" (18), I argue that the island trope leads to ideological polarisations which are difficult to avoid: one wants to protect it or invade it. The idea of possession of territory, which is often associated with the coloniser, is dismantled in Benson's novel by the portrayal of Raphael's description of Ilot Gabriel, which he feels "was his" (52). Notwithstanding the fact that Benson romanticises island life, his novel foregrounds the island space as a site of movement and resistance. The British writer Benson first complicates the image of isolated island life: Leonard's dream of a diver's mask, the representation of a supply shop at East point (6) and the introduction of ducks (7) foreground the island's experience of trade, exchange, and modernity. The funerary ritual that gathers villagers and a spirit-seeker singing "about graves opening and spirits flying to Africa" (24) substantiates that the Chagos population was not "a floating population" (Pilger 29) but had, as John Madeley contends, a diasporic culture of its own (3). Raphael's insistence that his son should "overtake his footsteps and fish all day without needing to work for Chagos Agalega" (19), the company that employed Chagossian workers, on the one hand alludes to the stereotype of Ilois being exclusively fishermen but, on the other hand, suggests the spirit of independence of the Ilois who want to live on sustainable local resources and possibly return to pre-industrial modernity. This image corroborates Françoise Peron's view that although islands have been the prey of banalisation, globalisation "renders the feeling of being an islander more acute" (Bongie 22) and "the longing for islands certainly expresses the quintessence of a need for the return to the local" (Peron qtd. in Bongie 22). I will come back to this idea later.

Benson's text shows that this intimate relationship to the island as well as the forced migration in the ship *Nordvaer*, which forcibly removed the Chagossians from their homeland, are key to the formation of Chagossian

collective memory. Calling attention to the idealised life that Chagossians used to have, that is, community gardens (38), no murders, absolute knowledge of the lagoons (14), and no money (47), the experience of Chagossians is inscribed within the heterotopia of the island which allowed for "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 2). In this sense, the island's geographical space opens up spaces to other (counter)spaces. One should here note that the idealised vision of the island is challenged by the eviction event which transforms the geographical site into the contradictory and metaphorical site of trauma. This contradiction or ambiguity is all the more evident in the heterotopia of the ship which, according to Foucault is "the greatest reserve of the imagination" but which, in this case, embodies both the trauma of eviction and the close relationship to the sea Chagossians used to have. The island and the ship become heterotopias in that they are made up of several sites that are themselves incompatible.

Expanding on Benson's depiction of Chagos' eviction and inspired by the actual accounts of dislocated Chagossians, Shenaz Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* (2005) weaves together the fate of Charlesia (based on the real person of Charlésia Alexis), a woman who desperately attempts to go back to the island of her ancestors, with that of Désiré.⁴ The latter is a young man who discovers he was born on the ship that transported the last inhabitants of the islands. The novel revolves around Charlésia's visits—very similar to Raphael's in Benson's novel—to Port-Louis harbour. The harbour becomes a site of reconnection to the imaginary community of Chagossians born out of displacement and diaspora. But what is more symbolic is not the harbour itself but the ship it contains. The hold of the ship plays here a significant role in redefining home and origins. In *Le Silence des Chagos*, the ship, the *Nordvaer*, conveys the trauma of displacement (the term "chagos" comes from Portuguese "chagas" which means "wounds" in the religious context). What distinguishes Patel's novel from Benson's is this representation of the ship which, in *Le Silence des Chagos*, explicitly uses the slave ship trope, something Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo argues provides an undeniable ethnicisation of memory (100). Using prosopopeia whereby the ship becomes a speaking character, the novel recaptures three traumatic events: the compulsory dislocation of the last Chagossians, the birth of Désiré on the ship and the killing of island dogs by fire.⁵ In the mute crying body of the ship "the silenced cries of men and women"

resonate with the howling burning dogs and the cry of a newborn (137-38 my translation). The ship speaks to Désiré and helps him to understand his past. Muzzled Chagossian voices vibrate throughout the novel and contrast with the ringing bells of independence that conceal the silent selling of the archipelago. Charlesia and Désiré sing back to this national hymn with an "o mer patrie [oh motherland sea]" (147) that challenges the French hymn and assimilation, replacing its imperial centre with oceanic imagery infused with nostalgia. Similarly, the sea, which in Benson's novel is for the most part a site of reconnection, is in Patel's novel associated with the trauma of eviction. Identity and the birth of a collectivity rely in this novel in many ways on trauma which is concentrated in the ship trope.

If trauma is central to *Le Silence des Chagos*, Charlesia's distress is wedded to her deep uprootedness but also linked to the nostalgia for the Chagossian life she used to have, a life she sees in nostalgic terms: a life with the sea, copra production, solidarity and sharing, abundant fishing, poisson-banane recipes and the séga of Saturday night (115). As with Odette and Leonard, the solidarity she has with her island contrasts with the slums to which she has been relocated. In underscoring Chagossian community work in which the island is remembered as a space of labour, the novel distinguishes Chagossian life from a prelapsarian Edenic island or a tourist picture of idleness and sandy beaches. In many ways, the nostalgia that is here associated with the island space is a productive form of nostalgia which differs from Edenic colonial models where islands were considered spaces to be conquered. Désiré's exclamation "Was life there really as simple and agreeable?" (115 my translation) provocatively interrogates the idealised tales of Chagossians who associate their homeland with a form of paradise.

The ambiguity of the geographical space points to the ambiguity at the heart of the nostalgic process. On the one hand, the collective feeling that results from nostalgia is in both novels concretely associated with topographical sites such as the beach, the shore, the quay at Port Louis, the swish of a line or a boat, sites that offer a transient and metonymic reconnection with the Chagossians' island and enact the nostalgic feeling that reminds them of their communities in idealised terms which, as Spitzer posits, "permits persons to stress positive experiences and aspects of the past selectively" (92). However, nostalgia is not deprived of pain either. What becomes clear is that "nostalgic memory plays a significant role in the reconstruction and continuity of individual and collective identity."

(Spitzer qtd. in Ravi 6). In this instance, "by publicizing their history and suffering, the *Ilois* are contributing to the maintenance of their homeland and the homogenisation of their identity." But their distinctiveness and their possibility to gain compensation has also led, as the author of *Le Malaise Créole* suggests, to "the *Ilois* [']s occup[ation with] a more prestigious position than the *Créole Morisyen*," that is other people of mixed heritage (often Afro-Malgasy) (Boswell 166).

Trauma, nostalgia, and Eden myth also intermingle in Anita Sullivan's *Exiled from Paradise* BBC Radio 4 production (2005) which explores the lives and struggles of Chagossians in the United Kingdom testifying to multiple island diasporas: from the Chagos to Mauritius and from Mauritius to England. The mother Lisette works on the production line of a food canning factory, her daughter Kizzy attempts to tell her story at school—emphasising the importance of publicly narrating her story—and Serge, the father, fights on a committee to welcome other Chagossian refugees to the U.K. The text evokes similar images of having had to leave the island with one suitcase and being packed in the dark belly of the *Nordvaer*:

I never go on aeroplane before. A big metal ship take us away from Diego. The *Nordvaer* she called. We sleep in the hold like animals, sleep on sacks. In my memory, is always dark. Always some cry. In Mauritius, they dump us on dock. No house, no land, no job. (14-15)

The ship emerges again as the intruder, the destroyer of harmonious life. The infidelity of the female protagonist Lisette who reconnects with a former Chagossian lover in London reiterates on a social level the geographic wish of Chagossians to reconnect with their past. Again, the *Nordvaer* takes on symbolic meaning and becomes a site of critical memory, a symbolic element of memorial heritage and the origin of misplacement. Although the core of the plot takes place in the U.K., some nostalgic scenes in broken English (which unfortunately does not convey Creole), do occur in Mauritius and are equally engulfed in nostalgic drives. In the introductory scene to the play, Roznay speaks of Diego from Mauritius with a sega song in her mind: "I come to this beach sometimes to remember. But it is not the same, is not the same. ... Diego very, very beautiful island. ... The simple life. There is no sickness. No cyclone" (2). Serge's mother's description openly exemplifies the entanglement of utopia with nostalgia, thus confirming Susan Stewart's thesis that "nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face" (23). The line between nostalgia and utopia, which engulfs wound and imagination is, like a shore, utterly blurred. Although in some

ways the island space constitutes a heterotopic site for Chagossians, it is nevertheless clear that the Chagossian nostalgia for home remains profoundly utopian. Some shocking videos on YouTube advertise Diego Garcia as the best spot for American militaries with its beauty salons, sandy beaches and fitness clubs. This picture of "militourism" (see the work of Teresia Teaiwa) substantiates the cultural and ethnic values attached to the term "paradise" that contrasts with the un-commodified life of which Chagossians dream.

In many ways, the title of Torabully's 2009 poetry collection *Cahier d'un retour impossible au pays natal* inscribes this impossibility of a return while simultaneously challenging it. Drawing on Aimé Césaire's famous collection, the Mauritian poet writes the displacement of Chagossians at the same time as he shows their desperate attempts to find justice. Just as Césaire's *Cahier* aimed to rediscover an African sense of self and invoke a hopeful future, Torabully unearths the injustice inscribed in the name given "*Ilois: / Ile / Loi / Deux poids, / Deux lois?*" (Ilois/Island/Law/Double standard/double laws?) (10) and gives Chagossians a revolutionary stance. The term *Ilois*, like *Nègre*, is heavily charged with connotations of marginality. Pointing an accusing finger at a "you," making use of a collective "we" and Césairian language mixing insults and invective, Torabully openly unsettles the fiction of the desert island: "Ils dirent que nous n'étions que des passagers / des ouvriers en transit / des pêcheurs en transat. C'est ainsi que nous entrâmes dans la fiction / Des nations de celles qui édictent les dictons" (They said we were only passengers / transient workers / fishermen in deckchairs. / That is how we entered the fiction / Of nations that impose sayings) (12). Torabully points an accusing finger at the discursive constructions that led to Chagossians' displacement as "the fishermen in deckchairs," which implies idle and lazy behaviour. Using the metaphor of excision, his pledge of resistance shows how Chagossians were forcedly relocated in the cardboard shacks of the ghettos of Port-Louis, a marginalised space that heavily contrasts with what they remember as "their paradise lost."

Torabully's poem also alternates between the trauma of having one's land snatched from under one's feet and the idealisation of the homeland left behind but the utopian aspects of Chagossian consciousness emerge as directly resulting from the trauma of eviction and more importantly from the actual impossibility of a return: "Tu parles de l'Eden, mais n'est-il pas rappelé à ta mémoire / sans cesse parce qu'il est inhabitable, parce

qu'il est sans espoir?" (You speak about Eden, but isn't your memory ceaselessly reminded that it is uninhabitable because without any hope?) (25). In these lines, the much longed for past results from the impossibility of having physical access to it. Speaking as "the impertinence of the island that resists you" (34), the narrator denounces how Chagossians have been uprooted from the island and their identity and how they have become and engendered disunited nations. The Cesairian tree and vegetal imagery (Banyan, coral, root) Torabully brings into play points to a similar desire for dynamic rootedness and balance, for voice and ultimately return: "notre droit inaliénable au retour nous proclame" (our inalienable right to return proclaims us) (39).

The literary works studied here indict the use in the 1970s of the myth of the desert island and the fiction of Chagossians being transient workers used by British authorities to sanitise an archipelago for military purposes. Old colonial systems have been replaced by insidious twentieth-century imperial techniques that have forced Chagossians out of their islands. All the works analysed here perpetuate in several ways the Edenic myth and homeland discourse that is central in Ilois's cultural distinctiveness at the same time as they equally interrogate the concept of paradise associated with islands. If the life Ilois are portrayed to have had seems harmonious, writers insist that it was a life of work and deprivation and not an Edenic paradise of idleness and luxuriance. In other words, images of remote idyllic gardens deprived of history are here challenged by images of a dynamic archipelago that has been the site of migrations, labour, solidarity, and loss.

Central to those four texts is that they depict Ilois life with nostalgic and even utopian overtones. However, the context of the Chagos, because it involves expulsion, trauma, and homelessness, is much more complex and heterotopic. It is haunted by nostalgic memory that is itself organised around, not the "coexistence of critical memory with nostalgic memory" (Spitzer 101) but probably the tension between the two. This tension between trauma and nostalgia is itself inhabited by the vision (idealised or maybe not) of how Chagossians used to live and should recreate a new island life once they are allowed to return. The utopian elements of most literary texts emerge as directly linked to the impossibility of a return, the elusiveness of the future. It is most probably only when Chagossians obtain a respectful compromise for a new future that critical and nostalgic memory will give way to "a more complete memory of a past in which both its negative and

its positive aspects w[ill] be acknowledged and employed" (Spitzer 101), that memory within the context of the insular Chagossian space will move beyond trauma and nostalgia. Until they win their legal battle, literary works such as the ones examined here will provide Chagossians with a first reappropriation of their island as "the land ... recoverable at first only through the imagination" (Said qtd. in DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley 20).

As Chagossians struggle to return to their islands but also to another alternative way of life, what those texts raise at the eve of our environmentally-conscious twentieth century is probably a more fundamental debate: can we go back to how our predecessors used to live? Is it possible to envisage a reconfiguration of the relations between humans and the natural world? What can be seen as an anachronistic reconstruction of paradise can here be read as a call to reconnect with landscape and local solidarities. In the context of the Chagos, whose history is fairly recent and part of modernity, the island space can be considered heterotopically as a countersite to modernity as well as a site of ecocritical resistance.

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Notes

- 1 See Elizabeth DeLoughrey's *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* and Antonis Balasopoulos.
- 2 For a more detailed presentation of the historical developments related to the Chagos, see John Pilger and Véronique Bragard.
- 3 Peter Hawkins notes that *sega*, because of its African origins of the Creole language and its musical forms, has been marginalised.
- 4 Term used by Mark Curtis in *Web of Deceit* (qtd. in Pilger 22).
- 5 Portions of this argument on *Le Silence des Chagos* have appeared in my essay, "Murmuring Vessels: Relocating Memory in Shenaz Patel's *Le silence des Chagos*."
- 6 Pilger tells how dogs were actually gassed by American soldiers as children listened to the howls of their pets (5).

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