

Impossible Homes in Nathacha Appanah’s *Tropique de la violence* (Tropic of violence)

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Nathacha Appanah’s *Tropique de la violence* (Gallimard, 2016) was written after the author spent a couple of years living in the French island of Mayotte, located in the Comoros archipelago, in the Indian Ocean.ⁱ Appanah is both a writer and a journalist, and although it is a work of fiction, the novel is inspired by what she witnessed when she was there. Indeed, in an interview, Appanah explained that while she lived in Mayotte, she often encountered isolated minors living on the streets, who had to be left behind by illegal immigrant parents, hoping that they would find a better life there.ⁱⁱ Some of the questions she asked herself, such as: “What would become of these kids? What happens if no one is left to feed them? How can we protect them? What will happen when they become teenagers?”ⁱⁱⁱ (my translation), fed her writing. The novel tells the harrowing story of Moïse, the son of a Comorian illegal immigrant who abandons him to Marie, a French nurse. After initially experiencing bliss in the safety of Marie’s home, Moïse starts questioning his origins and finds himself living in the streets after Marie’s sudden death when he is fourteen. He then goes on to experience the most abject violence, living in “Gaza”, the largest slum of the island, where he falls prey to Bruce, a youth, leader of a gang and “king” of Gaza. Through multiple perspectives, the narrative describes a place gangrened by deprivation and violence, and completely forgotten by (mainland) France. Moïse’s (or ‘Mo’ once part of the gang in Gaza) destiny gives shape to the novel and questions the possibility of building a home and experiencing a sense of belonging, in such an environment.

Home and Asylum

The question of asylum appears very early on in the narrative as one of the narrators, Marie, adopts the baby of one of the illegal immigrants that is admitted to the hospital where she works. The reader is told very little of the baby’s biological mother - in fact we barely get to hear her

voice, as Marie and she don't speak the same language - except from the fact that she is abandoning her child because one of his eyes his green, suggesting he is possessed by the devil. Superstition - and not maternal love - then seems to be at the origin of the act. Yet, no judgement is passed on her; instead the reader is invited to reflect on the impossibility to build a home for herself and her son, the frailty of the *kwassa kwassa* (small fishing boat in Comoros dialect) in which she arrived, echoing the vulnerability of the people it carries.

A fragmented structure

The narrative is told from the perspective of five characters, Moïse, Marie and Bruce as well as Olivier, a policeman, and Stéphane, a humanitarian worker. Each segment is named after one of the characters and takes the form of an interior monologue, interspersed with direct speech, retracing the story retrospectively. In that way, Marie and Bruce are already dead at the beginning of the narrative, as the voice of their spectres gives an account to the reader of what led to their mutual ends. As Christine Marcandier notes, this strategy allows for the same scene to be told from different perspectives, questioning the possibility of an unequivocal truth and making the characters both victims and culprits at once (13).^{iv} It contributes to creating an unsettling reading experience, where the reader is left with unanswered questions and a sense of helplessness. Some of these questions include: why does Moïse end up following Bruce in the slums? Or, as Bruce ponders in the text, "is this really France?" (loc. 950, my translation). Indeed, the picturing of the refugee crisis in Mayotte and the depiction of extreme poverty and violence on the island undermine the fiction of the nation as a home for all born on its shores.

Finding a Home: Broken Spaces

Places and spaces play a very important role in the text and in Moïse's sense of self, as he gradually loses all he knew after Marie's death. Constant movement between spaces and perspectives reveal a complex web of connections between the self and the other,

problematizing fixed categories and territories. The home itself is a source of ambivalence. It is the place of a happy childhood for Moïse, where he experiences love and safety, with his mother and their dog, Bosco, named after the child's favourite book, Henri Bosco's *L'Enfant et la rivière* (The Child and the River). But it also becomes a place of resentment, where Moïse feels his black identity was stolen from him by the white education Marie gave him, hinting at the broken relationship between France and its former colony. The home turns out to be a nightmarish space, where Moïse glimpses at the decomposing body of Marie after she dies of a stroke and he fails to call the appropriate authorities.

Outdoor spaces prove to be equally ambivalent, providing the character with a sense of safety and belonging, as well as one of terror and dehumanising violence. In that way, the forest acquires an almost mythical dimension, haunted by memories of picnics with Marie and Bosco, during which he felt true happiness "[his] favourite place in this country" (loc. 402). However, the forest ends up being haunted by Bruce also, as ironically, Moïse loses his former self completely in his safe place, where he murders his tormentor.

"Gaza", which is the real name of a slum in Mayotte as Appanah observes (Djailani and Assibatu n. p.), becomes Moïse's new home after Marie's death and is a place of extreme suffering for him and others. Gaza is an important space of challenging Moïse's sense of self as he crumbles and he experiences the most abject violence, being the victim of physical assault and rape. The depiction of the inner-city slum also allows an interrogation of national and international borders: "Gaza is Cape Town, Calcutta, Rio. Gaza is Mayotte. Gaza is France." (loc. 471-78). The reference to the actual Gaza is also played out with irony in the text, as humanitarians are not interested in coming to France, and would rather go to Gaza in Palestine, "the best of the best on a CV" (loc. 1116, my translation).

Finally, the beach and the ocean are pivotal in the story of the island. As noted by Jean Anderson, who analyses another of Appanah's novels, the postcard beach cliché is

problematized in her work.^v Here, images of the paradisiac beach coexist with shores where illegal immigrants seek to enter France. The Bandrakouni beach, where Moïse's birth mother first enters Mayotte carrying him in her arms, is a haunting space for the boy, and his trip there, meant to liberate him from his past, will lead to his brutal assault by Bruce and his gang when he returns to Gaza. The book ends under water, as it is in the ocean that Moïse finds ultimate shelter.

Conclusion: Impossible Homes, Ephemeral Shelters?

Violence destroys any hope of belonging in *Tropique de la violence*; but despite the overwhelming violence that prevails in the society depicted in the text, homes are built in the connection between an adoptive mum and her child; in the bond between a boy and his dog; or in the solace of a book, be it a childhood favourite, or a deeply moving narrative.

ⁱ Nathacha Appanah. *Tropique de la violence* Gallimard, Kindle, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Djailani, Nassuf, and Soidiki Assibatu. "Tropique de la Violence, de Nathacha Appanah: C'est un roman de l'humanité et des inhumanités." *Project-Îles*, 21 August 2016, revueprojectiles.com/2016/08/21/tropique-de-la-violence-de-nathacha-appanah-cest-un-roman-de-lhumanite-et-des-inhumanites/.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Marcandier, Christine. "La possibilité d'une île : *Tropique de la Violence* de Nathacha Appanah". *Ciclic, Livres et auteurs d'aujourd'hui*, 2017, hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01719180, p. 13.

^v Jean Anderson, "The Other Side of the Postcard: Rewriting the Exotic Beach in Works by Titaua Peu, Chantal Spitz (Tahiti) and Nathacha Appanah (Mauritius)" *Dalhousie French Studies*, Vol. 94 (Spring 2011), pp. 5-12, p. 7.