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**Murmuring Vessels:
Relocating Chagossian Memory and
Testimony
in Shenaz Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos***

Véronique BRAGARD
Université Catholique de LOUVAIN

It seems most evident that the expulsion of the Chagos islanders, 'what is widely seen as one of the most shameful episodes in British colonial history,'¹ has been violently expunged in the tide of history, a perfect illustration that 'history is written by the victors'² and that islands have been increasingly and repeatedly reduced to unremitting preys of imperial expansion. Only marginal journalists such as John Pilger, whose work *Freedom Next Time* (2006) devotes one chapter to 'stealing a nation' in the Chagossian context, have dedicated some of their research to the fate of these 'wretched of the sea.' In 1968, the British government granted Mauritius its independence on the condition that Britain could keep the Chagos archipelago, situated in the central Indian Ocean. On loan to the United

¹ Fred Attewill and agencies, 'Chagos islanders win right to return,' *Guardian Unlimited*, 23 May 2007.

² Peter Burke, 'History and Social Memory,' in *Memory, Culture and the Mind*, edited by Thomas Butler (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 106.

States for military purposes, it became a strategic base controlling the area. This ‘transaction’ did not only imply financial and political invasion: most crucially, it led to the ejection of hundreds of islanders from their homes. The fact that this topic remains unknown within the francophone world, paradoxically to which Chagossian and Mauritian authors belong, and will only be solved within the English-speaking world illustrates the long-term consequences of colonial disputes, Mauritius having been captured by the English during the Napoleonic wars but having remained mainly French-speaking. If former residents of the Chagos won their legal battle to return home in May 2007, their return and future remain uncertain. The traumatic experience of their eviction from their homeland will linger on in the collective memory of displaced Chagossians for many more years to come.

In her 2005 novel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, the Mauritian writer and former journalist Shenaz Patel fictionalises the testimonies of these ‘relocated’ Chagossian inhabitants. In an attempt to understand and exorcise the past, she weaves together the fate of Charlesia, a woman who desperately attempts to go back to the island of her ancestors, with that of Désiré, a young man who discovers he was born on the ship that transported the last inhabitants of the islands. What does it mean to be forced to leave one’s native island in one hour? What was it like for the two thousand Chagos inhabitants – first called *Ilois* (islanders) by the colonisers – to be forced to leave the soil and sand they had been living on for decades? What does it mean to know that the landscape of your island has been wiped out and replaced by a military base? How can testimonial literature convey this dislocation and engage in the struggle to have the Chagossians’ voices heard? How can one listen to or speak for the Chagossians?

This paper approaches the different ways in which collective memory is articulated in connection with the ship metaphor that unifies Patel’s novel. More precisely, in scrutinising Patel’s use of prosopopoeia – that is, a form of personification in which an

inanimate object gains the ability to speak (in this case the ship that speaks for the collective trauma endured by Chagossian displaced people) – this paper seeks further to explore how the trauma of forced exile can be conveyed, even exorcised through creative writing.

In 1965, as the British Empire was coming to an end, it managed to create a new colony, the British Indian Ocean Territory, of which the Chagos archipelago was part, in order to ‘preserve a permanent strategic position in the heart of the ocean.’³ While the British granted Mauritius its independence, the former empire secretly appropriated Chagossian territory. Some two thousand people, mainly descendants of slaves and Indian indentured labourers working on coconut and copra plantations, lived on this archipelago. As the USSR started operating in the region, Britain signed a fifty-year treaty⁴ that granted the United States access to the territory for military purposes, in exchange for discount of approximately 14 million dollars on a US-purchased nuclear submarine.⁵ Because the island of Aldabra, the first choice, was the breeding ground of rare giant tortoises, the US government opted for the Chagos – which had 1,800 inhabitants but no tortoises. After it was leased to the United States in 1970, the latter invested 19 million dollars in a base on the chief of its islands, Diego Garcia. The latter has become a major strategic military staging post that has served the Iraq war and has been suspected of being a detention and nuclear centre.

To make these territories accessible to military facilities, between 1965 and 1973, the British authorities moved two thousand people (mostly descendants of slaves), the majority of whom were taken to Mauritius and the remainder to the

³ H. Ly-Tio-Fan and S. Rajabalee, ‘An Account of Diego Garcia and its People,’ *Journal of Mauritian Studies*, 1:1 (1986), 96.

⁴ As Dodds observes, referring to Madeley, the treatment of the Chagos starkly contrasts with the way in which the Falklands were defended by the British forces in 1982. The question of race played a major role. Klaus Dodds, ‘God Save the Falklands’, in *Islands in History and Representation*, edited by R. Edmond and V. Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 183-84.

⁵ John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 24.

Seychelles. In 1973, the compulsory eviction of the population accelerated a hasty, inhuman packing of the archipelago's inhabitants into the holds of ships for a forced voyage that was to uproot them for ever.⁶ Of African origin and Catholic religion, many were rejected by the dominant Mauritian Hindu population and underwent serious difficulties in adapting to Mauritian society. The six thousand Chagossian descendants remain the 'parias de Maurice'⁷ and belong to 'the poorest segments of the population.'⁸ This brief historical survey confirms the emergence of new centres and peripheries, highlighting the constant remapping of power and resistance movements. Diego Garcia has become a fortress in the middle of the Indian Ocean while the Chagossian population, relocated to shanty towns in Mauritius, constitute a new periphery within the periphery.

As early as 1975, world-wide opinion was roused as to the plight of the Chagossians.⁹ Chagossian islanders have had to fight against the voices that claimed the territory was uninhabited or that they were only temporary workers. Charlesia, the character of Patel's novel, most evidently refers to Charlesia Alexis, who actively participated in the demonstrations of 1981 (several hundred Chagossian women sat and sang in front of the British High Commission in Port Louis) and hunger strikes that eventually led to 'talks' but also to Charlesia Alexis's brutal arrest.¹⁰ In 1983, Olivier Bancoult created the Chagos Refugee Group and launched a 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

⁶ Hakim Malaise, 'Exil forcé loin de Diego Garcia,' *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 2001, p. 21.

⁷ Laurent Decloitre, 'Les habitants expulsés de Diego Garcia veulent retourner sur leur île,' *Libération*, 27 July 2004.

⁸ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Common Denominators: Ethnicity, Nation-Building, and Compromise in Mauritius* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), p. 11.

⁹ H. Ly-Tio-Fan and S. Rajabalee, 'An Account of Diego Garcia and its People,' p. 101.

¹⁰ John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, p. 31.

to international law and Chagossians won the right to return, but with the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, things changed. Prime Minister Blair invoked an Order in Council, signed by the queen, to overturn the verdict, revealing how the government, under extreme pressure from the US, could not allow the return of Chagossians to their homes. 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'¹¹ for a brief visit organised by the British Foreign Office. Moved by shocking moments of discovery and communion with the land, this emotional and painful trip has reanimated the dream of a permanent return to their homeland while underscoring how difficult such a return would be. Thanks to the release, in May 2007, of secret documents testifying to the British-US Chagossian deal and revelations of 'an imperious brutality and contempt,'¹² Chagossians have 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, though, whether these denunciations will lead to the homecoming of the islanders to their native soil.

The literary voices of Mauritians have not remained indifferent to the plight of the Chagossians. In *Rôle parole* (1995), the poet Khal Torabully revisits, with sharp irony, the way in which the Chagos were bluntly turned into a commodified product, as they were sold for three million pounds: 'Si nous pouvions vendre les vagues,/Nous n'aurions pas hésité./Voilà pourquoi la mer s'est sauvée.'¹³ The mercantile vocabulary points an accusing finger at how the Mauritian government at the time sold the Chagos archipelago to the British for whom, in the possessive words of Paul Gore Booth (permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office), 'The object of the exercise was to get some rocks which will remain ours',

¹¹ *L'Express*, 11 April 2006.

¹² John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, p. 38.

¹³ Khal Torabully, *Rôle Parole* (Maurice: Le Printemps, 1995), p. 37.

cited as an epigraph in Patel's novel (p. 39). This thirst for soil and expansion is further aggravated by the second part of the epigraph that reveals the perpetuation and even exploitation of the desert island myth: 'Unfortunately along with the birds go some few Tarzans or Man Fridays whose origins are obscure and who are hopefully being wished on to Mauritius' (Diplomat Dennis Greenhill, 1966). This reference to colonial images of supposed 'savage' inhabitants relegated to some primitive past is most shocking since it is not only charged with echoes of a colonial hegemonic vision, but it also acknowledges a human presence that it intends to remove. Diplomat Dennis Greenhill's words recall the many instances in which island populations have been considered insignificant. As Pilger notes, 'like Australia's Aborigines in the nineteenth century: they were deemed not to exist'.¹⁴ If many islands have been the prey of old colonial schemes, it is clear that US expansionism, by bluntly militarising numerous islands like Hawaii, Guam, Porto Rico, Azores, Guantanamo or the Marshall islands, has taken over. The US empire is built on these strategic military outposts,¹⁵ themselves built on the elimination of the human element of these insular spaces. When people protested against nuclear testing in the Bikini Islands, Henry Kissinger exclaimed 'There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn.'¹⁶

Ducasse's poem, the epigraph to the third part of Patel's novel, underscores how demapping led to psychological erasure and suffering. Playing with the homophone of il/île that conjoins island and people, Ducasse interweaves images of the island taken out of history with the silenced lives of the displaced inhabitants:

¹⁴ John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, p. 21.

¹⁵ According to the planetnonviolence website, the Pentagon has 702 military bases outside its territory in 130 countries and more than 6,000 within its territory.

¹⁶ Mary Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Antipodean Archipelagoes: Post-colonial Cartographies in Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. (PhD Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1999), p. 10. Also in DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), p. 18.

Île nous reste les cartes les traces
Vies voilées par l'histoire violée
Il nous reste à écrire
La haine imbécile
Et l'histoire qui s'enchaîne
Diego ton nom sur la carte rayé
Diego amer
Diego à mort.

Patel's novel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, goes much further in condemning the historical dislocation and reinvention of the island space. The author gives voice to those who are still waiting for compensation and holding on to the dream of reinhabiting their homeland. To write *Le Silence des Chagos* (the profits of which go to the Ilois Welfare Fund), Patel took her inspiration from the story she was told by Charlesia, Raymonde and Désiré, representative Chagossians she met and to whom she dedicates her novel. The author's promise to Charlesia to write about her life led her to engage with the complexities of testimony. Charlesia was born on Diego Garcia in 1943, of a large family who lived on copra production for a Mauritian-based company. She married when she was fourteen and had ten children. Her life changed drastically in 1967 when she left her native island for Mauritius as her husband needed medical care. After his treatment, she realised she would never get a ticket back. She was told that 'the islands were closed.' Despite her deep despair and imprisonment, she persisted in her fight for her people's rights.

The novel *Le Silence des Chagos* opens with two appalling scenes: an Afghan child witnesses his house and mother being bombed by B52s while another hungry child grips his mother's hand in despair. In the latter narrative, the mother loses her sight in the depths of the 'entrailles de l'océan indien'¹⁷ in the

¹⁷ Shenaz Patel, *Le Silence des Chagos* (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 2005), p. 11. All further references are to this edition.

harbour of Port Louis (Mauritius). Besides sharing similar despair at the loss of their homes, these narratives converge on the site of Diego Garcia. In 2001 (after 9/11), from this military base, B52s took five hours to reach Afghanistan for a war that killed thousands of civilians. For the second woman, Diego Garcia is associated with her forced deportation from her Chagossian island to Mauritius at the time of Mauritian independence. The noise of the independence cannons of the first chapter resonate with the frightening noise of the bombings in Afghanistan, opening the scars of different, yet similarly traumatic experiences.

Patel's novel is punctuated by Charlesia's visits to Port-Louis harbour. Every day, she goes to the harbour, vainly waiting for a ticket to return to her island. Her distress is wedded to her deep uprootedness but also linked to the nostalgia for the simple Chagossian life she used to have: a life with the sea, copra production, *poisson-banane* recipes and the *séga* of Saturday night (the historic Charlesia has become a representative of Chagossian music). The solidarity and simplicity of life she associates with her island contrast with the ghettoising slums to which Chagossian people have been relocated. Although the text seems to resort to a happy nativistic way of life, it also interrogates the island's mythification as a paradise lost: 'La vie là-bas était-elle vraiment aussi simple et agréable?' (p. 112). The novel further distinguishes Chagossian life from a western touristic picture of idleness, as it underscores Chagossian people's uncomplicated life of community work. In this case, the land left behind reveals a strong, emotional, symbolic presence alongside the struggle for new values to counterbalance global consumerism.

The fate of Charlesia, who desperately attempts to go back to her island, is interwoven with that of Désiré, a young man who was born on the ship after his mother was forced hastily to leave the Chagos. Parallel to Charlesia's vain harbour visits, the story of Désiré's feelings of absence and rootlessness in collectivity unfolds. His is a confrontation with the mystery of his origins. Désiré's double naming as 'Désiré' and as

'Nordvaer' is indicative of his hidden Chagossian roots. At the age of twenty, he learns from his mother that he was born on the ship 'The Nordvaer.' He realises that this event embodies his people's secret, shameful displacement. The Nordvaer was a cargo ship destined to transport copra and ten crew members. In 1971, as the British needed to 'clean' the islands, one hundred and forty Chagossians were packed in its belly for several weeks.

Désiré is led to approach the sea, the very locus of his absence of self. His decision to take on a job at sea functions as his determined inclination to engage with his past. His body's seasickness on board reproduces his pregnant mother's anxious distress when she was forced to leave her native island in one hour. Her exclamation 'comment empaqueter toute une vie en une heure?' (p. 95) is not unreminiscent of the Jewish ghetto experience during the Second World War. Furthermore, his seasickness reenacts his mother's experience of the suffocating hold as she gave birth (p. 104) to him on the ship. It also intimates the repulsive living conditions in the Mauritian shanty towns where she was sent. More generally, the sea's rejection epitomises the inscription of his people's deportation on his body.

Like a child seeking his mother, Désiré vainly attempts to reconnect with the sea. Whereas the ocean site connotes uprooting to the Chagossian people, for Désiré, it is coupled with non-identity: the absence of administrative and ontological references that culminates when he is refused a Mauritian identity card. It is the ship, not the sea that responds to Désiré's call. The ship, an emblem of passage as well as a 'lieu de mémoire'¹⁸ of the Chagossian nation, answers Désiré's questions and triggers his encounter with Charlesia, and with the collective traumatic memories of his people.

The ship further develops into a murmuring vessel, an anthropomorphic character with a history and feelings, the container recalling the cries of deported Chagossians, those

¹⁸ In Pierre Nora's sense of the term, that is, as a site considered as a repository of collective memory.

‘sacrifiés de l’indépendance.’¹⁹ An embodiment of time and space, it calls to mind Gilroy’s chronotope of the ship in motion – ‘a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion.’²⁰ Using prosopopeia, whereby the ship becomes a character, the novel brings forth its history: from its building in Hamburg to the packing in its belly of the exiled. This crying vessel becomes Désiré’s maternal figure: ‘un bébé est né dans mes entrailles’ (p. 138). Although it does not provide him with maternal consolation or identity, the ship leads him to reconnect with an imaginary community forged from the trauma of exile. Instead of a human body as the vessel of history (as is the case of Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* or Morrison’s *Beloved* for instance, in which central characters stand for lost history), it is the ship here that is turned into a human body, listening to the collective voice of its hold. More concretely, prosopopeia is used by the author to expose three traumatic events: the displacement of the last Chagossians, the birth of Désiré and the killing of island dogs by fire²¹. More concretely, investing the ship with a lyrical voice is used to convey trauma, that is, something which remains impossible to grasp. The third-person narrative with its realist and unified perspective somewhat undermines the traumatic experience often conveyed by such devices as repetition, gaps, affective states and visual images. However, the ship metaphor enables the author indirectly to engage with the consciousness of her characters, while maintaining a respectful distance from their testimonies. More broadly, the ship image can be read as a synecdoche of a significant interrogation, namely the passage of the testimony via the voice of the author. The sentence, ‘Ils résonnent en lui, les cris silencieux que ces hommes et ces femmes ont étouffés au fond de leur gorge, tellement fort qu’ils ont coulé de leurs yeux en longues traînées salées’ (p. 138) illustrates how the author herself and literature have become a

¹⁹ *L’Express*, 19 March 2007.

²⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 4.

²¹ Pilger tells how dogs were in fact gassed by American soldiers, as children listened to the howls of their pets (*Freedom Next Time*, p. 5).

murmuring vessel. Using the ship metaphor as a voice recalls Césaire's words « ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche. »²² Besides crystalising a sense of history, the cries from the hold resonate with the cries of slaves and coolies, with a poetics of dislocation that constitutes the matrix of the Indian Ocean imaginary. *Le Silence des Chagos*, which the author considers a 'livre-document,' subversively challenges the silence that has prevailed on the Chagos question. Until recently, television and other media had failed to report on what has happened. The NPR programme on Diego Garcia, however, exemplifies recent changes. Whereas the 2001 programme emphasised a bored soldier's fascination with the island, the program of May 2006 was devoted to Jeanette Alexis's struggle to reclaim her island.

The ship (and its absence) also functions as a site that makes Charlesia and Désiré meet. Charlesia tells Désiré about her struggle and about their island's (non)history. Even if the islands have been silenced, as the title suggests, its inhabitants (among whom many women) have not. Their muzzled voices resonate throughout the novel and contrast with the resonating, proud bells of independence that conceal the silent sale of the archipelago. In defiance of the national anthem, Charlesia and Désiré sing back with an 'o mer patrie' (p. 147) that challenges the French anthem and prestigious assimilation, replacing its imperial centre with oceanic imagery. Charlesia's explanations lead the reader back to the Middle East war that continues to kill not only soldiers and civilians but also those who, behind the scenes, have been forced to give up their land: 'Ils nous ont tous tués. Ils continuent à tuer d'autres personnes ailleurs. C'est à cela que sert notre paradis' (p. 149). The term *souvenance* used at the end of the novel to refer to something 'plus vivant encore que le souvenir' (p. 150) – recalls Morrison's concept of re-memory.²³ What do you do after you have remembered? Re-memory is a kind of psychic haunting in which the specifics of a

²² Aimé Césaire. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1939), p. 43.

²³ Toni Morrison uses the word re-memory in her novel *Beloved*, to refer to the act of re-membering memory.

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. Charlesia's *souvenance*, she declares, goes beyond memory: it is within her and will always draw her back to what she was forced to leave behind. This enduring compulsion to look back contrasts with the selective memory of governments who have allowed themselves to overlook those invasions. More ironically still, the Chagossian situation contrasts with Thatcher's words when she defended the Falkland claim to 'preserve Britain's greatness from being relegated to a 'distant memory of an offshore island.'²⁴

Patel engages here in an enormous task to pass on and keep alive this *souvenance*. Obviously, her text raises the Spivakian question as to who should speak for whom. The present essay, which reinscribes forms of domination, of course, is no exception. Patel's novel can be envisaged as biased, as it is written by a Mauritian intellectual and Mauritius has been complicit with the deportation of Chagossian people. But the novel is notably written by a Mauritian woman who exposes the marginal position of Chagossians in Mauritius as well. It is my contention that the author's subtle and prudent prose challenges the Spivakian criticism that could be launched against her work, for she respects the characters' testimonies. Furthermore, in engaging with Chagossian memory, Patel initiates a first dialogue among communities – Chagossians and Mauritians. Last but not least, the very fact that the voices of these people have reached me through Patel's efforts and are now reaching you, is evidence of a necessary rupture of the silence that has governed this tragedy.

While overtly paying homage to the silenced voices of the six thousand Chagossian descendants and to women's participation in the struggle, Shenaz Patel reminds us that, notwithstanding globalised cross-cultural dialogues, territories like small islands or vast oceans remain invisible preys to neo-colonial practices. The fact that Chagossians have been called

²⁴ Klaus Dodds, 'God Save the Falklands,' p. 181.

'Ilois' – that is 'islanders', used as a proper name – associates the status of islands with cruel marginalisation, as is the case with many insular spaces. However, as the novel and the unyielding struggle of Chagossians testify, islands have also been evident sites of resistance. *Le Silence des Chagos*, which mixes testimony, fiction and metaphor, helps the reader access a collective memory of displacement. The murmuring vessel of the ship, a witness to the relocated people, is appropriated by Désiré (in his dreams) and then by the author herself as a trope for the reconstitution of cultural memory and possible identity. Yet the Chagossian identity remains difficult to locate: it is not in the Chagos, which are empty, nor in the sea, which rejects Désiré. 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.

The ship imagery is metaphorically articulated to interrogate escalating US imperialism. As Françoise Vergès contends, '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.'²⁵ Within the pulling powers that traverse the sea, the island 'recurs as a figure of postcolonial space.'²⁶ More recently used as nuclear testing and dumping grounds, islands become 'inextricably linked with the motivations and objects of a continuing imperialist project.'²⁷ As strategic ramparts within ocean sites, islands have been objects of covetousness. As Edmond and Smith point out in their introduction to *Islands in History and Representation*, islands, 'unlike continents, look like property.'²⁸ DeLoughrey insists on the power currents that dominate the oceanic space. Her study denounces the way in which Gilroy's and Rojo's works 'inscribe ocean space as *aqua nullius* in a way which negates the military

²⁵ Françoise Vergès, 'Writing on Water: Peripheries, Flows, Capital, and Struggles in the Indian Ocean,' *East Asia Cultures Critique*, 11:1 (Spring 2003), 250.

²⁶ Dorothy F. Lane, *The Island as a Site of Resistance* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁸ R. Edmond and V. Smith (eds.), *Islands in History and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

and economic patrolling of the watered boundaries between nations.’²⁹ Patel’s novel falls in line with DeLoughrey’s criticism. It urges us to look more closely at how dominant powers have increasingly taken control of waters and islands, at the same time as it compels us to engage in challenging the ‘absence of the US from postcolonial study.’³⁰ But more than considering how the novel denounces US expansion embodied in the Diego Garcia military basis, it is the Chagossian tragedy of the deportation of hundreds of people and the trauma that has ensued that are underscored in Patel’s work. Deporting its population and turning the island into a non-place falls within the narratives of trauma and forced exile. Contrary to what I have argued elsewhere³¹ – namely that the ocean can signal a Gilroyian web of cross-cultural exchanges – I here posit along with DeLoughrey (1999) that the ocean site still maps a dense web of power relations involving the ever-expanding US imperial agenda and resulting in the destruction of subaltern communities.

More generally, Patel’s novel and work (I would like to include her 2003 novel *Sensitive* here) raises the more important question of the possible survival and resistance of the subaltern. As a character of Devi’s novel *Ève de ses décombres* (2006) contends, ‘Mon père a dit qu’entre les géants américains et chinois, notre pays était une fourmi qu’on ne remarquait même pas quand on marchait dessus.’³² Although the British Government is duty-bound to restore the islands, it remains to be seen whether the British government, US’s ‘junior partner’³³ to use Chomsky’s words, is really ready to diverge from its big brother and put at risk ‘the “special relationship” whereby [both] reinforce each other’s imperial ambitions at the cost of native

²⁹ DeLoughrey, *Antipodean Archipelagoes*, p. 101.

³⁰ Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (eds.), *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 11.

³¹ Véronique Bragard, ‘Transoceanic Echoes: Coolitude and the Work of Mauritian Poet Khal Torabully,’ *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 8.2 (2005), 219-33.

³² Ananda Devi, *Ève de ses décombres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 70.

³³ Noam Chomsky, *Imperial Ambitions* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), p. 38.

populations.’³⁴ Restoring the Chagos to the Chagossians constitutes a first act of resistance against the American Empire that Britain has blindly followed since the end of World War II. In this context, Patel’s novel emerges as a first step toward the acknowledgement of the Chagossian nation and the return to its territory, a wish already powerfully articulated by her character Ton Faël in her second novel *Sensitive*: ‘il se met à gesticuler et à crier qu’un jour on verra, la vérité éclatera, et ce jour-là, personne ne pourra les empêcher de rentrer chez eux, à Diego. Lui, il l’imagine toutes les nuits.’³⁵

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³⁴ London Yank, ‘Diego Garcia: Blair Order “Unlawful”, ‘Irrational” and “Repugnant”,’ *European Tribune*, 12 May 2006.

³⁵ Shenaz Patel, *Sensitive* (Paris : Editions de l’Olivier, 2003), p. 81.

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