CHAPTER 3
DISLOCATING THE INDIAN NATION: ANANDA DEVI’S HOMELANDS

rien à faire rien à foutre des images désarrimées de nos terres
—Ananda Devi¹
[to hell with all the disarrayed images of our homeland
—Ananda Devi]

Le lieu est incontournable.
—Edouard Glissant²
[sense of place is uncircumventable
—Edouard Glissant]

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omni-presence, which is carceral) Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.
—Jean Baudrillard³
Unlike Phileas Fogg, who spent only the briefest time in India, scurrying back to Europe with Aouda in tow, Ananda Devi’s recent characters travel toward India to stay, to enjoy, and to amble like tourists through its temple towns and crowded streets. Literary geographies of her work register how, during the intervening hundred and fifty years since Fogg’s visit, capitalism has grown unbridled, passage across Earth’s surface has continued becoming swifter, and India, now a nation-state in its own right, participates in a network that forges human subjectivities according to its overwhelming nationalistic logic.

Much like with the opium network, contemporary financial workings are not readily discernible. This is not due to an operational infancy that relegates capitalism to a surreptitious silence as one sees in Verne’s work. By the time the millennium has turned, the forces of globalization have permeated each nook and cranny of human existence. Capitalism exists as a white noise, hardly noticeable in its pervasiveness, yet available, loud and clear, if you press your ear to the writings of those like Devi whose recent literature has expressed an aesthetics of resistance to this new order. This is an order whose contours remain undefinable, and the origins of whose gossamer-like spread remain unidentifiable. Literary geographies of Devi’s work reveal how it is on the human body that the complicated nationalistic and financial articulations of space collude to generate the corporeal alienation particular to this current epoch.

Devi has always written about India. Realizing that she was neither a Creole writer nor an Indian writer, after much questioning Devi might have finally discovered that it is in a Mauritian identity that she was able to find herself and locate a ‘process of synthesis and syncretism,’ but India and her Indian origins have played an important role in Devi’s writings. For her earlier characters in works based in Mauritius, like *Le Voile de Draupadi* (1993) and *L’Arbre fouet* (1997), India was a faraway land whose religious stories regulated everyday lives; a site that one evoked as a place of mythical tales and as the origins of quotidian taboos. Eventually though, in later works like the novel *Indian Tango* (2007) and the short story collection *L’Ambassadeur triste* (2015), the narratives moved to the streets of a twenty-first-century India, where her women characters continue defying social norms and breaking moral and religious taboos. If in one of her earlier works based in Mauritius, *Rue la Poudrière* (1988), it was a father-daughter incest that took center stage, in *Indian Tango*, placed against the backdrop of a conservative Indian middle-class milieu, it is a lesbian encounter that serves to liberate the woman protagonist from her patriarchal chains.

Along the literary road on which her characters move from the streets of Mauritius to the streets of Delhi lies also the varied map of her spatial encounters
with India: a) the faraway mythical India that the diasporas imagine; b) India as a nation-state designate that, in its subservience to the global economic order, confines human existence; and finally, c) a nonhierarchical, processual India that Devi’s own text produces. As Devi’s work has moved out of Mauritius, whether to London in *Les Jours vivants* (2013) or to Delhi in *Indian Tango*, it is almost as if her work in visiting these newer locales is becoming aware of their interconnectedness. Throughout, India is present as part of an overpowering global network of capital.

If the second chapter of this book followed the setting up of an infrastructure that pulverized the world into entities revalorized according to the functioning of a market economy, this chapter deals with changing spatial anxieties in Devi’s works. As these anxieties pivot from the local community of a Mauritian road to a reconfigured globe, the spatiality-related identitarian matrices that they negotiate simultaneously furnish plentiful insights into the changing locations that undergird Devi’s literary arc, as well as the strategies that have been the mainstay of a politics of location within the context of postcolonial literature.

**Global Pathways**

Illustrating the changing dynamics of Devi’s spatial anxieties are the titles of three of her works. As they register Devi’s evolving spatial engagements with the formation of a human subjectivity, they also chart out the spatial anchors that this chapter analyzes. In no particular order, in this chapter I shall go back and forth between: the city; a global body politic conceived in terms of nation-state boundaries; and lastly, India, a particular nation-state.

I shall be talking about Devi’s other works as well but for the moment let us place in order of chronological appearance her two novels: *Rue la Poudrière* and *Indian Tango*, as well as her collection of short narratives, *L’Ambassadeur triste*. Devi’s literary engagement moves from the local of a Mauritian road in an earlier work, *Rue la Poudrière*, to a globe recalibrated as a function of national boundaries and capitalism, as it happens in *L’Ambassadeur triste*. Ambassadors in the twenty-first century function as indispensable links between nation-states that serve as nodes of this global body politic. Between the two works, India of *Indian Tango* serves as a constitutive example of the global logic of nations.
that comes up in *L’Ambassadeur triste*. Later, this chapter will show how Devi dismantles this logic of India.

*Rue la Poudrière* is the oral rendition of the Creole form of an actual Mauritian road called Rue de la Poudrière.¹¹ This real-life road, much like in the novel, was where prostitutes practiced their profession. Human identity is configured according to the oral linguistic practices of the island and is located within a specific real-life quarter of the island that conjures up a specific cultural and material signified.¹² Unlike her predecessors who, Ritu Tyagi points out, asserted a “unified identity located in [...] clear geographical confines of their island territory,” Devi in her work transcends “cultural and regional boundaries” to present “new models and possibilities” (2011, 106). Despite the contributions that she has made to the cause of women from the Indo-Mauritian community,¹³ even when Devi is “representing the Indo-Mauritian society” (2011, 106) it is with the intention of exposing “nationalist notions of identity as limiting” (2011, 106). Thus, one can see and understand why Tyagi sees in Devi’s work an “openness to the universal” (2011, 106). It is through an analysis of Devi’s treatment of the dynamics of the local community that one reaches the conclusion that Devi embraces not “the insularity that the island can impose on Mauritians,” as her literary predecessors did, but “the expanse of the sea” (2011, 106). *Rue la Poudrière*, through its precise locatedness, allows seeing Paule, the protagonist, as part of a larger global dynamics.

However, in the later works both the literary stimulation as well as the conclusion arrived at are based in a much broader global space. In a way, Devi’s characters have crossed the sea, both metaphorically as well as literally, to deploy the local dynamics in order to discover a global space. This is where the unlocatable sites, available in the title of the collection as well as in the narratives that make *L’Ambassadeur triste*, help us understand this explicit denouncement of the nation-based global divisions.

While the majority of this collection recounts the touristy experiences of foreigners in India, the title story “L’Ambassadeur triste” is about a homesick ambassador stationed in Delhi “depuis dix ans déjà” [‘already since a decade’] (10). Both the title of the collection as well as of the short story, “L’Ambassadeur triste” already prepares the reader for a paradigm of nation-states, mutual recognition and bilateral political relations, and instantly evokes the entire apparatus of imagined communities that remains, as Benedict Anderson has shown, at the foundation of nation-states. Yet, apart from the location of the ambassador’s current posting, New Delhi, the only other pertinent geographical information available is that his origins are in a “pays nordique” [‘a Nordic country’] (12).
The story never evokes the usual markers of the nation-state apparatus like passports, languages, maps, flags and currencies. One never finds out what country he represents and where exactly he comes from. His country of citizenship remains for him, as well as for the reader, a “pays perdu” ['lost country'] (9).

A collection that starts with the unknown origins but the known current location, New Delhi, of an ambassador ends with another story, “Bleu Glace” (‘Ice Blue’), about another unnamed man. This time though, both where the unnamed man comes from and where he is located remains unknown. In between the two extremes – of the precise locatedness of Rue la Poudrière and the unanchored man from “Bleu Glace” – lies the itinerary that Devi’s work has followed to crystalize her notions about spatial divisions.

The collection starts with a story about a representative figure of the process undergirding nations – an ambassador – and a recognition of the existence of a country, namely India. The collection ends at an isolated seal-meat processing factory where the reader is introduced in great detail to how the product comes into existence, but one finds absolutely no identifying markers about this man, or, indeed about any of the other workers. Identifying markers apart from the factory floor do not exist, because they cannot exist, for such is the stifling spread of a product-based world, is the lesson I would like to take from these two extremes of identifying human location.

Between the two stands India. Or, rather, two spatial dynamics of the same bounded entity bearing the name India. One, heralded by the Hindu right of the country, remains as an example of a modernist state working in collusion with the growing capitalist network. The other is the decentered India that emerges from Devi’s texts: an illustrative example that unravels through itself the workings of a larger paradigm of nation-states, to become eventually a processual, non-national space. Devi has always written against the reductive idea of nationhood, as is seen in the discussion above where, even when she represents the “Indo-Mauritian society” the objective is to expose “nationalist notions of identity as limiting” (Tyagi 2011, 106). Yet, by the time Devi’s text has traversed oceans to reach India, it has both started reflecting on other manifestations of bounded nationhood as well as begun presenting multilayered ways of countering these manifestations. In order to see these transformations that take place in Devi’s writing, it is important to see how her characters are navigating the roads of Mauritius.
Along a Local Road

It is unthinkable to imagine Devi’s literature without women’s struggles against society. Similarly, it is becoming unthinkable, in seeing the transformations taking place in her oeuvre, to imagine her writing without a genuine engagement with the processes that shape space and shape us in relation to space. This is more than just a presentation of a passive landscape. It is about seeing everyday human activities as crystallizations of a geographical logic that attempts predeterminations of all: from the mundane to the extraordinary.

For example, Françoise Lionnet (1995) writes about the woman subject in Devi’s novel Rue la Poudrière: a literary context within which, dating from nineteenth-century to contemporary literature, “from the noblest to the most perverse, the metaphysical to the sexual, cities have been read as both utopian and dystopian” (50). Focusing on Paule, who works as a prostitute, who has been rejected by her parents, and who inhabits what can only be described as the financial underbelly of the city, Lionnet elaborates on how the woman subject, and in particular the postcolonial woman writer, negotiates the dynamics of these urban images. After unwittingly sleeping with her drunk father, mistaking him to be a client, Paule drinks a poisonous potion and dies.

As Paule prepares the potion, she imagines her mother’s presence. Her mother is the one she imagines offering her this poison. The act is described as the abortion that the mother always wanted: “Et finalement, finalement, c’est arrivé, ce qu’elle voulait finalement. Marie s’est avortée de Paule…” [‘And, finally, finally it happened, what she had wanted finally happened. Marie aborted Paule...’] (Rue 188). A woman bearing the name of ultimate motherhood, Marie,14 makes no efforts to hide that Paule is an unwanted daughter, and then in the end assists in her suicide. Lionnet’s ominous reading discovers Rue la Poudrière “conflating the female’s and city’s demise,” where the “subject’s attempts to disentangle herself from” oppression “leads to annihilation” (1995, 68). Cities are those postcolonial spaces in which the female subject is “tragically caught in a vise.” I completely agree that not only in Rue la Poudrière but also in other of Devi’s works urban spaces designate how “with global development come the ills of late capitalism” (Lionnet, 1995, 68).

Indeed, the urbanscape in this novel does function as the metaphoric equivalent of Paule. Here is what Paule’s narrative voice contemplates, as she looks on to the city from her window:
Vivre, comme Port-Louis, sans conscience et sans moralité, des états divergents d’amour et de haine […] Vivre, comme Port-Louis […] dans une terrible ritualité sans signification, sans question (191). […] Mais si Port-Louis bouge, moi je suis immobile, parvenu à un point d’arrêt, au point de non-retour. […] j’imagine les eaux du port se refermant autour de mon corps en dérive, le bruit de déglutition des eaux lourdes dans ma tête. (191) […]

Dehors, le bruit s’amplifie, la chaleur augmente. Les cris deviennent plus perçants. L’enfer. Port-Louis brûle. Puis, un bruit plus fort tonitruant auprès de moi. Je suis secouée, arraché de ma contemplation. Ma fenêtre toute proche, blanche de soleil, me découvre ce côté bourbeux de Port-Louis, plein de tôles rouillées, de latrines découvertes, de réchauds à charbon fumants. Tout brûle, des vapeurs s’élèvent, transparentes, chaudes, odorantes. L’odeur de Port-Louis s’élève, vers le soleil-forge qui cogne sur les choses rougies à vif. Le soleil glaive qui fouille et s’enfonce dans votre tête, consumant l’esprit. La petite maison devient tout doucement un four. (192)

[To live, like Port-Louis, without conscience and without morality, conflicting states of love and hatred […] To live, like Port-Louis […] a wretched meaningless ritual, without questioning. […] But, if Port-Louis moves, I am immobile, at a standstill, point of no return. […] I imagine the water of the ports closing in on my drifting body, the heavy swallowing of the water in my head. […] Outside, the noise is amplifying and the heat going up. Cries become increasingly piercing. Hell. Port-Louis is burning. Then, an even louder noise booms near me. I am shaken, ripped from my contemplation. My window, right next to me, sun-bleached, reveals to me Port-Louis’ grimy side, brimming with rusting corrugated iron sheets, open latrines, and smoking coal stoves. Everything is ablaze, fumes rise up – transparent, hot, stinking. Smells of Port-Louis rise up, toward the forge-Sun that smashes into red-hot things. The sword-Sun that forages through and digs deep into your head, ravaging your brains. The small place slowly turns into an oven.]

In this literal equivalence between the woman and the city, it is easy to see how, according to Véronique Bragard, Paule’s life “epitomizes in several ways the city of Port-Louis itself.” Both “have been bought, fragmented, imprisoned and are
falling to pieces” (119). Interestingly, “vivre” [‘to live’] is an ironical expression used to equate Paule’s existence with that of Port Louis. For it is soon afterwards that Paule is to die. At the same time, the comparison is not completely ironical, because the point here is that the modernist machinery and the productive human body are interchangeable. While the body might die, the city does “live” in its personification of perpetual decay.

This literal overlapping of the woman and the city unfolds the gendered creases of spaces. Home is a site of terror as much as the city constantly domesticates discontent. Space can no longer be understood in terms of the urban and the rural, the home and the outside; neither do any of the associated connotations of safety or threat hold true. The novel’s reading of the simultaneous colonization of the body and the city displays how both work and sexuality are constituted by a newly emerging paradigm of urban spatiality, where women have to be relegated to the spatial and economic margins. The modernist urban spaces of commodification accept only conforming bodies; bodies invested in its mission. Within this dynamic, all human relations have to dissolve. Urban productive processes alienate the human body from itself. Paule’s personal bewilderment at having her father as a client also becomes a discontent directed at the urban productive processes within which her labor of a prostitute is prefigured. In this urban paradigm, a discontent Paule is doomed to be erased. Paule imagines her mother furnishing the poison, putting a definitive end to any vestiges of affective relations as the defining feature of human contact.

Instead, these relations and their value are now predicated on the extent to which they are invested in a relationship between productive elements. At least that is how I would like to see the slow movement of the description, which moves from inside the room to the outside, and rises along with vapors and the smells of the city to the sun to return to the room. As the noise and heat are rising, so are the smells and sights of open latrines and coal stoves (“latrines découvertes, de réchauds à charbon fumants” [‘open latrines, and smoking coal stoves’]). All human senses are under attack. The description moves from the ground and along with the rising vapors reaches a red-hot sun that takes on the qualities of a forge (“soleil-forge” [‘forge-Sun’]) to end inside the head, where it muddles up the brain. As the room where Paule sits in this circular trajectory is converted into a “four” [‘oven’], the rendering of the city and the body as sites of manufacturing and production is complete.
This is a scene of rejection. While the modernist aesthetics would have us focus on the shiny object, the final consumable entity and its exchange value, this description focuses on the refuse that machinery creates. It is not what lies in between the two, but the open latrines on the ground and the vapor floating on top that one focuses on; both are the ungainly byproducts of means of production that here challenge the senses and yet never figure as part of the exchange value that the scenic, touristic Mauritius is often depicted to be. Similarly, Paule’s unworthiness in relation to the productive process has predetermined her rejection from the system. Paule’s father had sold her into prostitution to Malacre. The “terrible rituatlité” ['wretched meaningless ritual'] – both for Paule and for the city – then is to be understood as the repetition and the constant reiteration that creates meaning. Both are quite literally “sans signification” ['meaningless'], without importance as well as without signification. Or rather, both the urban-scape and the bodyscape have been emptied of meaning and what one sees here is their reinscription in a dynamics of machines and decrepitude.

The intermingling of the city, the commodified body, natural elements and all human sensations signals the ultimate rationalization of the human experience as well as the spatial limits within which Devi places her earlier work. Just as Paule imagines “les eaux du port se refermant autour de mon corps en dérive” ['water of the ports closing in on [...] [her] drifting body'], so does this narrative delimit its treatment of all that remains within the waters of the Indian Ocean, that is on the island of Mauritius. One would have to wait for Devi’s later works to see the city, and other delimited geographies of human experience such as nations and nationalisms, figure as part of a global dynamics.

As her work looks outward into the horizon beyond Mauritius through the spatial equations it contemplates within the frame of human relations, Devi’s writing has continued foregrounding the imbrication of gender in the urban expanse. It also displays an increasing awareness of how the nation and its accompanying nationalism collaborate with a financial apparatus to scale out their expansion, always and necessarily in collusion with cities. Indeed, in her recent works, the material logic of urban growth in India makes manifest how the workings of an international capital lead to the creation of physically and socially constructed inequalities. The financial apparatus of Indian urban landscape thus articulated is part of a global whole whose authority percolates through geographical units of nations and cities that it has aggregated into itself.
Dislocating Location

Throughout Devi’s work, there lies a refusal to define location. The evolution of this purposeful placelessness, a lack of stable meaning, can be read alongside the juxtaposition of Glissant and Baudrillard, both of whom contemplate locations within a frame of constantly escaping meaning, though from completely different vantage positions. For Glissant this absence of meaning exhorts a constant struggle with identity and offers a productive opportunity for remaining engaged with the process of defining one’s location. Baudrillard, on the other hand, in the dystopian Disneyland parallel in the epigraph above, sees capitalism emptying American society – and by extension the entire postglobalized society – of meaning. While at an explicit level Devi has staunchly refused to define location, and her work remains closer to Glissantian articulation, a deeper reading of her recent works reveals an awareness of the kind of dystopian world Baudrillard talks about.

“Incontournable,” from Glissant’s well known refrain “le lieu est incontournable,” has multiple possible translations (‘place cannot be ignored’ or ‘place cannot be avoided’ or ‘place is uncircumventable’). For J. M. Dash this expression means that “place can neither be gotten rid of nor can its contours even become fully known.”16 It is this dual bind of realizing that location exists and yet cannot ever be fully known or be ignored that provides a productive impetus to the constant quest for meaning that forms the basis of Glissant’s understanding of a world that exists in relation.17 Verne’s world that is mediated through a grammar of measures, quantification, and colonial apparatuses has to be necessarily circumventable. Glissant’s, on the other hand, is always already uncircumventable. Indeed, he demonstrates performatively through the semantic ambiguity of this spatial metaphor incontournable, which could both refer to an uncircumventable location as well as an unapprehendable meaning, how it is important to search for meaning despite knowing it to be inaccessible.

When responding to a question, Glissant retorts with astonishment at entertaining the possibility of decoupling identity from location:

Qu’est-ce que ça [lieu] à voir avec l’identité ? […] l’identité ne peut pas se passer du lieu. (37)18

[What does it [location] have to do with identity? […] identity cannot exist without a location.]
One understands how and why the physical spatial location is important to Glissant’s work. The constant causal links that he draws between human subjectivity and location is why Glissant makes frequent reappearances in this book: “si nous sommes dans le monde, c’est par le biais d’un lieu” [‘if we are in this world it is because of a location’] (36).

I am only looking at the locational inflections of this adjective, “incontournable,” which Glissant privileges in his insistence above. Others, like Mary Gallagher,19 scouring through different aspects of Glissant’s work have found in this “cleaving to place” an evidence of “place and memory being inextricably intertwined” (Gallagher xix). It is also in this location that Geneviève Belugue20 finds in Glissant’s treatment an infinite entity, ‘an aesthetics of the Diverse’ where all is ‘interlinked and interdependent.’21 The point here of course being how this and other spatial analogies in Glissant’s work very self-consciously draw attention to their mode of representation of the world. Glissant’s constantly evolving signifier resists any elisions, nationalistic or otherwise, and sets up his spatial metaphors, and his literature in general, to absorb the mutating complexities of the postcolonial identitarian text.

The textual interceptions that Glissant’s texts carry out result from a signifier purposefully let loose to wander about. Baudrillard’s America too belongs to what Gilbert Germain calls a “new significatory space” where “signs are free to commute unbounded by strictures of any sort”22 (Germain, 42). However, these are elements reintegrated into a capitalist system determined by consumption. In the earlier stages of capitalism, the value of a commodity “was determined largely by its use and exchange value” (Germain 40). In present times with the technical hurdles to production “such as cost and accessibility” overcome, and the focus being on consumption, we have reached a new principle of social organization, wherein what matters is the image of the product as it is “self-consciously crafted by manufacturers and advertisers” (Germain 41). This is an image that is created in anticipation of (and to encourage) its eventual consumption. It is thus that in our age the value of a product is no longer attached to its real world signifieds. It is because they remain disconnected from their referent that Germain concludes for Baudrillard: “Value becomes a floating signifier” (41).23

The dominance of capitalism has ensured that our current day world functions as a signifier independent of any signified, not answering to any definitional limits. In this sense Los Angeles and America, in relation to Disneyland, become hyperreal: a “realer than real” world (Germain 42). In this equation, it is in Disneyland that the postmodern subject lives out the fantasy of the American dream. Propelled by mechanization, cartoon characters and social situations, the subject is able to experience true American reality, as it could be, in what would
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seem like artificially created contexts. The hyperreal then is the America that surrounds Disneyland, where the consumption-driven signifier is overwhelming the reality. This is the product of a consumerist world where “the images representing them so overwhelm their referents that they break the bonds of representation entirely, thus becoming free to commingle indiscriminately” (Germain 42).

Where for Glissant the free-roaming spatial signifier functions as the precondition for a productive disruption of the domineering colonial text, the snapping of the bond between the signifier and the signified in Baudrillard’s reading of the capitalist society is the fabrication of a new order where the definition of the world too exists as a “floating signifier.” The two spatial referents then are the two kinds of undefinable spatial locations that complement each other in Devi’s work, which the subject must capitalize on and manipulate to stake claims to a postcolonial space.

Grounding Identity

It is not as if Devi is consciously cognizant and engaged with these two distinct spatial paradigms. Neither is it as if Devi claims to juxtapose the two against each other. I juxtapose the two in order to highlight the transformations in a literary oeuvre that in its earlier days began on the streets of Mauritius and is now offering deliberate self-conscious insights into the human society as the creation of capitalism. When I say that for the purposes of Devi’s oeuvre, at an explicit authorial level it is the Glissantian kind of a geographically unanchored narrative that is the enabling condition of a forever-evolving identity, I am doing what Odile Ferly does in her book, A Poetics of Relation: Caribbean Women Writing at the Millennium. Ferly’s study “does not claim that Glissant’s Relation directly inspired all the women writers [that Ferly has] discussed” (6). Ferly premises her arguments on Glissant’s lack of engagement with gender and shows how women authors through their literary practices, which remain sensitive to the importance of gender, produce a “modified, more gender-aware version of Relation” (6). While acknowledging Glissant’s contributions and influences in the Caribbean literary world, Ferly functions with the belief that “Glissant’s ‘gender blindness’ can be corrected” (6). I too would argue that Devi’s spatial engagements when read alongside Glissant produce a much richer and a more nuanced kind of relation.

This idea of an unanchored place that Devi has reiterated in several of her works, and that she advocates for more explicitly in nonfictional writings, makes
itself available through poetic mechanisms in Devi’s poetry collection *Quand la nuit consent à me parler*. This collection assumes a woman’s voice to address the reader. In talking of the moment (“Quand” ['when']) of consent to “parler” ['speak'], the title of this collection presents speech and carries within it the absence of speech that preceded it. Devi, after all, is faced with writing about the impossibility of communicating the abject human exploitation, in the very language, French, that served to subjugate the colonized populations of Mauritius.

Appearing toward the end of the collection, the poem “Les mots meurent de mort lente” ['Words Die a Slow Death'], which displays how “les mots érigent des murs de mensonges” ['words erect walls of lies'] (43; 65), might seem to be about such an impossibility of language. However, when this poem deploys language to underline its own limitations, it puts into action a process of harnessing poetry writing in order to bypass the inabilities of human language. Since it provides us a way out of a linguistic cul-de-sac by speaking of the simultaneity of speech and nonspeech present in the title – *When the Night Agrees to Speak to Me* – one understands why poetry figures in this poem, and indeed all throughout this collection, as “notre veine porte” ['our vein a door'] (43; 65).

In her insistence on “poétique” ['poetics'], Devi shares much with other well-known concepts in the Francophone literary tradition. Through allusions to similar articulations, such as *Poétique de la Relation* (Poetics of Relation) by Glissant, Devi enters into a dialogue to set up her own voice. Just as some renditions of Négritude unambiguously situate their origins in Africa, many writers belonging to the diaspora of slavery and indentured labor display yearnings to locate fixed geographical origins in their quest for an identity. In her poem “Poétique des îles” ('Poetics of Islands') Devi is retorting, no doubt, against such a geographically tied understanding of identity when she angrily states:

```plaintext
rien à faire rien à foutre des images désarrimées de nos terres ...
images gravitationnelles [...] nous condamnent à rôder le nez au sol (49)

[to hell with all the disarrayed images of our homeland ...
gravitational images [...] condemn us to keep our noses to the ground (67-9)]
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This indictment of homeland and similar “images gravitationnelles” ['gravitational images'], is an acknowledgment of the reductive nature of such identity paradigms that “nous lestent de trop de nous-mêmes” ['weigh us down with too much self'] (49; 69). In other words, these paradigms do not recognize the
complex, multifaceted nature of identity construction that makes any anchoring unachievable. The rejection (“rien à faire rien à foutre” [‘to hell with’]) of the pull of these geographical locations is in direct proportion to the urgency of identitarian interrogation she responds to in her work. When writing her quasi-autobiographical poetic essay for the collection Je est un autre: Pour une identité-monde,27 which bears the self-explanatory title “Flou identitaire” [‘identitarian haze’], in an imaginary conversation with “pourvoyeurs d’identité” [‘purveyors of identity’] (179) Devi presents herself as suffering from the “maladie” [‘illness’] of “démultiplication débridée d’appartenences” [‘unbridled amplification of identities’] (179). The abundant irony of this “illness” counters the urge to sediment and limit the many facets of herself, as these “pourvoyeurs d’identité” would want her to. The idea here is not to repeatedly emphasize this nonfixity that Lionnet (among many others) already recognizes as a hallmark of Ananda Devi’s writing. Lionnet evokes how in Rue la poudrière, the “narrator’s, and the narrative’s, double flight from meaning and reality, from fixed location and stable identity” needs to be read as a “desire to escape from circumcised existence” (1995, 60). The narratives, the locations and human interactions have all set up a productive ambivalence that challenges the power dynamics undergirding the context in which Devi’s marginalized characters struggle.

Such moves that wrench multiple postcolonial subjects from metaphorical and literal ‘purveyors of identity’ and rearticulate them as the site of plural influences abound in Devi’s work, whether it figures as literary texts, writings about herself, or about the larger postcolonial identity. The unbridled then in ‘unbridled amplification of identities’ exceeds, both the patriarchal and the traditional frameworks and becomes the fertile ground where differences are diffused and provide the means for communal resistance to dominant structures, nations and imposed identities.

When speaking of a colonial conception of a nation, I am referencing not only the modernity-inspired model of nation-states but all conceptions that tie down identities to specific borders. The colonial deterritorializations that resulted in slavery and forced migrations are in Ananda Devi’s discourse translated into a nonbinary empowering form of spatiality. Devi is one of the women authors to have registered the impossibility of a nonmultiple space, reinscribing the colonial project instead within an open-ended spatial paradigm that is one of possibilities. Nation-states, or narrow nationalisms built on the belief of a single identity, working under the sign of modernity, could never satisfy this need for a dynamic interactive space that respects and recognizes the influences of a plurality of identities.
Patriarchal Homelands

This diffracted, multifaceted, nonsedimented type of topography available in Francophone literature has taken a long time to take its contemporary form. Before Francophone authors harnessed spatiality’s full productive potential, its definition remained subsumed within a reductive understanding of colonial-capitalist space. For example, by situating his movement’s geographical origins in Africa, Léopold Sédar Senghor’s version of Négritude only advanced the same old colonizing model of defining identity through a nation. In his haste to set up normalizing identities, Senghor is among those early writers who advanced simplistic definitions of history as well as geography that are based on exclusion. Senghor’s is a twofold move that involves firstly establishing the African as different, unique, and then looking toward Frenchness or Francité as the defining force. Senghor speaks fervently of adopting a French way of thinking that would allow the African and the African diaspora to express itself with clarity that is inherent to French thought.

It is no wonder then that Y. V. Mudimbe saw Négritude as a part of Western thought. Mudimbe calls Négritude “a product of a historical moment proper to Europe, more particularly to the French thought, which marked it.”

Even more startling is its clear misogynist outlook. Indeed, the name itself of Négritude has been criticized for its patriarchal leanings, as it takes the word nègre – the black male – as its starting point. What makes this enunciation on the space of Africa scandalous is that the mostly male writers of the Négritude movement, like Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas, exploit female allegorizations of Africa in their search for self-vindication. Colonization raping the passive mother Africa and the continent as a beautiful woman who beckons are just some of the sexualized metaphors of the female body that have provoked Maryse Condé to describe Négritude as “a sexualized discourse of Black liberation.”

This was an urge to locate in space structures similar to those of the colonizer.

When it comes to recognizing gender as a formative element in the colonial experience, one points to Frantz Fanon as an example of a male theorist whose contribution remains notable. However, there are moments when ruptures in his text give access to what Anne McClintock calls “designated agency” (98) for women. While it is true that Fanon lived in a period where political movements and definition of power were all male-centric, Fanon’s continuing intellectual influence demands a closer look into his presentation of the role of women.
One has pointed to the much-discussed passage that follows as an example of Fanon's ambivalent acknowledgement of women's role in the Algerian struggle for independence. Belonging to Fanon’s *Sociologie d’une révolution* (*L’an V de la révolution algérienne*), the following quotation presents how the traditional Algerian Muslim woman takes off the veil to participate in Algeria’s war against colonization, an act that allows her unhindered access to the European quarters. An ease of travel that the Algerian woman is then able to use toward the purposes of the revolution:

Le voile protège, rassure, isole. Il faut avoir entendu les confessions d’Algériennes ou analyser le matériel onirique de certaines dévoilées récentes, pour apprécier l’importance du voile dans le corps vécu de la femme. Impression de corps déchiqueté, lancé à la dérive; les membres semblent s’allonger indéfiniment. Le corps dévoilé paraît s’échapper, s’en aller en morceaux. Impression d’être mal habillée, voire d’être nue. Incomplétude ressentie avec une grande intensité. Un goût anxieux d’inachevé. Une sensation effroyable de se désintégrer. L’absence du voile altère le schéma corporel de l’Algérienne. Il faut inventorier rapidement de nouvelles dimensions à son corps, de nouveaux moyens de contrôle musculaire. Il faut se créer une démarche de femme-dévoilée-dehors. Il faut briser toute timidité, toute gaucherie (car on doit passer pour une européenne) tout en évitant la surenchère, la trop grande coloration, ce qui retient l’attention. L’Algérienne qui entre toute nue dans la ville européenne réapprend son corps, le réinstalle de façon totalement révolutionnaire. Cette nouvelle dialectique du corps et du monde est capitale dans le cas de la femme.

Mais l’Algérienne n’est pas seulement en conflit avec son corps. Elle est maillon, essentiel quelquefois, de la machine révolutionnaire. Elle porte des armes, connaît des refuges importants. Et c’est en fonction des dangers concrets qu’elle affronte qu’il faut comprendre les victoires insurmontables qu’elle a dû remporter pour pouvoir dire à son responsable, à son retour : « mission accomplie » … RAS (39-40)

The quotation has been extracted from a chapter that is appropriately titled “L’Algérie se dévoile,” in *Sociologie d’une révolution*. In the synonymy that the title of this chapter establishes between woman and Algeria lies the crux of the argument. One could easily read the verb “dévoiler” as referring to a woman taking off her veil, or to the unveiling of a new Algeria. Or even the other way round.
It is not so much which of the two (woman or the nation) acts as a synecdoche for the other that needs to be ascertained. Chantal Kalisa rightly summarizes Fanon’s understanding of the male colonizer when she asserts that, according to Fanon, for the male colonizer the “body of the colonized woman came to represent a national emblem and the land itself” (25). What one needs to point out is that in equating the country and the woman, this title, “L’Algérie se dévoile,” is paradoxically carrying out much the same thing that Fanon aims to criticize in the white colonizer. The very first signs of the tension “between nationalism and feminism” (Kalisa, 25) in Fanon’s work emerge right from the title of this chapter that purportedly talks about the contributions of women in the struggle for independence. Fanon, Kalisa points out, “repeats the same process of erasing the colonized woman in the decolonizing effort” (25).

Let me push this reading a little further. Fanon derives his authority to speak about Algerians from the insight he drew as a result of his work as a psychiatrist. Is it not possible to see the above presentation of the discussions that allowed Fanon access to the subconscious workings of Algerian women otherwise than what he claims it to be? What if this description – which starts with a veiled woman, goes to an inappropriately dressed woman ("mal-habillée"), then a naked woman ("nue"), and finally to a woman who walks stark naked, in full public view, through the European city ("toute nue dans la ville européenne") – were to be seen as the condensation of the desire of a heterosexual male? Could it be that Fanon himself is no different from the subject of his analysis: the pathologically sick colonized black man who feels himself superior in sexually possessing a white woman? He is after all thinking of a woman bearing all the traits of a white European woman walking naked on the streets. He does assume the voice of a black man in his much-quoted Peau noire masques blancs, to speak of how in caressing the white woman’s body the black male is able to appropriate “civilisation et la dignité blanches” ['white civilization and dignity']:

Dans ces seins blancs que mes mains ubiquitaires caressent, c’est la civilisation et la dignité blanches que je fais miennes (76).

[When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine (45).]

One could of course retort that Fanon’s could not be a selective vocabulary that privileges a certain kind of female sexuality, and is instead a scientifically arrived at conclusion of an objective professional. In addition, it could be that the “je”
that is talking about holding the breasts of a white woman is no more than a rhetorical device aimed at heightening the textual effects. But, is it?

To ask another question: Is “l’homme” [‘man’] as it appears in Fanon’s text, an indicator of general mankind, as Bhabha claims, or is it a gender-loaded term, which as Kalisa points out “is primarily describing a male world”?40

The answer would be an emphatic yes. Fanon’s is most definitely a male world. At least that is the conclusion one draws on seeing this woman, who after encountering dangers, taking great risks, taking charge of her body, rebelling against the society, conquering the European quarters, reports back to: “son responsable” – ‘her male supervisor.’41

Is it not paradoxical, how when speaking of the European city, Frantz Fanon underlines the “revolutionary” manner in which the woman participant deploys her body (“réinstalle” [‘re-establishes’]) against the European city only then, almost immediately, to classify this as a conflict with her body? If by relearning her body she is able to invade the European city, which the male revolutionary is unable to, would it not be logical to see the woman as the very catalyst that redefines and appropriates the European city toward a revolutionary end?42

Several scholars (McClintock and Rashmi Varma, for instance) have pointed to the rather obvious contradictions in Fanon’s enunciation regarding gender and nationalism. McClintock for example, shows how women militants in Fanon’s writing can only be understood as “passive offspring of male agency and the structural agency of the war” (98).

In other words, for McClintock “theirs is a designated agency.” No wonder, caught between the male revolutionary and the need for national identity, the woman revolutionary can only figure as repeatedly fractured, out of control body:

“corps déchiqueté” [‘body torn apart’]; “lancé à la dérive” [‘set adrift’];
“membres semblent s’allonger indéfiniment” [‘the limbs seem to lengthen indefinitely’]; “corps dévoilé parait s’échapper” [‘unveiled body seems to escape’]; “en morceaux” [‘falling into pieces’];
“Incomplétude” [‘incompleteness’].

Lastly, and perhaps the most destructive, is the “sensation effroyable de se désintégrer” [‘frightful sensation of disintegrating’]. Through Fanon’s text one can see how women43 “are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (McClintock 90). Indeed, Condé’s assessment of Négritude being “a sexualized discourse of Black
“liberation” neatly applies to Fanon’s presentation about the war of Algerian independence. Women are progressively unclothed and deployed for the task of an Algerian homeland.

Spatial practice in Devi’s literature, while remaining in conversation with the normative colonial narratives of space as available in Fanon’s text, also presents colonized bodies in a manner aimed at unsettling patriarchal understandings of space. In *Quand la nuit consent à me parler*, Devi strongly counters all homelands and the associated reductive “images gravitationnelles.” It should not be surprising to discover that Devi’s poetry also uncovers the wounds that a woman’s body bears.

This would explain why Devi constantly beckons, as she does in the ninth poem, to “Enlève ma peau. Dévêts-moi de moi./Regarde de plus près” [‘Peel back my skin. Unclothe me of myself./Look closer’] (20; 19), and then confronts the reader with instances that show the lack of identity, or rather an inarticulatable identity. In the twenty-eighth poem, “un roulis de saris verts” [‘An unrolled swathe of green sari’] (40; 59), the very garment that a woman covers herself with, exercises indifference toward her and indicates instead her erasure; here, one understand how any attempts at locating identity, in particular locating a woman’s identity, can only mark a site of absence:

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Un roulis de saris verts
Indifférents au sort
De la femme annulée
Masquée par ses bleus (40)

[An unrolled swathe of green sari
Indifferent to the lot
Of a woman erased
By her bruises (59)]
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Even as stabilizing the complexities of identity remains an impossible task, this insistent invitation to attempt definitions of this opaque presence sets apart Devi’s poetry and identity politics in the mostly male-centric, origin-fixated postcolonial Francophone canon. It is also because of this simultaneous invitation and refusal that I can state that in Devi’s work this unidentifiable location is to be understood as “incontournable” in the Glissantien sense of the term.

Devi’s fictional spaces allow us to decipher the gendered workings of geography and to understand them not just as passive entities but as active participants
in the process that makes postcolonial identity. To use Varma’s words, in reading texts like those of Fanon, I would like to see how through the act of walking “women register their place in the tumultuous Algerian society” and are able to alter space by drawing “different maps of the colonial city” (25). In other words, authors like Devi are able to interact with spatial concepts such as geographical nation-states like India to reinscribe them within a knowledge paradigm accommodating more varied struggles of identitarian assertions.

It is through such a theorization of impossible homelands that Devi’s work delivers a distinctive geopolitical statement about the contemporary need to realign our understanding of nations and geographies alongside lived experiences. Impossible homelands signal the impossibility of abstractions of nationalism that would contain space within mathematical paradigms of maps and charts; this is so not only (and quite obviously) because their physical coordinates cannot be located in the aftermath of the colonial violence but also because of enunciations such as Devi’s. In such enunciations one can understand how space, identity and language cannot exist as separate entities but will have to be understood forever as part of a multilayered, constantly evolving process in which all three are intertwined in a mutually influencing relationship.

**Tango with India**

Let us look a little deeper into the impossible homelands that mark Devi’s writing. Devi posits herself as “culturally hybrid” and constantly disavows any attempts to anchor down her identity or her literary craft. Why this growing fascination with India? One sees that two of her recent works, the novel *Indian Tango* and the short story collection *L’Ambassadeur triste*, are set in India. Despite the candidness with which Devi accepts not knowing the “quotidien” [‘everyday’] of India and wonders if it might be just a mythical India that inhabits her, she does not hesitate in crossing the Indian Ocean to place her recent writing in India, which she refers to as “contrée inconnue” [‘unknown land’].

One understands the reasons why the origins of the numerous foreigners in India in the short story collection must remain unknown, if they are to indeed become emblematic of a new all-welcoming citizenship. For example, in “L’Ambassadeur triste,” the ambassador remains unidentified, as does the unnamed woman in “À l’aventure” who harbors a desire to be like one of those
adventurous women she secretly admires. For her sixtieth birthday, she comes to India in search of an adventure.

With a bottle of Avian water in hand her adventure involves renting a car for the first time in her life and driving independently in one of India’s cities, where all road rules and social conventions are unknown to her. One could easily find the chaos of this unnamed city with its unruly bumper-to-bumper traffic, hassled traffic police officers and street side beggars, in any number of nondescript Indian cities. One had told the protagonist that the people in this generic Indian city were more polite, and the city was located close to scenic places. She had also been informed (wrongly, she realizes) that the traffic was less chaotic. As she negotiates the traffic with great difficulty, the descriptions connote everyday urban Indian commonplace. The woman finds herself in a nowhere land:

Aucun panneau, aucun signe, aucune indication. Elle était dans un pays sans nom. (28)

[No signs, no markers, no directions. She was in a nameless country.]

The city becomes a microcosm of human identity, where the visibly materially comfortable woman of unknown origins forms a human bond with a street-side child beggar, whose peeling wounds and fever mean he will not survive long. One needs no language, no signs, no direction markers, for they would be the prerequisites of a knowledge model that seeks to stabilize meaning. This “pays son nom” ['nameless country'], through which this unnamed tourist drives, is emblematic of Devi’s conception of belonging and human identity. Even as it frustrates the unidentifiable protagonist, this unidentifiable location also becomes the site for human affinities where, as the story closes, she has formed a bond with a child with whom she shares neither language nor culture, and definitely not her comfortable financial situation.

The very first story in this collection is about an ambassador placed in the city of Delhi. The very last story, “Bleu Glace,” furnishes no toponyms. The unnamed man is from an unnamed place, working in another unnamed location. Placed between the two, the short narrative “À l’aventure” retains India as the only factual geographical coordinate. It is almost as if the collection is progressively dissolving all geographical markers that could serve as anchors for identity. One understands that if they are to remain “incontournable,” these locales within the identitarian paradigm have to remain always already marked with the
potential of human interactions, even as they move closer to vanishing point while furnishing the possibilities for reconciling human incongruencies. The quotation that follows, where Devi talks about why she placed her novel *Indian Tango* in India instead of Mauritius, prepares the groundwork for understanding how her work recalibrates spaces through its focus on bodies and dislodges the dominant spatial paradigm, which inscribes humans in maps, and charts, and numbers, as one sees in Verne’s work:

> I started with this idea of a transgression, a transsexual transgression. [...] I always need a strong sense of place [...] I was able to bring in the strangeness of the place that even I feel when I go to India, and at the same time to have one part which is really set in traditional India. (Hawkins 10)

In talking about India, what Devi achieves in her works is this seemingly incompatible “strong” sense of place, along with a strangeness linked to her Indian identity. The “gravitational images” that appear in her poem “The Poetics of Islands” and that I mentioned earlier do attract, but what one encounters in the end is a zone that exists in this space beyond boundaries.

When read alongside the “strangeness of place” that she experiences in a known India, the suffix “trans” – available for example in transgression and transsexual – is one I choose to read as belonging to a newly created spatial paradigm that evokes a spatiality beyond known definitions that harbor fixed identity. One that becomes the ideal staging ground for the layered complexities of identity.

Nevertheless, why India? If Devi is serious about denouncing how authors tend to get caged in by ideas of “restrictive” national belonging, why then, in an oeuvre that destabilizes the foundation of nationhood, does India have to figure as the constant narrative locus? Is one to understand this purposeful inclusion as a contradiction, or perhaps a change in ideological positioning? Is she locating in India a homeland, as did other Francophone writers who looked toward Africa as the place of their origins?

Notions of caste, religion, spirituality and community that she identifies with India played a major role in Devi’s upbringing. These influences are abundantly available even in her earlier works. Think, for example, of the pandit in *L’Arbre fouet*, the protagonist Aeena’s father, who has come from India and whose brahminical patriarchal ways have become the reason for Aeena’s constant repudiation. Elsewhere, she evokes the sea as a constant reminder of the
country of their ancestors. India’s presence as a far-away country is here just one of the many identitarian vectors, albeit an important one, that both problematizes as well as provides the means to counter the hierarchical assumptions of a casteist and gendered society. In Devi’s earlier work, India served to magnify the complexities of the Mauritian society.

To challenge successfully anchored homelands that one identifies as geographies of source, as happens with Senghor, Devi has to engage with India. The illusory India was distilled through the immigrant’s vision and displayed as a set of spectacular and mythical traits to fill in the lost contours of the dispossessed’s everyday life. Engaging with this India allowed Devi’s text to unhinge her work from all fixed locations and to place them within a constantly evolving orbit of Glissant’s “incontournable.”

The point interestingly is not really about the unknown origins of these foreigners, or about the unnamed city. This is a paradigm of nation-states and ambassadors where India is the only named geographical entity, and other geographical coordinates like countries of citizenship and precise locations, both within and without, slowly dissolve. The India that emerges loses its limiting moorings to figure eventually outside the nation-based grammar that is central to the evocation of a parochial nationalism.

In order to locate the human story within a network of human solidarity and collective resistance, it is crucial for this India to be located outside the national frame. The human location exceeds all known geographies, and characters of different provenances have been transformed into a collective. No longer in search of some elusive definitions, they situate themselves in terms of a national geography, but a geography that sits on shifting identitarian sands and needs constant recalibration.

In other words, while for the colonial-capitalist project geography served the purpose of an exclusionary anchor, of an essentialist identification, for Devi’s world these homelands come to be seen as the spatial residue of imperial times that the contemporary project needs to constantly reckon with. Further, and more importantly, what was hidden from the view of this make-believe India of reincarnations and sins was the often-ungainly site of real human labor and exploitation and the troubling social and economic relations that undergirded the postglobalized Indian nation-state. This change of location allows confronting the internal contradictions of both the very concept of a homeland within the postcolonial Francophone context and the shifting financial dynamics of the globe.
To move within international borders creates the grounds for fracturing these borders from within. What one discovers within this urbanized India – in the form of contradictions between the restrictive homeland and its imaginary evocations, between the false promise of eternal salvation and the everyday grit and grime – prepares the grounds to unhinge the homeland. These homelands could be both the different illusory forms of homelands available within the Francophone canon, as well as the restrictive homeland that takes patriarchal forms in Devi’s other works.

In the brief analysis that follows, India appears as an “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase. Rather, India appears as a gendered imagined community. The representation of human collectivities increasingly accommodates the relation between bodies and geographies, between identity and belonging, between citizenship and the material conditions, and becomes more marked in its portrayal of everyday life.

It is this Janus-faced India, with its constrictions and possibilities that scaffolds Devi’s identitarian preoccupations vis-à-vis the nation where the human body confronts economic repression and exploitation. The name of the novel, Indian Tango, already puts the Indian nation front and center and informs through “Tango” of the constant negotiation with space that one needs to carry out. This novel is the story of Subhadra, a Delhi woman living with her husband and mother-in-law. Before she meets and commits the subversive act of sleeping with another woman, the stasis of her everyday life is contrary to the movement that the title evokes.

Devi’s presentation of India, and in particular of the aspirations and imaginations of its middle class, draws on a nationalistic tradition that sees all elements as constituting subsections of the nation of India. Subhadra’s aging authoritative mother-in-law, referred to as Mataji in the novel, the carrier of the parochial and patriarchal workings of a modern nation-state, in her insistence on the need to maintain the purest form of a patriarchal Hindu country, is a quintessential example of the bigoted India that Devi implicitly deplores. The India that emerges through Mataji’s character becomes a conduit for distilling a definition of a nation in the interests of an ideal nationhood. Within this cultural conservatism, any symbol of nonbelonging, regarded as bereft of tradition, exists beyond boundaries, and the nation thus created has to play out on its subjects’ bodies.

Indian Tango opens some time right before the 2004 general elections in India, when the country was debating the possibility of the Italy-born Sonia Gandhi becoming the prime minister. This white woman, according to the wishes
of Mataji’s dismissive racism, has to be sent back to England. That Sonia Gandhi, as the informed reader would know, is actually of Italian origins remains a moot point. The color of her skin has destined her to an elsewhere, which is a place away from the ideal India.

It is Jugdish’s (Subhadra’s husband’s) responsibility to read the daily paper to his mother. What the reader witnesses in one of these regular sessions is quite literally how a nationalistic India purges human bodies not conforming to the demands of an ideal nation. As Jugdish’s reading progresses, the news items he highlights and those he omits, according to what he understands to be his mother’s preference, reveal an India where dead bodies of murdered Muslims, of immolated villagers and those of brides burnt to death by their mothers-in-laws are run-of-the-mill affairs for Mataji. As the novel puts it, Jugdish reads only those news items that “ne choquera pas sa mère” ['would not shock his mother'] (36). Even if, hypothetically speaking, Jugdish had chosen to read the omitted portions, the reader is well aware that the matriarch would not have believed what such trashy newspapers (“feuilles de chou” ['rags']) said against the “grand pays non-violent” ['the great non-violent India’] (37). This is an India belonging to Gandhi’s legacy that she has imagined for herself.52

In *Indian Tango*, there are numerous examples of women’s bodies being called into the nationalistic agenda of the Indian nation-state. The two violent deaths of women in the novel are a perfect example of what McClintock says about privileging women’s shamed bodies as indispensable to the creation of an idea of nationhood:

Une enfant exposée, une virginité vendue aux enchères [...] trop du ventre de ce pays. (37)

A naked child, her virginity auctioned to the highest bidder [...] too much of the country’s underbelly.]

While both are news items published in the newspaper that Jugdish is reading out aloud for his mother, the first reports the death of people in communal riots
and gains great approval from Mataji. The novel is set during the immediate years that follow the 2002 riots in Gujarat, a state in Western India, headed at that time by Chief Minister Narendra Modi. Mataji’s vengeful endorsement of Hindus massacring Muslims aligns the mother-in-law alongside a right-wing nationalistic political ideology.

Ils vont tous nous massacrer. Se venger, oui, oui, c’est bien, c’est très bien. (36)

[They will slaughter us. We need revenge! This is good! Yes! This is very good!]

The irony is not lost on the reader. Mataji is presented as “[r]éfugiée derrière la parole de Gandhi” [‘seeking refuge in Gandhi’s words’] and yet consumed by a paranoid sectarian hatred. She finds it perfectly acceptable to endorse the killings of Muslims in order to protect “nous” [‘us’].

While one identifies Hindus and Muslims according to their religion, women and children are identified as such. That these women are raped and then have their abdomens torn out (“éventrées”) is already a powerfully violent imagery that speaks to the violence prefigured within a restrictive nationhood toward women’s bodies. A woman’s body, irrespective of its other identity markers, is always implicated with its reproductive sexuality toward nation building.

Mataji’s conception of a right-wing nationalism does not flinch at the thought of the female body immolated in the cause of ethnic cleansing. The same ideology also very actively disapproves of any other kind of violence that might undermine the imaginary greatness of India. One needs to elide all disconcerting imagery regarding this reproductive body in order for it to continue scaffolding the national cause. The news story that revolves around the second quotation above is about a young girl from the slums. Her mother puts her virginity on sale to the highest bidder. Enraged men, whose offer the mother turns down, rape and mutilate the girl. The price was not good enough.

Since it would contradict Mataji’s “illusion de la grande Inde philosophale” [‘illusion of a great philosophical India’] (37), Jugdish does not read this news item to his mother. The idea of a for-sale young naked virgin girl gang raped would not sit well with her vision of a great philosophical India. The voice in the background of the novel explains that reading this news item would “révèle trop du ventre de ce pays” [‘reveal too much of the country’s (under)belly’] (37).
The changing connotations of the French word “ventre” (meaning both womb and belly) testify to the arbitrary lines drawn across the human body that equate it with the nation. Is it the literal “ventre” the “ventre” of the raped woman’s body? Or does this “ventre” function here as a metonymic device for the entire country: the underbelly of the nation? Or is it meant to be both? This ambiguity renders the nation’s belly and the woman’s belly indistinguishable. Much like in Fanon’s title “L’Algérie se dévoile,” this woman-nation ambiguity belongs to a prescriptive grammar that creates the nation as a gendered entity. Nationalism, to remain meaningful, feeds on the body for its own constitution: exposing one “ventre” would necessarily implicate shaming the other.

Mataji’s Gandhian nonviolent India is not so much a descriptor of reality but is instead a paradoxical field of epistemic violence. A violence that first categorizes and then reduces these bodies to the demands of a nation. This violence shows how inhabiting a nation’s boundaries is not equally available to all. Where for McClintock it was important to engender the nation as a mother, here the affirmation of a national identity is necessarily dependent on a very purposeful erasure and concealment of this gendered body’s overt exploitation.

### Delhi’s Underbelly

The idea here is not to present the overpowering pervasiveness of these forces; instead, this figures as a revelatory argument. If this novel presents spaces wherein feminine sexuality becomes a function of national spatiality, there are also moments in Devi’s writing that contrast this logic of expropriation. Her work becomes the staging ground where spatiality and identity are extricated from the clutches of nationhood to link them instead to a community created by the shared urban experience of everyday exploitation. This tension between the body and the determinative powers also becomes a means to counter these powers. This rejected body, in the fractures and derision it negotiates, produces a corporeality that is participatory, unlike the distinctly subservient kind that Mataji’s India commands.

The quotation that follows is a description of the landscape of Delhi from the point of view of Subhadra’s eventual lover. This unnamed woman breaks away from constant surveillance and control to discover a transformed landscape.
expressed in terms not of mythical borders but of the economic presence that underwrites bodies in the urban environment:

Le soleil qui entre par les impostes dès cinq heures du matin m’empêche de dormir. Mes draps sont embrumés de rêves chauds. Je sors tôt pour tromper la vigilance de la lumière. Je n’ai plus peur de la rue ni des regards. Mais tout le monde fait comme moi et, bientôt la rue est encombrée de scooters et de marchands ambulants et de porteurs tenant en équilibre sur leur tête des balles de riz de cinquante kilos, ou, sur le vélo qu’ils poussent, des empilements de planches de plusieurs mètres de long, des armoires, des matelas. Ma promenade vers le petit parc non loin devient un parcours d’obstacles. Je m’y habite. Je me faufile. Je contourne les enfants encore endormis sur le trottoir sans les réveiller, avec un regard de tendresse navrée pour leur petite bouille sage. Je laisse, subrepticement, un fruit, un vêtement, un stylo, auprès d’eux. Mais je sais que, si je les réveille, le regard qu’ils ouvriront et poseront sur moi ne sera pas rempli des rêves de la nuit mais de l’immédiateté de la vie. C’est un gouffre que je n’ai pas envie d’affronter. (46)

[The sun that starts shining through the fanlight at five in the morning prevents me from sleeping. My sheets are all soaked up in clammy dreams. To evade the vigilance of light I set out early. I am no longer scared of the street or its people. But everyone, like me, has come out early, and very soon the roads are choked with scooters and street hawkers, and porters with fifty kilo rice bags balanced on their heads, or, pulling their cycle rickshaws piled up high with planks that are several meters long, with almirahs or with mattresses. My walk to the little park, not very far from home, turns into an obstacle course. I figure my way out. I weave in and out. I go around the children still asleep on the footpath without waking them, looking with sad tenderness at their small calm faces. I quietly place a fruit, or a piece of clothing or a pen next to them. But I know that if I wake them up, the eyes that open and with which they shall look at me shall not be brimming with the dreams of the night, but with the immediacy of life. It’s an abyss I have no desire to confront.]
It is almost as if one is reading the exact converse of the scene that describes Paule’s dying moments. Not only in its descriptive itinerary but also in the way it registers economic activity, this is an antithesis of the culminating moments of the novel *Rue la Poudrière*. Paule, dejected and having given up on life, sits contemplating the crumbling city from which she has definitively retreated. The description moves from inside Paule’s room to outside and after following the white-hot sun returns to a sun-heated furnace-like room, where one presumes the protagonist finally succumbs to the pressures of the city.

In *Indian Tango*, as if to mirror the beginning of everyday life that is to follow, the description begins with the rays of the early-morning sun entering the room to wake up the unnamed woman. The narrative then follows the woman, who unlike Paule, moves into the city in an act of defiance, even as she senses the societal pressures (“Je n’ai plus peur de la rue ni des regards” [*‘I am no longer scared of the street or its people’*]). Where Paule is recording a moment of unraveling of the city as the ungainly and often hidden byproduct of the urban processes, here the description adds up the city with the bustle of the mundane minutiae of everyday microlevel economic activities, the totality of which aggregates into lives of ordinary urban populations all across the world.

The scene begins in the bedroom of Subhadra’s lover and ends on the footpath where homeless children are sleeping, that is to say the scene ends in their bedroom. The reversed map of financial movement, from the bedroom of a well-to-do woman through the vendors of things for everyday use, finally ends with the financially frozen children lying on the footpath. Through this reversed map, as the novel spatializes the narrative by charting objects in her room, on the street, on the footpath as well as in her own consciousness, it paves the way for understanding the materiality of lives in terms of everyday iterations. Multiple levels of interweaving emerge through the trope of charting through bodies. When the novel moves through the woman’s body, then through the hawkers and vendors, and in the end quite literally over and around children sleeping on the roadside, it presses for rethinking the idea of community and communal space solely in terms of a nation.

The novel follows the mobile narrator to elaborate on the plethora of possible relationships between citizenship, everyday life and marginalized subjectivities. Instead of focusing on the moral and physical imperatives of a nation’s imposed law this trajectory, which traces through the lines created by bodies spread across communal spaces, juxtaposes private and public not as separate entities but as components integral to each other. Indeed, it asks us to interrogate, as the narrator implicitly does, the financial distance between the two sleeping places.
Where for the sanitized version of the mother-in-law, the child’s naked body left for sale in a public space needs to be negated and ignored, the same body multiplied many times over forms here an irrevocable itinerary marker through which this woman charts her path across the city.

In this telling, the social is unimaginable without understanding the investment of bodies within the communal. This novel reveals for us the concealment of the effects of the national discourse on bodies, in particular on gendered bodies, and the nation having male characteristics. If this novel reveals national spatiality as the privileged site through which one exercises control on bodies, it also unfolds for us the simultaneous dissolution of such spatial configurations. It is through such a communal spatial depiction that the novel challenges the limits of nationality even as it presents alternative configurations of imagining community beyond the hegemonic and abstracted spaces of nationhood.

Devi’s focus on the commoners’ everyday also prefigures the anxiety to counter the order of the Baudrillardian hyperreal. During the fast globalizing twenty-first century, Devi records how the inscrutable financescapes, whose proliferation propels Appadurai’s writings and which I discussed in Verne’s context, have alienated the most elemental of all spaces: the human body. The body in movement (“marchands ambulants” ['street hawkers']; “porteurs” ['porters']; “le vélo qu’ils poussent” ['pulling their cycle rickshaws']; “Ma promenade” ['My walk']; “Je me faufile. Je contourne” ['I weave in and out. I go around’]) in the description above that is situated according to urban coordinates will, in the section that follows, lose all its moorings. Within the hyperreal, signified-less consumerism co-opts these bodies and alienates them from their contextual anchors as well as from their subjectivity.

**Antipodal Itineraries**

As already discussed, the collection *L’Ambassadeur triste* is bookended by two very-loosely connected vignettes about two lonesome men who relocate internationally for financial persuasions. The first, the title story’s “L’Ambassadeur triste” (“The Sad Ambassador”) is the unnamed ambassador of a Nordic country posted in Delhi to boost his country’s economic ties with India. Surrounded by all possible comforts and a retinue of servants normally afforded to the rich in India, the perpetually sad ambassador lives a miserable life constantly pining...
for his home country. Abandoned by his wife three months into his stay, he awaits, for the last ten years, the day when he would be able to leave this “terre de damnés” [‘godforsaken land’] (10). As if to prepare the argument about the antipodal relationship between the two men, “Bleu Glace” (‘Ice Blue’) is the last story, placed at the other textual extreme of the collection. “Bleu glace” is about another unnamed male located at the opposite end of the social and financial spectrum. Unlike the ambassador, this financially nondescript man lacks empathy and is “rarement triste” [‘rarely ever sad’] (178). Without any “diplômes, sans aptitudes particulières” [‘particular qualification or aptitudes’] (176), in search for money, he has traveled to one of those “lieux si inhospitaliers que personne ne veut y travailler” [‘places that are so inhospitable that no one wants to work there’] (176-7). Where exactly might this place be? No one knows. However, there are enough indicators to suggest that the ambassador and this man might have interchanged geographical locations.

The ambassador “rêvait de fjords et de lave figée” [‘dreamed of fjords and frozen lava’] (9) and is from a place where it is only occasionally that “lumière fendait les nuages d’un scalpel” [‘light is able to slit through the clouds with a scalpel’] (9). That he is from a “pays nordique” [‘Nordic country’] (12) is the only geographical information available about him, apart from the location of his current posting – New Delhi. The unnamed man in the other story works in an extremely cold place where ice breaks under one’s feet like glass, and frozen liquids in air make crackling sounds – all climactic condition one would identify with a Nordic country (175-6). It is one of those places, the narrative voice tells us, like northern Alaska, Greenland, Iceland or the coasts of Newfoundland, where no one wants to work.

Their connection is never overtly stated. However, these two stories do talk of a meeting between two men, who resemble very closely the profile of these two unnamed characters. From the ambassador’s point of view, one learns that he had advised a strange man looking for work in his country to seek employment instead in Alaska (16-7). In a mirroring narrative, “Bleu Glace” talks of the man approaching many ambassadors, one of whom, with “l’allure triste” [‘sad looks’] (177), after trying to dissuade the unempathetic man from such an undertaking might have directed him to his current job, where he works now in a seal-meat processing factory. The narrative states:

Les seuls endroits où des gens comme lui – sans diplômes, sans aptitudes particulières – sont bien payés, c’est là où il y a la guerre ou dans des lieux si inhospitaliers que personne ne veut y travailler. Le nord de
l’Alaska, le Groenland, l’Islande, les côtes de Terre-Neuve. Il a sollicité plusieurs ambassadeurs, dont l’un, à l’allure triste, a tout fait pour le décourager d’une telle démarche, avant d’être aiguillé sur cet emploi. (176-7)

[The only places where people like him – without any particular qualification or aptitudes – are well paid, is where there is a war or in places that are so inhospitable that no one wants to work there. Northern Alaska, Greenland, Iceland, the coasts of Newfoundland. He approached many ambassadors, of whom one, with sad looks, tried his best to discourage him from such an undertaking, before being directed toward this job.]

It could well be that the sad ambassador had directed the man toward this job. In addition, because of the way the place names have been included in the quotation above from “Bleu Glace,” it is unclear whether they refer to one of the inhospitable places that are likely to hire an unqualified person like him, or if they refer to the embassies of these places that he might have visited to explore job opportunities. The point being that one cannot be certain if “cet emploi” [‘this job’] in a seal-meat processing factory is placed in Alaska, where the ambassador might have directed him, or if he is in one of the other locales, such as Greenland and Iceland – one of the Nordic countries.

Nonetheless, what connects these two men, and brings them together in this argument, is not only that they have interchanged geographical locations with each other. Nor is it only that they stand at geographically, socially, emotionally and financially opposite ends. Despite their antipodal relationship to each other, they are both subservient to a system where the collusion of the modern nation-state and capitalism exercises control and resignifies their bodies, as well as their geographically dispersed locations, within an interconnected financial matrix that extends across the globe, across nation-states and encapsulates all classes and peoples alike. While Indian Tango and L’Ambassadeur triste both, right from the title itself, are inherently dependent on a matrix of nation-states, the narratives themselves prepare the grounds for understanding its confrontation with alternative articulations by displaying the collusion between these states and capital.

Without ever taking overt center stage, the presence of a network of global financial system is palpable and constantly available through the effects that it produces on peoples’ lives and in particular on their bodies. In a story that gives
you little inkling of the ambassador’s origins, it nonetheless points out that it is the economic system, a system that is “des plus abscons” [‘most complicated of all’], which is behind his existence in India and the intergovernmental connection between these two countries:

Il ne savait plus qui avait cru que le salut économique du pays était lié aux accords commerciaux avec les géants de l’est. Cela aurait eu un sens s’ils avaient eu quelque chose à exporter, mais toute leur économie était bâtie sur un système bancaire des plus abscons et [...] il avait été envoyé là-bas en fanfare et à grand renfort de promesses électorales de relance économique. Mais, une fois rendu, il s’était heurté à une fin de non-recevoir masquée par des manifestations volubles d’amitié. (12)

[He had no idea who thought that the economic salvation of his country was dependent upon commercial agreements with giants of the East. It would have made sense if they had something to export, but all their economy was based upon the most complicated of all banking systems [...] he had been sent there with great fanfare, backed with electoral promises of economic revival. But, once there, he collided with blunt refusals laced with voluble shows of friendship.]

The “most complicated of all systems” needs to be understood here as more than just a qualifier for the banking system of the ambassador’s native country, and instead needs to be interpreted as an exemplar of the Baudrillardian space I have been evoking. When “economic salvation” and “economic revival” are the reasons for the ambassador’s presence in India, this complicated system becomes the reason for the sadness of the main character of the title story and thus also the very raison d’être of this collection. Due to economic compulsions the powerful ambassador is forced to relocate toward India, and, in the last story, the unqualified worker is forced to relocate away from India. Not only does this forced relocation speak to the all-encompassing power of this system that circumscribes the globe – it also gives access to a seemingly far-flung vector of a system that is changing definitions of a fast liberalizing Indian setup. From a period when Vernian travelers, as active colonial incarnations traversed a colonial geography relying on colonial infrastructure, in Devi’s work one comes to witness the dynamics of a system that abstracts laboring bodies across the globe. This system props up unseen capitalist pillars not only in the freezing cold of “Bleu Glace” but also in the hot Indian desert of Rajasthan that is found in “L’Ambassadeur
triste.” This all-encompassing global apparatus enfolds within itself moving parts like the lowly-educated unnamed man, and hegemonic tools like the ambassador, as well as all those nomads who have come to a standstill, unable to wander about the desert (in the Baudrillardian sense that I discuss below) because of production processes being played out elsewhere.

Desert Safari

We are speaking of the time when the ambassador travels through the deserts of Rajasthan where he thought the heat would kill him (23). Despite catching a dreadful diarrhea that forced his guide to stop every ten minutes to “évacuer mes intestins” ['evacuate my intestines'] (23), the ambassador does return alive. He brings back stories of space-constricted nomads, unable to move, as if frozen in place due to a hyperreal that is spreading in from the cold seal-meat factory of “Bleu Glace.” This was a mission to go and locate a rich businessman who, interested in unique experiences in the most inhospitable places (21), had decided to travel to Indian deserts. The businessman never returned and his wife, concerned about his well-being, contacted the embassy. The ambassador, convinced that on completing the mission his government would let him return to his home country (24), charges for the desert. He finds a dead body. Or, rather, he finds what remained of a human body after the sun, the wind and the vultures had done their job (24). One learns that the nomads accompanying the businessman, panicked on discovering that the foreigner in their charge had died. Apprehensive of the harassment they would face at the hands of the police if they were to report the death of this man, they fled the spot.

This desert holds no promises. Or, rather, because of the advancing hyperreal, it cannot hold any promises. It leads to death, and for the ambassador, to ultimate disillusionment when he finally realizes, after this two-day trip, that India loathes him and wants to expel him like a virus:

Mais après deux jours dans ce désert aux couleurs effarantes, [...] j’ai compris une vérité qui m’avait jusqu’ici échappé : ce pays me détestait... non, me honnissait, éprouvait envers moi une haine opiniâtre, comme si j’étais un virus dont il devait se défaire. (24)
[But after two days in this desert of frightful colors [...] I finally understood a fact that had until then escaped me: this country hated me ... no, it despised me, displayed an unyielding loathing toward me, as if I were a virus that it had to rid itself of.]

This desert of frightful colors, which does not give the sad ambassador a passage home, is quite unlike Baudrillard’s desert, which, as James Walters points out, offers both the hyperreal stripped of “meaningful interaction and social dynamism” (120-1) and the possibility of redemption. For example, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard’s Las Vegas figures as “the absolute advertising city,” which rises “whole from the desert in the radiance of advertising at dusk, and return[s] to the desert when dawn breaks.” This is a Las Vegas where “advertising is not what brightens or decorates the walls, it is what effaces the walls”; where surface reabsorbs “whatever signs circulate there” and plunges us “into this stupefied, hyperreal euphoria” (*Simulacra* 91-2). This desert is, to borrow from Lefebvre, where “space appears solely in its reduced form. Volume leaves the field to surface.” The walls and the human activities that they enclose no longer give the desert its meaning. The contourless surface of the desert becomes the flat backdrop on which can be projected a new value, a new semiotic process that owes its allegiance to bright neon lights, advertising screens and mechanization.

This process also owes its allegiance to all the “tableaux Excel” [‘excel spreadsheets’] and “outils de communication de dernière génération” [‘cutting-edge tools of communication’] (21) that had helped the rich businessman plan everything in the most precise manner and that he subsequently introduces into the landscape of Rajasthan. His death needs to be understood as martyrdom in the cause of reinforcing this new mechanism of generating meaning, in a place that is as isolated as the seal-meat processing factory and as infernally hot as the unnamed man’s current location is cold.

In an earlier work like *L’Arbre Fouet*, almost all evocations of India involved a mythical entity of inscrutable laws and faraway religion. Even in the novel *Indian Tango* India remains a magical land where “bonheur n’a pas de traduction” [‘happiness has no meaning’] and “veillesse est grande” [‘old-age is venerated’] (19). By the time one comes to *L’Ambassadeur triste* to speak of the unskilled man who has exchanged locations with the ambassador, who himself is busy chasing after the rich businessman, the matrix of signification has completely changed. The undefinability in Devi’s work that followed Glissant’s “lieu est incontournable” is now replaced by the signified-less signifier of Baudrillard’s hyperreal global spaces.
The cold of the seal factory is as implicated in the process of value creation as the extreme heat of Rajasthan, where nomads, apart from being guides, now work in hotels:

Il faut dire qu’ils étaient désormais des êtres assiégés, leur territoire diminuant jusqu’à ce qu’il ne leur reste plus, pour leur transhumance, qu’un espace délimité de toutes parts par la sédentarité agressive des autres peuples. Leur bétail n’était plus aussi prisé qu’avant, ayant été remplacé par des produits congelés venant de Nouvelle-Zélande. Leur artisanat aussi avait été détrôné par des objets en tout point semblables venus de Chine. Ils vivaient grâce aux touristes fascinés par leur étrangeté, leurs yeux clairs, leur peau burinée par les vents et le soleil, et aux hôtels qui faisaient appel à eux pour chanter, danser, cuisiner des plats traditionnels et s’exhiber comme des ours savants. Leur regard avait la couleur de l’horizon, car le voyage était inscrit dans leurs gènes. (21-22)

[It needs to be pointed out that they were becoming increasingly besieged beings. Their lands were shrinking till all they had left for transhumance was an area bounded from all sides by the aggressive sedentariness of other peoples. Having been replaced by frozen products from New Zealand, their cattle wasn’t as sought after as before. Their handicrafts too had been ousted by products made in China, that were comparable in all respects. They were making a living thanks to tourists fascinated by their strangeness, their pale eyes, their skin etched by the wind and the sun, and also thanks to the hotels that called them to sing, dance, and prepare traditional dishes, and perform like trained bears. Their eyes had the color of the horizon, because traveling was written in their genes.]

This is quite literally a scene of the advancing hyperreal and a change in the meaning of space through changing definitions of movement. Tourists, those current-day cousins of Phileas Fogg, have transmuted into nonambulatory entities because travels (if one can call it that) involve staying in hotels. Ironically, it is this new paradigm of touristic displacement across hotels, a part of “sédentarité agressive” ['aggressive sedentariness'], which is constantly shrinking desert spaces belonging to these nomads, whose nomadic movement and transhumance are the very reason these tourists are here.
It is not that the nomads are not moving (after all, “le voyage était inscrit dans leurs gènes” [‘traveling was written in their genes’]). Their movements now involve traveling along prefixed pathways that lead to hotels where they recreate an authentic cultural experience for the traveling tourists: “chanter, danser, cuisiner des plats traditionnels et s’exhiber comme des ours savants” [‘to sing, dance, and prepare traditional dishes, and perform like trained bears’]. This made-for-the-tourist value-based system, where it is in the hotels that these nomads recreate the desert and its culture for the rich, exists no more than as a simulation of the real. So much so, that even what one sells as traditional arts and crafts are nothing but impostor imitations mass-produced in China.

What completes the saturation of this desert by the new capitalist order of value is that these nomads of Rajasthan now consume “produits congelés venant de Nouvelle-Zélande” [‘frozen products from New Zealand’] because of which their own cattle have lost their place of pride. Where “Bleu Glace” presents the process of packaging meat in a faraway land (a process in which an uneducated man of potential Indian origin is implicated), “L’Ambassadeur triste” shows the changing definitions of the lives of the people of Rajasthan due to similar packaged products that originate from a different hemisphere.

The forced movement of the likes of the uneducated man contributes to the forced stasis of the nomads. In this tourist-infested, imitation-product-flooded land of nomads who consume packaged products, it is no longer possible to disengage from the “illusion of value” (Simulacra 153). Where Las Vegas is a desert of advertisement and neon lights, in Devi’s narrative it is the make-believe life of these nomads that hides the real. Their economic activity of creating a hotel-based signifier of pretend practices offers no hope, either for the ambassador or for the nomads. For Baudrillard, though, it is still possible to be nomads of the desert of hypereality “disengaged from the mechanical illusion of value” (Simulacra 153).

It is following from Borges’ story of a map that eventually crumbles into the desert that Baudrillard found his opening parable for his famous Simulacra and Simulation to speak of the hyperreal that surrounds us. Borges, in his short one-paragraph story “Exactitude in Science,”56 talks of the “Art of Cartography” that reached such perfection that the Cartographers Guild “struck a Map of the empire” of such exactitude that its size conformed to the size of the empire. The map “coincided point to point with it” (325). Eventually, with later generations, who, it turns out, were not interested in cartography, the map is left to rot in the desert. Baudrillard reverses this map-territory parable to speak of the present day hyperreal that I have been referencing above.57 “The territory,” Baudrillard
explains, “no longer precedes the map.” Instead, it is “the map that precedes the territory” (Simulacra 1). The hyperreal of the consumerist society is just that. It follows the map imposed by a designed-for-the-consumer culture.

In Borges’ narrative this map lies in tatters “in the Deserts of the West, still today,” and there is “no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography” in the “Land” (“Exactitude”). However, in the multiple usages of the desert in Baudrillard’s writing one can still see hope against a simulacra that ensnares unnamed workers in the cold of snow and among unfriendly machinery.

James Walter states that if this desert makes multiple appearances in Baudrillard’s work, it is, for sure, to connote the decrepitude associated with the desert in the fable above, such that “the desert is a metaphor for late consumer capitalism, stripped of symbolic exchange, of meaningful interaction and social dynamism” (120-1). This desert “symbolizes the vacuous superficiality of the hyperreality” (Walter 120). More importantly, this desert is also “the desert of Mount Sinai where desolation makes possible revelation” (Walter 121). That is why one can hope to discover a path in this desert that shall take us back to the order of the symbolic exchange. The “superficiality of the hyperreality” and the potential of “revelation” both are simultaneously available in Baudrillard’s enunciation below:

[O]nly the phantom of value still floats over the desert of the classical structures of capital, just as the phantom of religion floats over a world now long desacralized, just as the phantom of knowledge floats over the university. It is up to us to again become the nomads of this desert, but disengaged from the mechanical illusion of value. (Simulacra 153)

Desert as a metaphor here operates like the depthlessness of the capitalist city; “The desert of the real itself” (Simulacra 1). Baudrillard will soon go on to write, “because the desert of cities is equal to the desert of sand” (Simulacra 153). If the capitalist city is the desert, it is still possible to “again become nomads of this desert,” to be “disengaged” from this all-pervasive “illusion of value.” The shift toward the desert where it is possible to be disengaged from “illusion of value” is what the following section displays. It lays out how Devi’s work, in the way that it delineates the lives of ordinary global citizens, is markedly political and is geared toward an active engagement with the collusion that contemporary society is witnessing between capitalism and nationalism.

Exploited bodies are invested in a machinery of capital generation that shows up, despite its absence as an overtly overbearing entity. This is the
dominant hierarchy, working in the background that reconfigures human bodies according to the demands of an abstracted system of transactions. Devi’s narratives stage these bodies to assert their presence within capitalistic dynamics, all at the same time revealing its workings to open up the possibility of undoing India as a modernist nation that figures as one of the vectors in the global system of capitalism. It is through negotiations of simultaneous revealing and undoing of a global economy that Devi’s oeuvre begins to chart out alternatives to standardized understandings of nations with boundaries and representative economies.

**Producing Dissent**

Returning, then, to the cold of the seal-meat processing factory where the workers, both locals and outsiders, are negotiating their everyday lives and bodily associations within a system that regulates and regiments everything to maximize production. With very little interaction between them, already the division between the local workers and those from outside is rigid. Further, the employers have proscribed any interaction between outsiders and the local women. This is to prevent a repeat of incidents like the rape of a local woman by a foreigner, as had apparently happened in the past. There is, however, one day of exception. On Christmas, outside workers get to bid against each other in an open auction to buy the privilege of sleeping with a local woman. This one-night arrangement with the local population, while being extremely expensive for the workers, makes locals more money in one night than they would earn in an entire year (187). Could one call it prostitution then? I would resist the urge to hasten with a judgement. We do not know the actual cultural moorings of this geographical context to qualify this as a stigmatized practice, and Devi’s text offers no explanation. While these alone are good reasons to stay away from labels, I choose indifference toward a definition because I would like to read this as the ultimate affect-less dystopian market dynamics of financial abstraction, where things derive their definitions by their association with the larger monetary network. While Paule from *Rue la Poudrière* is a prostitute in Mauritius and inhabits spaces, both geographical as well as moral, that connote the stigma associated with the profession in the local context, the women from “Bleu Glace” are participating in the creation of a hyperreal institution generated by the consumerist dynamics of satisfying sexual needs.
This arrangement almost literally plays out David Havey’s assertion about how “capital continuously strives to shape bodies to its own requirements, while at the same time internalizing within its modus operandi effects of shifting and endlessly open bodily desires, wants, needs, and social relations.”\(^{58}\) As a signified-less signifier this arrangement cannot have a name, because its contours depend on the changing dynamics of this production mechanism, which in itself is built-to-demand for eventual consumers. This system is designed to absorb the perpetually “shifting and endlessly open” bodily needs and desires of workers that it imposes upon them, thereby ensuring smooth and nimble operations of constantly evolving financial equations that result from a global matrix.

With factory workers themselves acting as consumers, the auction figures as the mediating mechanism that modulates demand and supply of local sexual availability, in these dynamics of international proportions. If the ambassador is part of a system that aims to increase economic ties within nations, then it is not without the exploitation of people like this unnamed man, whose international movement in turn is both facilitated by and is dependent upon ambassadors and nations. While it is the worker’s body that bears the ultimate abstraction within a system of value, they both remain as interdependent cogs of a much larger whole.

In the culminating moment of “Bleu Glace” the uneducated man through his sole annual act of purchased lovemaking displays the complete enmeshment of the worker’s body within the capitalist system. The first thing that the worker notices on his arrival is the strong smell in the seal-processing factory: “Ce qui le frappe […] C’est l’odeur.” [‘What strikes him […] It’s the smell.’] (183). The last thing that the reader gets to know is that on the only night of annual sex the man “fait l’amour à l’odeur des phoques” [‘made love to the smell of seals’] (192). Between the two moments lies the gradual process of conformation of the human body to capitalist contours. Both the man’s and the woman’s subjugation to the product that they serve is thematized in the transition that one sees between the seal-worker relationship. This conversion suggests ways of understanding meaning under the new economic grammar and the altered bodily conventions under the new dispensation.

The first of the two descriptions below presents this man’s maiden encounter with the dead seals in the factory. The second is a description of the woman the unnamed man is having sex with. It delineates the woman’s body from his point of view and uses a vocabulary that is startlingly similar to the one used in the first description, where the unnamed man stands watching a coworker sitting astride over a dead seal, processing its body for eventual packaging and sale:
...in a pose that was too human. The head was too small for this massive body. The eyes are closed, [...] the flippers are together, almost as if they were receiving communion. [...] it’s blue-black color, the slipperyness of the mass as it hits the floor. [...] The man climbs atop the carcass, one leg on each side, finds a hold with his fingers and tears the flesh, spreading wide the lips of her slit...

The graphic description of the worker violently tearing the seal’s body, and spreading wide the lips of its sexual organ, establishes the power dynamics between the worker and the product. Until this point, the product and the worker exist as separate entities, both implicated no doubt in the production process, but in a way where the seal exists as the raw material being rendered into exchange value. It prepares the grounds for understanding the change in this dynamic that one discovers in the scene of the two workers having sex. The man, completely drunk, sees the woman sitting astride over him as bearing the characteristics of a seal. At the same time, his resistance-less body is being carved like that of the seal:

Dans le noir, il voit ses yeux fixés sur lui, parfaitement immobiles. Sa tête est un peu petite, par rapport à la masse du corps qui se fond à l’obscurité. Elle a les mains jointes – une pose de communiante. Elle se lève à demi et se glisse sur lui. [...] Sa bouche glisse sur lui. Elle va et vient, le longe et le dévore.

Elle s’assied à califourchon sur lui en lui tournant le dos. Sa chevelure, très longue, lui recouvre entièrement le dos. C’est comme un pelage bleu-noir qui cache le teint pâle de la peau au-dessous. Cela lui rappelle quelque chose, mais il ne sait pas quoi. Il est engourdi par le sommeil et l’alcool. Il ferme les yeux, commence à se livrer à elle, mais ensuite, ses narines frémissent. (191-2)
[In the dark, he sees eyes fixed on him, perfectly immobile. Her head is a little small, in relation to the mass of her body which dissolves into the darkness. Folded hands – a communicant’s pose. She half rises and slides on top of him. [...] Her mouth slides over him. She goes back and forth, goes lengthwise and devours him. She sits astride over him with her back toward him. Her hair, very long hair, covers her entire back. It’s like a blue-black fur that hides the pale complexion of the skin below. It reminds him of something, but he can’t say what. He is numb with sleep and alcohol. He shuts his eyes, and starts to give in to her, but, then his nostrils quiver.]

The earlier quotation personified the dead seal: its eyes closed shut, in a “position trop humaine” [‘pose that was too human’]. Now, it is the woman, her eyes fixed on the man, who assumes the physical traits of the seal. While the text provides multiple examples of how the woman replicates the seal’s appearances, here are a few that interest me: “tête est un peu petite” [‘head is a little small’]; “yeux fixés” [‘eyes fixed’]; “mains jointes” [‘folded hands’]; “pose de communiante” [‘communicant’s pose’]; “pelage bleu-noir” [‘blue-black fur’]. All of them transpose on to the woman the seal’s traits using a language that is an almost literal reproduction of the language used to describe the seal in the earlier quotation:

“tête est beaucoup trop petite” [‘head was too small’]; “yeux sont fermés” [‘The eyes are closed’]; “nageoires sont réunies” [‘flippers are together’]; “position de communiante” [‘receiving communion’]; “sa couleur bleu-noir” [‘its blue-black color’]

At the same time, through various stages of coitus, the woman’s actions, as she “se glisse sur lui” [‘sits astride over him’], replicate the worker’s lengthwise carving of the seal’s body: “Elle va et vient” [‘goes back and forth’]; “le longe” [‘goes lengthwise’]. In the end, she “le dévore” [‘devours him’]. If she physically resembles a seal and acts simultaneously like a factory worker, the man could also very easily be understood, in his passive surrender, as replicating the passivity of the earlier presented dead seal. It is difficult to say if this scene of sexual intercourse needs to be understood as a reversal of the worker-seal equation, such that it is the seal that now sits astride the worker, or if it is a continuation of the earlier dynamics where it is now another factory worker, the woman, who carves out the flaccid and senseless unnamed man, no different from the dead seal. The story
ends with a declarative sentence, simply stating that for his “unique nuit de sexe de l’année, il fait l’amour à l’odeur des phoques” [‘only night of sex of the year, he made love to the smell of seals’] (192).

For the rest of my argument it is irrelevant which of the two serves as the metaphoric reminder of the seal. In fact, in functioning simultaneously as the workers and the seal, and remaining enmeshed in each other, the two humans replicate in this scene the process of value creation from the factory floor and put on display the extent to which they are imbued with the meaning of the product that their labor produces. This mutual interchangeability between the labor power and the seal gives us an insight into the complicated relationship between capital, labor and raw material. Both the man and the woman are simultaneously human as well as animal, labor as well as raw material. The coming together of these bodies, clearly identified as originating from different locations and yet condensed as one with the raw material, also displays the concurrence of two spatiotemporal scales wherein, at the global scale, “globalization’ and all its associated meanings” intersect “with bodies that function at a much more localized scale” (Hope 109). In other words, “the long historical geography of capital accumulation” (Hope 109), as would be necessary in setting up this local factory as well as the entire global apparatus that it metonymically represents, manifests here in the night-long annual ritual, which can only be understood as the sexual by-product of a system of accumulation.

Harvey contends that accumulation “accelerates turnover time” and that even “while [it] simultaneously” annihilates “space through time,” it does nonetheless retain “certain territorialities (of the factory and the nation-state) as domains of surveillance and social control” (Hope 109). One cannot help but wonder if Devi might have purposefully followed Harvey to set up her literary narrative, in which the nation-state and its apparatuses of ambassadors serve as conduits for the international movement of labor to this factory in order to process local raw material. In addition to bounded territories, nation-states and factories also serve as binding entities: situating identities and creating a new matrix along which to situate the globe.

Lest we completely capitulate and concede the world to the hyperreal, let us pause for a moment to ask ourselves the following question: Is it not interesting to note that for an author like Devi, who has repeatedly made her work the site for exposing and also speaking against women’s exploitation, this story offers little if any explicit commentary on the annual ritual of bidding on women for the privilege of spending the night with them? Neither does it in any evident way speak about the phallic structure of the society we live in. Contrary to
the purposeful insistence, for example, on the vengeful parricide by a wronged daughter that challenges the misogynist society of _L’Arbre fouet_, the short narrative “Bleu Glace” seems to gloss over the gender-related power dynamics. The woman climbing astride, taking charge over the man’s body, her back turned toward him, is this simplistic reversal the only challenge to the male-centric society that one can read in the work of an author who has always written about women?

In fact, in one fell swoop this moment of heterosexual intercourse dismantles the entire sign-based system that defines our consumerist culture and the gender-based society we live in. It is not without reason that this sexual scene figures here as part of an economic system, whose components aggregate into a much larger whole that is greater than the sum of all its components, based on capitalist exchange value. William Pawlett points out how, in Baudrillard’s writings, sexuality “like economy, is separated out from total social relations, from ritual meanings. It is abstracted, individualised and modelled on economic metaphors” (101). Much like the products in the capitalist society that follow the order of the consumer, the human body, gender and sexuality too are all within the hyperreal, now situated according to the “market of signs.” Women “are given ‘woman’ as sign, as simulation” (Pawlett 95), in the same way as sexuality “is not a fact or a thing, it is the product of signifying practices that are uniquely modern and Western” (Pawlett 96). What one sees in this scene of purchased lovemaking is a commentary on the human body, sexuality and capitalism, all three intertwined and interlinked by “signifying practices” of modernity and yet creating conditions for overwhelming this system of values to return to a system of “symbolic exchange.”

The culminating moment of the woman atop the man belies the mental image he held of these women, and which betrayed his adherence to the phallic order. He had imagined them as docile women (“se plieront” [‘give in’], “un bon élève” [‘a good student’] (189)), possessed by local men: “attendent d’être prises” [‘waiting to be taken’]. However, once inside the tiny room, he is surprised when the woman first looks him straight in the eye with “une sorte d’effronterie” [‘a sort of effrontery’] (191), and then takes the lead in undressing him. She sits on his lap and kisses him with such greedy passion that he is taken aback (191).

The establishment of symbolic exchange does not happen with the woman eventually attaining the sexual position atop him. It is in his mixture of bewilderment, of alcohol and sleep-induced incomprehension that the first instance of exchange takes place outside the tyranny of the modernist sign. He drifts between sleep and semi-wakefulness, “Les yeux à demi fermés, quasi révulsés” [‘eyes half shut, almost revolted’] by what he sees on top of him. It vaguely “lui
rappelle quelque chose, mais il ne sait pas quoi” [‘reminds him of something, but he cannot say what’] (192). He will not be able to either, because the woman is replicating Baudrillard’s seduction and creating a unique event of deriving pleasure in a scene that can only perplex him. She:

s’étale vers lui […] le lape, le noie, l’engloutit

[reaches out toward him […] laps him up, drowns him, swallows him up.]

The man can only watch the scene pass by him. The linguistic sign stands inadequate to this event and he can only resort to a vocabulary of his quotidian. It is no wonder then that the culminating sentence uses a vocabulary related to seals and the production process to state that he “fait l’amour à l’odeur des phoques” [‘made love to the smell of seals’] (192).

Striptease, as Pawlett develops Baudrillard to point out, “is ambivalent because it involves ‘a woman’s auto-erotic celebration of her own body’ […] that both evokes and revokes the other, the male onlooker.” Similarly, this unnamed man, whose presence in this cold place has been facilitated by an order of values, is responsible for the woman’s pleasure, and yet he lies confused, not understanding what transpires around him. As he makes love to the only coordinate that the system of signs allows him, the smell of seals, the woman progressively derives pleasure in and through his presence: “Sa bouche l’absorbe. Elle va et vient, le longe et le dévore” [‘Her mouth absorbs him. She goes back and forth, goes lengthwise and devours him’] (192). Striptease involves a male onlooker, who cannot actively participate, who is both “summoned and excluded” (Pawlett 98); here, the man unwittingly participates in a process of exchange about which he remains unaware. He remains implicated in a different erogenous experience from the one that the woman goes through. Present for the purposes of the woman, yet absent from any symbolic exchange.

In the first story of this collection, “L’Ambassadeur triste,” the nomads run away from the dead body of the rich businessman. Because such a flight from the carrier of the latest technology and tools of abstraction only amounts to validating them, in abandoning this dead body the nomads have strengthened the order of abstracted values. In “Bleu Glace” there is no need for overt resistance to the male order, or for a political statement against this man’s obvious phallocentric worldview, because “seduction in its symbolic order is not exchanged” (Pawlett 99). Any resistance to this world of signs would imply its recognition and indeed a transaction with its static meanings. In Baudrillard’s work, as we
know, seduction “in its symbolic form occurs beyond the conscious volition of subjects” (Pawlett 103). The woman just exists.

In “L’Ambassadeur triste,” the ambassador’s wife, seeing him disheartened and inconsolably discouraged in Delhi, would reassure him that this was only a stepping-stone, and that they would be at the Metropolitan Opera in New York before long (10). Within three months the wife left “lui et l’Inde” [‘him, and India’] (10) forever. Indeed, she leaves him alone to the revolting olfactory experience of the vapors and odors of India:

Une poussière et une terre qui lui entraient par les narines et ressortaient par les pores, […] il se résorbait dans les vapeurs chimiques de diesel et de soufre qu’un air nocif diffusait dans la pureté de sa chair. (9-10)

[A dust and soil that was entering through his nostrils and exiting out through his pores, […] he was getting dissolved in the chemical vapors of diesel and sulfur that noxious fumes were dispersing into the purity of his body.]

The unnamed man makes love to the smell of seals, and the ambassador’s every pore is diffused with the sign of nations. It is in abandoning the ambassador that his wife walks away from the machinations of a nation-based grammar. For this woman in the factory, it is in possessing this man that she renounces him, as well as the rationalized spatiality of the world composed of these factories and nation-states like India, which facilitate the presence of those like him among the seals. The factory floor then becomes the place to produce dissent. A process that commences with the dust and vapors of Delhi ends in a nowhere-land where this man is left whiffing seal smells, thereby ensuring that Mataji’s stable and imagined India has forever been dislocated from the grammar of nation-states.

Rediscovering India

I will take a detour now to connect Devi’s still unfolding oeuvre about India with the country’s current political situation. If it is important for Devi to write about India, it is also equally important for her to evoke as well as to divest this
bounded geography of bigoted and exploitative qualities that one is imposing upon it. This concluding segment helps understand the contours of contemporary India that Devi focuses on.

Remember the Gujarat riots and Mataji’s communal paranoia that takes a vengeful form against Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat? The riots took place in 2002. In 2014, news reports began flooding the media about how twelve-year-old school children in Gujarat were learning that current-day scientific discoveries have their roots in ancient India. They were learning that “the first aeroplane was invented during the mythical Dvapara Yuga, when the Hindu God Ram flew from Sri Lanka to Ayodhya in India with his wife Sita and brother Laxman in a Pushpaka Vimana – a swan-shaped chariot of flowers.” This blind valorization, which values above all the imagined purity and greatness of Hindu religion, would very soon start spreading its tentacles across the entire country. Narendra Modi, who was the chief minister of Gujarat during the now infamous 2002 riots, is currently heading the national government as the country’s prime minister. Modi led his right-wing party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to victory in 2014 and then again in 2019. His government has progressively led a conscious effort “to reflect its own specific brand of ‘cultural nationalism’ in these institutions [bodies that deal with education and culture] by engineering long-term changes in their programmes and priorities.” Examples abound of the sure march toward a saffronization of India’s educational and cultural institutions. A march that will eventually change the very character of the country.

As there has been a growing crackdown on universities and thought-leaders that disagree with the government and its ideologies, concerns have been raised about this systematic quelling of all dissent. In 2014 Bidwai warned that if things continued unabated, “our educational and cultural institutions will be totally saffronised and irreparably damaged.” Indeed, as the current scenario of the year 2020 reveals, more than just being ideological, the aggression toward universities in India has become overtly violent. One sees acts of violence on universities as a direct result of Modi’s bigoted policies.

In addition to promising a corruption-free government, Modi had primarily come to power on the mantra of development, specifically a model of development he borrowed from his own home state. This “Gujarat model is based on nothing remotely resembling a development strategy, only a fawning subservience to corporations amounting to a more or less complete handover of control over the pace and pattern of development to private capital” (Desai 55).

All of this to show that Devi’s literary work is responding to a contemporary India that is simultaneously moving into two opposing directions: toward
the past in search for pure cultural roots and also along the path of “development” paved with rosy pictures of GDP, growth figures, and foreign direct investment in Indian markets. Ordinary people, already enduring exploitation by the hegemonically advantaged within India, are now being thrown at the mercy of markets operating across international borders.

In fact, these national boundaries are softening in another sense as well. Being Indian is no longer about having Indian citizenship. A citizenship now involves a globally scattered ethnic diaspora that has to belong to the “motherland” for the nation to appear stronger, and for nationalism to thrive. Mahesh Gavaskar describes how Modi woos the ethnic diaspora during his international prime-ministerial travels, noting how imagining “a homogeneous ‘people of Indian origin’ on foreign shores” elides the “troublesome reality back home” of a “fractured society” and therefore appears “more hospitable to nationalist utopias” (9). It is thus with the diaspora that “the nationalist in Modi lives his dream on such occasions” (Gavaskar 9).

One needs to understand Devi’s diasporic writings and their spatial engagements with India as a response to this citizenship that contemporary forms of power are imposing upon her, and those like her, to limit them to postcolonial statist and capitalist logic. While studying Verne’s work I looked at the colonial project’s tyranny on the world. In this chapter the focus shifted to postcolonial nationalism and its understanding of human spaces. To display the exploitative energies of the nation-state this chapter traced how this spatial division reinforces itself at the cost of identities and human bodies.

It is almost as if there is a finite container of identitarian energies within the human microcosm. For these spatial divisions to find relevance, they have to feed off human bodies. The better these spaces become at containing (both meanings intended) humans, the less pronounced is the presence of human subjectivity. It is true that this mutual exchange between humans and spatial divisions, natural as well as artificial, has already been the subject of several postcolonial authors’ works. Yet, when read alongside questions of homelands and belonging, the spatial arrangements in Devi’s work remind us that it is imperative for us to create alternatives both to earlier Senghor-like spatial narratives that mimic colonial nationalisms and to Fanon-like reckless masculine articulations of national identities. They also remind us that it is becoming even more urgent to reckon with the ever-mutating forms of transnational markets that create value out of human bodies. Spatial arrangements in Devi’s work reject the sign-based hegemony that both global capitalism and a religion-based right-wing ideology are attempting to achieve over the image of India.