

The Multiplying Worlds of Ma Joie

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Abstract

This essay explores the environmental and spatial afterlives of plantation colonialism in the Seychelles through an ecofeminist auto-theoretical approach. Drawing on family archives and field philosophical research, it reflects on my position as the granddaughter of a former plantation owner while tracing the material and spatial legacies of the Plantationocene. Rather than reconstructing a linear historical narrative, the essay unfolds as a series of temporal and spatial folds through which plantation infrastructures, creole domestic architectures and provision gardens emerge as sites of both domination and creative resistance. Attention to minor architectures and everyday spatial practices reveals the entangled histories of the plantocracy, enslaved and indentured labour, and creole cultural formations. Through a process of 're-membering' informed by critical fabulation, the essay examines how plantation landscapes persist in contemporary environmental and social

relations, from migrant domestic spaces to postcolonial land redistribution and blue-economy development. The multiplying environmental worlds of Ma Joie demonstrate how plantation histories continue to shape ecological practices and spatial imaginaries while opening possibilities for reparative engagement with creole material knowledge.

Keywords

Seychelles, postcolonial ecologies, plantationocene, critical fabulation, ecofeminist auto-theory, creolisation, minor architectures

One sentence summary

The essay uses an ecofeminist, auto-theoretical lens to examine how the spatial and environmental legacies of plantation colonialism in the Seychelles persist and are reworked through everyday practices, revealing intertwined histories of domination, resistance, and possibilities for reparative engagement.

This environmental storytelling essay follows a material, spatial and temporal drift, employing eco-feminist auto-theoretical work toward a reparative approach to my position as the granddaughter of a former plantation owner in the still unfolding majoritarian hold of the capitalist-colonial conjunction. I arrive and depart, then arrive again at a cluster of tropical islands called the Seychelles to do the field philosophical work of engaging in the environmental after-effects of the racialised Plantationocene.¹ What is remembered can only be relayed as a nonlinear folding, refolding and unfolding of geontological time, including an acknowledgment of the *longue durée* of the vibrant vegetal and animal life and non-life of the islands, and incorporating pockets of ancestral knowledge that have been violently

displaced and disturbed by a capitalist-colonial land grab logic imposed upon the islands reconfigured as resource.² I move cautiously toward a reclaiming of Seychellois creole material practices of creative resistance, but rather than telling stories that are not mine to tell, I attempt to remember, or re-member, the small spaces and minor architectures that challenge received spatial stories. By re-member I mean to put things together again, perhaps in a different order. In this, I take advice from Saidiya Hartman who introduces a method she calls 'critical fabulation' which likewise challenges the accepted historical order and content of events.³ She speaks of 'minor gestures' as 'ways of sustaining and creating life, caring for one another, undoing slavery by small acts of stealth and destruction, communal dreaming, sacred transport'.⁴ Hartman resorts to this approach because, as she explains, the archive is full of lacunae when it comes to stories of slavery. Lauren Fournier helps me engage in post-disciplinary processes of auto-theory, through which I situate myself amid unspooling processes of subjectification, and re-member via the scraps and pieces of spatial and material stories, the memories of small spaces and their attendant events that have been passed down to me as my only inheritance as a granddaughter of the Plantationocene.⁵

The Seychelles archipelago, situated in the Indian Ocean, built its meagre wealth on the plantation regime. From an eighteenth-century trading post to a twentieth-century tourist destination and so-called blue economy, the tropical islands that compose today's Republic of Seychelles have always been geopolitically entangled with East Africa, not least on account of having been a slaving depot and dependent on enslaved labour for early agricultural development. As a half-migrant child growing up in Australia, I would receive vaguely described memory-images of the islands washed in sepia, fragments of stories describing a gang of brothers getting up to no good, and a plantation house sitting serenely above a pristine shoreline. [Fig. 1] On the Sundays of my childhood, when my extended migrant family gathered, I would hear the melodious intonations of a French tongue touched with a creole dialect. I am the unfaithful granddaughter of a former plantation owner, who was a privileged member of the Seychellois French plantocracy. This means the work I undertake is one of reparation and learning-with the emergence of Seychellois creole spatial and material practices, the existence of which I had no inkling of as a child.

The islands were no calm idyll but environmentally, socially and politically unsettled from the outset. Despite this, the names of former plantation estates insist on the conceit of the colonial fiction of calm island idylls and easy relations: Ma Joie, Valendor, Plaisance. These are the names of plantation estates my grandfather once owned

with his brother. This is where my father grew up alongside his eight brothers and two sisters, girls who arrived at the end of a long, drawn-out Catholic and Victorian-inflected reproductive project. [Fig. 2] The eldest had departed to study law in London before the youngest was born, subsequently becoming politically active in the Seychelles before the coup d'état of 1977. Due to diasporic trajectories, the family never sat around a dinner table as a complete constellation and never will. Deaths of family members have intervened in the meantime and with them embodied spatial memories have been lost.

The seeming confusion of a Victorian moral demeanour with the cultural logics of a French Catholic plantocracy is the result of colonisers (the French) being colonised by yet other colonisers (the British). After the Seychelles were claimed in 1756, they were subsequently ceded to the British with the Treaty of Paris in 1814, barely two generations later. This state of affairs no doubt created considerable consternation among the French landholding elite concerning their national identity and their desperate desire to declare their 'not one drop' rule, an imperative supported by a myth of White racial purity. We are French, though we also speak Seychellois *kreol*, though our schooling is undertaken in the English language. Who are we after all? What have we become? This legacy impacts on my own efforts as a critical, eco-feminist scholar; how am I to position myself? Auto-theoretical reflections place me in proximity with White privilege, which at the same time opens opportunities to learn with other situated modes of life and environmental stories, their unfoldings and refoldings. Rather than following one dominant environmental storyline, the approach I take is one of multiplying worlds.

Even before the first colonial settlers arrived, the Seychelles islands were involved in trading networks that included Africa, South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. Once the French had claimed the islands as their own, a Captain Picault first annexing them in 1744, and a stone of possession subsequently installed in 1756, the Middle Passage that criss-crossed the Indian Ocean provided their Plantocracy with enslaved labour.⁶ Much like the infamous Middle Passage of the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean is triply abysmal in the way Édouard Glissant has described: peoples violently separated from community and home, language and customs, packed tightly into the abysmal conditions of slaving boats; the abyss of the ocean ready to receive too many of their lifeless or near dead bodies during the crossing; enforced departure from ancestral lands as one's past falls into a bottomless abyss, seemingly lost forever.⁷ These, too, are important spatialities to re-member. Seychellois scholar of creole language and culture Penda Choppy argues that the Indian Ocean has born witness to as long a violent history as the Middle Passage



Fig. 1: Front façade of the Ma Joie main plantation house, circa 1955. Photo: Frichot family archive.

across the Atlantic.⁸ She explains how enslaved peoples had been captured from 'Guinea and the West African coast, the East African coast, from the Cape of Good Hope to the Port of Suez, including Ethiopia and Egypt, and the Malabar Coast from India, and east of the Cape Cormorin area.'⁹ Violently torn from intimate familial and tribal relations and rituals, alienated from their languages and customs, these are the coming people who compose a creolisation of the islands. Importantly, the Seychelles archipelago must be situated amid a complex of oceanic flows and trading relations, including a violent history of slavery, and less as an isolated and deserted island idyll.

The Seychelles has long celebrated its open 'melting-pot' identity, yet a history of what Françoise Vergès discusses as *métissage* (in the context of Réunion Islands, still an overseas department and territory of France) has not always been welcome. The composition of the Seychelles population was never straightforward, not from the beginning. Landing in 1770, the advance party who first arrived and set up camp on the island of St Anne (where Seychelles Club Med can now be found) was composed of: 'fourteen white men (including a commandant, a surgeon and chief carpenter), seven black slaves, five Indians, and another person described as a "negress".'¹⁰ I could linger, as Hartman does when she introduces her notion of critical fabulation in 'Venus in Two Acts', to ask about this 'negress'; one woman included in a party of men struggling to survive on a deserted island.

Hartman finds evidence of two young, enslaved women in ships' logs traversing the Middle Passage of the Atlantic Ocean, and speculates on the sexual violence imposed upon them. She declares her commitment to representing the lives of the nameless and the forgotten. Because the archive remains silent, or else, you must force it to speak, and as she starkly puts it, 'there is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage.'¹¹ The preliminary settlement on St Anne proved a failure, and the small band returned to Île de France (what is today known as Mauritius). Another band of settlers would be sent, this time to what is now the main island of Mahé, and their efforts proved more successful. As I have stressed in a previous essay, these early settlers were mixed and multi-coloured, arriving from a diversity of backgrounds and circumstances.¹² It is worth noting that early definitions of creole simply described those of European descent born in the colonies, generation after generation. Creole subsequently came to designate a *métissage* of cultural backgrounds, a racialised admixture of 'otherness'; of not Whiteness, defined in the negative. As Vergès remarks, *métissage* translates as the mixed heritage of peoples, and it is steeped in ambivalence; it is a term that is either considered a powerful means to enrich

humanity or else, lead to its degeneration.¹³ Not one drop of the other's blood: an imperative that of course fails, but in this failure gives rise to expressions of *creolité* that inflect landowner and worker alike, muddling their socio-cultural relations and their spatial modes of inhabitation.

Settled on the backs of enslaved labour in the eighteenth century, the Seychelles was captured by the British in 1810 and then, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, formally ceded to them with the 1814 Treaty of Paris. While the British Slavery Abolition Act was decided nineteen years later, in 1833, 'apprenticeships', forms of indentured labour, and an illegal trade in enslaved peoples proceeded before and continued well afterwards. Nwulia draws attention to the full title of the Act, which he dismisses as a misnomer: 'An Act for the Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Colonies, for promoting the industry of manumitted Slaves, and for compensating the Persons hitherto entitled to the Services of such Slaves'.¹⁴ He makes clear that the greater political concern was dedicated to how the planters would be compensated, and how the formerly enslaved labourers would be maintained as industrious and useful, endorsing, as Nwulia says, a mode of serfdom. Nwulia explains that until 1840 'when immigrant Indian labourers replaced black workers on the plantations, it was the black slaves who furnished through their labour the indispensable means for the prosperity and well-being of the white colonists'.¹⁵ This is a prosperity that the plantocracy clung to desperately, using every legal loophole to defer the liberation of their workers. The plantation regime produces the construct of race, and manufactures the Black labouring body, as Achille Mbembe argues: 'to produce Blackness is to produce a social link of subjection and a body of extraction, that is, a body entirely exposed to the will of the master, a body from which great effort is made to extract maximum profit'.¹⁶

Early on, the financial promise of the spice trade led to experimentation on the Seychelles islands. The infamous event of the pre-emptive destruction of the Jardin de Roi in Anse Royale on Mahé is a tale often told, one that characterises the fierce competition between the French and the British.¹⁷ A French ship arrived displaying British flags, and being perceived as a threat to hard-won botanical knowledge and the desire to maintain the secret of the island's resources, the experimental garden was burned to the ground. It turns out that the ship was a French slaver flying a false flag, 'bringing slaves to Mahé'.¹⁸ Early cultivation of cotton was short-lived in the Seychelles, as it was not possible to compete with the burgeoning cotton industry in America supported by its own extensive plantation regime.¹⁹ Sugar, which is still grown on the Mauritius islands today, proved too labour-intensive in the Seychelles. For the privileged landholding plantocracy,

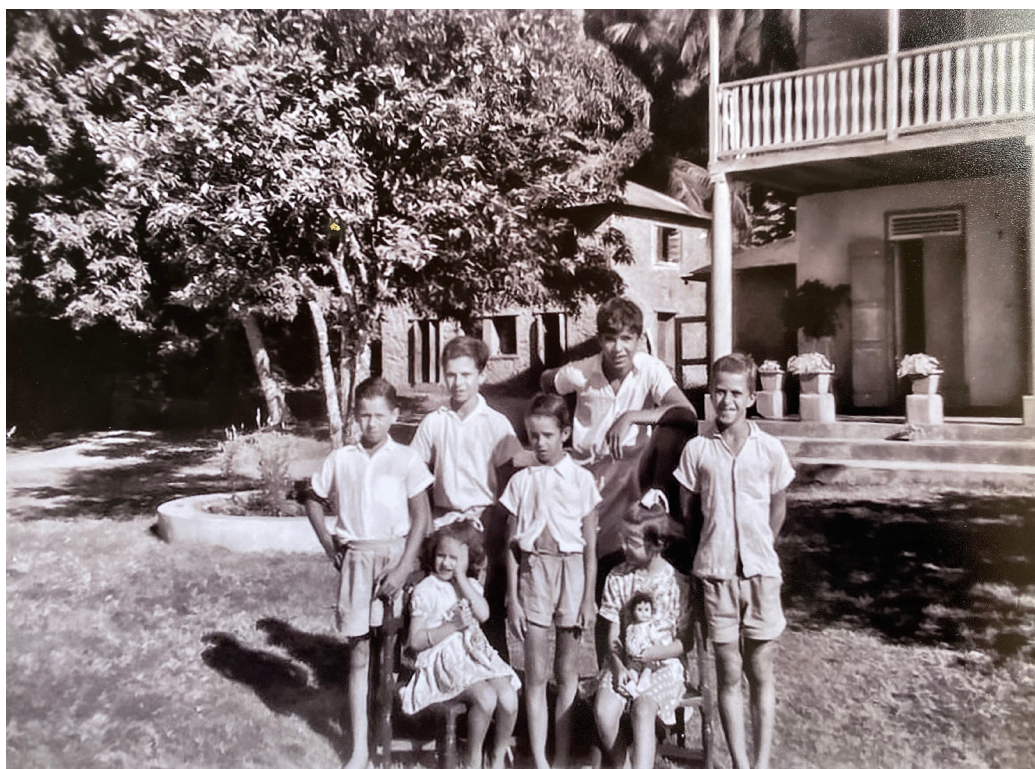


Fig. 2: Family photograph with partial view of front façade of Ma Joie main plantation house, with manager's stone house toward the left, circa 1955. Photo: Frichot family archive.

the 1820s to the 1830s was especially challenging following the uneven emancipation through 'manumission' of enslaved peoples and a growing sentiment at the centre of Empire that slavery is morally questionable. Many of the families of the predominantly French plantocracy departed, others found loopholes to maintain a partially enslaved workforce or else resorted to indentured labour. Laws were imposed to punish vagrancy, meaning that 'manumitted' slaves quitting their masters' plantations found they could not enjoy their newly won liberty, but had to be reinscribed again as labourers into the plantation regime, on threat of being imprisoned or punished.²⁰ Between 1830 and 1840 the population of the Seychelles diminished by close to a half, from 8 500 to 4 360, as settlers departed with their slaves for 'territories where slavery was legally permissible' and not constrained by the new British laws.²¹

But the plantation regime persisted, relying on the coconut, which grows readily and simply needs to be collected from the ground and dried and processed in the mills installed on plantation estates, much like the small factories and coconut drying facilities installed on Ma Joie, the largest of my grandfather's estates. The ancient trees of the plains of the east coast, some four to five metres in circumference and reaching twenty-five metres high, were felled for their timber, the land prepared for agricultural pursuits.²² Today, at the former estate of Ma Joie, signs of infrastructural plantation architectures are lost in the undergrowth, with barely a hint of the water basin that once serviced the *l'usine* (a small cinnamon-distilling factory) and a patch of stone-laid driveway indicating where vehicles would once have approached a plantation house that is no longer to be found.

The years go by. Island society organises itself as an assemblage of different cultural milieus: the French Plantocracy and their sprawling Catholic families; the British Imperialists organising the governance of the islands and mostly professing the Anglican faith; and those labouring upon the estates, including formerly enslaved peoples and indentured labourers brought in from South Asia. The population diversifies; a burgeoning Seychellois creole, or *kreol*, cultural identity begins to distinguish itself. Yet as Mbembe observes, 'it would be a mistake to believe that we have left behind the regime that began with the slave trade and flourished in plantation and extraction colonies'.²³ Even if its expression has meanwhile transformed, history does not run along a linear path, but folds, unfolds, and refolds and might be discovered in the small and seemingly inconsequential spaces that make up plantation infrastructures and their aftermath. Mbembe's account of chronology is never stable, but 'shot through with the past' and, as has also been observed by many thinkers of the Plantationocene, 'the structures of labor, migration,

surveillance, and capital in our contemporary world are presented here as deeply connected with and alarmingly close to older slaving and colonial orders'.²⁴ I find Vinciane Despret helpful here too when it comes to telling complex, enfolded environmental stories. She resists telling her story of birds by following a chronological thread, opting for a story 'constructed as a series of folds' following the material flow of ideas in such a way that surprise encounters emerge in further 'hidden folds'.²⁵ Such are my complex encounters with the Seychelles, composed of folds of small and incidental spaces, and overlooked material practices, like those to be found in the creole garden and the creole homestead (*lakaz kreol*), both of which emerge as spaces of creative resistance to the plantation regime.

Despret advises scholars to slow down and pay attention, to be wary of our habitual analogies, because our 'conceptual nets' can over-code and reduce worlds rather than multiplying them.²⁶ Inspired by Donna Haraway, she writes that '*paying attention* here with an added sense of being attuned, of "giving your attention" to other beings and at the same time acknowledging the way other beings are themselves attentive. It is another way of acknowledging importance'.²⁷ I am attempting to re-member, I do not merely want to tell tales. I am in search of another order of things. Making reference to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Souleymane Bachir Diagne speaks of an African imaginary as a 'plural, open and dynamic reality' animated by a 'movement of re-membering', by which he means a remembering of a past state of affairs as well as a putting back together that is required in the aftermath of enforced diaspora.²⁸ It is a distinction my dear friend Desirée Braithwaite has taught me, having studied the thinking of critical Black theorists, and undertaken her own reflections on what it means to be from Barbados, given the long history of slavery in the Caribbean. We must remember, re-member, she emphasises, rather than simply relay the ready-made tales from the history books; we must recall but also recompose. We must also, she argues, acknowledge our differing proximities to White supremacy: Who has benefited, who has not, from this long history of violence? We must pay attention, we must multiply not diminish worlds, argues Despret.²⁹ To ask such questions following Hartman's approach to critical fabulation can help, which involves 'excavations at the margins of monumental history for the ruins of the dismembered past to be retrieved and turning to forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate or adequate sources for history making'.³⁰

Seychelles achieved its independence from the British Crown in 1976, but when the new jet-setting president James Mancham was away the following year for a meeting of Commonwealth countries, his prime minister Albert

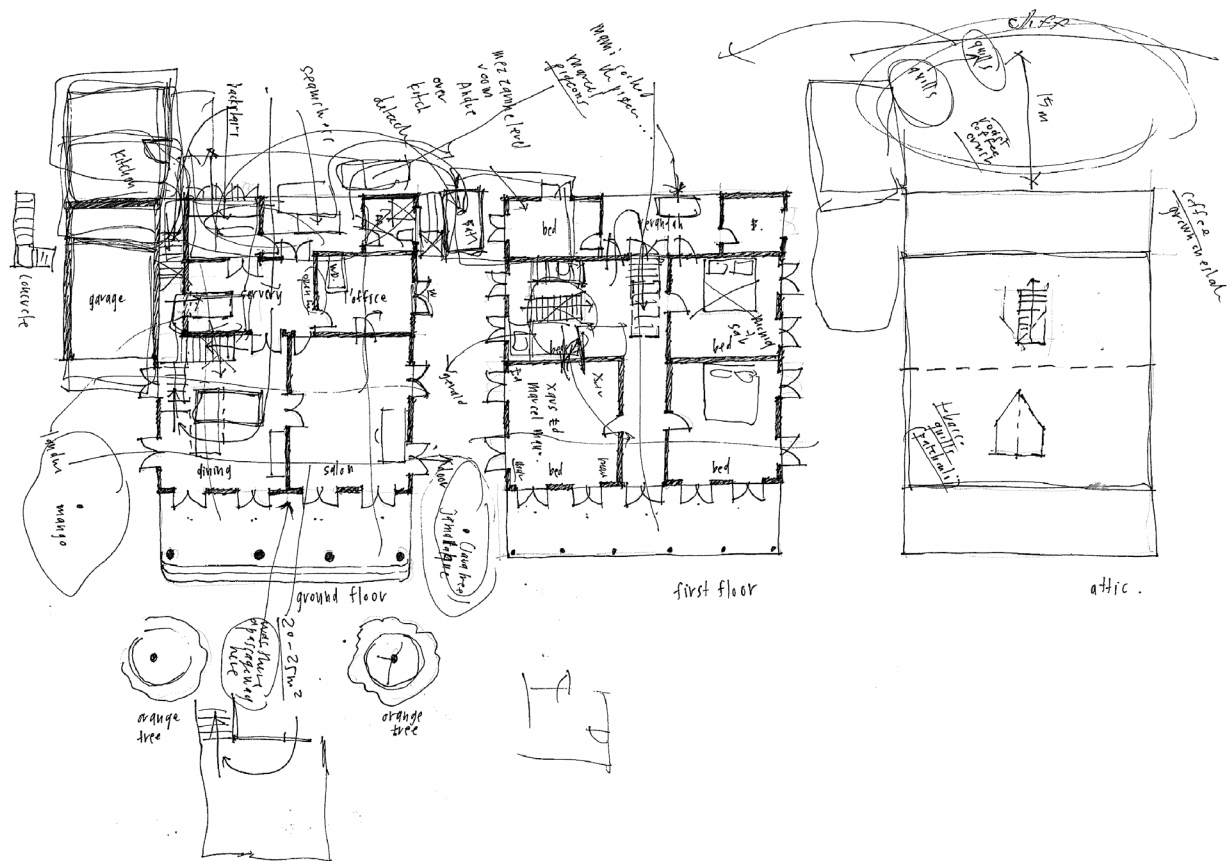


Fig. 3: Sketch plan of the three storeys of the Ma Joie main plantation house. Drawing: author.

René led a coup d'état with support of a Tanzanian militia. The two had studied law at Middle Temple in the mid-'50s alongside my uncle, my father's eldest brother. These controversial political developments would have been discussed loudly at my grandparents' Sunday evening family gatherings, but being a child at the time, I have no memory of them.

Instead, what I remember are the small spatial details and furnishings of the old plantation house. This second-hand remembering becomes a process of re-membering, insofar as I am obliged to patch the details of gleaned spatial memories together to compose a plantation house that no longer exists. My construction work is based on family stories that were repeatedly told, and in returning to these spatial memories and their associated domestic events, I attempt to pay careful attention (as Despret and Haraway urge) to the blind spots or what is kept just out of view. [Fig. 3] The sideboard in the dining room, or perhaps it was the salon, in which my precociously intelligent aunt would hide to read. The radio that stood on a small table in the salon around which the family would gather to hear broadcasts and radio stories. Both these rooms were forward facing and therefore more public. They led onto the front verandah with its four bays of large double timber doors locked at night with timber bars. There was a cabinet somewhere close to the bottom of the stairs, fondly remembered, with drawers allocated to the sons of the plantation owner so they could keep their possessions safe. Slingshots, pocket-knives and the like, all the necessary weapons and tools of a boy's own adventure tale across the islands. Upstairs the four bedrooms were shared by the many sons, allowing less opportunity for the hiding of treasures, while the daughters, the youngest in the family, were kept separate. When the daughters were very small, they shared a bedroom with their parents. For some time, on the upstairs rear verandah, which at some point had been enclosed, a creole nanny slept in a small room, suggesting that spatial segregations were not so strict, but rather a question of convenience and expediency.

When we turn to the history of a plantation house like Ma Joie and its grounds, we see that spatial segregation and colour lines tend to be complex, enfolded. There is the large house for the planter, the small houses for the workers, the intermediate houses for the managers, but across the plantation estate a diversity of daily rhythms, spatial encounters, and crossing of colour lines persists. There are those who work in the house, some of whom also sleep in the house, and there are those who work on the estate, suggesting differentiations of labour and responsibility.

Cinnamon, coconuts, vanilla and tobacco were all harvested on Ma Joie, the largest of my grandfather's estates, and where the main plantation house in which

my father grew up was to be found. During the Second World War every scrap of ground, even the front garden, was planted with patchouli for the war effort. In terms of the day-to-day estate business, my grandfather's brother was more hands-on, managing the hundred-plus workers, most of whom also lived on the Ma Joie estate. The *grann kaz* (Seychellois creole for big house, usually referring to a plantation house) was humble by European standards, and as compared with some of the more elegant colonial abodes still to be found today repurposed as open-air museums and tourist sites, such as the former plantation at Domaine de Valle des Près, which now accommodates a Creole craft village, or the former plantation house of the Dauban family on the island of Silhouette, now folded into a Hilton Labriz resort as a small museum and point of entry close to the private ferry terminal. Despite the relative modesty of the *grann kaz*, a hierarchy of housing nevertheless organised the Ma Joie estate. The double-storey stone and timber plantation house with its rear and front verandahs, its attic and its noisy corrugated iron roof under tropical rains, stood above the North Coast Road looking toward a once pristine coast. Along the south side of the property a stream ran clear, today nearly indiscernible, and the plantation vehicle would pass across a small bridge to arrive at the garage, attached to the side of the house.

Smaller stone houses nearby were available for the estate manager, and those leading work teams. These are pointed out to me on a site visit with a heritage cultural worker who grew up on the estate. Then there were the one- and two-room corrugated *lakaz kreol* (creole houses), raised up from the earth one or two steps, fenestrations colourfully painted, interiors very likely adorned with colourful collages of magazine cut-outs. This is, at least, how *lakaz kreol* has been reimagined at the reconstructed Creole craft village at the Domaine de Val des Près. At the bottom of the architectural hierarchy stood the simple thatch hut with an earthen floor and perhaps one piece of prized furniture. A corner chair, for instance.

A heritage cultural worker I met on my first field philosophical foray in July 2023, proudly employed with Seychelles Heritage, surprised me when she confessed that she was born on the Ma Joie estate.³¹ Her mother worked in the *grann kaz*, her father tended some crops on the estate in exchange for payment, what is called the block system. This was an arrangement similar to the *moitié* system that emerged after emancipation, when formerly enslaved people were granted land on the condition that they would still labour on the plantation for the benefit of the plantation owner. As I have argued with two co-researchers, this system can be connected to the emergence of the creole garden, which I will return to in what follows.³² Therese and her family lived in a simple thatch

hut with an earthen floor. She revealed that her family had been chased away when the father asked for remuneration for his labour.³³ They escaped the estate, their belongings bundled in cloth squares, in the middle of the night. I did not ask at the time, but I wondered later whether they were obliged to abandon their treasured corner chair as too cumbersome to carry.

This was some years after my grandparents had migrated to Australia, leasing the estate to a neighbour, leaving behind the crystal and the silver coins, carrying pillows and blankets instead, seemingly anticipating what eventuated in political upheaval with the coup d'état of 1977. Keen to facilitate the university education of their many children, and keep them out of further mischief, my grandparents were economic migrants following other family members to join a small community of Seychellois émigrés in Perth, Western Australia in the mid-1960s. One of my uncles explained to me that when they arrived, they were obliged to undertake medical examinations to prove that they were White. This was during the period of the infamous White Australia Policy, extending from the settler-colonial nation state's federation in 1901 through to the 1970s, being dismantled slowly, reluctantly, part by part, from 1949 to 1973.

There is an astonishing vividness to my father's spatial and material memories of growing up on Ma Joie. Even though he migrated with his parents and seven family members as a fifteen-year-old, he can describe the agricultural logics at work, the different tasks designated for estate labourers, whether women or men. He can describe the layout of the plantation house and who slept in which room, and how these arrangements would change from time to time as children grew older or were sent to the UK or Europe to study. These small or minor spaces should not be considered as insignificant, for they add up to a larger, more complex whole composing the power relations played out between bedrooms and corridors, verandas and salons, kitchens and dining rooms. In her close reading of the small spaces of Empire, Swati Chattopadhyay argues that here is where encounters between masters and servants would take place, and where cultural mixing of material practices and modes of consumption would begin to take hold. By paying attention to such spaces an analysis of the everyday spatial power relations of Empire can be ventured.³⁴

Of the memories I have grown up with and have subsequently gleaned, a key circulatory detail that has caused confusion is the stairs that exit the dining room and arrive on the first floor where the bedrooms are located, but which also dip down again from a landing to the rear part of the house on the ground floor, and then out onto the rear verandah. Many disagreements emerged

among the siblings concerning how exactly the staircase was arranged, though there are recollections of peering through the balustrades at the adults laughing, eating and drinking late into the night at celebratory gatherings. Designing staircases, as anyone who has taught an architecture design studio knows, is notoriously tricky and reconstructing a staircase from collective spatial memories has proved frustrating. I had become especially interested in this detail on account of the tobacco that I knew was regularly dried in the attic. [Fig. 4, 5] How did it get there? After inquiries, I discovered that estate workers would enter from the rear of the house up this staircase, then up again into the attic. While this was based on mere spatial speculation, a matter of assuming a fact that had not necessarily been witnessed by the children of the plantation owner, what is known is that harvested vegetable matter travelled up through the two storeys of the house into the attic where it would be hung from the rafters to cure. The shared circulation of creole estate workers and the inhabitants of the plantation house, while not necessarily corresponding temporally, performs a proximity that suggests a subtle gesture toward spatial creolisation.

Where illustrations of plantation estates, especially in North America, often describe illusions of bucolic village scenes, little huts lined up on display leading to the master's house, this was not always the case in the Seychelles. In the context of eighteenth-century Virginia, Dell Upton ascribes to the 'great Planter' the desire to create a hierarchical landscape, 'leading to himself at centre'. His house, Upton continues, 'was raised above the other buildings and was often set off from the surrounding countryside by a series of barriers or boundaries'.³⁵ It seems things were way more confusing in terms of the spatial organisation of Ma Joie, or else the children of the plantation owner never 'saw' nor registered anything beyond their own abode, nor that of their uncle's further down the hill situated on the North Coast Road near Point Conan. But I can speculate on spatial proximities based on other oral stories I was gifted while undertaking fieldwork there. Madame George, who still oversees the famous gardens at Jardin du Roi, tells me how her grandmother could call out to the cook to plan dinner as the cook lived within earshot in a *lakaz kreol* (creole house). Given that something in the order of one hundred labourers lived on the Ma Joie estate, their housing, while out of sight, must have been located in relative proximity to the main plantation house, and some within earshot.

Concerning Ma Joie though, I was met with confusion when asking where the estate workers' housing was to be found. A curious blindness persists here, registering the invisibilising of peoples depending on which side of the colour line you found yourself on, however entangled.

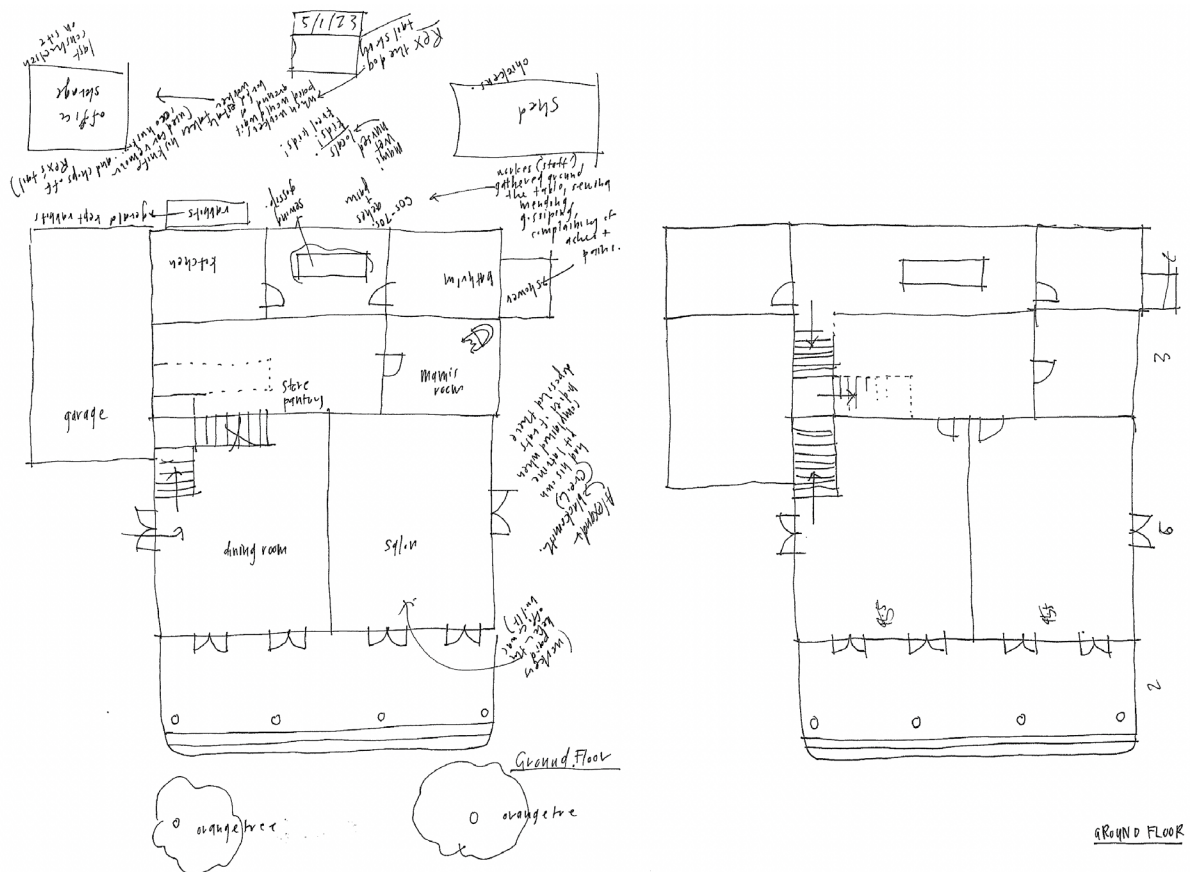


Fig. 5: Sketch plan of the ground floor of Ma Joie, attempting to resolve the layout of the stairs from memory with another version of the layout. Drawing: author.

Nwulia remarks of early Mauritius and Seychelles that 'society in Mauritius and the Seychelles was one in which skin color was a rough indicator of legal status and a pervasive index of social "respectability"'.³⁶ Of Blackness, of being a Black body, Achille Mbembe writes: 'the Remainder – the ultimate sign of the dissimilar, of difference and the pure power of the negative – constituted the manifestation of existence as an object'.³⁷ But the subject rendered object also occupies an environmental field: Upton describes the complex interplay of Black and White landscapes, through which Black and White bodies moved according to different diagrams of power, and how on either side of the colour line you passed, or you did not pass, because roads and pathways, rooms and corridors, woods and waterways were either available to you, or not. Enslaved workers, Upton explains, either perform before their 'masters', or else, escaping from their masters' view gather to socialise, rebuild cultural bonds, and tend to their provision gardens.³⁸ Upton observes that where 'Whites' in eighteenth-century Virginia were obliged to follow conventions by 'upholding formalities' of spatial occupation, Blacks could pass almost at will, entering the main plantation house to linger in corridors and on verandahs to await their orders. They were able to visit friends and relatives on other plantations, and even attend church, and they further occupied a landscape composed of 'woods, fields and waterways', all of which opened opportunities for creating community.³⁹ Upton observes, nevertheless, that the master's landscape was a 'network that implied connection and movement', what he describes as a processional landscape, while the enslaved worker occupied a landscape composed of discrete places.⁴⁰ There are customs and expectations, spatial passages, thresholds and detours, and while the colour line is seemingly more porous than that which Upton describes, on the Seychelles there were, as my father once infamously pronounced 'the good people and the workers'.

Ma Joie, the main plantation house, was situated just above the North Coast Road, and would once have commanded expansive views toward the island of St Anne and Cerf Island, until the considerable land reclamation along the coast cluttered up the former view. The front verandah, the space of leisure and rest, was where the family gazed out toward the waters across a small field of grass past two ornamentally arranged orange trees. Much of the rest of the estate climbs the mountain behind them, and it is here that clusters of estate workers' housing would have been found. Because of the topography, which becomes increasingly steep toward the peak of Mt Signal, only the lower section of the estate would have accommodated housing. [Fig. 6] While Ma Joie was still a functioning estate, the illusion of a large house standing mostly

alone on expansive lands might have been maintained, as other smaller buildings, housing, sheds, small distilleries, mills, were hidden away behind, to the side, and further up the slope, all camouflaged by tropical island vegetation. I believe a copra drying shed was located close to the main road, though. Much as Upton has described, there is evidence in this spatial organisation of the processional qualities of the estate, such as the winding road to the front façade of the plantation house with its grassed terrace and ornamental garden, and then the discrete spaces of labour and worker accommodation hidden further up the slope of the property.

I know that the Ma Joie estate had its own carpenter, laundress, seamstress and nanny. I know that the house workers would gather to gossip around a table on the rear verandah while mending, or preparing meals, and that the matriarch, my grandmother, would listen in for gossip from other plantation estates. There is a subtle acknowledgment here that the domestic workers held knowledge that the matriarch valued, thereby implicitly shifting their epistemological power relations. The front and rear verandahs accommodated distinct uses and modes of occupation. While the plantation house workers usually gathered around a table on the rear verandah, the children of the plantation estate would also gather here for afternoon tea. The front verandah was another matter, reserved for the relaxation and social encounters of the plantation family. I know that the plantation family would eat creole curry for lunch, and usually French cuisine for dinner. Creole cuisine here disrupts the family's claims for French cultural identity. It is consumed and enjoyed, and yet its mixed cultural origin likely remains uninterrogated. I know that a fisherman lived in a small hut near the shoreline and would regularly bring his catch up to the kitchen. The kitchen is an interstitial space that my father remembers vividly, standing by the elbow of the cook, Rachel, as meals are prepared on the wood-fired stove under the watchful eye of my grandmother. My grandmother, the matriarch, held sovereignty over her very own room, called the office, which she kept under lock and key. Like the kitchen, it was located toward the rear of the house, and was composed of two parts, one locked, as here was where the cash would be kept and the most valuable of household accoutrements secured inside a wardrobe (though the precious crystal was on display in a glass-fronted cabinet in the dining room). The other part accommodated a large sideboard with cupboards and open shelves reaching toward the ceiling. This part was accessible to the domestic workers and formed a connection from the rear of the house, the kitchen, the servery, to the dining room.

I have described the Ma Joie *Grann Kaz* as humble relative to other plantation houses of the Seychelles. Domaine

de Val des Près, and the Dauban Grann Kaz on the island of Silhouette, as well as houses documented by Claude Britz for Unesco, show that the kitchen is usually located as a separate building at a distance from the main house.⁴¹ In a house he documents on the third-largest Seychelles island, La Digue, one passes from the main house across a side verandah, through what is called an office along a covered walkway into the kitchen.⁴² This is an arrangement that has been compressed into the one main building at Ma Joie. And the incorporation of the kitchen, with its wood-fired oven, into the main house at Ma Joie would prove fatal, as after the house was transformed into a bakery, it subsequently burnt to the ground. A process of spatial creolisation might be observed here in the enfolding of spaces, and the loosening of distinctions and hierarchies.

Then, in the front salon, a corner of the room was reserved for my grandfather's desk. Here he would sit to work in a location more amenable to public encounters and a fine view. Where the reproductive labour is found toward the rear of the house, expressions of civic duty and the economic responsibilities of a land-holding patriarch are situated toward the front of the house looking out across the coastal domain of his property toward the sea. This proprietorial purview is of course crucial to his position as a member of the plantocracy, claiming his God-given rights of ownership of his landed property.

Once he relocates his family to the isolated, conservative city of Perth, Western Australia, he will instead take up his habitual position on the rear enclosed verandah of an old Californian bungalow that smells like a mixture of curry powder and sour milk. Here he sits in proximity to an aluminium framed flyscreen door that slams shut abruptly and leads down two steps into a back yard at the bottom of which he tends to his chilli plants and a small vegetable patch. My grandmother uses an old kitchen fork to undertake occasional weeding, while talking to the house cat in her melodic French. The chilli seeds are said to have arrived on the long ship-bound Indian Ocean journey with his migrating family. The front yard, with a view onto a leafy suburban street, was reserved for clipped grass and a row of rose bushes, likewise tended to with great love and care by my grandfather into his senescence. Evidence of the spatial relations of the former plantation can still be found in the contrasts of formality (an ornamental front garden) and informality (the vegetable patch in the rear yard) that organise this suburban migrant home, but here the world is more compressed, the vista curtailed, and the winters less mild. There are no longer creole house workers to assign tasks to, but, much like the former estate workers themselves, the planter and his wife must make do in these culturally foreign circumstances, as migrants, as outsiders.

This is what I re-member, based on the memories

passed down to me, and some that are my own, though as Hartman warns, in fabulating this colonial fiction from scraps and half-lit memories, 'the arrangements of power continue to occlude the very object that we desire to rescue'.⁴³ In undertaking this research, I must also re-member the privileged place that situates my own family history. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write: 'The settler positions himself as both superior and normal; the settler is natural, whereas the Indigenous inhabitant and the chattel slave are unnatural, even supernatural.'⁴⁴ If the 'Black', the 'Slave' or the estate worker occupy discrete spaces, as Upton describes, these nevertheless foster opportunities for a life to express itself despite the spatial diagrams of surveillance and control of the plantation regime. As Upton has argued, it is amid such interstitial spaces that life begins to emerge, and expressions of creative resistance can be performed. As a retort to the plantation regime, the provision plot as a support system for *lakaz kreol* manifests refugia for sustenance and cultural mending.

The creole house, *lakaz kreol*, is not complete without its kitchen garden, grown for provisions and for pharmaceutical benefits, using whatever containers are available for its plantings. The two belong together as a spatial and material composition, a biorefugia. Two steps down from a simple corrugated or timber-clad two-room house or directly through the opening of a thatch hut, passing from smoothed earthen floor to the swept ground outside. While it appears to be the case that provision plots, also known as yam fields and slave gardens, emerged as a matter of necessity among enslaved labourers who otherwise had limited access to food supplies, these become powerful sites of creative resistance. Scholarship pertaining to the provision garden is abundant in the Caribbean context, but has only recently been establishing itself in the Seychelles context.⁴⁵ Choppy, who leads the Creole Cultural Institute at the University of Seychelles, has undertaken important work on what she calls the pharmaceutical garden, also called the creole garden in the Seychelles.⁴⁶ Choppy explains that the creole garden emerges concurrently with New World societies of plantation slavery.⁴⁷ Plants are grown not only for sustenance, but for medicinal purposes and are also 'associated with cultural beliefs about protection from evil spirits'.⁴⁸ Creole gardens foster biodiversity, food security, and cultural sharing. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Seychelles could no longer rely on importing foodstuffs. An initiative called *Every Home a Garden* was organised by the Seychelles Agricultural Agency in 2020, encouraging locals to grow their own fruit and vegetables in their yards, with many participants on the reclaimed island of Persévérance getting involved.⁴⁹ For a former plantation society, today the Seychelles paradoxically imports most of its food. The creole garden flourishes again amid

challenging circumstances, and Choppy and her research group study this reemergence against the background of the Plantationocene, and Covid-19, arguing that the garden includes a celebration and reclaiming of contemporary creole identity. The creole garden also extends beyond the plot that is planted into the surrounding forests and waterways (as Upton has described) where fish and prawns can supplement a family diet.

When Mairi O’Gorman and I dialogue with Najea Barbe about the land her family has reclaimed, land that was formerly a plantation estate, we discover the cross-generational sharing of material knowledge that pertains to the creole garden.⁵⁰ As we explain in our co-written article: ‘To tend one’s own plot of land was a government initiative in Seychelles post-coup, aimed at returning those who had labored for the plantocracy to subdivided land that they could now claim as their own.’⁵¹ Najea’s grandfather and her parents had worked on this former plantation estate. The madame of the estate was determined by the government to have let the plantation become unproductive, as she was no longer cultivating crops, nor keeping chickens and pigs. Najea, her mother, her two brothers, and her sister, were able to reclaim part of the plantation estate as their own, land populated by lively memories such as fishing for prawns in the stream and foraging for pharmaceutical plants. Meanwhile, the old plantation house was reduced to a smaller plot, hidden among palms closer to the coast.

Much the same took place at Ma Joie, which was subdivided into smaller land holdings, in some instances reclaimed by former estate labourers. The old plantation house burnt down, and as I have already described you must hunt in the undergrowth to find remnants of the small water basin that supported the *l’usine* where the cinnamon was distilled before being exported to South Asia. Post-coup Seychelles enabled such requisitions of land. Today, a Blue Bus (member of the Seychelles public network system) called Ma Joie climbs the mountain toward Mont Signal, arriving part-way up at modest apartment blocks. In a fitting twist of fate, some members of my father’s family have sought to reverse the historic requisitioning of the Ma Joie estate, but now the only plots available are in near-inaccessible locations approaching the mountain peak. They find themselves seeking out those parcels of land that estate workers and maroons were once obliged to resort to for survival and subsistence when planting their provision plots.

The creole garden is a space of cross-generational learning, a work of re-membering carried from ancestral lands and shared with the generations to come. Recomposing the pieces of memory, the embodied practices, that have travelled across the Middle Passage in

the brutal hulls of slaving ships has led to the securing of biorefugia. From a source of stigma recalling bleaker times, Choppy and her team discover that the creole garden reemerges as a material practice associated with pride in cultural identity. To make the garden work they determined that the kinds of measure that had to be taken included: making do with poor-quality patches of earth and planting in recycled containers, old water bottles and the like; understanding that the creole garden extends beyond the home, and its gathered bounty can be used for barter; developing creole dishes in relation to the kinds of plants and spices that could be cultivated, including the introduced cinnamon tree.⁵² The research team laments that a younger generation seems to take less interest in the creole and pharmaceutical garden, overlooking its cultural and health benefits, and the ways in which cultivating a creole garden places you in profound contact with both your ancestral knowledge practices and the environment-worlds of the islands.

Near the end of my first field philosophical foray to the Seychelles in 2023, I was standing on my de facto aunt’s terrace in Sans Souci, facing east, where the breezes cool on oppressive afternoons. Overlooking the botanical gardens, the view unfolds a story of coastal land reclamation and urban development, coral reefs repurposed as crushed materials for island foundations, and to underpin the coastal highway that leads to the airport that opened in 1972, one of the first areas to be reclaimed from the sea. The colourful lives of coral reefs having been rendered as non-life materials, ‘dredged calcareous materials’, rubble available for construction.⁵³ Tourism and tuna are the key export industries today, which means that the preservation of coral reefs has become a priority as well as a challenge for a nation state eager to foster a blue economy. Looking toward the northeast, and then toward the southeast, two manufactured islands are visible from the breezy heights of Sans Souci. Toward the north, the island of Persévérance, toward the south, Eden Island. By their proper nouns they already advertise their socio-political urban logics. One island is lush with palms and vegetative exuberance, the other barren on account of planning concerns that water and sewerage utilities will be disrupted by wily roots. Where the reclaimed island of Persévérance is one of Seychelles’s answers to affordable housing, Eden, a reclaimed luxury island inspired by Dubai’s development boom, is fringed with yachts, and home to lavish villas and five-star resorts. What differing qualities of infrastructural networks can be assumed to be at work here? What histories of casual segregation through spatial means continue to be expressed? Or else, perhaps other stories are to be told, ones of self-sovereignty and control over one’s own house and plot of land? The Seychellois social

project *Every Home a Garden* proved particularly popular on Persévérance.

A vegetal life of rude greens, blasting blues, vibratory reds and oranges, and indecent pinks colours the lovingly composed creole pharmaceutical garden and the *lakaz kreol*. These are colours that challenge the sepia browns of the former plantation owner's family archive, an archive of images I pour over searching for further hidden material details. The joy presumed in a name such as Ma Joie hides a more complex multiplying of worlds. While I should not forget the small dish of bright red chillis that nearly always sat on the kitchen table of my grandparents' migrant home, nor the vivid green of the clipped grass of the ornamental front garden and the bright pink and yellow roses, this is a migrant home claimed by way of privilege. Even though the colour-coding comes undone, and the colour line becomes mixed, what I find myself moving towards is a celebration of a creole people to come that must continue to be re-membered. This is the work I currently dedicate my intellectual labour to.

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Notes

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Biography

Architectural theorist and philosopher, writer and critic, H       Frichot was Professor of Critical Studies and Gender Theory, and Director of Critical Studies in Architecture, KTH Stockholm, Sweden until 2019, and also holds an honorary professorship at the Bartlett School of Architecture. She joined the University of Melbourne, Australia, as professor of architecture and philosophy in 2020. Her recent publications include *Dirty Theory* (AADR, 2019/2025) and *Creative Ecologies* (Bloomsbury, 2018). She has co-edited many anthologies, including: *Infrastructural Love: Caring for Our Architectural Support Systems* (Birkhauser, 2022); *Architectural Affects After Deleuze and Guattari* (Routledge 2021); *Ficto-Critical Approaches* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and special issues of the *Journal of Architecture*, *Jennifer Bloomer: A Revisitation* (2024) and *Deleuze and Guattari Studies Journal, A Deleuzian Life – A People to Come* (2025), celebrating 100 years since Gilles Deleuze's birth.

