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AFRICAN DREAMS: RE-ENCHANTMENT THROUGH RELATIONAL ONTOLOGIES
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Re-enchantments: Toward Relational Architectural Futures

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Abstract
Footprint 38 positions Africa as a site for thinking and theorising worlds to come. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's understanding of re-enchantment as a mode of restoring relational vitality and imaginative possibility, the issue gathers a collection of situated writings that explore forms of attachment and worlding across African peoples, places, and objects. This editorial interprets these contributions through the framework of relational ontologies, identifying and tracing the transversal theoretical and methodological resonances which inform the four overlapping and interweaving thematic lines of the issue: infrastructural futuring, diasporic subjectivities, speculative futuring, and cosmotechnical relationalities. Across these interpretive trajectories, the conceptual and material foundations of our field are reworked. Architecture emerges as an assemblage-in-becoming, a mode of re-enchantment, through which socio-ecological, -technical, -economic and -political relations are activated and mediated.

One sentence summary
The editorial outlines a set of transversal theoretical and methodological modes of re-enchantment that position Africa as a site of thinking and theorising worlds to come.

Keywords
Re-enchantment, relational ontologies, Africa, architectural futures, memory

Thinking architecture from the margins

In *Brutalism*, critical theorist Achille Mbembe draws on the monolithic form and uncompromising materiality of brutalist architecture to explore how contemporary capitalism remodels humanity into mere matter and energy.[1] He justifies this conceptual borrowing by suggesting that both politics and architecture are, at their core, concerned with the arrangement of bodies and materials. Unsurprisingly, Mbembe finds in our field a language for the planetary operations through which brutalism is enacted: the occupation, depletion, disassembly, and demolition of territories, bodies and imaginaries. Against these forces and their foreclosure of alternative becomings, Mbembe affirms the radical potential of Afro-diasporic thought to cultivate a counterpolitics of hope – of dreams.[2] At the risk of cliché, *Footprint* 38 takes up this call to dream. It positions Africa as a site of thinking and theorising worlds to come. As such, it offers a bold, polyphonic response to the 'epistemic silences' regarding non-Western, particularly African, discourse within the journal's output.[3]

These silences reverberate within the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at TU Delft, which has a rich yet largely under-theorised history of engagement with the Majority World through education, research and curatorial practice. Researching and teaching between the Netherlands and southern Africa, our academic practice is situated within this genealogy.

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Alongside recent faculty- and student-led initiatives, *Footprint* 38 repositions and critically reappraises this institutional tradition in relation to knowledge ecologies beyond what Ramón Grosfoguel terms the 'westernised university'.[4] Following Karen Barad, we privilege capacious intra-actions between theory and praxis from the South.[5] Thus, we pursue not a closed map of African discourse but an operative cartography through which relations are traced and continuously modulated.[6]

Such cartographies are vital if, as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni urges, we are to 'rethink thinking itself'.[7] By this, he means unsettling the historically determined configurations of centre and periphery that characterise Western thought and perpetuate the domestication of non-Western knowledges. The enduring effect of these asymmetries, Amina Mama notes, is that 'most of that which is received as knowledge about Africa is produced in the West.'[8] Within such epistemic (de)formations, Africa is conceived either as a pathological condition, framed through indices of population growth and unemployment, or as an extractive testbed for Euromodernity, in which notions of informality and incremental urbanisms are rehearsed.

In *Footprint* 38, we aim to break with these tropes and the narrow theoretical responses they elicit. Instead, we offer a collection of situated writings that explore forms of attachment and worlding across African peoples, places, and objects. Tracing these onto-epistemological relationalities within and beyond the continent as a bounded territory, the featured contributions mediate the processes of fluidity and fixity that shape African lifeworlds.

Re-enchantment through relational ontologies

The displacement that emerges from this interplay is brought into sharp relief when Tunde, the main character in Teju Cole's *Tremor*, encounters a *ci wara*, a Malian headdress, in a New England antique shop.[9] He ponders its transmogrification from ritual artefact into a decorative curio – or the possibility that it was deliberately fabricated as an imitation. Unable to determine its provenance, Tunde feels compelled to reclaim the *ci wara*: 'to bring it closer to home, closer to his own home where it can be seen by kinder eyes, by eyes that place authenticity elsewhere.'[10] His desire to know the object differently, to recover the multiplicity of meanings it holds, constitutes what Mbembe would call an act of re-enchantment. Here, Mbembe echoes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's commitment to 're-membering' forms of kinship – with nature and with others – weakened by historical and contemporary régimes of earth mastery.[11]

Re-enchantment thus emerges as a productive mode of resistance to the brutal logics that render vibrant worlds inert. The scholars and practitioners gathered here approach this possibility through what Arturo Escobar calls relational ontologies: knowledge produced not about, but from intimacies with the material and non-human world.[12] Our initial invitation to authors – to think through people, place, and object – has yielded imaginative encounters with diverse milieus. These sympoietic entanglements are offered here as 'dreams': co-constitutive practices of imagination rooted in Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick's insistence that we are a *'*storytelling species*'* – and that our stories have the capacity to move us.[13]

Dreams take on different forms in this issue: articles, visual essays, image-based narratives, and what we term dialogues. The latter warrants some elaboration. Crossovers and imbrications among proposals submitted in response to the call for abstracts presented us, as editors, with an opportunity to experiment with this format. We therefore invited authors – previously unknown to one another – to orient their individual enquiries toward each other: to think and write, in Donna Haraway's words, 'tentacularly', as accidental but enthusiastic collaborators.[14] The three dialogues featured in the issue, appearing as two review articles and an interview, reveal the potential (and limitations) of knowledge developed along collaborative, multidirectional axes.

Similarly, as the editorial process evolved, a constellation of transversal theoretical and methodological resonances emerged among the contributions. We invite readers to engage with the issue through four overlapping thematic lines, which we elaborate on below: infrastructural futuring, diasporic subjectivities, speculative futuring, and cosmotechnical relationality. Whilst these threads are not explicitly reflected in the organisation of the issue, they are offered here as vectors of interpretation through which readers can trace the circulation, intersection and transformation of ideas across contributions.

Infrastructural futuring

Infrastructural futuring remodulates terrains familiar to architectural discourse – global commodity, technology, labour and knowledge flows – from Afrodiasporic positions.[15] Drawing on fieldwork in Ghana and Morocco, Costanza Franceschini and John Hanna's visual essay traces Sino-African infrastructural entanglements, shaped by financial speculation, debt regimes and political cycles. Through photographic sequences and ethnographic observations, they show how 'big' infrastructure projects operate as socio-political projections of promise and (post-colonial) progress. Infrastructural futures thus emerge not as signs of African lack or developmental failure, but as expressions of the libidinal economy in which desire operates as a material and productive force within socioeconomic systems.[16] As such, unfinished and suspended projects, understood as a 'production of desire', continuously defer to a promised future.

In dialogue, Piero Medici and Anna Kintsurashvili approach architectural 'performance' in modernist architecture from different but intersecting perspectives. Piero reappraises the 1957 issue of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* magazine, titled 'Afrique Noire', as an aestheticised instrument of postcolonial domination. He shows how the dissemination of Western climatic design principles and technologies, through print media as an epistemic apparatus, maintained Africa as a laboratory for Euromodernity, even as many countries on the continent achieved formal independence. Through the mediated framing of African climates as a technical problem and European comfort as a universal standard, modernist architectural experimentation and Western resource extraction were legitimised. Conversely, Anna Kintsurashvili examines how the Uganda National Cultural Centre and Theatre, designed for Kampala's expatriate community, performs as a site for the collective rehearsal and enactment of postcolonial imaginaries. Here, 'performance' defies colonial hierarchies by foregrounding embodied storytelling as a form of knowledge production. Kintsurashvili's account rejects object-based heritage preservation in favour of architectural meaning and value that coevolves with memory, understood as a productive epistemic force.

The dialogue between Abdullah Ogunsetan and Olorunfemi Adewuyi, of the design and research collective OMI, and Eytan Mann examines virtual environments as memory infrastructures that exteriorise and accumulate experience through technical systems.[17] Through their work in Lagos, Nigeria and Haifa, Israel, respectively, OMI and Mann present digital models and speculative reconstructions as epistemic methods that actively reconstitute incomplete and contested histories. Mann compares his digitisation of an erased Palestinian neighbourhood with OMI's models of tropical modernist architecture, describing both as 'unfinished propositions' which sustain indeterminacy as generative conditions through which material futures are collectively re-authored. Their conversation thus explores virtuality beyond representation, as an immanent, participatory field in which the future remains open and productive.[18]

Diasporic subjectivities

Diasporic subjectivities foreground the embodied and situated practices through which African and Afro-diasporic communities individuate and inhabit space.[19] In their visual essay, Ana Barone and Tainã Dorea draw on the work of poet and theorist of Afro-Brazilian performance Leda Maria Martins to examine how bodily movement and oral expression construct diasporic archives in São Paulo's Zona Leste (East Zone).[20] They argue that samba and slam poetry operate as transgenerational epistemes that reterritorialise the city through a concatenated grammar of embodied, oral and spatial practices.[21] They illustrate how memory and place are continually produced and transformed through performance, with the body acting as both archive and analytical medium for worlding the city otherwise.

Thinking with Christina Sharpe's concept of 'the weather', Khensani Jurczok-de Klerk turns to Zurich, where she reinterprets the Swiss city's distinctive fog as a metaphorical ecology of racial-sexual violence.[22] Through 'the fog' as a technicity, and its associated phenomena of condensation, floating and grounding, Jurczok-de Klerk examines how anti-Blackness is spatially organised and lived in Zurich. Oral archives and biographical accounts offer situated perspectives of how the particles that compose Zurich's metaphorical fog – migration policies, gendered labour regimes, bureaucratic procedures, and racist media – condense unevenly around Black foreign women. Within this hostile atmosphere, Jurczok-de Klerk theorises floating as a tactical mode of inhabiting the suspension and disorientation produced by the fog, and grounding as a means of cultivating proximity and collective presence within it.[23] The article constructs a genealogy of Afro-diasporic counterpublics and feminist strategies of endurance within anti-Black European climates.

For Anusia Govender-Elshove, Indian classical dance – like samba and slam poetry – serves as a form of 'presencing' against the invisibilisation of othered bodies in colonial and apartheid South Africa.[24] Govender-Elshove's autoethnography of her matrilineal family's dance practice foregrounds, to paraphrase Deborah A. Miranda, the body as a sensing, breathing, moving archive.[25] Through choreographic practice, counter-spatialities and counter-histories of Indian South African indenture, migration and displacement are rehearsed and activated.[26] Govender-Elshove therefore shows that memory is neither stable nor complete but moves, exteriorised through embodied and technical practices re-inscribed across space and time.[27] In resonance with the other contributions, she positions bodily movement as an onto-epistemological praxis of resistance, which unsettles static conceptions of space and foregrounds the body as a central medium through which architectural knowledge is produced.[28]

Speculative futuring

Speculative futuring emerges through experimentation with autoethnography, narrative writing, and forms of historical speculation as modes of theorising. These methods reject detached knowledge production, privileging what Donna Haraway calls 'situated knowledges', which mark the partiality of subject and object.[29] Reading Haraway through Walter Mignolo's 'geopolitics of knowledge', Christopher Clarkson draws on the genre of critical memoir to explore how autobiographical encounters yield epistemologically

generative, immanent methods.[30] Rebutting Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902) with his own *Not So Stories*, Clarkson critiques Euromodernity's fabrication of false binaries – the guardrails of colonial epistemologies. Against the universality and presumed certainty of authoritative narratives, Clarkson experiments with methods that unsettle Enlightenment divisions of inside/outside, nature/culture, and self/other through minoritarian experiences and perspectives.

Similarly, Hélène Frichot foregrounds the 'minor gestures' and 'minor spaces' that perforate and subtly subvert the spatial hierarchies of colonial plantation ecologies. A descendant of Seychelles plantation owners, Frichot draws on Saidiya Hartman's method of critical fabulation to weave personal narrative with ecofeminist theory, recomposing the fragments and scraps of spatial memory gleaned from her family.[31] In doing so, she traces spatial operations of creolisation that cross and renegotiate the dimensions of colonial power across the plantation architectures and spaces lived by her family and plantation workers. Frichot's article develops a reparative historiographic method, revealing the plantation as a porous site where racial and gender hierarchies are, as she writes, 'leaking, crossing, and recomposed', and where past and present cross through geontological folding.

Across these methodological approaches, the archive emerges as an incomplete and actively reconstituted epistemic field. It is conceptually closer to what Brian Massumi describes as the anarchive: 'a repertory of traces' of events that are 'reactivatable'.[32] Both Clarkson and Frichot are cognisant of the limits of the histories they engage with. They use speculative and interpretive research practices not to verify or reconstruct these histories, but to multiply and thicken them with displaced and marginalised experiences. Here, knowledge is produced in dialogue with the constellation of memories and orientations which, to paraphrase Carine Zaayman, characterise the experience of being-in-the-present but cannot, by definition, be archived.[33] These stories move us toward new narratives and future imaginings.

Cosmotechnical relationalities

Cosmotechnical relationalities extend architectural thought beyond the human. Coined by philosopher Yuk Hui, the neologism 'cosmotechnics' is taken up to foreground the technical practices that unify and mediate non-Western relations to the cosmos.[34] Within this framework, authors approach technological objects and multispecies ecologies as assemblages of becoming, 're-grounding technics' within specific cultural and cosmic relations rather than a universal technological order.[35] Revisiting selected pre-colonial African domesticities, Liana Psarologaki and Arinola Adefila develop a paraontology – a desedimented and partial ontology – of the broom.[36] Combining ecofeminist and new materialist theory with poetry and oral history, they position the broom-body assemblage as an eco-technical ritual that initiates and mediates relationships between domestic space, inhabitants and their environments. Thus, through the embodied act of sweeping, conceptualised as an architecture of care, ecosocial relations are transmitted.

Cosmotechnical thinking guides Courage Kpodo and Kathryn Chesebrough's dialogical exploration of arboreal architectures in the Upper West Akim region of Ghana and riparian environments of Nairobi, Kenya. Drawing on Akan cosmology, Kpodo proposes a series of speculative design interventions informed by cultivation traditions of the Avia tree along a path established by colonial cocoa producers. In these interventions, tree planting nurtures expanded forms of land stewardship that thicken and slow the path, reconnecting ecological and spiritual systems while multiplying spatiotemporal relations.[37] For Chesebrough, human-tree relationships organise networks of socioenvironmental care in Nairobi's flood-prone Mathare Valley, the second-largest urban informal settlement in Kenya. Citing the tacit knowledge through which youth-led organisations cultivate and maintain riparian sites, she speculates on the potential of designed arboreal infrastructures as a response to urban environmental risk. Together, the authors reposition architecture as a mediated coupling between human and non-human actors, in which ecological systems, spiritual practices and urban-rural processes are brought into dynamic relation.

Killian O'Dochartaigh provides a critical reflection on the counter-spatialities of the indigenous Twa who inhabit the Virunga Forest and Mountains, spanning Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Through participatory action research, he reveals the vibrant, unbounded forest-life ontologies through which the semi-nomadic Twa resist the colonial imaginaries that produced static national borders and exclusionary conservation regimes, which persist in state-led visions of the future. With the Twa, O'Dochartaigh explores countermapping as a collective eco-ethical praxis that intersects indigenous cosmologies with architectural drawing and animation. Through these 'hybrid relational ontologies', the Twa are reinstated within Virunga and 'new, if uneven, forms of dialogue between people, land and power' are initiated.

Architectures of relation: thinking and inhabiting the world otherwise

Across the contributions to this issue, Africa operates not as a site to which theory is applied but, echoing Mbembe's call, as a generative locus from which to imagine renewed forms of architectural thinking and practice.[38] Taken together, the entanglements of peoples, places, and

objects traced by the authors do not resolve into a singular epistemology, but instead constitute a heterogeneous field of situated perspectives and practices whose divergences are as productive as their resonances.[39] Through these lines of flight, the issue reworks the conceptual and material foundations of architecture. Architecture emerges less as a fixed object than as an assemblage-in-becoming through which socio-ecological, -technical, -economic, and -political relations are activated and mediated.[40] The boundaries between architectures, environments and bodies thus appear as thickened zones of negotiation – thresholds within which these relations are continuously recomposed.[41]

Within these shifting configurations, movement and performance emerge as central modes of epistemic production. From domestic rituals that transgress conventional notions of interiority in favour of embodied socio(eco) logical practices that perforate colonial hierarchies and regimes of visibility, the authors demonstrate how movement contests Euclidean space. In place of stable geometries, they foreground spatio-temporal fields of relation in which anticipation, suspension and incompletion function as technicities of futuring – of dreaming.[42] These potentialities are generated through the synchronisation, offsetting and crossing of multiple temporalities, from financial cycles and human lifetimes to arboreal growth and geological time. This orients the issue to considerations beyond the human, as authors centre multispecies partnerships and new materialist socialities in which agency is unevenly distributed across complex ecologies.[43]

The line between past and present is treated as similarly porous. Across the contributions, memory operates not as a fixed record but as an active, generative force.[44] Through anarchival practices, storytelling and autoethnography, authors reconfigure the status of history, unsettling its authority while opening it to reinterpretation.[45] In this way, *Footprint* 38 positions re-enchantment not as a return to lost wholeness, but as an ongoing attunement to the fluid proximities between people, place, and object – an invitation to think and inhabit the world otherwise.[46]

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Notes

1. Achille Mbembe, *Brutalism*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Duke University Press, 2024).
2. Here Mbembe echoes longstanding calls for endogenous knowledge production advanced by, among others: Paulin Hountondji, ed., *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails*, trans. Ayi Kwesi Armah (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997); Claude Ake, as described by Jeremiah O. Arowosegbe, 'Endogenous Knowledge and the Development Question in Africa', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2016): 611–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2015.1060692; and Archie Mafeje, as described in Jimi O. Adesina, 'Archie Mafeje and the Pursuit of Endogeny: Against Alterity and Extroversion', *Africa Development* 33, no. 4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.4314/ad.v33i4.57349.
3. Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275.
4. Recent initiatives include exhibitions such as *Diversity? You tell us* (2023) and *Indigenous Intelligence: Ancient knowledge* (2025)*;* workshops and seminars focused on *Urban Futures Otherwise: Feminist and Southern Perspectives* (2025), and *The Role of Positionality and Decolonial Perspectives in Research* (2024); courses such as *Architecture and Colonialism* (2025) and the accompanying exhibition *Reclaiming Space/ Reclaiming Narrative (2025)* (which were highly contested); student initiatives such as the symposium *Reframing Colonial Memory in the Public Realm* (2026); Ramón Grosfoguel, 'The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century', *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 73–90.
5. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 33, 132–188. In Barad's agential realism, matter and meaning are co-constitutive, and entities do not pre-exist their relations; rather, they emerge through relations. Intra-action, as a technical ontological claim, describes how phenomena are the primary units of reality, where relations precede relata, produced through 'agential cuts', which are not given in advance.
6. Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 170, 177. For Simondon, modulation is the process through which information operates. It is ongoing, context sensitive and dependent on metastable conditions where structure emerges through continuous interaction.
7. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning over a New Leaf* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 34.

8. Amina Mama, ‘Is It Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom’, *African Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (2007): 4, https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2005.0122.
9. Teju Cole, *Tremor* (New York: Random House, 2023).
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Re-Membering Africa* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2009).
12. Arturo Escobar, ‘Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South’, *AIBR, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 11, no. 1 (2016): 11–32, https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110102e.
13. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, ‘Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?: Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations’, in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 25.
14. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 30–58.
15. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 141. For Stiegler, technics constitutes a system of ‘tertiary retention’ through which temporal experience is mediated, producing a future that is always deferred, incomplete, and conditioned by externalised memory. Citing André Leroi-Gourhan, he says it is ‘*tekhnê*, that invents the human’, thus, technics goes beyond ‘tools’ or ‘technology’ and is not something external to the human, but is constitutive of the human through material exteriorisation of inorganic matter as technical accumulation that stores epiphylogenetic memory: ‘the human invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool – by becoming exteriorized techno-logically’. Also see Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 170, 177.
16. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 31–32, 37, 63, 151, 230, 288; Daniel W. Smith, *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 160–74, 175–88. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not a lack but a productive force immanent to social and economic systems. As Smith explains, ‘libidinal economy and political economy are one and the same thing… identical in nature’ (*Essays on Deleuze*, 162), such that ‘affects or drives form part of the infrastructure itself’ (ibid.,183, 323; *Anti-Oedipus*, 63). Desiring production and social production ‘are the same machines … but not at all the same regime’ (*Anti-Oedipus*, 288), with desire operating at a molecular level through ‘immanent syntheses’ (*Essays on Deleuze*, 163) that generate new relations and flows. Thus, desire is machinic; it connects flows and produces relations, ‘always implanting itself back into its production, such that “desiring-machines” function only on the condition that they are constantly breaking down’ (*Essays on Deleuze*, 163; *Anti-Oedipus*, 31–32, 37, 151, 230), meaning desire is unstable, generative, and constantly reconfiguring.
17. Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*, 19. Stiegler understands technics as the exteriorisation of memory through ‘organised inorganic matter’, producing temporal relations and collective knowledge (Technics and Time, 19). He describes this as epiphylogenesis: the accumulation of experience outside the body in technical systems.
18. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 23, 208, 212, 260, 264; Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, trans. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 11–12. Deleuze defines the virtual as ‘fully real in so far as it is virtual’, opposed not to the real but to the actual (*Difference and Repetition*, 208). Virtual multiplicities function as differential structures whose actualisation proceeds through divergence rather than resemblance (*Difference and Repetition*, 212, 264), preserving the openness of what is to come. The virtual designates a field of real but non-actual potential, thus the imaginary is not opposed to the real but precedes it, forming a pre-individual field whose relations generate the real, since ‘the real, the imaginary and their relations are always engendered secondarily by the functioning of the structure’ (*Desert Islands,*11–12). Therefore, problems are not merely questions in thought; they are ‘extra-propositional’ structures (virtual) that exist independently of their solutions (actual), acting as the genetic power that generates sense.
19. Deleuze, ‘Chapter II: Repetition for Itself’, in *Difference and Repetition*, 70–129. For Deleuze, habit is a ‘passive synthesis’ that ‘contracts’ repetition into a lived present; it is ontogenetic (it produces being since it is pre-reflective and forms the subject) such that the subject is not the ground of habit, but habit is the ground of the subject. Similarly, it is temporal and immanent, since it constitutes the present as duration. Thus, inhabiting space is not the expression of a prior subject but the local stabilisation of a pre-individual field of forces. This departs from Bourdieu’s concept of inhabiting space, which reflects a socially structured habitus (durable dispositions shaped by position in a field), since for Deleuze it designates how subjects themselves are produced through immanent contractions of repetition rather than through the reproduction of already constituted social structures.
20. Leda Maria Martins, *Performances of Spiral Time,* trans. Bruna Barros and Jess Oliveira (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478061434-003.
21. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 8–78; Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy: Volume 1: The Future of Work*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 1–70; Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society, Volume 1: The*

Future of Work, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 19–40. Grammatisation, as developed by Bernard Stiegler, refers to the process by which continuous flows of experience, such as gesture, speech and movement, are discretised into reproducible elements that can be recorded, transmitted and recomposed, allowing memory to be organised, iterated and transformed, in line with his broader account of tertiary retention as the technical exteriorisation of experience. For background, see *Technics and Time, 1* and *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. This is formally developed in *For a New Critique of Political Economy* and *Automatic Society* vol. 1.

22. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 102–24, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373452-004. For Sharpe the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblackness as 'the singularity' (106).
23. Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 19–20, 29–30, 275–77. Following Stiegler's account of technics as a milieu of tertiary retention that conditions perception and subjectivity, 'fog' may be understood as a diffuse technical milieu through which social, political and racialised relations are mediated, while 'floating' describes a situated mode of navigating the disorientation produced within such milieus. Drawing on Simondon's conception of the 'individual-milieu coupling', where 'individuation is … ontogenetic only insofar as it is an operation of the complete being … a partial and relative resolution that manifests in a system which contains potentials and includes a certain incompatibility with respect to itself' (3–4), individuation unfolds within a metastable equilibrium: a relational field of policy, media, labour and race, rather than among isolated entities. Such fields condition perception, movement and affect. Atmospheric formations such as fog can thus be read as relational milieus through which social and perceptual conditions are co-constituted, while 'floating' designates a mode of inhabiting the pre-individual, sustaining indeterminacy rather than resolving it into fixed form.
24. Gail Lewis, 'Questions of Presence', *Feminist Review* 117, no. 1 (2017): 4, 8, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0088-1.
25. Deborah A. Miranda, 'When My Body Is the Archive', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2018): 125–26, https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.42.2.miranda.
26. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1, 105, 208. Here, Deleuze argues that 'the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual' (208). Memory is immanent – a non-representational, embodied becoming re-actualised through repetition: 'not generality … repetition and resemblance are different in kind' (1). The body is not a container but a site of intensities and repetitions (208), and 'we do not repeat because we repress; we repress because we repeat' (105).
27. Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 141. For Stiegler, memory is always a technical and prosthetic process of exteriorization, such that 'the human invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool – by becoming exteriorised techno-logically'.
28. Simondon, *Individuation*, 19–20, 29–30, 275–77. Read through Simondon's account of individuation as metastable and processual, memory can be understood as performative rather than archival: the body operates as an an-archival medium through which memory is continually re-enacted rather than stored. Brian Massumi, 'Working principles' and 'Materializations of the anarchive: anarchival propositions' in *The Go-To How-To Guide to Anarchiving,* ed. Andrew Murphie (Montréal: The Senselab, 2016), 6, 45–46. For Massumi, the concept of the anarchive is extended through embodied practices in which the body becomes a site of inscription and transmission. 'It is activated in the relays: between media, between verbal and material expressions … a kind of event derivative, or surplus-value of the event' (6), such that memory persists through variation and continuous becoming. What emerges is a conception of distributed, processual technicity, synthesising Stiegler's account of technical memory, Deleuze's notion of becoming, and Simondon's individuation with an anarchival logic of activation and transformation. Also see Marie Topp and Emily Jeffries, 'Collective self-interview: the body as anarchive', in *The Go-To How-To Guide to Anarchiving*, 77–79.
29. Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.
30. Walter D. Mignolo, 'Prophets Facing Sidewise: The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference', *Social Epistemology* 19, no. 1 (2005): 111–27, https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/02691720500084325.
31. Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
32. Massumi, 'Working Principles'. A reactivatable 'repertory of traces' and carriers of potential; 'not inert … [but] triggering events, not documentation of a past … [but a] feed-forward mechanism … never contained in any particular archive or object … [but] made of the formative movements going into and coming out of the archive … made of formative tendencies; compositional forces seeking a new taking-form'.
33. Carine Zaayman, *Anarchival Practices: The Clanwilliam Arts Project as Re-Imagining Custodianship of the Past* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), 13–14.
34. Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016), 19–20, 29–30; Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 29. Hui defines cosmotechnics as 'the unification between the cosmic order and the moral order through technical activities' (*Technology*

in China, 20; *Recursivity*, 29), arguing that 'technics is always cosmotechnics' (*Technology in China*, 19). Against the universality of modern technology, Hui insists on a plurality of 'multiple cosmotechnics in different cultures … necessary to reconstruct the genesis of technicities … with their own cosmic specificity'. Drawing on Simondon, he describes cosmotechnics as a 'reattachment of the figure to the ground', not as a return to unity but as a bifurcation into 'a multiplicity of cosmotechnics with different relations to different grounds' (*Recursivity*, 29-30).

35. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 42–50, 166–83; Smith, *Essays on Deleuze*, 3–27, 122–45. For Deleuze, becoming is a process without fixed endpoints, defined by continuous variation rather than stable identity. It unfolds through relational assemblages and multiplicities – between bodies, systems, and environments – such that 'there is only desire and the social', produced by desiring-machines that distribute states of being and becoming across intensities (*Anti-Oedipus*, 183; *Essays on Deleuze*, 124), between whole and parts, an ongoing 'processes of becoming, and returns' (*Anti-Oedipus,*42), a proliferation and accumulation of bifurcations (*Essays on Deleuze*, 26, 124). Within such assemblages (e.g., broom–body, tree–land), 'desiring-machines … never exist independently of the … social formations that they constitute', and, as they function within social machines (*Anti-Oedipus,*183), ritual operates as a cosmotechnical transmission of becoming.
36. See, for instance: Nahum D. Chandler, 'Paraontology; or, Notes on the Practical Theoretical Politics of Thought', Society for the Humanities Annual Culler Lecture in Critical Theory, 15 October 2018, 1h 59 min, https://vimeo.com/297769615; Fred Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–80, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2345261.
37. Hui, *Recursivity*, 275. Here, the cosmos is not external to technical practice but operates as an organic order, analogically related to the body and enacted through cultivation. The 'cosmos is organic insofar as it is analogical to the body'.
38. Mbembe, *Brutalism*.
39. *Decolonization*, 34; Mama, *Is It Ethical to Study Africa?*, 4; Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 575–599; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Mama critique the dominance of Western epistemologies and call for a plurality of knowledge systems grounded in diverse historical and geopolitical contexts, while Haraway rejects universal epistemologies in favour of partial, embodied, and context-specific perspectives.
40. Simondon, *Technical Objects*, 170, 177. For Simondon, modulation describes the continuous transformation of relational systems through which structure emerges from metastable conditions rather than fixed form. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33, 132–88. Barad's theory of intra-action holds that relations are not external connections between entities but the very processes through which entities emerge.
41. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88. 'On the one hand, it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand, it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies'.
42. Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, 25. Wynter frames storytelling and imagination as practices through which new forms of life and social reality are actively produced. Her work on Black geographies demonstrates how racialised subjects produce alternative spatial practices that disrupt dominant, abstract spatial logics. She argues that new futures emerge through the re-narration of the human, where storytelling and imagination function as foundational modes of world-making.
43. Escobar, *Thinking-Feeling with the Earth*, 11–32; Hui, *Technology in China*, 19–20, 29–30; *Recursivity*, 29–30, 275.
44. Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*, 141.
45. Massumi, 'Working principles' and 'Materializations'. Anarchival practices treat archives as sites of activation and reinterpretation rather than fixed repositories of truth. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o conceptualises memory as a process of 're-membering' that actively reconstructs relations disrupted by colonial histories, advocating for relational modes of knowing that foreground interconnectedness between people, place, and material worlds. Hartman's method of critical fabulations combines archival research, critical theory, and fictional narrative to reimagine the lives of people whose stories have been silenced or erased by history. Ngũgĩ, *Re-Membering Africa*.
46. Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 5. Mbembe describes re-enchantment as a mode of restoring relational vitality and imaginative possibility against reductive material logics: 'in Afrofuturism, the invention of a new world is a vibratory act. This act proceeds from what we could call radical imagination. The vibratory act is characterized by its straddling and going beyond the given and its constraints.'

Biography

Gert van der Merwe was born and grew up in Namibia. He moved to South Africa to study, graduating from the University of Pretoria with an MProf Arch (2014), where he subsequently established a practice and taught until 2020. In 2022, he returned to Namibia, where he teaches at Namibia University of Science and Technology. In 2023, he became a research associate at the Gobabeb Namib Research Institute and enrolled at TU Delft for a PhD titled *Water: Flow, Code and Stock – A Rhizomatic Genealogy of the Political Ecology in Namibia*, and in 2024, he joined the editorial board of *Footprint*.

Serah Calitz examines mining's design of water, energy and food in twentieth-century South Africa for the MineLives project, a bilateral research grant between the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at TU Delft and the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand. She completed her professional degree in architecture with distinction at TU Delft in 2018. Serah has worked in professional practice for MVRDV and OMA and has exhibited work at VI PER Gallery (2025), Lisbon Architecture Triennale (2025), International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (2022), and Dutch Design Week (2019).

Assimilated Inhabitability: (Black Bodies) Floating in the (White) Fog

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Abstract
This article examines the socio-spatial conditions surrounding Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the early 2000s, a period shaped by the slow transformations of Swiss feminist emancipation following women's suffrage in 1971, and by increased African migration to Europe in the wake of liberation movements across the continent. While Switzerland cultivated an image of neutrality, progress and order, these decades were also structured by diffuse racial-sexual hostilities. Drawing on Christina Sharpe's notion of 'the weather' as an anti-Black climate, I introduce 'the fog' as both metaphor and materiality to describe the ecology of hostility shaping Black women's lived experiences in Zurich. Through oral archives, biographical accounts, and feminist spatial theory, the article traces three operative phenomena of the fog: condensity, through which racial-sexual violence thickens around Black womanhood; floating, describing states of suspension and disorientation within everyday spatial and juridical encounters through which Black women's presences unsettle hostile environments; and grounding, visible in collective formations such as the *Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen* (1993–2010). These practices reveal how Black women's geographies in Switzerland emerged through improvisations of survival, refusal and relation within hostile urban atmospheres. The fog thus operates as a spatial and conceptual frame for apprehending anti-Blackness in Switzerland while foregrounding Black feminist strategies of endurance and world-making within its lingering climate.

Keywords
Blackness, spatiality, inhabitability, world-making, Switzerland, geography

One sentence summary
This article theorises 'the fog' as a spatial metaphor for anti-Blackness in Zurich, tracing Black women's strategies of survival, grounding, and world-making within hostile socio-spatial conditions.

Entering the fog

In the fog, one floats: fearful, cautious, slowed. Orientation becomes unstable and distance collapses. Movement is governed less by sight than by hesitation, touch, and an acute awareness of other bodies nearby. Fog disrupts the assumption that space is immediately legible or that movement unfolds along clear trajectories. Instead, it produces suspension: of direction, of certainty, of arrival. Yet within this suspension, and particularly in the conscious presence of others moving through the same atmospheric condition, new modes of relation become possible. Fog, in this sense, does not merely exist as background or setting; it operates. It structures how bodies move, how they encounter one another, and how they endure space.

This understanding of fog as an operative socio-spatial condition was sharpened for me through an encounter

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with artist Olafur Eliasson's *Din blinde passager*.[1] Entering the installation involves moving through a 39m long, 1.5m wide corridor saturated with dense mist, where visibility is reduced to less than two metres. [Fig. 1] Silhouettes emerge and dissolve; proximity oscillates between comfort and eeriness. Vision no longer governs orientation, and the body is compelled to navigate through other sensory registers. The work does not explain fog; it subjects the body to it. In so doing, it offers a momentary but visceral sense of how atmosphere can function as a spatial force; one that disorients, suspends, and yet remains relational. It is this sense of fog as an active condition – one that shapes perception, movement and sociality – that I take up in this article to think through the socio-spatial environments surrounding Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the 2000s. Fog is mobilised here not solely as an illustrative metaphor, nor as an aesthetic device, but as a way of apprehending how hostility, opacity and disorientation are materially and spatially organised in the city. 'The fog' names an ecology of racial-sexual violence that operates across scales, from everyday encounters to administrative and juridical structures, producing conditions in which Black foreign women are held in states of suspension and uncertainty.

African American Black studies academic Christina Sharpe's phrase 'the weather' offers critical language for naming the conditions that render Black life perpetually vulnerable in the afterlives of slavery and colonialism. In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,* Sharpe develops the weather as a conceptual register for understanding how anti-Blackness operates as an ongoing atmospheric condition rather than a series of discrete events.[2] For Sharpe, the weather is not something one passes through, nor an external environment that can be escaped. It is the total climate produced by histories of racial violence; a condition that saturates social, political and intimate life, shaping what is possible, perceptible and survivable. The weather insists on duration. It names how anti-Blackness is sustained not only through spectacular acts of violence, but through slow, ordinary, and often imperceptible forms of attrition.

In this article I take Sharpe's conceptual offering as a point of departure to think with – and through – what I propose to call 'the fog'. If the weather names the broader atmospheric condition of anti-Blackness, the fog allows for a more spatially and situated specific articulation of how this condition is lived, navigated and endured in Zurich.[3] Fog condenses. It limits visibility without enclosing. It produces uncertainty without clear boundaries. It suspends bodies in space rather than forcibly expelling them. As both metaphor and materiality, the fog becomes a way of apprehending how racial-sexual hostility in Switzerland operates not through overt racial regimes alone, but through opacity, administrative diffusion, social coldness, and the spatial management of presence and (not) belonging.

From afar, Switzerland has long cultivated – and continues to maintain – an image of holistic flawlessness. Over the last century, its national brand has been shaped by consolidated and punctual infrastructures, a fair and sober social life, and a politics of neutrality. While elements of this image hold some merit, its persistent and totalising force functions as a mask. It obscures the conservative and regressive socio-political conditions that have historically structured life in Switzerland and that continue to hinder social progress, particularly for those subjected to racial-sexual violence. These conditions are rarely announced. Rather, they are embedded in everyday spatial practices: in bureaucratic procedures, inaccessible housing markets, gendered labour regimes, selective migration policies, and the quiet disciplining of bodies deemed out of place. In this contribution I focus particularly on the socio-spatial conditions surrounding Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the 2000s, a period marked by intensified African migration to Europe, and in the Swiss case, increasing feminist initiatives and demands, following the remarkably late 1971 achievement of Swiss women's suffrage.[4]

During the colder months, Zurich is recurrently enveloped in dense fog – an ordinary meteorological phenomenon that slows movement, blurs orientation and dampens perception.

> Fog occurs mainly in the cooler months in the low-lying areas on the northern side of the Alps. The weather-station location of Zurich-Kloten is a typical example from the region. Here, the autumn months top the charts when it comes to fog. It is not unusual to see fog every three to four days in October.[5]

Read alongside Zurich's global reputation as one of the safest and most stable cities in the world, this fog becomes instructive.[6] It exposes how, even within a context celebrated for order, security and liveability, violence against Black women has persisted, not always through overt exclusion, but through forms of suspension, attrition and slow suffocation that unfold within the very infrastructures of safety. By situating Black women's experiences within this context, I join broader scholarly efforts to nuance dominant narratives of Swiss history by accounting for racialised and gendered lives that have been rendered peripheral, temporary or invisible.[7]

My positionality frames this analysis. I am a Black woman from South Africa, now living, rooting and making a home in Zurich. I write from within an institute for the history and theory of architecture, engaging oral archives and

biographical accounts of Black women whose trajectories resonate with my own insofar as they too arrived at a similar age and lived as foreign bodies in the fog. At the same time, their lives unfolded within distinctly different generational, political and socio-spatial conditions that demand careful attention. Writing from this position, I attend to the spatial operations of the fog in Zurich – both as a literal atmospheric phenomenon and as a conceptual device for apprehending racial-sexual violence – and to the everyday improvisations through which Black foreign women navigated these hostile environments. By attending to what I call the condensity of the fog surrounding Black foreign women during this period, I seek to expand feminist histories of Zurich, while foregrounding the spatial world-making practices that emerged from within conditions of suspension.[8] Rather than imagining a lifting of the fog, the analysis traces how Black foreign women lived with it: floating, haunting and grounding the spaces that sought to suspend them. In this sense, Black women take on the figure of shadowed ghosts, floating in white fog.

In this article I approach the socio-spatial conditions of anti-Blackness experienced by Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the early 2000s through fog as an operative socio-spatial phenomenon. It is structured around three interrelated operations of the fog. I begin by theorising how the fog is spatially organised in Zurich and introduce condensity as a way of naming the compounded yet often diffuse and difficult-to-name forms of racial-sexual violence that thicken around Black womanhood in uneven ways, depending on class, legal status, education, language and access to social networks. The second section turns to floating as a tactical mode of inhabitation through which Black women navigated space without secure ground, remaining active, responsive and improvisational within conditions of suspension. Reading the distinctly different biographies of Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, Paula Charles and Dinahlee Obey Siering, I show how such suspension was differentially lived and negotiated. In the final section I examine grounding through the *Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen* (1993–2010), a self-organised site of political, social and affective gathering that cultivated proximity, recognition and collective presence within hostile urban conditions.[9] Moving across these operations does not lift the fog. Rather, it offers a spatial vocabulary for tracing how Black foreign women endured, negotiated, and at times reworked the conditions that sought to suspend them.

The condensity of the fog: structural violence and everyday life in Zurich

Sharpe conceptualises 'the weather' as the total climate produced by anti-Blackness – a climate in which premature death is rendered normative rather than exceptional.[10] The weather does not describe discrete acts of violence, but the environments in which Black life is lived and constrained: environments structured by repetition, accumulation and duration. It is within this framework that Black suffering becomes spatially organised, historically sustained and often rendered ordinary. I propose 'the fog' as a Zurich-specific condensation of Sharpe's weather. The fog does not replace the weather. It specifies – as metaphor and situated materiality – how that climate is spatially and atmospherically articulated in a city that disavows racism through narratives of neutrality, order and humanitarianism. The fog is situated in and specific to Zurich, in that it socially and spatially limits visibility without enclosure, produces uncertainty without spectacle, and suspends bodies rather than immediately and explicitly expelling them. It is within the fog that the biographies introduced in the next section become legible not as isolated experiences, but as patterned encounters with a hostile socio-spatial environment.

Sharpe insists that the weather produces its own ecology. In this context, ecology denotes the relational field in which bodies, institutions, and spaces are mutually constitutive.[11] The fog's ecology in Zurich is composed of innumerable particles: migration policies, gendered labour regimes, controlling images, bureaucratic procedures, and everyday encounters in public and domestic space.[12] These particles do not operate independently; they accumulate, thicken and linger. The question, then, is not whether racism exists in Switzerland – feminist scholar Noémi Michel has spent much time highlighting the 'raceless' denial logic the Swiss state upholds while paradoxically and simultaneously exercising racial violence through racial profiling – but how it becomes spatially organised and lived as atmosphere.[13]

Sharpe reminds us that the weather encompasses the totality of our environments – a climate structured by anti-Blackness that determines what can be seen, acknowledged and lived. As mentioned in the introduction, Switzerland is frequently cast as the poster child of a progressive and transparent state with its international image carefully curated through alpine landscapes, crystal-clear lakes, punctual infrastructure, political neutrality, cultural-linguistic diversity, and the moral authority of the Geneva Convention. This postcard image operates as a surface of clarity. Yet, like fog, it obscures what lies beneath: the storage of Nazi gold in Swiss banks during the Second World War; the financing of South African apartheid-era extraction economies in the 1970s; and the reliance on racially stratified, seasonally restricted Italian labour to construct Switzerland's pristine infrastructure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Switzerland's



Fig. 1: Olafur Eliasson, *Din blinde passager*, 2010. Photo: Thilo Frank / Studio Olafur Eliasson.



Fig. 2: *Yearnings for Homeplace, from Within the Nuclear Family House*, 2024. Image: author.

self-presentation as an exemplary modern nation is inseparable from these entanglements. Its political neutrality functions not as absence, but as a strategy of externalisation where colonial and racial violence are displaced elsewhere, allowing the internally and externally projected image of order, cleanliness and transparency to remain intact.

This double face of modernity and coloniality is central to understanding the spatial conditions analysed in this article.[14] The fog, in this sense, does not contradict Switzerland's politics of clarity; it enables them. Ironically, entering the fog becomes a way of demystifying the postcard, rendering visible the infrastructures of concealment through which injustice is kept out of sight and out of mind. As mentioned, many Swiss scholars have shown that racism in Switzerland functions precisely through its public denial. The editors of *Racial Profiling* argue that racialisation operates through institutions and everyday practices because 'race' is officially disavowed as a meaningful category.[15] The contributions in the volume further demonstrate how this disavowal enables structural racism to persist through policing, border regimes, and the regulation of movement and visibility. Racism appears not as ideology, but as procedure – as something that happens routinely, politely, and often without acknowledgment. The fog names the experiential register of this procedural violence, which sustains an anti-Black ecology.

This ecology suspends Black bodies within it, holding them above the ground – some at a greater distance than others. While the fog does not distribute its effects evenly, it engulfs the Black body without exception. What varies is not exposure, but condensity: the degree to which hostility thickens around a life depending on class position, legal status, education, language and proximity to social networks. This understanding of racism as an atmospheric and structural condition resonates with Swiss scholars who have shown how racialisation in Switzerland operates through institutions and everyday practices precisely because it is publicly disavowed as racism.[16] Rather than appearing as overt ideology, racism is routed through administrative procedures, policing, migration regimes, and the regulation of belonging. Swiss scholars in *Un/doing Race* insist that racism in Switzerland must be understood as a structural phenomenon – one that organises space, movement and visibility, while remaining largely unnamed within dominant narratives of neutrality and order.[17] This insight is crucial for thinking about the fog as a socio-spatial condition: hostility does not announce itself, but accumulates through routine bureaucratic encounters and everyday spatial governance. The fog, in this sense, is not simply metaphorical. It names how anti-Blackness becomes atmospheric: felt as uncertainty, exposure and isolation rather than as a single identifiable event.

Floating in the fog: suspensions in Black women's biographies

Black women in Switzerland have developed a range of responses to endure the fog. These responses do not necessarily confront or dispel it, nor do they always produce forms of resolution or escape. Rather, they function as survival mechanisms – ways of getting by within an atmosphere from which one cannot simply exit. I conceptualise these practices as floating. This departs from the common understanding of floating as a state of being 'not settled permanently; fluctuating or variable'.[18] This conceptual move draws on Black feminist geographic thought, particularly gender studies scholar Katherine McKittrick's insistence that Black women's lives are produced through uneven spatial possibilities through what she terms 'cartographies of struggle', in which domination and invention coexist.[19] Floating names a condition in which Black women inhabit space without secure ground, yet remain active, responsive and improvisational within that suspension.

Floating also resonates with Swiss social anthropologist Serena O. Dankwa's work on Black women's everyday negotiations of intimacy, labour and belonging in Switzerland, which foregrounds how gendered racialisation is lived through ordinary social relations rather than exceptional moments of violence.[20] Building on this insight, floating describes not passive drifting, but tactical inhabitation: a way of remaining present within hostile environments that do not allow for full settlement. It is a spatial condition shaped by constraint, but also by the ongoing labour of endurance. Black foreign women floated in Zurich with varying degrees of proximity to the ground, determined largely by their conditions of arrival. Those who arrived poor, uneducated, without situated language or local social ties were often suspended further upward, held in heightened states of isolation, exposure and precarity. For those who arrived with education, financial stability or access to Swiss social networks, the fog still surrounded them, but their feet remained closer to the ground. This intersectional – to use critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw's term – differentiation echoes analyses and reflections in the work of Swiss feminist scholars and activists Rahel El-Maawi and Jovita dos Santos Pinto, who show from a second generation diasporic perspective, how racialisation in Switzerland is unevenly distributed across classed and gendered lines, producing differentiated experiences of vulnerability rather than uniform exclusion.[21]

With the increase of Black populations in Central Europe during the 1970s, the presence of Black foreign women in Switzerland also grew. These arrivals were shaped by distinct and often overlapping migration pathways. As sociologist and gender studies scholar Sarah Schilliger has demonstrated in her work on migration and labour regimes,

these pathways were deeply entangled with gendered expectations, economic dependency and state control.[22] Some women arrived through marriages to white Swiss men, at times consensual and at other times embedded in racialised gender economies. Others arrived through educational programmes that afforded limited social mobility. A smaller number migrated by choice in response to a globalising labour market. Many more arrived under conditions of catastrophe and displacement, seeking asylum. What unites these trajectories is not sameness, but suspension. Conditions of arrival shaped how Black foreign women floated in Zurich, determining the condensity of the fog they encountered and the strategies they developed to endure it. Drawing on a brief qualitative reading of three distinctly different biographies of Black women who arrived in Switzerland from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, the following section foregrounds floating as part of a broader spatial vocabulary for understanding safety, exposure and the absence of secure ground in Zurich.

Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli arrived in Switzerland in the late 1970s; she was from Kenya with a relatively middle-class background. Zurich was a study destination, and her relocation was facilitated by education, mobility and later marriage to a Swiss man. Yet despite this proximity to institutional access and cultural familiarity, her everyday life was marked by profound isolation. Living in the agglomeration of Zurich, embedded in a conservative suburban landscape, her cultural and social needs were not met. She recalls:

> Where I came from, there were no housewives. Now I was suddenly sitting there, in the Zurich suburbs of the 1980s, and I was a housewife. I spoke German, took part in flea markets organised by the women's association in the village and always greeted my neighbours with a hearty *Grüezi*. But there was a loneliness inside me that kept spreading. When I gave birth to my daughters, I was alone. My husband had been given just one day off work for the births. There was no room where I could sit and talk with other women: about our lives, the children, everyday life, the men. I missed the exchange of information about the village, family, friends and girlfriends. Yes, I even missed the gossip. I was sitting there with a husband who worked outside the home every day, two small children, polite neighbours and a very clean flat. As a young Black mother and wife in the countryside near Zurich, I lived completely isolated from the Black community. I had to find other Black women in whom I could mirror myself in order to survive in this foreign territory and for the sake of my mental health.[23]

Zeedah's experience illustrates how the fog suspends not only through material deprivation, but through the social exclusions embedded in everyday suburban life; spaces that appear orderly, clean and hospitable, yet function as sites of profound isolation for racialised women. [Fig. 2]

Around the same time, in the late 1970s, Paula Charles arrived in Switzerland from St. Lucia via decades spent in London. Her arrival was marked by extreme precarity. Poor and determined to escape an abusive life, she entered Switzerland legally on an 'artist's visa', believing she had secured work as a performer. Instead, she became one of many women who were unwillingly duped into working as go-go dancers and coerced into performing sex work. She had no local ties, no money, no language, and no formal education. Throughout the 1980s, she was thrust into the fog; rendered invisible to educated and elite society, while simultaneously hyper-visible through racialised and sexualised controlling images of Black foreign women. As defined by African American critical race theorist Patricia Hill Collins, controlling images are produced by media and institutions, and are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable forms of everyday life.[24]

In her autobiographical book *Soul Stripping*, Charles recalls one of her early journeys through Switzerland:

> One of the first small villages I recall working in was called Lomiswil. I had to take the train there from Zurich. Back in those days there were very few Black people. I sat on the train, shy and not knowing where I was really going. I had to ask the conductor to tell me where to get off. He punched my ticket and seemed happy to have someone of another colour on the train. There was a man sitting next to me and a couple across from me. The couple stared at me without blinking. I felt like sticking my tongue out at them. Later I was angry with myself for not changing my seat. But I figured it would just be the same shit. Never have I been able to sit in comfort on a bus or train in Switzerland. I sat there, not knowing what to do with myself, moving my hands nervously and trying to get rid of other passengers' attention by looking out the window at the beautiful snow scenery going by. But my neck started to hurt from keeping my head turned for so long. I wanted to turn my head back but didn't know how. I was so conscious of that staring couple.[25]

Unlike Meierhofer-Mangeli, Charles's suspension reveals how infrastructural efficiency – punctual trains, seamless mobility – can coexist with suffocating hostility. Movement through the city was possible, yet never neutral or comfortable. The fog here condensed not through isolation, but through exposure.

A decade later, in 1992, Dinahlee Obey Siering arrived in Switzerland from Liberia via several years in the United States. Her trajectory was shaped by catastrophe and displacement, following the outbreak of the Liberian civil war in 1989. After precarious periods in Sierra Leone and Guinea,

she travelled to the United States as an asylum seeker before relocating to Switzerland with her Swiss-resident husband. Her legal status was tethered to marriage. Since 1992, Swiss citizenship is no longer granted automatically through marriage; instead, applicants must meet residency and duration requirements, namely, they must have been married to a Swiss citizen for at least three years and have resided in Switzerland for five years.[26] Dinahlee recalls a decisive rupture:

> In 1996, the marriage broke down and I was deported. My residence permit was linked to my husband's employment. Anyone who had been married for less than three years had to leave the country after the separation. We divorced six months before the three years were up – we just couldn't be together anymore. We were angry with each other and couldn't stand it anymore. I was very lucky. I was one of the very few who was able to stay despite being deported. I knew people who hired a good lawyer. My lawyer was knowledgeable about immigration issues. It was terrible to receive those letters from the immigration police. Letters with cold words.[27]

Dinahlee's account exposes the juridical dimensions of suspension. Immigration law, gender dependency and racialised state power converged to hold her life in limbo, suspending her between belonging and expulsion. Returning to Liberia in 1996 would have resulted in possible death, given that more than 250 000 people were killed during the wars between 1989 and 2003.[28] That she was able to remain in Switzerland was contingent not on protection, but on exceptional access to legal support. Her narrative demonstrates how the fog condenses through law, producing prolonged uncertainty rather than immediate removal.

Taken together, these biographies reveal suspensions in the fog – moments of disorientation, exposure and precarious survival. Floating, however, names not passive drifting, but tactical improvisation: a way of navigating atmospheres thick with hostility while still searching for kinship, mobility and belonging. These vignettes are not offered as representative in a statistical sense, but as spatially and historically situated accounts that foreground how some Black women's lives in Zurich were shaped by uneven access to ground. Paula Charles's account of moving through Switzerland's rail infrastructure – punctual and efficient yet suffocating – illustrates how mobility can coexist with hostility. The train, often celebrated as an emblem of Swiss order, becomes a site where Black presence is rendered hyper-visible through staring, surveillance and discomfort. Similarly, the suburban domestic spaces described by Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli – clean, quiet and socially regulated – operate as zones of isolation rather than refuge. In both cases, the fog is produced not through overt exclusion, but through spatial arrangements that restrict relationality and belonging.

The ecology of the fog is further sustained by controlling images. In Switzerland, these images circulate powerfully in public space. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) campaign poster from 2007 advocating the deportation of 'criminal foreigners', visually encoded through the expulsion of a black sheep, is exemplary.[29] Plastered across streets, train stations and bus stops, the image collapses Blackness into criminality and foreignness, saturating everyday space with racialised suspicion. That this initiative was successfully passed in 2010 – ten years after state-commissioned reports documenting racism – demonstrates how the fog persists even when its effects are publicly acknowledged.[30] The recent (2023) SVP campaign, which was deposited as a printed flyer in the mailbox of every resident in Switzerland, demonstrates the racist narrow-minded perspective the state upholds and propagates through controlling images and spatial imaginaries of urbanity and countryside. These images suggest that Black life is crowded, chaotic, poor, and that it exhausts urban infrastructure, against an idealised Swiss life that is spacious, orderly, clean and reflected in the endless pastures of the countryside. The latter is imagined and imaged as normative and aspirational for people who are white, Swiss, heterosexual and conform to the nuclear family.[31] [Fig. 3]

The first national study conducted from the perspective of Black researchers, *Schwarze Menschen in der Schweiz: Ein Leben zwischen Integration und Diskriminierung,* documents repeated experiences of anti-Black hostility in public space: seats left empty on public transport, glances charged with suspicion, assumptions of illegality.[32] These accounts resonate directly with Charles's description of bodily self-surveillance on the train, and with the hesitation and avoidance she describes as routine. Such encounters are not episodic; they accumulate, forming an ecology in which everyday movement becomes affectively and socially constrained. The fog thickens further at the intersection of race and gender as evidenced by critical Black Swiss feminist scholars in *Un/doing Race*. For Black foreign women, this unevenness is intensified by gendered dependency embedded in migration and family law. Dinahlee Obey Siering's account of receiving deportation letters after the breakdown of her marriage exemplifies how juridical space functions as a site of suspension. The letter – cold, administrative and spatially distant – becomes a socio-spatial device of control, holding her life between expulsion and conditional belonging.

These racial-sexual violences unfolded within a broader gendered infrastructure that structured women's lives in Switzerland during the 1980s to 2000s. Despite the introduction of the right for women to vote in 1971 and the



Jetzt 10-Millionen-Schweiz stoppen!

Das sind die Folgen der masslosen Zuwanderung:

- Kaum mehr bezahlbare Wohnungen
- Klassenzimmer mit Schweizer Kindern in der Minderheit
- Noch mehr importierte Kriminalität
- Milliardenteures Asylchaos
- Überall Baustellen und noch mehr Beton
- Immer noch mehr Staus auf den Strassen
- Explodierende Krankenkassenprämien
- Schlägereien zwischen rivalisierenden ausländischen Gruppen

Jetzt ist der Moment zum Stopp sagen! Wir wollen keine 10-Millionen-Schweiz. Mit einer kontrollierten Zuwanderung schützen wir uns, unsere Kinder und unsere Natur. Ihre Wahl entscheidet!

Am 22. Oktober SVP wählen! Jede Stimme zählt!

Mit einer Spende auf IBAN CH83 0023 5235 8557 0001 Y unterstützen Sie unsere Kampagne. Herzlichen Dank!
SVP Schweiz, Postfach, 3001 Bern, **www.svp.ch**

SCHWEIZER QUALITÄT
SVP
Die Partei des Mittelstandes

Fig. 3: Schweizerische Volkspartei der Schweiz (SVP). ‘Jetzt 10-Millionen-Schweiz stoppen!’ (‘Stop 10-Million-Switzerland Now’), 2023.

proliferation of feminist organising that followed, the nuclear family remained the dominant spatial and economic unit. Drawing on Silvia Federici's critique of reproductive labour, it becomes clear that domestic space functioned as a site of extraction and confinement.[33] Limited parental leave, prohibitive childcare costs, and the shockingly late criminalisation of domestic violence in 1990, rendered the home a precarious space – particularly for foreign women without access to extended kinship networks.[34] Zeedah's isolation within the suburban household must be read against this structural backdrop. McKittrick's work on Black women's geographies helps clarify the spatial stakes of these conditions. She argues that Black women are repeatedly positioned within spaces deemed uninhabitable, in other words, spaces where presence is denied ontological grounding.[35] The fog's ecology produces precisely such conditions. Floating therefore names the way Black women survived within this environment: not by resolving the fog, but by improvising modes of inhabitation within suspension. The operations and ecologies traced here thus constitute the structural conditions that make floating necessary, uneven and enduring.

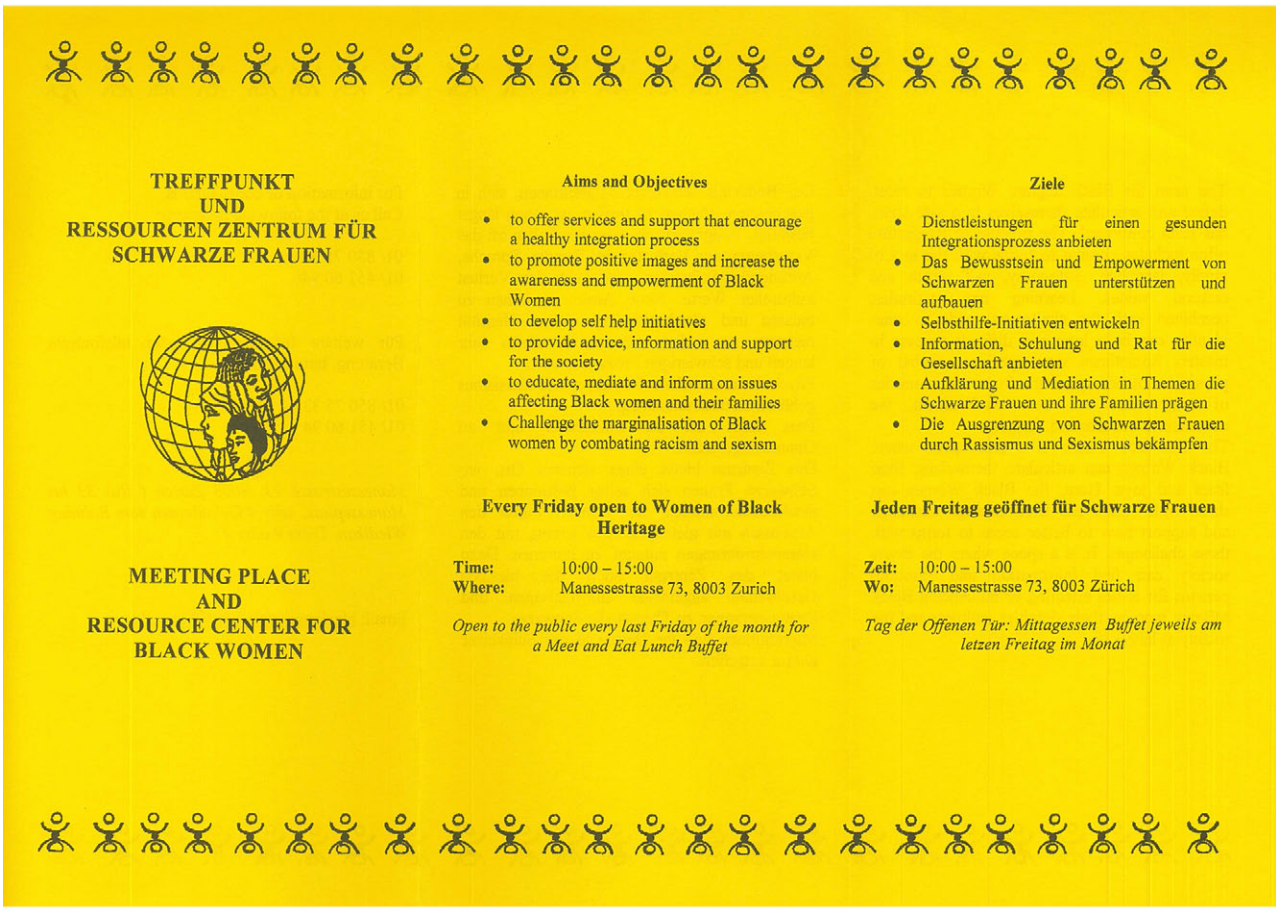
Grounding in the fog: strategic essentialism at the *Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen*

If the fog operates to obscure vision – of buildings, objects and other people – then it is not surprising that practices of grounding emerged as spatial responses to this condition. Against the disorientation traced earlier – of Paula Charles on the train, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli in the suburban home, Dinahlee Obey Siering confronting the cold temporality of juridical deportation letters – Black foreign women in Zurich in the 1990s created pockets of retreat in which clarity of self and relation could re-emerge. These were not exits from the fog, but spatial interruptions within it: sites that refused suspension by cultivating proximity, recognition and collective presence. Many of these pockets were grounded in community formations that countered the isolating effects of the fog. They were not novel inventions, but continuations and adaptations of African diasporic practices of homemaking shaped by mobility, memory and displacement. Across diasporic life, belonging is often produced through hybrid rituals of care, conviviality and shared survival rather than through stable territory. In Zurich, these practices materialised as what I call Black hybrid improvisations of social survival, which centred well-being as a form of spatial retreat away from expectations to assimilate. These spaces were at once reclusive and gregarious: they offered relief from exposure while enabling confidence-building, sociality and collective affirmation.

Scholars have offered different vocabularies for understanding such formations. Nancy Fraser's concept of counterpublics describes parallel arenas in which subordinated groups generate oppositional discourses and social practices outside dominant public spheres.[36] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's undercommons names fugitive spaces of Black study and social life that persist despite material constraint.[37] What unites these formulations – and what is most salient here – is their grounding function. These spaces allow othered people to locate themselves within hostile environments, countering the condensity of racial-sexual violence descending upon them through the fog. From a Black feminist perspective, such formations can be understood as world-making practices, describing spatial interventions that reconfigure how life is lived within constraint, without presuming universal safety or belonging. In the words of African American speculative science fiction writer Octavia Butler, 'you got to make your own worlds, you got to write yourself in, whether you were a part of the greater society or not, you got to write yourself in.'[38] [Fig. 4]

The Treffpunkt exemplifies this form of grounding. Founded as an improvisation of social survival, the Treffpunkt functioned as both a meeting place and a resource centre for Black foreign women in Zurich who were otherwise dispersed and isolated across the city and country. Located at Manessestrasse 73 in the neighbourhood of Wiedikon, the Treffpunkt occupied a ground-floor space with large storefront windows – an architectural condition that mattered. Every Friday, the space was populated exclusively by Black women and on the last Friday of each month, it opened to a wider public through food and social programmes. According to the women who frequented the space, the decision to leave the storefront windows uncovered was deliberate.[39] As a result, Black women's presence was made unapologetically visible within the urban fabric, mediated through the storefront onto the street. Inside, women shared cultural references through music, food, garments, tapestries, books and conversations. Social services circulated informally through the pro bono professional labour of women within the community – among them the founder of the Treffpunkt, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, whose earlier isolation within suburban domestic space was directly answered here by a collective spatial practice. The Treffpunkt offered an interior atmosphere in which women could breathe differently – away from the fog – and ground, or in bell hooks's words, touch the earth.[40] [Fig. 5]

The Treffpunkt's spatial effects extended beyond its walls. For those moving through the city outside through the fog, the sight of Black women simply being together had transformative resonance. It disrupted controlling images of Black womanhood inherited from the 1970s and 1980s by making alternative modes of presence visible.



TREFFPUNKT
UND
RESSOURCEN ZENTRUM FÜR
SCHWARZE FRAUEN

MEETING PLACE
AND
RESOURCE CENTER FOR
BLACK WOMEN

Aims and Objectives

- to offer services and support that encourage a healthy integration process
- to promote positive images and increase the awareness and empowerment of Black Women
- to develop self help initiatives
- to provide advice, information and support for the society
- to educate, mediate and inform on issues affecting Black women and their families
- Challenge the marginalisation of Black women by combating racism and sexism

Every Friday open to Women of Black Heritage

Time: 10:00 – 15:00
Where: Manessestrasse 73, 8003 Zurich

Open to the public every last Friday of the month for a Meet and Eat Lunch Buffet

Ziele

- Dienstleistungen für einen gesunden Integrationsprozess anbieten
- Das Bewusstsein und Empowerment von Schwarzen Frauen unterstützen und aufbauen
- Selbsthilfe-Initiativen entwickeln
- Information, Schulung und Rat für die Gesellschaft anbieten
- Aufklärung und Mediation in Themen die Schwarze Frauen und ihre Familien prägen
- Die Ausgrenzung von Schwarzen Frauen durch Rassismus und Sexismus bekämpfen

Jeden Freitag geöffnet für Schwarze Frauen

Zeit: 10:00 – 15:00
Wo: Manessestrasse 73, 8003 Zürich

Tag der Offenen Tür: Mittagessen Buffet jeweils am letzen Freitag im Monat

Fig. 4: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen brochure, 1990s. Source: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen Archive, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli.



Fig. 5: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen (with Yvonne Wirz, Sefa Dänzer-Agyeman and Anisa Sherif from left to right), 1990s. Photo: Silvia Luckner.



Fig. 6: A typical Friday at Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen, 1990s. Source: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen Archive, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli.

For those inside, the Treffpunkt functioned as a hyper-visible interior that simultaneously deflected the white gaze lingering outside in the fog. This reversal – visibility without exposure – had tangible effects on confidence-building and mental health.[41] Dinahlee Obey Siering reflects on this socio-spatial impact:

> The Treffpunkt was like a second home to me. There were people there who had similar stories to mine. Paradoxically, I have learned a lot about Africa and the women of my continent since I have been here in Switzerland. We have similar stories, but we are so different, so diverse. At the Treffpunkt, we learned from each other – those were really wonderful years when we still had a room! We were able to share experiences that gave us strength. It was a safe space.[42]

The Treffpunkt's strategic essentialism forged solidarity without denying difference. Feminist scholar Spivak conceptualises the term 'strategic essentialism' to describe how marginalised groups might temporarily adopt simplified, essentialist categories – in this case 'Black' and 'woman' – as a strategic political move to make their collective voice heard.[43] However, Spivak has cautioned on multiple occasions that this is not an endorsement of essentialism as a metaphysical truth, as it is a momentary tactic in political struggle. In this sense, we can consider the Treffpunkt as having employed strategic essentialism to mobilise, gather and convene Black women around their common needs during a time when they were perceivably a minority, alienated and isolated in the fog. [Fig. 6]

Yet grounding was not universally accessible. While the Treffpunkt functioned as a space of respite for women such as Zeedah and Dinahlee – whose lives were already tethered, however precariously, to forms of societal legibility, by way of their access to culture, social networks, education and legal status – it did not provide relief for all Black foreign women. The fog was not evenly distributed, and neither were the possibilities for breathing within it. For women positioned at the most acute intersections of racial, sexual and class-based violence, the Treffpunkt was often physically and socially inaccessible. Paula Charles was one such woman. Arriving poor, uneducated, without situated language, and coerced into sex work, Charles inhabited a vastly different condensity of the fog.[44] Her labour rhythm – working nights along Langstrasse – collided directly with the Treffpunkt's operating hours (Fridays, 10:00–15:00).[45] This temporal mismatch was not incidental; it was spatial. The Treffpunkt's grounding was structured around a daytime lifestyle of availability that implicitly presupposed distance from (nocturnal) labour, from its sexualised violence, and from the exhaustion that followed. For Charles, whose survival depended on navigating work and its dangers at night and resting during the day, the space could not be entered. The negative impacts of the fog increase the longer it lurks.

Access was also socially mediated. The Treffpunkt emerged through networks of women whose proximity to stability – often through marriage to Swiss men, education, or professional mobility – made collective organisation possible. Charles's position, shaped by stigma and extreme precarity, did not align easily with these networks. In interviews, she has remarked that during the 1980s and 1990s it was often white lesbians – rather than other Black women of higher class position – who offered her solidarity, protection and recognition.[46] This dissonance complicates any assumption of automatic racial kinship and foregrounds how class stratification within Black communities can reproduce distance, even within shared exposure to the fog. The Treffpunkt was also less frequented by upper class elite Black women in the Women of Black Heritage group, which one former member of the group Nicole Vögeli-Montjean remarks was too politicised for her.[47] This highlights the nuanced nature of counterpublics and how their inclusion and (often uncontrollable) exclusion address specific class-based needs even when their members have commonality in culture and historical struggle.

In this sense, this exclusion is not a failure of the Treffpunkt, but a diagnostic of the fog's severity and the Treffpunkt's limitations in being able to address the needs of all Black foreign women. That would problematically presuppose a homogeneity that such spaces ultimately try to counteract through self-definition. This demonstrates that space, even when carefully made and collectively sustained, cannot resolve all the layered violences that structure different lives. The fog suffocates unevenly. Anna Tsing reminds us that such atmospheres are patchy: uneven in their density, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes thin.[48] Some bodies are held just close enough to the ground to gather breath together; others are suspended too high, too precariously, for such grounding to be possible. Charles's survival strategies unfolded elsewhere, underscoring that for some, safety could not be spatialised into a stable interior at all. In this regard, the relevance of architecture as a category for constructing cultures of belonging must always be requestioned and situated. Sharpe writes with precision about breath as a political and bodily register under conditions of anti-Blackness. In hostile climates, breathing itself becomes strained. The fog, materially and metaphorically, restricts air. Hostility enters the lungs and endurance becomes exhausting. As Sharpe reminds us, aspiration is not only the intake of air but a reaching toward possibility, and 'one can only hold one's breath for so long'.[49] Within the Treffpunkt, women could exhale – laugh, sing, rest – and momentarily aspire. These

moments did not resolve the fog but enabled some freedom of movement within it.

Acknowledging the Treffpunkt therefore requires reflexivity. I do not claim to speak for it, but to situate it as a place and a practice. What it did matters as much as what it was. The Treffpunkt grounded some women within hostile atmospheres, countered controlling images of Black women, and enabled relationalities across diverse experiences of Black womanhood in (German-speaking) Switzerland. At the same time, its limits reveal the fog's persistence and peril. Grounding and floating are not opposites, but unevenly distributed responses to the same hostile climate – the fog. These groundings in the fog show one example of how collective survival was enacted spatially without promising resolution.

The Lingering Fog

In this article I have proposed the fog as a way of apprehending how anti-Blackness becomes spatially organised and lived in Zurich. Thinking with Christina Sharpe's weather, I have approached fog as a situated condensation of a broader racial climate: one that limits visibility without enclosure, produces uncertainty without fixed edges, and suspends bodies in space rather than simply casting them out. What the fog names, then, is not only an atmosphere of feeling, but a spatial condition through which violence is distributed, normalised and made difficult to grasp. Across the three operative phenomena of condensity, floating, and grounding, I trace how Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the early 2000s moved through a city whose infrastructures of order, safety, domesticity and legality did not secure inhabitation equally. Suspension appears across multiple sites and scales: in suburban housing, in juridical procedures, in transport networks, in the street, and in the social organisation of visibility itself. Read in this way, the city emerges less as a neutral container of racial-sexual violence than as one of its active mediums.

The spatial contribution of this article lies in approaching the fog as an operative concept for architectural and urban analysis. It offers one way of reading how hostile conditions accumulate not only through discrete events or bounded sites, but through atmospheres, routines, thresholds, interiors and arrangements of proximity. At the same time, I suggest that space is never only regulatory. The Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen, in particular, indicates how modest and improvised spatial formations can cultivate relation, recognition, and temporary ground without resolving the wider climate that necessitates them. To remain with the fog, then, is not to seek conceptual clarity at all costs, but to stay attentive to the suspended, uneven and often fragile spatial conditions through which Black women endured and, at times, remade Zurich.

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Notes

1. Olafur Eliasson, *Din Blinde Passager*, 2010, installation. I experienced the iteration at the Tate Modern in London in 2019.
2. Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016).
3. Ibid.
4. Bearing in mind that Appenzell Innerrhoden was the last canton that granted the right for women to vote in 1990.
5. *Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology Meteoswiss,* 'Fog in Autumn', *MeteoSwiss* website,https://web.archive.org/web/20260611010947/https://www.meteoswiss.admin.ch/weather/weather-and-climate-from-a-to-z/fog-in-autumn.html.
6. According to The Economist Intelligence Unit, from 2020–2025, Zurich has remained in the top five most liveable cities in the world. 'The Global Liveability Index 2025', *Ranking the World*, 2025, https://download.rtl.lu/2025/06/17/543eec5f5ab81d-ba3379d742d5858001.pdf.
7. Swiss-based scholars Noémi Michel, Jovita dos Santos Pinto, Serena Dankwa, Stefanie Claudine Boulila, Patricia Purtschert, Rohit Jain, among others, have published on this topic. See: Rohit Jain, *Schwarzenbach Geht Uns Alle an! Gedanken Zu Einer Vielstimmigen, Antirassistischen Erinnerungspolitik* (Zurich: Seismo, 2022); Patricia Purtschert, *Kolonialität Und Geschlecht Im 20. Jahrhundert : Eine Geschichte Der Weißen Schweiz* (Bieleveld: Transcript, 2019); Jovita Dos Santos Pinto Pamela Ohene-Nyako, Mélanie-Evely Pétrémont, Anne Lavanchy, Barbara Lüthi, Patricia Purtschert and Damir Skenderovic, eds., *Un/Doing Race : Rassifizierung in Der Schweiz* (Zurich: Seismo, 2022), https://urn.ub.unibe.ch/urn:ch:slsp:9783037772522:ihv:pdf; Mohamed Wa Baile, Serena O. Dankwa, Tarek Naguib, Patricia Purtschert and Sarah Schiliger, eds., *Racial Profiling: Struktureller Rassismus Und Antirassistischer Widerstand* (Bieleveld, Transcript Verlag, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839441459; Stefanie Claudine Boulila, 'Race and Racial Denial in Switzerland', *Ethnic and Racial Studies Review* 42, no. 9 (2019): 1401–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1493211; Noemi Vanessa Michel, 'Sheepology: The Postcolonial Politics of Raceless Racism in Switzerland', in *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 4 (2015): 410–26.
8. 'Condensity' refers to the condensed nature of the fog encompassing the density of social, political and economic layers.
9. Referred to as the 'Treffpunkt' from this point forward.
10. Sharpe, *In the Wake.*
11. This definition departs from and develops the common understanding of ecology as 'the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings'. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Ecology', https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ecology_n?tl=true.
12. Take, for example, the Swiss Red Cross campaign portraying a variety of racially diverse recipients of Swiss aid. [Fig. 3] However, what is striking is how all of the Black women are portrayed visibly as African, rural, traditional, poor, as mothers or as caretakers. Elke Frietsch writes about these types of media images that perpetuate poverty, lack of education and poor health in former colonial states and developing countries, yet at the same time, when analysed, reveal Western empirical involvement in producing these very conditions. Elke Frietsch, 'Ich Bin Fan Vom Roten Kreuz', in *Terra Incognita? : Der Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen in Zürich*, ed. Simone Prodolliet, Shelley Berlowitz, Elisabeth Joris and Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli (Zurich: Limmat-Verlag, 2013).
13. Noémi Michel, 'Racial Profiling und die Tabuisierung von "Rasse"', in *Un/doing Race*.
14. Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80.
15. Wa Baile et al., *Racial Profiling Und Antirassistischer Widerstand*.
16. *Becoming Black in Switzerland*, documentary film, directed by Julianna Fanjul and Rachel M'bon (RTS Radio Télévision Suisse, 2022), 50 minutes, https://www.akkafilms.ch/en/becoming-a-black-woman; Wa Baile et al., *Racial Profiling Und Antirassistischer Widerstand*; Dos Santos Pinto et al., *Un/Doing Race*.
17. Wa Baile et al., *Racial Profiling*; Dos Santos Pinto et al., *Un/Doing Race*.
18. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Floating', https://www.oed.com/dictionary/floating_n?tl=true.
19. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds : Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
20. Serena O. Dankwa, Christa Amman and Jovita dos Santos Pinto, 'Profiling Und Rassismus Im Kontext Sexarbeit: Overpoliced and Underprotected', in *Racial Profiling*, 155–72, https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839441459-009.
21. Coined in 1989 by Crenshaw, intersectionality describes a framework for understanding how multiple social identities – such as race, gender and class – overlap and interact to create unique, compound experiences of discrimination, inequality or privilege. Kimberle Crenshaw, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics, in *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender,* ed. Katherine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 57–80, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5. Rahel El-Maawi and Jovita dos Santos Pinto, 'Handwerksgeschichten: Schwarze Frauen Im Gespräch' (craft stories: Black women in conversation), in *Racial Profiling*, 109–38, https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839441459-007.
22. See among other texts: Sarah Schilliger, 'Challenging Who Counts as a Citizen: The Infrastructure of Solidarity Contesting Racial Profiling in Switzerland', in *Inclusive Solidarity and Citizenship along Migratory Routes in Europe and the Americas*, ed. Helge Schwiertz and Helen Schwenken (London: Routledge, 2021).
23. Frauen', in *Terra Incognita?*, 43.

24. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
25. Paula Charles, Soul Stripping : Autobiography of Paula Charles (Basel: Bergli Books, 1995), 146.
26. Ibid., 'Afterword'.
27. Shelley Berlowitz and Dinahlee Obey Siering, 'Ich Bin in Einem Land Aufgewachsen, in Welchem Die Hautfarbe Kein Thema War', in *Terra Incognita?*, 135.
28. Dounard Bondo, 'Thousands Dead but No Prosecutions - Why Liberia Has Not Acted', *BBC* website, 23 February 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56128139.
29. Schweizerische Volkspartei der Schweiz and Goal Advertising Company, 'Sicherheit Schaffen', 2007, poster.
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Biography

Khensani Jurczok-de Klerk is an architectural researcher and designer. She is the founder and creative director of Matri-Archi(tecture), a network of intergenerational African diasporic women working across architecture, art and curatorial practice to engage questions of history, spatiality and imagination. As a doctoral fellow at gta, ETH Zürich, her PhD examines how Black foreign women in Zürich have constructed forms of kinship to create liveable geographies in the wake of racial-sexual violence since the 1980s. Khensani works across visual, written and sonic media to remember untold histories and envision new spatial futures. Her practice frames architecture as a storyteller of place, memory and possibility. She sustains a practice grounded in the geographies of both Switzerland and South Africa.

Not So Stories

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Abstract
This essay seeks to disrupt three complacently accepted theoretical distinctions that are a product of a modern (and therefore) colonial school of thought, which creates false, extensible divisions to subsume differences under a singular conception. The error of these divisions is demonstrated (rather than claimed) by confronting them with autobiographical accounts of a Southern African context, offering an experiential counterpoint to the context from which this modern school of thought has emerged.

When confronted with the context of South Africa, the theoretical ground upon which these distinctions are built begins to falter, offering in its place different (embodied) relations to nature, people and things. Myth making and critical memoirs inform a praxis of 're-membering' the Gordian knot of relations that has been severed by false dichotomies. Doing so enables a contingent reading of the worlds that constitute Africa and thereby challenges prescribed distinctions produced by critical theory: inside/outside; culture/nature; self/other.

Keywords
South Africa, re-membering, Gordian knot, relational ontology, contingent realities, embodied epistemology

One sentence summary
Three autobiographical accounts from South Africa confront and destabilise the logic of three false theoretical dichotomies (inside/outside; culture/nature; self/other), demonstrating a praxis of 're-membering' to generate a relational understanding of the worlds we live in.

Just so?
A snake enters the living room; a French violin plays Italian music in the shadow of Table Mountain, and the names of the Voortrekkers are reified on street signs in a country they've never seen. Three disparate tales that appear at first glance to be totally unrelated and are also completely enmeshed with one another. Much like the diversity of items Bruno Latour observes in his morning newspaper: 'none of these [horizons, stakes, time frames, actors] is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story.'[1] Our knowledge of things and power, or culture and nature, is entangled to the extent that Latour calls it an imbroglio or 'Gordian knot'. According to Greek mythology, the Gordian knot was so impossibly intricate, so convoluted and enmeshed that the one who could disentangle this knot was prophesised to become the future ruler of Asia. It was Alexander the Great who stepped forth to claim the crown, not by diligently tracing each thread of the knot, but by slicing it in two with his sword. It is an apt analogy, as this dividing act is not simply for the sake of differentiation between the knot's parts; rather, it is an act of control

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and power, that is, there is something to be gained in its division. It is the same logic with which modern thought has made a duality of our understanding, such that grand narratives or universal truths may lay claim to the world, disregarding place or time. Europe has thus constituted itself as the enlightened and epistemological centre of the world through its colonial processes of modernisation; first through the division of the world, and subsequently through its construction of narratives and systems of control that function as 'universal truths' by subsuming (or interiorising) those parts of the world (materially, economically and ideologically) that remain severed. As Enrique Dussel elaborates, modernity does not begin with the Enlightenment, but rather is born in 1492 with the landing of Christopher Columbus, 'when Europe was in a position to pose itself against an other.'[2] With Columbus's arrival comes the myth of modernity: the rational concept of emancipation, and at the same time the irrational justification of genocide. The logic of modernity is one of interiorisation, and it depends upon the construction of a division, or cut, between an imagined inside and outside with the objective of consuming the world and vilifying that which is beyond its purview.

The title of this article is a negation of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories,* conceived as oral bed-time fables for his daughter in the early twentieth century. While narrating by heart, Kipling would sometimes deviate from the original version, and his daughter would interrupt him to say, 'No no, the story must be told Just So.'[3] It is for this reason they were put to paper to be read out loud verbatim for ever more. A hundred years after being written, my mother would read to me from Kipling's *Just So Stories*, and I listened to just how exactly the leopard got its spots, and the rhino its skin. It is perhaps through these stories, ones told just so and without deviance, that we make sense of the world – religious texts, historical accounts and scientific paradigms that persist in the face of centuries and sometimes thousands of years – but this is not to say that the world makes sense. The comfort of hearing the same story continuously, a story that is predictable and 'makes sense' by virtue of its repetition, is tremendously powerful, no matter how fanciful the story might be. With this comfort, however, comes the danger of what Arturo Escobar calls a 'one-world world', in which one dominant world (conception) is permitted exclusively.[4] In perpetuating the grand narrative, one effectively cuts through the Gordian knot that constitutes lived experience; the complexities of life are sliced through, and the world is won.[5] Owing to this manoeuvre, modernity has arisen as the champion of our times. In the production of a narrative that upholds false divisions, and the subsequent pretence that it is the only narrative to be applied regardless of place, context or time, the division is operationalised towards expansion and to uphold a status quo. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos claims, it is owing to those 'abyssal lines' of theoretical thought from the global north that the world has been cut open.[6] The binary reductions that are imposed upon the complexities of our world are the most readily extensible, as Anna Tsing shows in her writing on non-scalability: stripping the world of difference in order to impose a single order affords certain actions to take place at scale and quickly, but it does not so readily accommodate the contingencies and errors that make up the stuff of life, leaving little hope for a future that is not dependent on binary divisions.[7]

It is no coincidence that modern theoretical discourse operates similarly surgically and with equally divisive powers; its greatest conquest perhaps being the creation and division of a mental interior against a sensory and physical exterior. 'I think therefore I am' has far-reaching implications for the way we behave in the world we live in, and masks the violence of our actions in the apparent cleanliness of the divide between thought and experience.[8] This essay echoes the necessity for situated knowledges and challenges the problems of what Donna Haraway has called the 'God Trick,' or 'seeing from nowhere' while cognisant that 'not any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts.'[9] Further, in opposition to the preferential treatment that theory (etymologically derived from the Greek 'theōros', meaning spectator) has for vision, this essay takes up Heidegger's presentation of being-in-the-world as a unitary phenomenon that is irreducible to its parts and emphasises an embodied and relational ontology.[10] The issue of a disembodied and spectatorial theory is further taken up especially as a decolonial project, by taking heed of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as the taxonomic and essentialist agenda hidden in theoretical work that speaks on behalf of a subjugated other, in turn upholding the West as the subject while participating in and upholding power structures that determine not only what counts as 'theory' but also determines who may speak, publish and theorise.[11] The idea of truth (a mythical construction in its own right) has become a tool that makes it possible to suppose that theoretical thought has no bearing on place, and one's being in the world has no consequence for the theories generated. However, the logical ground upon which modern critical theory and its 'truths' stand is firmly situated in a decidedly European mode of thought and has its roots in a colonial experience and understanding of space, much like Kipling's *Just So Stories*. By synthesising an understanding of the truth, which is dependent upon a false and grossly simplified division, lived experiences that do not fall within the scope of that truth are necessarily false, irrational, unreasonable, invalid and foreign. As Walter Mignolo emphasises,

thought is neither universal nor neutral, but rooted in a specific geography, history, culture and power.[12] It seems pertinent, therefore, to engage in a research practice that entangles one's own lived experience with theoretical discourse in order to re-member that which is dismembered by those dividing lines of thought that pervade our existence – thereby engaging in the exercise of decolonialising the self. As someone who grew up in Cape Town, South Africa between 2000 and 2015 before moving to the Netherlands, where my familial heritage in part lies, I intend with this essay to come to terms with the issue of a colonial legacy not merely as a historical account but as a deeply personal and embodied experience. In doing so, the hope is to effectively suture the ends of rope that constitute the Gordian knot and pave an understanding towards a future that is not dependent upon a binary, oppositional understanding of the world. Instead the aim is to reveal and demonstrate an interwoven and relational understanding of the space between South Africa and Europe to construct passages between what Arturo Escobar describes as the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' of critical theory.[13]

In order to combat the singular conception of lived experience, especially within an academic context, in this essay I present three *Not So Stories.* These critical memoirs take on the challenge of retying the Gordian knot of relations between three false dichotomies of inside/outside, culture/nature, and self/other. These distinctions are comfortable because they are repeatedly told and framed within a logic that does not bend to the world of individual experience, and they are generic because they have no basis in a life lived. In stark contrast to the proliferation of the conventionally spectatorial stories of South Africa that address the country as a case study – examined from a distance as one might a specimen in a lab – the memories presented here function as grounds for interrogating and critically reflecting upon European framing and logic. The logic that brings these stories together is therefore not causal or chronological, but diffractive and associative, so as to explore an alternative discourse of the worlds that constitute Africa. They are not immediately commensurable, and yet they are not unrelated.

Methodologically, I take inspiration from the work of anthropologist Lesley Green, whose book, *Rock Water Life,* makes use of personal and physical encounters with the South African landscape to produce a work of empathy and critical evaluation of the ecological relations that a South African history, present and future entail. In taking this approach, it is evident that it is 'not possible to think about nature without attending to the nature that people constitute, and our bodily entanglements with the places in which we live and have our being.'[14] It is this same embodied entanglement I use in this essay in order to produce an approach to critical theory that does not simply proliferate a preexisting discourse. I take further critical inspiration from scholars working in different disciplines, such as Ann Cvetkovich (women's and gender studies) and Peter Stallybrass (literary studies), both of whom use personal memoir to inform their theoretical approaches.[15] By entangling my own memories with those comfortably accepted distinctions of inside/outside, culture/nature, and self/other, I grapple with both the personal and intimate origin and those opaque reaches of my experience with the worlds beyond my own in search of a common-place as defined by Édouard Glissant.[16] Each of these distinctions presents us with a Gordian knot that has been cleaved through the processes of creating a limit that does not exist, a divide that tries to interiorise part of the whole in order to exert some power over an imagined outside.

Understanding the modern project as one of interiorisation, I begin with tackling the distinction between the inside and outside, as a primary example of the error of forgetting to consider the lived experience and context in which theory is being produced. With this, echoing Sylvia Winter's call for new myths, I propose a new creation story of the inside as a consequence of the drip line, and use the logic of this boundary to discuss the distinctions of culture and nature, and self and other; both of which derive from a fundamental misconception of the limit between the inside and outside. I disrupt these divisions both as literal and theoretical issues, because my intention is to make explicit that re-membering necessarily implicates both experience and all-emergent theory as a product of one's situation. I am here; therefore, I think this.

How the outside got in

In the high and far-off times, o Best Beloved, before there was an inside, when the wind howled and storms raged on, all of mankind and the world of beasts stood naked and bore the force of the sun and the rain outside.[16] It was terribly cold and terribly wet, terribly hot and terribly dusty. Hippopotamus heaved a heavy sigh and said, 'This cannot go on,' and sunk himself into the great lakes between the reeds with just his nostrils sticking out above the water's surface. In the evenings you can hear him chortling, happy and proud to have escaped the heat of the day. Leopard, with her beautiful spots, said, 'Enough is enough!' and left the tufts of sandy-yellowish grass of the highveld and the blistering heat of the rocks up into a tall marula tree to stretch out on a leafy branch. She purred and purred, looking like sunshine sifting through the leaves in a cool breeze. Scorpion with all eight of its legs and its needle raised high, felt a vibration on the rock, and then another. Scorpion scuttled its way under a flat stone on the top of a hill, and snuggled his exoskeletal body in the warm sand to

hide from the cold wet rain, bristling happily at the sound of thunder that could not reach him. And so it was for all the world of beasts, o Best Beloved, Meerkat dug holes, while the mongoose shivered under a honeysuckle bush, Dassie slipped into cracks and crevasses in the cliffs, and every creature did their best to make the outside less fearsome and less terrible.

It did not take long, as you can surely imagine, for all the very best hiding spots to be taken, and one little girl, much like yourself, o Best Beloved, was left out in the open. None of the animals welcomed her to share their spot, and so for centuries she wandered in search of a place on this planet just for herself, where there would be no rain and no sun, no wind and no dust. And then, one day, on the violent coasts of the African continent, above the waves that came crashing against the rocks, she heard a hollow sound from below. She clambered down the rocks and the slippery grass in the terribly cold and terribly wet rain while the wind howled and the thunder growled. There, she encountered something she had never before seen. The violence of the waves had carved deep into the rock-face and produced a dark and hollow space, where the sun could not reach, nor the rain nor the wind nor the dust. Cautiously, the little girl stepped forward as she stretched her neck into the darkness, to see if anyone had already claimed the spot, when suddenly she felt something terribly cold and terribly wet; a slimy drop of rain water landed on the back of her neck and crawled its way down her spine. It had trickled down the face of the cliff above. Without a moment's hesitation, she jumped across the drip line and into the darkness. At last she was inside.

Negotiations of the drip line

European architectural history knows its own fable: Marc-Antoine Laugier's primal hut, presented in his *Essai sur l'Architecture* (1753). It describes and illustrates a square plan with vertical tree trunk columns and beams supporting a leafy roof. This allegory, with its sparkling rivers, delightful forests and banks of green grass, presents us with a European nature, and a decidedly European 'savage'.[18] The primal hut that Laugier constructs is brought into focus as an architectural beacon for its 'essential' composition of functional and structural elements, devoid of capricious additions. More than two hundred years later, I too was introduced to this story as a first-year bachelor's student. It is a story too easily told, and the sentiment of Laugier's myth and his protagonist who is 'in search of a place to rest,' is echoed in today's architectural practice, which invests great (material and mental) energy into the creation of spaces that are comfortable.[19] Incredible technical development and material production is aimed at the near-total isolation of the interior from a hostile outdoors. The politics of such an architecture is not far from the wall itself; in fact, these technical choices are swallowed by legislative procedures that dictate exactly to what extent this divide should shelter the human from sound, mice and rats, humidity, light, air, and so on.[20] The distinction between inside and outside emerges from this framing as a table of measurable quantities and materials that enforce a logic of technocratic division, rather than negotiation or experience. The distinction between two spaces is not a neutral or symmetrical act, if only because there is no neutral ground or symmetrical space in which to draw this distinction. Indeed, spaces are divided with the intention of 'creating' difference, and there is a hierarchy implicit in the division of space. The inside has privileges which the outside is not given, while they are perhaps better understood as one continuous space under differing degrees of control. The understanding that distinctions are drawn not merely for the sake of differentiation but for the sake of creating hierarchy is fundamental to the spatial practice and is echoed in all dialectic oppositions.

It is not the ascetic and structurally essential Greco-columnal hut in a French forest that serves as the zero-hour of architecture itself, but the drip line of a cave close to the southern tip of Africa, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. While the presented creation story (How the Outside got In) provides us with an allegorical depiction of this cave, it is not without factual merit. The earliest evidential example we have today of an inhabited interior by Homo sapiens is 70 000 to 100 000 years old: the Blombos Cave of present-day South Africa.[21] As an ongoing site of archaeological study, today this cave is mapped and plotted across three dimensions, and in this measure the interior of the cave is defined by the cave walls, and what is known as the drip line, a space created by falling rainwater that drips from the cliff face above and does not enter the cave. The drip line serves therefore as the primal example of an interior-exterior divide; it presents us with the inception of the architectural limit, and with it, the interior. It is, however, an interior that is ill-defined and delimited by a most diffuse and ephemeral boundary. Much like the architectural interior of my childhood home in South Africa, the drip line produces a normativity that is not based on its ability to divide, but rather on its porosity. The drip line proposes therefore a technical normativity of discomfort, one that permits the ability for things to go awry.[22] Just because everything was fine yesterday does not mean that it will be tomorrow, or tonight. If one were to consider the architectural divide not as a strict dialectic opposition, but rather as a technical concretisation of the drip line, then it is because the limit is not static, and necessarily incomplete, that it is able to do what it does so brilliantly: enable the inside to be a form of negotiation with the outside.[23] Taking the drip line

as a model for engaging with the division between false interiors and exteriors might allow us not only to reimagine the dynamic between spaces, but also conceive of oppositional terms as things that are in a continuum with one another.

It was a brutally hot summer's eve in 2008, where lethargy and the cool of the night were your only respite from the heat. We sat in the lounge with the sliding door left ajar to permit a cooling breeze from the garden. At some point, a consistent and very loud hissing noise emanated from a dark corner of the lounge. 'Do you hear that?' I asked. We saw Brutus (the dog, not the Roman) sniffing under a low coffee table in the corner against the glass of the sliding door, where the noise was coming from. 'Brutus?' He turned his head over his shoulder and looked at us briefly with nervous eyes and then returned to his olfactory investigation. The hissing was loud and ominous, swelling and receding like waves against a jagged shoreline, filling the space of the lounge with a disconcerting energy. I got up to investigate, and looking over the back of Brutus' short black fur in this darkest corner I discerned the stripes and tight coil of a puff adder. Unbeknown to us, at some point in the evening, the puff adder had welcomed itself into our lounge, enjoying the soft warmth of the carpet under its skin, to shelter in the corner next to the couch where my brother was sitting. After taking Brutus out of the room, which calmed the snake, we donned hiking boots and double layers of jeans to begin the strange task of ushering this dangerously venomous snake gently out of the lounge and back into the night. By some mystical powers of common understanding between the puff adder and us, we managed to make the exit through the sliding door (opened widely in the meantime) seem more appealing than the crevice under the couch that my brother and mother now stood on, broom-wielding.

That night, before bed, my mother read D. H. Lawrence's poem, 'Snake', to me:[24]

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.
…

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

From that day on, my fear of cytotoxic venom and its entropic capacities dwelled on the floor of my own home, under the bed, and in dark corners beneath desks and couches, not simply outside amid the fynbos, under rocks and in dark crevices of mountain passes.[25] No longer was the inside truly removed from the dangers of the mountain overlooking us. Rather, the lounge, my bedroom, the kitchen, drawers, bookshelves and corners of bathrooms were an extension, or simulation of the outside, whereby the presence of the elements and creatures informed a different form of living.[26] The limit of the door does not create a true 'dialectic opposition' between inside and outside, but rather creates a zone across which the encounters with the wilderness could be of the same type (rainwater, sand, snake, scorpion, rainspider…) but are of a different intensity to what one might find outside.[27] While the divide between the inside and the outside is a technical one, Gaston Bachelard illustrates that it is not a definitive one, 'for the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open.'[28] Howling wind in the gaps of windows, the rain seeping through cracks of tiling, damp permeating through basement walls, mice navigating pipelines and crevices, and the gecko on the bathroom ceiling: these events occur because the inside is not as removed a space from the outside as one might assume from their abstract and oppositional definition. The physical divide is necessarily porous – and it seems pertinent that if one were to agree with Bachelard and consider the corner to be 'the germ of the room', then the snake within that corner consolidates the notion that this interior space only exists as a consequence of the outside.[29] It stands to reason that there was an outside before there ever was such a thing as a corner from which any room could emerge – and therefore the interior is not something that is removed from the outside, but is in fact born from it. In my childhood home, even if the doors and windows are closed, when it is cold outside, it is also cold inside; when it rains outside, it also rains inside; when it is dark outside, it is also (often) dark inside.[30] It is not because we welcomed these creatures into our house that they entered, so much as the house offered a form of respite from either the heat or the cold, the wind and the rain.[31] In much the same way that we take shelter from the elements, so too does the wilderness. The question this poses then is: What difference, if any, exists between the inside and the outside, and if the divide between them is not total, what exactly does it regulate, if not snakes, temperature, rain or wind?

The inside is to be understood as an experience that is contingent on the outside, rather than a definitive space.[32] In an architectural understanding of the generic interior that alienates it from an equally generic exterior, we have perhaps done away with the architectural interior's most vital relation. We have cut through literal space in order to win partitions of the outside, but have forgotten that our interior is necessarily a part of the outside. There is no pure

architectural interior space, only modulations of any particular exterior as negotiated by the drip line.

Of migrants and music

The assumption that there is a strict division between the natural environment and the constructed interiors we inhabit is the first slice in understanding culture as removed from the natural world of which it is in fact a product. If the drip line is to have a consequence on our understanding of the technical and physical differentiation between the inside and outside, it stands to reason that the emergent culture of these spaces is similarly defined by an incomplete boundary with its natural environment. Culture is not a separate entity to the natural environment outside of that culture, but culture and its natural environment form an entangled knot together, and as such our cultures are necessarily contingent upon their specific environments.

Modern thought is plagued by a foundational argument that operates on the dichotomy between culture and nature, subject and object, the division between a physical interior and exterior space architecturally is mirrored in the ontological dualism as presented by René Descartes.[33] While in his essay, 'Meditations on First Philosophy,' he clearly grapples with the difficulties posed by his own conclusion that the mind exists independently of the material body (and yet is bound to it), it is this division that has served all of the modern socio-political and natural sciences since.[34] The entanglement of culture with its natural environment has, since the advent of modern thought, been severed by a rigid framing that serves empirical analysis, effectively splitting the relations between the domains of natural and cultural sciences, physics and politics.[35] In creating a politics of citizens that can have no relation to the nonhumans produced by science, and a science of non-humans that can have no appeal to politics, Boyle and Hobbes had conveniently 'crossed out god'.[36] This poses problems for Descartes's argument, which in order to bridge the divide created between the substance of matter ('objects of pure mathematics') and the substance of the mind 'detached from the affairs of the senses', God is required as the preeminent creator of both mind, and matter.[37] The founding paradoxes of modern thought were born: we have at once created separations between the natural and cultural spheres (which requires a god in order to function), while in practice we consistently rely on the co-production of what Latour calls 'hybrids' between culture and nature (without God) to understand the world.[38] Once again, the division of the knot that culture and nature present is not merely for the sake of distinction, but so that culture can be framed as a privileged interior space, insulated from the brutality of a 'natural' world. In so doing, this division has also enabled culture to enact immense brutality upon the natural world. 'I think, therefore I am' obscures the violence, subjugation, and erasures which our global cultures rely on to conquer the world, its resources and its people. Its extensibility is dependent on the definition of nature, which, as we will see, is made flexible by way of its categorisation as an exterior space, belonging to the outside.

Looking into the cavernous space of my violin has always left me with a strange sense of wonder. Within this resonating chamber, a yellowed label reads: H. Claudot, Luthier, Elève de Gand et Bernardel, Paris. The label is printed, except for two handwritten numbers in black ink: '7' in the date, '1897,' and the production number, '100.' As a child, Paris was to me a place that existed only in my imagination and on TV, and yet, at the age of twelve I was this hundred-year-old French violin's new custodian. It was an honour and a burden – one which could not be left unattended, and therefore had to be carried with me everywhere in the South African heat and Capetonian winter downpours. Those same climatic forces under which my house's tin roof would creak and groan, also shifted the wooden body of my violin, causing it to go out of tune.

I no longer play the violin, but today, ten years after my last violin lesson, I can still smell Isabel Arzul's perfume in the ominous A5 notebook that critiques my lacklustre playing during our Friday afternoons together. The notebook in question contains an array of musical scales to be practised, technical advice regarding passages of Antonín Dvořák, and tokens of wisdom and pleas of desperation: 'Perfection is what you want', and 'I want a performance please.' All written in her idiosyncratic red ball-point cursive script. I learned much from Isabel Arzul, and in her teaching, demanding as it was, metaphor was often used to great effect: my bow-arm wrist needed to be wobbly jelly, counterpointed by the necessity for my left hand to be Table Mountain, which loomed over us through the sash windows of her lofted studio, strong and unwavering.[39] The South African environment was not merely a backdrop to the performance of études and arias, which demanded a great deal of vibrato and the occasional use of my mano sinistra to play pizzicato. Instead, I was invited to consider my left hand to be Table Mountain; and in a certain sense by doing so, owing to Table Mountain and its imposing rigidity, I was able to effectively play the violin, and especially play it in tune.

After my sixth practical violin exam with UNISA, having played rather dismally (I did not 'deliver the goods' as Arzul pleaded on the 2nd of June 2014), I went with my mother to walk along Sea Point Promenade.[40] An immense sense of relief of the exam being over, and guilt at not having played better or practised more always followed the stress

of these exams, and walking beside crashing waves in the crisp sea-breeze and sunlight felt appropriate. It was on this walk that I first saw a Eurasian oystercatcher. It was a rare sighting.[41] *We decided that it must have been a good omen to see that bird, and indeed I did pass my violin exam that day. The Eurasian oystercatcher was to me then as foreign as my violin and much of the music I played.*

Music, as a cultural product, is dependent on the instruments we use to perform, objects that are manufactured from raw materials of the natural environment. The violin is a technical object with exacting specifications that are born of the 'natural' context in which the violin was conceived, and not all violins are created equal.[42] In the sheltered valleys of Alpine forests such as the *Val de Fiemme*, spruce trees grow slowly and in straight, vertical lines. The slow, summer growth is counterpointed by winter's near-dormancy, producing rings of alternating wood density at consistent and close spacing within the tree's trunk. These seasonal shifts, in turn, produce a structure of board that facilitates the resonance of vibrations produced in the string of a crafted instrument. The qualities of density, strength, and consistency that spruce trees possess are all but demanded for the instrument's ability to perform, and we want a performance.[43] But before the luthier has so much as laid their hands on a piece of wood, the tonal qualities of a violin are constrained and determined by the seasons and growth of the specific tree felled.

Spruce, however, is not a native species to South Africa, let alone any country in the southern hemisphere. The wood of a spruce tree is of an entirely different physical construction to the yellowwood and sapele trees that material scientist Martina Meincken used in 2020 to produce the first 'African violin'.[44] Indigenous to the African climate, yellowwood (*Podocarpus latifolius*) is denser, so it resonates with different harmonics that generate darker tonal qualities that are more powerful in lower tonal ranges.[45] The increased physical density means it is slightly heavier, and not insignificantly in my view, this means the musician of the African violin needs to be stronger in order to play the same music. That said, it will not be the same music – the 'same' note will sound different compared to a spruce instrument, and so while the European landscape produces a European instrument, one that is used to score European concertos, one cannot help but wonder what music the likes of Sibelius might have composed, if the violin of his time was made of sapele and yellowwood, instead of spruce and maple. The embodiment of the music, the physicality of the instrument and the room it is in are not coincidental, nor do they result from a purely cultural pursuit detached from a physical environment. Especially when one considers it is those same climatic forces that penetrate our architectural interiors, which influence the tuning of an instrument by impacting its material condition.

The Eurasian oystercatcher I saw after my violin exam all those years ago is a migrant in South Africa, who I now regularly encounter each spring, as a migrant myself in the Netherlands. While nature and culture are often understood as distinct and opposing entities, the two cannot be untied from one another. This is not to say there is no difference. A spruce tree is indeed a distinct entity to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor; however, there can be no violin, let alone a concerto as we know it without the spruce tree. As Deleuze, in his own evaluation of Descartes states, 'two things can be thought as being really distinct without being separable, no matter how little they may have requisites in common'.[46] The binaries of mind/body, subject/object, culture/nature, collapse upon themselves to produce an embodied topography: our environment inhabits us as much as we inhabit it, and our cultural products are irrefutably the result of this relation. I must confess I still do not fully understand what Isabel Arzul meant when she wrote to 'think Italian'… but perhaps it wasn't for the sake of understanding that she wrote it. These relational ontologies that constitute a musical performance cannot be so easily done away with or untied. The sheet music is Italian, the violin is French, and the landscape South African; together we played music.

New Transvaal stories

For the establishment of Cape Town as a refreshment station for VOC ships heading east, the Dutch settlers constructed canals in the likeness of their familiar *grachten* to provide water to the town, and gave these canals the same names as those they emulated in the Netherlands.[47] The colonial practice of naming, mapping and restructuring foreign space is a way of coding and territorialising an other world in the likeness of an originary space.[48] Land that is conquered or claimed is no longer 'foreign', but an extension of the motherland; subjects that are educated in the ways of culture of the colonising entity are no longer savage features of an untamed landscape, but considered subjects of the crown, and so on – the division between two cultures is owing to the distinction between culture and nature, and the foreign space with its people are taken as an exterior condition, in contrast to the interior culture. This distinction serves as a means to enact a hierarchical dynamic so as to enable the ensuing brutality of inducing a foreign territory and its people into one's own socio-political framework. The understanding of 'others' as distinct entities from oneself relies on a misshapen division between the inside and the outside, and yet it is clear

that the shape one culture takes is not wholly removable from those cultures it encounters.

In the words of Achille Mbembe, 'colonial terror constantly intertwines with colonially generated fantasies of wilderness and death and fictions to create the effect of the real'.[49] The act of naming is a tool for extending the semantic and cultural realm of one's own space, an imagined reality imposed upon a physical territory.[50] In their attempt to expand the Dutch space over Africa, effectively consolidating it as a space within the territory of the Netherlands, the land was both physically and semiotically reorganised, that is, given new names that perpetuated a memory of a Dutch cultural history – an effect of the real as a product of Dutch fantasy. The grachten of Cape Town were expected to do much the same job as they carried out in the Netherlands, but the nature of the southern tip of Africa is different from the water-logged horizon that constitutes the Dutch natural environment. As a consequence, the Dutch settlers in the Cape endured a continuous water shortage, and the use of these canals as a sewerage system rendered the town a rather miserable affair. It was clear that alternative solutions were necessary to combat the South African environment, and in the decades after the British assumed control of the Cape in 1806 the canals were covered over in favour of dams and reservoirs on Table Mountain. In the meantime, Dutch settlers who had remained after their VOC contracts ended (dubbed 'free burghers') were then under the jurisdiction of the British. In 1836 the Boers (distinct from the more highly educated and wealthy 'Cape Dutch') embarked on a journey into the South African interior to form an independent state: the Transvaal, free from colonial rule of both the British and the Dutch.[51] The Transvaal was the territory beyond (trans) the Vaalrivier; an area that has, since the fall of Apartheid in 1994, been redrawn and renamed such that the territories north of the Vaal river now include the provinces of Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga.

Today, I enter the Transvaal by crossing six lanes of traffic that flow along Zijpendaalsweg. The Transvaal is small, a tightly clustered neighbourhood with a few intersecting streets abutting a large park. This is not the Transvaal of Southern Africa, but a neighbourhood in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Cronjéstraat leads to an intersection with Delareystraat. The streets meet each other, jauntily, and the resulting space of this intersection is called Bothaplein, a public square and also the name of a bus stop. Delareystraat is lined with weeping willows and has a stream (St. Jansbeek) cutting through the middle of it lengthwise. At the end of the street is a four-metre tall sculpture of three sunflowers that seem to have reached the end of their prime, bowing to the south against a slope of unkempt brambles and vines. One street sign is mounted on a post and reads Delareijstraat, and just behind it, a few metres higher on the façade of a building from 1910, is another sign, spelled Delareystraat. A Eurasian blue jay flutters onto the corner of the bricked building's roof, above the sign, and the only thing I can think of are the lyrics to Bok van Blerk's 2006 Afrikaans pop-hit that sparked a certain controversy:[52]

De La Rey, De La Rey,
Sal jy die Boere kom lei?
De La Rey, De La Rey.

A few weeks later, I enter the Transvaal by stepping out of tram number 12 and into the blistering cold of Paul Krugerplein; this is the Transvaal of The Hague. An older woman steps out with me, frail and slow-moving. Small ice crystals are falling and a white plastic packet rustles along the brick floor past my legs and the decorated mosaic orbs in the public square. The square is bordered by small grocers and places selling kebab and Indian wedding attire. I walk down Paul Krugerlaan and tick off the various names of Boer statesmen and generals; like a river with tributaries I pass by Reitz, Kock, Pretorious, Botha, Cronje and Joubert until doubling back and walking along De La Reyweg, this time honoured with a central corridor of grass and benches, with various trees; all of which in the winter have lost their leaves. A man beside me pulls out a handkerchief, and the only connection I can fathom is to recount a story of Herman Charles Bosman, 'Makapan's Caves', in which the protagonist, Oom Schalk Lourens, under the charge of Paul Kruger and Piet Potgieter storms the deep and convoluted caves of the Krantz that had been besieged for weeks to exterminate the remaining indigenous people:[53]

All over, through the rocks and bushes, I could see black openings in the krantz that led right into the deep parts of the earth … and all the time there was that stench of decaying bodies … We tied handkerchiefs round the lower part of our face, but that did not help. Also, since we were not Englishmen, many of us had no handkerchiefs.

As with the grachten of Cape Town, the act of mapping and naming colonial territories places them within a 'European geopolitical frame of reference … which sees such territory as fundamentally terra nullius – unpeopled and therefore open to possession and settlement'.[54] This is not to say that colonisers were unaware of indigenous populations, but rather, owing to what Mbembe recognises as the necessity for sovereignty to 'relegate the colonised into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood', the state

of political exception that the colonial enterprise offers meant that the colonised could be considered not as people, but part of a landscape that is therefore unpopulated.[55] By positioning the other within the category of nature, they fall 'outside' of the privileged space that constitutes the 'inside' of a given culture, and they are in turn treated as an object. The colony exists as a process of interiorisation of 'other' worlds to create a contiguous socio-political space; an extension of the 'one world world' that is necessarily homogeneous – consistency across colonial territory and colonial homeland affords the myth of expansion, and the territorial 'inside' becomes larger as the diverse and incomprehensible exterior is subsumed and reduced. In short, the 'infinite diversity' of the world is rejected in favour of the perpetuation of sameness; it is the 'crisis of a particular world or set of worldmaking practices, the world that we usually refer to as the dominant form of Euromodernity.'[56]

It is seldom, therefore, that non-Eurocentric names of colonial territories make their way back to the land of the coloniser – there is no Sophiatown or Soweto, Imizamo Yethu, or Shaka street in the Netherlands. These names belong to worlds beyond the reach of a European geopolitical (colonial) framework, which remains dependent on a process of othering to constitute its own identity.[57] So why would the Netherlands name their new neighbourhood developments in some of its largest cities such as Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague, and Arnhem, after the Transvaal? For indeed, the Transvaal has left South Africa and now finds a home in the quaint shopping streets and residential areas in the Netherlands. The turn of the twentieth century brought with it the Second Anglo-Boer War, which saw the loss of the Orange Free State and South African Republic (Transvaal) to British dominion. As a consequence, the Dutch claim to their colonial pride was tarnished by a European competitor. As is written on the Arnhem Municipal website regarding street names, 'The Netherlands felt a strong affinity with the suffering of the Boers, *because they were descendants of the Cape Colony.*'[58] The Dutch Afrikaanderwijken and Transvaalkwartiers present a form of retroactive extension of territory – laying claim to colonial land beyond reach, both in space and time. The Transvaal was in Africa first, but it is given the status of constituting a part of the Dutch socio-political space by being named in the Dutch territory. The pride in the Boers and its generals is not out of simple admiration, but rather owing to a shared heritage. The conquests of the Boers is regarded in turn as the conquest of the Dutch, and with it the myths and valiant efforts of the Afrikaans generals become the result of an inherited Dutch courage in the face of a British enemy – it all has remarkably little to do with Africa and its people. The irony of this is the highly tenuous relation between the two physical spaces; there are no blue jays or weeping willows, grachten or gazelle bicycles in the old Transvaal of South Africa, just as the Netherlands has no mine dumps, no springbok, and no caves filled with dead black bodies.

As Nadine Gordimer describes in her essay, 'The Witwatersrand: A Time and Tailings', what was considered 'the blankness of the place on earth where they found themselves' received names, 'simple designations, characterless as an X in place of a signature, identifying emptiness by its few natural features, a spring, a stream, a rise in the ground'.[59] And so an area five times the size of the Netherlands gained the name that refers to the crossing of a river that informs its territory – this name carries the weight of historical record, and in its conception, the territorial implications of that name are projected into all future memories of struggle, warfare and victory. The name alone conjures forth the British concentration camps, Napoleon's seizure of the Netherlands, the Dutch extermination of indigenous peoples, and ultimately the ego of European nations in competition over land beyond their reach.

Just as there is no longer any physical *gracht* in Cape Town; there is no *Vaalrivier* in the Netherlands, and yet the names of each persist in the space of the other. It is very much the case that the 'question of names has less to do with the *geography* of the place than it has to do with the *history* of those who have chosen, who use, and who recognize the names.'[60] Importantly, these names underpin histories (and therefore futures) of places as entities that are not in opposition to each other, but very much entwined. They function as forms of remembrance, but also of ownership, and to remember a particular past by giving it a name is to produce a future in its likeness. These multiple worlds are therefore never in a state of completion, but rather under continual construction in the past, present and future. It is worth questioning, then, the names we choose for the futures we intend to construct. For if we hope to live in a world that does not rely on false dichotomies that subjugate people and places to the violence of an imagined 'outside', we must recognise that our understanding of the inside is not as far removed from that which we seek to destroy, and in slicing those differences apart we invariably lose the ability to reunite what has been lost for the sake of material gain.

Not So

A snake in the lounge, a French violin, and streets in the Netherlands named after the Voortrekkers in colonial Southern Africa: disparate tales that are entangled in my own experience. It is one of the strange wonders of the world that stories such as these are not necessarily coherent, and yet they are not contrary to one another. It is in the bringing together of these alternate worlds and the recognition of their immense diversity that some semblance

of reality might be discernible – there is indeed no *just so* story. From each story presented here, one could come to an independent, resounding conclusion: the inside as we understand it exists only in relation to a particular outside; culture is necessarily a product of the landscape; and the production of worlds is dependent on the semantic and socio-political significance of the name ascribed. It would seem however, that doing so might fall precisely into the trap this essay sets out to problematise. This is because, while each of these conclusions might be true, given the context in which they are produced – that is, within the locus of my experience, and in discussion with the presented theoretical discourse – they cannot be said to be the case for all interiors, cultures, or place names. To provide a single sentence that neatly delivers their entire significance would be problematic, for the issue of the drip line must be taken up in its entirety, not for the sake of claiming any truth. Rather, it has been my intention that these critical memoirs demonstrate an alternative method for dealing with the conflict that theory encounters with the lived experience; especially with a life lived outside of the European territory. Characters, places and artefacts come together in such a way that their relation is fraught with much explanation that the world does not offer readily. However, it is a grave error to perpetuate the frame of logic that delivers the same divisions and narratives repeatedly, explaining away the diversity of worlds in favour of one that isolates and divides characters, places and artefacts. Rather we ought to seek an understanding of the vital relation between worlds; re-membering the frayed ends of rope that constitute the Gordian Knot. Any hope of a truly decolonial and radically open future that is neither anti-European nor calling for some form of indigenous primitivism, depends upon a theoretical ground that is shared rather than divided to be subsumed.

It is because the general is rarely confronted with the actual and the specific that critical theory has a tendency to lack critique: the inside and outside are considered in abstract terms; the landscape and the culture are not met with the consequences of asking 'Which landscape?' and 'What Culture?' and the problems of the self and the other are not targeted at a particular self. By making use of embodied experience and personal memory, the tools that theory provides are better able to address the conditions of a life lived, rather than the hypothetical and abstract 'lives' of a generic and disembodied reader. In order to break away from the tradition of western critical theory and dismantle some of the 'abyssal lines' that constitute the demarcations of modern thought, it is necessary to introduce new myths grounded in the tangible realities of the worlds beyond the Western Canon.[61] To break away from the possessive interiorisation that plagues modern thought, we must turn away from Laugier's hut, which finds itself nowhere but in the abstract space of a page, to the drip line of the Blombos Cave in South Africa. The drip line proposes a form of differentiation without opposition, providing an ability to reframe and retie the Gordian knots of our relations to each other, the natural environment and to the physical outside. For indeed, the re-membrance of worlds torn apart is contingent on a door left half-open, a porous divide that enables interaction between worlds, rather than their strict division.

Given this essay's autobiographical nature, these stories are entrenched in a cultural, political and natural context so vast and complex, that it exceeds my scope to explain or analyse it here. The context is there, and it weighs heavily, but it has not been my intention to explicate or otherwise 'frame' it. Rather, through the exploration of hyperlocal and personal experience these stories reveal the intricacies of relation and entanglements in the multiple worlds that constitute Africa. There are, admittedly, many more worlds than can or have been addressed here. When one recognises the infinite diversity of our planet and the 'necessarily regional character of our concepts' that are a result of direct and embodied experience, it seems to me that there is no choice but to question those comforting abstract universalisms or 'just so stories', and the demarcations that enclose and divide our world.[62]

As my mother read to me in bed, Dickens (the cat, not the author) slept at my feet, and Brutus trembled beneath my desk, afraid of the thunder outside. The rain hammered deafeningly on our tin roof and a leak would be dripping into a bucket in the corridor just outside my bedroom. It was cold, and getting into icy sheets that slowly warm up until you, in the morning, no longer want to leave them was routine in the winter, and has become a point of nostalgia for me now.[63] Kipling's tall tales made me wonder as a child, just how exactly did all of these things come to be the way that they are – the rain dripping through the roof, the wind rattling on my window and the cold in the sheets; or the scorpion in the kitchen the other day, or the racket birds make when there's a snake nearby; and, what if something terrible happens? My mother would tolerate my late-night questioning with great patience, though fatigue would eventually win her over. As she drifted off, but somehow continued to answer my questions, the answers would slide into strange worlds, half-based in dreams and half in response to my questions.

These are the *Not So Stories*, ones that don't align with expectation or convention, don't quite answer the question asked, and consequently do not offer much comfort. As Édouard Glissant explains, 'to understand these [relations]

truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.'[64] The division between the inside and outside cannot exist simply as a list of measurable quantities but can only be understood through intentional experience. This presents what Glissant calls for as a non-reductive and empathetic approach to the relations of a common-place. Indeed, it is in the stories told otherwise, ones told 'not so', that new understandings and relationalities can be forged, as Arturo Escobar elaborates: 'to think new thoughts, by implication, requires to move out of the epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with the multiple relational ontologies of worlds in struggle.'[65] Doing so enables our understanding of experience to escape prescription or predetermined meaning and offers in its place a contingent reality that is founded on embodied and relational ontologies.[66] The work of addressing the *Just So Stories* is important for any hope of creating a future that is different from the prescriptive past. This is to be done by living attentively, and recounting all the worlds that are the result of stories told *not so*.

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Notes

1. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1.
2. Enrique Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)', *boundary 2,* vol. 20, no. 3 (1993): 66.
3. Daniel Karlin, 'How the stories got their name: Kipling and the origins of the "Just-So" stories', *Oxford University Press* blog, 23 December 2015, https://blog.oup.com/2015/12/kiplingstories-names/.
4. As Arturo Escobar defines it, using John Law's formulation of a crisis of Euro-modernity: 'that is, a world allegedly made up of a single Word, and that has arrogated for itself the right to be "the" world, subjecting all other worlds to its own terms or, worse, to non-existence.' Escobar, 'Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South', *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 11, no. 1 (January-April 2016): 15, https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110102e.
5. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 3–5.
6. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Epistemologies of the South and The Future', *From The European South: A Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities* 1 (2016): 17–29, 20.
7. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales', *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 3 (2012): 505–24.
8. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Richard Kennington, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Indianapolis: Focus Publishing/Hackett, 2012), 33.
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10. Mark Wrathall, 'Martin Heidegger', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 31 January 2025, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/#Dase.
11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).
12. Walter D. Mignolo, 'Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of decoloniality', *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 449–514.
13. Escobar, 'Thinking Feeling', 13.
14. Lesley Green, *Rock, Water, Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 17.
15. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Peter Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds', in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). Cvetkovich refers to the varied works and writing practices of Walter Benjamin, Michael Taussig, Nadia Serematkis and Avery Gordon for their ability to appreciate the magic and mystery that sit alongside the banal, which can turn the ordinary into a scene of surprise – she

emphasises however, that a simple account of everyday experience is insufficient. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 11.

16. Édouard Glissant, 'For Opacity' in *Poetics of Relation,* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 189–95.
17. This section sets the scene for the memoir fragments to follow. It echoes the stylistic devices of Rudyard Kipling's bed-time fables, the *Just So Stories,* to generate a new and alternative allegory for the origin of the inside. Kipling's tales are all addressed to his 'Best Beloved' daughter, for whom they were written.
18. Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture,* trans. Wolfgang Herrmann and Anni Herrmann (Los Angeles: Hennessy & Ingalls, 1977), 11.
19. Ibid., 12,13.
20. I refer here to the *Bouwbesluit 2012* of the Netherlands, which stipulates building codes that concern (among other topics such as sustainability and safety) the topic of 'health'.
21. Magnus M. Haaland, Christopher E. Miller, Ole F. Unhammera, Jerome P. Reynarde, Karen L. van Niekerk, Bertrand Ligouisg, Susan M. Mentzer and Christopher S. Henshilwood, 'Geoarchaeological investigation of occupation deposits in Blombos Cave in South Africa indicate changes in site use and settlement dynamics in the southern Cape during MIS 5b-4', *Quaternary Research* 100 (2021): 170–223, https://doi.org/10.1017/qua.2020.75.
22. Yuk Hui, 'Notes on Technical Normativity', in *Technological Accidents*, ed. Joke Brouwer and Sjoerd Van Tuinen (Rotterdam: V2, 2023), 154–67. Please note, it is not my intention to romanticise dysfunction or discomfort, nor present it as an ideal.
23. Stavros Kousoulas, 'In/Side/Out', in *Noetics Without a Mind*, ed. Stavros Kousoulas, Andrej Radman and Heidi Sohn (Delft: TU Delft Open, 2024), 12.
24. D.H. Lawrence, 'Snake', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Vivian De Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (New York: Penguin, 1993), 349–51. Please note, this is an excerpt of the first and final stanzas of a considerably longer poem.
25. Different snakes hold different kinds of venom. That of the puff adder is cytotoxic, in the worst cases causing necrosis, or the decomposition of living material.
26. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations and Simulacra*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 85–92.
27. I have never seen a puff adder outside. My second and only other encounter with a puff adder was within a pool-pump shelter. My own experience would suggest that remaining inside increases the chances of encountering a puff adder.
28. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 2014), 237, 238.
29. Ibid., 155.
30. Most houses remain uninsulated, and with single glazing. The roof of our house was prone to many leaks through its tin roof. And regarding darkness, it is admittedly not always the case – however power outages were not uncommon growing up, and today are if anything more regular; centrally regulated and scheduled per neighbourhood under the term 'load shedding'.
31. With Karbonkelberg just behind our house, the garden and with it the house was very much alive with the movements of the local fauna. Animals that have entered my home (or at least the stoep) include but are not limited to: Cape legless skinks, Cape cobra, scorpions, rain spiders, geckos and lizards, banded orb-weaver spiders, sunbirds, guineafowl, fieldmice, doves, Cape white-eyes and bulbuls, thrushes and rock pigeons.
32. Kousoulas, 'In/Side/Out', 15.
33. René Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy', in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes,* trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane (Cambridge: University Press, 1911); Green, *Rock, Water, Life,* 39, 40.
34. 'And certainly, considering the ideas of all these qualities which presented themselves to my mind, and which alone I perceived properly or immediately, it was not without reason that I believed myself to perceive objects quite different from my thought, to wit, bodies from which those ideas proceeded; for I found by experience that these ideas presented themselves to me without my consent being requisite, so that I could not perceive any object, however desirous I might be, unless it were present to the organs of sense; and it was not in my power not to perceive it, when it was present.' Descartes, 'Meditations', 19–22.
35. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 3.
36. Ibid., 28.
37. Descartes, 'Meditations', 25, 2.
38. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 32.
39. The left hand, or *mano sinistra*, is responsible for applying pressure to the strings along a fretless neck of the violin. The operation requires correct positioning first of the arm, the rotation of the wrist, and in turn the fingers. While the distance between individual tones a-b, e-f, b-c, f-g is the same across the strings, the strings are at increasing distances from the hand, meaning that each string requires different movements of the hand's muscles, wrist, or arm to play the correct note. Suffice to say it is very difficult to play the violin in tune; and ensuring that you have a rigid and ready hand as a controlled entity is necessary in order to play the same notes consistently in tune.
40. The University of South Africa (UNISA) is an open distance learning institution that organises remote exams.
41. This bird is not native to Southern Africa and commonly migrates between Europe and Asia. The term 'vagrant' is used to denote a bird that is off-course from its regular migratory route. Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström, *Collins Bird Guide: The Most Complete Guide to The Birds of Britain and Europe,* trans. David Christie and Lars Svensson (Dublin: Harper Collins, 2022).
42. See Gilbert Simondon's *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* for an elaboration on the relation between technology

and its objects with regard to cultural production. Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects,* trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogrove (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017 [1958]).

43. Federico Formica, 'For Italy's Musical Woods, Threats From Without and Within,' *Atlas Obscura*, 23 July 2021, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/val-di-iemme-resonance-wood.
44. Martina Meincken, Gerhard Roux and Thomas Niesler, 'An African Violin: The feasibility of using indigenous wood from Southern Africa as tonewood', *South African Journal of Science* 117, no. 11–12 (November 2021): 1–8.
45. Ibid, 5,6.
46. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque,* trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006 [1992]), 63.
47. Helen Swingler, 'Grachte', pumps and the first hydroelectric station – how water shaped the city', *UCT News*, 3 February 2023, https://www.news.uct.ac.za/news/audio/-article/202302-03-grachte-pumps-and-the-irst-hydroelectric-station-how-water-shaped-the-city; Green, *Rock, Water, Life,* 26–59.
48. Beth Williamson, 'Historical geographies of place naming: Colonial practices and beyond', *Geography Compass* 17, no. 5 (23 March 2023), e12687.
49. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, 25.
50. While the act of naming seems at first glance to be inconsequential for the material world, De Landa contends this quite rightfully in his lecture *A Materialist Theory of Language*. Manuel DeLanda, 'A Materialist Theory of Language', European Graduate School Video Lectures, 12 November 2011, 1 h 13 min., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAhaXe3BRe0.
51. Condensing this history into a 200-word paragraph is greatly reductive of the intricacies and complex relations; not all of Dutch descent considered themselves Boers, not all Boers were trekboers, and not all *voortrekkers* were of Dutch descent. Additionally, those who did venture out, the *voortrekkers,* established several self-governing states, not one. Among these was the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek (informally referred to as the Transvaal), the Orange Free State, the Republic of Swellendam (who revolted against Dutch rule, but utilised the Dutch flag), the Republic of Graaff-Reinet, Utrecht Republic, and more. Not all were established at the same time or for the same reason. They did all share in common a European heritage, if not affiliation, and all carried out a colonial practice of land claim in order to establish themselves. Finally, all of these peoples longed for a territory to call their own, independent of European governance.
52. Chris McGreal, 'Afrikaans singer stirs up controversy with war song', *The Guardian,* 26 February 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/26/music.southafrica.
53. Herman Charles Bosman, 'Makapan's Caves', in *The Complete Oom Schalk Lourens Stories,* ed. Craig MacKenzie (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2006), 9, 10.
54. Williamson, 'Historical geographies of place naming', 6.
55. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', 14, 15, 26. This logic is dependent on the belief that landscape and culture are distinct entities. Mbembe elaborates on the distinction between subject and object by making use of a Hegelian understanding of the living spirit, one that upholds death – effectively negating the nature of one's body in order to birth the subject. In turn, the act of killing and determining who dies becomes a form of reducing another body to the level of objecthood. The hierarchy is implicit in the distinction between subject and object, and if one recognises the folly of this division the hierarchy also collapses.
56. Tsing, 'On Nonscalability', 505–24.
57. Escobar, 'Thinking Feeling', 15.
58. 'Verklaring Arnhemse Straatnamen', my translation and emphasis, https://arnhem.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/sidebar/index.html?appid=fefd0c26eb764b3c85082 b5b1376c92. The original text reads: *Nederland voelde een sterke verwantschap met de strijd van de Boeren, omdat zij afstammelingen waren van Nederlandse bewoners van de Kaapkolonie.*
59. Nadine Gordimer, 'The Witwatersrand: A Time and Tailings', in *On the Mines* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2012), 19.
60. Carrol Clarkson, 'Remains of the Name', in *Literary Landscapes: From Modernism to Postcolonialism,* ed. Attie de Lange, Gail Fincham, Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 140, original emphasis.
61. Sousa Santos, 'Epistemologies of the South and The Future', 20.
62. Ibid., 20; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics,* trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.
63. The significance of nostalgia for this essay is perhaps self-evident, but I must be clear that my intention is not to look back with longing, nor to generate sympathy for a strange upbringing; rather, in keeping with Svetlana Boym's understanding of nostalgia, I intend to use these memoirs as tools for critical inquiry towards an unprescribed future. As Boym describes it, nostalgia is 'not always for the ancient regime or fallen empire but also for the unrealised dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete … for unrealised possibilities, unpredictable turns and crossroads.' Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.
64. Glissant 'For Opacity', 190.
65. Escobar, 'Thinking Feeling', 16.
66. It is therefore also owing to these stories' disparate nature that they gain their strength. As Ursula Le Guin lays out in her carrier bag theory of fiction, there is indeed a problem with the archetypal understanding of a narrative, one in which 'the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hit[s] its mark (which drops dead).' It is the superfluous and unexpected contained within the carrier bag that enables new ideas and conceptions of the world to be produced. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory Of Fiction', in *Dancing at the End of the World* (London: Ignota Books, 1986).

Biography

Christopher Clarkson is a South African researcher and design practitioner based in the Netherlands. In 2024, Clarkson founded his research practice, Blackletter, through which he develops projects that bring together text, photography and cartography to challenge abstract representations of space with an understanding of situated experience. He received his master's degree in architecture, cum laude, from Delft University of Technology in 2024. Since then, he has taught at TU Delft, Willem De Kooning Academie, and the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture. His work has been published as part of *Archined*'s series, 'Persistence of Questioning', and in Yale's architectural journal, *Perspecta*, in the volume titled 'Not Found'. Clarkson has served as an editor-in-chief of the student-run journals *Pantheon//* and *Bnieuws* (Faculty of Architecture and Built Environment, TU Delft).

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, ecofeminism 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 storying 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

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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'etat 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,

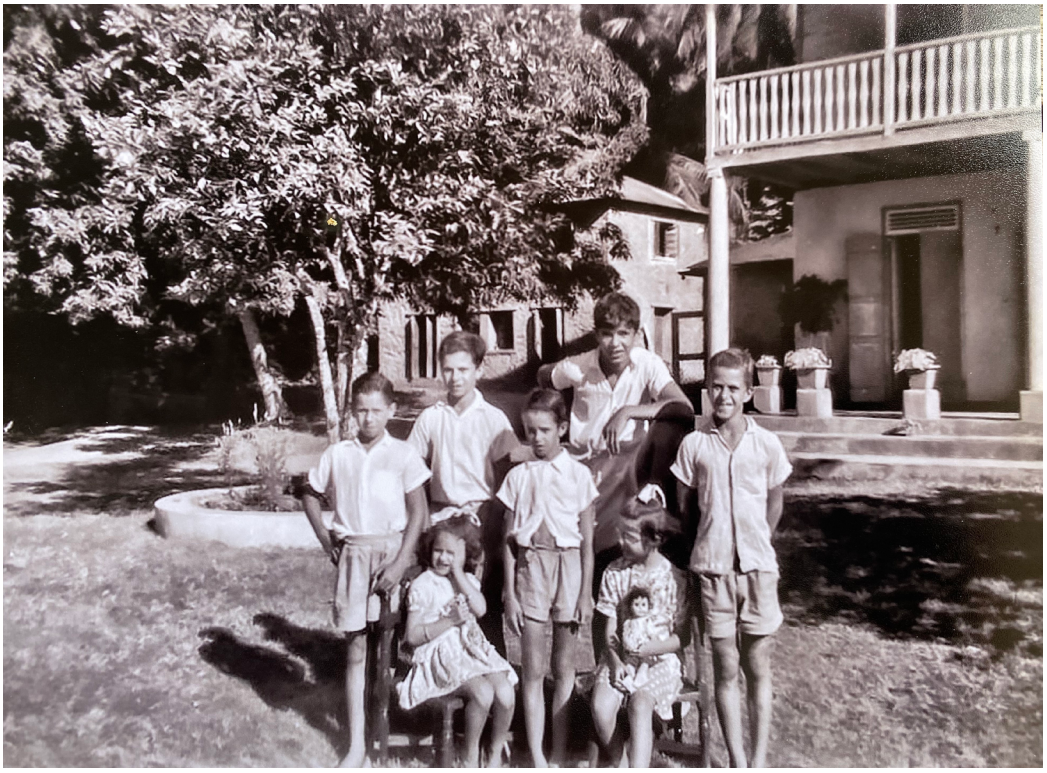


Fig. 2: Family photograph with partial view of front façade of Ma Joie main plantation house, with manager’s stone house toward the left, circa 1955. Photo: Frichot family archive.

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

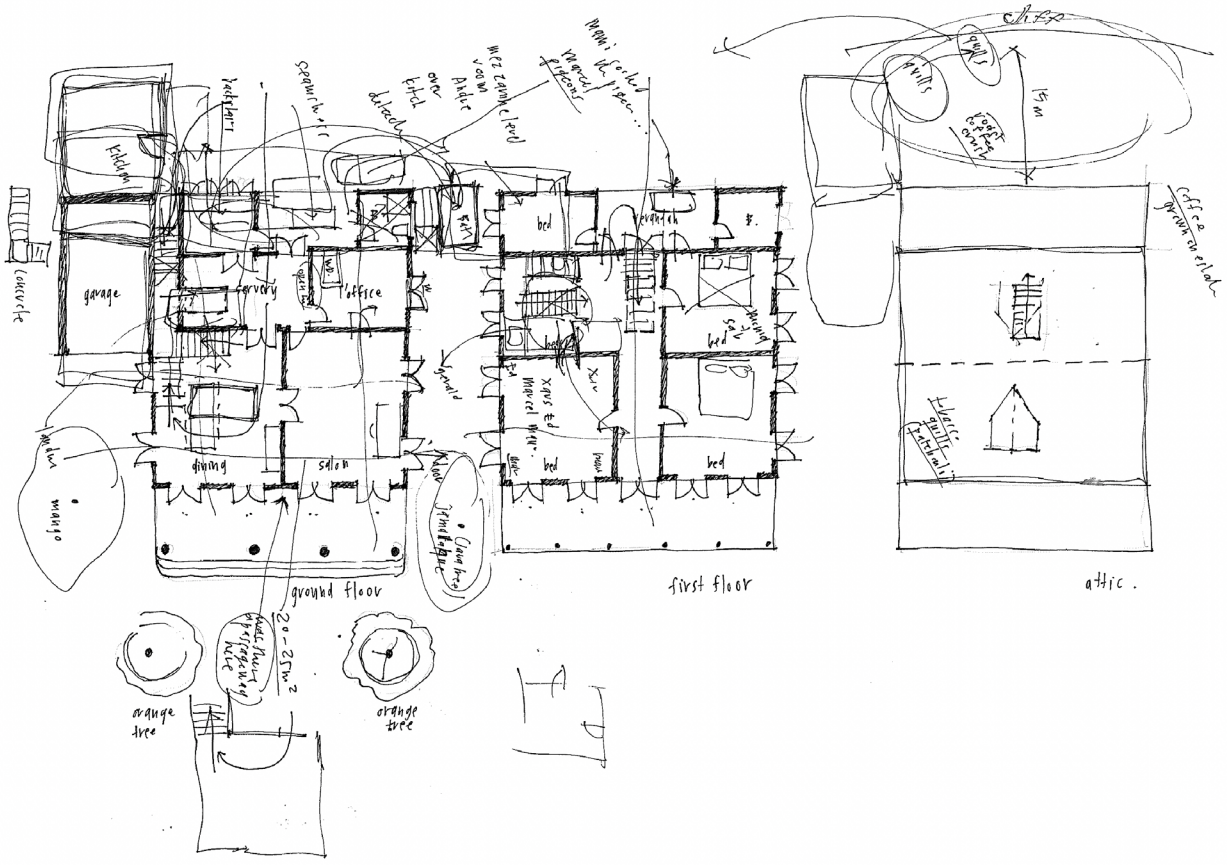


Fig. 3: Sketch plan of the three storeys of the Ma Joie main plantation house. Drawing: author.

René led a coup d'etat 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

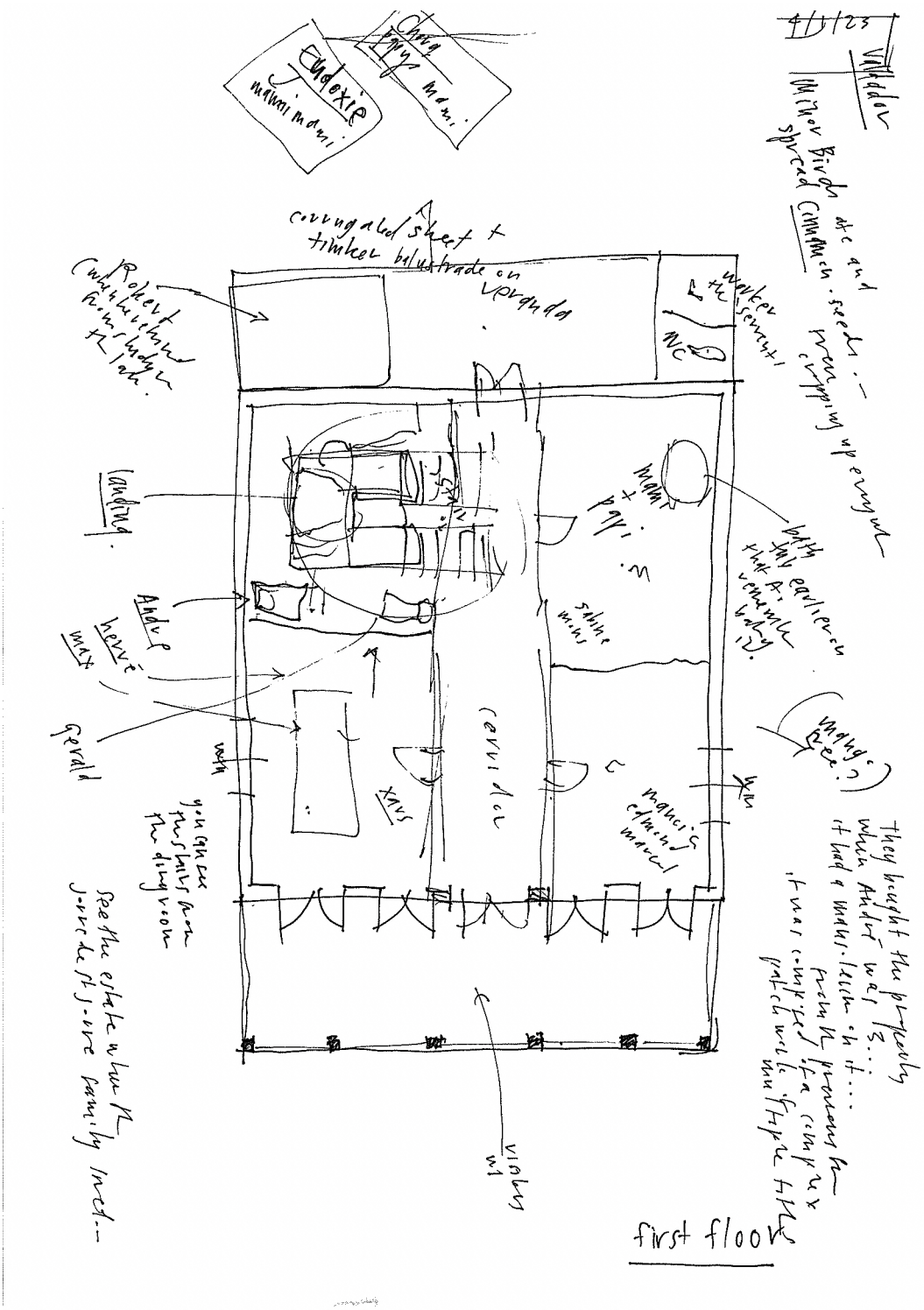


Fig. 4: Sketch plan of the ground floor of Ma Joie, attempting to resolve the layout of the stairs from memory. Drawing: author.

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'etat 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.

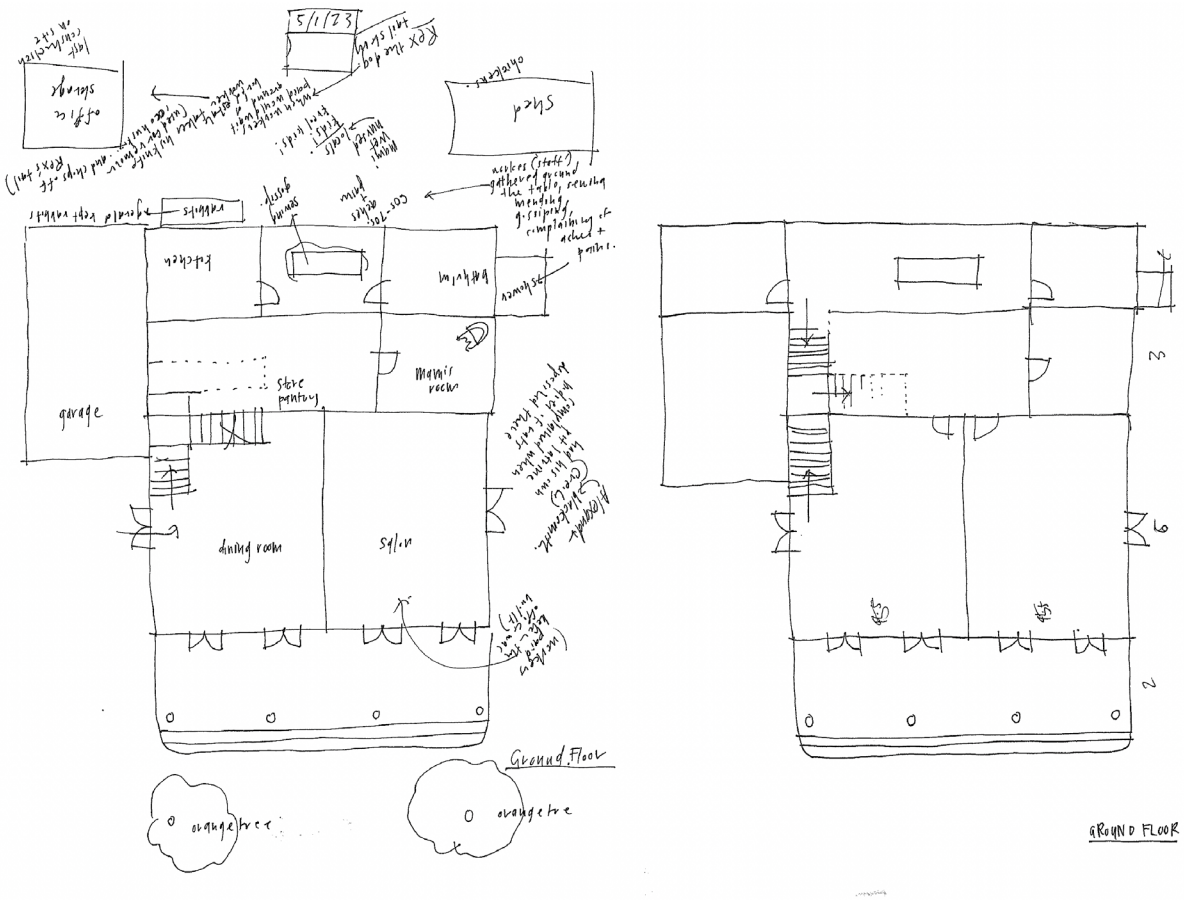


Fig. 5: Sketch plan of the ground floor of Ma Joie, attempting to resolve the layout of the stairs from memory with another version of the layout. Drawing: author.

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, Achile 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

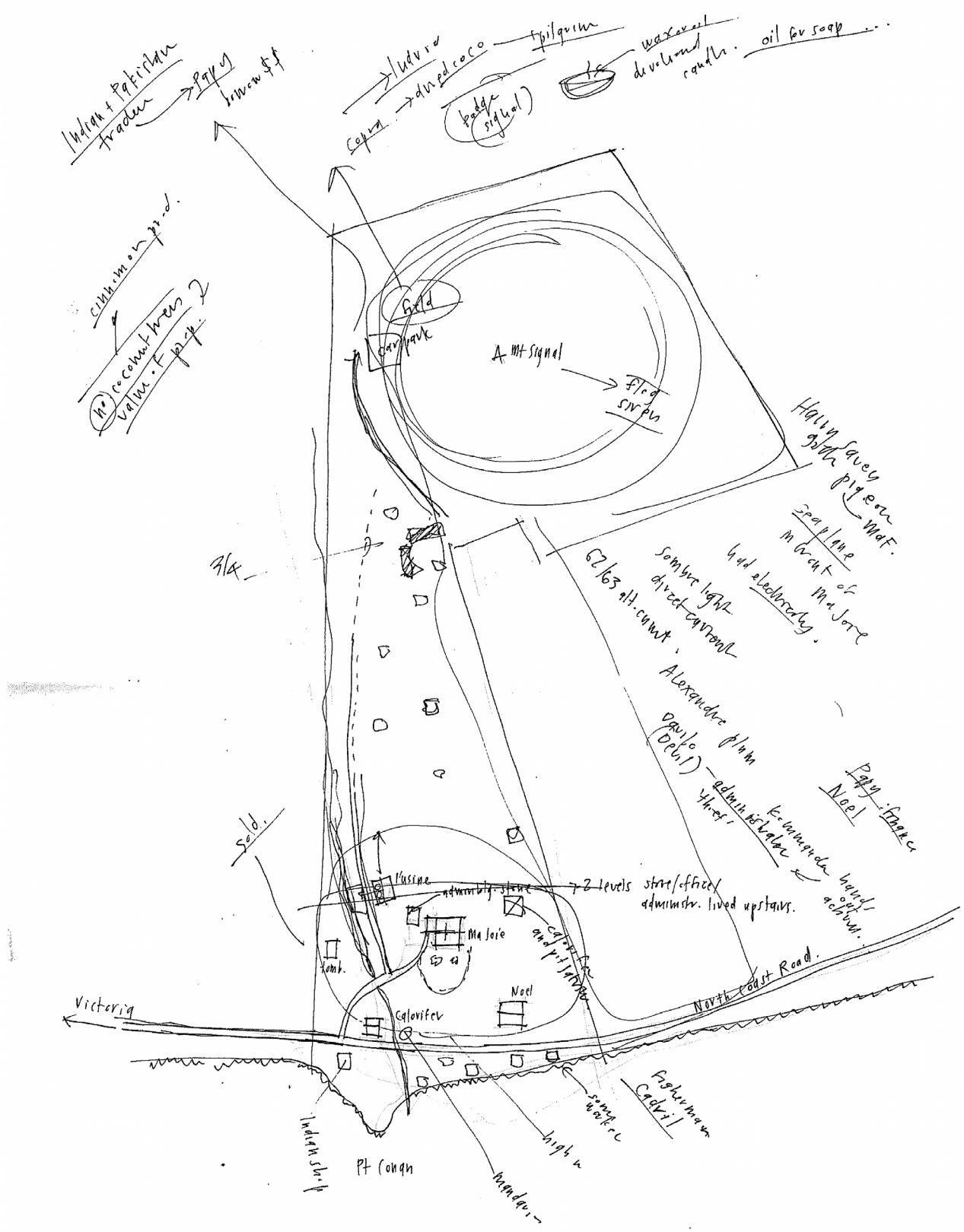


Fig. 6: Sketch plan of full Ma Joie estate. Drawing: author.

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 Persévérence 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 Persévérence.

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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Biography

Architectural theorist and philosopher, writer and critic, Hélène 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.

African Para-Ontologies of Domestic Cleaning: Ecological and Pedagogical Concepts of Repetition in Pre-Colonial Rituals of Care

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Abstract
This essay conceptually investigates a minor literature in domestic cleaning practices within pre-colonial African contexts. It focuses on unpacking and conceptually reframing the complex poetics of sweeping the floor of the home and the power of this practice as repetitive act of care, which also affirms social status. While these practices are site-specific and vernacular, they also entail commonality and ecumenicity. At the same time, the spatial and political characteristics of housework and specifically cleaning have been extensively theorised in the context of ecofeminism. The ecology and pedagogy of cleaning that stem from pre- and anti-colonial thought, however, remains larval. Sweeping the floor using a broom specifically is – speaking eco-technically – a ritualistic act that implies an architecture of care, discipline and repetition, and which has ecological and pedagogical allusions. This article conceptually and critically examines these allusions, focusing specifically on the complexity of the act of sweeping the floor in pre-colonial African homes. We do so by framing a para-ontology of the broom and its performative presence in the embodied act called sweeping, which is sensorial, environmental and ecological – therefore posthuman. Starting with Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction and Hélène Frichot's dirty theory, this essay explores the broom as a pedagogical and ecological asset with a value that can be reclaimed and thus lead to more equitable futures.

Keywords
Broom, cleaning, Africa, home, ritual

One sentence summary
This is a conceptualisation of the broom as a connective, ecological and pedagogical object of culture and social status, reflecting on domestic ritual, myth, and poetry from pre-colonial West Africa.

Of menial ordinance

Cleaning the home is a connective narrative of high value. It is equally complex and significant because it contributes to the architectures of everyday living of many different cultures. Its socio-economic value however is deemed low, resulting in imbalanced, hidden and precarious labour. Tasks associated with housework are casually and wrongfully considered menial, meaning not requiring much skill and lacking prestige. The performative act of getting a home clean(er) can, however, carry immense significance, projecting and sustaining socio-economic status and at the same time representing a sincere act of care and caring for (other, oneself, the immediate environment). It is additionally a contested act in terms of gender politics and labour, and of course it has its own diverse poetics and language,

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manifested in its architectures, its spatial appropriations and embodied functions. The language of housework has an intriguing legacy and rich genealogy. For instance, the term menial was originally used to describe acts associated with housework.[1] It is now a term that conveys tedium, mindless and lowly work generally. Such tedium in the case of domestic cleaning is loaded with ritualised emotional, psychological and spiritual engagement. It is not extravagant to quote Ursula Le Guin's ode to Socrates here: 'the misuse of language induces evil in the soul'.[2] The misuse of the meanings of cleaning may have induced an additional malice or two, and this is not unrelated to Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* where the bag-made-to-carry (and to care) becomes an ecumenical and ecosystemic point of reference for an alternative genealogy available to the humankind.[3] Now, replace bag with broom, and see what happens. At once we are swamped with questions: Who carries the broom? Where is it stored? What does it sweep away? What do you do with the swept matter? How often do you sweep? Does the broom have a stiff whisk or standard brush broom head? Too many questions for a menial task. *The Household Discoveries: An Encyclopaedia of Practical Recipes and Processes* mentions that

> to sweep well with a broom is an art that calls for quite a little skill and intelligence. There are wrong ways in sweeping as well as the right way, and the former are perhaps more often practiced than the latter.[4]

In this instructional manual-type entry, we read a protocol for sweeping. The embodied and therefore subjective act of holding the broom and performing with it becomes a peculiar gymnastic skill assessed for its propriety. According to this manual, there is also a designated day for sweeping, and very clear instructions about what not to do. For instance,

> it is wrong to push the broom forward so as to drive a cloud of dust into the air… It is wrong to sweep always on one side of a broom so that it will get lopsided and have to be thrown away… The right way to use a broom is to keep the handle always inclining forward and never allow it to come to the perpendicular; much less incline backward.[5]

There are additional notes explaining how to store a broom correctly and how to sustainably keep older brooms for 'dirtier' work. The editor of the volume dedicates the book to 'the thousands of practical housekeepers'. Sweeping the floor is a common ritual across the world, and some well-recognised and in many ways commodified 'attitudes to cleaning are remarkably uniform'.[6] From India to Nigeria, Greece to Wales, and Scotland to Ukraine, intergenerational oral history bids that the otherwise mundane act of sweeping the floor never be performed at late hours, thus becoming a ritual with some sort of temporally sensitive and symbolic significance. Sweeping the floor using a broom is – speaking eco-technically – a ritualistic act that implies an architecture of care, discipline and repetition, and which has ecological and pedagogical allusions. In this essay, we examine these allusions conceptually and critically, focusing specifically on the complexity of the act of sweeping the floor in pre-colonial African homes.

We start with the axiom that cleaning the home and particularly the sweeping act are polysemous and enriched by symbolic and epistemic varieties of meaning assigned to objects embedded in the domestic environment. These objects are contextually and conceptually potent when they become indicators of social status and connectedness with the divine. The broom, for example, features prominently in Yoruba mythology and spirituality.[7] Its presence asserts the collectivist moral order of strength in unity. Brooms are used as boundary objects to denote material and immaterial thresholds. A charmed broom should signal to a thief the power and authority of the owner of the house or room, stating that the territory is marked. Would-be thieves who gain access to the spaces marked by charmed brooms could take items but will not have the ability to leave the premises, under the charm of the broom. Instead, any attempt to remove the items they intend to steal will result in an uncomprehensible impulse to keep the space clean. The thief removes the charmed broom and begins to sweep until the owner arrives. African art historian David Doris describes this territorial attitude as a form of defence: 'to use a broom is to engage in a defining act of civilization; to sweep is to assert the boundaries of one's dwelling space and to defend that space against the natural forces of entropy'.[8] There is a transactional dimension to cleaning, which has personal rewards and carries socioeconomic, psycho-emotional and especially spatial and political recognition. The broom becomes the beholder of Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction.

Ecological paraontologies

In response to these complex dimensions of the broom in situ, we wish to highlight the distinctive and contested nature of the sweeping act of the broom. This is particularly evident when the success of removing dirt becomes subordinate to visually demonstrating that the act is done with intent and definition, in order to display status and erudition in the household. To do this, we employ a paraontological approach – 'a method of reading that… can account for that which conceals, retreats and shelters itself from classical ontology'.[9] Paraontology, with its roots in the perhaps dubious term Black ontology, is a concept developed

by Fred Moten drawing from Black philosopher Nahum Chandler. To be paraontological means to be evaluative and 'evaluations, in essence, are not values but ways of being ... This is why we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we deserve given our way of being or our style of life'.[10] While there is inherent negativity in thinking paraontologically, this negativity 'brims with potential for liberation', Thomas Dekeyser and David Bissell say, associating negativity with dance.[11] The dancefloor of the pre-colonial home is swept in the sometimes synchronous and sometimes conflicting rhythms of class, family, generation and the micropolitics of the everyday. Our methodology is eclectically founded in Black ontology and paraontology, meaning that we accept, like Claire Colebrook, that

> there is no innocent or pure foundation; terms such as 'matter' in the 'new materialism' are ways of recognizing that the point of view from which theory unfolds can never be fully theorized. Bodies, matter, flesh, or affect become ways of thinking about the imbrication of the cognitive/theoretical with a substrate (the Real) that is impossible and unavoidable.[12]

We therefore create theory that is unbound to its ontological obligation to serve the world as we know it. Such theory is dirty theory, a concept coined by architectural ecologist Hélène Frichot. To think paraontologically means to think dirtily (in Frichot's terms).[13]

We follow Frichot, by instigating thought through which we can 'cross boundaries, challenge decorum, contravene norms'.[14] Such theory is inherently paraontological and has ecological and pedagogical perspectives and ramifications. Through theorising a dirty paraontology of the broom we can meaningfully and creatively explore the connective and divisive facets of sweeping the floor using literary findings from oral history and heritage, poetry and fiction, as well as contemporary philosophy and anecdotes from the vernacular architectures of the everyday. More importantly, we can conceptually render everyday acts observed in the precolonial home and highlight the not so serendipitous spiritual links to indigenous cultures. Such examination allows us to conceptually map out how these acts of everyday care and recognition of social status create a network of practices that add ecological and pedagogical value rooted in heritage and underpinned by anticolonial thought. This geographically and paraontologically 'dirty' conceptual survey of the 'clean' is very important. Not only does it offer an opportunity to challenge concepts of cleaning-as-cleansing imposed by colonial, Eurocentric and westernised systems of thought, but it also leads to hopeful and liberatory reflective accounts on the ecological and pedagogical significance carried by the repetition and instated value coming from pre-colonial, domestic cleaning, paving the way for more equitable futures in architectural humanities. The paraontological and dirty therefore is the clean of a more equitable future.

Domesticities and ritual

Housework is never just the job, and the job is never done.[15] Sweeping the floor in this context becomes not only a narrative act of commoning, but an orchestrated synthesis of power play among bodies, objects, spaces and infrastructural systems. Julia Wieger says that

> many of the discussions on commoning point toward ways of life beyond capitalism. They thoroughly examine everyday practices for possibilities of less exploitative ways of living together. That is also why they so strongly concern the domestic realm, a part of our everyday lives prone to gender inequalities.[16]

Catharina Gabrielsson adds that 'housework points to an ethics of care that is fundamentally at odds with capitalist accumulation.[17] The political and performative dimension of the act of sweeping the floor in this case is in direct dialogue with the domestic. This is a dialogue that architectural feminist criticism has systematically surveyed. The 2012 edition of *Neufert Architects' Data*, an essential reference guide for architectural design and planning, infamously shows a man taking a bath and a woman cleaning the bathtub.[18] Cleaning the home is always a site of narrative complexity. In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping,* a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize of Fiction, two sisters inhabit a house that has accumulated the dust and human debris of generations of women, revealing a tension between the hidden art of domestic life and the fragility of those who seek to escape their undervalued roles as keepers of houses.[19] 'If housework is understood as … beneath some people, then no architecture can undo this hierarchy'.[20] And indeed, domestic labour – the link between wage and housework – is political and social. It reveals inequalities, oppressions, and hidden structures of power featuring 'the unwaged housewife whose work is not separated from her life, if she is allowed to call it work'.[21] Yet, acts of domestic work (housework) can carry higher value. 'All types of cleaning, mending and repairing reproduce architecture on a daily basis', Elke Krasny reminds us in her seminal essay titled 'Care'.[22] The notion of care founded upon cycles of faithful – often meaningless and habitual – repetition is an important concept for understanding and establishing a dirty paraontology of the broom.

To embark on the laborious (pun intended) act of mapping a paraontology of sweeping the floor, we must explain how the ecology of the broom, as an asset of care, extends beyond sanitisation rituals (cleansing). To do so we must first understand the ecology of the acts of sweeping and

scrubbing, which are well rooted (as most housework acts are) in two principles, work process and technological system, according to Ruth Schwartz Cowan. This implies a parametrised ecology that is visible through the postwar industrialisation of housework.[23] In Cowan's words, if, for example,

> we view cleaning rugs as a work process, then we might see that it is composed of several activities (moving the instrument, moving the rugs, removing the accumulated dust, and so on), and that at least one of these (moving the instrument) is much harder to do with the vacuum cleaner than with the broom. In addition, if it is more likely that the presence of the vacuum cleaner will increase the frequency with which the work is done… or will involve fewer people in the work… then the question of whether cleaning a rug has been made easier or faster by the advent of vacuum cleaners becomes considerably more difficult to answer. Easier for whom? Faster for whom? Under what conditions?'.[24]

Technofeminist Helen Hester and digital economist Nick Srincek note in this context that even during the contemporary era of the smart home, a transformation that entails similar dynamics to earlier industrialisations,

> we remain enmeshed in a world of domestic technologies whose potential to reduce work has gone largely unfulfilled… the capacity of these devices to significantly reduce household labour has been limited by the social organisation of the work… with hours spent on housework remaining broadly stable for all of the twentieth century'.[25]

Once we think of the labour-saving apparatus as part of its wider ecosystem, we start questioning whose labour it is saving and how.

Such complexity also extends to the human's connection to even wider (planetary) ecosystems, demanding a multilayered and contextual understanding. From an anthropological perspective, the primordial connection with the natural fibres that constitute the material substance of the broom denotes proximity to the earth as a unique ecology. Other connections indicate historical, sociological, political and theological links to the sacred and mundane materiality of brooms as objects of bounty, and the pragmatic application of knowledge and technology for human utility, creating a unique, almost mysterious, eco-techno-cultural continuum. Trees and shrubs that to many communities have unique spiritual and existential importance are used to make brooms, including the majestic palm and vital coconut, as well as some ubiquitous shrubs, have spiritual relationships that encourage awe and wonder, inspiring appreciation for the life-giving products of the flora. Palm fronds, for instance, are commonly understood by some cultures as key spiritual symbols associated with power and energy. This interlocks with the reverence for the tree as an entity that is the inherent custodian of strength and longevity, and its symbolism, include fertility, wisdom and prosperity. We also observe products of the tree retaining an esoteric, almost arbitrary – even inexplicable, to many – mysticism, even when they are no longer part of the living organism of the tree and become an operative object of everyday use. An indicative example of this depiction is Obatala respectfully refraining from drinking from a palm. Obatala is one of the most important Yoruba deities, the divine spirits called Òrìṣà. Regarded in some narratives as the creator of humanity, the dual-gendered god is known for benevolence, patience, purity and fairness. With white clothing symbolising sacredness, spiritual cleanliness and peace, Obatala inspires creativity and artistic expression. In poetry, we observe Obatala exercising an act of compassion (care) by regarding the palm tree as kin, god, and part of a cosmic infrastructure that leads to life, even when it has been partially industrialised,

> an axis mundi and a bridge for communication with heaven. Because trees never lose their leaves and grow them back in the tropical climate of southwestern Nigeria, the palm tree lacks the critical quality of regeneration that characterizes cosmic trees, world trees, and variations on the tree of life.[26]

The palm trees

> I eat from the palm tree,
> I drink from the palm tree,
> Palm fronds formed the path through which I came into the world
> It is out of compassion for Orișanla that I do not drink palm wine.[27]

The cultural significance of brooms emanates from both the aforementioned religious reverence and integrated sustainable approaches that encourage ecological conservation and recycling of products, akin to a circular economy in hope of sustainable futures. Brooms are part of a system and lifecycle that is subject to a peculiarly chthonic axis mundi. The dirty broom, the worn-out broom, is an object at the end of its days. It can, however, be neither light-heartedly discarded nor piled up in storage for eternity. A new pedagogy is needed for such an ecological turbulence. The broom – once active and a sacred part of a living god, the tree – progressively becomes, through its repeated operative function, an object of industrialisation and therefore an integral component of waste management, accumulative capital and space. [Fig. 1] To own a broom is not just to own a labour-saving apparatus; it means ownership of nature and culture, and carries its own ecology of end-of-life care that is not yet resolved and accounted for.



Fig.1: A broom made from palm tree leaves. Screenshot from R&R *YouTube* channel, @rrchannel6665 (timestamp 2:17).

Accordingly, in pre-colonial homes brooms are used by women and men when carrying out domestic tasks. They also seem to take on a variety of cultural and legal significance in different contexts. While in postwar western homes, cleanliness was a 'marker of class status', a dirty house continued to be a sign of failure for the housewife or the mother whose 'caring as a practice was increasingly conflated with *being* caring as a disposition'.[28] Brooms, however, present a very special case of diverse objecthood, both symbolic and operative. They are supposed to clean away dirt and dust, but also create an exodus for negativity, evil spirits, bad thoughts and wicked omens that may have intruded into the home. This is the same object we see at the hands of the – traditionally male – chimney sweep and the – traditionally female – hunted witch. This does not mean that the broom is spatially genderless, on the contrary, it means that it can carry a dirty gendered genealogy complemented by contested objecthood and complex ecology.

Civilisation and objecthood

The ecology of the African broom centres on responsibility and collective action. An individual frond is unable to match the achievements of a strong assemblage of fronds. Brooms are used to represent solidarity. Cleaning is a communal activity and the use of brooms at the first light of dawn engendered collaboration and solidarity. Starting a new day or new season with a clean slate indicated that the community was aware of its civic responsibilities, open to receiving and hosting visitors. It was common practice to display the outdoor broom prominently in the compound, espousing one's cleanliness as cultural etiquette. The practice of punishing crime or greed with sweeping the market space or village square alone, suggests that it was used as civic pedagogy. The broom is used as an educational tool, a reusable learning object (RLO), supporting socialisation, moral education, and legal and environmental learning. The pedagogical phenomenon of using everyday political life to scaffold learning is still an important aspect of African moral education. Symbolic tools are used to frame proverbs, poetry, intergenerational oral history, wise sayings and intellectual cultural stories in such a way that they become useful nodes of connection that hold the historical and moral trajectories of the community. They create a 'worldling game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect'.[29] [Fig. 2]

The Hausa people of West Africa still believe that sweeping at night causes poverty. This myth may have come from the productive injunction to only sweep when there is enough light to see what one is doing and has become a taboo. Though electricity as a source of light effectively negates the tenet, the perceived prohibition to refrain from sweeping away one's riches at night remains significant in Hausa thought. The myths and superstitions fabricated around the broom for hygienic purposes portray sociopolitical beliefs steeped in the space created at the intersection of religion and nature and their connections with material objects. For example, in Zimbabwe, the Shona see little distinction between the cleanliness of the environment and of the spirit. The Shona phrase 'Kuchena mumweya, pfungwa nemumagariro', which translates as 'to be spiritually clean in thought, deed and practice', is used to connote hygiene and the care-full-ness of a woman. Michelina Andreucci argues that the female 'affiliation with the broom was an integral part of the Shona woman's protocol; a symbol of her existence, responsibility, co-operation and desirability'.[30] These connotations complement the symbolic and mythological capacity of using the broom. Sweeping the floor at night causes poverty. A child sweeping uninstructed forecasts the arrival of guests. If a man sweeps with brooms, he will not be successful in finding a woman to marry. Brooms also depict resilience. Several African proverbs refer to the broom's strength, reiterating the need for unity by demonstrating that the broom's functionality lies not in the power of a single frond but in the resilience of its united fronds.

For the Yoruba (Nigeria), 'Òṣùṣù ọwọ́ la fi ńgbálẹ̀ tí'lẹ̀ fi ńmọ́' means 'It's a bunch of broomsticks that's used to sweep the floor clean'. The broom's simplicity exemplifies the profound, demonstrating how the object embodies collective strength, unity and cooperation. Just as a broom's strength comes from its interwoven sticks, African societies emphasise interdependence over extreme individualism, manifesting as greed, selfishness and isolation. African cultures also use the broom to depict harmony and societal functioning. Individual parts of the community are effective when they function together and complement each other. In several African cultures, decision-making is consensus-driven, and the broom is used to portray the harmony of the village square. In Igbo culture (Southeast Nigeria), elders use broomsticks in mediation, where each person adds a stick to symbolise agreement, reinforcing the importance of unity in leadership. The Igbo proverb 'Ọtù anya na-anwụ, mana ọtù osisi adịghị emebi' translates as 'A single eye may go blind, but a single broomstick does not make a broom', reflecting the centrality of collective responsibility. The communitarian moral code is used to maintain the moral and social order of teamwork. The symbolism of the broom extends to principles of governance, decision-making and community progress. The society focuses on the principle that no one succeeds alone; progress requires collective effort. Yet diversity and complementarity are emphasised: each broomstick is unique, yet they work together for a common goal, just like diverse talents



Fig. 2: Traditional brooms made from the petioles of the coconut tree, and nylon rope on the wall at grocery store in Serium, Myanmar. Shutterstock, 2020.

in a team. The resilience of the broom and its capacity to withstand pressure due to tight binding shows that unity strengthens a team.

Brooms are also used to depict sacrifice. Some colonial travellers in Africa traditionally used young African boys as 'human canaries'. Known as 'dew driers', the boys' bodies were used as bait for leopards and hyenas which become exposed as the boys brush the dew of the high grasses in early morning jungle expeditions; this enabled the 'opening' of the road for would-be explorers. Poets and civil rights activists such as Dan Crawford coined the term 'Human Brooms' to portray the dew-driers' sacrifice and vulnerability as unwilling decoys.[31] Fundamentally, the sociocultural mores of the broom used to point to a heritage of purity through cleanliness, environmental management and sustainability, and of environmental affordance. Broom masquerades are popular in west African mythology and entertainment. The Diola people of the Casamance region (Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Gambia) use the Kumpo dance as a cleansing ritual protecting villages from bad supernatural forces. The masked figure appearing in the masquerade is believed to be a manifestation of a spirit, in the shape of a large broom-like figure. Covered in palm leaves and adorned with a stick, the masked figure engages in spinning acrobatic movements that resemble sweeping gestures. The masked figure communicates with the people through a special interpreter enjoining the community to be united, hardworking and judicious citizens. It is considered taboo to try to investigate the broom or use it to communicate with the spirit. We find similar masquerade rituals and dance performances in Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon and Benin Republic. The masquerades are used to coordinate communal work and protect males during circumcision initiation ritual, which leads us again to a common ground of hygiene, care and spirituality. Mary Douglas in her seminal book *Purity and Danger* devotes a lot of thought to the topic of cleaning as cleansing. Drawing from Durkheim, she asks:

> If the sacred is characterised by its contagiousness, how does it differ from non-sacred magic, also characterised by contagiousness? What is the status of the other kind of contagiousness which is not generated from the social process? Why are magical beliefs called primitive hygiene and not primitive religion?[32]

She concludes that we 'should start by recognising communal life for a much more complex experience'.[33] Such experience demands environmental and social affordances and is fundamentally posthuman. The broom that becomes human that becomes machine that sweeps, is a complex sensory-motor system that can be responsive, reactive and sentient. To hold (onto) the broom is to become broom-human, a status we have always known. The increasingly built environments we continue to create may sustain or challenge such affordance to hold, store and worship the broom. In the Museum of the Home in London, the exhibition *Rooms Through Time* explores how ways of living evolved in the UK from the townhouse in 1878 onwards.[34] In one of the rooms – the 'Tenement Flat 1913' we can see the mop and bucket resting in a corner, fully integrated in the décor, an intrinsic part of the furniture and the reenactment of life once well lived. It is far from an oddity and curated beautifully to add to the synthesis of objects and sounds that immerse the visitor in an environment from an increasingly lost era. [Fig. 3]

Fabulations of sweeping

Housework and in particular sweeping (dust) features prolifically in modern literature across languages and cultural territories, so as to create its own mythopoetic genre. Sweeping tools like brooms and brushes are frequently portrayed in poetry and prose as agents of labour. The poem 'Our Old Brooms' by Ngalim Jusline Veeyeenyuy, Cameroonian teacher and writer, unpacks the lifecycle of the broom becoming dead matter, soon to be replaced with no burial or wake observed:

Our Old Brooms
Our homestead is filthy and grimy
yet, we possess brooms, old brooms
littered along the family corridors
all the corners of the house, they know
but they can't sweep again.

Old brooms don't sweep
they dig deep trenches
deeper than Lake Barombi –
these pits swallow us gently
like the whale did Jonah.

We possess palm bushes
yet, our brooms are old
and our residence is foul.

We grumble and denounce
yet, we in idiotic clamour
recycle our ancient brooms in ululation –
after each seven and five years of deep drilling
and digging resumes anew.

New brooms sweep clean
and cover the trenches
dug by wizened brooms
yet, we shun and damn them,

never have we given them a chance
to show how well they sweep.

Dearest kin, for how long shall
we perish on the enclaved paths?
We somersault, tumble and shrivel
and end up engulfed by these mosh pits
dug by our cobwebbed brooms.

Our brooms are ancient indeed!
It's not late, let's all scamper
to the palm bush
and cook up new brooms
from fresh green viyang
before dusk arrives.[35]

Veeyeenyuy's poem includes a subtle call to action for African society – a call based on time-sensitive conviviality and laboured community engagement rooted once again in care and spirituality, exclaiming in ecstasy 'Our brooms are ancient indeed!'. Greece's national female poet Kiki Dimoula, on the other hand, is known for her emotive work that emanates intimacy and ambivalence. Dimoula, who left full time employment at the Bank of Greece to care for her children, and became one of three women ever to be inducted in the Academy of Athens, has been celebrated as 'the best Greek woman poet since Sappho'.[36] In her song titled 'Dust', Dimoula pays tribute to the housewife and progressively sets the scene for brooms, brushes and dustpans (a 'fleshless body') to dance to her rhythm of a virtual interior with no floors and balconies, turning the Athenian private life inside out, offering a new pedagogy of the ecology of the everyday – a treaty made with dust, a ritual made with the broom at hand and a myth carried by dirt. This all is too much to carry inside, Dimoula reminds us, while performing a mute sigh:

I pity the housewives
The way of their labour
Every morning to sweep the dust out of the home
Like the last flesh of a fleshless body of
brooms and sweepers
[…]
Never short of dust, the never-leaver
Any time that time brings it back
A new deal is done by dust.
[…]
[Dust] I let you be
I am not made to endure the flipping
Of the inside life, outside.[37]

In response to the ever-accumulated mythology of sweeping, we (the authors) present a short poem to contemporary and future brooms. We summon, through this poem, the power of convivial community and communion that takes place through the physical and social labour of cleaning the floor. We discard, through this poem, the dichotomies of a hard-wired binary world where machine cannot be body and nature cannot be culture. We celebrate, through this poem, the site-specificities and the emerging pedagogies of the lifecycle of our semi-operative and semi-spiritual objects that form ecologies, affordances and civilisations – the brooms.

Ode to the Broom
Do you recognise it?
Used to ride it.
Can we patronise it?
If you can hide it.
To the cupboard, to the utility
With pride, stance, humility.
It rests with care,
It dances with flair
By the hand to the floor,
All the way to the door,
Or a pan, much more fun.

Radical para-ontologies and hopeful futures

A radical para-ontology of the broom is rooted in pre-colonial thought and practice. It manifests in spiritual endeavours, social interactions, transgenerational ritual, phrases of wisdom, trees and poems. The para-ontological broom embodies the carrier bag theory of fiction and is dirty. It is an in-between agent of affordances and deeply connective practices. It sweeps the floor but does not get rid of the very DNA of the home – it just rearranges and rearticulates its energy to accommodate worlds afresh: a new dawn, a new arrival, a new tenant, a newborn life, a new broom. Its pedagogical capacity rests on its handle being made from both nature and culture, albeit always industrialised and sometimes bastardised and masqueraded. The broom was once the tool that could affirm the status of the good housewife and allow it to shine. The shiny and polished objects it creates, together with bodies and spirits, embody an architecture that itself enables and affords. The connectivity and value of such embodiment may seem lost by the operative disruption of the machine. This can pessimistically lead us to recognise the labour-saving apparatus solely as capitalistic mediator, a status that implies passive ownership of the object performing the spotless cleaning and superiority by the owner's capacity to acquire, use and replace. In such a process of the apparatus being broken down and not actively felt to be worn out, the value carried



Fig. 3: A tenement flat in 1913. Installation detail, Museum of the Home. Photo: author.

by the housewife as assets manager becomes diffused. This carries a value change and an honest questioning: Where is the value now? This question creates the necessary negative space for a para-ontology of the broom to emerge. Both value and energy in the form of performing the sweeping of a floor are now diffused and replaced – we do not know anymore where and how often they are sighted, sited and cited. Things that are valued are cited. If we reinvent the site and citing of the value of the carrier of the asset of the sweeping apparatus, then we can be hopeful. The pedagogy of reciting the poetry of the broom and re-siting the architecture of sweeping the floor affords host-carer justice. In such a pedagogy, contested pockets of labour are revalued and reinstated otherwise. The ambivalence of siting the broom asks: Where do I store it? When do I discard it? How do I replace it? Once I have done so and have entered a new life cycle assessment that calls for radical and compassionate waste management, what have I earned? What have I learned? Such a pedagogy carries relational logic and contextual sensibility, and these are also fundamentally pedagogical acts of care and communion. They may demand the physical apparatus of machine-body, yet they are beyond it. The instated affordances of body-object-environments sensoria and collegia of the broom have the capacity and tenacity to lead the way towards equitable and sustainable futures, beyond mono-species societies into multispecies and disclosive networks of convivial practice.

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    Anu banla ti orișa, ni mo șe,
    Ti mi o mu ẹmu.
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Biography

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Re-animating Virunga: Mapping Relational Ontologies Against Rwanda's Static Enclosures

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Abstract
The Virunga Forest and Mountains, spanning Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are more than a habitat for mountain gorillas; they form a transboundary milieu where diverse ontologies of land, life and relation intersect. Conservation infrastructures – national park boundaries, research stations and eco-lodges – embody one vision of Virunga: a bounded ecology to be preserved, studied and consumed through tourism. Yet these static enclosures disrupt other ways of dwelling.

This article traces how colonial imaginaries, originating in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century expeditions, crystallised into rigid borders that displaced the indigenous Twa. By contrast, Twa engagements reveal a relational ontology where forests are not resources to be enclosed but living fields of reciprocity and co-presence.

Through participatory action research, the article examines how a Twa community redrafts Virunga through counter-mapping – articulating spatial knowledge that resists resettlement boundaries and Rwanda's Vision 2050. Drawing on Robert Rundstrom's critique of cartography, it contrasts colonial mapping as a technology of control with indigenous mapping as a collective act that enacts multiple worlds. These counter-maps thus emerge as transectional cartographies – ontological interventions that are, in effect, re-animating Virunga by reinstating the Twa and their relational ontology within its living ecologies.

Keywords
Rwanda, political ecology, critical cartographies, indigenous knowledge systems, environmental justice

One sentence summary
The article examines how Twa counter-mapping in the Virunga region challenges colonial conservation boundaries, revealing relational ontologies of land and proposing alternative, justice-oriented cartographies of dwelling.

Before the boundary

In 2018, the Rwandan state-owned *New Times* reported on the expansion of Volcanoes National Park (hereafter, 'the park'), funded by land donations from the African Wildlife Foundation.[1] The article depicts officials replanting trees, projects increased revenue from gorilla tourism and the construction of 'model' villages for neighbouring communities.[2] The park, a conservation enclosure, is central to the government's post-genocide *Vision 2050*, which uses architecture and urban planning to transform land use from informal, traditional and subsistence practices into standardised 'model' settlements.[3] *Vision 2050* also re-orients natural resources – farmland, forests, wetlands and lakes – toward cash crops, renewable energy, construction and

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eco-tourism. The park is a central pillar in this neo-liberal dream, symbolising growth, sustainability and progress, and representing an ethnic unity with the landscape.[4]

Part of the larger Virunga bioregion spanning Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC, the park is a biodiversity hotspot and a critical habitat for the endangered East African mountain gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*). The semi-nomadic Twa – historically egalitarian and reliant on hunting, gathering, and shared forest resources – were displaced as these landscapes became enclosed in the early nineteenth century. A photograph in the *New Times* shows a hand gesturing toward a large map highlighting park boundaries in green, while everything else – socio-ecological relations, human–nonhuman exchanges – is rendered void. [Fig. 1] Cartography historian J.B. Harley notes that maps, once reflecting a culture's worldview, became instruments of imperial power by the seventeenth century, used to justify land appropriation and control.[5] By the late nineteenth century, colonial maps, despite inaccuracies, imposed Western visions onto African landscapes. The park accumulates these imperial cartographies, originally drafted by explorers seeking the mythical 'Mountains of the Moon'. I argue that the violence of these imperial cartographies persists in *Vision 2050*. The Twa, now 1 per cent of Rwanda's population, live outside the Virunga forests, divided into three national parks. Relocated alongside Hutu (85 per cent) and Tutsi (14 per cent) populations into model settlements, they have lost forest access and their population is declining.[6]

Geographer Robert Rundstrom observes that Western, text-based societies use maps to inscribe and control space, deliberately omitting non-Western ways of knowing.[7] By contrast, indigenous, oral-based communities like the Inuit use maps as an intracultural tool to communicate their deep knowledge and cosmological entanglement with their surroundings.[8] For these communities, mapping is a relational, ongoing dialogue performed through movement, not a static, complete result.

In 2009, I began work in Rwanda on a small community centre located in the wetlands of an informal settlement in Kigali, where rapid post-genocide urban transformation revealed tensions between modernisation and relational ways of dwelling with the land. In 2013, I collaborated with the German organisation Rhineland-Palatinate and local religious groups in northern Rwanda to assess government resettlement projects, during which I initiated mapping exercises with displaced forest communities. These exercises laid the groundwork for the maps and landscape models discussed in this article.[9]

In what follows, I explore how mapping relational ontologies can redraft Rwanda's static enclosures, which limit the Twa's socio-ecological relations and their aspirations for inclusion. Rather than a neutral inscription of space, I treat mapping as a relational practice – co-produced through dialogue, gesture and performance between researcher, interpreter and participants. Through this method, we see how colonial visions shaped the Virunga – and how their logic can be bypassed through collective, transcultural map-making. Crucially, the counter-maps presented here seek to offer a symbolic space to articulate forbidden and difficult conversations around historical injustices, ethnic identity and ongoing marginalisation in Rwanda. They allow for a re-imagining that enables a form of enchantment through hopeful articulation. The Twa's counter-mappings articulate dreams of forest dwelling and nightmares of forced resettlement, offering a different ontology of dwelling: one that is dynamic, spatio-temporal and entangled with human and non-human life. In stark contrast, the imposed, static settlements embody the complete cessation of these dialogues, leading to a profound sense of abandonment and disenchantment with the possibilities of modern societal existence.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first traces imperial cartographic visions of the Virunga Mountains and their role in severing the Twa from their forests.[10] The second blends participatory action research with counter-mapping to document the Twa's forests and resettlement experiences, reflecting on the potentials, limitations and ethics of this practice.[11] The final section presents digital animations of these counter-maps as 'transectional cartographies' that reinstate the Twa into the landscape, reanimating static enclosures of conservation and resettlement and inviting a rethinking of the architectures underpinning the fantasy of Vision 2050.[12]

Imperial visions and the cartographies of enclosure

The 1884 Berlin Conference formalised the partition of Africa among seven major European empires, legitimising their colonial vision.[13] Building upon Europe's ongoing scramble for Africa, this vision relied on maps as evidence to substantiate claims. Imperial cartographies were often produced overseas with little knowledge of physical or local conditions, resulting in deeply idealised and fictionalised borders, frequently inherited from inaccurate reports and romanticised explorer sketches. To make these visions verifiable, colonial cartographers sought geographical landmarks or, failing that, drew borders along astronomical lines of latitude and longitude.

There are eight main mountain peaks in the Virunga Mountains straddling the national and conservation borders between Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC. The Belgian, German and British empires used these geographical landmarks to carve up and anchor their colonial border claims onto the forested landscape.[14]



Fig. 1: Government official indicating the border and site of the Volcanoes National Park extension on a government map. Photo: Timothy Kisambira, 2018. Source: The New Times.

Lying within Rwanda, the southern face of this mountain range is known as the Virunga, an anglicisation of the Kinyarwanda word *ibirunga*, meaning 'volcano'. The northern face straddles Uganda and the DRC and is known as 'Mufumbiro' in the local dialect of Rufumbira.[15] This contiguous, lush bioregion is rich in soils, flora, fauna and minerals, making it not only the most densely populated and cultivated landscape in East Africa but also one of its most historically contested. From 1884 onward, Belgium, Britain and Germany competed fiercely for this prime colonial territory – prime for European settlement and industry – using maps not only as evidence of control but also to impose their interpretations and disregard indigenous knowledge. The British claimed the Virunga Mountains, citing distant sightings by explorers John Hanning Speke (1863) and Henry Morton Stanley (1876).[16] While searching for the headwaters of the Nile, Speke claimed to have seen a prominent peak, identified to him as the mythical Mufumbiro, which Western explorers believed was part of the ancient 'Mountains of the Moon' and the true source of the Nile. Sketches made by Speke and Stanley – drawn from nearly a hundred kilometres away – were later presented as hard evidence, culminating in the 1890 Anglo-German Border Agreement.[17] This agreement coincided with a revision of the astronomical border to enclose the area within Britain's colonial territory. However, in 1899, German cartographer Captain Robert von Beringe discovered that Mufumbiro was not a single peak but a chain of eight mountains.[18] This revelation prompted intense disputes, exposing the arbitrariness of the astronomical borders and leading all three empires to intensify mapping efforts to anchor claims to verifiable landmarks. As the full extent of the mountain range was charted, border negotiations continued, including a dispute over its name.[19] Germany favoured the name 'Virunga,' whereas Britain insisted on 'Mufumbiro,' used by northern communities to describe a broader cultural and geological landscape.[20] The boundary commission ultimately sided with the British, citing Speke's earlier illustration of a sequence of mountains.[21] Despite this, I use the name 'Virunga' throughout this essay, as it has become the widely recognised term in both academic and conservation contexts.

The boundary commission eventually formalised the split in 1910, maintaining the border at its mythical astronomical location and dividing the range between British and German colonies. The final border followed the straight astronomical meridian – one degree south – where it intersected with the peaks of the eight Virunga Mountains, partitioning territories. Between 1922 and 1925, the border between the Belgian Congo and British Uganda was redrawn from the peak of Mount Gahinga northwards. This redrawing transformed the Virunga Mountains and surrounding forest landscapes into a tri-border conservation enclosure, shared between the Belgian Congo, British Uganda and Ruanda-Urundi.[22]

American taxidermist-filmmaker Carl Akeley, commissioned by the American Museum of Natural History, travelled to the Virunga to capture specimens of the East African mountain gorilla. In 1923, following his explorations, Akeley produced a map petitioning for the tri-border landscape to be designated as a wildlife sanctuary for the protection and scientific study of the gorillas. His initial maps illustrate a twenty-five square kilometre area, triangulated between the peaks of Mount Karisimbi, Mikeno and Bisoke. Akeley proposed that the sanctuary be bordered by a perimeter road for native police, which he referred to as a 'deadline' – a physical line drawn around a prison – and suggested that it be permanently inhabited and supervised by Europeans.[23] [Fig. 2] In 1925, King Albert of Belgium allocated 10,000 hectares of land, creating the Albert National Park, with Akeley appointed to scientifically verify its borders on the ground.[24] In 1926, Akeley returned to Virunga, but died, to be buried within the borders of the new park. In his absence, Belgian zoologist Jean-Marie Derscheid and Mary Akeley (Carl Akeley's widow) continued with the verification of the park borders, producing a geo-botanical map of the entire park. In 1929, the borders of the park expanded into the Congo, increasing by 110,000 hectares, and it expanded again in 1930 into the British colony of Uganda.[25]

The colonial mappings that simultaneously established the colonial borders and the disposition of the national parks were inherited by Rwanda when it gained independence in 1961 and the country experienced a shift in political and ethnic power from the Tutsi to the Hutu that led to the rapacious expansion of agricultural activity across the country. Having already cleared 10 000 hectares of forest from the park for pyrethrum cultivation, the Belgians' extractive practices continued under Hutu rule for another decade, further eroding the borders originally intended to conserve the forests and gorillas.[26] Within the park, the American primatologist Dian Fossey produced hand-drawn maps locating gorilla colonies, tracking their seasonal movement around Mount Bisoke. Fossey's maps attempted to fortify the borders, to conserve gorillas and their forest habitats. The park borders were eventually granted protection with the forests and the gorillas mapped as geographical landmarks of global concern by Unesco in 1979.

Western visions have dominated the history of the Virunga landscape, using maps as tools to assert truth claims, speculation, and myth in the service of establishing borders. These maps, and the borders within them, were vague and never at rest. The colonial powers who drew

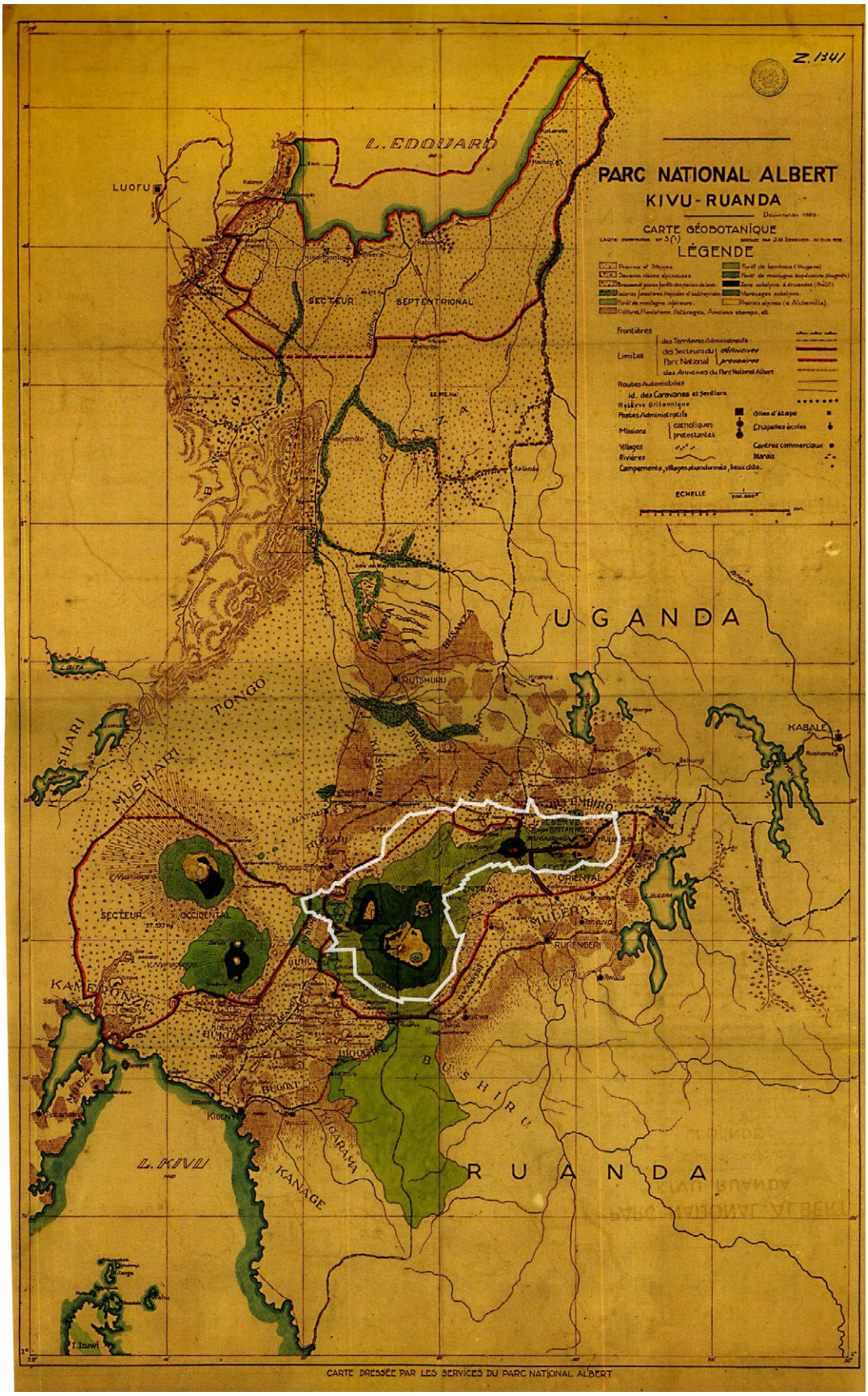


Fig. 2: Akeley-Derscheid's map of the proposed Albert National Park. The present-day tri-border extent has been added by the author. Source: Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, 1920.

these borders admitted their ignorance of both the physical geography and non-Western 'traditional' social lines of the landscape.[27] The borders that Akeley and Fossey drew reflected their own narrow interests in knowing and conserving the gorilla. Akeley did acknowledge that the Twa were an indigenous group with specific cultural rights to these forests, yet his maps said nothing about them or their dynamic ecological entanglement with the forests. Akeley's maps bordered the forests with deadlines, communicating an anti-ecological, anti-communal, non-relational understanding of nature as isolated and inert.

People – especially the Twa – are absent from these Western maps, which erase non-Western understandings of the Virunga landscape. They depict the land as a uniform, static and dehumanised space, partitioning non-human nature from the social world. These maps are Western approximations that centre European knowledge, while rendering the Twa's cultural claims and lived experiences silent. As J.B Harley notes, such maps 'legitimise the reality of conquest and empire'.[28] It is these static representations, their imposed borders and their problematic transformation of the Virunga forests – from a dwelling into a policed enclosure – that the Twa and I sought to map.

Dwelling differences: counter-mapping the forest

Across Rwanda, an excess of borders and boundaries enclose and appropriate common land as state property. Before these borders are enacted as law, they are drawn on paper and communicated as environmental and land-use development plans or maps. These maps impose a governmental power that communicates a Western language, knowledge and ontology of nature – as a finite resource for human consumption – and impose this onto the non-Western, dynamic, lived realities of Virunga. Non-Western people, their land-use practices, understandings and experiences of this landscape are absent from these government maps. Yet, although these maps represent authority, they communicate information in an arbitrary, vague and selective manner.

Graham Huggan, a scholar of post-colonial literature, suggests that cartographic discourse is simultaneously authoritative in its status and approximate in its function. In this discourse, maps are presented as a truth that is 'the subject of a proposition rather than a statement of fact'. Huggan's statement alludes to the agency of counter-mapping in challenging or deconstructing colonial and modern power.[29]

Maps, methods and positions

The imperial cartographies of the park deprived the Twa of customary rights to hunt and gather resources, a restriction that was sustained by colonial and later ruling governments.[30] By the 1990s, all access to the forests, for purposes other than conservation, was forbidden. Amid the civil war along the Rwanda-Uganda border in 1991, the Ugandan government established Mgahinga National Park, both as a conservation effort and to create a demilitarised zone. The creation of this park led directly to the eviction of thousands of Twa from the forests, forcing them to survive along the park's edge.[31] In 2011, an indigenous NGO, the United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda, provided the Twa in Uganda with an opportunity to narrate their experiences of displacement by recording their cultural understandings of the forest landscape onto a three-dimensional counter-map – a collective mapping practice that places community knowledge at the centre and challenges the legitimacy of official political authority.[32] Many Rwandan Twa have extended family across the border in Uganda, maintaining relations. These cross-border relations – both familial and cultural – are embedded in the ways the Twa understand and interact with the forest. However, the knowledge and experiences mapped onto the landscape model in Uganda were not communicated with the Twa in Rwanda, as the country's ethno-politics obstructed such exchanges.

There are twenty-four government-recognised resettlements along the edge of the park, intended to rehouse the indigenous Twa, who historically enter the Virunga forests to gather food and resources.[33] The government frames these resettlements as necessary for integration into modern Rwandan society, often via partnerships between local government, NGOs and religious institutions.[34] My initial role in 2013, participating with a German organisation, was to produce an architectural opinion to improve the housing and facilitate this integration. In development contexts, experts are often government officials or mzungus – a Bantu term for foreign, white, wealthy individuals. I first met the Twa travelling as this 'expert mzungu' in a white SUV, accompanied by a non-Twa entourage including interpreters, a social worker and a local nun.

Access to the Twa was tightly controlled by local authorities, NGOs and religious institutions. Initial meetings were often supervised by non-Twa representatives who steered discussions toward architectural solutions and away from structural inequalities of land and ethnicity. Open discussion of development politics in contemporary Rwanda is virtually impossible, as criticism of government policies on citizenship and ethnicity invite repercussions.[35] As a marginalised minority, the Twa are intimidated by these power structures.[36] Following a series of pre-engagements, it became clear that substantive dialogue was being obstructed: those who claimed to represent the Twa often echoed broader societal narratives, repeating government positions and thereby perpetuating discrimination.

It was only through chance encounters with a few Twa individuals, away from these intermediaries, that alternative perspectives on resettlement began to emerge.

Counter-mapping offers vital ways to reveal socio-ecological relations absent from official cartographies.[37] Yet, mapping relational ontologies builds on and departs from this practice. Where counter-mapping has been crucial for enabling marginalised groups to inscribe their claims and make the invisible visible, such maps risk becoming static artefacts, fixing complex relations into bounded forms and rendering living practices inert. Mapping relational ontologies, by contrast, is not simply an oppositional tool, but a co-produced mapping practice animated by dialogue. It reveals both the Twa's socio-ecological relations with the forest, and the asymmetries between researcher and community, staging new, if uneven, forms of dialogue. By focusing on the relational process itself, mapping relational ontologies cuts across traditional divides of nature/culture and land/people, ensuring the mapping remains dynamic, incomplete and ethically reciprocal.

Engaging meaningfully with the Twa required navigating language and cultural barriers and the constraints imposed by authoritative representatives. I remained acutely aware of my own positionality – a Western, white, middle-class, European, male – and of my inability to fully grasp the experience of displacement and dispossession. As an architect, my lexicon is centred on space and materiality, and my professional practice involves remaking the built environment. This contrasts sharply with the Twa, who are an egalitarian, semi-nomadic people; they do not design or construct permanent houses. My knowledge was limited regarding their former ecological and cultural practices as skilled foragers, beekeepers, animal trackers and healers. I was conscious of ethical critiques, particularly Edward Said's warning against instrumentalising the experiences of the oppressed and Kai Vöckler's concept of 'donor speak', a language structured to align with political and donor objectives.[38]

Drawing on the work of Richie Howitt and Emmanuel Lévinas, I approached engagement as entering an 'inter-subjective space', an ethical realm mediated through face-to-face encounters and mutual recognition.[39] This framework meant that mapping relational ontologies became a method to communicate with the Twa in reciprocal and ethically grounded ways, rather than relying on performative or extractive methods. These mappings also allowed me to acknowledge my own position – geographically distant and culturally estranged – while accepting the limits of my understanding.

In 2016, I returned to Rwanda to conduct a mapping workshop focused on the cultural rights value of forests, extending dialogues across the Rwanda-Uganda border. A small group of six community members participated, using the participatory principles of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). I maintained transparency, openly acknowledging that the research was continually evolving and that outcomes were not predetermined. Crucially, participants were never prompted to discuss the Rwandan genocide or their ethnic identity; such topics emerged only incidentally and voluntarily. Given the limited availability of conventional tools, exercises were adapted to use locally accessible materials, such as pebbles, sticks and sand.

Over several days, this select group of Twa community members – Patrice, Uwineza, Mwamini, Chance, Emmanuel and Joy – first narrated and mapped their dreams (their former semi-nomadic life within the forests) onto a three-dimensional landscape model. On the second day, at the foot of Mount Mufumbiro (Muhubura, 'the guide'), they mapped their nightmares – their experiences of resettlement – onto a two-dimensional map depicting the mountain itself: physically nearby, yet present only to view and memory.[40]

Dreams

The group assembled in Uwineza and Patrice's living room, with a landscape model – the three-dimensional base for our counter-maps. Through my interpreter, I explained that we would record their sites of cultural importance using annotated, coloured pieces of paper. I addressed the group by asking where they had previously lived within the forests. Patrice, the oldest male and self-appointed spokesperson, was the first to come forward. He pointed to the foot of Mount Muhubura within the forests and described the location of a large tree where he and his family of six had lived until the late 1980s. The tree, he said, provided them with an elevated shelter for sleeping and for keeping foraged goods out of reach of wildlife. His clan, he indicated on the model, had lived in the forests between Mount Muhubura and Mount Sabinyo. He then located two other clans nearby, called Rubrika and Kavuza, to the east, between Mount Sabinyo and Mount Gahinga. Patrice's accounts correspond with the anthropological understanding that forest communities tend to be small and share the forests with other, neighbouring clans.[41]

Patrice said that his family had lived in and under this tree before moving to a hidden cave he called Kaguriro, which he found within the escarpment of Mount Muhubura. This cave, he said, provided his clan with shelter from the weather, animals and government guards who patrolled the park. Numerous caves exist across the Virunga Mountain range, having been formed by warm pockets of gas trapped within cooling lava several millennia ago. Caves are polyvalent spaces. They provide the Twa with

shelter but are also spaces of ritual and celebration. In addition, dark caves are habitats for stingless honeybees that produce wild honey.[42]

When prompted about how they sourced food within the forest, Patrice listed a variety of animals they hunted across different locations and at different times of the year. Animals were hunted for both wild meat and their skins, which were used as raw materials for crafting goods. The Twa used local trees and plants, such as eucalyptus and bamboo, to make devices for hunting, carrying water, cooking and eating. Patrice described how they used bamboo to skin animals and remove their flesh, which was then wrapped in leaves and buried in a hole for cooking. On top of this, they would make a fire that would burn for several hours before the meat was removed and eaten by the group. According to Patrice, animal skins were used to create pelts and containers for his clan, while also functioning as trade goods exchanged with non-Twa communities for crops.

Using the model, Patrice mapped his hunting locations near sources of water where the buffalo (*imbogo*), antelope (*ifumberi*) and elephants (*inzovu*) drank. Patrice signalled on the model their main source of water in the ravine on the steep, southern face of Muhubura Mountain, which he called *Agacuri Ibuhoro*.[43] Patrice returned to the model to discuss the sourcing of wild honey. The hives of stingless bees, he explained using words and gestures, are removed from a tree or cave and placed on the ground next to a smoking fire to pacify the bees and allow the Twa to extract the honey. Wild honey that is not consumed immediately is kept and fermented to make mead or applied to the skin as a topical medicine. Honey, for the Twa, is a culturally valuable forest resource used within ritual dowries or exchanges with other communities for crops or dairy products.[44] Social transactions outside of the forest, between the Twa and other ethnic groups, Patrice informed us, were determined by the availability of forest resources for exchange – resources whose presence is shaped by seasonal and weather conditions. Rwanda has two wet seasons, one of which is longer and colder. The wet season from January to April is much colder than from October to mid-December. For the remainder of the year, from May to October, Rwanda is dry and hot. These wet periods and intervals make up the Twa's ecocalendar of three seasons: one of hunger in the forest called *urugandyi* ; one of hunger outside the forest called *amapfa* ; and the season of common abundance across the landscape known as *izuba*.

During *urugandyi*, Patrice said, the forests are colder and wetter, a period when animals hibernated or migrated, and when he and his group hunted for smaller animals or foraged for medicinal plants along the forests. He said they often looked for a plant called *umuhanga* that they consumed and that relieved stomach cramps and cramping during childbirth. Patrice mapped the locations of this foraging for the *umuhanga* plant along the edges of the park and riverbanks. The hot and dry season of *amapfa* in June and July is when the forests are full. Patrice told us, however, that it is the opposite for the farming communities whose land and households suffer from drought. Patrice described how, during this period, he and the Twa walked on foot to fetch water from a spring located on the banks of Lake Ruhondo, which he carried back to Gahunga for reselling.

Patrice's accounts are consistent with those of the Twa in Uganda, where the forest people experience time differently from the Gregorian calendar. Rather, for the Twa, forest time is defined by spatiotemporal experiences of sourcing food and episodic interactions with outside communities.[45] Patrice continued to map an intensely localised understanding of the landscape on the model, characterised by the actions of movement and gathering resources across varying locations. A tree, for Patrice, was simultaneously a source of food, a medicinal plant, raw material for craft and a place for safe storage.[46] Patrice's counter-mapping began to reveal a borderless forest dwelling, one that paid little attention to the fixed boundaries of the park. The dwelling spanned thirty square kilometres of the Virunga forest landscape, as scaled from our model. By comparison, his new modern house covered only forty square metres. As we reflected on these disparities, the rain began to fall heavily, hammering on the corrugated metal roof above, signalling the arrival of the first wet season of the year. The sound of the rain silenced our conversations, deferring our dreamings for the day. In that pause, however, the presence of the rain evoked enchantment – a reminder of dwelling as something more expansive, interlacing human life with forest, season and atmosphere.

Nightmares

Following the previous day's rain, the communal ground at the Twa settlement had dried. We gathered on an elevated plateau at its centre, its surface scattered with circular outcroppings of volcanic stone. Patrice, Emmanuel, Uwineza and Mwamini perched on the volcanic rocks. Chance sat on a wooden bench next to Joy. I laid a detailed printed map of the Virunga area that I had prepared in the middle of the group. I began by asking about the forest evictions at the onset of the Rwandan civil war. Pointing to the map, Patrice described being displaced from a small shelter he and his family had built from foraged bamboo stalks and eucalyptus branches, along the park and forest's borders. He explained that this shelter's location provided his family

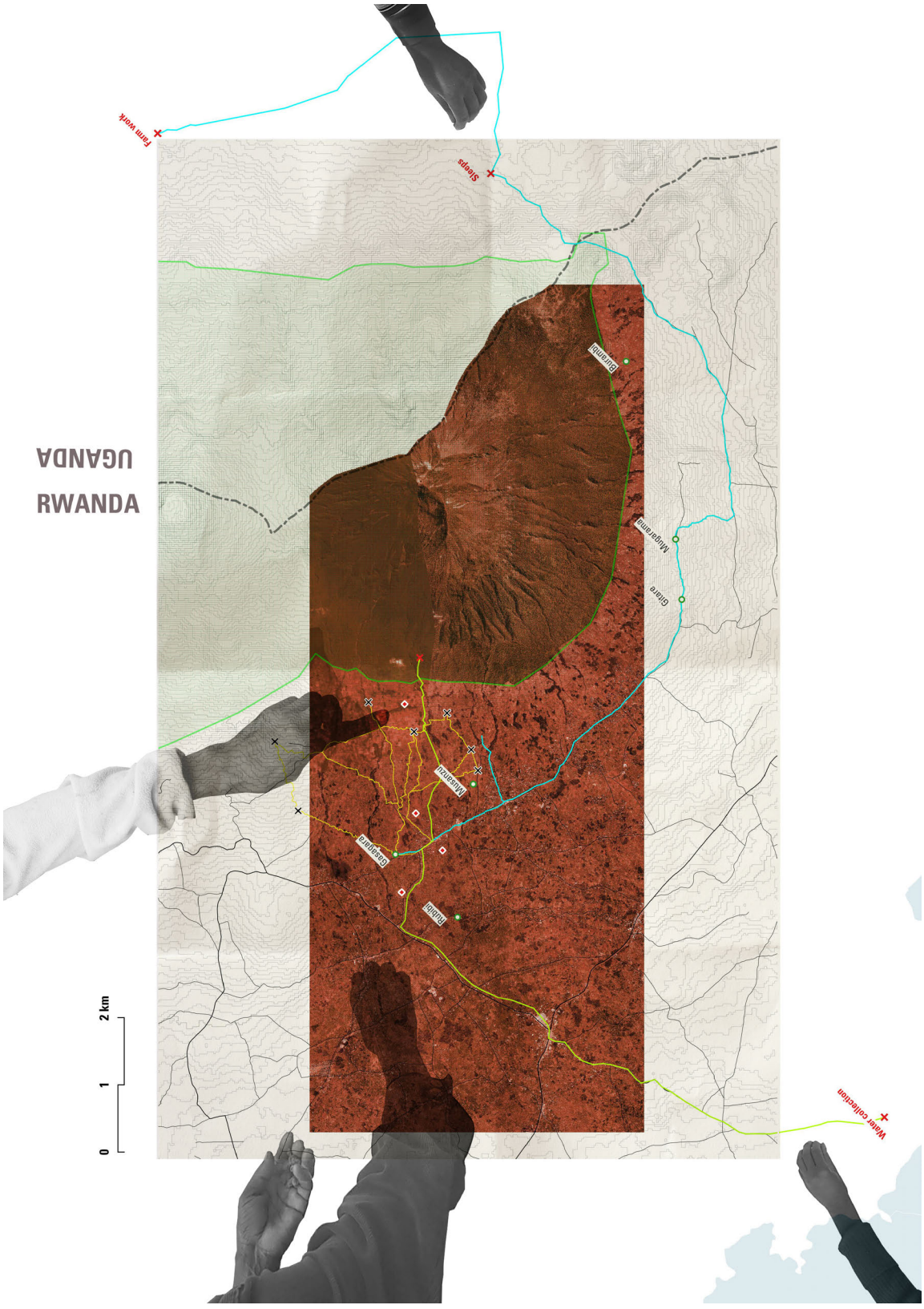


Fig. 3: Mapping dwelling differences in the Virunga forest landscapes. The red aerial overlay marks the survey zone in Rwanda, ending at the 1910 colonial border, while yellow paths and blue streams trace cross-border routes towards Uganda. Produced collaboratively with members of the Gahunga Twa community, who charted seasonal journeys and dwelling practices by placing stones directly onto the map. Composite image: Gahunga Twa community and Killian O'Dochartaigh, 2023.

with a view of the forest's edges, allowing them to seize the right moment to re-enter undetected and forage. Patrice recounted how this practice continued until he was caught by authorities, who demolished their shelter and pushed them further downhill, toward the nearest village. Patrice's hand traced a path of displacements on the map, showing how each time they rebuilt their shelter on someone else's farmland, the authorities would soon arrive to destroy it again, forcing them to move once more. During this period, they lived a semi-nomadic existence, but not out of choice. This continued until they were forced one last time to settle permanently in 2010, which was also the year of the government's campaign outlawing the construction of thatched roof housing.[47]

Following this, I asked the group about sites of cultural importance close to their present settlement. Uwineza said firmly that the most important places are where food is found. Or rather, that food is the most important place. Cultivated rain-fed crops such as potatoes (*ibirayi*), maize (*igikori*) and beans (*igishyimbo*) thrive in the Virunga landscapes, due to the combination of acidic volcanic soils and the wet, high-altitude climates. Whereas potatoes are a perennial crop, maize and beans are seasonal, cultivated and harvested twice a year. Uwineza's hand danced over the map, identifying food sources within a mosaic of crop fields.

Patrice edged forward, elaborating that as the Twa do not possess farmland or farming knowledge, it is difficult to feed and support their families. As a result, many of the Twa rely on foraging for surplus crops or undertaking menial labour for the non-Twa outside their settlement. He then pointed to the map, locating a potato distribution centre about two kilometres east of the resettlement. Patrice explained that he walks there daily in search of work as a day porter, carrying sacks of newly harvested potatoes from the fields to the centre. For a day's work, he earns between 400 and 1 000 Rwandan francs (roughly 26 to 66 British pence). During the dry season, when the fields are less active, Patrice said he shifts to fetching water from a spring on the edges of Lake Ruhondo, which he carries to the nearby town market to sell. For this ten-kilometre round trip, carrying two twenty-litre jerry cans of water, Patrice earns 800 Rwandan francs (about 66 pence).

Chance approached the map to describe how she leaves the resettlement each February, when food is scarce during the fallow period, journeying on foot and crossing the border with Uganda unseen. Carrying her child – strapped to her back – and a hoe (*isuka*), she traces a route north-eastwards from the clustered dwellings of Gasagara, following the blue footpaths shown on the map as they skirt the base of Mount Muhabura towards the most direct crossing into Uganda, avoiding both the prohibited forest and the formal border checkpoint further downhill. [Fig. 3] Her path continues beyond the red aerial overlay of our survey zone in Rwanda, which stops at the 1910 border, towards the settlements marked on the far side of the Virunga forest. She charts this twenty-five-kilometre walk by placing small stones on the ground, extending beyond the limits of our mapped frame, to reach her extended family village, where, she claims, the land is more fertile. Food security for most Rwandan households depends heavily on rain-fed crops. The threat of marketisation and climate change is undermining farming livelihoods and overall food security. As the Twa are not granted equal rights to farmland or employment, they must often travel further than other ethnic groups in search of food and labour.[48] As the last recipients of land or employment, 40 per cent of the Twa in Rwanda rely on begging to survive.[49]

Emmanuel now came forward and placed a stone on the map, representing a nearby location representing his farmland on which he cultivated bananas. He then placed a second stone representing a plot of farmland where he grew wheat and potatoes. A third stone was placed for a field of sorghum and beans. Emmanuel then traced his finger along the map, representing his weekly commute from these fields to the local market where he purchased seeds and sold surplus crops. Joy followed by picking up a stone to mark her plot of land on the map situated right behind us. The Twa do not customarily own farmland or private property. Their claims to land were erased long ago.[50] That Emmanuel and Joy mapped their ownership of multiple plots of farmland may indicate that they are, perhaps, not Twa at all, but were sent here to observe and record on behalf of others. Emmanuel and Joy's mappings revealed other borders that communicated ethnic privilege and difference. However, I could not ask about these differences as discussing ethnic identity in Rwanda is a taboo subject, a border that you do not explicitly cross.[51]

Before the counter-mapping session concluded, I asked the group about other places or buildings they value and visit. They highlighted the older colonial institutions – the hospital, the school, and the church – as places where they literally perform traditional dances for the public, while simultaneously performing socially, showing obedience and willingness to suppress their indigenous practices.[52] Uwineza noted that the market town downhill is of value, as it is a place where meat can be purchased and where the men can socialise. The town is a place of indulgence for the Twa, a place to escape. I turned to Patrice, the patriarch of the group and asked, 'What do you do, there, in town?' He smiled, replying, 'We drink and dream of the forests'.[53]

These counter-maps reveal radically different perceptions of dwelling in the forest: as resettled, as



Fig. 4: Still from the animated counter-map Mufumbiro using counter-mapping data of the Gahunga Twa community. Animation by Killian O'Dochartaigh, with assistance from Jason Men, 2021.

metaphysically borderless or materially enclosed. They also touch the less distinct borders of class and ethnicity that delineate the Twa's migratory and marginal existence. Here disenchantment comes to the surface: the disappointment of modernity in the form of housing that promises belonging yet enforces exclusion, and of 'development' that encloses and silences the Twa's ongoing claims to the forest. Despite living in a house (a bordered space) like other Rwandans, the Twa are still not treated equally. In the following section, I will explore these differences in dwelling and mapping, using digital technologies to make them more visible, and to animate, through the movement of the map, the Twa's dynamic and egalitarian claims.

Re-animating: from static GIS to moving counter-maps

Over two days, the Twa narrated and mapped their dwellings, first depicting the forest as spaces of movement, livelihood and deep relations with non-human life and then describing their resettled lives, marked by displacements in search of food and work. The Twa remain semi-nomadic, their movements shaped by deep-seated prejudices that limit their access to land, employment and opportunities. Yet, the physical maps we co-produced remained inactive, silent and stored away. They failed to fully capture the depth of the Twa's dynamic movements and their broader territorial claims.

After returning to Europe, I began digitally recording the Twa's counter-maps using drafting and mapping software. If their counter-maps and revisions of borders were to be taken seriously, it was crucial to leverage the technical tools of my privilege to create a precise, scaled map of their narratives. Over a two-week period, I layered the Twa's geographical claims and the corresponding claims mapped by the Twa in Uganda in 2011 alongside official data sets, including topography, forestry, governmental borders and gorilla colonies.[54] Each Twa claim was reinputted as a data point into GIS, automatically generating a unique coordinate in the global positioning system (GPS) also used by the government. Into this metadata, I encoded the site's name, its resource value and the time of year it was accessed, alongside the locations of forced, unmapped resettlement sites outside the forest.

However, even when all the data points had been inputted onto the counter-map, it did not yet communicate the spatiotemporal relations between the forest site and the Twas' movement, the topography, the weather patterns and the social interactions with other communities. To make the counter-map more active, I connected these isolated data points as relational pathways. I used high-resolution aerial photos to identify traces of established desire lines through the forest or along rivers and streams – paths showing habitual use, such as shortcuts to natural resources, connections between clans, and vantage points. This synthetic data was then cross-referenced onto the Twa's ecocalendar, collapsing their spatial understanding of the forest with their understanding of time as defined by intervals of hunger and abundance into one cosmological counter-map. To ensure credibility, this first digital counter-map co-opted the government's own cartographic language, layout, fonts and indexing to communicate the Twa's claims convincingly.

Once complete, this static digital map still failed to narrate the semi-nomadic, troubled lifeworlds of the Twa. It suffered from the same limitations as architectural drawings, emerging from a Euclidean two-dimensional geometry that insufficiently communicates a dynamic, impermanent and interconnected understanding of socio-ecological space. Maps created in this geometry often serve to specify what border or wall is to be built where.[55] To move beyond this fixed representation, I turned to anthropologist Timothy Ingold's suggestion of 'anthropography', the practice of drawing correspondences with the world.[56] I returned to the static counter-map on my computer screen, exporting it and re-layering it into video software with the aim of animating it. The lines between sites were programmed to move at a given speed and intervals. The ecocalendar was synchronised to revolve along with the Twa's lines of movement, which were overlaid onto a static image of the landscape model made a year earlier.

This new version of the counter-map animates the Twa's perambulatory movement and collective claims in the Virunga forests – a claim measuring 125 km^2. [Fig. 4] The dense white tracings of paths across the map record how space here is understood as topological and relational. Movement is traced not as linear distances but in relation to sites of cultural and resource value – marked on the map as nodes such as burials, hot springs, bamboo groves, weaving sites and water points. These informal paths weave across topographical and hydrological features – mountains, rivers, creeks and swamps – shown faintly in the background cartography. The constellation of points and lines conveys how the Twa's existence intersects with that of mountain gorilla, buffalo and duiker, all within the same habitats. Read together, these tracings assert dwelling not as residing in a fixed place, but as a continuous relational habitat, a meshwork of paths and sites inscribed with social knowledge of the landscape.[57]

The reanimated counter-map extends this logic, showing dwelling as a fluid network of connections that upholds the Twa's claims predating the 1910 colonial border. It demonstrates how the Twa see human and non-human worlds as dynamically co-existent, irrespective of the static borders that underwrite conservation and settlement. As such, the reanimated counter-map is called 'Mufumbiro',

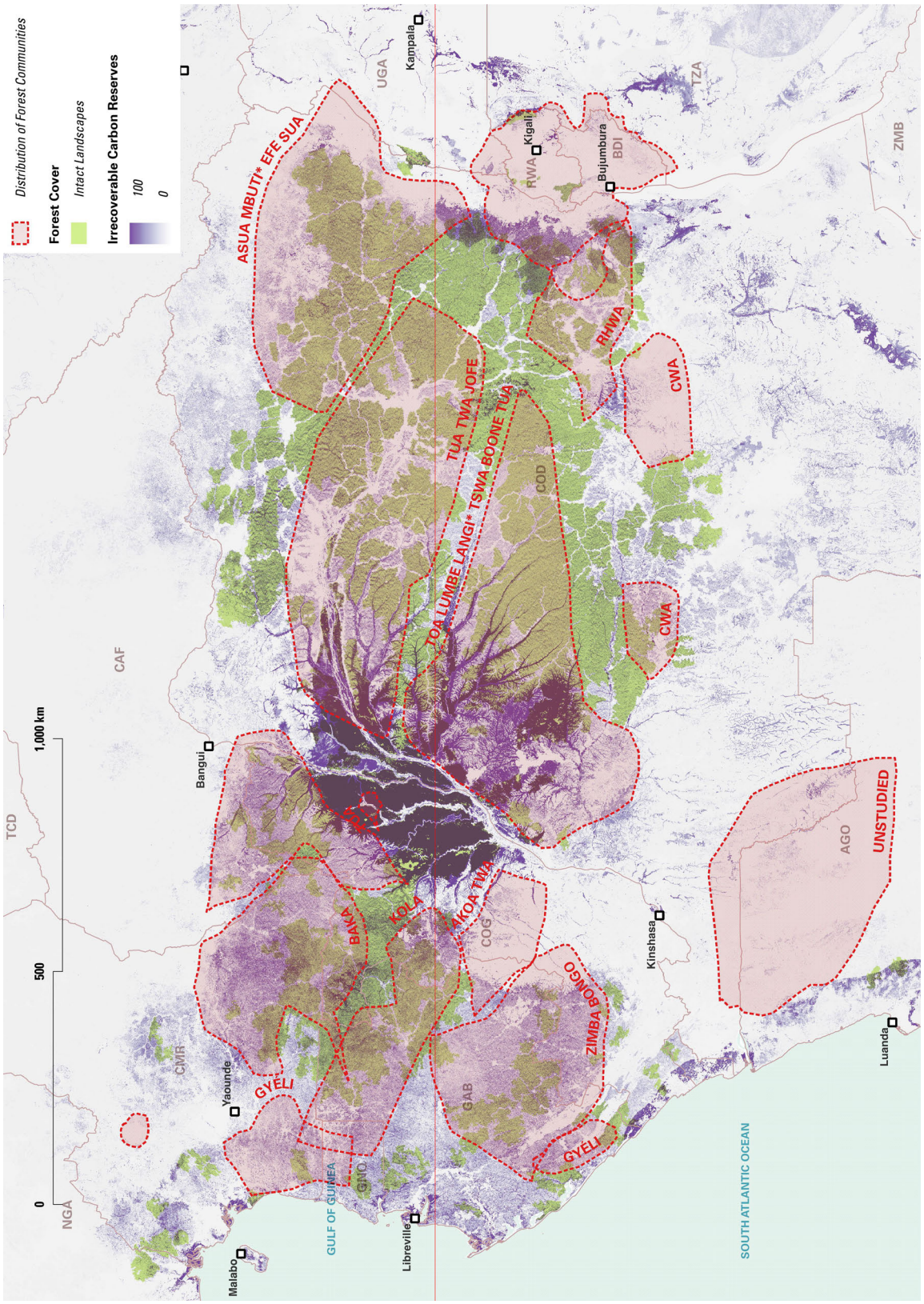


Fig. 5: Central African forest communities, Rwanda in red. Adapted from Bahuchet (1986) by Killian O'Dochartaigh; data from Intact Forest Landscapes (2016) and Global Forest Watch, Hansen (2013).

invoking the Twa's indigenous, geographically expansive and ecologically inclusive understanding of Rwanda's landscapes, while simultaneously using the technical process of animation to challenge static epistemologies of home.

Counter-mapping and relational ontologies

Rundstrom argues that different cultural experiences and knowledges of a place – specifically between intimate, lived understandings (indigenous) and distant, Eurocentric perspectives – are reflected in how maps are made, what they communicate and how they are used.[58] He suggests that text-based Western cultures value recording knowledge long after experiencing a place. Western maps, therefore, represent place in measurable, permanent data, communicating a spatially enclosed, empty and static understanding that fails to convey ecologically relational knowledge. [59] By comparison, non-Western cultures, such as the Twa, prioritise oral traditions and bodily actions (storytelling, dancing, performance) to converse about a place. The communal action of documenting place is often more important than the completion of the map artefact itself. The difference lies in the value placed on the process: for non-Western cultures, bodily engagement with their surroundings is intrinsic to map-making; for Western cultures, value is placed on creating a precise, conclusive map to assert ownership. Rundstrom illustrates this by describing how, in the nineteenth century, British explorers hired indigenous Inuit hunters as cartographers.[60] Drawing from deep knowledge, the Inuit created precise maps quickly and instinctively, often tracing them in the snow, sand or air. These embodied maps reflected the Inuit's daily practices and their social-ecological relationship with their environment, communicating a worldview where humans and non-humans coexist.

Similarly, the Twa did not only map their knowledge of the landscape from memory, but also performed it. For instance, Patrice mapped a water source called *Agacuri Ibuhoro* ('a slope that is slow'), embodying the difficulty of sourcing and carrying water, as he described it. This performance links to the concept of topogeny, coined by James Fox, which describes the generational transfer of place names used to organise and convey social knowledge of, and relations with the landscape.[61] The final re-animated counter-map was an iterative process spanning two years and involving multiple hands, geographical locations and time zones. This map originated in Rwanda in 2015 when the Twa first outlined their histories on the ground, which was then translated into a landscape model in London. The counter-map re-emerged in Rwanda in 2016, using the model and two-dimensional drawing. These counter-maps then returned to my apartment in London, where they were slowly layered onto a screen. From a position of geographical distance and privilege, the Twa's lines of movement and livelihood were envisioned, speculated upon and extrapolated from aerial photos of the Virunga forests and my own field photographs. In 2017, the final counter-map was exported and processed using video-editing software to make it move, demonstrating the transformation of static data into a dynamic representation.

This re-animated counter-map, continually performing in a loop and accessible online, has not been committed to the stillness of paper. It has been designed to remain open to addition and change, as it must, given the Twa have yet to see its final form. It remains incomplete – an ongoing process of exchange and a shared dream between the Twa and me.

Visions: reframing 'home'

The colonial and governmental maps of the Virunga are concerned with drawing border lines that represent and aid in taking control and commodifying the landscape. These maps underwrite the universal, Western understanding of nature as uninhabitable and uninhabited and define the architectural epistemology of a house as a static, bordered and distinctly private space. The lines on the Twa's counter-map, however, represent lines of life, of movement and a relational and temporal way of living in the landscape and with time. Cutting across boundaries, scales, space and time, they are at once transcalar and transectional.

The Kinyarwandan word *urugo* has several interconnected meanings. It can be translated as home, but also holds the social connotation of family, and is used to describe a physical barrier such as a fence. In pre-colonial Rwanda, this was also the measure of an individual and ethnicity's diligence, where the *urugo* was the result of hard labour clearing the forest and preparing the land for farming. [62]

In Rwanda, the average family size is 4.3 people, who together require a minimum of 0.75 hectares of farmland to meet basic nutritional needs.[63] The average plot of farmland owned by families has decreased since the 1960s, from two hectares to 0.5 hectares.[64] The area of land allocated to the Twa for resettlement measures 0.7 hectares, accommodating eight families.[65] Joy and Emmanuel, who own six scattered plots of farming land across the district, represent a privileged group, as they are not Twa and do not share the same experiences or beliefs.

To the Twa, the meaning of family extends far beyond the traditional nuclear family. The Twa belong to a much larger relational network of forest communities, spread across the 1.5 million square kilometres of intact equatorial forests within the Congo Basin (Rwanda to Cameroon), occupied by an estimated 300 000 to 900 000 hunter-gatherers. [Fig. 5] For the egalitarian Twa with their forest families,

relational ways of being cannot be delimited by the enclosures of the house, the borders of a forest, or a map. Mapping relational ontologies foregrounds their expansive, egalitarian ways of being.

Conclusion

Western maps create a static and externalised picture of the world, and reflect home as a bounded, private space severed from the natural world. Such maps cannot hold indigenous concepts of dwelling that are active, spatiotemporal and embedded within the landscape. As Doreen Massey reminds us, cartographic power lies in a map's ability to erase complexity, rendering space tame and silent.[66] This is nowhere more evident than in Africa, where 80 per cent of borders follow colonial astronomical lines, instruments of power that severed social and cultural relations. The Rwanda–DRC boundary remains one of the most divided and unsettled in the world today.[67]

Relational as they are, the egalitarian Twa and their forest families have been enclosed by domestic, forest, and governmental borders. Their resettlement severs deep connections to land and mobility. The counter-maps we produced are not simply oppositional artefacts; they are part of an intercultural dialogue, questioning the legitimacy of static visions while indirectly challenging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where 'adequate housing' does not include the right to land.[68]

It is here that the concept of mapping relational ontologies matters. While counter-mapping gives marginalised groups voice, such maps often remain static, politically alive yet ontologically 'dead'. Mapping relational ontologies goes further by treating mapping as an animated and animating process. It is a co-production: for the Twa, mapping is embodied performance – gesture, toponym, narrative – while for me, it is architectural drawing and digital mediation. What emerges are hybrid relational ontologies that reveal both the divisions imposed by conservation cartographies and the new divisions that surface in the collaborative encounter. Mapping relational ontologies is a transversal practice that reanimates erased relations, staging a process – rather than a finished product – that opens space for new, if uneven, forms of dialogue between people, land and power.

Reinstating the Twa within the landscape and animating challenges to Virunga's static, extractive conservation model happens through the repeated telling and re-telling of the Twa's struggle. This process begins by entering their space, walking with them, speaking with them and making maps together. In alliance with Ananya Roy's 'politics of location', these maps themselves speak, animating more complex understandings of the world attuned to the rhythms of semi-nomadic life.[69] They also provoke reflection about architectural practice: why build without considering existing socio-ecological relations? For whom are we building, and is building necessary at all? Choosing not to build can be an act of recognition.

The Twa in Rwanda have not yet seen these maps. Moving forward, my intention is to return with the maps – again, not to Rwanda, where political space is restricted, but across the nearby border to Kisoro, Uganda. There, the Twa have established civil and political representation in a more tolerant context. Bringing this research back will involve translating the maps into the Twa's own language – Kinyarwandan – while also encoding them in a visual, landscape-based language that conveys relational and toponymic knowledge, in order to overcome barriers of communication and access. In its capacity to reintroduce wonder and recognition into landscapes scarred by displacement, mapping relational ontologies is not only a method of critique but a vehicle for re-engagement. In their animation lies a certain enchantment: they do not simply document loss, but reanimate the presence of forests, kin and practices thought erased. It is this affective charge of seeing relations come alive that makes mapping relational ontologies a powerful practice for staging new forms of dialogue in one of the world's most divided borderlands.

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Notes

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1. Athan Tashobya, 'Conservation Body Donates Land to Volcanoes Park to Expand Habitat for Gorillas', *The New Times*, 10 January 2018.
2. Ibid.
3. *Vision 2050* (formerly *Vision 2020*) seeks to socially, economically and spatially urbanise a predominantly rural, agrarian society. Republic of Rwanda, *Vision 2050* (December 2020).
4. Hannah Nielsen and Anna Spencley, 'The Success of Tourism in Rwanda – Gorillas and More: Background Paper for the African Success Stories Study', *World Development Report 2011* (Washington DC, 2010), 3.
5. John Brian Harley, 'Deconstructing the Map', *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 1–20.
6. Ohenjo N. et al., 'Health of Indigenous People in Africa', *Lancet* 367, no. 9526 (2006): 1937–46; Natan Lerner, 'International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination', The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, vol. 08153, 2014.
7. Robert Rundstrom, 'Mapping, Postmodernism, Indigenous People and the Changing Direction of North American Cartography', *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization* 28, no. 2 (1991): 1–12.
8. Ibid.
9. For initial observations in Rwanda and early engagements with the Twa community, see Killian Doherty, 'Territories of Practice: Kimisagara Community Center, Rwanda,' *MasContext* (2013); Killian Doherty, 'Re-Making the City,' *Cityscape*, no. 3 (2013): 30–31; and Killian Doherty, 'Indigenous Perspectives: the Post-Conflict Landscapes of Rwanda,' *Footprint* 19 (2017): 151–55, https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/footprint/article/view/1435.
10. Studies of the colonial transformation of the Virunga landscapes into national parks highlight the enduring consequences of these enclosures. See *Virunga: Archives and Collections of an Outstanding National Park,* ed. Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and Han de Koeijer (Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2017); Gillian Mathys, 'People on the Move: Frontiers, Borders, Mobility and History in the Lake Kivu Region, Nineteenth–Twentieth Centuries' (PhD diss., Ghent University, 2014); and Killian O'Dochartaigh, 'Frame, Fortress, Fenestration: The Architectural 'Enframings' of Rwanda's Forests, 1904–2022', *Architectural Theory Review* 29, no. 2 (2025): 231–54. While these studies address the wider Virunga-Ruwenzori-Kivu borderlands, this article focuses on the 1910 Anglo-German border that delineated Rwanda and shaped subsequent conservation and ethnic relations.
11. Mappings and conversations with community participants were documented during fieldwork in Rwanda in 2015 and 2016. All participant names have been anonymised to protect their identities.
12. On the notion of 'fantasy', see Vanessa Watson, 'African Urban Fantasies: Dreams or Nightmares?' *Environment and Urbanization* 26, no. 1 (2014): 215–31.
13. The colonial powers included Germany, Belgium, France, Britain, Spain, Italy and Portugal; only Ethiopia and Liberia remained uncolonised.
14. They are: Nyamuragira (3 058m), Nyiragongo (3 470m), Mikeno (4 437m), Karisimbi (4 507m), Bisoke (3 711m) to the west with Sabinyo (3 674m) Mgahinga (3 474m) and Muhubura (4 127m) to the east.
15. Rufumbira, a Kinyarwanda dialect, is spoken by the Bafumbira – Tutsi, Hutu and Twa communities in southwestern Uganda bordering Rwanda and the DRC.
16. German explorer Gustav von Götzen traversed parts of the Virungas in 1894, though Speke had observed the mountains from afar in 1863, predating Götzen's journey.
17. John Hanning Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1863]), 214; Henry M. Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1878), 465.
18. During this expedition Beringe became the first European to kill a mountain gorilla.
19. William Roger Louis, *Ruanda-Urundi, 1884–1919* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52.
20. E. M. Jack, 'The Mufumbiro Mountains', *The Geographical Journal* 41, no. 6 (1913): 532–47.
21. Louis, 52.
22. In 1962, Ruanda-Urundi achieved independence, resulting in the formation of two states: Rwanda and Burundi.
23. Mary L. Jobe Akeley and Ethan C. Akeley, *Carl Akeley's Africa* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1929), 235.
24. Raf De Bont, 'A World Laboratory: Framing and Managing the Albert National Park, Belgian Congo', *Environmental History* 22, no. 3 (2017): 408.
25. C. A. Spinage, 'The Ecology and Problems of the Volcano National Park, Rwanda', *Biological Conservation* 4, no. 3 (1972): 194–204.
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33. There are thirty-six known Twa resettlements in Musanze-Burera – twenty-four outside the park and eleven around the Rugezi wetlands – based on maps and consultations with local civil society and religious groups.
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50. Ibid., 7.
51. Purdeková, *Even if I Am Not Here,* 475–97.
52. For more on the architectural role in mediating both literal and social performativity among the Twa, see O'Dochartaigh, 'Frame, Fortress, Fenestration', 235.
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Biography

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Dialogue I: Performing Modernist Architecture

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Abstract
In this review article, two independently authored texts examine how modernist architecture on the African continent continues to shape and be reshaped by the operations that actively produce memory. The authors approach these operations in individual yet interconnected analyses of building 'performance', both a tool of colonial production and a practice of decolonial re-enchantment. In *Dreams Extracted: The Colonial Disenchantment of* Afrique Noire *Modern Architecture and its Climatic Design Legacies,* Piero Medici examines how modernist buildings, urban plans and infrastructures in West Africa created a narrow and technocratic definition of performance, focused mainly on European standards of climate comfort. Presented as bringing 'civilised' living standards to the continent, these interventions, equipped with sun shading, natural and mechanical ventilation, obscured the colonial and capitalist extractive practices that sustained not only European development in the 1960s but also the very same comfort. *Re-enchanting Memoryscapes: Entangled Narratives of Tropical Modernism at the Uganda National Cultural Centre and Theatre* by Anna Kintsurashvili counters this narrative by centring performance as an embodied, relational practice happening through and within architectural form. Looking at the life of the Uganda National Cultural Centre and Theatre, performance becomes a practice of reclaiming epistemic authority. The piece situates the struggles of reclamation within contemporary debates on preservation, where institutions often risk reinforcing a universalising heritage gaze that prioritises architectural form over lived experiences. Read together, both texts propose that decolonial futures emerge not by analysing and preserving architectural form alone but by interrogating the operations that produce memory and reclaiming performance as a situated, collective, and continuously negotiated practice.

Keywords
Performance, climatic design, colonial modernism, tropical modernism, decolonial identity

One sentence summary
This review article presents two interconnected analyses of building 'performance' as a tool of colonial production and a practice of decolonial re-enchantment.

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Dreams Extracted:
The Colonial Disenchantment of *Afrique Noire* Modern Architecture and its Climatic Design Legacies

Piero Medici

The February 1957 issue of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*' magazine, published one year before the formal independence of several French West African colonies, was entitled 'Afrique Noire', named after its main dossier in the first part of the issue.[1] Its cover juxtaposes a physical model with axonometric bronze and steel beam detail of Mies Van Der Rohe's Seagram Building in New York, strikingly without any graphic or written reference to Africa. [Fig. 1] The issue's dossier 'Afrique Noire' is preceded by French architect Raymond Lopez's article titled 'Visite aux USA – La leçon de Mies van der Rohe', which recounts a visit to the US organised by 'l'Aluminium Francaise' to view aluminium components used in US industries, including Mies's nearly-completed Seagram Building. The dossier's opening article, 'Une Nouvelle Siderurgie Atlantique' (a new Atlantic steel industry), presents diagrams illustrating resource flows including iron, manganese and coal, flowing from French West African colonies to Europe and the US, with nothing flowing south. Supported by the diagrams, the article by Roland Pré, who was the colonial Administrator in Guinea and Cameroon, Governor and soon to become Director of the 'Bureau minier de la France d'Outre-mer' – the 'overseas French mining office', an institution created in 1948, responsible for promoting research, equipment and the exploitation of subsoil mineral resources in the territories under the jurisdiction of the French Ministry of Overseas France – argues that Europe's rapid development in the 1960s requires intensified extraction.

The issue promotes 'modernist architecture and planning' as a needed and efficient resource extractive apparatus. The visual rhetoric, juxtaposing Mies's details with ferrous flows diagrams, and the focus on the centrality of resources like aluminium in the development of present and future western industries, link modernist aesthetics, steel, glass and abstract geometric forms with the colonial seizure of raw materials. Pré argues that local population should accept modern architecture, engage in industrial and mining activities, and abandon their 'ancestral life, agriculture and villages' in 'our African territories'. Pré concludes that it is crucial to understand how to avoid the local masses from becoming adverse towards modern life and the new industrial complexes. Nowhere does he describe which local resources, compensation, goods and skills will be provided to local inhabitants, except for a vague gift of 'civilisation'. This enacts what Walter Mignolo terms the 'coloniality of knowledge', visually naturalising European technical rationality, which functions as a pedagogical tool that conditions readers to see Africa primarily as a reservoir of extractable matter rather than as a site of autonomous epistemic production.[2]

The message aligns with Hilde Heynen's claim that modernism reinforces supposed hierarchies of European superiority, which, as Mignolo argues, is the self-serving interest of western epistemology that obscures the geo-body-politics of knowledge.[3] Furthermore, it resonates with Jacques Ellul's argument that the European magazine foregrounds humans, especially the exploited and colonised locals, as a technical species in a relational technical milieu, co-constituting the human and technics.[4] On the other hand, imagining possible future practices in similar regions, we should consider for instance Sylvia Tamale's framework for social transformation, which challenges Eurocentric perspectives, suggesting possible decolonial directions. Incorporating ecofeminist principles, her paradigm is rooted in African philosophies such as *ubuntu*, and connects the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Tamale argues that the same imperialist ideologies that work to subjugate women also exploit nature, advocating instead for a decolonial feminism (anti-patriarchal) that is anti-neoliberal (to decrease climate change with neo-liberalism as its main cause), anti-colonial (anti-imperialist), anti-speciesist, holistic, and culturally specific, to resist erasure of indigenous knowledge systems by offering alternatives to colonial logics of justice and ecological sustainability.[5]

Climatic design and the colonisation of comfort: European priorities in African modernist architecture

The *Afrique Noire* report's second article, titled 'Evolution de l'architecture en Afrique Noire Française' by Michel Weill – from Atelier LWD, led by Michel Weill, Guy Lagneau and Jean Dimitrijevic, French architects active throughout their career in several projects in Africa – precedes the detailed illustration of the architectural and urban projects.[6] The article concedes that local architectures do exist, but deems them inadequate for 'modern needs'. Weill affirms that due to local climates, with high temperatures and humidity, European architects would need to adopt two main architectural principles in the near future. First, internal transversal cross-ventilated typologies, and second, incrementally, mechanical climatisation (air conditioning) in subsequent years, for offices and housing, controlling temperature and humidity to 'improve the comfort of Europeans not used to local conditions'. Regarding luminosity, which is 'far more intense than in France', Weill proposes shading devices, like steerable blinds or tinted glass, manufactured from light aluminium alloy, avoiding corrosion due to the high humidity, which plagues other metals. The article ends by highlighting the importance of implementing an architecture in



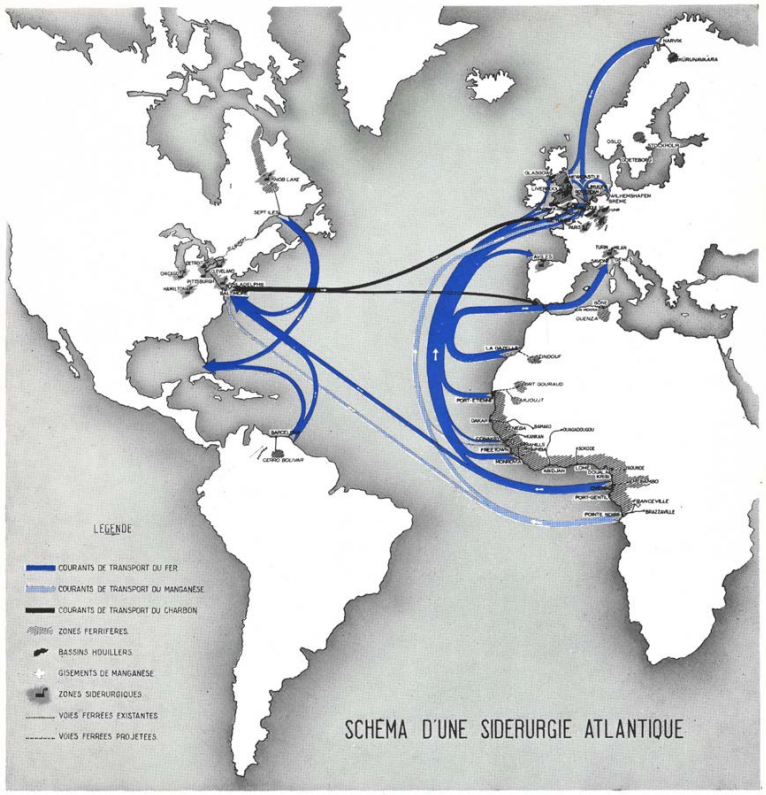


Fig. 1: Above, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 70, Afrique Noire' (1957), cover. Below, Roland Pré, diagram of Atlantic steel industry; image: L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 70.



Fig. 2: Hotel de ville d'Abidjan, architect Henri Chomette. Clockwise from top left: office tower in the background with light wooden steerable sun shading; the lower volume in the front is equipped with vertical concrete bise-soleil (the plan allows for an air conditioner to be installed in the near future); vertical concrete brise-soleil from the interior; horizontal glass louvres on the lower volume back facade.



Fig. 3: Palais de Grand Conseil de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, Dakar, architects Daniel Badani and Pierre Roux-Dorlut. Above, cross-ventilation is enhanced by the main building façade (with concrete brise-soleil) exposed to the prevailing winds. Photo: L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 70 (1957). Below, the building in 2026 (photo: author), very well maintained and freshly repainted, with several air-conditioning units installed. Unlike Guinea, Senegal maintained strong economic and political relationships of subordination with France after formal independence in the late 1950s. Photo: author, 2026.

accordance with the 'evolution of Africans, soundly engaging the great future of African countries that are waking up'.[6]

The article centres the climatic comfort of Europeans, reproduced on the African continent through modernist architectures. An interior climate colonisation, established, without interrogation or reflection on the concept of climatic comfort for local populations, nor whether lower temperatures, humidity, sealed envelopes, and mechanical ventilation in modernist buildings align with local cultural practices. The magazine advances a narrow, technocentric conception of building 'performance', detached from broader concepts of performativity – buildings as relational, behavioural, context-responsive systems, defined by their interaction with users over time. This Eurocentric conception of 'performance' directly relates to Heynen's and Mignolo's assumption of western material and immaterial hegemony, and is problematic in its epistemic justice, concerning, for instance, the privileging of French 'experts' experimenting in Africa, as a technical and scientific 'investigation' opposing the ontological relationality of everyday life. Therefore, the colonisation of comfort is associated both with the forced export of Europeans climatic living preferences, and also with the African built environment as a free testing ground for European techniques. By constructing the African climate as a hostile externality requiring technological mastery for European comfort, the article reinforces dualisms – such as mind/body, nature/culture, civilised/uncivilised – that underpin the capitalist-colonialist-climatic continuum.

Architectural projects as instruments of colonial and neocolonial domination

As Daniel Barber notes, it was in the colonies and former colonies that modern architecture 'initially flourished as a facilitator of the colonial project and then as its globalised corporate persistence'.[7] This is illustrated in the 'Afrique Noire' issue through an array of modern steel, glass and concrete projects, such as Hôtel de France, a large industrial complex and a new town for the production of aluminium in Edéa, Cameroon; Ensemble d'habitation et de commerce in Conakry, Guinea by Atelier LWD; or the Hôtel de Ville (seen in figure 2) and Immeuble de la centrale des sociétés in Abidjan, Ivory Coast by another renowned French architect, Henri Chomette, active in more than ten African regions.[8] [Fig. 3] 'Afrique Noire' also featured the urban plan of Abidjan and the Palais de Grand Conseil de l'Afrique Occidentale Francaise in Dakar by French architects Daniel Badani and Pierre Roux-Dorlut – whose African commissions launched their later career in France, and are illustrated in a mid-2010s publication, in a chapter titled 'Le genie Coloniale'.[9] [Fig. 4] The issue includes Belgian colonial institutional and apartment buildings, and an Aerodrome at Leopoldville (Kinshasa today) in the Belgian Congo, by French architect Claude Laurens. Across the featured works in the magazine, brise-soleils (sunshades) installed in various materials, colours, orientations and patterns on buildings' façades showcased new, modern African aesthetics and technology in buildings that respond to the local climates. Designed in collaboration with French architects and engineers such as Jean Prouvè, aluminium-made brise-soleils, despite uncertain efficacy, were ideal for experimentation in African regions, before further refinement in Europe. Architecture historian Paul Bouet, who focuses on North African French colonies, reminds us that solar energy and radiation both played a key role in France's agenda by 'achieving the adaptation to the climatic conditions of the region, to exploit its resources and the supply of "technical assistance" to "underdeveloped" local populations'.[10] Similarly, in West Africa, materials and shading devices were often tested for later European use, serving dually as aesthetic markers of progress and mechanisms of neocolonial control and technical dependency. Barber, commenting on the British Petroleum House in Nigeria, describes similar objectives in British West Africa, stating that moveable shading elements on the façade 'helped craft an economic and developmental logic that facilitated the spread of modern architecture around the world, essential to resource extraction; that produced the world of the present'.[11] Another paradox is that some British and French West African modernist buildings were both technologically novel and already obsolete at completion.[12] As Weill says, they were designed with passive ventilation and brise-soleil but intended to integrate future air conditioning systems, which often happened through subsequent transformations.[13] They were both innovative and out of date, rarely meeting standards for ceiling heights and ductwork that would have made mechanical climate control possible. Projects like the Palais du Grand Conseil and the Hôtel de France, oriented toward prevailing winds, embraced the natural cross ventilation through brise-soleils, but their anticipated conversion to integrate mechanical climate control were the first step towards the ultimate colonisation of indoor climate and perceptions of comfort with resource-consuming air conditioning. Relating this to 'political hegemony', Barber reframes modern architecture, concerned with climatic 'performance', through an 'evolutionary' gaze that underpins the colonial and capitalist project, subjecting Africans to instrumentalisation and 'developmentalism', echoing Rousseau's idea of the noble savage, and legitimising interventions premised on 'progress'.[14] Furthermore, by viewing modern climatic architecture as a 'civilising project' which simultaneously justifies the monetisation of 'sustainability' (that is, capitalist enclosure through 'expertise') and enables the exploitation

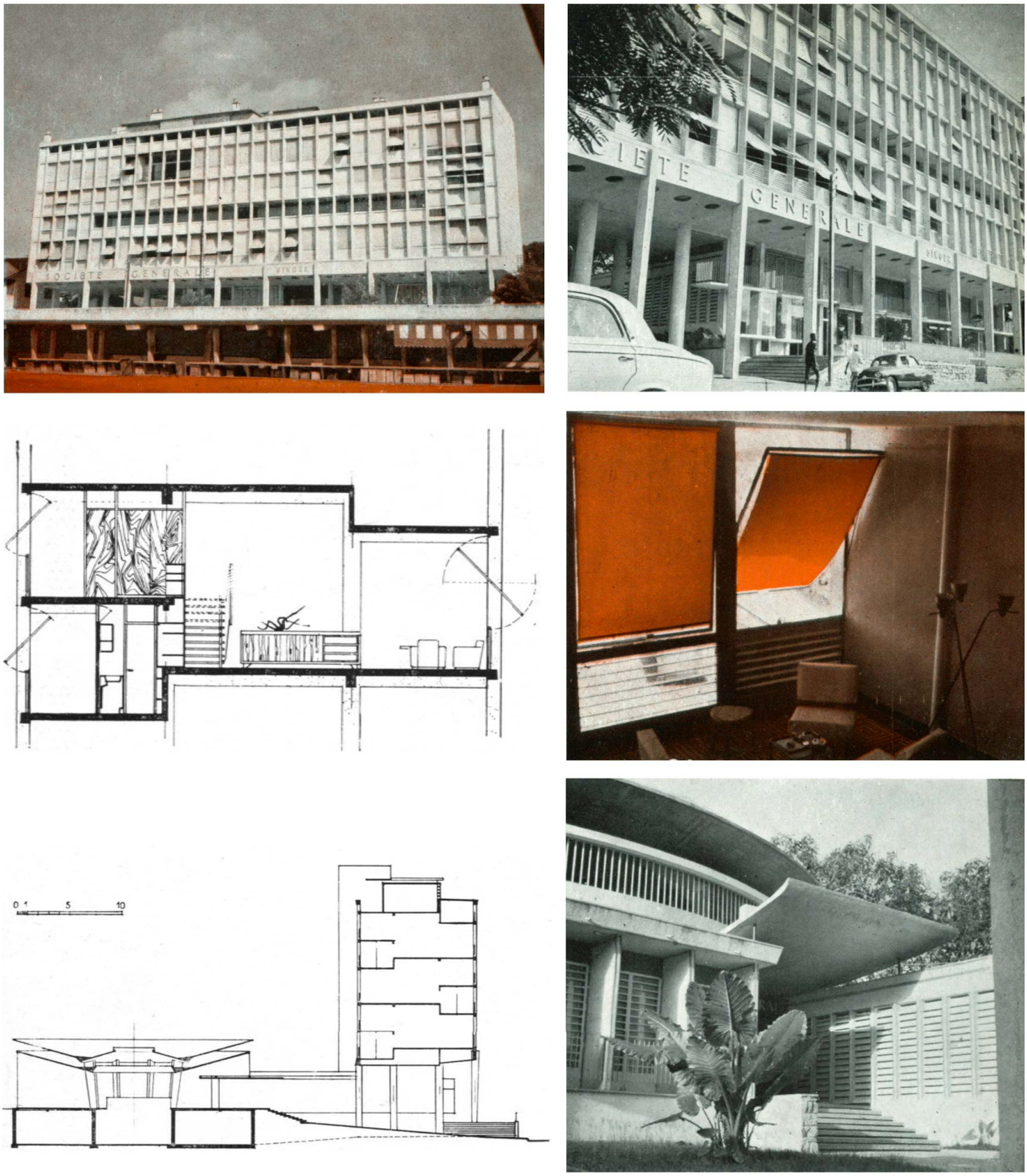


Fig. 4: Immeuble de la centrale des sociétés, Abidjan, by Henri Chomette. Clockwise from top left: front façade; porch at the ground floor of the front façade; image and section of glass panels pivoting on a horizontal axis with metal frames and shading, allowing for either natural cross-ventilation or air conditioning (to be installed at a future date); lower volume at the back of the building with louvres and brise-soleil; whole-building section. Photos and drawings: L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 70 (1957).

of resources, necessitating the supply of 'technical assistance' and 'underdevelopment', new needs or standards are produced. This process recalls Deleuze's 'production of desire', which drives consumption by de- and then re-territorialising. By colonising the interior through the prescriptive regulation of 'comfort', a territory for capitalist extraction is concretised.[15]

This raises the critical question of reclaiming epistemic authority, and the re-framing the *Afrique Noire* issue in terms of what knowledge it holds, where that knowledge originates, and what knowledge is oppressed. Jiat-Hwee Chang states that climatic design offered techno-scientific certainty in territories in flux experiencing rapid societal transformations brought about by modernisation and rural-urban migration, eroding traditional building practices, similar to what Pré described in West Africa, with locals moving from rural settlements to industrially extractive new towns and neighbourhoods.[16] Consequently, this new paradigm entrenched dependency on imported materials and expertise, persisting beyond independence. For some commentators, including Chang, climatic design functioned as a power-knowledge configuration, where distant centres of climatic expertise accumulated knowledge on climate and comfort, manifesting the power to direct architectural production in these distant regions, before and after colonial rule. Through magazines like *Afrique Noire,* Walter Benjamin would argue, architectural photographs and technical diagrams circulate as mass-produced objects; detached from African sites, from their lived relational contexts, they enter the world as ideological abstractions.[17] The magazine reproduced universalised modernist aesthetics while obscuring the labour and landscapes that underwrote them.

Colonial climatic legacies and imagining post-carbon futures

Afrique Noire, representing modernist African interventions exploiting ferrous and fossil resources introduced through Miesian models, while largely omitting analysis of African architectures and ethnographies, should be understood as an instrument disseminating cultural and material colonialism, paving the way for neocolonialism and coloniality after formal independence. The narrow technocentric conception of 'performance' constitutes another operation of de- and re-territorialisation related to 'climate'. The colonisation of interior climate, comfortable for European bodies, using African territories as experimental laboratories for technical performance, denied the symbolic and relational dimensions of architecture, which are embodied through performativity and action as relational operations. Such dimensions could be achieved by reappropriating epistemologies, for example through an ecofeminist decolonial method. This operation of de- and re-territorialisation of 'climate' also points to a second aspect pertaining to the presupposed division between interior and exterior, implying a dualistic ontology – separating nature/culture and inside/outside – as opposed to a relational ontology, which would be contextually more appropriate. Additionally, the strict separation of functions and narrow definition of performance, including the concept that shading elements contributed to a 'developmental logic', are conceived through a capitalist rationality, embedded in mechanistic regimes of capital extraction. The alienation of labour, atomisation of social life, and the shift from collective relations toward discrete individuals demand re-evaluation. In conclusion, a magazine such as *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* and the modernistic projects it publicised were not ideologically neutral, as they pretended to be; therefore, the relevance of reframing and reclaiming their supposed neutrality appears as pivotal.

The *Afrique Noire* issue raises several questions, such as: To what extent and for how long did *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* serve as an instrument of colonial and, especially, neo-colonial propaganda after independence, promoting modernism and climatic design being a power-knowledge configuration? How were French architects complicit, and how were African territories mobilised within broader cycles of de- and re-territorialisation? Which local traditional architectural approaches, typologies, techniques and spatial relations between people and places were marginalised or erased by modernist projects? How could repairing these relations foster decolonial and post-carbon architectures?

A few concluding questions, which also introduce the following article by Anna Kintsurashvili could be: What colonial and neo-colonial role do West African modernistic buildings play, and how did buildings evolve in years following independence, considering changes in façades, choice of materials, technologies, and buildings' use, as these relate to performativity and relational ontologies? To what extent could these projects and the media describing them also become the vehicle, the process, and an opportunity for eco-feminist, collective, creative approaches, through relational ontologies, to postcolonial appropriation and a post-carbon future?

Re-enchanting Memoryscapes:
Entangled Narratives of Tropical Modernism at the Uganda National Cultural Centre and Theatre

Anna Kintsurashvili

Sites of tropical modernism, once symbols of colonial cultural imposition, have evolved into places of reclamation in postcolonial societies. The Uganda National Cultural Centre and Theatre (UNCC), designed by Peatfield and Bodgener Architects in 1959, is an example of this shift. Originally an image of western cultural ideology, the UNCC has since been reinterpreted by local artists as a monument of public memory –a dynamic space where colonial imposition, creative resistance and national identity building intersect.

The contested (hi)stories of the theatre constructed for approaching independence, and evolving along with independent Uganda, reveal a new meaning in which we can frame building performance. Rather than treating it as a static or technical function – as often emphasised in colonial frameworks – these (hi)stories invite us to instead see the building performing as a relational actor, a space whose meanings are continuously reshaped by public memory, embodied practices and socio-political transformations. Understanding the building as a relational actor challenges the heritage discourses that prioritise architectural qualities of tropical modernism over its local meanings and imagines a possible future where preservation approaches recognise memory as a dynamic and performative force.

Below I trace how the performance of the UNCC evolved from a colonial institution to a living monument of cultural resilience, poetically described by Charles Mulekwa, a Ugandan actor and theatre scholar, as 'a theatre of oppression and a theatre of the oppressed'.[18] Through episodes of resistance, artistic interventions and grassroots memory work, the theatre becomes a lens through which to examine how performative acts reconstitute space, revealing that architecture's afterlives are inseparable from the relational worlds it sustains.

Colonial foundations

Built in 1959, just three years before Uganda's independence, the UNCC was deeply tied to colonial objectives. Even though it was constructed for a soon to be independent nation, the building was designed as a European-style theatre – replete with a proscenium arch stage and brise-soleil. [Fig. 5 and 6] The technical solutions were focused on climatic performance in the so-called tropics, using natural ventilation elements, a signature feature of tropical modernism. Meanwhile, spatial programming reinforced western theatrical norms while sidelining indigenous performance traditions. Its siting beside the legislative chamber (now Uganda's parliament) represented a continuation of colonial control over cultural expression.

Yet architecture, no matter how imposing, is never static. As the Uganda Protectorate stopped existing and the country gained independence, the UNCC evolved into a site of resistance. It became a space where local artists began to subvert the building's original function, using traditional performance practices to reinterpret its western architectural forms. One early act of such resistance and the search for decolonial identity was Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Black Hermit,* a play set to premiere on the eve of independence in 1962. Intended to celebrate the new nation, the play was abruptly stopped, because of its critical examination of tribalism and national unity. The authorities accused the production team of trying to 'Africanise' the National Theatre, and the first director, G. Maxwell Jackson, was dismissed.[19]

Emergence of indigenous voices and creative resistance

The appointment of Wycliff Kiyingi as the first native Ugandan director in 1964 was a turning point for the UNCC.[20] His production of his own play *Pio Mberenge Kamulali* satirised the clash between indigenous and western ideals, producing a theatre that reflected local narratives. This shift was further amplified by the work of Okot p'Bitek and Robert Serumaga, who championed traditional performance practices as a legitimate art form. [Fig. 7] They argued that the native rituals performed in the open village space needed to come to the capital city, on the National Theatre's proscenium arch stage; only then could a true Ugandan Theatre emerge.[21] Their advocacy led to a fundamental rethinking of the theatre's role and its western architectural forms – a rethinking that transformed the UNCC from a colonial relic to a dynamic platform of indigenous storytelling.

The mid 1960s, a period of cultural rethinking, was followed by Idi Amin's authoritarian rule, under which the UNCC became a space of both repression and resistance. Byron Kawadwa's *The Song of a Cockerel* (1975) allegorically criticised the regime's abuses, ultimately leading to Kawadwa's execution.[22] This tragic event cemented the UNCC's role as a battleground for cultural and political expression. Simultaneously, it led to years of silence, often seen as a period when the theatre of creative resistance became merely a theatre for entertainment.[23]

The revival of creative resistance took place over a decade later. Alex Mukulu's play *Thirty Years of Bananas*, staged in 1992 to commemorate thirty years of Ugandan independence, marked a return of open political critique to the UNCC's stage. Staged six years after President Museveni came to power with the promise of increasing



Fig. 5: Front façade with brise-soleil, 1959. Photo: Peatfield and Bodgener archives.



Fig. 6: Proscenium arch stage, 1959. Photo: Peatfield and Bodgener archives.

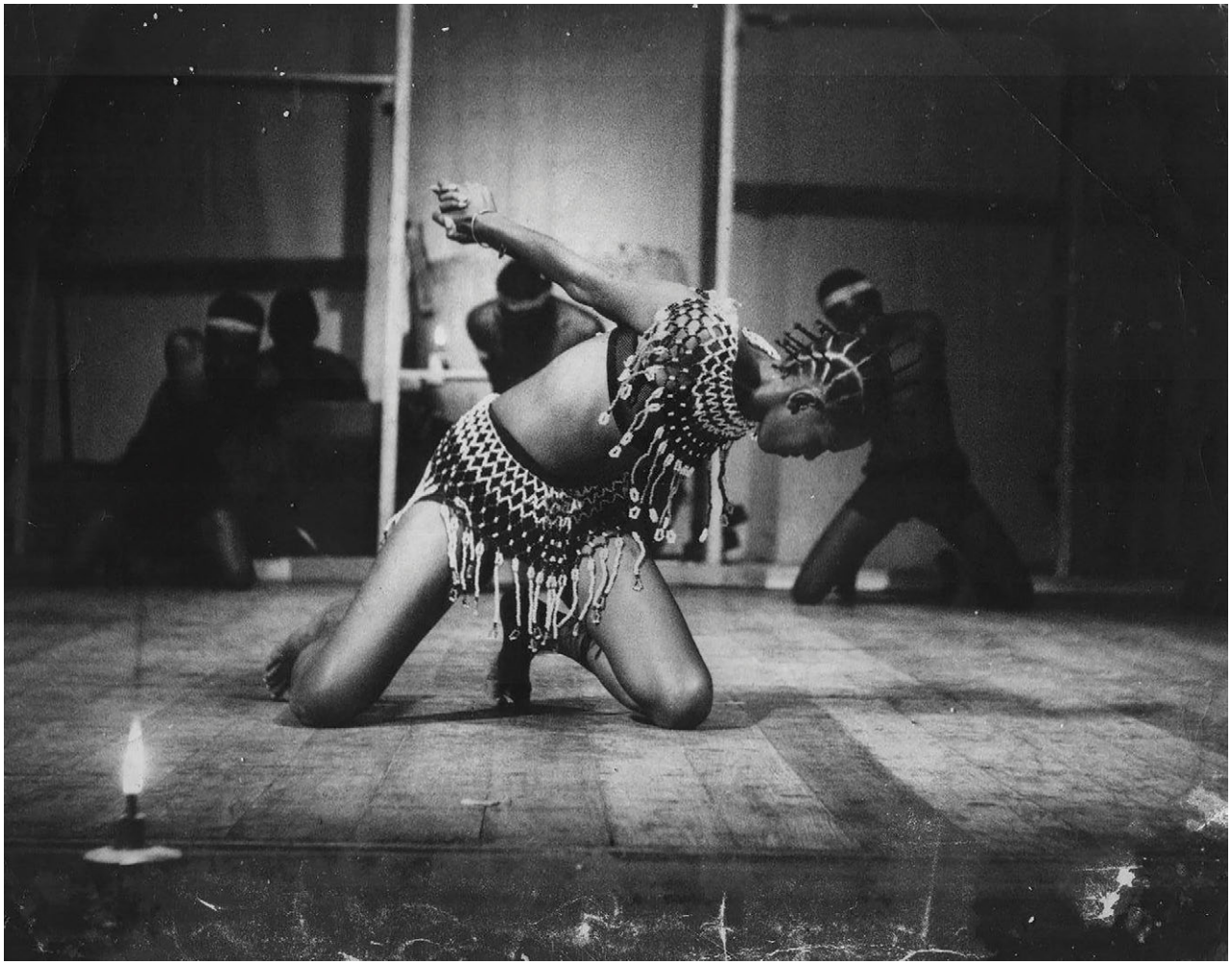


Fig. 7: Robert Serumaga's *Renga Moi* on the National Theatre stage, late 1960s. Photo: UNCC archives, HIPUganda.

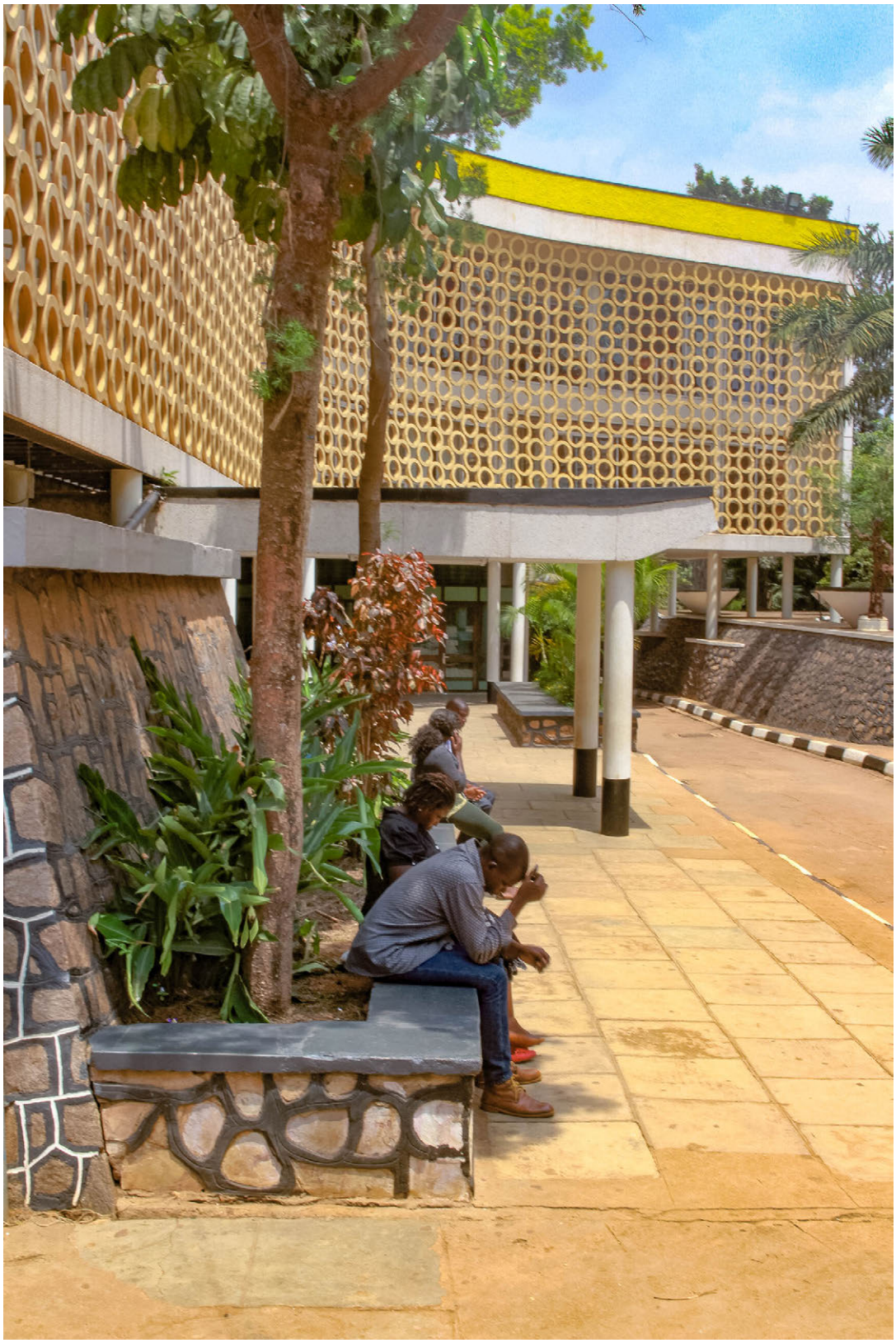


Fig. 8: Uganda National Cultural Centre and Theatre, 2018. Photo: Eugene Kavuma.

freedom of speech, the play openly criticised every political leader of independent Uganda. Mukulu portrayed former presidents as busts, sculpted without ears to represent the unwillingness of their regimes to hear the opinions of the people.[24] Although there was no bust of President Museveni, this was explained during the performance – 'we don't display busts of people who are still being tested'.[25] The play boldly reflected on the turbulent history of post-independence Uganda and drew audiences from all ethnic groups, demonstrating the theatre's performative power to unite and create dialogue.

Re-enchantment and preservation through public memory

In recent years, debates on the preservation of the UNCC have raised questions about whose (hi)stories are prioritised, and how the building itself continues to perform in shaping those narratives. These discussions point to a broader understanding of building performance – not an architectural feature or just theatrical activity within the space, but the building's ongoing role in activating memory, identity and cultural meaning in the public sphere. The 2016 proposal to demolish the theatre to make space for a commercial redevelopment sparked resistance from local artists, heritage experts and international organisations such as Docomomo International.[26] While architectural preservationist stressed the building's modernist value, Ugandan artists discussed the role the UNCC played in developing local culture. They argued for cultural continuity – the need to preserve not just a structure but the lived experiences embedded within it.

Following the widespread public resistance, the redevelopment plans were replaced with a quick renovation, often referred to as the '2017 facelift'. After the renovation, which was also positively featured in *Docomomo*'s 'Heritage Saved' section, concerns were raised in Kampala about the quality and increasing commercial focus that risked erasing the cultural significance of the space.[27] As Ugandan artist Philip Luswata put it, 'We are not just preserving a building; we are preserving the memory of who we are'.[28] These debates and the UNCC's transformation from a colonial institution to a symbol of cultural resilience ask for a preservation approach that goes beyond renovation, but instead centres public memory. Memory is not static – it is continuously shaped by those who engage with a space over time.[29] When prioritising the lived experiences of local communities, preservation efforts can honour and give shape to the multiplicity of meanings associated with sites of such a double nature.

Guided by Achille Mbembe's notion of re-enchantment and Arturo Escobar's concept of relational ontologies, the (hi)stories of the UNCC show how imposed structures can be repurposed to embody local meanings and nurture cultural agency.[30] Re-enchantment, in this context, is about recovering the relations between the building, the memories of its users, and the broader cultural and socio-political conditions. Rather than treating colonial-era structures as mere relics of oppression, this perspective sees them as dynamic actors, living entities – spaces where political, social and artistic histories continue to unfold.

With this perspective, more than an architectural artefact, the UNCC is a monument of public memory, embodying the collective struggles, aspirations and creative expressions of its community. Its preservation needs to give the intangible meanings a tangible form by integrating oral histories, community engagement, and programming that reflects its evolving role. By embracing these layered (hi)stories spatially, the UNCC remains not just a modernist theatre of the past, but a theatre of possibility – one where memory, performative resistance and artistic expression continue to shape Uganda's cultural landscape, illustrating that memory itself can be a force of architectural and cultural preservation. [Fig. 8]

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Dialogue II: Arboreal Frameworks of Care

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Abstract
This review article pairs two texts that examine trees as socio-ecological mediators shaping spatial relations across the rural-to-urban continuum. Through the Avia tree (*Newbouldia laevis*), Courage Kpodo's *Stewarding Land: Some Architectural Directions* expands understandings of land stewardship in southern Ghana as relational, foregrounding how customary ritual, spiritual authority and arboreal temporalities complicate colonial legal frameworks. By positioning trees as living mediators between humans, ancestors, and land, the article challenges anthropocentric notions of ownership. In *Caring Forest Urbanisms: Human-Tree Relationships of Tenure, Memory and Livelihood in Nairobi* Kathryn Chesebrough draws on fieldwork in Nairobi's informal settlements to examine youth-led tree care as an ongoing re-assembly of spatial, social and political practice through which tenure, memory, and livelihood are asserted in flood-prone and contested riparian zones. It describes the agency and situated expertise through which young residents collaborate with trees as agents of care and claim-making, enabling provisional commons, restoring degraded landscapes, and generating alternative urban futures through sustained labour and relational expertise. Together, the texts argue that trees function not merely as ecological infrastructure but as active participants in social worlds – holding memories, redistributing power and reorganising time. By foregrounding care as an infrastructural and temporal practice, the review article advances a relational framework for architecture, landscape and urbanism within complex, multi-scalar webs of socio-arboreal relations.

Keywords
Care, arboreal architectures, forest urbanism, stewardship, design research

One sentence summary
This review article foregrounds arboreal care as a framework for architecture, landscape and urbanism within complex, multi-scalar social worlds.

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Stewarding Land:
Some Architectural Directions
Courage Kpodo

In Ghana, land is traditionally held in collective trust by chiefs or family heads for communal benefit, reflecting an understanding of ownership as temporal and accountable to past and future generations. Ownership, therefore, is better understood as a form of stewardship, extending relations beyond a discrete land parcel to the interconnected phenomena that constitute it, a relationality articulated in Donna Haraway's notion of 'response-ability'.[1] Such forms of stewardship require engagement with the natural world as a network of living and non-living presences whose fluid relations evade representation in survey drawings. This stands in contrast to Eurocentric epistemologies that position humans above other forms of life, and which have shaped Western notions of stewardship. As Denise Hoffman argues, even conservationist discourse remains anthropocentric by privileging humans as ultimate decision-makers.[2] An alternative paradigm of stewardship emerged in a prayer I witnessed offered by a community elder to a seasonal stream in the Upper West Akim District. In his invocation, Elder Sakyi acknowledges himself as an outsider and a 'young' being on land already inhabited by mystic and ancestral spirits embodied in natural features. Trees, mountains, and the stream are addressed as place-based beings to be appeased and considered in any physical intervention, suggesting a reciprocal and participatory model of land relations.

Me wɔyii me baeɛ nyinaa mo ani tua
Me na mehwɛ kuro so
…
Asu yi a wo da ha!
Gye nsa nom
Asuo Nsuma, gye nsa
Bepɔ bepɔ a mo wɔ ha nyinaa, mo nye nsa nom
Mo nkura anɔpa yi
Mo nena Akɔmea, mo nena Sakyi na ɔfrɛ mo

Ɛne sɛ, seesei yɛ pɛ sɛ yɛyɛ brigye bi wɔ wo so, na wo ten a fa mu.
na lɔrekwan a wɔyɛ no, ɛno nso, adi mu.

(When they birthed me, you all bore witness/ I am the steward of this place/ … / You stream that lies here!/ Drink this/ River Nsuma, drink this/ All mountains present here, receive this drink/ Hold on to it this morn/ Your grandchild Akomeah,/ your grandchild Sakyi is the one who calls out to you// It is such that, at this moment, we wish to create a path over you,/ That you may flow through/ That the path being created, may be rooted.)[3]

The prayer reflects a worldview central to many African traditional religions, where nature embodies the Supreme Creator (called *Nyame* among the Akan people in central and western Ghana). Through this cosmology, a multidimensional realm of spiritual forces structures human conduct, shaping how communities inhabit and engage with land. These beliefs organise rural life in ways that extend into cities. For instance, 'taboo days' during which farming is prohibited to avoid disturbing earth spirits, produce intensified market activity, particularly on Thursdays. Increased circulation of goods between farming communities and cities, as far away as Accra (the capital), lowers food prices and attracts urban consumers, illustrating how urban life remains structured by rural cosmologies and social cycles. Such reciprocities challenge the separation between rural and urban, which legitimises a view of humans as distinct from nature, reinforcing extractive relationships with the environment.

The stream over which Elder Sakyi prayed intersects a two-kilometre path connecting the farming community of Yaa-Aso to a five-acre parcel of land I hold atop a cluster of hills, under the traditional authority of Sukrong-Budu. I acquired the lease in early 2022, thinking of it as a way to preserve the land's economic and ecological value. Subsequent research revealed that this transaction reflects a broader regional history. The area constituted Ghana's first cocoa frontier, where, in the early twentieth century, forest land was cultivated commercially. Over subsequent decades, as cocoa production shifted westward, the region declined economically, compelling communities to reimagine their livelihoods.[4] Once-prized farmlands are now sold by owners seeking more reliable income, as in the case of the seller of my plot, who redirected funds to her provision store in the district capital, Adeiso. This trend is compounded by youth migration to cities, leaving an ageing population behind and prompting further divestment.

The lease document I hold adheres to legal practices established when cocoa became the Gold Coast's dominant export at the turn of the twentieth century.[5] It is modelled on British common law, which set long-term leases to span ninety-nine years, or approximately three generations.[6] While this temporal structure superficially echoes customary prohibitions against absolute ownership, it remains anthropocentric. It privileges human lifespans and succession while overlooking the temporal scales of forests, rivers, soils and hills – living and non-living entities central to customary land relations. In several communities, this mode of ownership would be considered inappropriate, even taboo, because it detaches land from its spiritual, ecological and ancestral meanings.

I began to consider what alternative forms of engagement my leasehold could take on if aligned with Elder Sakyi's prayer. How could architecture support community-engaged land stewardship rather than impose anthropocentric projections? Lesley Lokko's curatorial call at the 2023 Venice Biennial to reimagine Africa's architectural futures catalysed this inquiry. My contribution, '*The Beautyful Ones Always Were*' with Postbox Ghana, juxtaposed Ghana's post-independence modernist legacy with architectural practice that was extra-canonical, rooted in lived traditions, placing experimental land relations at the centre of architectural thinking.

This inquiry was expanded during my travels to coastal Togo and Benin, where I encountered the *Newbouldia laevis*. I first learnt of the tree through stories told to me by my father – how it was a spiritual and protective plant, revered among our people, the *Anlo-Eʋe*. Commonly called the 'African boundary tree', it is planted along streets where it grows as a living fence. In the Anlo dialect (of Eʋe), it is called *Avia* and is part of a family of plants collectively referred to as *ɛkpɔtsi*, meaning 'border tree'.[7] Its spatial and symbolic functions derive from its perceived ability to mediate boundaries, not only between private and public realms, but also between human and spiritual worlds.

The Avia is central to practitioners of the Vodun traditional religion, where it is cultivated around shrines and used in rituals.[8] Before entering the royal pythons' abode in Ouidah's *Temple des Pythons*, I underwent a purification rite, washing my hands with water infused with Avia leaves.[9] In that same town, Vodun historian Martine de Souza explained the tree's centrality in rites of passage, and that the so-called Tree of Oblivion along Ouidah's Path of No Return was an Avia, ritually erasing memories so slaves would not resent their captors.[10] She explained how nineteenth-century traders in the city of Abomey buried caches of cowrie shells, once used as currency, beneath Avia poles for protection, and that archaeological excavations beneath the oldest Avia trees still yield discoveries.[11]

Cultivators attribute antimicrobial, antimalarial, anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties to the Avia. Dassekpo et al. support these beliefs, but emphasise that their validity lies not in scientific confirmation, but in long-established belief and practice.[12] The Avia is a sacred mediator and historical witness, whose significance affords it a multidimensional role, mediating ecology, spirituality, medicine, law and architecture across time. Avia propagate from stem cuttings planted as live poles, which root and develop vertical shoots within three to four months. As they grow, the poles thicken: an ideal structural scaffold for beams and roofing. Yet such living architectural materials remain underrepresented in Ghanaian architectural discourse. Although literature on Avia's structural applications remains limited, Bolade et al. demonstrate the tree's uses, from musical instruments to veneer, addressing its functional value, but ignoring its socio-cultural significance.[13] My approach seeks an affirmative engagement with the Avia tree, preserving cultural memory and expanding its architectural depth through layered meanings; a trajectory which began during my Master of Architecture studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as described in the following section. [Fig. 1, 2]

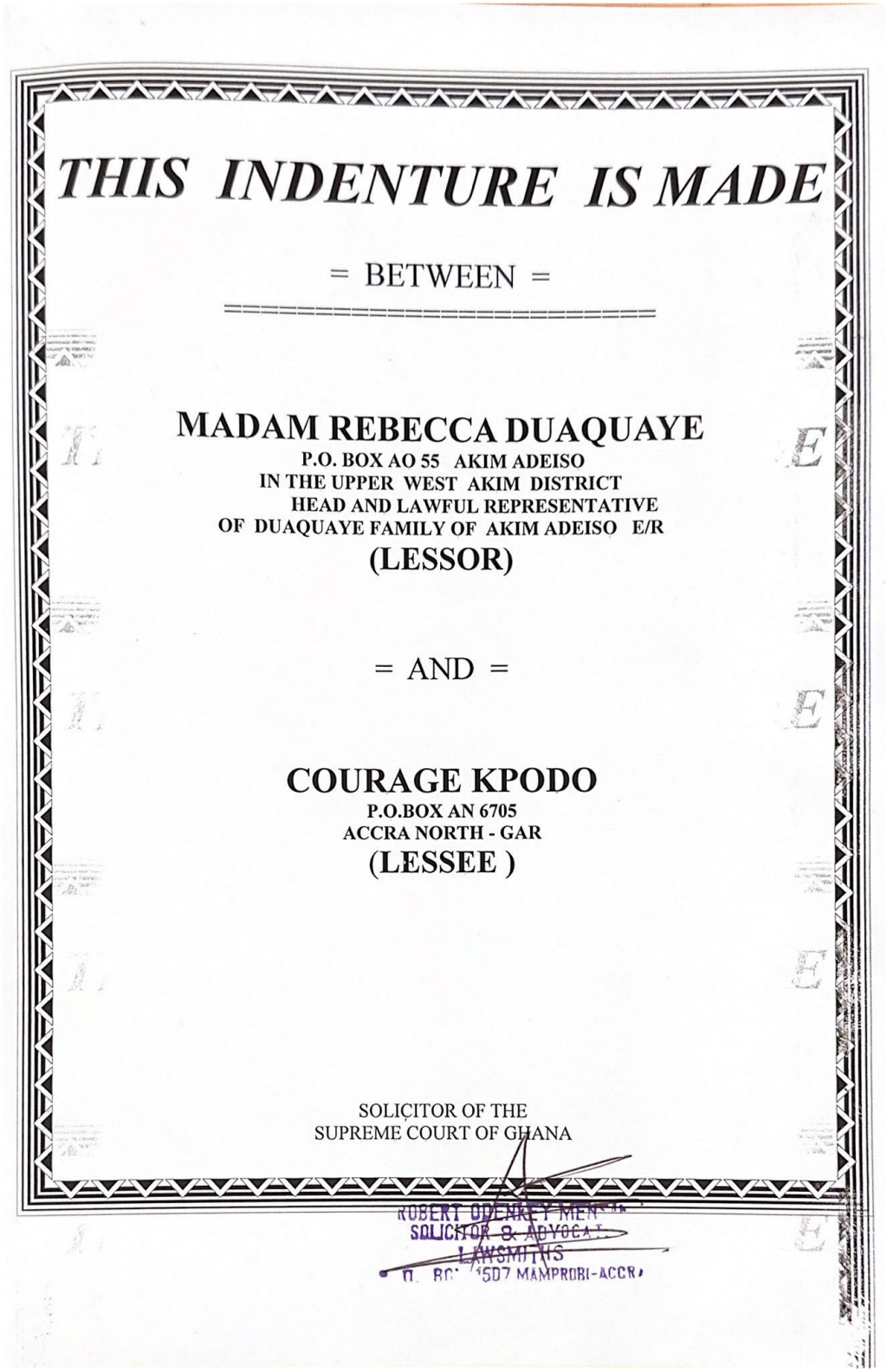
Making the path

The two-kilometre path connecting my land to Yaa-Aso, a community named after its founding matriarch, an early cocoa farmer, ascends a hundred metres through hills, crossing seven farms. It functions as a common, one of several paths transgressing boundaries of privately-owned land, allowing farmers to access their fields. These are the paths that first brought me to the land and historically served as a crucial infrastructure for the cocoa industry, sustaining flows of labour and produce.

Ghana's land-surveying history is rooted in resource extraction, initially serving the rubber and mining industries in the 1890s and the cocoa industry by the early twentieth century. The 1900 Concession Ordinance allowed Gold Coast citizens to obtain land permits under customary law but required concessions to be verified and registered with the Public Works Department, where government surveyors produced official drawings.[14] Many of the colony's forest lands were documented during this period. The land indenture I received, 120 years later, reflects this practice. In the accompanying survey drawings, the boundary line is precisely inscribed, but paths evolving organically in response to terrain or relationships between neighbouring farms are seldom captured. The gently ascending path from Yaa-Aso assumed its present grain by this logic; elevation changes and decades of farmers continuously plying it, and it was the longest I recorded.

Land concessions depend on two frameworks: the leasehold period (typically ninety-nine years) and a definitive site plan. Both operate through anthropocentric logics: abstracting land into a commodity, thus muting alternative forms of kinship. The path, originally introduced to export cocoa, adheres to this logic. However, during fieldwork, I observed diverse crops and functions along its length that resist this conceptual flattening, despite colonial efforts to establish a cocoa monoculture landscape.

Guided by these latent practices, I developed five stations, intended to 'thicken' the path; slowing movement, and transforming edges into metabolic zones rather than lines of control, expanding laterally, folding and mutating into unpredictable relations, where territorial knowledge



THIS INDENTURE IS MADE

= BETWEEN =

MADAM REBECCA DUAQUAYE
P.O. BOX AO 55 AKIM ADEISO
IN THE UPPER WEST AKIM DISTRICT
HEAD AND LAWFUL REPRESENTATIVE
OF DUAQUAYE FAMILY OF AKIM ADEISO E/R
(LESSOR)

= AND =

COURAGE KPODO
P.O.BOX AN 6705
ACCRA NORTH - GAR
(LESSEE)

SOLICITOR OF THE
SUPREME COURT OF GHANA

ROBERT ODENKEY MEN
SOLICITOR & ADVOCA
LAWSMITHS
P. BO 1507 MAMPROBI-ACCR

Fig. 1: Indenture of lease-sale by Robert Odenkey Mensah, Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Ghana, 2023.



Fig. 2: Avia tree framing terrace space. Dzita, Volta Region, 2024. Photo: author.

and infrastructures entangle: bodies and energies, ancestors and spirits, soils and waters, human and nonhuman. The Avia tree serves as the primary organisational element, given its cultural, medicinal and technical properties.

The southernmost station cultivates propagative Avia poles; later sent to the other stations as ecological and structural material. Planting follows intersecting grids, creating shaded spatial enclosures for resting and gathering, transforming the perception of the boundary tree. The minimal canopy supports polycultural growth, reinforcing this generative logic.

The topography welcomes additional functions, transforming it away from cocoa monocultures. I entered into deliberations with the farmers and arrived at a collective decision to expand the path to a two-metre width, anticipated by the existing expansions for cargo tricycles transporting produce uphill. We marked cocoa trees for removal, pruning or transplanting. The width was determined by the path's gradual expansion, as cargo tricycles occasionally travelled up the hills to transport farm produce, slowly widening it over time.

At the midpoint, a twenty to thirty-minute walk from Yaa-Aso, two imagined stations alter the rhythm, thickening and framing the path, without obstructing movement. In one, Avia poles support a roof above terraced seating; in the other, the carrying load of a lattice system. Their proximity to the path makes them communal spaces for pausing, gathering, and exchanging propagators, a common practice along the path. By affording these informal functions, they embed temporalities and generative processes into the grain of the path.

Widening the path improves the mobility of ageing farmers while diversifying material flows and synergistic economies. Soon after completion, an elderly farmer, Mr Amuzu, recounted a previous failed attempt to establish a pigsty, using the manure as fertiliser, due to width constraints on logistics. With additional clearance, he foresaw cheaper transport, making this and other circularities viable.[15]

The northern terminus in Yaa-Aso, the former Ghana Cocoa Marketing Board distribution building, once part of the export economy, is reimagined as an open-air market. Avia poles extend the building's footprint, accommodating trade. It is inspired by a farmer's observation during our deliberations that a widened path could catalyse local trade at its terminus, thereby minimising the outward flow of produce towards Accra.

This observation revealed to me the potential of thickening the spatio-temporal condition of the path stations. As a legal transgression, the path offered a conceptual scaffold for thinking beyond the five-acre limits demarcated in the survey documents. The project's title, *'Ending Well'*, refers to the ninety-nine-year lease and the potential to shape how it unfolds.

Close to Yaa-Aso, the path crosses and blocks the flow of the seasonal spirit-stream, so we agreed to restore it by installing six precast concrete culverts under the path, creating a small wetland on the opposite side for cultivating medicinal plants, including taro, moringa, lemongrass and Avia. Following traditional spiritual practices, Elder Sakyi offered a pacification prayer to the spirit-stream, affirming a more-than-human form of stewardship.

The imagined stations revere nature, a quality absent from the colonial legal instruments (leases and survey drawings) through which land claims are still asserted. These instruments simplify intricate landscapes by centring human authority. As an inheritor of these conditions, I aspire to practise an alternative and expanded stewardship through collective engagement. This approach recognises anthropocentric frameworks but resists their limitations, favouring reciprocal, place-based relations with land and its heterogeneous living and non-living forms instead. [Fig. 3]

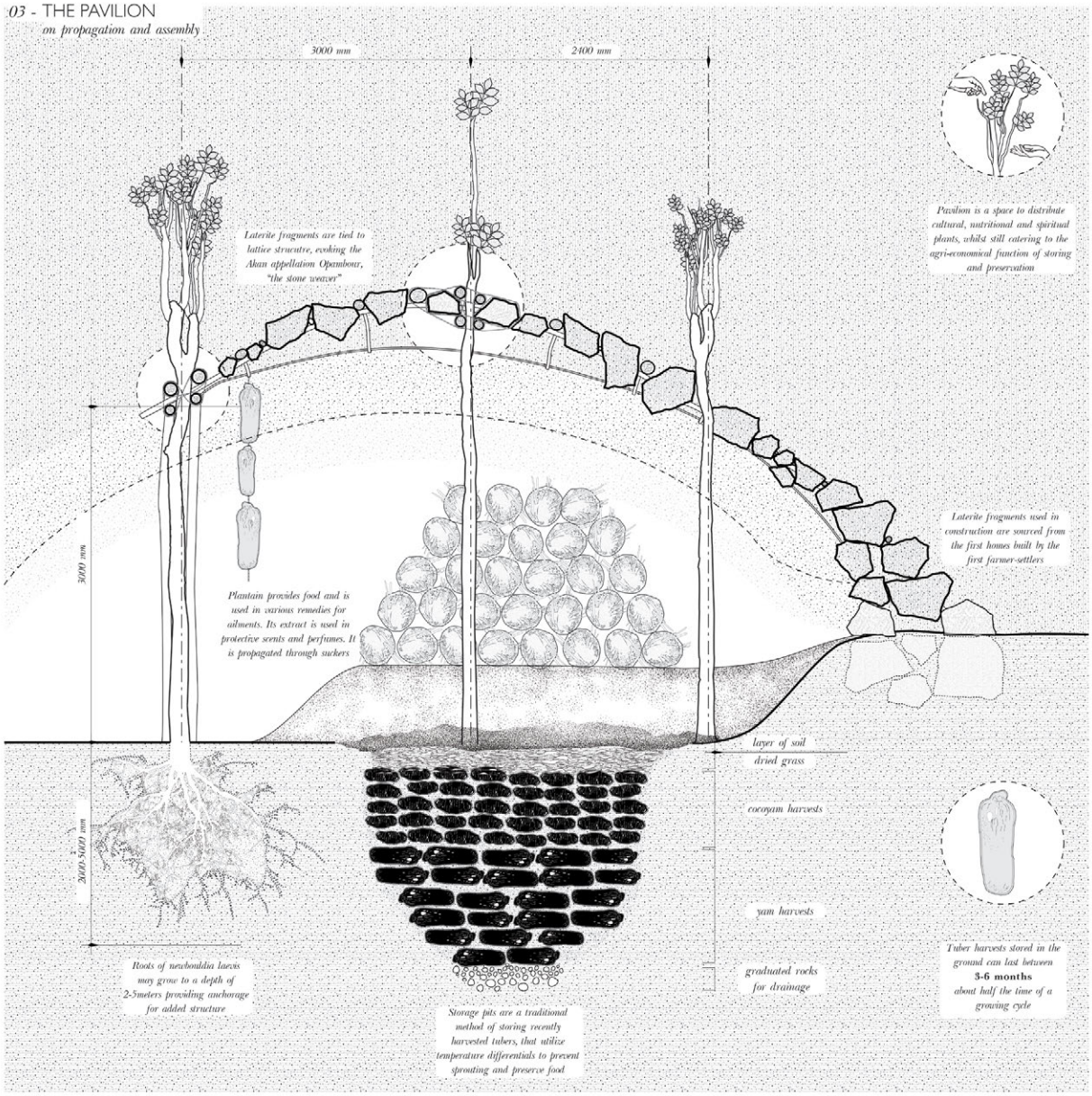


Fig. 3: Distribution pavilion and its assembly, 2024. Drawing: author.

Caring Forest Urbanisms:
Human-Tree Relationships of Tenure, Memory and Livelihood in Nairobi

Kathryn Chesebrough

Multiple and competing truths are entangled in the informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya. In the city's densest neighbourhoods, plagued by socioeconomic inequities, residents carry disproportionate climatic and public health risks resulting from flooding, drought, heat and communicable disease.[16] Inequitably distributed public spaces and the prevalence of exotic tree species alike bear colonial legacies.[17] Life-giving rivers have become fouled by industrial, sanitary and solid waste. Simultaneously, informal settlements are vital to the urban ecosystem, teeming with creativity, entrepreneurship and adaptive strategies.[18] In response, networks of human-tree relations are emerging, indicating adaptive modes of urban living brought into being by youth stewardship and care. [Fig. 4]

During 2023 and 2024, I conducted nine weeks of fieldwork in Nairobi where I observed the transformational impacts that youth groups have, particularly alongside the Mathare and Nairobi Rivers throughout informal settlements.[19] Our meetings were facilitated by Muungano wa Wanavijiji and Slum Dwellers International – Kenya.[20] Witnessing uniquely Nairobian urban-forest relations expanded my understanding of the socio-ecological dimensions of trees in these settings. Writings and photographs from interviews during my site tours were interpreted through mapping, diagramming and drawings that illustrate current practices and potential future directions.[21]

Amid glaring infrastructure and resource gaps, youth groups exercise critical leadership in community organising. Many groups form as self-help organisations to mentor young people and prevent crime and substance abuse.[22] Among the over 360 youth groups in the Mathare Valley, tree planting has become a popular 'climate action' activity.[23] Planting by hand, and against the odds, youth groups incrementally transform marginalised lands into new spaces, economies and publics: new territories of care.

Waste proliferates across informal settlements, and dump sites degrade neighbourhoods and riverbanks. As youth groups clear waste, they sort materials for recycling, plant saplings as markers of change, and maintain reclaimed spaces.[24] The trees catalyse networks of care embedded into everyday life, and are material expressions of labour, love and ambitions.[25] Care affirms waste work, and tree cultivation asserts value for systems and bodies often rendered invisible by the dominant forces of capital.[26] The youth groups' work is proactive, ambitious, and reparative – a present-future-past tense of responsibility. Tenacious seeds take root through collective effort, allowing new relationships to grow through trees and sustained caretaking actions of young people. Their practices lend new temporal and spatial dimensions to Nairobi's informally settled riparian landscapes.

Trees as tenure

In Mathare Valley, trees cooperate with young people, asserting rights to access, use and shared resources. Within these highly contested settlements, land and property tenure is unstable and fraught with corruption.[27] For the youth groups I convened with, growing trees created shared spaces that both resisted development by 'land-grabbers' and stood as testament to community negotiations.[28] By reclaiming former dump sites, youth groups claimed marginalised land and carved out space for themselves, albeit within zones officially owned and overseen by government entities. These arboreal interventions adapt traditional land practices, where trees serve as boundary-markers and signifiers of long-term commitment.[29] Designated shared green spaces are rare in Nairobi's informal settlements.[30] Growing trees is, therefore, employed as a practice of space-making. Trees produce new grounds, volumes and atmospheres, creating outdoor 'rooms' in neighbourhoods where daily public life unfolds. Where left undisturbed, seeds take hold, saplings assert their existence and trees propagate freely in contested and contaminated ground, thus radically defying power dynamics that favour privatisation. As tenure is neither granted to individuals nor to the public as a whole, youth groups serve as claimants, conciliators and custodians. Just as roots resist erosion, taking care of trees allows youth groups to claim space, a stability that allows for planning and imagining futures.

Trees as memory

Trees create and embody relationships between land and people across time in the Mathare Valley. Memory is inscribed through genetic adaptations or expressed in native species that evolve through increasingly irregular drought and flood cycles.[31] Urban conditions are etched into tree bodies, living tissues that 'keep the score', inscribed by pollution, flood, and competition for space.[32] Native species speak volumes more to Kenya's history than exotic species that are common in Nairobi.[33] Their bark, roots, fruits and leaves provide remedies that are often more affordable than western pharmaceuticals.[34] Urban forests support traditional land-based practices, carrying memory and knowledge into the rapidly urbanising contexts, and integrating rural caretaking into contemporary urban identities.[35] The forests demonstrate how, accessible and shared, traditional knowledge and native tree species connect lifeways across spatio-temporal scales.[36] Trees growing in memory of extrajudicial killings preserve painful histories while allowing



Fig. 4: Former dump sites are transformed into verdant publicly accessible amenities, as seen in Mathare Community Park. Photo: author.

gradual healing.[37] Youth groups cultivate restorative spaces for stressed bodies and minds, in response to busy urban environments and traumatic experiences of injustices prevalent in Mathare. Memories created with and within trees connect young people in informal settlements to multiple temporalities and landscapes.[38] As trees and youth endure harsh conditions, they embody a shared resilience amid unpredictability.

Trees as livelihood

Trees are part of the patchwork of resources that supports young people in informal settlements. Youth are chronically under-employed throughout Nairobi; caring for trees provides an outlet for their time and energy while building transferable skills. In Mathare, distinctions between traditionally rural and urban land uses blur as young people tend urban farms amid dense development. Consuming fruits supplements nutritional needs, offering immediate returns on human and ecological labour.

The time needed to care for trees is itself a commodity; tending to trees is a longer commitment than other economic endeavours. Trees supplement diets and incomes over lifetimes slower than those of their human caretakers and provide long-term dividends. The spaces created through tree planting accommodate micro-industries and the exchange of more-than-capital resources, including tacit ecological knowledge. Community cohesion grows in these accessible, open spaces, fostering mutual aid and social resilience. The hum of hustling is ubiquitous as youth co-produce and expand opportunities to fulfil their needs for food, shelter and income through tree care.[39] They form a caretaking corps in direct and evolving relationship with the landscape.

Temporalities of trees and care

Relationships with trees multiply expressions of property, value and time.[40] Acute circumstances give rise to emergent practices; tending the trees over time extends urgent decisions and marginal spaces into the social and spatial fabric of the settlement. While these emerge within capitalist, functional and utilitarian realities, they enable reciprocal encounters between trees, people and urban environments. Intimacy with plant time becomes a re-enchantment of the city.[41] Trees embody simultaneous pasts and presents; they become materially and structurally stronger in death; await opportunities; and possess knowledge beyond human capacities.[42] Temporal scales are revealed at the nexus between care practices and tree provisions: fruit, medicine and incomes derived in cooperation with trees meet corporeal, present needs, while dreams grow with saplings as youth project their visions for tenure, empowerment, and resilience into the future.

By protecting, engaging and otherwise valuing trees and their material and immaterial provisions, caretakers acknowledge the fragility of biological time shared by human and arboreal communities.[43] As youth groups promote self-help, tree care offers healing for human, tree, soil and water bodies. Maintenance animates ‘the world at hand’ in the present tense.[44] The organisation of trees generates complex spatial relations that emerge from novel landscapes while asserting a situated ethic of care.[45] [Fig. 5]

Aligning themselves with trees, youth stake claims in entangled futures that will outlive them, motivated by goals beyond individual benefit.[46] The communities I spoke with adopt a language of care, describing themselves as ‘growing’, not merely ‘planting’, trees. Care is leveraged to inspire others, gain recognition, build support, attract resources, and assert influence. The spectre of the future looms large in environmental outreach by NGOs and government initiatives in Nairobi.[47] In the rush toward progress, the material reality and labour of caretaking become obfuscated.[48] When caretaking is overlooked, abstract goals to enhance ecosystems remain posturing.[49]

As the bodies of youth, trees, contaminated rivers, and densely settled informal environments tumble together, their negotiations manifest in urban groves and networks of care.[50] These intimate assemblages create ‘care time’, moving beyond ‘productivity’ values as more-than-capital provisions accumulate across multiple temporalities.[51] They compost lived experiences and value intuition as a critical input, a form of empowerment.[52] The distance between present conditions and desired futures is the site of contestation, where competition and uncertainty are generative. Caretaking in the Mathare Valley stems from the volatility of socioeconomic precarity, flood disturbances and increasingly unpredictable rain and heat cycles.[53] Here, care is a stabilising force among chronic, uncontrollable and abstract issues, forming active hope despite the entwined threads, and threats, of seizure and flood.[54]

Caring forest urbanisms

In spring 2024, flooding in Nairobi claimed many lives and displaced tens of thousands.[55] Subsequent state-led demolitions abruptly enforced rote thirty-metre no-build zones along riverbanks. An oversimplified interpretation of the riparian zone loses sight of the nuance and possibility enacted by youth and trees, compounding traumas felt disproportionately by the urban poor.[56] These devastating events create a potent counterpoint to advocate for rebuilding with care-based expertise that resists permanent dispossession and cultivates resilience. With this contribution, I propose a speculative expansion of ‘forest urbanism’ as a commons of native Kenyan species within Mathare Valley’s riparian areas, to actively centre human-tree relationships



Fig. 5: Caretaking efforts are legible in accessible urban groves that create new relationships of tenure, memory and livelihood, as seen at LEWMO Park. Photo and image: author.

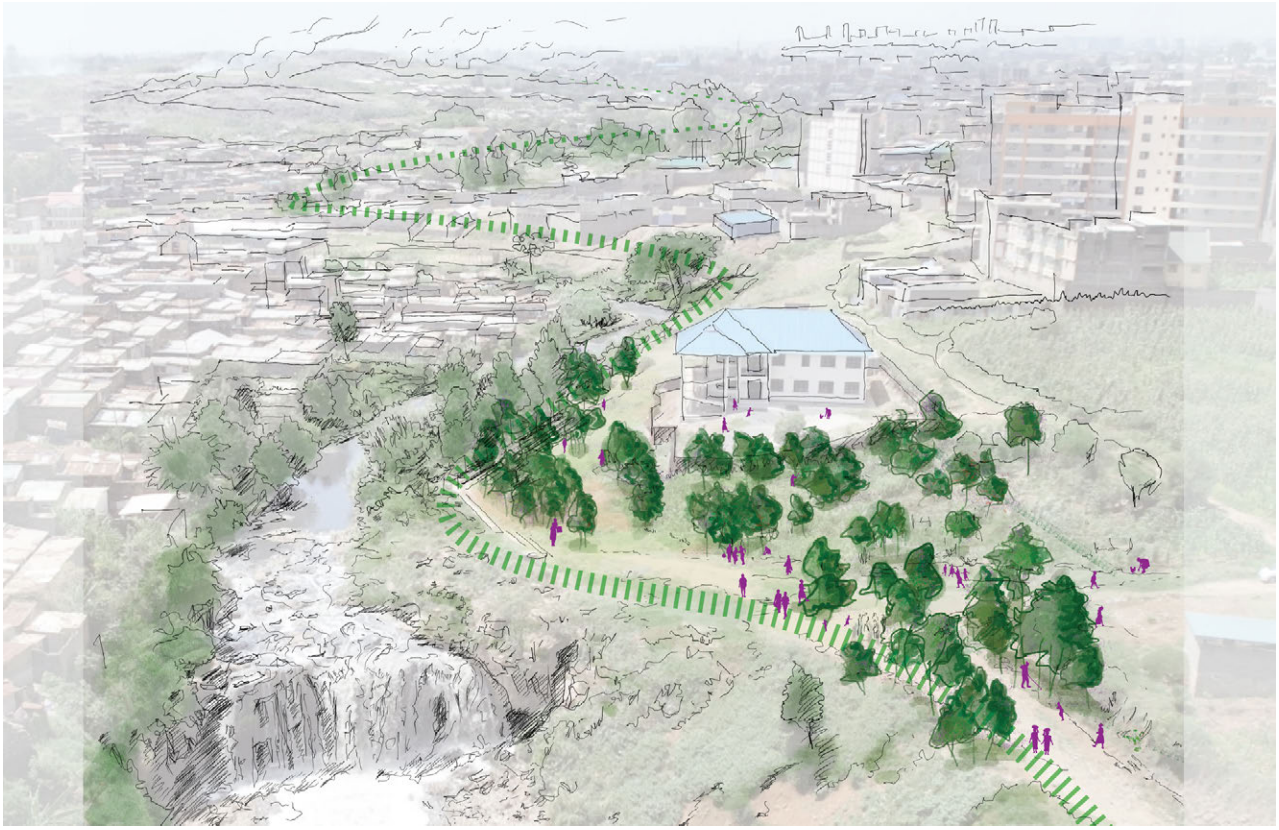


Fig. 6: Forest urbanisms can provide meaningful adaptations with a spectrum of forest and urban occupations. Image: author.

that create many provisions, functions and publics.[57] In my proposal, caring forest urbanisms go beyond one-dimensional 'greening' or infrastructures. Such an approach puts a face to process orientations of landscape urbanism and materialises across multiple temporal, spatial and social scales.[58] Caring forest urbanisms can generate networks of public space, flood adaptation infrastructure, urban river restoration, and expand urban ecologies in Nairobi.[59]

Central to this vision are networks of care that are empowered to produce space and guide transformations for socio-arboreal futures. An accessible public realm animated by communally managed tree provisions keeps city-making active and alive. Commoning through care counteracts 'depleted imaginaries' by generating spaces of indeterminacy, inviting caregivers and trees into spatial decision-making and confronting power structures.[60] Human-tree relationships hold meaningful potential for adapting informal settlements in place in response to shifting climatic regimes. Diverse spatial types, social practices and temporal perceptions are possible as trees and caretakers negotiate, innovate and hybridise the built environments. Temporal shifts with cyclical rains, tree provisions, tending, and harvests can expand perceived timelines of the forest and the city. [Fig. 6]

Community and ecological relationships are powerful design agents, creating multiple potential futures over time. Youth and trees in the Mathare Valley hold many truths at once, creating new worlds. Their experiences of tenure, memory and livelihood expand through socio-arboreal agencies and temporalities. Nuanced, effective, and novel occupations are growing in informally settled riparian edges as spatial and relational strategies. This moment calls for caring forest urbanisms as ambitious, generous, and vital as responses emerging from the margins.

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Notes: Stewarding Land

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8. Geographically, this would be along the West African coast that begins from the Volta Region of Ghana, across southern Togo and Benin and into south-western Nigeria.
9. The *Temple des Pythons* is a Vodun shrine in Ouidah dedicated to *Dan* or *Dangbé*, the rainbow/serpent deity associated with continuity, protection, fertility and the cosmic cycle. Royal pythons are kept and ritually cared for there.
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Notes: Caring Forest Urbanisms

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trees, particularly along riparian edges, as practiced by many groups.

26. Notions of caretaking as undervalued are derived from feminist and eco-feminist perspectives. See, among many others, work by Donna Haraway; Maria Puig de la Bellacasa; Mary Mellor; Anna Tsing, all referenced here, in brief.
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Biography

Courage Dzidula Kpodo’s work explores the transformations in built and cultivated spaces through writing, film, photography, curation and architecture. He was the lead curator for the inaugural edition of the biennial LagosPhoto Festival 2025, with the theme ‘incarceration’. He is presently developing an architectural framework for land-stewardship in the first cocoa-producing region in Ghana, a continuation of his 2025 thesis developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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Dialogue III: Virtual Ambiguity: Navigating Memory amidst Erasure in Lagos and Haifa

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Abstract
This conversation examines how digital twinning and immersive VR design can mediate architectural memory in two cities shaped by erasure – Lagos and Haifa. Through Independence House in Lagos and the ruined structures of Wadi Salib in Haifa, the dialogue unpacks digital reconstruction as an unstable and affective practice, one that holds open what conventional documentation tends to flatten. Where surveying and photography record dimensions and surfaces, digital twins allow re-encounter with sites made inaccessible through alteration or destruction, keeping their transformation sensed rather than fixed.

The digital twinning of Independence House and the photogrammetric record of Tafawa Balewa Square's gates propelled reconstruction efforts and opened public debate about the disappearance of tropical modernism in Lagos. In Haifa, similar techniques reframe preservation as a participatory and speculative act rather than a static archival one. Both cases argue for the digital model as a memory infrastructure that can hold conflicting narratives without resolving them – a field for critique and collective engagement with contested architectural futures.

Keywords
Digital twinning, architectural erasure, tropical modernism, virtual heritage, Lagos, Haifa

One sentence summary
This conversation explores digital twinning as a way to resist architectural erasure in Lagos and Haifa by sustaining ambiguity and enabling renewed, participatory engagement with contested and unfinished histories.

OMI – Abdullah: Until air travel overtook water transport as a dominant mode of intercontinental transport to (and from) Nigeria between the 1960s and '70s, ferrying into Lagos on a ship carrier convinced one that modernism had found strong roots in what was originally Lagos's foreshore. Modernist office buildings – of concrete, glass, and interesting skins of mosaic art – sprang up at unfamiliar heights. One of the earliest buildings to have dominated Lagos's skyline is Independence House.

Independence House is a twenty-five-storey building west of Tafawa Balewa Square and part of Lagos's former racecourse complex. It is an 'extraordinary thing' of reinforced concrete that, despite its height, has an 'inaccuracy of the outside columns of the building not more than a quarter of an inch'.[1] It has an impressive minimal facade of repeating concrete strips, each about one 150mm thick and no less than 1m deep, to help the building 'self-cool'. As was the case with most modernist buildings in Nigeria at the

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time, climatic control was a key concern. This parting gift by the British government to Nigeria on the occasion of independence served as the government's federal secretariat and later the defence headquarters, before it was destroyed in a fire under suspicious circumstances in 1993 and eventually abandoned. It is now derelict, and used mainly as a place to put up large posters and signage. [Fig.1].

Many of the sterling examples of buildings from this period – like the defunct Elder Dempster shipping line's head office (1964), Barclays Bank (1960) and the Nigerian Postal Service (c. 1960) – face a similar fate in Lagos today. If they are not slated to be demolished, they are renovated without recourse to the ideologies of tropical modernism. This style showed a form of environmentally responsive design through its use of strategic orientation, double-skin facades, breeze blocks, fair-faced concrete finishes, and brise soleil, among other associated architectural features. Preserving these qualities is not about staying locked in the past, but about maintaining an architecture that remains genuinely responsive to its context. There is an urgent need to conserve these buildings before the pace of change renders that possibility irreversible.

Eytan: The modernist ambition of Independence House was intended to symbolise progress, and now serves as an unsettling reminder of colonisation – haunted by the city's unresolved heritage, caught between modernisation and national self-definition. The emptied building is not a romantic ruin frozen in time and admired from afar, but an ongoing, active and unstable process.[2] Its monumental role resists definition precisely because its future life remains in dispute.

In my own work, I'm drawn to that same ambiguity, which surfaces with particular urgency in the Israeli landscape. Working in Wadi Salib, a destroyed neighbourhood in the heart of Haifa, I was driven to record the architecture and take it 'back to the lab' – to capture it before it shifts again, is overwritten, or disappears entirely. While surveying, drawings and photography record dimensions, materials and construction techniques, and the 3D scan adds an experiential dimension: the ability to revisit space, at least partially. The spatial experience of the ruin generates questions – what happened here? What were the circumstances of destruction? Who lived here, and where did they go? These are the questions that drive spatial investigation, in the tradition of Forensic Architecture, though with a different epistemological aim: not to establish objective truth but to hold ambiguity open.

In the case of Wadi Salib, a single structure that stood in the heart of a once-dense Palestinian neighbourhood is now slated for preservation, with a poster on its façade declaring its intended renewal. The image printed on the billboard claims to renew its past, as conservation projects often do, yet this violent past is rendered unproblematic, unquestioned – with no mention of Palestinian existence. Architecture preservation is ironically used as an instrument of erasure. Given all this, the ability to capture architecture in its present time, including an increased experiential dimension using 3D scanning has struck me as an urgent practice. I realise you too, are driven by an urge to witness, by staying close to architecture's spatial and material experience, as it hovers between presence and disappearance.[3] [Fig 2]

Lago and Haifa offer different historical contexts and historiographical urgencies, yet they share a palimpsestical challenge of coming to terms with national identity through architecture. I want to know more about how you came up with the idea to use 3D scanning, specifically photogrammetry, to capture Independence House. What is the reason for choosing this medium over another? What did you hope to preserve or perhaps reveal that traditional recording methods might have missed?

OMI – Abdullah: Our decision to adopt photogrammetry to record modernist buildings like Independence House stemmed from witnessing their steady erasure through demolition, unsympathetic renovations, or sheer neglect – in historic Nigerian cities like Lagos. Often, these changes occurred despite the buildings' listed status, resulting in a ruthless and disheartening transformation of the urban landscape.

When we launched the Nigerian Modernism Project in 2023, more than thirty tropical modernist buildings had already been demolished, abandoned or altered beyond recognition.[4] We found that traditional recording methods, such as drawings and photographs, were insufficient to capture both the rapid changes and the layered ambiguities surrounding these structures.

Photogrammetry offered a powerful alternative. It allowed us to keep pace with the speed of architectural erasure, to create comprehensive digital models that could be used to teach and explore the decolonial histories often overlooked in architectural education, and to establish accurate references for future restoration, should the will to preserve or conserve these buildings emerge.[5]

A striking example of this potential lies in our scan of the last surviving pair of gates at Tafawa Balewa Square, adjacent to Independence House, which were destroyed. Plans are underway for the demolished gates to be reproduced from this digital model – a small event, but significant of the erasure we set out to document.

Eytan: So this is more than a symbolic reversal of erasure – it is a deliberate reinsertion of the past into the present.



Fig. 1: An elevation of Independence House. Photo: Jide Ayeni.

How did that reconstruction come about, and how did the community or institutions around it respond? Independence House is a particularly revealing case: modernist architecture is so often critiqued for suppressing the Indigenous and embodying the spatial logic of colonial bureaucracy, now itself at risk of disappearance. And yet it occupies a cultural and political role in Nigeria's post-independence identity that can't simply be set aside.[6]

In this light, the photogrammetric model becomes more than a recording technique - it is an archival act, and in Derrida's sense, never a neutral one: to determine what is archivable is already to exercise power over what can be remembered and claimed. It becomes virtual – a speculative medium that offers something the physical residue, or even a material restoration, cannot. The virtual model positions the ruin on what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'plane of immanence', treating every laser-measured stone as part of an open field where neglected colonial masonry can link to new stories and futures – open to re-inhabitation rather than sealed as heritage.

Immersive virtual models reclaim a kind of agency that conventional preservation cannot. To walk through Independence House's entrance hall, to encounter the mural, to move through the space as a body-in-place – rendered in real time to the headset according to your own movements – is a critical re-encounter with the built environment. It allows architecture to be experienced not only as historical fact but through critical fabulation: fact-driven fiction. The viewer is not passive but involved in the production of the space, which is precisely what undermines the preservationist logic that treats the building as an untouchable relic. This medium insists on presence where the physical fabric no longer can.

In Wadi Salib the stakes are different but the tension is the same. The question there is not only how to resist a sanitised preservation that maintains facades while erasing meaning, but how to respond to the active removal of Palestinian history from the Israeli built landscape. Bringing the ruin into a pedagogical setting – the architecture studio, the immersive environment – raises the possibility of something more deliberate: activist preservation. Not neutral heritage work, but a practice that names who is doing the erasing and insists on whose memory the archive is for.

OMI – Olorunfemi: The reconstruction of the Tafawa Balewa Square gates was in many ways an unexpected affirmation of the 'potential of the virtual'. The gates, tall, sculpturally geometric, and imposing, measuring 4.93m by 7.2m, once framed the entrance to Nigeria's national parade ground, a space that became symbolic of sovereignty and ceremonial power. When they were demolished amid a change of ownership, their loss felt abrupt, part of the insidious, almost casual erasure of symbolic architecture and, by extension, the city's memory.

We then had the opportunity to create a detailed photogrammetric model of the gates months later. This was largely due to public pressure from conservation advocates. The attempted reconstruction of the Tafawa Balewa Square Gates is the brainchild of a group of concerned architects and community stakeholders headed by Chuka Ihonor, a Lagos-based architect who afforded us access to document the remaining gates. Our role was specifically focused on documentation, with less involvement in the politics of the proposed reconstruction. However, there was consensus with state authorities that the gates contributed significantly to the story of the complex. Although designed by a British artist, Paul Mount, he collaborated with local artists in its realisation. The model we produced became crucial in communicating with fabricators and craftspeople. It provided both dimensional precision and visual fidelity that archival photos alone could not offer.

You are right to point out that this kind of digital technique offers something more than documentation: a stage for advocacy and protest against the waste or abandonment of these architectural sites of knowledge. In the hands of practitioners, the results become a kind of memory infrastructure capable of being projected onto different realities.

The idea that a virtual clone of an interior, especially one tied to contested, layered histories, might serve not just as a record or monument but as a site for reconciliation is fascinating. It points to a shift from static remembrance to preservation as a form of activation. In this sense, the virtual model becomes an effective tool. It allows people to engage with architecture as memory infrastructure, a space where multiple, even conflicting narratives can coexist without being flattened into a single, sanitised story.

An 'imaginative return' suggests that virtual reconstructions can help us reinhabit spaces that were physically erased, politically silenced, or emotionally abandoned. Not to reproduce them exactly as they were, but to re-encounter them in ways that allow grief, reflection, critique and possibility. I am particularly interested in how you have explored Wadi Salib in pedagogy to this effect. Dare I say it serves as a tool for spatial justice?

Eytan: Your phrase 'memory infrastructure capable of being projected onto different realities' has stayed with me. It reframes memory, especially in spaces marked by conflict and erasure, not as something to be secured or settled, but as something that can be held open, projected, inhabited differently by different people.

While the language of spatial justice is often invoked in such projects, I find it can be confining. It risks casting



Fig. 2: An elevation of Abu Hatzira-Reno House, with a sign presenting a rendered image of the plan restoration work. Photo: Eytan Mann.

heritage as a battleground where one side must prevail – one truth recognised, another rejected. In places like Wadi Salib, that framing can foreclose more than it opens. Working in VR produces an affect that doesn't immediately demand political alignment. It evokes atmosphere, presence, disturbance – and from that, empathy may emerge, along with the tentative possibility of reconciliation. This is not a forensic exercise. It doesn't strive to restore events as they were. It works differently: allowing the ambiguity of a place to come through, treating complexity as the condition rather than the problem. That, in the end, can be more politically productive than any national narrative, which so often purchases coherence at the cost of contradiction.

Which brings me back to Lagos. Independence House, like the gates at Tafawa Balewa Square, is not just a remnant – it is an unfinished proposition. I want to ask whether the digital model can do more than preserve what was lost: can it allow us to dwell in the ambiguity of what was contested, or even to imagine what was never allowed to exist? How do you see this layered past – indigenous and outsider modernism entangled – not as heritage to be secured, but as a force that might still shape the city's future?

OMI – Olorunfemi: Unfinished propositions are a strong way to frame the work and an important point of reflection, especially because architecture is never truly finished. It grows, changes and shifts according to human needs, economics and politics. In the case of these buildings and the gate, which featured the work of artists, they may not yet have reached their full potential as tools for decolonising architecture. In that light, yes, I do think the digital model carries this duality. On the one hand, it serves as a stage for preservation and remembrance. On the other hand, it functions as a memory infrastructure that creates space for contestation. After all, you can't contest what didn't exist or what wasn't known to be a 'truth'. Ambiguity arising from contestation may not be a void, but rather something generative.

I'm increasingly convinced that the virtual model can help us democratise the projection of realities. Whereas physical access to these buildings remains deeply politicised and limited, the virtual version opens new modes of entry and engagement. By democratising access, perhaps we can foster more critical conversations about how these structures might evolve in the future. As an act of inhabiting, however, I'm challenged by how much the model itself can hold. But if we move past the idea of the archive as capturing only the physical dimension of the building, I'm intrigued by the potential of layering the everyday life stories embedded within these spaces. These are stories that may influence the new realities we imagine. [Fig 3].

Take Independence House, for instance. It was the victim of arson, an event that introduces layered histories of destruction, fraud, loss of trust, betrayal, and state failure. These are narratives rarely captured when buildings are preserved through conventional means. Yet by layering in physical accounts, news clippings, videos and objects – materials that typically remain peripheral to architectural heritage – the model can open the possibility of revealing alternate futures. So yes, I do believe the digital model allows us to dwell not just in what is being lost, but in the everyday life of the architecture, which cannot be represented formally. It frees us from the binary of preservation versus erasure. We can inhabit the speculative, and through that arrive at what might be the best new life for the architecture. And perhaps more importantly, we can do so collectively, through shared memory, imagination and critique. That is the work I hope we continue in Lagos, Haifa and beyond.

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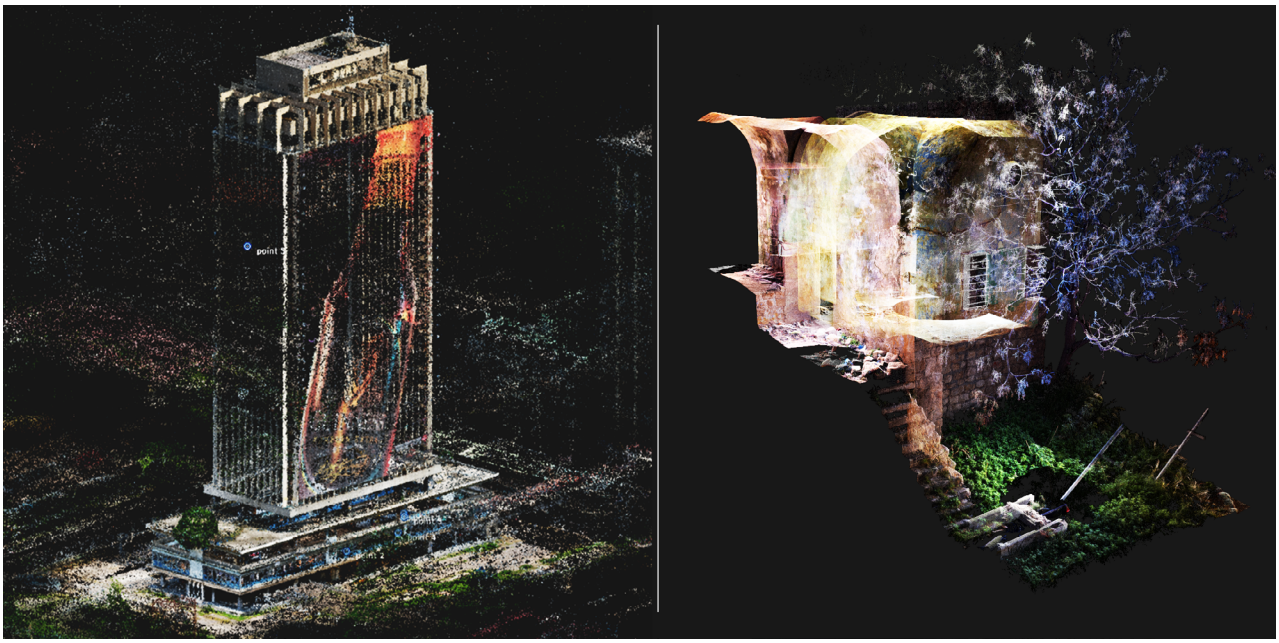


Fig. 3: Point cloud visualisations were produced with 3D scanning of Abu Hatzira-Reno house in Haifa and Independent House in Lagos. Source: authors.

Notes

1. Peter Nkanga, 'The Independence House Lagos Not Many Know About', Nairaland Forum, 2 March 2022, https://www.nairaland.com/7011874/independence-house-lagos-not-many.
2. Bjørnar Olsen argues that a ruin is never a closed book but 'able to actualize a past that is otherwise forgotten', precisely because it endures in place. His reference to the crumbling Argive castle that suddenly served again as a fortress underscores how material remains keep past and present in circulation as a 'living monument' that continuously stages memory. Bjørnar Olsen, Michael Shanks, Timothy Webmoor and Christopher Witmore, *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
3. Photogrammetry reconstructs three-dimensional spatial geometry from overlapping photographs by triangulating common points across images, producing models that can be revisited, measured, and manipulated independently of the physical site.
4. The Nigerian Modernism Project is run by Omi Collective, Lagos – a research and documentation initiative focused on tropical modernist architecture in Nigeria.
5. The history of decolonial architecture in Nigeria remains understudied. See Olorunfemi Adewuyi, 'Regional Modernisms; Tropical Skins', *Disegno Journal Online*, 19 February 2024, https://disegnojournal.com/newsfeed/regional-modernisms-tropical-skins.
6. See Yfaat Weiss, *A Confiscated Memory: Wadi Salib and Haifa's Lost Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) and Mahmoud Yazbak and Yfaat Weiss, 'A Tale of Two Houses', in *Haifa Before and After 1948: Narratives of a Mixed City*, ed. Mahmoud Yazbak and Yfaat Weiss (Dordrecht: Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation and Republic of Letters Publishing, 2011), 11–42. Both texts address the entanglement of colonial land seizure and heritage claims in Haifa's built environment.

Biography

Abdullah Ogunsetan is A3–Archnet's 2020 prize-winning applicant for writing about African architecture. Following a series of training and workshops that accompanied this award at the MIT Libraries, he has dedicated himself to collecting metadata on Nigeria's built environment, much of which has remained under-documented, inaccessible, or non-digitised. He continues these vital efforts with Omi Collective, where he leads research to document and preserve modernist and post-colonial buildings using photogrammetry. His work has been presented at the Jaap Bakema Study Centre's Conference in 2024 and exhibited in 2025 at the Saudi Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Abdullah holds a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Lagos, where he is currently enrolled in the master's programme in environmental design in architecture.

Olorunfemi Adewuyi is an architect and researcher. He founded Omi Collective (2023, Lagos), an antidisciplinary design and research group working across architecture, urbanism, objects, and research. Omi, meaning "water" in Yoruba, his mother tongue, reflects Adewuyi's sustained engagement with the politics and poetics of this resource. He approaches architecture as a method for producing intelligence from contradiction, studying and transforming the pressures of material life, culture, memory, and power into (plat) forms that can be inhabited, questioned, and extended. Through this process, his work brings latent and dismissed intelligences into view. Adewuyi is the recipient of awards and fellowships, and was recognised by Wallpaper* and Dwell in 2025 as a notable emerging designer. His work circulates internationally through respected journals, exhibitions, and institutions. Adewuyi's research on modernism in Lagos was supported by the Goethe-Institut Nigeria's Support and Connect Grant in 2024.

Eytan Mann is an assistant professor at the Department of Architecture at TU Delft, and a member of the Architecture Archives of the Future group. He is an architect and computational designer whose work explores the intersection of data-driven design and architectural historiography. Through his research, he investigates modes of transmedia historiography by combining archival material with digital modelling, leveraging computation to augment sites and archives, and designing new interfaces with heritage. As part of a design collective, he collaborates on projects across various sites that explore innovative approaches to augmenting historical methods through digital technologies. His practice bridges theoretical research with hands-on digital experimentation, seeking new ways to interpret and present architectural heritage. Eytan holds an SMarchS degree from MIT School of Architecture and a PhD in architecture from the Technion Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, where his research focused on computational approaches to architectural history.

The Future is Always on the Other Side: A Visual Ethnography of Uneven Infrastructure Development in Ghana and Morocco

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Abstract

This visual essay builds on collaborative and interdisciplinary research on infrastructure development as part of the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus project 'Sea-ing Africa: Tracing Legacies and Engaging Future Promises of "Big" Infrastructure Projects in Port City Regions in Ghana and Morocco', as well as on Costanza Franceschini's long-term ethnographic research on Sino-African infrastructural entanglements. The photographs were captured during four fieldwork trips to Morocco and Ghana between February 2023 and May 2025, and portray some of the infrastructures that are the object of our study and the subject of discussion with our research interlocutors. The analysis of infrastructure development as a socio-political terrain characterised by disconnection, suspension, incompleteness and disruption suggests that, rather than engendering distrust in a specific developmental model, infrastructural unevenness produces a constant mechanism of temporal shift, in which the future promised and dreamed of is perpetually out of reach.

Keywords

Infrastructure, uneven development, future, visual ethnography, Ghana, Morocco

One sentence summary

The visual essay illustrates how uneven infrastructure projects – marked by disconnection, suspension, incompleteness and disruption – produce a continuous temporal shift, keeping the promised and dreamed future perpetually out of reach.

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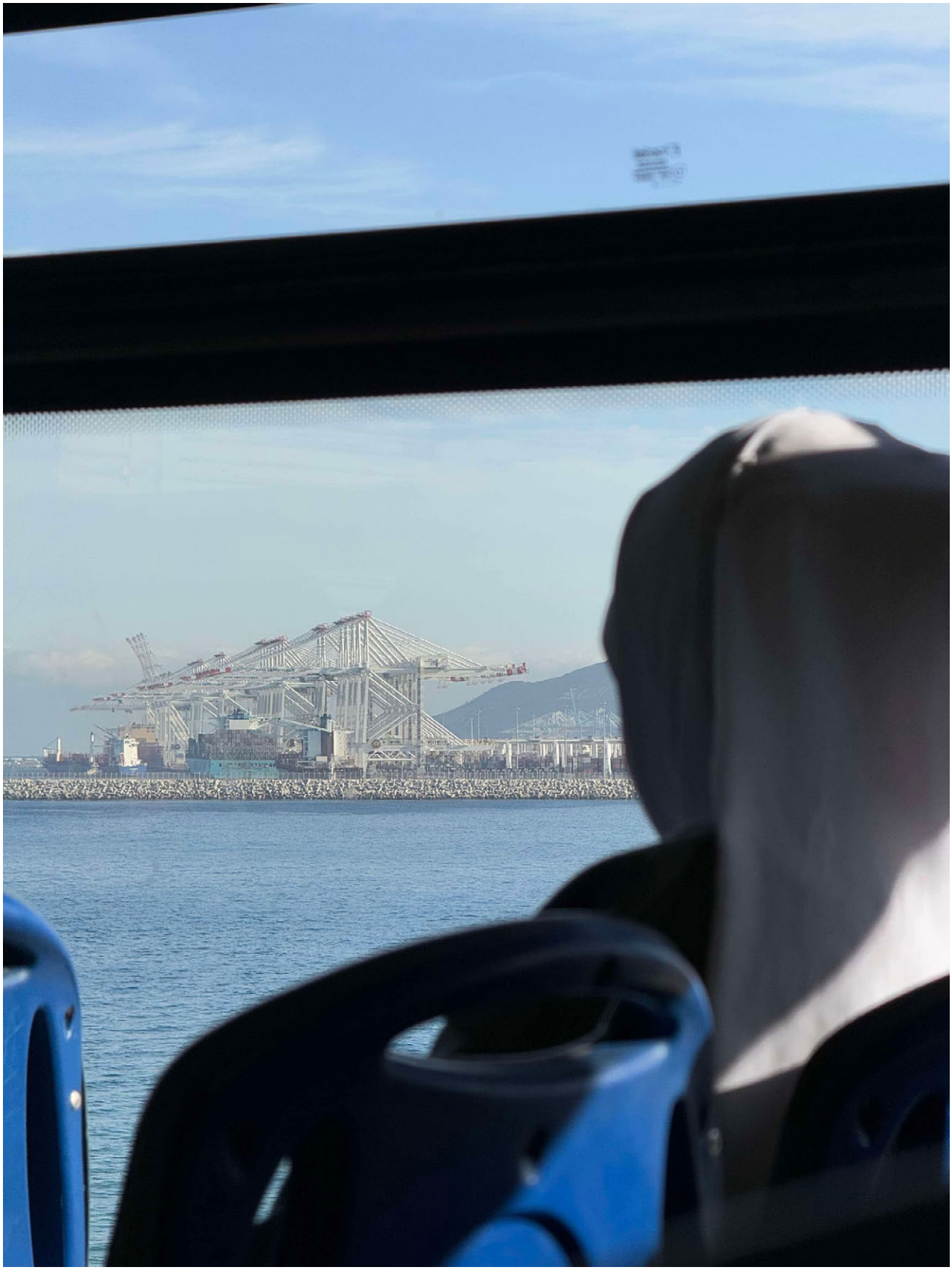
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Infrastructural Dreams

Modernity, in other words, is, on this account,
always already displaced and deferred:
it is always on the other side of the river,
or up the stream – or up in the sky.
– Saree Makdisi, 'Postcolonial Literature in a Neocolonial World'[1]

Infrastructures are inherently associated with promises of development and modernity, thereby shaping visions and imaginaries of the future.[2] This sense of possibility is often anchored in material objects typically made of stone, bricks, concrete or steel.[3] When these infrastructures exceed a specific scale, embody distinct aesthetics or introduce new technological or construction practices, they also become physical and embodied icons that mediate values related to progress and advancement.[4] In contexts such as Ghana and Morocco (which are the topic of this essay), this sense of possibility plays a significant role, where it is often intertwined with Western forms and dreams of modernity. In these contexts, visions of development and the future emerge from a combination of global imaginaries and the demands for access to specific material conditions.[5] These idealised and grandiose visions are typically engendered by political discourses, which frequently utilise the promise of infrastructure, particularly highly visible projects such as transport infrastructure, as a central tenet of their electoral campaigns and political consensus.

Fig. 1: Tangier Med Port, Morocco, January 2025. Photo: John Hanna.



The politicisation of infrastructural development is not confined to African countries or the Global South; it is also pervasive in countries of the Global North, where iconic projects become the focus of metaphorical expressions of unrealistic aspirations, but also a site for contention.[6] While the promise of infrastructure is often associated with the creation of employment opportunities, economic growth and enhanced living conditions, the actualisation of such projects routinely deviates from these expectations. Such deviations tend to result in a disconnection between infrastructural projects and the people that use or operate them. This disconnection can manifest in different forms such as misaligned priorities, limited accessibility (seen in figure 3), or the disproportionality of infrastructural projects in relation to the human scale.

At a political level, the construction of infrastructure – often used as a bargaining tool to obtain votes and consensus and promote a certain idea of development and modernity – can be a double-edged sword, since infrastructures arouse not only consensus but also discontent, indignation and conflicts. In response to a news article reporting the former Ghanaian president's speech announcing all the infrastructure projects realised by the NPP government between 2017 and 2022 and posted on the Ministry of Roads and Highways' Facebook page on 8 March 2023, for instance, a user commented: 'Under Mahama [the former president] NPP Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo said we don't eat roads, but now do we eat roads'[7]. This is only one example of statements that contrast new infrastructure with empty stomachs or dire living conditions, highlighting the critical role that infrastructure plays in political life and showing how infrastructure projects can easily turn from instruments of consent to symbols of protest. Moreover, the use of metaphors associated with stomachs and eating echoes what Jean-François Bayart describes as the 'politics of the belly'.[8] As he claims, in many African countries, 'both politicians and their fellow citizens share a particular governmentality together with the imaginary figures of power that are part and parcel of it … a system of power-through-eating'.

Fig. 2: Casablanca Port, Morocco, January 2025. Photo: John Hanna.



Similarly, in September 2025, following the deaths of eight women in a maternity ward in Agadir, protests erupted, exposing deep fractures in Morocco's infrastructural politics.[9] A movement led by a group called Gen Z 212 emerged, demanding that the government prioritise accessible public healthcare, affordable housing and improved public transport over other types of monumental infrastructure projects, such as the construction of stadiums. Morocco is currently preparing to co-host the 2030 World Cup and is building what is set to become the world's largest football stadium.[10] However, according to citizens, this stands in stark contrast to the absence of basic services and essential needs. Through slogans such as 'No World Cup, health comes first' and 'We want hospitals, not football stadiums', protesters highlight how decisions about which infrastructures are prioritised – and for whom – are deeply political.[11]

Broken Promises

Infrastructures are often unnoticed when they deliver, while their breakdown or partial realisation is what makes them strongly visible.[12] In many cases, infrastructures become subject to a 'politics of suspension'.[13] Their temporal or permanent status of incompleteness, which leaves them unbuilt and unfinished, illustrates how the unevenness of infrastructure development is intrinsically connected to neoliberalism and the relationship between capital, state and labour forces.[14] Indeed, unevenness is often caused by the fact that the promise of infrastructure is, in practice, economically unsustainable.[15] While the inability of states and governments to finance or repay the promised infrastructure, which leads to suspension, is to the detriment of citizens and workers employed in the infrastructure development sector, it simultaneously fuels alternative financial flows through credit and debt restructuring schemes that benefit banks, credit institutions and large multinationals.

Fig. 3: Tangier Med Port, Morocco, February 2023. Photo: John Hanna.





Fig. 4: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, September 2022. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Fig. 5: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, 5 February 2025. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Fig. 6: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, 5 February 2025. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Fig. 7: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, January 2024. Photo: John Hanna.

The Takoradi interchange project in the twin city of Sekondi-Takoradi has been a point of heightened interest and debate among the city's residents and Ghanaian citizens more broadly. The project was financed through a contentious barter deal, signed in July 2018, between the Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro and the government of Ghana. This agreement stipulated the construction of a series of transport infrastructures by the Chinese company in exchange for Ghanaian raw bauxite worth two billion dollars.[16] However, the construction of these infrastructures has been hindered since Ghana defaulted on its external debt obligations in December 2022.[17] The government of Ghana is currently in the process of restructuring its debt and attempting to reach an agreement on the repayment of the infrastructure already constructed by Sinohydro between 2020 and 2022, which has not yet been repaid through mineral resources or other means.

Following the initial suspension of construction work in January 2023, which led to a critical breakdown of the road network in the vicinity of the site, Sinohydro consented to complete a section of the work to alleviate traffic congestion around the newly constructed interchange. However, the subsequent dismantling of the scaffolding, signifying the company's departure from the site and leaving behind a suspended bridge leading nowhere, made the situation more complex. The promise of infrastructure and development around which the local public discourse had been shaped in preceding years, was broken.[18] Clearly, this promise as shaped in discourse and political campaigns was not only about assemblages of concrete, steel and asphalt, but about a new regional identity, shaped by aspirations for gaining ground or even progressing beyond other Ghanaian regions.[19] Not only was the interchange never completed, but connectivity and mobility were never improved either. Today, the half-built structure stands as both a marker of failure and a reminder of a half-lived dream.

Fig. 8: PTC Interchange, Takoradi, Ghana, January 2024.Photo: John Hanna.


中国水电
SINOHYDRO

The future is always on the other side

Comments on videos and social media posts depicting Sinohydro dismantling the construction site of the Takoradi interchange echo those of our research interlocutors, who claim that the newly installed government, instead of completing ongoing projects, immediately began promising and commissioning new ones.[20] This demonstrates how, in contexts of visible failure and disruption, the promise of infrastructure-led modernity is neither denied or abandoned: it only takes on new forms. This phenomenon was observed not only in the political sphere but also among numerous residents in Takoradi and across other areas of Ghana where the research was conducted.

In Axim, a small coastal town located near Takoradi in the Western Region of Ghana, for instance, many interlocutors exhibited a temporal shift in perspective regarding the expected associated benefits derived from infrastructure development projects, reallocating these expectations from existing – and failed – infrastructure projects and associating them with new infrastructural development plans. At the end of January 2025 Costanza Franceschini, one of the two authors, returned to some of the coastal infrastructure development projects she had been researching over the past four years, eager to learn of their afterlife.[21] Some fishermen and local residents accompanied her, demonstrating some of the problems the project encountered. These included: the challenge of access for canoes within the harbour, the difficulty for fishermen to access the sea where the breakwater was too high, and the lack of sewerage and water drainage systems near the new protective barrier.

After walking through the infrastructuralised landscape and a detailed discussion reiterating the impact of the projects on local fishermen, some people began to describe, with great optimism, a proposed sea defence that they had heard was about to be built.

They expressed confidence in the proposal, with the expectation that it would bring tangible benefits to the community. This sentiment appeared to contrast with their perceptions of the existing failed infrastructure. In the days following that visit, other residents and the chief fisherman mentioned the same project, which appeared to be the focus of all the community's hopes and expectations for future development.

Fig. 9: Sea defence, Axim, Ghana, 30 January 2025. Photo: Costanza Franceschini.



Such shifts and the constant reallocation of expectations can also be observed elsewhere. In Morocco, while some communities have yet to experience the economic benefits of mega-projects like the Port of Tangier Med and the high-speed rail connection (TGV), attention is already turning to the anticipated economic impact of the 2030 Football World Cup and the proposed tunnel between Tangier and Paloma, Spain.[22]

The complicated dynamics surrounding the implementation of mega-infrastructure projects in the Global South, often marked by incomplete realisation, failure to serve the originally targeted communities, or continuous shifts towards newer projects, highlight how their development extends far beyond technical concerns. These projects are frequently entangled in complex issues involving financial structures,midentity-building, shifting alliances, changing governments, local infrastructural politics, competing priorities, sensitivity to global economic and geo-political conditions, or weak economic resilience.[23] These dynamics suggest that mega-infrastructure projects in the Global South cannot be understood merely as means of service provision or economic growth, nor should they be read only through their failure to deliver at a specific moment or against closed and solid timelines. Instead, the development of mega-infrastructure projects needs to be approached as an open-ended process requiring attention to issues such as anticipation, endurance, and the ongoing negotiation of dreams, aspirations, and claims over space and time.

Fig. 10: Rabat, Morocco, January 2025. Photo: John Hanna.



Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. Saree Makdisi, 'Postcolonial Literature in a Neocolonial World: Modern Arabic Culture and the End of Modernity', *Boundary 22*, no. 1 (1995): 85–115, 90.
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Biography

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Contemporary Afrographies in São Paulo: From Samba to Slam

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Abstract
Spanning from mid-twentieth-century samba to contemporary slam poetry, this visual essay traces a genealogy of Afro-Brazilian urban cultural expressions in São Paulo's Zona Leste, examining how bodies, voices and places operate as spatialised diasporic archives. Grounded in Leda Maria Martins's concepts of 'afrographies of memory', 'oraliture', and '*encruzilhada*' (crossroads), the essay investigates how performance and orality materialise Afro-diasporic knowledge within the context of peripheral urbanism. Through the case studies of the samba school Nenê de Vila Matilde and the spoken-word movement Slam da Guilhermina, the article demonstrates how minor literatures and embodied practices inscribe memory onto urban space, producing alternative cultural geographies that resist racialised marginalisation. By foregrounding the continuity and transformation of Afro-Brazilian expressive forms across generations, the essay argues that samba and slam constitute interconnected modes of cultural transmission that reterritorialise the city, revealing Afro-Brazilian urban culture as an ongoing process of diasporic negotiation, resistance and re-signification.

Keywords
Afro-Brazilian urban culture, afrographies of memory, oraliture and minor literatures, *encruzilhada* (crossroads), performance and orality, diaspora- and peripheral urbanism

One sentence summary
This genealogy reads Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions as diasporic archives, from mid-twentieth-century samba to contemporary slam poetry, as diasporic archives shaped by *afrography*, *oraliture*, and *encruzilhada* in São Paulo's Zona Leste.

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In her remarkable book *Afrografias da memória* (afrographies of memory), Brazilian poet and essayist Leda Maria Martins offers an important contribution to the study of Black culture and memory. Martins creates concepts such as afrography (graphic marks of memory on Black bodies) and oraliture (oral literature) to describe the specific manifestations of afro-diasporic culture that have crossed the Atlantic and which have materialised in the plurality of expressions across the Americas. She is particularly interested in unearthing theoretical instruments to interpret the prolific production of Black subjects in Brazil (the most African country outside of Africa) and the complex cultural formation of diaspora.

Martins argues that 'the history of Black people in the Americas is written in narratives of migration and crossing' – a legacy carried from Africa across the Atlantic.[1] Black memory is thus a wellspring of complex cultural signs: it is fundamental to Black people's alterity and culture, ethnic and linguistic diversity, civilisation and history, elements that resisted both colonisation and forced migration. Martins seeks 'to highlight the reach of the rhizomes that reterritorialise and re-create African cultures within the cartography of the Brazilian nation'.[2] The nation's African roots are understood as 'one of the constitutive signifiers of Brazilian textuality and cultural production as a whole – a dialogical and foundational matrix for the subjects who enact it and who are, simultaneously, shaped by it'.[3]

Thus, Afro-diasporic memory coalesces into afrographies – recompositions of the cultural elements diasporic subjects carried with them, actively deployed in the creation and translation of knowledge in the new continent. These afrographies of memory function as devices for updating and re-signifying ancestral cultures, traditions, codes and symbolic systems in territories of arrival.

Fig. 1: Location of Guilhermina Slam. Photo: Tainã Dorea.

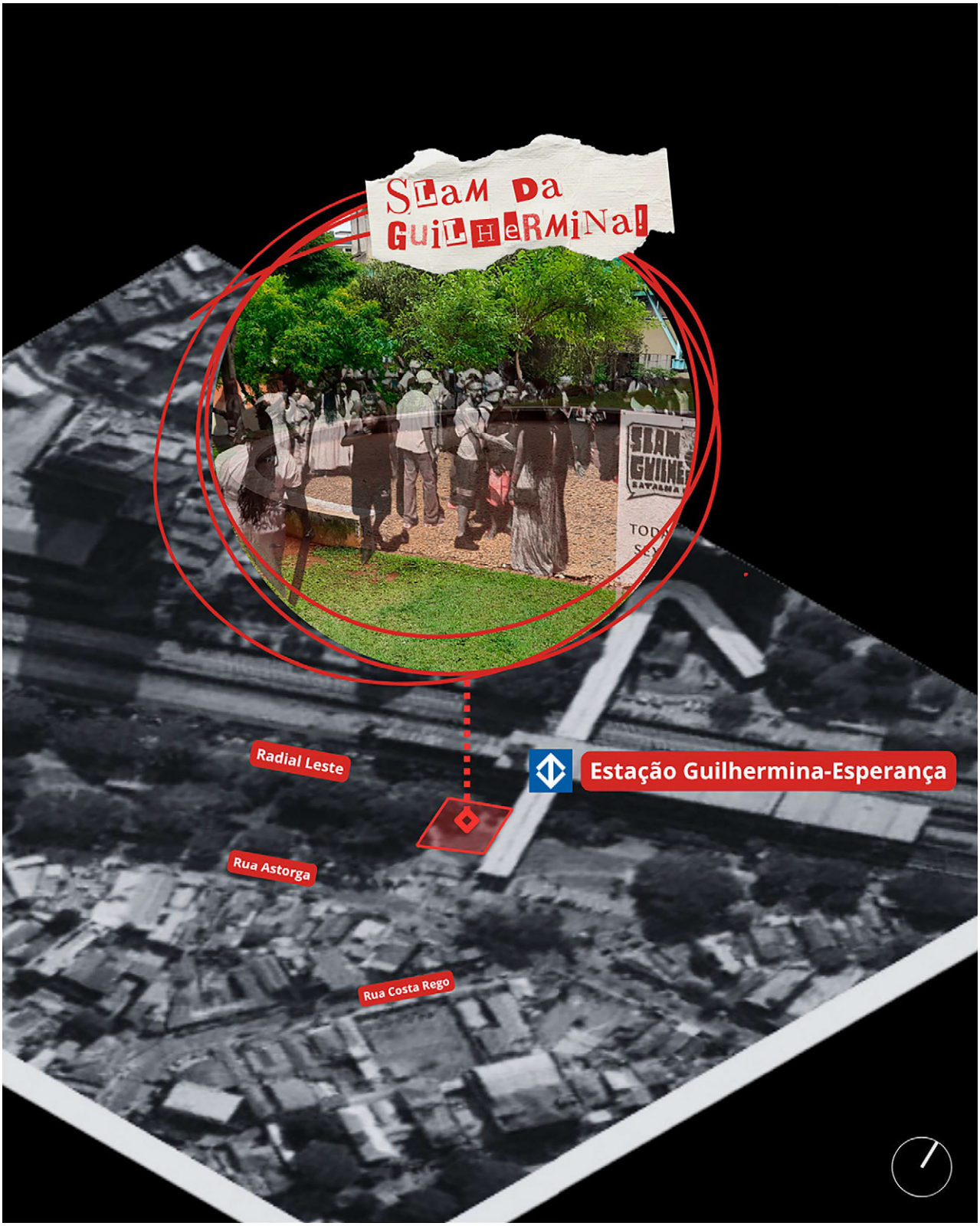

SLAM DA GUILHERMINA
BATALHA DE POESIAS

In many cases, these memories emerge through orality, the privileged medium for transmitting African cultural tradition, which Martins considers fundamental to the re-territorialisation of displaced peoples and actualisation of their culture – just as vital as written form of cultural transmission. To address this oral-cultural dimension, Martins proposes the concept of oraliture. Finally, Martins also employs the idea of the *encruzilhada* (crossroad) as a symbolic and metonymic operator for afrographies: a system of collective representations, a space of intersection and interpretation of knowledge, a means to weave new inter- and transcultural identities.

In other words, for Martins, the meaning-making of afro-diasporic subjects arises from intertextuality, the connection between truth and understanding, and the reinterpretation of senses produced in hybrid, intercultural contexts elaborated upon in postcolonial critique. Thereby, her interpretation aligns with thinkers like Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, for whom there is no 'pure' culture.[4] Culture is instead a constantly evolving field, shaped by encounters between subjects bearing distinct repertoires, whose crossings engender new meanings and manifestations.

In this visual essay, we propose to apply the concepts of afrography, oraliture, and *encruzilhada* to urban space, to examine the persistence of afro-diasporic cultural expressions across generations in Vila Matilde, Vila Esperança and Vila Guilhermina, neighbourhoods near each other, located at the Zona Leste (far east zone of the city) of the largest Brazilian city, São Paulo. In the Zona Leste, peripheral and middle-class communities settle around train and subway lines, combining diversity with inequality, and producing a vibrant cultural scene where samba, rap and street art tell the history of one of the most popular areas of the metropolis. Focusing on two key manifestations of afro-diasporic culture – the Nenê de Vila Matilde Samba School (one of the most traditional samba schools

Fig. 2: Location of Guilhermina Slam in the Guilhermina neighbourhood. Photo: Tainã Dorea.

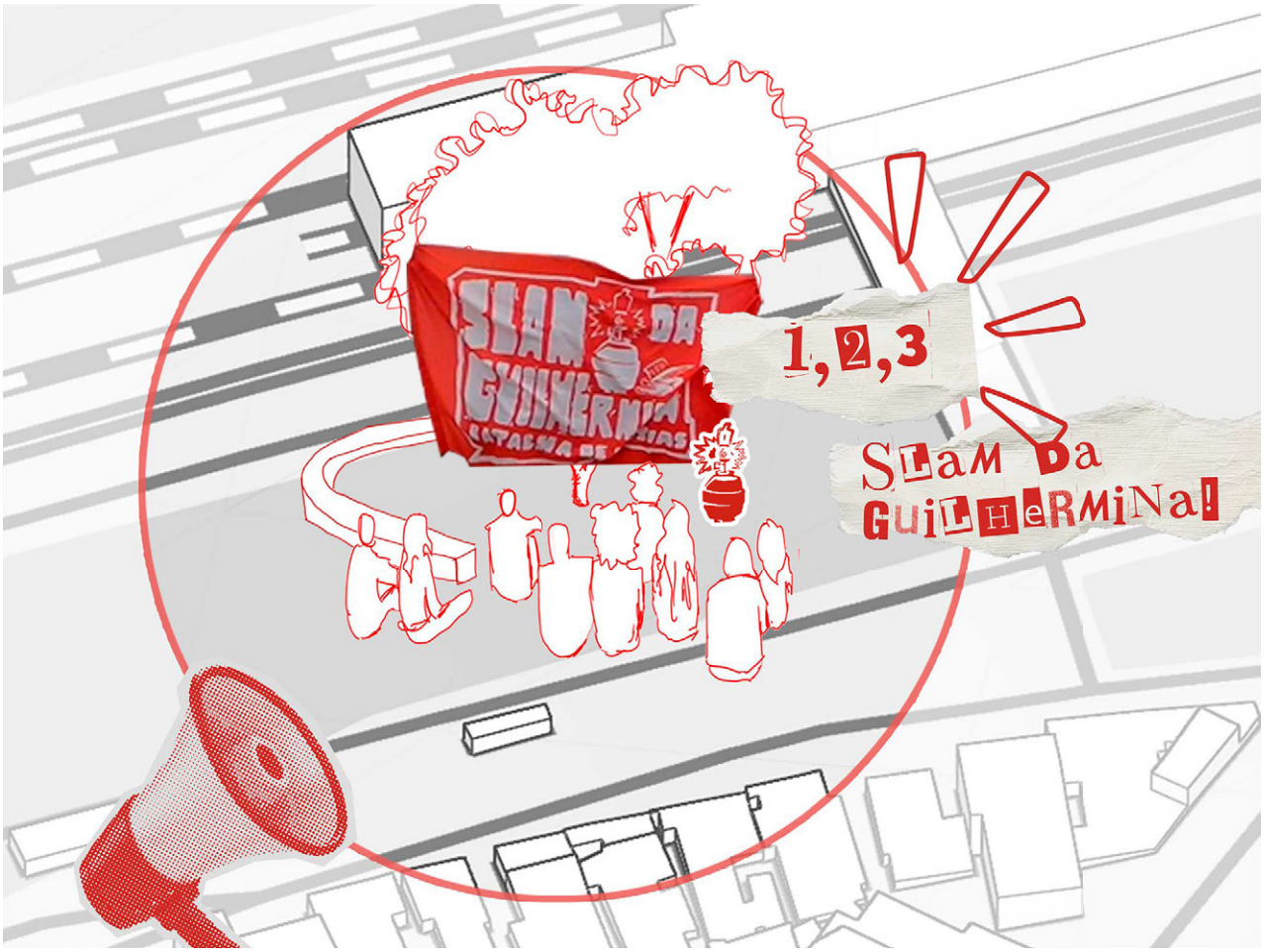

Slam Da Guilhermina!
Radial Leste
Estação Guilhermina-Esperança
Rua Astorga
Rua Costa Rego

in São Paulo) and Slam da Guilhermina (a poetry competition in Vila Guilhermina neighbourhood, showcasing spoken-word performances by disenfranchised voices, often addressing social inequality, race and urban violence) – we aim to demonstrate how afrographies of memory can be recognised not only on bodies but also in urban places that record knowledge systems transmitted through generations. Afrographies graph the ground, imprint the terrain and leave their traces, reshaping the whole city. The Black expressiveness in Zona Leste gave rise to creative cultural forms that transcend the locality, resonating across the metropolis and generating significant intersubjective and social impact.

Escola de Samba Nenê de Vila Matilde

In the early 1930s, when Alberto Alves da Silva (1921–2010) – known by the stage name of Seu Nenê da Vila Matilde – arrived in São Paulo from the countryside of Minas Gerais at just six or seven years old, the carnival celebrations in Vila Esperança were a vibrant mix of street parties and ballroom dances where Black and white residents mingled freely. At the time, Vila Esperança was a popular neighbourhood on the outskirts of São Paulo, connected to the city centre by suburban railway. Migrants from poor regions of the country, deprived by drought and famine, and European immigrants escaping war inhabited the region. The festivities were spearheaded by a family of Spanish immigrant musicians who, in 1932, founded a carnival *bloco* (group of people dancing and following a samba band through the streets) called Clube 5 de Julho. In a 1988 interview with the municipal Department of Historical Heritage (DPH), Seu Nenê recalled how the club hosted parties that began a month before carnival, drawing revellers from neighbouring districts like Brás and Bom Retiro, all aligned along the suburban railway and formed by people coming from outside the city, whether from the poor parts of Brazil or abroad.

Fig. 3: Guilhermina Slam. Collage: Tainã Dorea.


1,2,3
Slam da Guilherminа!

By his early twenties, Seu Nenê was a regular at the Paulistano da Glória club, where he played tambourine and danced. Though an amateur musician, he earned small fees – until 1947, when a promoter swindled him out of his payment. Frustrated, he declared: 'You know what happened? Now I'll play at Largo do Peixe just for joy!'.[5] He shifted his focus to Largo do Peixe – a bustling crossroads near a train station, where Black vendors sold fish and other goods. There, amid the rhythm of *pandeiros* and *cuícas* (Afro-brazilian frame and friction drums, respectively), he and fellow *sambistas* began holding weekend gatherings that fused *batuques, samba,* and *tiririca* (a traditional game). These informal circles laid the groundwork for what, in 1949, would become the legendary Nenê de Vila Matilde Samba School.

From a musical perspective, Seu Nenê played a key role in bridging the rhythm of São Paulo's samba with that of Rio de Janeiro, characterised by the two-beat *surdo* (large, deep-toned bass drum) pattern. From Rio's carnival, he also incorporated other elements into his samba school, such as the *baianas* section (a traditional part of the carnival parade, with old ladies dressed in large skirts, turbans and layered necklaces), the flag-bearing couple of *mestre-sala* and *porta-bandeira* (the male master of ceremonies and the female official school flag bearer), and the narrative-driven *samba-enredo*.

Fig. 4: The mulberry tree located at the centre of the square where the Slam takes place, affectionately referred to as 'baobab'. Photo: Tainã Dorea.



During the 1950s, the samba school helped shape the identity of São Paulo's carnival. Until 1952, the school's activities were limited to the streets of Vila Esperança. Its first competitive carnival was in 1953. Three years later, it became champion of São Paulo's carnival, dethroning Lavapés, which was the city's first samba school, founded in 1937 by female *sambista* Eunice Madre. 1968 was a landmark year when São Paulo's carnival was officially recognised and Nenê de Vila Matilde became the first samba school in the city to have its own rehearsal hall. Until then, rehearsals took place in the streets near the home of its founder. The school went on to win São Paulo's carnival championship eleven times.

Slam da Guilhermina: spoken-word competitions as cultural movement

Sixty-three years after the foundation of Nenê de Vila Matilde Samba School, a slam competition was initiated in a nearby public square at Guilhermina-Esperança subway station, located on the Red Line, which serves Zona Leste, giving access to people from other neighbourhoods. Slams are spoken-word competitions that bring together young poets from marginalised communities, often attracting over 150 participants, including audience members, performers, organisers and passersby who stop to watch the competition.[6] This cultural expression can be understood as a way of using the body and voice through performances that push the boundaries between literature, poetry, music, life, art and activism. Rooted artistically in hip-hop aesthetics (particularly rap), slams showcase poetic forms associated with so-called minor literature.[7] In other words, following Martins's terminology, slams are a manifestation of oraliture.

Slam poetry originated as an artistic expression in the United States in the 1980s, particularly in Chicago. However, its global spread has led to diverse local

Fig. 5: Slam event on 31 January 2025. Photo: Tainã Dorea.


SLAM
GUILHERMIN
TODA ÚLTIM
SEXTA-FEIR
ÀS 20H

manifestations and histories. In São Paulo, the slam movement gained momentum in the early 2000s, influenced by the city's established hip-hop culture and poetry scene.[8] Slam provides a platform for young urban poets and artists to express their voices with raw intensity, often addressing social, political and personal issues.

A landmark in São Paulo's slam history was the creation of Slam da Guilhermina in 2012. Founded by Emerson Alcalde, known as 'Esopo', the event helped to popularise the slam format in the city by offering an inclusive space for emerging artists. Over time, the movement expanded to other areas of São Paulo, regularly taking place in various venues such as bars, cultural centres and festivals. Events like Slam da Ponta (Itaquera, Zona Leste, 2014), and Slam Resistência (Roosevelt Square, central area, 2014) exemplify how the movement has diversified and become rooted in São Paulo's street culture.

Beyond providing a space for artistic expression, slams in São Paulo have built a community of poets and artists who share experiences, develop skills, and promote cultural exchange. Over the next decade, it played a central role in creating space for the emergence of an urban youth identity, while also leaving a mark on the urban fabric. The city's slam scene continues to evolve other art forms and social movements. It emerges as a new mode of cultural expression within a site previously shaped by the local samba tradition, constituting a new layer of afrography.

Fig. 6: A slammer at the Slam event on 31 January 2025. Photo: Tainã Dorea.



Oralitures

In Nenê de Vila Matilde's samba-enredo 'The Poet Has Spoken (We Are the Zona Leste)', urban spaces connected to samba are celebrated. Right in the first verses, Largo do Peixe and Sapucaí are referenced as spatial landmarks that map the afrography of Nenê's carnival: 'It's all there/For you to enjoy/From Largo do Peixe/To Sapucaí'.[9] Simultaneously, the samba lyric echoes Pastinha's saying 'We are the Zona Leste/Fighting with dignity',[10] transforming the social meaning of the region's identity discourse by associating it with lyricism and poetry itself, yet without abandoning the melancholic sentiment of urban belonging that shakes along with the train: 'And there at Central/ The suburbanite comes/ Shaking off sadness/ To the rhythm of the train'.[11] Thus, the song is constructed through an afrographic awareness that marks urban space, drawing on old carnivals – the confetti battles, costume parades, drum circles and tiririca fights of Vila Esperança and Vila Matilde – a bygone era that somehow persists in the present, creating a circular narrative: 'Vila Esperança/ How we miss the old carnivals …/ Vila Matilde/ Of the immortal batucadas/ Of the tiririca/ Beloved old guard/ New guard/ It's the triumphant finale'.[12]

Almost three decades later, slammer Emerson Alcalde also evoked the region's landmarks to talk about his urban experience, now permeated by violence: 'Here in the "Lost" Zone, people disappear/like during the dictatorship … A man is a man/And the homis are the homis/The wall was broken/the fourth wall was shattered/Yet we're still discriminated against for living in this area'.[13]

Fig. 7: The Guilhermina Slam manifesto. Collage: Tainã Dorea.


"pODe cHeGaR
SOB a LuZ
Da
LaMpaRiNa
CeLeBRaNDO
a pOeSia"

In Alcalde's poem, the difference between *a man* and *a homi* (slang for cop) lies in the armour of violence. A man ceases to be a man, becoming a *homi* – someone who left their *humanity* behind, and, echoing Frantz Fanon, dehumanises others.[14] However, when the poet announces the breaking of the fourth wall, he speaks of dismantling segregation, as slam poetry transcends neighbourhood boundaries, city limits and even national borders, through its appearance in competitions worldwide. 'This is Jardim Romano/ground for Indians, Blacks, the poor, Northeasterners/We're isolated in this swamp – the Extermination Zone'.[15] Yet, they are still discriminated against for living in this demarcated area, where the railroad celebrated by Seu Nenê decades earlier is now the Red Line subway – the symbolic colour for violence: 'Have you ever wondered/why our subway line/is the Red one? …/Our Nenê resists in the quilombo/ formed by the wings/ with Samara, Matilde, Dalila, Penha, Helena, Mara/ She will be violated, massacred for trying to change the status quo/ She'll get shocked, framed, racism, bullets'.[16] Identities are defined by race, ethnicity, colour and class: Indigenous and Black people, the poor, Northeasterners, all social markers of isolation and hostility.

Poetic language blends contemporary philosophy and crime headlines by linking locality names (like Jardim Pantanal, in the far east of the city) to Agamben's 'space of extermination'.[17] Samara, Matilde, Dalila, Penha, Helena, Mara (local villages) personify violated mothers searching for their missing children and nurturing survivors, the same young slammers challenging the established order through verse: the shock, the criminalisation, the racism, the *homi's* gunshots. In this narrative, the poet introduces the very idea we seek to defend – that slam poetry and samba schools, resisting in Nenê's contemporary *quilombo* (organised settlements of escaped enslaved people in colonial times, located in hard-to reach places for strategic

Figure 8: Some of the physical-symbolic elements at the Guilhermina Slam event. Collage: Tainã Dorea.



defence against militias and troops), become afrographies, living inscriptions of memory that reclaim urban space and dignity across successive generations.

In the 'Manifesto of Guilhermina Slam', slam takes over the square, inhabits the city, and claims it as its own. In an ode to place, we see once again the awareness of afrography: 'Guilhermina is *Esperança*'; one place spills into the other, becomes another, crafting identities beyond those imposed by administrative boundaries.[18] Esperança means hope, a goal for these young poets. At the same time, the poet jokes with the distance between his place and the city centre, and its occupation by hip-hop culture: 'from Guilhermina to São Bento is just a matter of time'.[19] São Bento (the Red Line station anchoring downtown) is the very birthplace of São Paulo's hip-hop scene in the 1980s. The subway ride takes an hour, but art and culture spill beyond the periphery, spill over the segregating borders of racial hegemony, touching other spaces and infiltrating the centre. To conquer the entire city and become the metropolis's burning desire? Just a matter of time.

Afrographies in urban space

Luis Rufalo Rodrigues posits the crossroads as a conflicting intersection of internal and external realities: 'The crossroads, the navel and mouth of the world, tells us that nothing is finished. We are at war'.[20] In a chapter on the spatial dimension of racial relations, Renato Emerson dos Santos proposes breaking the hegemonic silence of racism through two premises: the spatial organisation of racial relations, producing what he calls geo-graphies*:*

> Racial relations inscribe space, establishing temporary "geo-graphies" (such as territorialities of groups defined by cultural traits linked to racial belonging, like hip-hop "spots"), enduring ones (such as racialised segregation patterns), or near-permanent ones (like quilombola territories or toponyms tied to legacies of racial relations)'.[21]

Fig. 9: The mulberry tree on a non-event day. Photo: Tainã Dorea.



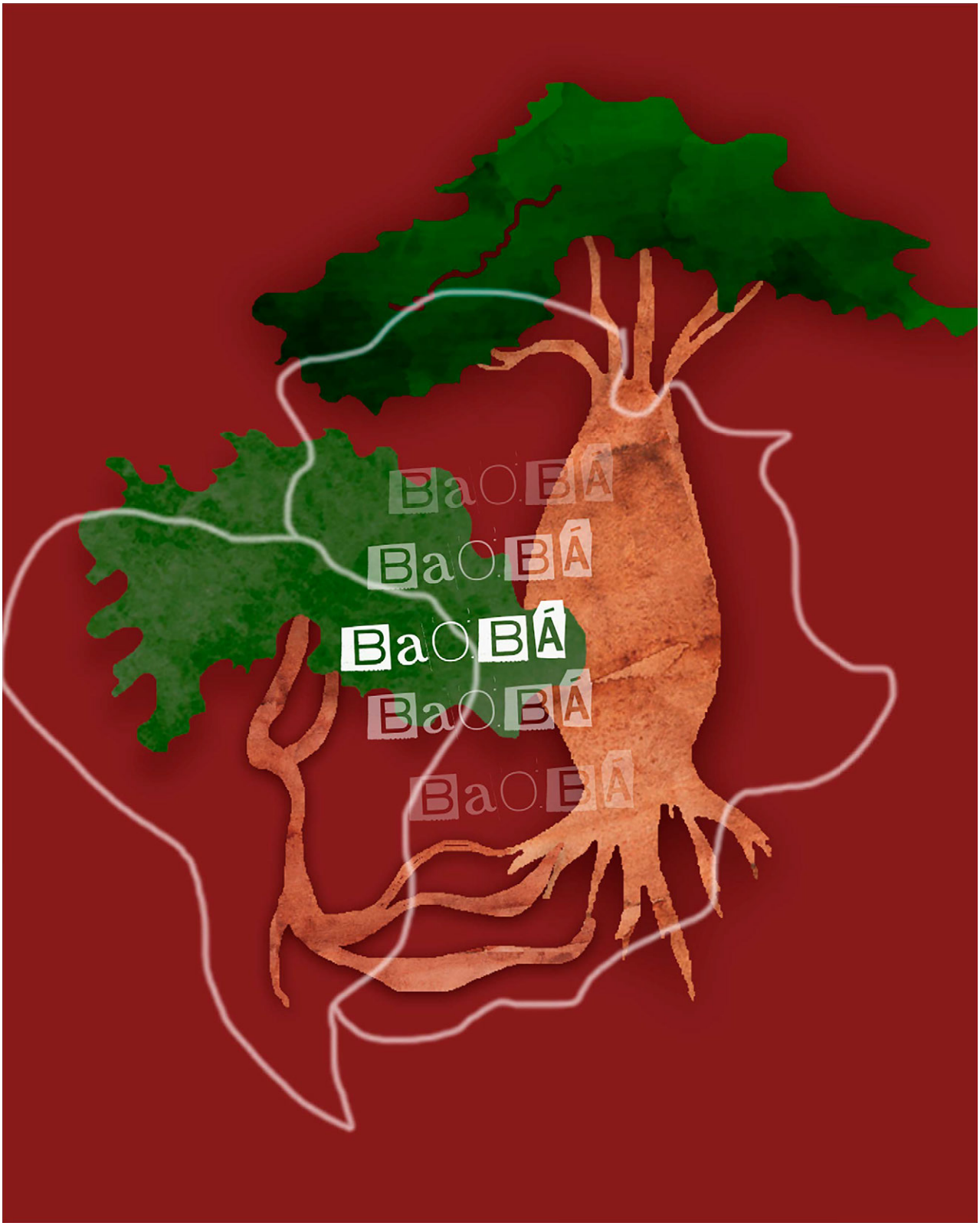
Santos's concept directly echoes Martins's afrographies – manifestations etched into physical space.

> Racial relations, in their multiple dimensions (corporeality, religion, culture, etc.), with their manifestations of attributes and classificatory systems, constitute their own spatializations. Likewise, anti-racist struggles, resistance to oppression, and the Black Movement also produce their own spatializations.[22]

For Martins, borders are erected to conceal territorial ambiguities and ambivalent identities, defining what is or isn't acceptable as standard behaviour. This creates a false perception of the metropolis as hegemonic, singular and cohesive by obfuscating differences, contradictions and conflicts, while dictating the terms that underpin the social pact, order and belonging in urban space. In this context, afrographies become sites of physical and symbolic struggle. Minoritarian identities grounded in past experiences and ancestral knowledge materialise in space and become layered over time, to ensure permanence, perpetuation and re-signification.

Thus, there is a connection between samba and slam inscribed in the urban space of past and present, Brazil and Africa, traversing space and time through successive generations in the diaspora. These cultural forms embody the fight to reclaim space and lives lost to state violence, amid the militarisation of public power and the escalating disregard for Black life. Though each cultural expression/form adopts strategies shaped by its historical moment resulting in vastly different forms of expression and content, their emergence in the same urban space reveals a genealogy of ancestral, generational, and spatial connections, each speaking to their contemporaries.

Fig. 10: Representation of the union between the mulberry tree and the baobab tree, symbolising the connection between Brazil and Africa. Image: Tainã Dorea.


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Biography

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The Body as Site, Movement and Migration: The South African Indian Diaspora in Dance and Archive

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Abstract
This visual essay questions what constitutes an archive. Using autoethnography as a method, it frames the relation between my family's sixty-five-year-old dance archive and embodiment as co-constitutive and relational dynamics. It foregrounds minor histories as a tactic for resisting hegemony, in the face of homogenisation and operations of control. This situates dance as a counter-archive: a site where memory, resistance, and cultural knowledge are preserved through embodied movement when material traces have been erased or lost. In South Africa, issues of citizenry, xenophobia, genocide and poor living conditions persist. Moving against this genealogy of oppression, the essay spans from indenture and migration, through apartheid to the present, and aligns personal archive, diasporic history, and contemporary practices to examine how dancing bodies rehearse and reconfigure the often misunderstood or under-represented. It presents minor socio-political narratives of the 'Other', across generations, and offers new modes for understanding citizenship and belonging.

Keywords
Indian indentured, Indian dance, family archive, migration, South Africa, decolonial methodology

One sentence summary
The movement and migration of the Indian dancing body to and within South Africa, and its socio-political experiences are explored through the family archive of pioneering Indian dance pedagogues.

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I am a descendant of indenture. My ancestry was forged by empire's need to replace slavery with a labour force to produce 'white gold': sugar.[1] Consequently, the Indian diaspora was dispersed across the globe in the fifteenth century to the Caribbean (1845) and to Africa, particularly Mauritius (1834) and South Africa (1860). As Anita Ratnam observes, 'The diaspora body is intersected with location and dislocation – of an uprooting and a transplanting in distant and strange soils'.[2] This visual essay draws on my family dance archive, carefully documented over a period of sixty-five years, initially by my late mother, Rani Govender (1944–2005), the first South African pedagogue of Bharata Natyam and Kathak, and later by me. In the late 1950s, she and her sisters, Prema and Radha Nydoo along with Salochana Naidoo, were the first South African women of Indian descent to travel to Madras, now Chennai, India, to study a full repertoire of Bharata Natyam – a South Indian classical dance form. Limited resources and the lack of diplomatic ties between India and apartheid South Africa severed traditional, cultural and religious moorings.[3] Like the Ghanaian Sankofa bird, I look back to look forward, using artefacts from the archive to re-story how the body performs under repression through dance and embodiment. For me, movement and migration are inseparable from dance.

Fig. 1: Programme from the Nydoo Sisters' *Arangetral* or debut performance in Bharata Natyam, where the title 'Natya Thillakum' (meaning dance excellence or eminence) was bestowed on them in Madras, India (1961). Source: anonymous, Govender family archive.

SRI SARASWATHY GANA NILAYAM

TRIPLICANE : : MADRAS-5

BHARATHA NATYA ARANGETRAL



Kumari RANI & Kumari PREMA *(of South Africa)*

Daughters of Smt. & Sri M. A. Nydoo of (Durban) South Africa

(78th & 79th Disciples of Sri K. LALITHA - Director of the Nilayam)

on 15th June 1961 at Rasika Ranjani Sabha, Mylapore at 6-30 p.m.

HON'BLE SMT. LOURDAMMAL SIMON

Minister for Local Administration, Presides

Girmitiya in South Africa

Famine, colonial religious and social restrictions, disease, and extreme deprivation in India compelled twenty-two-year-old Parumaul to put his thumbprint to a *girmit* (indenture agreement), written in the foreign language of English, and believe a false promise of an abundant life. I located a copy of the original emigration certificate (ship's list) of my maternal ancestor, certified by the former Department of Indian Affairs. The realisation that 'the migrants can't use these certificates, … they nevertheless function as erstwhile documents through which a certain (retrospective) humanity may be given to a people without "history"' is stark.[4] According to my late *aya* (great-grandmother), the *girmitiya* (indentured labourers) were transported across the *kala pani* ('black waters'), and upon arrival at the port of Durban on South Africa's east coast, they were lined up like cattle, publicly stripped and inspected for identifying markings, and personal belongings were burnt – a symbolic erasure of personhood.[5] Gayatri Spivak asks: 'As the historical record is made up, who dropped out, when and why?'[6] Although materially dispossessed and physically humiliated, the indentured carried their culture within them. Our family archive is therefore bereft of any early material belongings. Beyond ethnic dance and music, the possibility remains that some of the indentured had received training in classical dance.

Fig. 2: My ancestor's record on a ship's list in 1894 (updated by the Department of Home Affairs, 1988).

B.M.25

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS – DEPARTEMENT VAN BINNELANDSESAKE

COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANT

Serial Number	105
Colonial Number	36616
Date of Arrival	20:12:1894
Name of Ship	CONGELLA
Place of Registration	—
Date of Registration	—
Number in Register	—
Name	PARUMAUL
Father's Name	PARUMAUL
Age	22 YRS.
Sex	MALE
Caste	KOSAVA
District	MADURA
Thanna/Taluq	MADURA
Village	KADAYANGALAM
Height	5'6"
Bodily Marks	SCAR ON LEFT SIDE OF BELLY
Name of Next-of-Kin	—
Relations Accompanied	FATHER
Small Pox/Vaccinated	VACCINATED
Remarks	—

Certified a true copy.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

BINNELANDSE SAKE
DURBAN
1988 -10- 06
HOME AFFAIRS (40)

B.M.25

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS – DEPARTEMENT VAN BINNELANDSESAKE

COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANT

Serial Number	231
Colonial Number	36132
Date of Arrival	06:03:1888
Name of Ship	BARQUE ZUATHLANDRA
Place of Registration	—
Date of Registration	—
Number in Register	—
Name	M. RAMAYAH
Father's Name	M. APPAYAH
Age	18 YRS.
Sex	MALE
Caste	KAPUDANUM
District	GUNJAM
Thanna/Taluq	KARAKAVALSU
Village	RAVICHANDRI
Height	5'2"
Bodily Marks	FACE PITTED WITH SMALL POX
Name of Next-of-Kin	M. DULAPEE - BROTHER
Relations Accompanied	—
Small Pox/Vaccinated	VACCINATED
Remarks	—

Certified a true copy.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

BINNELANDSE SAKE
DURBAN
1988 -10- 06
HOME AFFAIRS (40)

Dance

Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, among other authors, argue that the indentured's struggle for survival, or practice of their culture, was not considered a colonial priority.[7] Singing or dancing while working in the sugarcane fields was punishable by lashing and many new arrivals struggled with this adjustment. It took a century before the Indian diaspora in South Africa could publicly express themselves in a full repertoire of Indian classical dance. I am left to reimagine what the Nydoo Sisters' Bharata Natyam choreographed duets would have looked like, as much of the early visual record (film and pictures) were lost in a fire. Their choreography, through body positioning, footwork, mudras (hand gestures) and rasa (facial expressions), where bodies become archives, narrated stories from ancient religious texts. These performances, an act of archiving itself, were subversive.[8] The physical archive began as a scrapbook, compiled by my mother at the start of her dance career in 1959, to mark achievements. It is not merely a collection of artefacts, but an embodied historical record of how Indian (classical) dance migrated to, and evolved in, South Africa. As Neeraj Bhatia argues, 'There is no political power without control of the archive', foregrounding it as a critical site of cultural resistance and historical reclamation,

Fig. 3–6: The Nydoo Sisters in a portion of a Bharata Natyam performance sequence (1961). Photos: anonymous, Govender family archive.









functioning as both a counter-history and a means of restoring agency.[9]

I became the custodian, curator, witness, and embodied archive, bridging past and future Indo-South African dance traditions. Due to South Africa's (historic) lack of diplomatic ties with India, traditional expressions differ from those of other Indian diasporas, and formal training required self-funded study abroad. This severely limited Indian South Africans' access to formal training in traditional dance. In addition to the two classical dance styles introduced by my family, I became South Africa's first exponent of Odissi (1986) and Sufi Kathak (1990), while my mother and I researched and introduced ethnic Indian dance styles into the country. In 1993, we converted The Nydoo Sisters School of Dance into the non-profit Anavarata Dance Institute, offering low-cost or free dance education to South Africans, while hosting inclusive multicultural performances, nationally and internationally. In 1996, we were commissioned by the National Education Department to develop the country's first Indian dance syllabi, which despite the constitutional promise of an inclusive cultural expression, is yet to be implemented at basic education level and therefore limits current local tertiary study and research.

Fig. 7: A puppet mechanism depicting Indian dance as cultural isolation during apartheid, and a miniaturised representation of my family archive, in the installation *Where Do We Leave Our Footprints?*, OSUN exhibition in collaboration with UniAndes (Colombia), Baard University (Berlin), and Latitudes Art Fair and Contra Arts Festival in Johannesburg, 23–26 May 2024. Photo: Robert Elshove.


WHERE DO WE
LEAVE OUR
TPRINTS?

Apartheid

Apartheid was a system of legislated separation which disenfranchised all aspects of life, for people of colour, including restrictions on movement and the right to vote. The 1950 Group Areas Act was choreographed as concentric rings, according to racialised hierarchies, with whites constituting the centre, followed by Indians, Coloureds (a mixed-race category) and Black townships on the periphery. Since the 1906 Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance, or 'Black Act' as it came to be called, was passed to control Indian and Chinese entry into the Transvaal Colony, movement into 'white' areas required a 'pass'. This prompted Gandhi's leadership in the 1908 mass burning of passes, and the 1913 Satyagraha Campaign, which became a cultural incubator, created by apartheid, galvanising cultural resistance. Within the oppressive socio-political climate of apartheid, our dance became a form of satyagraha (passive resistance) and ahimsa (non-violence) to reclaim agency and identity. Despite legal prohibitions against interracial association, my family subverted apartheid laws by inviting the late South African actor Ken Gampu (1929–2003) as guest of honour at their 1965 performance in Durban. Ironically, as my maternal grandmother noted in a newspaper interview, most audience members were white; drawn to the 'exotic' costumes and movement.[10] The Nydoo Sisters received fan mail in Afrikaans, considered the 'white' oppressor's language. Interracial dance classes were at first taught surreptitiously and then, after the advent of democracy in 1994, publicly.

Fig. 8: Ken Gampu, the Nydoo sisters' guest of honour at a Durban performance, with their students, prior to their return to India to study Kathak, a North Indian classical dance style, known for its storytelling through rhythmic footwork, hand gestures and lightning pirouettes. Photo: *The India Trend,* 1965.

INDIAN CULTURE

"DANCING BELLS" WAS FITTING FAREWELL

DANCING BELLS WAS A FITTING FAREWELL

It was an evening of sadness and joy. Sadness because two stalwa of the Indian cultural renaissa ice were leaving for India — joy because they brought hom a vivid message for our glazed eye "westernised" lost souls.

This was perhaps the first time that a full scale dance production was mounted by anyone — and what a stirring evening it became.

With sixteen pupils whose ages could not have ranged more than an average nine years, the Nydoo sisters Rani and Prema provided three hours of sheer dancing delight for our starved masses.

Dances of every conceivable type were executed with such apparent ease that one was surprised at the standards reached especially in the Bharatha Natyam class.

The piece de resistance was undoubtedly the Siva-Parvati dance done on Bharatha Natyam basis by the Nydoo sisters. In a setting that would have done Mount Kailas justice the sisters went afire with this really difficult number. In a perfect exhibition of co-ordination and facial expressions the sisters reached a point as near perfection as could be possible. At the end of the twelve minute recital it left a feeling of awe inspiring respect for these two girls who in their teens have reached such a standard of perfection.

Cultural Tonic by the Nydoo Sisters



The narrations and decor by J. R. Devar, were well knit and timely. J. R.'s narrations at times reached a brilliance that reminded one of that brilliant narrator A. S. Chakrapani of All India Radio fame.



The outstanding feature of this show was the impact the Nydoo sisters have made on the younger generation. The little girls who participated in this show are very good and full of promise. One can only hope that when the Nydoo sisters come back they will continue to propagate this wonderful art.

A touch of filmland's glamour was present when Ken Gampu of Dingaka fame was introduced to the audience by Mr T. P. Naidoo. Obviously touched by the warm hearted response of the Indian audience, Ken Gampu could only muster a very sincere "thank you".

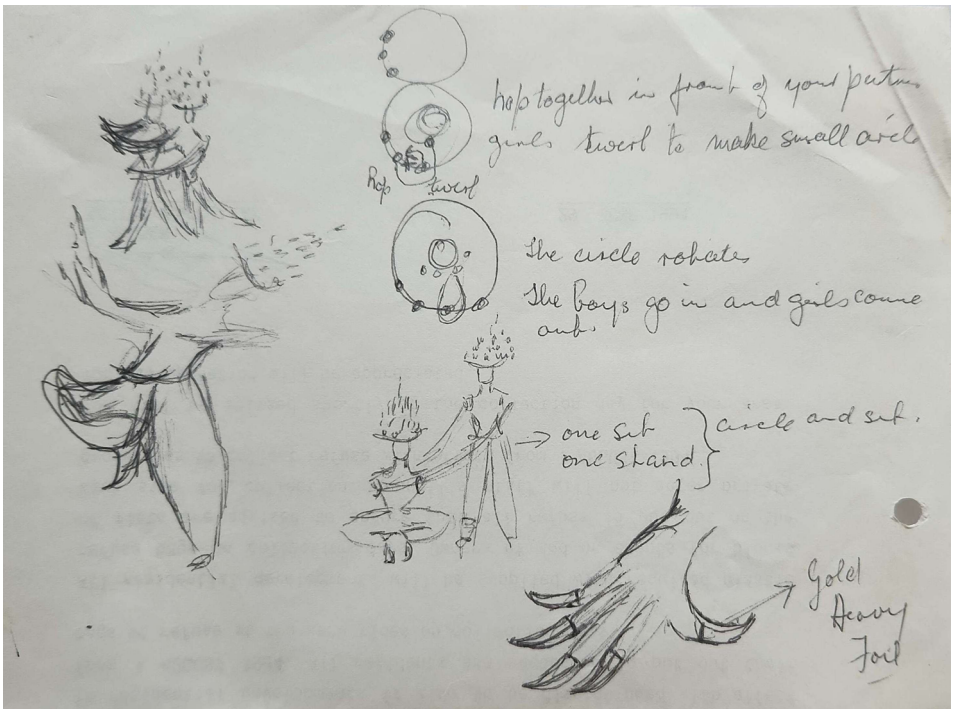


The present

Post-apartheid South Africa is characterised by movement, in and through spaces and places once denied to the 'Other'. Contemporary dance transcends race, as evidenced by the growing cultural exchange and acceptance beyond inherited identities. I now predominantly teach Indian dance, from classical to Bollywood and world dance styles, to Black South Africans. The repetition, focus, group cohesion and consistency of dance practice and performance temporarily suspend lived reality, offering dancers, many from disadvantaged communities, the opportunity to process hardships. It provides respite from contemporary challenges, while fostering resilience, collaboration and a sense of achievement. Dance empowers individuals and groups to resolve conflicts through collaboration. South Africa, shaped through trade, migration and hegemonic invasions, is a hybrid nation with a mélange culture, an intermingling of cultures and bloodlines. The eclectic nature of my dance repertoire and of the archive reflect this multi-racial configuration, becoming a lens through which I interrogate my own cultural heritage and identity. Human experience always leaves a trace, however fragmented, shaping how we become. The future holds multiple possibilities for how the body, as individual, community, society and the danced, continues to evolve and respond to the challenges, traumas, adversities and triumphs. Africa, and South Africa in particular, have continued challenging hegemony. It is not just about biopolitics – the placement and structuring of bodies – but extends to the entire ecology, thus constituting a cosmo-technical operation. Dance continues to be a medium for resistance, an expression of tenacity, resilience, healing, celebration and way of life.

Fig. 9: Choreographic notes and costume design for a performance titled 'Illumination' that interwove Indian dance with African and other world dance styles for our Mauritian Independence Day Tour (1995), by Rani (Nydoo) Govender. Photo: author.

Fig. 10: A collaboration of professional South African dancers (from left to right), seated: Janell Barnard and Anusia Govender-Elshove; standing: Harry Khumalo and Oupa Mokwena (2002) in a Johannesburg performance combining Kathak (North Indian classical dance) and South Indian (Kalaripayattu) martial arts. Photo: Rani Govender.


hop together in front of your partner
girls twirl to make small circle
Hop
Twirl
the circle rotates
the boys go in and girls come out.
one sit
one stand
circle and sit.
Golel
Heavy
Foot



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Notes

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2. Anita Ratnam, 'Foreword', in: Devar Singh Vasugi, *Bharatanatyam: An Ancient Indian Classical Dance: A journey from India to South Africa* (Durban: self published, 2019).
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8. It is a code of sorts, indecipherable by outsiders. Franz Fanon in his various writings shows how colonialism enforces racial legibility, and Édouard Glissant talks about 'the right to opacity', i.e., how diverse cultures are respected and recognised differentially – 'to be fully seen is to be dominated'. Benjamin P. Davis, 'The Politics of Édouard Glissant's Right to Opacity', *The CLR James Journal* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2019), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26946358.
9. Neeraj Bhatia, 'Re-assembling the Archive', AA Files 77 (2020): 117–126, 117.
10. This issue is expanded upon by Edward W. Said's (1978) concept of orientalism; 'the Orient' is not a real place but a discursive construction. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72, https://doi: 10.2307/2505169. Franz Fanon's notion of the racialising gaze (from *Black Skin, White Masks,* 1952) and Walter Mignolo's argument that exoticism becomes a technology of knowledge extraction, are explored in Linda Martín Alcoff, 'Mignolo's Epistemology of Coloniality', *CR: The New Centennial Review 7* (2007): 79–101.

Biography

Anusia Govender-Elshove is the progeny of her pioneering Indian classical dancer mother, the late Rani (Nydoo) Govender (1944–2005). In addition to Indian and African dance styles, Anusia's interests include dances of the world, interwoven dance cultures, dance theatre, paper engineering, and digital arts. She obtained her MA and PhD Degrees in theatre and performance at Wits University School of the Arts, around the curation of her sixty-five-year-old family dance archive and developing 'paper choreography' and 'unarchival' as decolonial methodology around liminal spaces in the documentation and re-storying of the Other. A former Centennial Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand, she is currently a lecturer in writing and interactivity at the Wits School of Arts Digital Arts Division.

Footprint is a peer-reviewed journal presenting academic research in the field of architecture theory. The journal encourages the study of architecture and the urban environment as a means of comprehending culture and society, and as a tool for relating them to shifting ideological doctrines and philosophical ideas. The journal promotes the creation and development – or revision – of conceptual frameworks and methods of inquiry. The journal is engaged in creating a body of critical and reflexive texts with a breadth and depth of thought which would enrich the architecture discipline and produce new knowledge, conceptual methodologies and original understandings.

Footprint is grateful to our peer reviewers, who generously offered their time and expertise. In this issue, the following papers were peer-reviewed: 'Assimilated Inhabitability: (Black Bodies) Floating in the (White) Fog', 'Not So Stories', 'The Multiplying Worlds of Ma Joie', 'African Para-Ontologies of Domestic Cleaning: Ecological and Pedagogical Concepts of Repetition in Pre-Colonial Rituals of Care', 'Re-animating Virunga: Mapping Relational Ontologies Against Rwanda's Static Enclosures'.

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