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AN ISLAND INFRASTRUCTURE OF GARDENS, GOSSIP, AND *'GRIGRI'*

ABSTRACT This essay considers a complex skein of interconnections between gendered gossip, creole gardens, and 'grigri,' that is, magic and witchcraft as it is so named in the context of the Seychelles islands where we locate our work. Rather than the pernicious circulation of gossip and 'fake news' that today contribute to the derangements of neoliberal platform Capitalism with its distribution of violent misogynistic memes, or the work of gossip mobilized as surveillance in repressive societies of control, we argue that gossip can be resituated as a feminist infrastructural support system, one privileged setting of which is the pharmaceutical garden. The gossip, as Italian feminist scholar and activist Silvia Federici explains, was the name once given to a female friend. While Federici situates witch-hunting and witch trials in the context of the combined emergence of colonialism and capitalism – as products of the enclosure of the commons, the disenfranchisement of women, their expulsion from the guilds, and their removal from areas of expertise including midwifery and reproductive know-how – a history of ethnographic literature studying the Seychelles has tended to treat *grigri* as mere superstition (Benedict / Benedict 1982: 96), and to stigmatize the gendered knowledge in which it is rooted. Gossip, we argue, can manifest as a powerful mode of creative resistance that enables the support of modes of life via expressions of self-care and community care, upon which women and those who identify as women as "weavers of memory" (Federici) and cultural and material knowledge depend. Drawing on Mairi O'Gorman's previous ethnographic research in the Seychelles where she looks to the ambivalent role of gossip as it pertains to land scarcity and the role of magic or *grigri*, and Hélène Frichot's work on infrastructural love, we home in on the situated practice of gossip in the creole garden and how grigri as a form of arcane knowledge is deployed, with both good and bad intentions.

ARRIVING IN THE REPUBLIC OF SEYCHELLES

Once you pull back the curtains on the bucolic beach scenes, and exit the tourist any-place-whatevers, other forms of life and modes of cultural practice can be found in the Seychelles archipelago. For one of us, Hélène, this was the first time we had set foot in the Republic of Seychelles, renowned the world over for its picture-perfect postcard visions of crystalline waters and leaning palms. For the other of us, Mairi, this was one of several fieldwork and family visits, returning again and

again to celebrate a different, more situated point of view on the islands, one that acknowledges an emerging creole (in Seychellois *kreol*) cultural and material identity with associated practices. For both of us, there pertains shared Seychellois heritage and what this means for the complex conundrum of colonial and post-colonial spatial memories and material relations. Together we collaborated with a third of us, Najea, in order to venture into the creole, or rather, the *kreol* garden, to understand its recuperative powers from one who holds this knowledge most intimately. Paying attention to what we can learn together in the garden, in this essay we aim to celebrate its pharmaceutical and restorative powers, articulating modes of life in the sustenance and medicinal garden as lessons to be learned for feminist creative practices. We visit the *kreol* garden, acknowledging its association with *lakaz Kreol* (the creole house), which means situating these cultural formations against a colonial history of the Plantationocene (Haraway 2015; Chao 2022). This is a darkened historical backdrop dependent on a former slave trade through the "middle passage" of the Indian Ocean, a history of enslavement and indentured labor, as well as undervalued knowledge practices that have survived violent displacement. For the three of us, feminist creative practices seek to revalue that which has been oppressed, though each of the authors of this article situate what this means for them in different ways. Creative and material practices enable a shared process of learning emerging as forms of empirical magic procured in the simple act of gathering together.

In the *kreol* garden, which we enter following a generous invitation from Najea, we suggest that there are at least two kinds of feminist creative practice at work: the one that draws on ethnographic and field philosophical ways of paying attention and listening carefully, the other that situates itself as an embodied and embedded practice on the ground, feeling the good earth, knowing what each plant and each flower can achieve for sustenance and well-being, and to treat all kinds of ailments. The provision plot, 'slave garden,' and yam field, have been discussed in depth in Caribbean postcolonial literature, but less so in the Indian Ocean context of the Seychelles. The important work of Penda Choppy (2021), Mairi O'Gorman (2019), and more recently Michael Palmyre (2023), has offered significant contributions. The provision garden commenced as the means of basic sustenance for formerly enslaved workers on Plantation estates, but in time they became locales of cultural rejuvenation (Wynter 1971; McKittrick 2011 and 2013; DeLoughrey 2011 and 2019; Carney 2021). Choppy writes that the "creole garden emerged as a survival strategy" and then proceeded

to become central to "creolization in the Seychelles" (2021: 12). She further argues that the *kreol* garden depends on diminishing cross-generational sharing of knowledge practices in urgent need of new modes of transmission (ibid.:12). As for *grigri*, it is a local form of witchcraft and magic loaded with good and bad intentions, benefits, and harms. As Palmyre explains, only fleeting attention has been paid to witchcraft and *grigri* in the Seychelles – very little literature exists, and that literature is challenging to source, or else written from an anthropological outside – an omission his doctoral thesis seeks to redress (2023: 58). Two of us, Hélène and Mairi, situate our interest in *grigri* as a reflection on what might be foraged in the *kreol* garden, and how this might inform creative feminist practices. Learning with the third of us, with Najea, has allowed us insight into the wonders of the garden.

So we decided to situate ourselves, each in our respective positions, each with distinct concerns and knowledge practices. Together we sketch out an island infrastructure of gardens and gossip, while speculating on *grigri*. We must stress that subsequently, and based on our shared conversation, two of us (Hélène and Mairi), continued to reflect on what it might mean to reclaim *grigri* as an empirical craft to be shared. For we realized in the process of our fieldwork, driven as we were by our curiosity, that it was necessary to be cautious and sensitive to the specific situation of the Seychelles.

Gossip, as well as *grigri*, can both be considered ambivalent circulatory practices. There is the pernicious contagion of gossip, recognized in the contemporary explosion of fake news, and there is the gossip that a small island society such as the Republic of Seychelles can circulate as a means of surveillance and control when abrupt shifts in political power take place. In these ways, gossip, as a form of communication, can quickly inflame a body politic, but it can also be understood as an expression of infrastructure defined as social communication. Scholars Abdou Maliq Simone and Ash Amin both speak of infrastructure beyond transport systems, utilities, and telecommunications, as a social form, going so far as to consider "people as infrastructure" (Simone 2004; 2021). Simone speaks of the "continuous recombinations of people's experiences and practices" in their collective lives, binding together households, communities, and institutions as messy assemblages that are alive to pasts, presents, and futures (Simone 2021: 1342). Simply, infrastructure is established through our profound social and environmental interdependencies. Ash Amin, identifying an infrastructural turn in geography and related fields, locates infrastructure in the "liveliness of socio-technical systems" (Amin

2014: 138) collecting material things and social actors together in their daily spatial and political relations. Infrastructures are what connect us together, at least until they fall apart, leading to the breakdown of social relations as much as technological ones. What we are keen to collaboratively collect are the social infrastructural effects that emerge between *kreol* gardens, the gossip we share with each other as a means of learning, and the *grigri* we aspire to resituate as a kind of empirical craft, while acknowledging the entanglement of *grigri* with constructions of race in relation to colonization, capitalism, and modernity (Palmyre 2023).

We mix our methods, drawing on feminist theories and practices, the architectural and environmental humanities, ethnographic field stories, and what has been recently identified as "field philosophy" (Buchanan / Bastian / Chrulew 2018). Field philosophy challenges the formerly privileged position of the researcher as an objective outsider privy to forms of knowledge that their "informants" are supposed to have no access to. Instead, field philosophy humbly opens itself to a diversity of positions and ways of knowing, seeking to learn, rather than impose what are presumed to be superior epistemological systems of classification. As philosopher Vinciane Despret argues, the field does not simply pre-exist a field of inquiry, or a "field-to-be," though a lively milieu most certainly does pre-exist the arrival of the concerned field philosopher (Despret 2018: 423). That is to say, when we venture forth, we compose a field based on our situated points of view and on our interests, with the hope of addressing pertinent problems. For her part, feminist philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers remarks: "Field philosophers must certainly break with the master defining and appropriating what he claims that he can know" (Stengers 2018: 408). Such an orientation is also described in her argument for an ecology of practices (2005). In a context, such as the Seychelles, emerging from a colonial past, the residual violence sheltering under the denomination 'master' needs to be acknowledged. Rather than assuming a master/slave dialectic, a field philosopher is instead open to what unfolds in the encounter, generously facilitating opportunities for situating the work we might do together, without undervaluing extant modes of existence that would be within their rights to find what we do quite useless or unnecessary.

The work that we do here is shaped by our positionalities, overlapping yet distinct. In what follows, we choose to refer to ourselves by our first names, as an expression of the familiarity we shared. Hélène and Mairi are both scholars embedded within global North institutions, differing in seniority, but sharing an

experience of belonging to the Seychellois diaspora. Hélène's paternal family are part of the *gran blan* plantocracy who fled the islands in anticipation of the profound political shifts of the mid-twentieth century, departing in advance of the socialist coup of 1977. She has written a series of essays on the Seychelles, engaging in the role of critical care and infrastructural interconnnectivity (Frichot 2019; Frichot 2022). Mairi's maternal family are mixed Afro-Creole "Kenya-borns," raised abroad in the context of large-scale economic migration to the continent, who returned to their wider kin network in the islands during this same period of change. Mairi has completed an important doctoral thesis, *Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life* (2019) addressing *kreol* material culture in the Seychelles. Najea, born in Seychelles to Afro-Creole Seychellois parents, is least embedded in the Northern university and most firmly situated in the islands – she has witnessed the rapid political changes of the Seychelles in person, coming of age in the post-liberation Republic. Throughout her career in civil society and the third sector, as much as through growing her garden, Najea has lived and worked in profound intimacy with Seychellois *Kreol* culture, and the efforts of culture bearers to integrate it into global frameworks of heritage management, classification, and knowledge production.

Anthropological studies of the connection between gossip and *grigri* on the Seychelles are not new, but nor are they numerous. This is also why we are so keen to reposition ourselves as feminist creative researchers when we venture into the *kreol* garden as our composed "field." We do not want to impose ideas, nor allow our curiosity to get the better of us, though we will undoubtedly do this despite ourselves as we arrive with our thought-forms already packaged. We share a history characterized by the uneven distribution of violence, both physical and spiritual: from colonial expansion; through to the establishment of a plantation system that persisted long after it had collapsed in other parts of the world; to the upheaval of a decolonization that was never a clean break from what had preceded it. We are divided by this history, too – each racialized differently both within Seychelles and outside it, with a range of experiences of class and material in/security, with different pasts that shape how we each engage with the concept of womanhood. Our aim has been to secure a culturally safe and appropriate rapprochement. Field philosophy aspires to be non-extractive, as such we hope to move beyond some of the famous early anthropological works situated in the Seychelles, while also learning from their insights.

AN ABRIDGED HISTORY The Seychelles is an archipelago of around 115 islands, situated 7 degrees south of the equator in the Western Indian Ocean; most of the population (approximately 100,000 people) live on the main island of Mahé, along with the Inner Islands of Praslin and La Digue. Though the islands were well-known to Asian and Arab seafarers, it was not until the late eighteenth century that they began to be considered potentially valuable to expansionist European powers – claimed by France in 1771, and subsequently passing into British control in 1814. The French, and the British after them, administered the islands as a set of plantation estates founded on the forced labor of enslaved Africans and, after the abolition of slavery, indentured Asian workers and so-called "Liberated" Africans.[1)] The collapse of the economic viability of the plantations, which began in the nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth, occurred in parallel with the rise of parliamentary and decolonial politics. In 1976, the islands became independent from Britain under the SDP (Seychelles Democratic Party); in 1977, a *coup d'etat* led by the SPUP (Seychelles People's United Party) ushered in an era of one-party rule. Multipartyism was formally reinstated in 1991, but it is only in very recent years that the effects of this have been felt on the ground. In 2015, support for the ruling party began to weaken and the balance of power within the National Assembly shifted, and in the presidential election of 2020 the LDS (*Linyon Democratik Seselwa,* Seychelles Democratic Alliance), a coalition of the former opposition parties, came to power. Throughout this economic and political history, surveillance, centralized power, and authoritarianism have been countered by gossip, rumor, and acts of resistance, large and small. *Grigri* (witchcraft) is just one of the means by which ordinary Seychellois could envision and enact alternatives to the prevailing order.

Palmyre has highlighted that the small existing literature of *grigri* is dominated by non-Seychellois voices (2023: 58) and also by racist tropes. This tone is perhaps best exemplified by Ozanne's early twentieth-century account, which dismisses *grigri* as a "hotch-potch of popery and voodooism that baffles any attempt at scientific examination" (1936: 107). Alongside outright dismissal, some writers adopt a softer, exoticizing tendency that is no less rooted in a colonial mindset (Emerson 2010). However, *grigri* is not in fact inexplicable; Palmyre has identified several recurrent discourses surrounding this practice of "influencing" others. Among these is the contention that *grigri* is rooted in slavery and the memory of African religion (Palmyre 2023: 59; Scarr 2000:

1)
This term refers to those captured by the British Royal Navy from Arab slave ships; they were subsequently re-settled across the British Empire, from South Africa to Aden, and often forced to work in conditions that materially resembled slavery (Durup 2010). In Seychelles, where planters were unsuccessful in petitioning the British government for funds with which to import Asian workers, their labor was central to the continuation of the plantation system. While Hélène and Mairi carried out fieldwork in 2023, archival images of Liberated Africans were becoming commonplace on tourist handicrafts, and were the basis of a celebrated set of artworks by Emmanuel D'Offay.

30); that it combines both "black" (meaning malign) and "white" (benign) forms or combines harm and healing (Franda 1982: 31; 32; Carpin 1996: 51); and that it brings together various "modes of action" (Benedict 1966: 64) that essentially function as "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) in a repressive social context. The work of Seychellois anthropologist Jean-Claude Mahoune has added some nuance to this idea of *grigri* as primarily African, highlighting its links to freemasonry and European mystical traditions (1987), but nonetheless *grigri* functions as a "raced concept" (Palmyre 2023: 63) at the interstices of negative stereotypes surrounding Blackness, black magic, and Africa (Benedict / Benedict 1982: 89).

The work of Marion and Burton Benedict exemplifies some of the historical tendencies of ethnography, both taking *grigri* seriously as a form of action, while reproducing it as a "raced" concept. Their work is situated in the same Marxist-materialist vein as Sylvia Federici's analysis of the witch-hunt in Europe (2014), and that of Michael Taussig in Latin America (1977) – which is to say that they treated belief in *grigri* as a product of immediate socioeconomic realities. They depicted *grigri* as having purchase in a "matrifocal" society characterized by deprivation and "dependence" (Benedict / Benedict 1982: 115). Writing just in advance of the massive political upheaval of Seychellois independence in 1976, shortly followed by the socialist coup of 1977, Burton Benedict observed: "In general, female networks are denser and more supportive than are male networks. A female with less direct access to money than a male must work harder to forge the obligations that make up their network" (ibid.: 108). He was dependent on his wife's careful fieldwork to be able to make this observation. There are clear gender divisions of intellectual labor at work in the Benedicts' co-written book on the Seychelles.

For her part, Marion Benedict wrote incisively of her tentative friendship with CM, an aspiring healer interested in cultivating the art of reading cards, and an insatiable gossip, at least according to Benedict. From CM, Benedict learned the power of naming, for to know as many people as possible in your local community, and to know their names "helps to control them, helps to gain power over them. Knowledge about them, acquired both directly from them and indirectly through innuendo and gossip, yields more power over them. Manipulation of gossip becomes an important source of power, which I have called gossip power. It cannot operate without names" (Benedict 1982: 100). Benedict was excited to observe that gossip and *grigri* are entangled: "Gossip seemed to take on a life of its own, apart from being thoughts in peoples' minds and words

on their tongues…Gossip when applied became black magic. And, conversely, black magic becomes applied gossip" (1982: 96). Here the arts of paying careful attention to and engaging in the circulation of gossip could be directed at ends both helpful and harmful in one's social relations.

Her relationship with her informant CM led Benedict to a much-anticipated visit with a local witch doctor, a *bonhomme de bois* (or in Seychellois *Kreol*, *bonnonm dibwa*) where she made the powerful connection between *grigri* and gossip, one that has piqued our interest. What she did not make explicit is the connection of gossip and the practice of witchcraft or *grigri* to the medicinal garden, the source from which most of the mixtures and concoctions of the *bonnonm dibwa* are derived. It is as if in bringing into focus the material conditions which produced belief in *grigri,* the material properties of the plants used by practitioners became obscured. When Benedict visits the local witch doctor, materially present before her in a bundle of powders and sticks that are prepared in different combinations to treat the specific complaints of each 'patient,' there is concrete evidence of the resources of the garden. The *bonnonm dibwa*, or *bonnfanm dibwa* is, literally, the good man or woman of the forest; he or she knows where to forage for healing plants, barks, and other vegetative materials and he or she knows how to cultivate, prepare, and apply them. Franda explains that it is often older people who tell fortunes, doing so by using "packs of cards, seeds, tea or coffee strainings, mirrors or palm reading" and by building on their deep knowledge of "human foibles" (1982: 32). Marion Benedict's 'knowing' relation with the *bonnonm dibwa* was expressed by the anthropologist as though they had some secret agreement between them. She conveys to her reader that while he maintains his power over the locals, by tacit agreement he can hold no power over her. In this, Benedict reveals all the privileges, and perceived superiority of her position, and she also makes assumptions about who her audience of readers is likely to be, making them complicit in her claimed position in knowledge. Benedict has reproduced, from Ozanne's earlier and more explicitly colonial treatment of *grigri,* the racialized non-modern or irrational subject who undertakes a practice that is lacking in scientific reason, thereby diminishing the care that might be discerned in their craft.

We hope we can avoid being so presumptuous when we seek to learn about the socio-material connections between the *kreol* garden, gossip, and *grigri*. We must all the while acknowledge the delicacy of our positioning.

A GIFT SHOP We went to visit Najea in the gift shop where she works. The shop is packed with tourist trinkets, many of them made elsewhere, in Thailand, Bangladesh, or India. We were overwhelmed by the scent of the many novelty soaps available for sale. Najea diplomatically encouraged a last tourist to make her decisions and purchase her trinkets, so she could close up shop for the evening.

Mairi had first met Najea at a workshop dedicated to developing the framework of Intellectual Property in Seychelles, and subsequently formed a friendship. Najea was keen on removing ourselves from the tourist haven – a recent luxury development – where the gift shop is located and finding a place more amenable to conversation. Soon enough we found ourselves discussing the complexity of property relations. Property relations compose a perennial point of discussion in the Seychelles, often pulling families apart as they disagree with each other on how land will be passed on and who gets what proportion of what. Properties that are the subject of disputes are often evident in their dilapidated state of disrepair. As Najea makes her successful journey through the juridical and bureaucratic systems that determine Seychellois land tenure, it also causes family disputes.

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. This can be situated in a wider East African context. When the SPUP claimed power in 1977, and Albert René claimed the presidency, it was with the support of a Tanzanian militia (Franda 1982: 19–20; 53–55). Land reform in postcolonial Tanzania had been based on the centrality of agricultural production to a uniquely African socialism (Brennan 2012: 144), and Seychellois socialism was colored by the close relationship between the two nations (Franda 1982: 119). A radical redistribution of resources was partially achieved and tenaciously held onto: "The new regime had one immediate reform in mind: to redistribute wealth, including land and capital" (Rojid / Afif / Sacerdoti 2013: 2).

The reforms could not help but echo earlier logics of subdivision. One of these was the process of familial inheritance, by which land was inherited by all descendants of a landowner, divided and subdivided until it had to be either sold or maintained as a small plot (Benedict / Benedict 1982: 212). This process has its origins in Napoleonic civil law and the earliest days of the colony, and remains extant; it is part of the reason for the emotional charge of property disputes (including Najea's). The second was the nineteenth-century *moitie* system by which the formerly enslaved were "granted" land

on which they were "apprenticed" to their former masters (perpetuating conditions similar to slavery, and allowing these landowners to maintain or increase the size of their concession) (Durup 2013: 30; Choppy 2022: 18). This persists as a historical undercurrent, structuring property relations and requiring prowess and determination to disrupt its logics – racism and social disadvantage still linger (Choppy 2020: 59).

But in contrast to the often indiscriminate accumulation of land that occurred under the old system, the new divisions were premised on productivity. One of our interlocutors explained that in the 1980s, land reforms led to the creation of the "block" system, under which a contractual commitment to agricultural production was central to being granted a plot of land. It worked with varying success: Some families were able not only to tend the land for their own sustenance but to produce enough to sell at the market, while others (though they had made the same commitment to develop their plot) followed the acquisitive logic of the older system, and left it to remain undeveloped.

Before we rush to judge, a wariness about a residual colonial "ideology of improvement" (Bhandar 2018: 8–10) might be reflected upon here. Improvement presumes that what came before was insufficient or lacking in civilization, was yet to be instituted appropriately according to judgment criteria in favor of the colonizer, or perhaps, those currently in political power. Though land sometimes has the appearance of intrinsic value, it is in many respects an abstraction (Hall 2017: 3) and a "fictitious commodity" (Li 2014: 600). It is *through* labor that its value becomes inscribed (ibid.: 589), so that it is impossible to speak neutrally of land as productive without interrogating the conditions under which it is made to produce.

Today, agriculture on the small island nation-state that is the Seychelles has become even more crucial to food security, with the government's purported aim, as of 2015, "to have a resilient and sustainable agricultural sector that enhances food and nutrition security, contributes to economic growth and respects the natural environment" (SNAIP 2015). This project is full of tension: between the needs of the resident population, tourists, and the environment. During her time in the third sector, Najea collaborated with other culture workers on a book project and initiative *Every Home a Garden* (see Pointe 2020), and it has become commonplace for medicinal gardens to be reinstated on former plantation estates. Still, Najea's journey to reclaim the land on which her family now lives, which her grandfather had managed, which her father had

worked, and her mother had tended, required determination and the wherewithal to stake her legal claim.

Drawing on her own involvement in the complexity of property relations in Seychelles, Najea discussed how, after the 1977 coup, the government commenced the process of redistribution: "they were taking lands from people who has lots of lands and was not using it properly." This was what happened to Madame C, on whose estate Najea's family had lived since her parents married – something that was possible because Najea's maternal grandfather had been the plantation overseer. Madame C ceased farming, no longer keeping chickens and pigs, and so her land was requisitioned by the government, though not without a fight, according to Najea. "So the government decided to take the land, and it's like a village: one for you, a piece for you…" Because Najea's family had lived there so long, they were not displaced but allowed to stay. But family relations continued to become more strained with her father, especially in relation to Najea and her elder brother.

Just before her father finally decided to divorce their mother and leave the family, Najea came to be haunted by an idea: What if her father decided to kick them all out of the house, and off the land? Her brothers, her sister, her mother? Najea discussed this concern with her mother, and they decided to go and see the relevant minister at the time: "…because a lot of people were trying to get a piece of land to buy. We went to see him, we talked to him, and he agreed…without my father's knowledge." Government officials came, they "earmarked the land they were going to give to us and I start doing all these paperwork." While this was happening, and soon after her father had moved out, someone put an idea in her father's head – this is of course how gossip of a pernicious kind usually spreads. Someone alerted him to all that he had to lose in leaving behind the house and the land, and so he decided to fight back. He took not Najea's mother, but Najea and her younger brother to court. It was Najea and her younger brother who were actively trying to claim the property on behalf of the rest of the family. Her father lost, and the land was maintained by Najea, her brothers, her sister, and their mother. This all unfolded around 2004–2005, close to thirty years after the 1977 coup, and 170 years after the abolition of slavery.

GOSSIPING ON GRAND ANSE, WRAPPED IN THE WIND The three of us huddled on the beach, conspiratorial, as the wind blew and the waves crashed, and a couple of desultory troupes of tourists made an attempt at a swim. We could see a small island off the coast, Ile aux Vaches, the island of cows. We were sitting in a bay

called Grand Anse, the Grand Beach, and behind us was the school that Najea once attended as a child. It is an idyllic setting, with the beach close by, though she never learned to swim so well. Najea sat between us, and we wondered whether – what with the wind and waves – the recording would work at all, or whether we would later find only the voice of the wind whipping and teasing. Cloaked in the wind, sand between our toes, soft drinks in hand, and dried sweet potato chips to snack upon, it was like we were sealed in our own acoustic privacy, as though it was important to keep the secrets to ourselves, because the ancient island itself might otherwise listen in and carry our secrets to other parts, at our own peril. In the three or so weeks we had been here for this field visit, on several occasions allusions to the animate life of the islands themselves had been made, whether through the cipher of ghosts, or *grigri*, or the Seychellois figure of the *dandosya* (zombie), and further, in the *longue durée* of its deep geological time.

Palmyre explains that *dandosya* "figure into gossip about who may be involved with *grigri*, and a common claim concerned people who kept tidy yards and gardens who, the claim went, could only do so because they kept *dandosya*" (Palmyre 2023: 176; see also 59). One interlocutor told us that a young girl *dandosya*, purportedly controlled by a local witch doctor whose house was located close by a plantation estate, came to play with the children of the estate workers and was chased away by our interlocutor's father. The unwilling labor of the *dandosya* in the garden or estate – a zombie, a figure situated perilously between death and life and not owning a will of their own – speaks powerfully to a history of slavery, where peoples were displaced from their traditional lands, forced to suffer the "middle passage" packed in the hulls of boats (Glissant 1997), and rendered as property by the colonizer who put them to work against their will, at the limit working them to death.[2)]

Though most history books insist that the islands were uninhabited when first settled by a party from the island of La Réunion, Choppy argues that some of the first settlers must be recognized in those enslaved peoples who managed to escape, the early maroons (Choppy 2022B: 14; Nicolls 2022: 28). Rather than the habitually cited line up of "fourteen white men (including a commandant, a surgeon and chief carpenter), seven black slaves, five Indians, and another person described as a 'negress'" (Nwulia: 1981 17; see also Franda 1982: 7), another story might be told of first settlers (Nicholls 2022).

From the beginning, women were involved in land ownership in the Seychelles. Françoise Vergès has described La Réunion as an "island of men," where a pronounced gender disparity in the original

2) Comparison can be drawn with the figure of the Haitian zombie (Davis 1988), which Palmyre identifies as a similar but distinct manifestation of the same history (2023: 1740–1745); and Comaroff and Comaroff's work (1999) on similar stories in the South African context.

population gradually ossified into a fundamentally "*masculine* society" (2007: 141), dictating the character of *créolité* that emerged. A slightly different trajectory is evident in Seychelles. While a dominant French plantocracy claimed the most powerful hold on *habitations* measured in *arpents* (designating the apportioning of land in blocks to colonial settlers) (Nwulia 1981: 27), their hegemony was undone in parts and parcels. One of the earliest landholders was the free Malagasy woman Vola-ma-Effa (Durup 2013: 18). By the twentieth century, while it was unusual for women to purchase land themselves, it was relatively common to be given land by a "paramour" (Benedict / Benedict 1982: 211) and also possible to inherit it via the process described in the preceding section. The Benedicts explained this as the origin of the common designation "Mme So-and-so's land" (even where the land was legally owned by a man) (ibid.: 211), and this way of relating to property has persisted.

The land on which Najea and her late mother had grown up was owned by Mme C. Now the land, the outline of which can be barely made out on Google Maps, if you know what you are looking for, includes Najea's own garden, as well as the "Magic Garden" her older brother, a brother barely a year older than herself, has been tending for over twenty years. Najea's younger brother is a landscape designer, and it is clear these three siblings are dedicated to the garden as a place of cultural and familial memory, hands-on practiced knowledge as well as recuperation. Property first claimed through colonial apparatuses of property ownership and improvement can be undermined in gardens such as Najea's through feminist practices of alternative land use, a focus on sustenance and sharing rather than exploitation and expropriation. Najea's mother's presence is still felt throughout the house, and the garden is formed in the shape of what she taught her children.

Najea's maternal grandfather was the overseer of this land when it was part of Mme C's estate. Her father was a worker on the estate, while her mother tended to their own provision garden, a smaller one near the house, and a larger one further inland, a short walk up the hill. During the holidays Najea and her brothers and sister would clamber to receive small jobs on the plantation. Some days they would venture into the woods with their parents to collect cinnamon bark. It was very exciting, said Najea "You had your bag, you had your lunch, and you would go up there and get all the fruit. You had pineapples, oranges, jackfruit, and you would…" Here Najea paused to mimic spitting the seeds out as the children wander into the woods, and this would mean, as she explained, that yet

more fruit trees would grow in time. When school was still on, the moment Najea and her brothers and sister arrived home they would be directly set to work in the family provision garden. Her father would check whether the garden had been sufficiently watered by the children by sticking his finger into the earth. Sometimes he would send the children off to buy *kalou* for him to drink, an alcoholic beverage made of coconut palm sap and sold to workers by the estate. There was always more work to be done. Kitchen refuse could be collected from houses of this Madame and that Madame and used to feed their pigs and chickens. Najea was always curious, keen to learn, constantly asking questions to her mother and grandmother, incrementally embodying the craft of tending to the garden and learning what it was good for.

As a child, Najea remembers selling produce in a streetside stall outside the family bungalow on Saturdays. She also remembers carrying produce such as watercress on the local bus to the main market in the capital Victoria, the Sir Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke Market. For the children such a visit to town happened rarely, and was considered as exciting as a trip overseas, filling Najea with a mix of emotions, excitement, and anxiety. Now Najea explains that her aspiration is to open her own shop on the main road in the small, two-story hut that has been recently constructed, but which appears to remain incomplete, waiting in anticipation. It is clear she would be happy to leave the gift shop in the tourist haven behind and claim self-determination in her own localized commercial venture. This would mean more time in the garden, for there is never enough time to tend to the garden, between her work in the gift store, the long bus trip between home and work, and with only one day a week that she can claim as her own.

This desire for autonomy must be understood in the context of the relationships engendered by the plantation. Even after Najea and her mother had succeeded in securing their plot, old habits died hard. She recalled Mme C passing them as they returned home from fishing, and asking to see what they had in their bags. Najea's mum replied, "Oh no, this is my bag. What do you want?" Mme C thought, Najea surmised, that they had taken 'her' coconuts. "It was good to actually hear her say it," Najea told us. "She was a lady, I would say."

ARRIVING IN THE MAGIC GARDEN We paid two visits to Najea and her partner's house and garden. They live at the back of the house, while her sister lives in the front section with her children. Najea cooked *kreol* coconut curry, including a cinnamon leaf from her own garden, a crucial ingredient. On the second visit, Najea arranged

for us to meet her brother, F., even though we had insisted that it is her we are interested in speaking with, and her garden we would enjoy learning more about. It soon became apparent why it was so crucial to venture toward the rear of Najea's garden, past the small river where she and her siblings bathed as children, and where it was once possible to catch prawns, though less likely now. Tentatively, we followed Najea in a single file, and by the time we returned, we were covered in mosquito bites, while Najea remained unaffected. It is as though the local environment is prepared to accommodate her, but we remain visitors there, under cautious notice.

// Figure 1
Hélène Frichot, At the bottom of Najea's Garden, July 2023

To arrive in the Magic Garden, we followed a path through Najea's medicinal and sustenance garden. The two gardens are connected by sibling bonds, building on the cross-generational knowledge passed down from a mother to her children, and before that, grandparents. We passed through a metal gate, and along a minor avenue of leaning pink flowers which partially obscure the way. Najea pointed out the tortoise pen on the right, an attraction common to many former plantation estates, and still found at former plantations that have been transformed into tourist attractions, such as the Jardin du Roi, the Takamaka rum distillery (a reconstruction of the former estate of La Plaine St. André settled in 1792, and once owned by Hélène's grandmother's family, the Jorre de St Jorres, placing her in uncomfortable proximity to the colonial French plantocracy), and the Union Estate on the island of Praslin.

Najea's older brother, F. greeted us cautiously after his barking dogs alerted him to our arrival. We were reading a handmade sign that describes a plan of the Magic Garden, showing the layout of the picturesque paths, including simple illustrations of the hand-crafted timber bungalows where the older and the younger brother live, as well as separate huts and shelters, some accommodating cooking ovens and hot plates, resting places, look-outs, sheds and areas where seedlings can be cultivated. Along the garden path there are sign posts directing the way. One simply reads "Hope & Faith My Masterpiece…" Najea's brother spoke of how the garden teaches him about time; he gives all his time to the garden, and the garden reciprocates. One look-out includes a memorial with images of F.'s personal history as he cared for his garden over the years. His hair is bundled into a mass of Rastafarian dreadlocks expressing his pan-African philosophical beliefs. In his youth, this resulted in his

father expelling him from the family house, and F. sleeping in a tree for months in what would become, in time, his Magic Garden.

It dawned on us that we were venturing into a private domain, usually only accessible to close family and intimates. We acknowledge the honor of this invitation. Even if, at first, the reason for our keen interest was greeted with some suspicion, slowly, as we tour the marvelous garden, and exclaim at how it flourishes, Najea's brother warms to us. It became clear that for the most part Najea's older brother composes and tends this garden for his own pleasure, and yet it is also a test site, a laboratory of sorts, for the younger brother's landscape practice, which benefits from what is discovered in the Magic Garden. By coincidence, Hélène discovered that a local Seychellois architect she was in dialogue with had arranged for Najea's younger brother to offer landscape design advice on his plot of land in the same neighborhood. An ecology of practices emerges amongst the siblings in connection with the gardens they share and the local knowledge they glean and circulate. They share produce, much as they offer advice to each other, and advice is mixed with gossip, ghost stories, and memories of the adventures they shared as children.

Ecology of practices is a formulation borrowed from the thinking of Stengers, who forwards concept-tools dedicated to thinking immanently, here and now, through what is happening to us (Stengers 2005: 185; Frichot 2018). We use our (garden) tools to "actualise the power of a situation" (Stengers 2005: 185), to enable us to think with each other, with the soil and the plants in the garden. This is a form of empirical and pragmatic craft, which, we venture, can be offered as a redefinition of magic, where magic is associated with ritual, and where ritual is understood as a form of gathering that makes present our concerns, pulling us out of ourselves as self-serving, individuated subjects. The ritual of gathering can "make us think and feel and wonder about what sustains us" (Stengers 2008: 51), and also what does not.

INCANTING GOSSIP AND *'GRIGRI'* AS FEMINIST CREATIVE PRACTICES

When it comes to the beneficial role of gossip, feminist activist and scholar Silvia Federici explains that:

> "In many parts of the world, women have historically been seen as the weavers of memory – those who keep alive the voices of the past and the histories of the communities, who transmit them to the future generations and, in so doing, create a collective identity and profound sense of cohesion" (Federici 2018: 41).

The gossip, Federici explains, was once simply the word for female friend. Gradually, gossip has come to be associated with idle and informal talk, deployed at the risk of damaging reputations or causing unrest. Because it is assumed that gossip is a mode of discourse specific to women, Federici argues that the further assumption is that women have nothing better to do with themselves and suffer from "having less access to real knowledge and information and a structural inability to construct factually based, rational discourses" (ibid.: 41). Knowledge here is split between two modes, a privileged form of knowledge that is abstract, scientific, universally transferable, and know-how as a specific embodied form of knowledge, handed down through generations, enabling community cohesion, and shared as "medical remedies" and to soothe "the problems of the heart" (ibid.: 41). Federici's point is that women's knowledge practices are diminished through the derogatory usage of the term gossip, wherein their intentions are assumed to be malign and self-serving, characteristics that then prepare the ground for accusations of witchcraft. Feminist creative practices can turn this devaluation around in an act of reclamation, returning to gossip in its relation to empirical arts and the sharing of know-how via bonds of female friendship, including cross-generational relationships. Federici reports on a meeting she attended discussing the meaning of witchcraft where a woman there remarked that magic pertains to the fact that "we know what we know" (ibid.: 42). Eco-feminist, self-proclaimed neo-pagan witch Starhawk explains that magic is what we might habitually assume to be performed in the sleight of hand of the magician, or the supernatural spell and evil manipulations of the stereotypical witch. Instead "Learning to work magic is mostly a process of learning to think things, to experience concretely as well as to think abstractly" (Starhawk 1997: 27). Magic helps us pay attention to material things and their relations.

// Figure 2
Hélène Frichot, A timber pavilion in the Magic Garden, July 2023

Gossip travels, expressing itself through indirectness, euphemism, and cloaked asides. Gossip, like *grigri*, can be curative, or it can be toxic. Gossip (or Seychellois *kankan*) and surveillance can work together in a heavily surveilled environment in which *grigri* can take root. Some of these coded means of communication have become crucial for the survival of a *kreol* reclamation of history on

the Seychelles, while other forms of gossip are pernicious in their will to surveil, producing knowledge as a form of "power over." This indirectness has been remarked upon by the Benedicts in their early field research, contributing, or so they claim, to attitudes and practices which mean you never go against someone directly. Instead, you go in secret to the *bonnomn dibwa* who confirms what you suspected and then acts secretly against the other person. Najea is more circumspect, suggesting that the Seychellois get along with things:

> "This is how I see it. Seychellois, when there is something just happened, it's hard, they argue about it, we say this this and that, in a few days we [are] so happy! We forget! We adapt, we say OK, but we just say, you know this this is, we will talk to ourself, we not happy with it, but we're not gonna – it's like, we don't do strike. Have you heard Seychellois do a lot of strike? Never!"

There is a resilience expressed in coping with daily challenges communicated in Najea's story of her own travails. As Choppy remarks, the Creole people of the Seychelles have always "had to find creative ways of surviving in very harsh conditions. This is why Creole culture and identity is a triumph of creativity and sustainability" (2020: 58–59). Friendship among women (and those who identify as women) can support a social infrastructure dedicated to solidarity. A struggle takes place here to reclaim the benefits of gossip as female relations of power-from-within. Federici explains, "when a term commonly indicating a close female friend turned into one signifying idle, backbiting talk, that is, talk potentially sowing discord," then what takes place is "the opposite of the solidarity that female friendship implies and generates" (ibid.: 36). It is the eco-feminist witch Starhawk, a figure of inspiration for Stenger's concept of ecology of practices (Stengers 2005: 194; Stengers 2008), who speaks to the distinction between "power over" and "power-from-within" (Starhawk 1997: xxv). The latter is immanent within ourselves and our forms of gathering. The witches, Starhawk explains "were the wise women and cunning men of the country villages. They were herbalists and healers, the counsellors in times of trouble" (1997: xxvi). It is much the same story Federici relates when she connects gossip to witchcraft, and the central role of the commons in advance of their devastating enclosure (2018; 2014). For us, in the Seychelles context, the commons is located in the *kreol* garden where material knowledge practices manage to survive, despite great impediments

How, finally, does this pertain to feminist creative practices as an ecology of practices of the everyday, of ordinary affects, of collective work, of gossip and *grigri* in the garden? Gossip proliferates, it is contagious, it carries home truths and advice for survival and sustenance, and it can also mislead, casting aspersions on the one who unwittingly becomes the subject of gossip. When we bent our three heads together to hear about Najea's garden, and her struggles for securing the title on the land for her family, what we were doing was gossiping. We were passing informal modes of knowledge between us and sharing intimacies, but were we also dabbling in *grigri*? No, at least, not in any kind of straightforward way, though we were exploring the "power-from-within" each one of us could bring to our gathering, especially in what it means to trust each other enough to share our stories. We must be clear too that the work Najea does in the garden is not *grigri*. Rather, the healing and harmful properties of the garden form the basis for a spectrum of practices – household provisioning, herbalism, and traditional healing, all the way through to the power of the *bonnonm dibwa* and *sorsye* (witch) – that come to constitute daily life in Seychelles.

//Figure 3
Hélène Frichot, Hope and Faith in the Magic Garden, July 2023

Michael Palmyre explains that *grigri* is "located in a murky domain between legal herbalism and illegal witchcraft. It is located on the side of the illegal in that its use could be dedicated to undermining state activities (Palmyre 2023: 82). Furthermore, post-coup, a gender divide is discernible in approaches to *grigri*, between the authority of the herbalist (formerly associated with the figure of the *bonnonm dibwa*) and their condoned, science-adjacent practice, and the suspicious spells and potions of the one who practices *grigri*. This perhaps deepens the distinction that Marion Benedict noted between men as *bonnonm dibwa*, and women as mere cartomancers and dispensers of love potions (Benedict / Benedict 1982: 88).

Palmyre himself never encountered a *bonnfanm dibwa,* though he did hear stories of women practitioners from his interlocutors (2023: 77). He suggests that this absence is explained partially by his own identity as a male researcher, and that of the men he spoke to – who tended to refer him on to other men (ibid.: 76). But he also speculates that the "masculinization" of the Creole world, as described by Vergès, plays a role in the gendering of witchcraft (ibid.: 78); that the struggle for control over reproductive power identified by Federici in the witch hunts of Europe also has salience

in the post-coup landscape of Seychelles (ibid.: 148, 156). In La Réunion, the masculinization of *créolité* was realized through the revolutionary deployment of the figure of the *marron*, who rebelled against slavery to kill his masters, at the expense of the more prosaic figure of the enslaved woman charged with enduring sexual violence, bearing and nursing the children of the colony (Vergès 1999: 43). In Seychelles, this figure of the *zonm lib* (free man), sometimes identified as a counterpart to the *dandosya* (Palmyre 2023: 173), has likewise obscured feminine and feminized figures within the national imaginary. The relative social power of women in Seychelles (see Yoon 2011: 104–5; Campling, et al. 2011: 53) does not change this, but rather contributes to the construction of a sphere of "culture" in which men are positioned as experts and expertise as masculine. The figure of the herbalist exemplifies this, and the ambivalence *bonnonm dibwa* underscores it.

Palmyre observes that "'grigri' as a concept is held together by discourse more than by any standardised community of practice" (2023: 111). Part of its power is expressed through rumor, innuendo, and gossip. When circulated through gossip, practitioners can be marginalized, and yet the rumor of their powers expands their reputations (ibid.: 115), hence the role that gossip plays, at least in the continued discursive circulation of *grigri*. Herbalism can be incorporated into a vision of Seychellois Creole culture that is legible both through the lens of science and that of living cultural heritage (see Jeffery / Rotter 2016); *grigri*, as Palmyre argues, is entangled with "bodies, discourses, and practices" (Palmyre 2023: 29) that contribute to its status as racialized and abject.

A comparison with *moutya*, a traditional form of dance once associated with the rebellion of enslaved Africans, sexual freedom, and occult practices, is instructive. *Moutya* has been the focus of a concerted revival, reclaimed and celebrated (Parent 2020: 10), and now inscribed as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Seychelles (UNESCO 2021). It is part of Seychellois *kreolite*, even if its form has changed somewhat in the process. *Grigri*, Palmyre argues, persists as a "racialised signifier," albeit a floating one (2023: 30, 118), encompassing both negative stereotypes of Africanness and positive revaluations. The *bonnonm dibwa* thus occupies an ambivalent position in relation to the modern Creole nation: an emblem of harms, past and present, actual and imagined; and a repository of traditional knowledge.

But in speculating on the potentialities of resituating *grigri* as a material feminist creative practice, of learning from one another, we are not attempting to reposition the *bonnonm dibwa* or to

question the authority of the accredited herbalist. We must be cautious, for strictly speaking *grigri* remains illegal, even if near impossible to prosecute, partly on account of the difficulties of legally defining witchcraft (Palmyre 79–80). Two of us are relative outsiders to Seychelles, and remain at risk of exoticizing and thereby sensationalizing *grigri* as an occult art.

Instead, we are thinking of Najea's mother. By drawing on the herbal practice of her own mother, who would instruct the children to go to the garden and gather "seven things" when they were ill, Najea explains:

// Figure 4
Hélène Frichot, View from a look-out in the Magic Garden, July 2023

> "Let's say you get one takamaka, one needs to be lemongrass, one needs to be – so seven types, orange, lemongrass, lemon, but it has to be seven. For you to make this bath, for you to take your bath to make the fever go away."

Najea links this to the treatment of *tanbav*, a form of impetigo that is common across the Indian Ocean, and which is understood to be derived from a traditional Malagasy framework in which the child's body must be properly incorporated into the father's lineage in order to be healed (Pourchez 2017). This cosmological and spiritual aspect is not necessarily part of how the illness is understood in Seychelles, where it is merely an inconvenience and annoyance for a busy mother. But the care, the meticulousness, and the potent power of the herbs all ground it back in the regenerative power of the garden.

When we seek to reclaim *grigri* as a material practice undertaken in intimate relation to the *kreol* garden, celebrated as a source of sustenance and knowledge of herbal remedies, we query the ways in which *grigri* has been figured as a force to be expelled from the construction of contemporary *kreol* identity. Beyond discourse, it is in the entanglement of "bodies, discourses, and practices" (Palmyre 2023: 29) that we seek opportunities for rethinking the value of *grigri*.

The weaving of memory and the reclaiming of the garden from an extractive colonial past can become the means by which the feminist creative practitioner takes courage in her self-determination and her expertise, individually, and more importantly, collectively and collaboratively, in solidarity. Feminist creative practices in the garden include: the sharing of embodied practices and knowledge of what is good, and what is toxic, what plants can be used for what

ailments, and how this might change from one application to the next (*grigri*); the circulation of know-how in the tending of the garden and the cross-generational transfer of knowledge from grandparent to parent to child as well as between friends and neighbors (*gossip*); the practice of tending to the garden by acknowledging its needs as needs one shares in (*the garden*). What we learn while walking alongside Najea and learning with her is how in the garden you are not only working toward your harvest, but when you look back, things that appeared as frustrating or obstacles become part of the story of what you have gained. All these we consider as contributing to forms of feminist creative practice attentive to the refugia we carve out in everyday life, in the garden, as elsewhere.

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Najea Barbe has worked with NGOs and civil society organizations in Seychelles for over 20 years. She began her career at Red Cross Seychelles, before moving to LUNGOS (Liaison Unit of Non-Governmental Organizations of Seychelles), and subsequently to NATCOF (the National Consumers Forum). While studying General Management in 2013, she wrote her dissertation on factors affecting the consumption patterns of Seychellois consumers. She was a contributor to the 'Every Home A Garden' initiative (2020), encouraging homeowners to grow their own food crops.

Mairi O'Gorman is a social anthropologist who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh. Her doctoral thesis, *Tree of knowledge, tree of life: materials, intimacy and being Creole in London and Seychelles* (2019), was based on ethnographic fieldwork in both places. She is currently co-editing the book *Challenges and Prospects for the Chaos Archipelago*. Her research interests include islands, migration, creolization, cultural heritage, and arts-based research methods.

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