

Lieu de mémoire, lieu d'oubli, lieu de réparation?: the colonial house in contemporary Mauritian art and literature

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Lieu de mémoire, lieu d'oubli, lieu de réparation?

The colonial house in contemporary Mauritian art and literature

Julia Waters

University of Reading

The destruction of the vernacular *case créole* has emerged as a striking, recurrent theme in contemporary Mauritian cultural production, as well as a cause of much heated public debate. Reflecting contrasting conceptions of a *lieu de mémoire* – linked, paradoxically, to processes of memory, loss, forgetting, and occlusion – this article explores the diverse representations of the colonial house and its destruction in recent artistic works (by Florent Beusse and Jano Couacaud) and novels (by J.M.G. Le Clézio and Gabrielle Wiehe). Initially, the artistic works appear to be motivated by a nostalgic yearning for ‘lost traditions, wrecked ways of life’ (Nora), but close analysis hints at a different story hidden behind the houses’ facades. In the literary imaginary, the destruction of colonial-era houses is portrayed not as the subject of nostalgia or regret, but as a necessary means of achieving long-overdue, symbolic reparation for historical injustices. As such, I argue, art and literature offer a site for revealing the ‘récits cachés de la mémoire nationale’ (Nora) – particularly around slavery – in the postcolonial present.

Keywords: Mauritian art and literature, colonial house, loss, slavery, reparation

La destruction de la ‘case créole’ est apparue comme thème récurrent dans la production culturelle contemporaine à l’île Maurice, ainsi qu’en tant que sujet de débats passionnés dans la sphère publique. Reflétant les conceptions contrastées d’un lieu de mémoire – lié, paradoxalement, à des processus de mémoire, de perte, d’oubli et d’occlusion – cet article explore les diverses représentations de la maison coloniale et de sa destruction dans des ouvrages artistiques et littéraires récents. Au départ, les ouvrages artistiques paraissent jeter un regard nostalgique sur les ‘traditions perdues’ et les ‘modes de vie détruits’ (Nora) associés à ces maisons de l’ère coloniale: mais une analyse plus attentionnée révèle les indices d’autres histoires qui restent cachées derrière leurs belles façades. Ces histoires sont confrontées de manière plus explicite dans l’imaginaire littéraire, où la destruction des maisons de l’époque coloniale est présentée non comme sujet de regret, mais comme moyen nécessaire d’obtenir, enfin, une réparation symbolique pour les injustices historiques trop longtemps niées. L’art et la littérature offrent ainsi, je propose, un site fertile où déterrer les ‘récits cachés de la mémoire nationale’ (Nora) – en particulier autour de l’esclavage – dans le présent post-colonial.

Mots clefs: art et littérature mauriciens, maison coloniale, disparition, esclavage, réparation

Recent Black Lives Matter protests have shone a light on long-suppressed histories of colonialism and slavery, the legacies of which still haunt the physical and social structures of contemporary, postcolonial societies. Across the globe, demands that the one-sided historical narratives promoted by national *lieux de mémoire* be rewritten have led to the toppling of statues and the excavation, literal and symbolic, of the dark pasts of stately homes and national institutions. In Mauritius, a former French and then British colony founded on the dual ‘crimes fondateurs’¹ of slavery and indenture, the recent inauguration of *Le Musée Intercontinental de l’Esclavage* in the centre of the capital Port Louis marks a significant chapter in the country’s belated acknowledgement of its crucial historical links with the international slave trade.² The location of the museum, in a former military hospital built by slaves during the French colonial era, was deliberately chosen for its ‘valeur historique et sentimentale’ as a way to ‘reconnaître le sacrifice et la contribution des esclaves et des descendants d’esclaves au pays’.³ The creation of a slavery museum in Mauritius was a key recommendation of the ground-breaking Truth and Justice Commission into the country’s history and legacies of slavery (2009–2011). The first three of the Commission’s twenty-five recommendations are: 1) ‘memorializing slavery’; 2) ‘a better understanding of, and a more inclusive, Mauritian history and culture’; and 3) ‘a better and increased protection of Mauritian heritage’.⁴ Museums and other *lieux de mémoire* are certainly concrete examples of official efforts to ‘memorialize slavery’ and so contribute to a ‘more inclusive

1 Mauritian novelist Ananda Devi used these terms in Patrick Sultan, ‘Rupture et héritages: Entretien avec Ananda Devi’, 2001 <<http://orees.concordia.ca/numero2/essai/Entretien7decembre.html>> [accessed 7 July 2019].

2 This marks a profound change in official attitude from what Anjali Prabhu identified in 2007 as an ‘inability of Mauritian society to come to terms with the issue of slavery and its historical ties to the African continent and Madagascar’. Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 152. The designation of Le Morne Brabant, a mountain associated with *marronage*, as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2006 already marked a significant symbolic gesture towards incorporating slavery in collective memory.

3 These quotations are from Avinah Teeluck, Ministre des Arts et du Patrimoine National, and Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth respectively. ‘Musée de l’esclavage : première phase lancée à l’ancien hôpital militaire’, *Le Mauricien*, 20 October 2020 <<https://www.lemauricien.com/actualites/musee-de-lesclavage-premiere-phase-lancee-a-lancien-hopital-militaire/382595/>> [accessed 18 February 2021].

4 ‘Report of the Truth and Justice Commission’, November 2011 <<https://reparations.qub.ac.uk/assets/uploads/2009-2011-Mauritius-Truth-Commission.pdf>> [accessed 5 March 2021].

Mauritian history'. Yet, although one 'historic and sentimental' colonial-era building may have thus been conserved, the destruction (by demolition or neglect) elsewhere of numerous other 'tangible memory traces linked to the colonial'⁵ demonstrates the difficulty, in a postcolonial Mauritius driven by economic development and diversification, of achieving 'a better and increased protection of Mauritian heritage'.

This article will examine how the widespread and ongoing destruction of the vernacular colonial-era house in postcolonial Mauritius is represented in contemporary art and literature. As the co-authors of *The Empire Writes Back* point out, 'The construction *or* demolition of houses is a recurring and evocative figure for the problematic of postcolonial identity'.⁶ In his study of literal and literary dwellings in the French Caribbean, Jason Herbeck similarly argues that the house is 'an exceptionally receptive [...] figurative framework with which to comprehend the broad, collective, identitarian struggles inherent to [...] society as a whole'.⁷ Herbeck's assertion that houses 'may be read as dynamic, cogent witnesses to events and periods of the region's past, present, and even future'⁸ may usefully be applied to the Mauritian texts and context that this article will explore, particularly given his recognition that houses can also 'be interpreted by way of their [...] physical preservation (*or* lack thereof), and (in)occupancy over time'.⁹ In exploring the kinds of narratives, dominant or dominated, associated with this exceptionally receptive *lieu de mémoire* – and its destruction – in contemporary Mauritius, I shall heed Maeve McCusker's poignant reminder, originally applied to a Caribbean context, that, 'in [...] a society founded upon the institution of slavery, the space of the house acquires an even more heavily freighted significance than in postcolonial societies more generally'.¹⁰ I shall also consider 'the cultural amnesia of difficult and

5 Étienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno (eds), *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), p. 9. This volume includes my contribution on 'la Case créole' in Reunion Island, where French state funding and heritage tourism have ensured a different fate for colonial-era, vernacular buildings (pp. 148–58).

6 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 27; emphasis added.

7 Jason Herbeck, *Architextual Authenticity: Constructing Literature and Literary Identity in the French Caribbean* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p. 53.

8 Herbeck, p. 50.

9 Herbeck, p. 30; emphasis added.

10 Maeve McCusker, 'No Place like Home? Constructing Identity in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*', in Mary Gallagher (ed.), *Ici-Là: Place and Displacement in Caribbean Writing in French* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 41–60 (p. 42).

painful pasts¹¹ and the ‘racialized and romanticized versions of [...] social memory’¹² that have been identified in studies of the ‘Big House’ in the American South as characterizing its representations in both fictional or museum forms. In such contexts, the etymology of the term ‘vernacular’, deriving from the Latin *vernus* meaning ‘a slave born in his master’s house’, will prove particularly apposite.

As already stated, it is the *destruction* (and not, as in other contexts, the construction or museumification) of colonial houses that has emerged as a particularly insistent theme in recent artistic and literary works in Mauritius, in response to the widespread and ongoing loss of their literal, physical counterparts,¹³ and that will be the subject of this article. My analysis will focus on two art books and two works of fiction which, representative of a much broader potential corpus, offer particularly fruitful grounds for comparison. In a first part, I shall examine the depiction of literal vernacular dwellings – and their actual or impending destruction – in Florent Beusse and Amal Sewtohol, *Regards from Mauritius* (2014)¹⁴ and Jano Coucaud, *On Borrowed Time/Le Temps suspendu* (2017).¹⁵ In a second part, I shall then analyse the literary depictions of the loss of colonial houses, and of the Franco-Mauritian families who once inhabited them, in Nobel Prize-winning J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *Alma* (2017) and in début novelist Gabrielle Wiehe’s *Vent d’Est* (2018).¹⁶ In exploring the kinds of narratives told about the loss of colonial houses in contemporary Mauritian art and literature, I shall ask: What kinds of monument do these physical vestiges of Mauritius’s colonial past represent within Mauritius’s post-independence, multi-ethnic social and geographic fabric and in its collective memory? What kinds of narratives, real or imaginary, collective or familial, are conveyed or re-evaluated through the representation of colonial houses and

11 Stephen P. Hanna, Derek H. Alderman, and Candace Forbes Bright, ‘From Celebratory Landscapes to Dark Tourism Sites? Exploring the Design of Southern Plantation Museums’, in Philip R. Stone et al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), pp. 399–421; p. 400.

12 S. Hoelscher, ‘The White-Pillared Past: Landscapes of Memory and Race in the American South’, in R. Schein (ed.), *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 39–72, cited in Hanna, Alderman, and Bright, p. 400.

13 The Mauritian conservation NGO, SOS Patrimoine en péril lists numerous colonial-era houses in its database of endangered heritage sites: <http://www.patrimoineenperil.mu/inventaire/> [accessed 5 March 2021].

14 Florent Beusse and Amal Sewtohol, *Regards from Mauritius* (Port Louis: Éditions Vizavi, 2014).

15 Jano Coucaud, *On Borrowed Time/Le Temps suspendu* (Port Louis: L’Atelier littéraire, 2017).

16 J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Alma* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017); Gabrielle Wiehe, *Vent d’Est* (Port Louis: Atelier des Nomades, 2018).

of their destruction? What might the expansion of our understanding of *lieux de mémoire* to include the domestic house contribute to a postcolonial reconsideration of both received and suppressed narratives of Mauritius's colonial past?

Pierre Nora famously defines a *lieu de mémoire* as 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of [a] community'.¹⁷ Yet, reflecting on the evolution of his three-tome project over a period of eight years, Nora concedes that paradoxically the memorial function inherent in a society's attachment to particular *lieux de mémoire* is also underpinned by 'a deep consciousness of [...] threatened countryside, lost traditions, wrecked ways of life'¹⁸: that is, the purported memorial function of *lieux de mémoire* is always linked to a sense of real or feared loss. Nora also acknowledges the need to extend the original notion of a *lieu de mémoire* to include 'the discovery and exploration of latent or hidden aspects of national memory'.¹⁹ The recent volume *Postcolonial Realms of Memory* makes an important contribution to addressing some of the aspects of France's national memory pertaining to its colonial past and postcolonial legacies that had remained latent, hidden, or neglected in Nora's original project.²⁰ Reflecting these diverse conceptions of a *lieu de mémoire*, this article will explore the representation of the colonial house as a multi-faceted, contested *lieu de mémoire* endowed with multiple, often contradictory symbolic associations and, like the historical narratives with which it is enmeshed, open to ongoing revision and even dismantling.

Modern-day postcolonial Mauritius is a particularly interesting case study for interrogating diverse conceptions of memorial heritage. With no original human inhabitants, Mauritius's present-day multi-ethnic population is made up entirely of the descendants of immigrants, both free and unfree, from across the globe. As Catherine Boudet and Julie Peghini argue, the separate foundation myths of Mauritius's three main ethnic groups – colonial settlement (Franco-Mauritians); slavery (Creoles); indenture and/or independence (Indo-Mauritians) – have hindered the acknowledgement of collective national *lieux de mémoire*. Instead, they argue, the post-independence, state-supported maintenance of separate mutually exclusive 'mémoires ethniques'

17 Pierre Nora, 'From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*', preface to the English-language edition, in Lawrence D. Kritzman and Pierre Nora (eds), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Volume 1: Conflicts and Divisions' (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 18.

18 Nora, p. xxiii.

19 Nora, p. xviii.

20 Achille et al., *Postcolonial Realms of Memory*.

has resulted in an ‘éclatement’ or ‘empilement des mémoires’ that privileges (and funds) certain ethnically defined *lieux de mémoire* while leaving others – particularly those associated with the colonial era and hence with the Franco-Mauritian community – to fall into disrepair and oblivion.²¹ In her study of the ‘multiple memories’ of slavery and indenture in Mauritius, Srilata Ravi similarly observes that the ‘fragmentation of foundational memories produces fractured narratives of the nation that enter into conflict with a collective memory of colonial domination on the island’.²² Not only do distinct ethnically associated *lieux de mémoire* coexist and compete for prominence in postcolonial Mauritius but, as the current study will explore, the same *lieu de mémoire* may also hold very different (dominant or dominated, remembered or hidden) associations for different sections of society, in different contexts or from different disciplinary or generic perspectives. While several studies have fruitfully explored multidirectional and/or competing realms of memory in postcolonial Mauritius,²³ none has yet focused on the colonial house and its links, real or symbolic, with long-silenced dark aspects of the island’s colonial past.

In recent years, several artistic volumes of paintings, photographs, and old postcards have been produced in response to the seemingly inexorable loss of colonial architecture and, with it, of the local traditions, ways of life, and multi-layered histories that they reflect.²⁴ I shall now focus

21 Catherine Boudet and Julie Peghini, ‘Les enjeux politiques de la mémoire du passé colonial à l’île Maurice’, *Transcontinentales*, 6 (2008), 13–36 (pp. 13–14, 19).

22 Srilata Ravi, ‘Multiple Memories: Slavery and Indenture in Mauritian Literature in French’, in Nicola Frith and Kate Hodgson (eds), *At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 154–72 (p. 155). See also, on this topic, Ravi’s interrogation of the ethnic politics surrounding Mauritius’s two UNESCO world heritage sites, the Aapravasi Ghat, commemorating indenture and Le Morne Brabant, associated with resistance to slavery. Srilata Ravi, ‘Indo-Mauritians: National and Postnational Identities’, *Esprit Créateur*, 54.2 (2010), 30–46.

23 See, inter alia and in addition to Ravi’s works cited above: Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, ‘Ethnicisation ou créolisation? Le paradigme de la traite dans quelques romans francophones mauriciens et réunionnais contemporains’, in Julia Waters (ed.), *L’ici et l’ailleurs: Postcolonial Literatures of the Francophone Indian Ocean, e-France: An On-line Journal of French Studies*, 2, special issue (2008), 100–15; Françoise Lionnet, ‘Shipwrecks, Slavery, and the Challenge of Global Comparison: From Fiction to Archive in the Colonial Indian Ocean’, *Comparative Literature*, 64.4 (2012), 446–61; Julia Waters, ‘Rewriting Mauritius’ Pasts: Ananda Devi’s Postcolonial Self-Translation’, in Judith Misrahi-Barak and Srilata Ravi (eds), *Translating the Postcolonial in Multilingual Contexts* (Montpellier: PULM, 2017), pp. 53–70.

24 Other examples include: Jano Coucaud, *Ile Maurice: L’Age de pierre* (Curepipe: Totem Editions, 2012); Kievan Cadinouche, *Porlwi: Les vieilles maisons du vieux Port-Louis*: www.keivanphotography.com; as well as several volumes in Éditions Vizavi’s ‘Art et photographie’ and ‘Histoire et Lettres’ series: <https://www.vizavi.mu/>. The Facebook sites, ‘Vintage Mauritius’, ‘Extinct Mauritius’, and ‘Nou Patrimoine, Nou Richesse’ are also dedicated to such material.

attention on two which take different but complementary approaches to their common subject-matter: Florent Beusse and Amal Sewtohol's *Regards from Mauritius* (2014) and Jano Coaucaud's *On Borrowed Time/Le Temps suspendu* (2017). *Regards from Mauritius* combines paintings by the artist Florent Beusse of the island's tangible and intangible, natural and cultural heritage, with accompanying text by the novelist Amal Sewtohol. Despite their diversity, the most recurrent subject of Beusse's paintings is the colonial-era house, as in the watercolour below (Figure 1) of a well-maintained but deserted wooden house on rue Saint Georges in Port Louis, sitting upon a basalt platform within an orderly garden – a depiction which, appealing to the 'romantic allure'²⁵ of colonial architecture, invites the viewer to pull up a rattan chair and take afternoon tea on the shady veranda.²⁶



Figure 1 Maison créole, la rue St Georges, Port Louis. Copyright Florent Beusse.²⁷

- 25 Chase Quinn, 'Why the "romance" of plantation estates is more dangerous than confederate statues', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/24/romance-plantation-estates-dangerous-confederate-statues> [accessed 25 June 2020].
- 26 Given that Éditions Vizavi's main target market and source of income are tourists, Rice's observation, in relation to plantation museums in the American South, that 'big houses [...] have become eye candy for the tourists' is arguably applicable to such aesthetically appealing artistic depictions. Alan Rice, 'Museums, Memorials and Plantation Houses in the Black Atlantic: Slavery and the Development of Dark Tourism', in Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone (eds), *The Darker Side of Tourism: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism* (Tonawanda, NY: Channel View Publications, 2009), pp. 224–46 (p. 228).
- 27 *Regards from Mauritius*, p. 19. My grateful thanks go to Florent Beusse and the staff of Éditions Vizavi for granting permission to reproduce this beautiful image here. A photograph

Sewtohul's accompanying text summarizes the essence of the book's attempt to capture the beauty but also the fragility of this fast-disappearing built heritage: 'J'aime tellement la rue St Georges. Ses petites maisons créoles résistent encore à l'invasion du béton. "Charme désuet" "nostalgie" dit-on. De quoi serons-nous nostalgiques, quand tout aura été rasé?'²⁸ The nostalgia evoked is reflected in the book's choice of peaceful urban and rural scenes and its slightly old-fashioned use of watercolour and pen and ink drawings, which combine to bear witness to a world that is fast losing ground to charmless, utilitarian concrete. At the time of publication, the buildings depicted in Beusse's paintings were all still extant, and several of his images contain references to modernity (in the form of cars, the airport, road signs, telegraph wires, hotels, dockyards, or a building site). Yet the majority of these more modern subjects are rendered in black and white, pen and ink outline, rather than in the more vivid, emotionally and imaginatively engaging watercolour. The Mauritius portrayed in these visual 'regards' is one that still retains a 'charme désuet' and that is almost entirely devoid of the concrete that the accompanying text decries. Combining an artist's eye for the beautiful and exceptional detail with a novelist's nostalgic 'remembrance of things past', the selective approach adopted – singling out elements that are both culturally specific and have striking aesthetic appeal while omitting those that mar, contradict, or problematize such a selection – creates a composite portrait of an island-space whose urban and rural landscapes have been virtually untouched by post-independence modernization. The rapid and recent 'invasion du béton', the reconfiguration of the island's natural landscapes and the destruction of vernacular colonial-era architecture to which Sewtohul's texts implicitly allude are all largely occluded in Beusse's artistic vision, in favour of an approach that foregrounds instead, and with palpable regret, the undervalued beauty and cultural specificity of what is fast being lost. The poignancy of the book's vision of Mauritius comes from the dissonance between the seemingly enduring charm of the paintings of colonial houses, on the one hand, and the regretful nostalgia of the written text emphasizing the fragility and increasing rarity of such subjects in reality, on the other.

On Borrowed Time, by self-named 'photographe de la mémoire' Jano Coucaud,²⁹ is also motivated by a sense of urgency in the face of the rapid loss of vernacular architecture and by a desire to capture its charm, beauty,

of the same house, taken from the same angle, appears in Coucaud's *On Borrowed Time* (p. 175) – a fact which in itself indicates the scarcity of such houses.

²⁸ Beusse and Sewtohul, p. 19.

²⁹ ION News, 'Jano Coucaud, "photographe de la mémoire" des vieilles maisons', *YouTube*,



Figure 2 Cover image, *On Borrowed Time*. Copyright Jano Coucaud.³⁰

and cultural specificity in photographic form before it is too late. Similarly impelled by a ‘quête de ces maisons créoles qui, je le savais, vivaient leurs dernières heures’,³¹ Coucaud takes a notably different approach from that of Beusse in *Regards from Mauritius*. Rather than presenting a selective portrait of Mauritius devoid of visual reference to the widespread destruction of the island’s vernacular buildings, *On Borrowed Time* meticulously chronicles the very processes of neglect and destruction that are leading to their seemingly imminent disappearance. As Coucaud poignantly remarks, in the volume’s preface:

Toutes ces belles choses disparaissent hélas à un rythme effréné. En travaillant sur cet ouvrage, j’ai eu pleinement conscience de mener une course contre la montre et je désirais ardemment immortaliser au plus vite

25 November 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFydvPQPpQ>> [accessed 17 July 2020].

30 Many grateful thanks to Jano Coucaud for generously granting permission to reproduce his photograph here.

31 Coucaud, p. ii.

ces vestiges pour la postérité. Je voulais par la même occasion montrer le mode de vie des riverains tout au long des ruelles des villes et des villages, et quelques intérieurs, avec leurs occupants à l'ouvrage. Certaines de ces maisons, avant la publication de ce livre, auront disparu.³²

This gloomy prediction, echoed in the final section of the book, 'Going, going, gone/Agonie', has proven prescient: the beautiful, time-weathered colonial-era house, whose characteristic *lambrequins*, wooden *bardeaux*, and luxuriant garden are immortalized on the front cover (Figure 2), was destroyed by fire six months after the photograph was taken.

The presence in this photograph of the house's elderly occupant, leaning on the rail of her veranda as if looking out at us across the warning of the book's title, reflects Couacaud's other stated aim, to 'montrer le mode de vie des riverains'. One section of *On Borrowed Time*, focusing on 'Maisons classiques', presents portraits of the archetypal grand dwelling places of former colonial masters and plantation owners: images that are notable both for the relatively good state of preservation of the buildings and for the almost total absence of inhabitants. In the other sections of the book, however, Couacaud eschews an approach that presents the colonial house as a decorative backdrop, static museum piece, or alluring site of romantic fantasy. Instead, Couacaud's double portrait of houses and their inhabitants seeks to assert the status of the vernacular house as a dynamic if beleaguered *milieu de mémoire* inhabited by a diverse cast of multi-ethnic residents from different sections of Mauritius's contemporary, postcolonial population.³³ In addition to grand 'classic houses', Couacaud's book catalogues numerous far more modest vernacular buildings that are scattered across the island. These humble constructions of wood and corrugated iron have, in Couacaud's photographs, been personalized by the eclectic multicultural paintwork, furniture, and ornaments of current and previous owners. The inhabitants' pride is reflected in their willingness to be photographed inside or in front of their homes, as well as in the visible signs of improvised repair captured by Couacaud's camera. Many of these smaller vernacular buildings are in an advanced state of disrepair as reflected in the 'en vente' signs nailed to padlocked and shuttered premises.³⁴ Their fragile remains are juxtaposed with high-rise concrete apartment or office blocks, as the

32 Couacaud, p. ii.

33 As a double portrait of dwellings and inhabitants, Couacaud's project shares many striking similarities with Jean-Luc de Laguarigue and Patrick Chamoiseau, *Cases des îles pays-mêlés* (Martinique: Éditions Traces, 2001), with which a cross-cultural comparative analysis might fruitfully be conducted.

34 Couacaud, pp. 192–93.

developers' bulldozers wait to pounce on vacant real-estate plots.³⁵ The destruction of these physical structures and the displacement of their inhabitants attest in a very real sense to the 'deep consciousness of [...] lost traditions, wrecked ways of life' that Pierre Nora highlights as a paradoxical characteristic of *lieux de mémoire*, and which also underlies the regretful nostalgia of Beusse and Sewtohul's 'regards'.

While taking slightly different approaches, both Beusse's and Couacaud's artistic responses to the loss of Mauritius's vernacular buildings foreground their aesthetic appeal and cultural specificity, and contrast these with the ugly anonymity of the concrete structures that are fast replacing them. Both allude, to different extents and in different ways, to the extensive post-independence reconfiguration of the island-space wrought by the rapid modernization and diversification of Mauritius's economy, previously dependent on and shaped by the monocrop of sugar. Both convey, in their focus on everyday people in context, the psychological as well as physical impact of changing urban and rural landscapes. Their visions of this disappearing physical and social world are undoubtedly tinged with nostalgia for a slower, seemingly simpler way of life. Both feature portraits of the island's current multi-ethnic inhabitants, so implicitly include descendants of those whose labour built and maintained the grand houses featured. But only oblique passing reference is made to the deeply unequal colonial system with which the houses are associated, acknowledgement of which problematizes the explicit aesthetic appeal and 'romantic allure' of such *lieux de mémoire*. In the textual accompaniment to the 'Maisons Classiques' section of *On Borrowed Time*, Couacaud alludes to the context of 'héritages de famille' and 'anciens domaines sucriers' with which these grand houses are associated.³⁶ The multi-ethnic, visibly impoverished inhabitants of many of the smaller, more dilapidated vernacular dwellings that his camera captures hint also at different counter-narratives. Such contrasting historical and contemporary narratives, lurking behind the buildings' beautiful facades, are left to the attentive viewer – and, as I shall now explore, to literature – to interrogate further.

The loss of colonial-era houses – and of the families, histories, landscapes, and ways of life with which they are associated – is a striking

35 Couacaud, pp. 190–91.

36 As Couacaud remarks, 'La plupart de ces majestueuses résidences ne sont pas menacées, du moins pas pour les années à venir, puisqu'elles font l'objet de soins réguliers. Mais on n'en compte plus que quelques-unes. Ce sont en général des héritages de famille, préservés de génération en génération, parfois devenus propriétés de grandes sociétés qui les ont converties en bureaux, restaurants, musées et salles de réception. Les grandes maisons des anciens domaines sucriers en font partie'. Couacaud, p. 161.

recurrent trope in recent Mauritian literary works. These novels include notably Carl de Souza's *L'Année des Cyclones* (2018)³⁷ which depicts the decline, expulsion, and migration of the Rozell family, along with the inhabitants of the surrounding labourers' camps, from the large plantation house where, as overseers for absentee landowners, they had lived for generations, as the land, previously dominated by sugar production, is redeveloped to grow pineapples for the tourist industry. The destruction of a once-grand colonial-era house is also central to Souza's 1996 novel, *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*,³⁸ in which the gradual disintegration of the eponymous house, as it slips inexorably down the mountainside, mirrors the relentless erosion of once-rigid social structures, as the previously dominant position of the decrepit Franco-Mauritian owner is gradually usurped by his socially mobile multi-ethnic lodgers. Amal Sewtohul's *Histoire d'Ashok et d'autres personnages de moindre importance* (2001) also features an old colonial house in Port Louis which is destroyed by fire, symbolically releasing the ghosts of its former Franco-Mauritian owner, her Indian servant and Creole gardener and with them the hidden and unequal multi-ethnic 'âme du pays'.³⁹ For the purposes of this article, I shall focus however on just two novels – J.M.G. Le Clézio's *Alma* (2017) and Gabrielle Wiehe's *Vent d'Est* (2018) – whose narratives share many striking thematic parallels and which, drawing on more or less fictionalized family genealogies,⁴⁰ are both structured around the ruination of vernacular houses and of the once-grand Franco-Mauritian families who inhabited them. Like the artistic works already discussed, these novels initially seem to lament the loss of beautiful historic dwelling places endowed, in their literary renditions, with multi-layered personal, familial, and collective memories of 'lost traditions and wrecked ways of life'. Yet, as I shall explore, the potential of fictional works to imagine occluded backstories, unrestrained by the need for historical or visible evidence (as is the case with artistic works), also allows them to unearth and interrogate some of the 'latent or hidden aspects of national memory' that lie physically and symbolically behind the houses' facades. As we shall explore, the fictional houses in Le Clézio's and Wiehe's narratives are represented as potent *lieux de mémoire* where gradually 'the official

37 Carl de Souza, *L'Année des cyclones* (Paris: Éditions L'Olivier, 2018).

38 Carl de Souza, *La Maison qui marchait vers le large* (Paris: Le Serpent à plumes, 1996).

39 Amal Sewtohul, *Histoire d'Ashok et d'autres personnages de moindre importance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

40 Such genealogical inspiration is particularly evident in Wiehe's *Vent d'Est*, in which an epilogue acknowledges the help and archival resources provided by family members.

family [...] frame is contested by a dissident memory which haunts the buildings and that transforms them from the idyllic to the horrific'.⁴¹

Both *Alma* and *Vent d'Est* are motivated by the main character's quest for physical traces of the past within landscapes radically transformed by economic and social development. *Alma* plots the decline of the Felsen family as narrated by the two remaining descendants, Dominique/Dodo and Jérémie, whose ancestral house and surrounding plantation, the eponymous Alma, have been progressively divided up, demolished, and obliterated from sight – and almost from memory – to make way for the construction of a shopping mall. The story of the family's decline is interwoven in mosaic fashion with that of other forgotten historical figures and events, and with the past and ongoing destruction of the island's natural environment, to portray a vision of postcolonial Mauritius in which all remnants of its colonial and pre-human pasts are in the process of being obliterated.

Vent d'Est is the retrospective account narrated by Rose, the last member of the once important land-owning Lestevals, of the family's financial and material ruin as reflected in the loss of a series of houses: both the homes of relatives that Rose recalls from her childhood and those, already ruined, of illustrious ancestors whom she learns about from family folklore.⁴² *Vent d'Est* opens with an account of Rose's shock and disorientation when, on returning to Mauritius after many years living in France, she sets out in search of once-familiar physical *repères*:

Je suis allée marcher au hasard dans les rues, à la recherche des ruines de *Béthanie*. Je n'ai rien reconnu, tellement tout a changé. Les allées, les avenues, les quartiers ont été entièrement remodelées. [...] Tout cela a été depuis si longtemps éventré. [...] je suis devenue chez moi comme une espèce d'étrangère.⁴³

A sense of estrangement in once-familiar home territory is a recurrent trope of recent Mauritian literature, as postcolonial social mobility and economic development reconfigure the public and private spaces previously carved up by colonial power relations.⁴⁴ In *Alma*, Jérémie's search for the traces of

41 Rice, p. 230.

42 The perpetuation of edulcorated family folklore in *Vent d'Est* is typical of 'the broader white myth-making' identified by Alderman and Modlin as underlying the romanticization of the past at plantation museums and other colonial-era sites. Derek H. Alderman and E.A. Modlin, '(In)visibility of the Enslaved within Online Plantation Tourism Marketing', *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 25.3-4 (2007), 265-81; cited in Rice, p. 404.

43 Wiehe, pp. 11-12.

44 See, for instance, Barlen Pyamootoo, *Bénarès* (Paris: L'Olivier, 1999); Bertrand de Robillard, *L'Homme qui penche* (Paris: L'Olivier, 2003); Nathacha Appanah, *Blue Bay Palace* (Paris:

his parents' demolished home – and for the family secrets that it contained – leads to a wider exploration of the physical and symbolic traces of the sugar industry and, via these, of the exploitative practices on which the lucrative plantation system was based. In both novels, the cyclical pattern of demolition and development – for housing, hotels, shopping centres, luxury real-estate projects, the *Métro Express* – results in the effacement of all physical evidence of the past from the present, leaving only the characters' fast-fading memories of places where physical *lieux de mémoire* had once stood.

Both novels include meticulously remembered descriptions of the houses where beloved family members or proudly evoked ancestors once lived, detailing their antiques-filled interiors, shady verandas, and the vast gardens or plantations in which the houses once stood. Such representations – typical of the aesthetic features promoted in plantation museums in the American South or Caribbean – are no doubt tinged with nostalgia for the now-deceased inhabitants of houses that seem destined to become *lieux d'oubli*. They also betray the narrator's profound sense of affective attachment to the houses themselves. Yet, as Rose's evocation of the places and family members of her childhood betrays, these dwelling places are also retrospectively reconsidered with a more critical adult's eye:

Les Camphriers, la maison de Léon et Aby, celle de ma tante Hortense et, plus loin, *Béthanie*. Ces différentes maisons et leurs habitants formaient une sorte de clan particulier, dont je savais confusément faire partie. Toutes ces têtes blanches me rassuraient, me communiquaient leur sagesse un peu surannée, un peu décalée. Hors du temps, en réalité.⁴⁵

With the benefit of both geographic and psychological distance, the adult narrators of both novels retrospectively recognize the profoundly unequal social and racial divisions on which the privileged outdated lifestyle of their isolated whites-only 'clan' had been based, highlighting quite different associations, for instance, from the 'charme désuet' lamented in *Regards from Mauritius*. In *Vent d'Est*, Rose's increasing sense of unease and estrangement from her previously familiar milieu crystallizes around her reconsideration of the family's relationships with their domestic servants – the descendants, she now realizes, of the many nameless, voiceless slaves

Gallimard, 2004); Ananda Devi, *Ève de ses décombres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006); David Constantin (dir.), *Lonbraz Kann* (2014); Thierry Chateau, *L'Envie* (Trou d'Eau Douce: L'Atelier de l'écriture, 2015).

⁴⁵ Wiehe, p. 47.

who had worked in her family's houses and who lie buried in unmarked graves in their grounds. The gradual revelation of the suppressed story of her family's historical part in the slave trade – revealed as she revisits the ruins of ancestral homes – prompts Rose to reconsider her own memories of seemingly loving relationships with the cooks, nannies, and maids whom she had naively considered as 'toutes mes tantes, mes mères, ma famille parallèle'.⁴⁶ She is forced uncomfortably to question the different kinds of collective memory, dominant or dominated, celebrated or suppressed, held by different sections of society, and so by those immediately around her:

Quelles pensées les animaient réellement à notre égard? Trouvaient-elles que nous ne valions pas mieux que nos pères – rien que des Blancs arrogants? [...] Mémoires de nos pères, témoins, victimes et instigateurs de la servitude, mémoire blessée transmise à travers les générations, cette mémoire collective me questionne. M'a tant questionnée. Portais-je la responsabilité de mes pères, leur culpabilité?⁴⁷

While this question remains provocatively open at this point in the narrative, an affirmative answer is nonetheless implied in the broader novel's plotting of the white Lesteval family clan's progression towards reparative oblivion.

In *Alma*, an explicitly racist remark by a family acquaintance similarly prompts Jérémie to delve into the suppressed history of slavery that had underpinned the island's and his family's wealth, the legacy of which informs such enduring prejudices and divisions in the narrative present. In both *Alma* and *Vent d'Est*, the physical destruction of the tangible traces of Mauritius's colonial past is ultimately and insistently portrayed as the necessary means by which other long-silenced, dominated histories – of the slaves who built and worked in these houses and on whose labour and suffering the Franco-Mauritians' 'paradis perdu'⁴⁸ was constructed – can be symbolically and literally unearthed. In *Alma*, a description of the demolished *grand' case* on the Roches Noires sugar plantation prompts the following acknowledgement of other memories and contributions that, no sooner uncovered, seem destined to be lost again beneath fresh concrete:

Tout ce labeur, ces dos courbés, ces visages noircis par le soleil et ces habits trempés de sueur, c'était pour rien. Tout ce peuple, arraché à ses terres, dans la profondeur africaine [...] Et tout ça pour quoi? Pour rien du tout.⁴⁹

46 Wiehe, p. 72.

47 Wiehe, p. 73.

48 Le Clézio, p. 217.

49 Le Clézio, pp. 69–70.

Diverging from his original search for traces of the extinct dodo, Jérémie instead draws up ‘la carte des *lieux de mémoire*’⁵⁰ associated with Mauritius’s plantation system, listing the place names of planters’ grand houses and of labourers’ camps. While the physical traces of these places have been largely ‘effacés par l’urbanisation ou par les lotissements’, nonetheless ‘leurs noms restent, ils résonnent de bruit et de sueur, de maladie, de mort’.⁵¹ The memorial excavations that both novels recount thus mirror in literary form the need, identified by Hanna, Alderman, and Bright in relation to other, real-life plantation contexts, for ‘a transition from a story often exclusively of white slave-owning families to one populating the plantation with previously invisible black faces and bodies’.⁵² This active form of familial and collective memorial excavation – prompted by the cyclical processes of construction, demolition, reconstruction, and obliteration – ultimately leads Jérémie on a pilgrimage to the abandoned ruins of ‘cet endroit le plus sombre de notre histoire, à nous les Blancs’: the remains of a slave prison at Bras d’Eau.⁵³ It is here that Jérémie is finally forced to uncover and acknowledge his ancestral guilt, as he is confronted with the physical traces of slaves whose scratches still mark the walls of the *cachot* in which they were held, and whose ancestors still endure the postcolonial legacies of this past in the form of racist slurs and structural inequalities.⁵⁴

In *Vent d’Est*, a similar process of memorial and physical excavation is prompted by the evocation of the loss of the main Lesteval family-home *La Butte*: ‘ravage dont personne ne semblait se remettre dans la famille’.⁵⁵ In Rose’s narrative account, the enduring trauma of this original loss paradoxically keeps the haunting memory of the house alive in the family’s collective conscience long after the place itself (as physical *lieu de mémoire*) has ceased to exist:

La Butte. C’était un sujet de conversation qui revenait sous les varangues de Rose-Hill aussi souvent que l’heure du thé, en milieu de matinée et dans l’après-midi. Sa perte était une douleur que personne ne semblait digérer,

50 Le Clézio, p. 145.

51 Le Clézio, p. 146.

52 Hanna et al., p. 403.

53 Le Clézio, p. 146. This process is reminiscent, in this context, of the notion of ‘symbolic excavation’ propounded by Derek H. Alderman and Rachel M. Campbell in ‘Symbolic Excavation and the Artifact Politics of Remembering Slavery in the American South’, *Southeastern Geographer*, 48.3 (2008), 338–55.

54 There are many similarities between Le Clézio’s novel and Patrick Chamoiseau’s broader oeuvre that is interesting to interrogate further. The resonances of Chamoiseau’s *Un Dimanche au cachot* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) here are particularly striking.

55 Wiehe, pp. 52–53.

et chacun essayait de la *faire vivre à nouveau*, une anecdote par-ci, une histoire par-là.⁵⁶

The unexpected consequence of the family's unresolved experience of traumatic loss, constantly relived through the obsessive repetition of nostalgic anecdotes and stories, is the gradual delayed revelation of other long-hidden, actively repressed histories of loss and suffering. Behind the dominant, commemorated family legends of brave European explorers and settler-pioneers – typical of the kinds of Franco-Mauritian 'foundation myths' discussed by Boudet and Peghini above – Rose recognizes that:

il y avait aussi le revers de la médaille, que je découvrirais plus tard. Ces trafics humains, ces peuples arrachés à leur terre, et ensuite cette marée d'engagés volontaires indiens [...] Cette histoire-là, je la connaissais peu: la mémoire familiale était sélective, très sélective.⁵⁷

The theme of the Lesteval family's 'highly selective', whitewashed memory recurs throughout *Vent d'Est*, as Rose is forced belatedly to confront the many suppressed dimensions of the narratives told about their collective past. Yet, as this quotation implies, the one-sided narratives adhering to such places need not be set in stone but, like the buildings themselves, are open to change, revision, and dismantlement over time, as the broader context or attitudes to that context change. Such shifting memorial associations with place reflect Herbeck's assertion that 'not unlike fictional protagonists, human structures evolve over time according to the interactions and experiences to which they bear witness or in which they prove to be active participants'.⁵⁸ In addition to evolving over time, however, the collective memory associated with as seemingly 'everyday'⁵⁹ a *lieu de mémoire* as a domestic house also differs fundamentally, as Rose here realizes, depending on whether one's ancestors owned the house or worked within it, were the owners of property or, like the houses, were considered to *be* property.

Material evidence of the hidden history of slavery, on which the Lesteval family's fortunes and cosseted way of life had been based, is unearthed when a tree is cut down in the garden of Léon and Aby's house, revealing two antique ivory marbles described as 'des choses très anciennes, des objets qui

56 Wiehe, p. 56; emphases added.

57 Wiehe, p. 56.

58 Herbeck, p. 46.

59 As Rice contends, 'some of the most iconic signs of the slave locale are the "everyday" Plantation Houses that dominate the landscape of ex-slave societies'. 'Museums, Memorials and Plantation Houses', p. 227.

nous viennent du temps de l'esclavage'.⁶⁰ Through these uncovered physical artefacts and the living memories that they prompt (of an old freedwoman whom Rose's uncle had met as a child), a memorial chain-reaction is set in motion linking the silenced histories of slaves to the very same houses whose loss is mourned, in the narrative present, by their former owners. As Rose ponders, echoing Jérémie's reflections in the *cachot*:

Leur histoire [des esclaves], a-t-elle marqué la surface des pierres, des arbres, celle du bois des maisons? [...] La mémoire des pierres. Je tends l'oreille et elle me parle, elle me chuchote des histoires anciennes, blanches et ciselées comme deux billes en ivoire rescapées du cœur d'un arbre.⁶¹

Through the symbolic as well as literal excavation of memorial traces from long-buried pasts to which the houses had borne witness, Rose begins to lift the veil of amnesia and silence that had wilfully stifled the 'darker' histories and memories of these places.

In both *Alma* and *Vent d'Est*, a central underlying message ultimately emerges, providing a contrastive occluded backstory to artistic emphases on the visible aesthetic appeal and nostalgic allure of Mauritius's fast-vanishing vernacular buildings. As Jérémie contentiously ponders:

Peut-être que [...] le chaos dans lequel sont tombées ces pierres est un châtement suffisant pour ceux qui ont jadis commis ces crimes, et dont personne ne se souvient. Ils ont en quelque sorte rejoint leurs victimes dans l'enfouissement et l'envahissement par les broussailles et les herbes.⁶²

In both novels, the destruction of colonial-era houses – or, in the above quotation, of the family tombs of former colonial masters and slave-owners – is ultimately portrayed not only as the subject of nostalgia or regret for 'lost traditions' and ways of life, but also as the necessary means of long-overdue symbolic reparation for historical injustices. As with Shelley's *Ozymandias*, such reparation is symbolically achieved through a process of physical and social levelling that foreshadows the former colonial masters' ultimate oblivion: both Jérémie and Dodo move to France, leaving behind no living or material trace of the once-grand Felsen family. In a postface to *Vent d'Est*, Rose's diary – the basis of the novel – is discovered after her death, in the ruins of a recently demolished

60 Wiehe, p. 74.

61 Wiehe, p. 74.

62 Wiehe, p. 217.

house, so completing the Lesteval family's story of decline and extinction. Nothing besides remains.

Over the past two decades, heritage studies have shifted from a conception of heritage as a material artefact or static museum piece, towards one of heritage as a dynamic ongoing process linked to agency and cultural power.⁶³ Such a shift is reflected, to a degree, in artists' attempts to document not just the fabric of Mauritius's remaining historic buildings but also the ongoing processes of their neglect and destruction in a rapidly changing multi-ethnic postcolonial present. In contemporary novels, the depiction of the loss of Mauritius's colonial-era buildings reflects the shift from a physical, tangible to an active, intangible sense of heritage, in extreme form. In Le Clézio's and Wiehe's works, it is the loss – rather than preservation – of colonial houses, the property of the former dominant slave-owning elite, which prompts the interrogation of dominated and occluded aspects of Mauritius's colonial past. The destruction of dwelling places is proposed as a necessary form of reparative agency in the present. Whether this constitutes 'un châtement suffisant' or just an initial step in a much longer, broader, and deeper process of reparation and reconstruction is not directly addressed. Literary texts such as those analysed in this article nonetheless offer a fictionalized physical and metaphorical space where uncomfortable long-repressed histories can finally be uncovered and the foundations for more inclusive futures symbolically laid.⁶⁴ After all, as Hanna et al. argue, 'the cultural amnesia of difficult and painful pasts [...] is not an option for racial reconciliation'.⁶⁵

Of course, it is far easier to propose the reparative potential of the demolition or terminal neglect of historic buildings in fictional texts than it is in reality. The immediate visual and spatial impact of the loss of these aesthetically appealing structures, particularly when replaced by anonymous concrete structures or car parks, may well be felt more viscerally than the putative affront caused, with their preservation, by their latent associations with the island's long-silenced 'crimes fondateurs'. In reality as in fiction, colonial-era houses in Mauritius tend not to be torn down and reoccupied by the descendants of slaves or other exploited groups. The *vernus* rarely

63 See, for instance, David C. Harvey, 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, Meaning and the Scope of Heritage Studies', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7.4 (2001), 319–38; and Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

64 This point echoes Ravi's assertion that, 'like many forms of memory preservation – including museums, memorials, rituals, symbols and ceremonies – literature is also a medium of remembrance'. Ravi, 'Multiple Memories', p. 156.

65 Hanna et al., p. 400.

becomes, even symbolically, the owner of the former master's house. While some real-estate plots may be sub-divided and smaller vernacular houses proudly occupied, as in Couacaud's photographs, by new multi-ethnic residents, larger properties and former plantations tend still to be owned and exploited by faceless absentee landlords and international corporations. Indeed, as Tijo Salverda points out, 'Franco-Mauritians have been able to extend their dominant economic power and privileges well into the postcolonial period [and] have maintained control over large parts of the island's agricultural land'.⁶⁶ Demolished colonial-era buildings are predominantly replaced, as the novels and art books analysed reflect, by structures which continue to exploit and exclude both the local population and new waves of immigrant labour.

If the razing of Mauritius' colonial architecture continues apace, there is a very real danger that, with the exception of a small number of static monuments and museums that 'memorialize' slavery, no 'tangible memory traces linked to the colonial' will soon remain on which to anchor the work of 'conscientious remembrance'⁶⁷ required to expand and further enrich the nation's historical narrative. Not only would the stories of white slave-owning families thus be lost with the fabric of their former homes but, as the fictional works analysed above hint, those of 'previously invisible black faces and bodies'⁶⁸ would also remain forever unheard. As ongoing debates about the present and future function of historic buildings with links to colonialism and slavery attest, if Mauritius's colonial houses are to be conserved as inclusive national *lieux de mémoire*, so answering the Truth and Justice Commission's call for 'a better and increased protection of Mauritian heritage', then it will at the very least be necessary collectively to confront and acknowledge their – and their former owners' – links to a historical colonial system in which Black lives did not matter. In order to achieve 'a less racist and elitist society' (recommendation 4), it is also imperative to remain alert to the contemporary forms of exploitation, exclusion, and inequality that underpin the structures that are built in their place.

66 Tijo Salverda, *The Franco-Mauritian Elite: Power and Anxiety in the Face of Change* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), p. 10.

67 'Conscientious remembrance is more than a necessary expansion of the nation's narrative. It is an act of moral engagement, a declaration that there are other [...] lives too long forgotten that count.' E.T. Linenthal, 'Epilogue: Reflections', in J.O. Horton and L.E. Horton (eds), *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American History* (New York: The New Press, 2006), pp. 213–24; p. 224.

68 Hanna et al., p. 403.