

# *Decolonizing Your Island Imaginary*

Preparations for a Novella in Four Parts

Hélène Frichot

Introductory reading compiled by Kim Gurney

# *Reading of Hélène Frichot's Decolonizing Your Island Imaginary*

Compiled by Kim Gurney

The Decolonial Winter School 2018 at the University of Cape Town began with a cleansing ceremony. Following introductions (slave name, colonial name and preferred name), three questions went iteratively around a circle. What do you know? (That I am here.) How do you know it? (My body tells me.) And, finally, what other ways of knowing interest you? (Works of art as embodied knowledge.) The morning session that I attended concluded by passing around indigenous plants and speculating about them before a traditional healer informed us of their properties. Many found they were familiar with, and had intuitive knowledge about, the plants, but did not always know their names. The exercise showed how knowing can precede naming.

The full programme included modules on epistemic violence and the public university, ontology and the body, land reform, and actualizing justice and

liberation. It concluded with a tantalizing session: 'Towards utopia at the vanishing point.' The latter was hosted by Fees Must Fall, a social justice movement coeval with the removal of a colonial-era statue of Cecil John Rhodes ('Rhodes Must Fall'). Rhodes did fall. Fees fell too. South Africa now has free tertiary education for qualifiers who cannot afford the cost. That fall began with a performative act, of throwing of shit from a portable toilet cannister at the Rhodes statue, thereby making structural inequities more visible and bringing the periphery to the centre. This 2015 protest, claimed by the initiating student as performance art, triggered a chain of complex and contested events that continue to reverberate in the country's post-apartheid public sphere today. Fallists often insist it was not just about a statue; hence the need for other kinds of decolonization.

This cues Frichot's text: decolonizing an imaginary, 'a suite of colonial imagi-

naries is composed and decomposed through processes of decolonization'. We travel in the text through interlinked vignettes of powerfully evoked worlds in a suite of colours. An island is sepia, a migrant family home is hyper-saturated, an old apartment is conveyed in translucent greys and deep brown shadows. Finally, we are at the centre of empire in royal blue, indigo and chalk. Not only do we move in these various geographies through different colours, but also at different speeds, suggests Klaske Havik. She adds that there is something misleading about those hues, something the images seem to evoke and then turn totally upside-down, 'something very troubling'. This looping plot has thematics reminiscent of Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River*,<sup>1</sup> offers Naomi Stead, a collection of ten interconnected short stories about a young girl from a postcolonial Caribbean island, moving through life.

### **Mahé. 1961**

The text opens with a violence. A girl, running, bleeding. Her brother is a witness. An unseen but smelled expensive cigarette smoke, linked to a young man we are yet to meet. A young man who travelled 15 days on a boat to get to another world, as Havik points out. These kind of details link the vignettes, one to the other.

It also opens with a founding image, which gives the impression of being a

fragment from an archive – a family album or perhaps institutional, suggests Robin Wilson. He calls the image a floating eye, with a strange ambiguity and latent details capable of embellishing 'fiction' with 'truth' to write history differently. Wilson asks: 'How far does this present image travel into the text? Where does it get left behind?' The residual is offered as raw material, Wilson says, and extends this to consider what a transversal photograph might comprise. There are other fragments, too, Havik reminds us: the terrace of the plantation house, the veranda, a man sleeping, the boy as the only person actively engaging with the insects, the sounds, the smell . . . a slow and precise moving of the frame, which other readers in the group regard as filmic.

The text is set on a family property evoking legacies. Land. Specifically: tobacco. A tension is set up of people working the land, and people with the land. This section evocatively describes a scene by panning around different characters, starting with a boy and forbidden Creole. This is an early signal of the issue of voice, language, accent, and translation. There is also an interesting communion between humans and animals – the bird, the cicada, the girl and her secret animal hospital.

Imagine the bird coughs up the meal . . . does this hold the key to the whole project? asks Marko Jobst.

### London, England. 1958-1961

We travel back in time. The son is departing England for the scene just narrated back home. The idea of passing is invoked, as in 'to pass as best he could'. Recently reading Diana Fuss on Frantz Fanon, I was struck by a distinction offered between mimicry and masquerade in recent feminist theory: that mimicry was ironic while masquerade was not. Fuss writes about the potential of a mimicry of subversion while also acknowledging a mimicry of subjugation; that the two interact and converge through slippage, 'from mimicry into mockery, from performativity into parody'.<sup>2</sup>

An image is described of discarding oneself, layer by layer. It connotes displacement – of home. Of other things. When we leave this place, we depart with another violent encounter in which the protagonist is a participant.

Does the bird that swallowed the cicada have an eye, muses Jobst, looking back at the woman from her lap? How does she look to the woman in whose lap she fell, and to the girl next to her? And what, he asks, is the gaze of that which is non-human? How does it allow for the exchange of gazes between humans . . . to reach for the limit of all gazing, as it were?

### Paris, 1968

We are several years later in time, following the young girl in the story. There is a maroon ribbon in her hair, a telling detail we connect with the first, earlier narrative. There are ideas of un/packing, of coming and going. The alienation, in so many ways, is apparent: 'What they don't know is how far she has had to travel to get here.' Indeed, adds Havik, being a minor, a minor person, a minority, evokes notions of embarrassment . . . Class, status, hierarchy, racism.

Manet's painting *Olympia* and the gaze of the attendant. In its time, this painting was very subversive because the subject looked back at the viewer, with its own agency to confront and upend the viewer's gaze, and suggests a relationship to processes of decolonization.

The student uprising in Frichot's text has uncanny contemporary world echoes. On feeling the weight of a stone in the protagonist's hand, the text states: 'In the days to come . . . her local world will come undone and a new point of view will be wrenched open.' It is about the return – as another, says Havik. But the larger plot is also about the arrival – such as the young man being only part of whom he used to be, or halfway towards something else, she adds. Indeed, as the author herself later tells us in reader response, the text holds a tension between withholding and releasing. Its protagonist was initially carried

along by the social uprising around her and then moves into self-determination, which brings us towards the final section.

### **Perth, 1977**

We are a decade on in time. The scene has now dislocated to a geographically distant place.

A young girl's thoughts: 'The wonder of how many such weeks there had been, an attempt to count them up, and how many more there were yet to come, you know, forever.' Time is evoked once more, extending and contracting. There is also a deliberate temporal interweaving. The woman, now an aunt, returns to a differently peopled scene, blocking the line of escape of the girls she encounters in her untouched room. It is another forbidden territory.

The ending, regarding the eldest son's close call, narrates yet other kinds of violence – this time mediated through distance. But the bird, Jobst reminds us, intervenes for the non-human and thinking beyond human power structures to posit decolonization as the process that unfolds at the edge of the human.

In closing: *Preparations for a Novella* travels between sites, times, characters and events. It finds in its proposition moments when spatial memories are made and lets the threads in that weave spool forward. There is something

deeply set, as a weaver on a loom might predetermine a pattern. But there is also the instability of a loose knot that may yet unravel, come undone and spool lines together in a different way. The text strikes a sensitive balance between foregone conclusions, in the way of certain structural realities, while still honouring the capacities of everyday agencies in its rendering of the key episodes of a novella to come. The thread is red. It registers a pattern making itself through repetitions over time but leaving enough wiggle room for the outcome to diverge. As the author describes it: *a test site*.

And that, in the context of decolonization, may be precisely the point. As Jobst avers: the text keeps staging or citing but not offering narrative closure – there is no final story. The story is in the questioning, or undoing, of the very premise of storytelling that has a definitive narrative arc – as his/tory, colonial history specifically, that demands neat narrative closures and certainties, he says.

We return full circle to the founding image, then, which Wilson suggests could hold the key. Characterized by a torpor, he suggests that image may yet unleash a diaspora of characters into a future text to follow. In the meantime: 'The text makes of the silent image a cicada scene.'

- 1 Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).
- 2 Diana Fuss, 'Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification', *Diacritics*, vol. 24 (1994) no. 2-3, 20-42: 24.

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**Hélène Frichot**

## **Preamble**

### **Mahé, Seychelles, 1961**

The boy squats fixated by the side of the house in the provinces of the shadows. The rest of the world is asleep, eyes shut in the languid afternoon heat. It is only the boy who is awake to the humming quiet. On the front terrace, recently swept by the young creole maid Beatrice, the father's white shirt is open two buttons down, and his straw hat with the brown band has slipped the hemisphere of his drowsy forehead. A captive cicada waits. The boy cups his hands, and closes them, attempting to draw forth the cicada's singular sound. Separate it from the chorus of its brothers and sisters. Suddenly, the boy's head snaps to attention during a lull in the rhythm of a cicada song. Somewhere near the storeroom beside the kitchen, off the back half of the house, he has heard a scuffling. In a flash of white crumpled dress and lost maroon ribbon his sister shoots across the path, stirring up dust as her sandal meets the dirt beneath the orange trees, which it stirs up, then she cuts right, a stripe of red down her leg and one drop hits the

ground. The smell of a cigarette, the expensive kind, the kind rarely to be found in these days of scarcity, follows after. The cicada escapes, the boy, distracted, watches it secure its freedom. He cusses in forbidden creole. Lifting off his haunches the boy trails off then squats down again to place his forefinger into the ground, rubbing the red viscous drop into a paste. A pilgrimage of ants catches its scent and revises its trajectory. The cicada lands in one of the orange trees standing sentinel to the front façade, as the boy exits towards the left. A bird snatches the escaped cicada in its beak and swallows. Some minutes past four, one of the recently awakened older brothers will down the bird, with its partially digested meal, from the vantage of the upper floor veranda, catching its wing with his sling shot, a fluke, for his eyes are bad and his aim is poor.

### **Interlude**

Across four scenes, closer to fleeting sketches, I offer a preparatory test site for a future project that may, or may not, come to fruition. These scenes anticipate a novella, or a 'fictionella', dedicated to the difficulties of decolonizing spatial imaginaries.

What is at stake are processes of decolonization, specifically of spatial memories, including the residual hold of colonial imaginaries and how these might be creatively critiqued. Inevitably, there persists the trouble of presuming to speak for the other, and forgetting one's relative position of privilege. We are ever at risk of laying traps for ourselves as we tell our pass-me-down stories.

As you have now witnessed, the story opens deceptively bucolic, on an island paradise, in the grounds of a colonial plantation house coloured sepia, shades of mahogany and amber hue, as all the world seemingly sleeps its way through a siesta. An encounter is witnessed between a returned colonial brother and a younger sister the aftermath of which will



concatenate through the following three parts of the projected novella. The second part locates us now at the centre of the Empire in royal blue, indigo and chalk with burnt orange highlights. Temporal registers begin to slip and slide: a young man suffers a humiliating sexual encounter as an older man is confronted ascending from the basement flat accommodation of a government in exile. Part three is sketched in cold translucent greys, and deep shadows, witness to a young woman venturing far from home. She is hosted by a reclusive family member in an old apartment on Rue Buffon overlooking the Jardin des Plantes. Shadows of prehistoric dinosaur skeletons are dimly visible through the looming windows of the museum across the way. She is about to commence a year of study in a far-off land that is both culturally familiar, yet strange. Sitting in a stone courtyard on campus, holding a book between her hands – attended on the right by the statue of a poet, and on the left by the statue of a biologist – she hears a noise as though the long-lost sea were approaching her. A massive swell of student bodies floods the courtyard, taking her up in its wake. The final scenes unfold in a suburb of the most geographically isolated city on this damaged planet. It is offered up in hyper-saturated Super-8 colours, brilliant fuchsias, lilacs, yellows and blues. Sunday evening, a regular family gathering, a composition of sun-touched children's limbs lingering on a makeshift aqua blue tarpaulin picnic mat, laid out on a backyard of buffalo grass. A suite of colonial imaginaries is, from one scene to the next, composed and decomposed through processes of decolonization.

But to begin, we are in the tropics, on a cluster of islands just outside the path of seasonal cyclones.

### **Plantation Stories Continued**

In the settlement of Victoria, Seychelles, traffic revives around the central roundabout with its commemorative clock dedicated to the diamond jubilee of a dead queen. The faint sound of its 4 p.m. chimes weaves its way along a coast laden with leaning coconut palms, and up the driveway, past the orange trees to the old plantation house. The plantation grounds take up

some 200 acres. Terraced and planted upwards towards a prominent island peak, it is one of four such family properties spread across the main island. All of them will be requisitioned, parcelled up into smaller holdings, some of which will be claimed by the hands of the hard labour once put to work on the land, but the driveway up to the old house survives to this day. There is tobacco, some of which is dried in the attic of the family home. The coconuts that grow wild across the estate are harvested like manna from heaven. Each morning the working men with their hessian bags – gunny sacks – collect the fruit that has fallen during the night. Crack, one, two, three, they turn the fruit on the end of a stake to yield the nut inside. The cinnamon trees are harvested in three-yearly cycles following an elliptical loop up and across and down the slope of the property. The labour is divided, the women strip the leaves and cut the bark into quills with their small curved knives. The men cut and collect the larger branches. Every part of the plant is used, the aromatic timber makes an excellent stove fire in the old kitchen. The women descend the slope with their bounty balanced on their heads and sinewy necks, in large bamboo baskets cushioned with folded cloth, while the men heave their hessian bags of logs on muscular shoulders. Once the leaves have been steamed in the forty-foot vats in the *l'usine* and the thick essence collected in one-litre glass bottles, packaged in timber boxes, protected with straw, due to be exported by boat to India, the damp vegetable matter is spread across the grounds as fertilizer. The many sons of the plantation owner run like pups through the vegetable mess rolling their bodies in it, smudging their white shorts and shirts to the daily horror of the plantation laundress. After the joys of shooting down birds with .22 rifles, or catching rats to claim the price on their heads, their third favourite chore is undertaken on those mornings when it is time to inseminate the vanilla flowers. They scamper from bush to bush with stolen stamens inserting them into the yawning mouths of one pale waxy flower after the other. Taken *en masse* this murder of sons is a constant blur of movement, one barely distinguishable from the next, but when midday meal times arrive each is allotted his place in descending order,

the eldest seated closest to the patriarch, the youngest at the matriarch's end of the long dining table, the supervisory end of the table closest to the kitchen where the cook labours daily.

Abruptly the house is awake. Two bodies, silver quick, shimmy down the heavy columns of the front terrace. This is just moments before the father awakens. The father catches sight of his sons' tail ends rounding the house and grunts in surprise. In the darkened salon behind him his wife leans forward from the cushions of her old damask arm chair, making herself visible as though emerging from the camouflage of her afternoon reprieve. The cook in the kitchen, who had mastered the art of napping on her feet, raises her crumpled brown face from her hand, the mark of her large elbow leaving a faint ring of perspiration on the bench top, she goes to fetch the lentils to separate the food from the stones and debris. As she settles herself onto a tired rattan stool in the rear yard in the shade of her favourite tree, a bird with a crippled wing falls plump in her aproned lap. It does not cough out its cicada meal, but such a thing would be worth imagining. The girl comes along from the south side of the house, a dark expression on her brow, but she promptly shifts her concerns, crouching by the cook who takes her hand comfortably in her own. They both croon over the bird, which the girl collects, taking it away to join her secret animal hospital.

### **London, England, 1958-1961**

His ship is due to embark on its long journey southwards, but for now he is in a fix. He has suffered a losing streak and has had to downgrade his ticket home from London, a metropolis that is gunmetal grey and flinty. He becomes cagey when his friends ask about seeing him off at the station tomorrow on his way to Southampton, via steam boat through the Suez Canal, calling in at Mombasa and finally arriving at Port Victoria. No good-byes, old chaps, he cheerily responds. Come visit me in my very own island paradise soon! Though he very much hopes they will not. He reflects with a hardening knot in his gut on the large run-down plantation house, the sound

of its corrugated iron roof under the rain. The worn-down damask chairs, the endlessly mended clothes.

They have a special treat organized for him. He is slapped on the back, and led by hand. Room after room after room, one engulfed by the next, as though the place were nothing but luxuriant, velvet-lined interior. Shadows and recesses, infinite abysmal mise en abyme. The lights down low to hide the wear. Thick curtains move heavily across a doorway. Is that a face disappearing into the shadows? He is led further along and the air becomes thicker as he traverses serial antechambers into a wing of the establishment he had never before visited, nor realized existed. All those long nights of playing cards and flaunting his winning streak, while scrambling to keep up with his schoolwork. In the end, he had had to sit complementary exams at Middle Temple, privileged school for becoming barristers. But that is all behind him now. Finally, they come to a halt, and he is issued into a chamber. His eyes refocus. She calls to him with her silken limbs and obscured face. He is instructed towards the necessary ablutions. A large washing bowl, a heavy jug, a small royal blue towel. Wash them well in warm soapy water. The water is cool. Now come. He doesn't remember getting his trousers down, but he remembers stepping towards her as she lay across the bed, paid up and awaiting him. Now her skin looks waxy translucent, and her head drops away as her neck curves over the horizon of a satin pillow. He steps towards her, noting her curiously hairless flower, and with the first step he promptly spills himself. With the second and the third step he manages to regain himself. How long does it take? He suffers a fleeting vision of bundles of cinnamon branches and undergrowth, pepper trees laden with berries, looming mountains rising up towards the sky. Botanical bounties awaiting extraction. Moving forward more rapidly towards the headless torso, he focuses on a lamp that glows yellow on the far bedside table, her left arm stretched towards it as though holding it aloft to light the way. He lunges towards her and his early losses run through him red, and so he takes her by the hips and flips her and enters her all in one smooth movement, his fingers sinking into waxy flesh. He takes her via whatever

passage presents itself to him, and why not take it all, follow all available openings. He enters into the world and it has a salty taste, and the faintest tinge of vanilla. He twists her arm harder. She lets out a whimper and a head attempts to raise itself out of the tussled bed clothes. Then she hesitates, and sighs, and resigns herself to the violence of youth and the vindictiveness of male virginity. As he exits she turns and gives him a look, which he catches. Back in his trousers now, his damp shirt tucked in. He suddenly witnesses her maturity, her experience, and what he apprehends before pushing it out of mind and swiftly departing the room, is the open gaze of a woman who has seen it all before, a look on the level that has measured his kind and found it wanting. The next morning, with a growing sense of unease only matched by his queasy stomach, he peels himself off the carpet of his friend's room, grabs his travel trunk, and leaves, barely making it to the station in time. Hiding the shame of his newly discovered manhood, which comes with an expensive degree, travelling home again, home again.

### **Paris, 1968**

Grey translucent air as though one could see through a world in which the weight of things is a matter of little consequence. The other side of the world, the up-side of the world, a girl discovers herself over-ground. She holds her hand up to this new atmosphere, all her veins and arteries etched vividly producing a neat pattern match with the bare broken branches of the trees along the boulevard beyond her window.

They find her a quiet, queer girl, she rarely smiles, and she wears rather drab clothes, a maroon ribbon in her hair, a cheap excuse for a fringe. When she speaks her accent holds a melody that is languorous, and they take her for stupid, all at sea in the big metropole, a provincial no doubt. What they don't know is how far she has had to travel to get here, how well she has familiarized herself with being out of place. Between lectures on a Monday morning she is sitting in the courtyard with a book in her lap, behind her the

tall unfluted Corinthian columns beyond which the administration offices are to be found. On her right a poet and on her left a biologist, both cut from stone. A lingering after-image from this morning's lecture. Art history, Manet's *Olympia*. The impudence of her gaze, on the level. And tending to her, leaning across the bed with a basket of fresh cut flowers, a dark attentive face.

She lifts her head, animal-like, tilts an ear, because the improbable noise of the long-lost sea rumbles towards her and then bursts as a wave of bodies spills from the passage on her left, one body nearly falling over the next, their shouting laughing voices now distinct, and their voices now in unison. *Defence d'interdire. It is forbidden to forbid.* A circular paradoxical construction. It is forbidden to forbid. No prohibitions here. The colonnade across the courtyard is flooded, they move towards her, she recognizes some faces, she stands up warily, they are shouting all together, they near her and a few break away and take her up, folding their arms into hers, raising her up, her book abandoned, she turns in time to see one stray page lift off and take flight. A poster, *Usine-Universite-Union*, smeared with homemade glue, another poster with a bearded face, and a voice through a requisitioned megaphone. Then something begins to burn her eyes.

Carried along, she has not been home for a great many nights, she has lost count. In the reclaimed Odéon Theatre, a marathon of speeches, and one crowded afternoon a young man takes the stage, reserved, neatly dressed, and his serious, lullaby voice takes her in. The Odéon rises up to the gods from the packed stalls, young men and women hang precariously from gilt balconies, the red velvet holds the smell of spent tobacco, the interior atmosphere is nearly unbreathable. Garlanded with young bodies, laughing, calling out. There is a lull in the noise and the laughter and the profanities called out across the void as the well-dressed young man on the stage speaks with the wretched of the earth, that we may claim self-determination, that another world is possible, a world we will call, the Third World. In

the days to come she will feel the weight of a cobblestone in hand, her fury rising up, a hand barely large enough to hold it, let alone throw it. And her local world will come undone, and a new point of view will be wrenched open.

### **Perth, Western Australia, 1977**

Now it's late Sunday afternoon again, the weekend spent, and a lilac-tinted evening descends. Moving her legs around on the blue tarpaulin, her knees knock against those of younger and older cousins. Some speak a melodic French cut through with creole, others murmur in broad English, they don't really pay too much attention to which language they are speaking, the important thing is to have your say, to shove your way into whatever gap in the conversation you can find. Relegated to the aqua blue tarpaulin crinkling beneath their restless, pale and freckled, tanned and olive and brown limbs. They have discarded the chipped plates, the rice and lentils served and eaten, repulsive though oddly comforting consistency. And sometimes the orange salty desiccated fish, her favourite, in a large aluminium baking pan. Blackcurrant cordial drunk out of old yoghurt containers, sour milk to spoil berry, eradicating the risk of breakage and with household economics in mind.

She and her older cousin begin to plot a local adventure. On the kitchen table inside, ever present, a small dish with sliced chilli and white vinegar. And the buffalo grass cuts into their bare calves and thighs, when their legs stretch beyond the tarpaulin raft, and later in the evening the adults beneath the awning ignore the children's plaintive cries of collective boredom. The adults talk endlessly in their slow melodies, shattered from time to time with, BEZE, Creole, FOUTOU, expletives, and tangled with Australiana where gaps have started to reveal themselves in the mother tongue.

Tonight, as the Super-8 projector begins to whirr, the two girls sneak quietly down the unlit hallway and into the bedroom, unoccupied, untouched

for years. One door of the bedroom leads into the hallway, which leads further along to the grandparent's bedroom, forever out of bounds. The other door of the aunt's bedroom leads into the lean-to where the younger cousins are gathered in front of the Super-8 projector mounted on its tripod. A cartoon, the same cartoon animated again every time, the one where the knives slice through the air in pursuit of a cat who has swallowed an oversized magnet and a mouse who looks on with a belly laugh. The same scenes evince the same laughter. The room, the aunt's room, is untouched, no-one ever enters, the room awaits them. Their line of escape has so far proved successful. On the low dresser with its squat stool, dollhouse-like, the eyeshadows and lipsticks and hairclips and brooches and mascara and eyeliner are a cornucopia of dress-up possibilities. Where should they start? There are the heels behind the built-in cupboard's sliding door, and something with sequins slips out, and something in hot pink, and something in orange, and another in a shade of turquoise. Their feet are by far too small, but this will not stop them. By now the vivid emerald greens have mixed with the sky blues, and the blush has smeared into the shocking red lips of small girls who have pulled over their heads oversized garments, who have riffled through forbidden drawers, who have not hesitated to consider the radical contents of the bookshelves. They suppress their laughter, but snort uncontrollably through pink nostrils.

Then the door to the hallway opens. Standing there is a woman they have never before encountered, though their bodies murmur in genetic recognition. She looks down at them, at their fury of powders and tulle and taffetas writhing on the floor of the compact interior bedroom, which she has not set eyes on now for so many years. She has returned.

The next week, when they are gathered again for the Sunday meal, news arrives of the eldest son's close call. Just shy of a silent bullet that passed him by as the front door to the terrace house was cordially opened. He witnesses his oldest friend's breast abruptly adorned with a corsage plume



of unseasonal red spreading outwards. He turns. A wing and a prayer. He mutters. The faint scent of vanilla. He ducks out of view. Later, and I stress, I cite from newspaper clippings, the police report that the killing may have been politically motivated. The killer was bearded, they say, and I quote, of African appearance, or of Mediterranean appearance, or of Asian appearance. There appears to be some disagreement, though in further reports there is talk of a female accomplice.