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The Republic of Seychelles, the Ocean, and the
Financing of Climate Futures*

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Practising the Blue Economy in a Big Ocean State:

The Republic of Seychelles, the Ocean, and the
Financing of Climate Futures

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Geography
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Abstract

Loosely identified with the catch-all term of 'Blue Economy' (BE) and funded through 'innovative' financial instruments, in the past decade the Republic of Seychelles, an archipelagic state in the Western Indian Ocean, has pioneered novel interventions in its ocean space at the intersection of sustainability discourses, environmental protection, and social development to map out modes of existing as an ocean territory on a warming planet. Empirically drawing from these interventions, the present work examines the applied political as well as analytical (re)orientations that such recent fascinations with the ocean are able to generate - for both local practitioners and scholarly debates. Theoretically, this thesis builds upon, and extends, a) geographical scholarship within critical ocean studies, b) contemporary policy and academic literature on the Blue Economy, and c) emergent work on climate finance as (one of) the basis to (un)make future trajectories. Methodologically, it stems from one of the first sustained long-term ethnographic involvements with the development and operationalisation of a national Blue Economy agenda (twelve months in Seychelles). In linking these threads together, this thesis advances an approach that I term 'oceanic thinking' as an *applied political ontology* that (re)centres the subject(s) thinking *with* and *from* the oceanic environment as an act of political mobilisation. With that, it argues for the value that 'oceanic thinking' holds for contemporary climate finance interventions in the marine governance realm - especially for prefiguring (perhaps progressive) political spaces where collective subjectivities and agencies are formed for those actors usually at the receiving end of development practices, but at the forefront of climate change.

Specifically, the thesis first extends work in critical ocean studies and allied disciplines by testing out the applied political possibilities that the 'oceanic thinking' approach holds. Second, it complements Blue Economy scholarship with a much-needed ethnographic account of an unfolding BE programme *in place and time*. Third, it unpacks the scalar politics of the BE demonstrating its reality more as a policy reification at a state level rather than a fully-fledged, and fully embraced, development agenda on the ground - while articulating the state's efforts to move beyond the Blue Economy towards a form of 'oceanic thinking'. Fourth, it contributes with a reading of the political openings that contemporary blue climate finance instruments allow, specifically for local

communities. Finally, it advances a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' reading of the Blue Economy in Seychelles - that is, a reading that carefully attends to the affective and material potentialities the ocean has always had to either reinforce or disrupt political configurations.

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List of Abbreviations

AOSIS	Alliance of Small Island States
BE	Blue Economy
BEF	Blue Endowment Fund
BERI	James Michel Blue Economy Research Institute
BGF	Blue Grants Fund
BIF	Blue Investment Fund
BOS[S]	Big Ocean State
COP	Conference of Parties
DBS	Development Bank of Seychelles
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation
GE	Green Economy
GEF	Global Environmental Facility
ICS	Island Conservation Society
IDC	Islands Development Company
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MACCE	Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment
MPA	Marine Protected/Protection Area
MSP	Marine Spatial Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SDP	Seychelles Democratic Party
SIDS	Small Island Developing State
SIF	Seychelles Islands Foundation
SMSP	Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan
SeyCCAT	Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust
SFA	Seychelles Fishing Authority
SPUP	Seychelles People's United Party
SWIOFish3	Third South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Governance and Shared Growth Project
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UniSey	University of Seychelles
WIO	Western Indian Ocean

Statement of Copyright

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*A Silvio e Pierina,
Rosa e Maria*

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. One Ocean, Many Opportunities

In February 2018, Damian Carrington (2018) wrote for *The Guardian* about the recently designated Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the Republic of Seychelles:

The tropical island nation of Seychelles is to create two huge new marine parks in return for a large amount of its national debt being written off, in the first scheme of its kind in the world. The novel financial engineering, effectively swapping debt for dolphins and other marine life, aims to throw a lifeline to corals, tuna and turtles being caught in a storm of overfishing and climate change. If it works, it will also secure the economic future of the nation, which depends entirely on tourism and fishing. With other ocean states lining up to follow, the approach could transform large swaths of the planet's troubled seas.

I must have bumped into this article not long after it came out online that immediately captivated me with what looked like a fascinating success story where environmental protection, social security, and economic prosperity merged into one, single development project - the contours of which were far from settled, as *The Guardian* piece demonstrates - led by a seemingly small island nation in the middle of the Western Indian Ocean - the Republic of Seychelles (see Figure 1.1). *The Guardian* was not the only international outlet to cover the news of the designation of the new MPAs in Seychelles (e.g., Jaramillo 2022; The Nature Conservancy 2018). There was a palpable excitement worldwide as such designation was one of the first tangible outcomes stemming from the novel financial mechanism that set the entire process in motion in 2015. Although it has since expanded to other areas of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development - a move that in itself shows its widespread uptake (OECD 2023) -, such a financial instrument commonly referred to as 'debt-for-nature swap' captured the renewed enthusiasm the ocean was gathering globally for its perceived socio-economic and ecological potentials to effectively tackle the already palpable risks associated

with a changing climate. Catalysing this imagined double role of the ocean as a solution to both enhance socio-economic well-being *while* creatively acting as a climate change adaptation and mitigation hub, the debt-for-nature swap became closely associated with what was then called the 'Blue Economy'.

The Guardian's snippet is also illustrative of a narrative that came to dominate how the ocean, some of the countries it touched, and the relationship between them were to be framed around 'debt swap': protection is achieved through exchanging a country's debt, a protection that would 'swap debt for dolphins and other marine life' (e.g., corals, tuna, turtles) that suffer from a warming climate and ever-so busy fishing grounds. If successful, 'other ocean states' could potentially benefit from such an innovative financial mechanism. Even if only meant to provide a necessarily quick summary of an intricate financial and political deal, Carrington's narrative - which is exemplary of a standard narrative around 'debt swap' in the media and international settings - leaves the reader with a rather sanitised picture of what exactly unfolds with these deals and their multiple ramifications. For a start, the 'debt swap' would be better termed 'debt restructuring' or 'debt conversion': indeed, the debt Seychelles' owed is not swapped but restructured - that is, the major portion of debt involved will still need to be repaid by the government to investors whereas only a small percentage will fund marine conservation and activities (Chapter 2). Secondly, the restructured debt in the Seychelles case represents a small dent in the government's balance sheet, not 'a large amount'. Thirdly, overfishing and climate change are hardly issues that can be tackled through MPAs alone - especially considering that Marine Protected Areas further apply different degrees of 'protection' (e.g., from 'no-take areas' to 'sustainable use zones'), a point also noted by Carrington (2018) (see Chapter 4). Fourthly, the volumetric spatiality and vibrant liveliness of the ocean itself are disaggregated into, and reduced to, several of its most charismatic species (e.g., tuna, corals, turtles) and most significant spaces (the zones covered by MPAs). In turn, such a move risks reiterating hierarchies of human-sanctioned protection around what counts as valuable, and hence salvageable *through* commodification - from both a capitalist logic of resource extraction (e.g., tuna) and societal preferences for more appealing marine species (e.g., corals, dolphins).

Equally crucial, Carrington's piece also sheds light on discussions around debt restructurings for what they *fail* to mention. For instance, the article does not provide the full picture of the newly designated MPAs as integrated within the Seychelles' government push for its 'Blue Economy' (BE) development paradigm in its extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Silver & Campbell 2018). Indeed, the government's initial thrust behind establishing new MPAs came as part of such a BE

agenda – an agenda that is nothing short of a complete overhaul of Seychelles’ ocean space. Although MPAs are likely the most eye-catching outcome of the process (as *The Guardian’s* piece demonstrates), they are only one of its most consequential outcomes. At the centre of the BE, and the financial mechanisms pioneered in Seychelles to support it, lies the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan initiative (SMSP) – the first marine spatial plan to be developed in the Western Indian Ocean for the entirety of a country’s EEZ. The name nicely encapsulates what is at stake: the main objective of the SMSP is to spatially organise, and regulate the conditions under which, *all* types of activities (and not just conservation) take place within Seychelles’ vast 1.35 million km² EEZ – that is, an oceanic surface area approximately 3,000 times Seychelles’ 455 km² land size and that roughly equals the size of Germany. Striving to achieve such a massive planning effort through the Blue Economy and the related Marine Spatial Planning exercise becomes a means for the Seychelles state to achieve the twin goals of economic development and, in the case of a historically low-emitter country like Seychelles, primarily climate change adaptation.

Yet, given the scope of this undertaking, there is little wonder that, as Carrington (2018) notes, ‘despite the biggest consultation since the Seychelles nation was founded, some islanders have not welcomed the new plan’ – either in the form of the newly established MPA networks or the SMSP more broadly. Indeed, local practitioners lament a fragmented state apparatus incapable of shaking off the legacy of the authoritarian regime that marked the beginning of Seychelles as an independent country from the late 1970s until the early 2000s (see Chapter 3), a regime itself heavily influenced by the longer colonial pasts of the previous two centuries (Robinson 2023). As I will explore in what follows (Chapter 4), a tangible example of these tense dynamics manifests in the discussions around the anticipated futures of the so-called ‘outer islands’ within the Blue Economy paradigm. Indeed, local practitioners working with or on these islands (see Figure 1.1) – that is, the tourist or conservation (or both) outposts in many instances thousands of kilometres away from the ‘inner islands’, where political power is concentrated and the majority of the population lives – repeatedly stressed ‘the monopolistic’ tendencies dominating the politics of those places. Those tendencies, they argue, are themselves a remnant of the colonial past, inherited from the authoritarian regime, when the outer islands were essentially run as small businesses by colonial families interested in barely profitable cash crop economies. Fast-forward to today, and these remnants are engrained in the opaque and, in the words of one practitioner, ‘unwritten rules’ dominating the managerial structures of these territories – with the state *de facto* devolving decision-making powers to selected parastatal and non-governmental organisations. In short, contrary to the façade of the strong, success story proposed in media outlets like *The Guardian*, the reach of Seychelles’ ocean strategy as both a

social and spatial intervention goes far beyond the mechanism of its iconic ‘debt for nature swap’ and the recent fascinations with the oceanic environment, but is simultaneously deeply embedded within the country’s turbulent pasts.

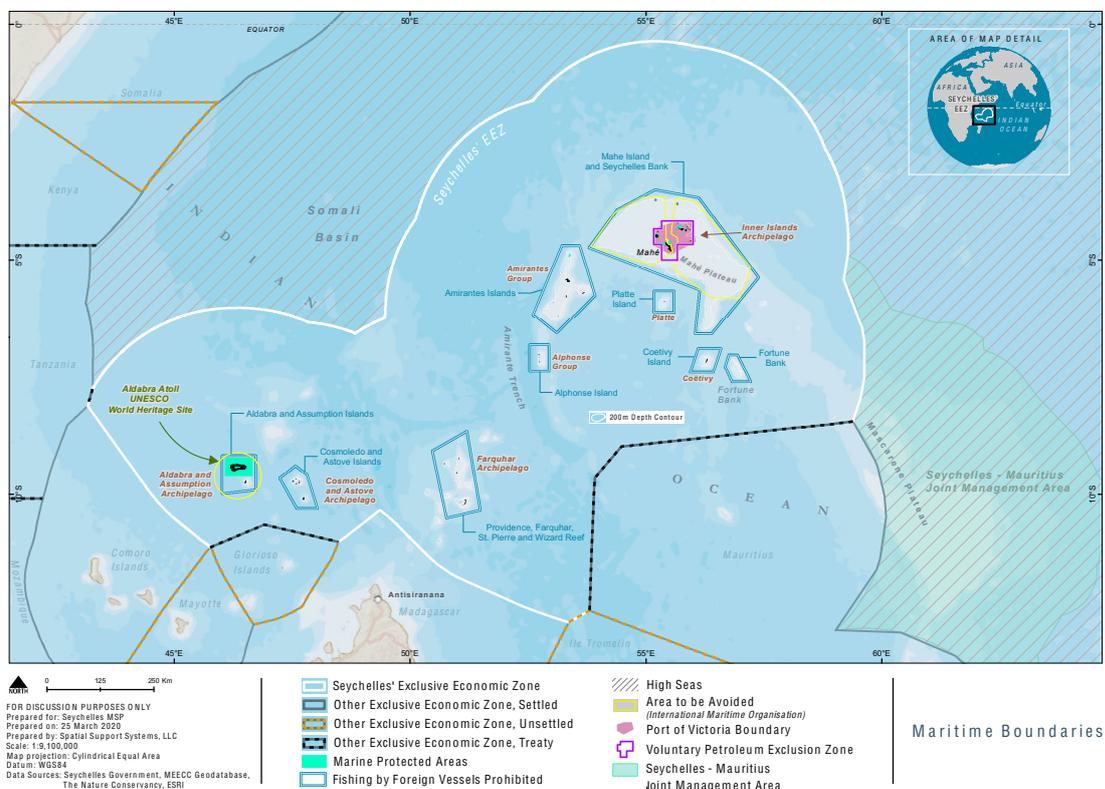


Figure 1.1. The Republic of Seychelles’ Maritime Boundaries as delineated through the SMSP process. © Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative.

1.2. One Ocean, Many Vulnerabilities

Read alongside the aftermath of bankruptcy that required the World Bank’s intervention in 2008 and a subsequent sweeping set of economic restructuring programmes (see Chapter 3; Campling *et al.* 2011), Seychelles’ turn seaward may seem like an almost obvious choice. The numbers seem to suggest that too: for a country that is highly dependent on the ocean for its economic and social well-being – with the two main economic sectors of ocean-based tourism employing 30% of the country’s labour force and directly and indirectly contributing 70% to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic halt (Seychelles Trade Portal 2024), and fishing accounting for approximately 25% of its GDP in 2022 (iOS Partners, Inc. 2024) – Seychelles’ quest to sustainably develop and conserve its vast ocean ecosystems and resources rings even more urgent. Simultaneously, at the time of the debt restructuring, the archipelago had already been disproportionately affected not just by the turbulences of a geopolitical and economic system, but

also of a warming planet with, for instance, devastating mass coral bleaching events (Graham *et al.* 2015). Therefore, as an overarching development paradigm, the Blue Economy (BE) was tasked with providing the foundations to effectively coordinate the state's plans towards these two distinct, but interrelated, threads of socio-economic development and climate change adaptation – and others that were to become apparent soon after – while also catalysing the renewed international attention to, and (if not readily disbursed, at least promised) funds for, the world's endangered blue spaces.

A detailed analysis of Seychelles' geography and of the two socio-economic pillars of the fishing and tourism industries will inform a later discussion (Chapter 3). Here, instead, I draw attention to the importance of planning with the already felt, but even more dramatic projected realities of living with a warmer (and warming) ocean as particularly crucial for Seychelles' state officials – as Carrington (2018) himself duly notes in the opening quote. The 1998 mass coral bleaching event offered a powerful reminder, both to Seychelles and the world at large, of just that – what it means to live with a changing climate *today*. In 1998, Seychelles experienced a devastating climate-induced mass bleaching event due to a particularly strong El Niño that coincided with the Indian Ocean dipole¹ – causing the surface-level ocean temperatures in the Western Indian Ocean to shoot up vertiginously, and quickly (Graham *et al.* 2015). As a consequence, over 90% of Seychelles' granitic islands' live corals were wiped out – making the archipelagic state one of the worst hit globally. Considering that on the inner, granitic islands resides well over 90% of the population, and it is where most of the tourism activities are concentrated, the 1998 bleaching event is remembered not just as an ecological disaster, but as a socio-economic one too. Seychelles has one of the highest fish consumption per capita in the world, with fish being the primary source of protein for the majority of the population (iOS Partners, Inc. 2024). Therefore, bleaching events like the 1998 one negatively impact, among others, fish distribution in Seychelles' internal waters – resulting in changes not just in peoples' diets, but also in the catch of artisanal fisherfolks that might not be able to provide the expected species staples to the local market, in turn jeopardising their own livelihoods (Graham *et al.* 2020). Although particularly destructive, the 1998 bleaching was not an isolated event but was followed by other major events in 2016 and 2019 – with climate change accounting not just for the intensification of one single event, but also for their subsequent repetition in such a short time frame (e.g., Graham *et al.* 2020).

¹ El Niño Southern Oscillation is a global, inter-annual climatic cycle particularly strong in the Eastern Equatorial Pacific resulting, most notably, in the warming of sea surface temperature due to changes in wind patterns and sea surface interactions. The Indian Ocean dipole is a climate phenomenon that interests, among others, the east-west temperature gradient across the tropical Indian Ocean and influences wind and rainfall anomalies.

Events like the 1998 mass coral bleaching do not just affect corals and small-scale artisanal fisherfolks. Instead, they also shed light on the possible dynamics affecting the redistribution of pelagic fish species in a warmer Western Indian Ocean (WIO). As the second main economic pillar of the country, it is hard to overstate the importance of the fishing industry for the socio-economic fabric of Seychelles not just on a local scale, but also at an industrial and state level. Within that sector, fishing for tuna and tuna-like species represents the most substantial share both in terms of revenue-generation for state's finances (through, for instance, the non-Seychellois-owned industrial purse seiners and long-liners' licensing fees to fish within Seychelles' EEZ) and in terms of job employment (with, for instance, employment along the entire tuna value chain from processing facilities to stevedoring, ship chandling, repair and related services). To put into perspective, of the 25% contribution to national GDP in 2022 recalled above, 22% is directly derived from industrial tuna fisheries and tuna processing facilities (iOS Partners, Inc. 2024). With the extremely high sea surface temperatures coupled with a deeper thermocline in the WIO following the 1998 event, tuna schools migrated further east than their usual expected grounds - shifting the industrial fishing fleets with them. As a consequence, in that period, 'purse seiners made use of Asian Ports [sic] rather than Port Victoria which resulted in a 40% decrease in tuna landings and transshipments and a loss of 34% of vessel expenditure to economy' (iOS Partners, Inc. 2024:44). Coupled with the intense overfishing of many of those same stocks (for a fuller discussion of the fishing industry, see Chapter 3) and the continuing warming of the WIO, such migratory movements of tuna and tuna-like species towards cooler grounds are now becoming the anticipated reality that the Seychelles' government is required to plan with, and for (Marsac 2017).

Yet, the climate risks associated with a warming planet do not just stay in the ocean but are at the same time moving on land. Indeed, a changing climate has already been affecting the annual average temperatures, with the minimum temperature steadily rising between 1989 and 2018 (Etongo *et al.* 2021). In the same period, rainfall patterns have shown not just a drastic change in terms of maximum and minimum figures, but their distribution during the year demonstrates a tendency towards extreme rainfalls and flash floods - as the last two weeks of May 2019 made abundantly clear (Etongo 2019). The question of flash floods and coastal erosion due to stronger wave patterns is extremely urgent for the country considering that, because of the geological peculiarities of the granitic, 'inner' islands (see Chapter 3), approximately 90% of the critical infrastructure of Seychelles is located within the narrow coastal strips circling the main island of Mahé with an average elevation of only around two metres (Khan & Amelie 2014). Such a situation is mostly

a result of the last few decades of infrastructural (notably tourism) developments that pushed for a coastal squeeze and land reclamation to circumvent the steep and hard granitic topography of the islands – an unplanned development that scholars have already noted is likely exacerbating the climate vulnerabilities of Seychelles (Etongo *et al.* 2021). In addition, the peculiar topography of the archipelago makes a complete ‘retreat’ from a rising sea an almost impossibility even today; a reality that, as in the case of fisheries, the government is already actively engaging with, through for instance its most recent *Coastal Management Plan 2019-2024* (World Bank & Ministry of Environment, Energy, and Climate Change of Seychelles 2019).

In short, the Blue Economy, and the assorted type of finance that is mobilised in its name, aims at simultaneously target conservation measures, climate change adaptation strategies, and the development programmes that could cascade from their operationalisation. In that regard, any effort to understand Seychelles’ contemporary interventions into its EEZ – as part of the Blue Economy agenda, but also beyond that – needs to account for both the narratives of anticipated socio-economic prosperity that usually take the spotlight around the BE paradigm *as well as* the existential threats posed by a changing climate. Indeed, in Seychelles, climate change is felt as primarily, and materially, an *oceanic* event – where the traces of, and vulnerabilities to, a warming ocean register with the local population in all the interlinked configurations sketched above. Therefore, an analysis that tries to unpack the financial mechanisms tasked with facilitating the governance of the ocean in the country – or, for that matter, any of the ocean-focused governance architectures being assembled there – must always be cognisant of these multiple, entangled realities.

1.3. One Ocean, Many Threads

The Guardian (2018) article that opened this work ends with the words of the then-Minister of Environment Didier Dogley: ‘We don’t have answers for everything now but the marine spatial plan has started the process of thinking about these things - before we were not. The debt swap triggered everything.’ It is precisely the juncture evoked by former Minister Dogley that marks the beginning of the present work: What happens when a space, in this case the ocean, seeps into the development discourses of what is officially identified as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) (Silver & Campbell 2018)? A space that makes up 99% of the territory of the country. A space constantly in flux – even more so today on a warming planet swinging between being spectacularly destructive *while* also being a source of abundance and well-being (Graham *et al.* 2020). A space that defies any easy categorisation of, among others, what counts as territory, sovereign control, jurisdictional

boundaries, or resource extraction (Peters & Steinberg 2019; Steinberg & Peters 2015). A space that has historically acted as a central artery of capitalist circuits (Campling & Colás 2021), but has recently attracted an assorted constellation of financial and quasi-financial figures with different, more directly extractive, aspirations.

With such a backdrop, the present work will be oriented by the following questions:

- What kind of geographically informed modes of thinking emerge at the confluence of these political, financial, and performed (oceanic) currents in Seychelles?
- Holding the archipelago's heterogeneous pasts in conversation with contemporary articulations of what the ocean *should* look like (and for whom), what 'modes of doing ocean management' (Peters 2020) register (or not) within current development practices?
- What spaces are opened and foreclosed for Seychelles - at a state as well as community level - with recent blue finance instruments?

Moving beyond the geographies of the archipelago, these questions simultaneously offer openings to speak to a wider set of scholarly concerns that transcend the particularity of Seychelles *per se*. For that, the underlying lines of inquiry that I will pursue in this work are:

- What are the theoretical and political affordances as well as limitations of what I term here 'oceanic thinking' - that is, thinking *with* and *from* the ocean (Peters & Brown 2017; Steinberg 2025) - about the global push for 'blue' development practices as an antidote to a warming planet?
- To what extent are these recent ocean-focused development interventions (re)shaping the relationship between capitalism and the sea? Specifically, what role could non-governmental organisations and the associated constellation of financial actors play in that arena?
- What is the value of the ethnographic practice in researching these emerging policy discourses and the socio-ecological reconfigurations they call for?

In taking up such an analytical agenda, the main proposition I am arguing in this thesis is for the value that oceanic thinking - as an *applied political ontology* that (re)centres the subject(s) thinking *with* and *from* the oceanic environment as an act of political mobilisation - holds for contemporary climate finance interventions in the marine governance realm. In particular, this thesis posits the value of such an oceanic thinking for prefiguring (perhaps progressive) political spaces where collective subjectivities and agencies are formed for those actors usually at the receiving end of development practices, but at the forefront of climate change. To do so, I first understand Seychelles' successive

governments' turns towards defining a development agenda centred on its massive EEZ under the remit of the 'Blue Economy' as a 'heuristic device'. Here I am adopting Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler's (2021:xii) latest interventions in the field of island studies that take an analytic approach less focussed on 'advocating what island thinking and practices should be, and more [focussed instead on] heuristically drawing out and analysing the ways in which these conceptualisations are today being developed'. In foregrounding the Seychellois state's efforts to enrol the volumetric nature of its watery territory (e.g., as coastal stretches to be protected, as seabed resources to be mapped, as tuna migratory flows to be allocated, as shipping lanes to be safeguarded) through the heuristic device of the BE, I further suggest that it is symptomatic of a form of aquapelagic assemblage (Hayward 2012a, 2012b) that the country is pursuing in the current turbulent and changing (socio-political) climate(s).

Building upon, and expanding on, early works in island studies to account for a tendency towards 'ocean blindness' in the field (e.g. Stratford *et al.* 2011) - that is, a tendency to excessively focus on the landed spatial configuration that makes up islands and archipelagos - Hayward (2012a:5) introduces the concept of 'aquapelagic assemblage' as 'a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging'. Informed by Latour's actor-network theory (2005), he further defines aquapelagos as 'entities created when humans occupy and interact with integrated island and aquatic spaces' (Hayward 2012b:2). Here, it is the interaction that matters; an interaction that is not a one-way process (i.e., the human acting on the more-than-human), but a constant dialogue between, and entanglements of, the human with the more-than-human. Aquapelagos, then, are to be conceived as continually in (re)formation, historically sedimented, simultaneously performed, real, and imagined entities. In the pages that follow, I will advance a compositional analysis of Seychelles as an aquapelagic assemblage against the grain of each of those elements - as a (multiplying) entity continually (re)forming; historically sedimented; simultaneously performed, real and imagined (see also Tsing 2000).

Methodologically such an analysis will be primarily informed by a long-term ethnographic engagement in Seychelles (twelve months), punctuated by one brief return to the field after eleven months and multiple hybrid and fully on-line meetings in between. I will provide a detailed discussion of the research process, timeline, and my own changing positionality within the assembling ocean governance infrastructure in the country - with the many openings as well as challenges that came

with them - in Chapter 2. Yet, the result of that process is one of the first, to my knowledge, long-term ethnographic accounts of any Blue Economy project globally that seeks to interpret the construction of its paradigm as an integrated development-conservation-financing programme. Indeed, I deemed such a methodological practice essential to complement the burgeoning body of policy-infused literature that tries to systematise and predict what the Blue Economy is or should be, but pays less attention to its current actualisations on the ground, and in the water (e.g. Benzaken *et al.* 2024). It is exactly through that methodological choice - ethnographically mapping the (dis)articulations that the Blue Economy was experiencing locally, both at the state and community level - that I encountered the first major thread running through this work: The Blue Economy as a coherent development paradigm in, and for, Seychelles was articulated primarily in its policy reifications as a state agenda, but was rarely meaningfully owned by local practitioners and stakeholders (Chapter 2). Instead, I suggest that Seychellois state officials have somewhat moved beyond the Blue Economy towards what I term 'oceanic thinking' - that is, a broader political turn towards actively leveraging the extensive watery territory of their country to advance political claims on a global stage.

From that starting point, and before delving into the contemporary interventions, I paid attention to the scale-making projects (Tsing 2000) permeating the 'oceanic thinking' approach in the country, which led me to simultaneously question another pivotal theme associated with the Blue Economy: the tendency towards 'presentism' within BE literature (Chapter 3). Situating these recent economic and policy interventions within longer histories of capital and institutional entanglements with ocean space - a move that critical scholarship working on these new developments has been slow in taking up (e.g., Ceglia *et al.* 2025) - I first read the BE moment attentive to the geological and socio-economic pasts of Seychelles, pasts that signal the turbulent relationship with its surrounding waters from its very beginning. From this materialist perspective, an oceanic thinking approach inflected by a 'more historical' as well as a 'more elemental' (Steinberg 2025) reading of the entanglement between the archipelago and its surrounding ocean space emerges - an approach more attuned to its geo- and bio-physical unique features, one that re-centres and historicises its oceanic nature, and that also orients us towards potential climate futures if we are to heed fossil records from a time when the sea temperature was ever so slightly warmer than today (Dutton *et al.* 2015).

In tying together these geological threads with the more recent colonial and post-colonial history of Seychelles - an uninhabited group of islands until the end of the 18th century, when French colonisers established the first permanent settlements - I simultaneously foreground Seychellois *créolité* as a

historically dense, locally articulated, *oceanic* formation. Here, I inflect Hayward's aquapelagic assemblage with more recent scholarship broadly termed Critical Black Studies to ask what it means to live 'in the wake' (Sharpe 2016) of the colonial project and how does that register (or not) within the current political climate - a move that connects both the colonial legacies of a fractured political landscape as well as the divergent and alternate political forms the oceanic environment has historically helped mobilise. More specifically, I approach these questions from an angle that foregrounds a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' reading of ocean space - that is, a reading to 'achieve the goal of thinking both *from* and *with* the oceanic environment', foregrounding its geo-material and biological forces and the '*different* spatiality' and political mobilisations that those forces demand as a historical space (Steinberg 2025:14, emphasis in the original).

In drawing out these elements, the broader argument here points to the multiple, at times unremarked, but always contested roles the ocean has historically played within the politics of the archipelago - as, for instance, in its facilitating colonial expansion with the slave trade during colonial times, while acting as a buffer zone for troublesome individuals to the imperial powers; or its role as a 'cash cow' during René's authoritarian regime. In that regard, the Seychellois *créolité* as a materially dense oceanic formation serves to connect, while historically situating, contemporary configurations of what Seychelles as *an ocean country* should be. In other words, empirically tracking the modes through which the ocean - as lived, imagined, or performed - entangles with the many histories of the country allows us to conceptually map it as a space where political subjectivities are formed in relation with, for, or against it. This becomes particularly crucial in times of not just political, but also climate uncertainties when divergent visions of what counts as social development, sovereignty, or environmental sustainability, to name just a few, turn into slippery terrains for supposedly novel Blue Economy discourses. Such is the work - both theoretical and political - that I am suggesting 'oceanic thinking' does for both academic interventions interested in 'critical ocean studies' as well as a different set of literature interested in blue and climate finance (see next section).

Indeed, delineating the historical and cultural elements of the oceanic politics assembling in Seychelles also allows me to directly contribute to the more recent strand of literature focussing on climate finance. For many of the scholars working in that tradition (e.g., Perry 2022), and for the even more recent strand focussing on *blue* climate finance (Christiansen 2023; Hunt 2020; Kılıç 2024), Seychelles' financial innovations touted as 'innovative' by Damian Carrington (2018) in *The Guardian* are to be considered innovative only in so much as they resolve the two distinct, but interrelated debt

and environmental crisis by linking them together through novel instruments to continue longstanding, colonial legacies of capital and resource exploitation.

While sharing many of the concerns of this literature, my intent is also to take up parallel calls to work 'for and against climate capitalism' on the assumption that 'climate capitalism is the material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes' (Webber 2023). Building upon the historical accounts of Seychellois *créolité* as an oceanic formation, I gather here ethnographic moments when the ocean (re)turns to be a space of political contestation for alternate, imagined or performed, futures potentially away from current capitalist logics of resource extraction, but instead towards forms of what I term *care work*. In analysing some of the most recent interventions in Seychellois marine development as *care work* my intention is to move beyond 'capitalist management of climate change and its impacts' - impacts that are all too real as the previous section attests - towards 'outlin[ing] an approach that works towards reparative outcomes from contestations within, and negotiations with, climate capitalism' (Webber 2023:15), as for instance the discussions around the redevelopment of the ex-Reef Hotel will demonstrate (see Chapter 5). In short, I am arguing that practicing 'oceanic thinking' - that is, being attentive, as scholars, to the ways various actors and practitioners continuously mobilise their material, lived, as well as imagined ocean partly through, and because of, these 'novel blue' financial instruments - allows us to flash out moments where political subjectivities and political spaces are con-figured, potentially generating sites of resistance to and struggle against a more exploitative neoliberal logic of environmental management. Such an approach is meant to complement the emergent body of scholarship on blue as well as more broadly climate finance outlining the potentiality of recognising and cultivating (however small, momentary, or unrealised) spaces where alternatives might be generated.

Overall, what emerges from my analysis of, and in, Seychelles is that the politics of the Blue Economy paradigm in the archipelago show a high degree of uncertainty and mixed outcomes. On the one hand, following the logics of *The Guardian's* (2018) article, the state apparatus and elite actors' tactical deployment of this paradigm has the overarching twin objective of ensuring economic and environmental sustainability *and* equipping the country with an ocean-centred climate adaptation agenda. In following the scalar politics that I outlined above, here I am retracing the multiple ways elite actors, starting from the more recent and shiny Blue Economy agenda to the murkier waters of colonial times, are enrolling the watery territories of the country to leverage their own visions of the archipelago - and the extent to which those lively spaces orient (or not) those projects. With that, I demonstrate how state officials have moved beyond the Blue Economy as a single development

agenda to practicing a form of 'oceanic thinking' that tries to enrol, and turn to, the ocean as a primary element of political negotiation and liveability in the current geopolitical and climate scenarios. Yet, oceanic thinking does not rest with elite actors alone. Simultaneously, and mediated through those same Blue Economy-related initiatives, when touching the ground (so to speak) within local communities, this oceanic thinking approach is able to generate potentially novel and more progressive articulations of what an ocean state could be as a (unintended) result of blue climate finance initiatives. As most often than not, these counter-visions are also always ripe with tensions, never settled, always contested (and contestable).

Therefore, the final, guiding contention that informs this work, already hinted at above, will tease out the differential configurations of what 'Seychelles as an ocean country' - and relatedly the 'Seychelles state' in charge of that - is imagined to be, who is advocating which vision, at what specific historical conjuncture, and the power geometries sustaining - and sustained by - those configurations; analyses that feed into broader questions about the value of 'oceanic thinking' for (re)imagining state territory, sovereignty, and development practices in our contemporary world. My primary objective here is to read those configurations through the 'more elemental' and 'more historical' (Steinberg 2025) approach characterising the 'oceanic thinking' project informing this thesis to demonstrate the ocean politics at work in mobilising the archipelago more aptly as an *aquapelago*, both today and in the past.

For instance, as former Minister of Environment Dogley's words show, today, state officials are quite openly and vocally trying to propose Seychelles' EEZ as a space for social, economic and environmental development in times of uncertain geopolitical futures and projected bleak climate scenarios. Within that framework, in the words of former Seychellois Ambassador to the UN Ronald 'Ronny' Jumeau, the country turns from being a *Small Island Developing State* to a *Big Ocean State*. The real, imagined, or performative affordances and limitations to swap one geographical referent - the *small island* - for another - *the big ocean* - will be discussed at length in Chapter 4. Here, I draw attention to how the political possibilities of what a 'Seychellois state' is imagined to be are articulated in relation to the materiality of its watery space - when, for instance, elite actors call upon the techno-scientific capabilities of a global non-governmental organisation (in this case, The Nature Conservancy) to map their extensive EEZ - primarily for political leverage to an outside, global audience. In the scalar politics that I am tracing in these pages, this is the work the Blue Economy does as a 'heuristic device' for elite practitioners - it creates a powerful, singular story that travels and

legitimises Seychelles' state officials' position on a global stage against narratives of 'smallness' and 'vulnerability' typically associated with SIDS.

To conclude, approaching the sedimented, human as well as more-than-human histories of the ocean in Seychelles, I first complement Blue Economy scholarship with a much-needed ethnographic account of an unfolding BE programme *in place and time*. Second, this ethnographic account unpacks the scalar politics of the BE demonstrating its reality more as a policy reification at a state level rather than a fully-fledged, and fully embraced, development agenda on the ground - while articulating the state's efforts to move beyond the Blue Economy towards a form of 'oceanic thinking'. Third, and relatedly, such an ethnographically informed oceanic thinking approach contributes with a reading of the (perhaps progressive) political openings that contemporary blue climate finance instruments allow, particularly for local communities, so as to respond to calls to work 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023). Finally, this account simultaneously advances a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' reading of the Blue Economy in Seychelles - that is, a reading that carefully attends to the affective and material potentialities the ocean has always had to either reinforce or disrupt local political configurations. Ultimately, this work gestures towards foreclosures *as well as* affordances of living and thinking *with and from* - ethnographically, theoretically, politically - the ocean as a development space, a performative spectacle, an analytical scaffolding, a material place during turbulent geopolitical presents, and uncertain climate futures. As Anna Tsing (2015:111) put it, 'This is not just a story, then, but also a method: big histories are always best told through insistent, if humble, details'.

1.4. Oceanic Thinking: A Conceptual Map

As anticipated, in this thesis I argue for the value that oceanic thinking holds for contemporary climate finance interventions in the marine governance realm - especially for prefiguring (perhaps progressive) political spaces where collective subjectivities and agencies are formed for those actors usually at the receiving end of development practices, but at the forefront of climate change. Such a proposition raises a critical question: What is '*oceanic thinking*'? How can it be articulated?

In a series of papers foundational to delineating the scholarly contours of what could loosely be referred to as 'critical ocean studies', Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters provoke the field of human geography and cognate disciplines to move away from a tendency for understanding 'geographical studies of place, territory, and time [through] static, bordered and linear framings'

towards an approach that is more attentive to the volumetric nature, the material liveliness, and temporal (re)formations of the world (Steinberg & Peters 2015:247-248; Peters & Steinberg 2014; Peters & Steinberg 2019). In advancing this position, they turn to the ocean, 'to its three-dimensional and turbulent materiality, and to the encounters with that materiality, in order to explore how thinking *with* the sea can assist in reconceptualising our geographical understandings' (2015:247-248, emphasis in the original). In their analysis, although novel interventions within geographic theory have welcomed a world of immanence, open-endedness, fluidities, and becomings (following, for instance, Deleuze and Guattari 2004), they have concurrently advanced 'a flat ontology' (e.g., Marston *et al.* 2005) - where Euclidean conceptions of stable surfaces, points and lines are reworked, but not fundamentally disrupted (see also Massey 2004) - that 'fails to account for the chaotic but *rhythmic* turbulence of the material world, in which, even amidst unique events of coming together, there is a persistent, underlying churn' (Steinberg & Peters 2015:248, emphasis in the original). Simultaneously, political theorists have abstracted and emptied the ocean of both its human and more-than-human histories (e.g., Schmitt 2003) as well as its possibilities for rethinking notions of, for instance, state sovereignty, power, and borders through their fixation on the inherited, land-like fixed qualities associated with these concepts (which are equally a simplification) (e.g., Giddens 1985).

In weaving together this variegated literature, Steinberg and Peters urge us to move beyond such a 'flat ontology' - with the theoretical and political limitations they identify - towards what they outline as a '*wet ontology* not merely to endorse the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also to propose a means by which the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and reenlivening of a world ever on the move' (Steinberg and Peters 2015:248, emphasis in the original). Working through a set of analytical and geophysical entry points - such as volume and territory, verticality and depth, materiality and time, mobility and dynamism - they demonstrate the value that such a theoretical lens holds. In their words: 'We advocate thinking from the ocean as a means toward unearthing a material perspective that acknowledges the volumes within which territory is practised: a world of fluidities where place is forever in formation and where power is simultaneously projected on, through, in, and about space. A wet ontology can bring geographic theory to the sea, and bring the sea to geographic theory' (Steinberg & Peters 2015:261).

'Wet ontology' as a conceptual scaffolding forms the crucial building block for what I am here advocating as 'oceanic thinking' as the primary theoretically and methodologically position informing this thesis. For a start, in foregrounding within contemporary circuits of climate finance the

'oceanic element' - in its theoretical, material, and lived valence - I am simultaneously contributing to analytically extending Steinberg and Peters' intervention to the uncharted terrains of *financial* geographies, while testing out the *political possibilities* that their theoretical lens holds in that space. Indeed, although the potentialities of a '*different politics*' (Steinberg and Peters 2015:260, emphasis in the original) animating the wet ontology project are always present in their discussion - as it is also possible to appreciate from the above extracts - they are less openly explored than their theoretical counterparts (although more recent interventions are pointing in that direction, see for instance Peters 2020; Steinberg 2022). This is partly due to the very nature of those contributions. As mentioned, they are primarily aimed at an academic audience working across specific disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., geography and cognate disciplines).

Yet, 'although the materiality of water can inspire political thought, it cannot, on its own, *resolve* it. Engagements with histories of bodies of/in water are needed as well, to direct water-inspired thinking toward the political. That is why, in the 'wet ontology' project, Kimberley Peters and I have proposed thinking with a geographic concept - *the oceanic* - rather than the elemental category that underpins it - *water*' (Steinberg 2022:12, emphasis in the original). In the pages that follow, in centring the 'oceanic' in its multifaced guises - as a geographical space, a theoretical scaffolding, a material reality, a lived experience, an imagined performance - I continue probing the political possibilities that such an approach is able to generate for both a wider body of academic scholarship (i.e., for climate finance literature) and practitioners on the ground (i.e., for actors, like those in Seychelles, that are able to harness the political spaces opened up by advancing what I will describe later as an 'ocean politics').

This last element - on the possibilities of 'oceanic thinking' for practitioners, usually at the receiving end of development programmes, to carve out (perhaps progressive) political spaces for themselves - brings me to the second main contribution that this thesis offers to the 'wet ontology' project and critical ocean studies more broadly: the value that ethnography as a methodological practice holds for attuning oneself to the more politically oriented ontological spaces configured by a 'wet' lens. This could be best illustrated with reference to the analysis of the Blue Economy that informs the opening empirical chapter of this work (Chapter 2). In narrating my own, long-term, on-the-ground (so to speak) engagement with the 'Blue Economy worlds' - as a recent academic area of interest; as an international discourse of triple, environmental-social-economic, win scenario; as a development paradigm at the forefront of policy goals for elite actors in a single country (Seychelles); and as lived reality for practitioners that participate daily in the marine governance realm - I submit that the

conceptual purchase that the Blue Economy is vested with within these debates as an single, all-encompassing development paradigm needs to be recalibrated to better resonate with the multiple real, felt, and imagined (non)articulations that the it experiences in its operationalisation.

In that regard, I propose that elite as well as non-elite practitioners in Seychelles have somewhat moved *beyond* the Blue Economy as a development paradigm towards what I term 'oceanic thinking' to navigate turbulent geopolitical times as an *ocean country*. Articulating a perspective that closely parallels the academic literature on critical ocean studies, Seychellois actors are experimenting with the possibilities that the ocean – as a space of human as well as more-than-human histories, beings, and biogeophysical forces outlined above – allows for political mobilisations that could challenge their own position on a world stage as a 'small island', and perhaps even open up spaces for development trajectories that could disrupt neoliberal strategies of environmental governance on a warming planet (Chapter 5). The value of ethnography as a methodological practice within critical ocean studies, then, lies not just in contributing with a much-needed long-term qualitative engagement with the Blue Economy as a unfolding policy agenda (Chapter 2), but likely in its ability to teach, following Anna Tsing (2005: xii), 'habits of restraint and care' – that is, an ability to remain attuned to local concerns and articulations while cultivating 'research topics that seem appropriate, and, indeed, useful to building a public culture of international respect and collaboration' (see also interventions in political ecology and cognate disciplines on human and more-than-human relationships in 'aquatic spaces', Oslender 2019; Bear 2019; Probyn 2014; Todd 2018).

To summarise, in adopting the term 'oceanic thinking' I build on 'wet ontology' theory but draw attention to, and re-centre, the *subject(s)* charged with the thinking, and the consequent political mobilisations that such a thinking-subject(s) might generate. The thinking-subject(s) that I am referring to in this thesis have already been hinted at above, and will be expanded upon in the following: it is simultaneously myself, as a researcher, practising that 'oceanic thinking' in attempting to grasp the assembling configurations of the ocean politics in Seychelles; but it is also a tactical deployment that Seychellois actors are actively cultivating as a political strategy to 'reckon interdependencies well' (Clifford 2001:474) as a 'small island nation'. With that, 'oceanic thinking' is not necessarily *qualitatively* different from the 'wet ontology' project delineated above – indeed, it shares both its concerns within the discipline and its foregrounding of the ocean as a generative space to think *with* and *from*. Instead, where the 'oceanic thinking' approach extends the 'wet ontology' project is in situating that analytic in an unfolding political project through an ethnographic practice – a move that, in turn, allows to hold the tension between the creative possibilities that such

an approach is able to generate for scholarly debates (e.g., the climate finance literature) as well as for political subjectivities (e.g., Seychellois state officials). In other words, such an 'oceanic thinking' project can be thought of as an *applied political ontology*.

In attempting this project - i.e., ethnographically writing *with* and *from* 'oceanic thinking' (see also Peters & Brown 2017) - I methodologically experiment with what, in a more recent intervention, Philip Steinberg (2025:15, emphasis in the original) calls a '*more historical*' and '*more elemental*' approach to 'achieve the goal of thinking both *from* and *with* the oceanic environment'. As I will explore later in relation to Seychelles' variegated geological and socio-political histories (Chapter 3), adopting a 'more elemental' approach requires us to theorise the ocean as a space of biological, and geophysical forces 'that necessarily exceed its liquidity, as atmospheric and land forces are understood as constitutive of, and constituted by, the marine environment' (Steinberg 2025:15). At the same time, a 'more historical' perspective serves to balance the elemental narrative with a particular attention to the '*different spatio-temporality*' that the ocean as a historical space demands: 'one in which space and time are recomposed amidst continual turbulence and re-formation and in which movement takes on a different character because the background itself is not stable' (Steinberg 2025:16, emphasis in the original). Crucially, such an alternate spatio-temporality stands true for both the geopolitical as well as the geophysical histories of the ocean - demanding us to pay attention to its historically varied, politically charged mobilisations.

In short, working within a scholarly tradition that asks us to take seriously the socio-political histories as well as the geomaterial forces and liveliness of the ocean as a space to destabilise and re-orient critical social thought, in this thesis I propose an applied political ontology that I term '*oceanic thinking*' to probe the possibilities of recent blue finance interventions to prefigure forms and practices of political mobilisations - especially for those actors usually at the receiving end of development programmes, but at the frontline of climate change. In advancing this provocation, with 'oceanic thinking' I draw attention to - and track the openings for - the subject(s) doing the thinking that sometimes consciously, sometimes less so, turn to the ocean as a space for political mobilisations. To be clear, this thinking-subject(s) shifts between myself, as a researcher, contributing to multiple scholarly debates (e.g., critical ocean studies and climate finance), the numerous individual figures populating the following pages (e.g., mostly Seychellois state officials and 'concerned citizens'), and a single, collective country (e.g., Seychelles as the poster child of the Blue Economy paradigm). In holding the tension between such an applied political and scholarly intervention, I stay close to the ethnographic practice - and the multiple stories it returned to me in

that encounter – that informed this work as its primary methodology. In other words, ‘oceanic thinking’ simultaneously registers here as a scholarly project, a political orientation, and a methodological practice.

1.4.1. Oceanic Thinking: What’s Next

In pursuing this intervention, the next chapters will articulate the value of ‘oceanic thinking’ in relation to a wide variety of literatures in the social sciences, especially geography and anthropology, to tease out points of contact, contributions as well as limitations that they share. In this final section, my aim is to map out these critical debates that what follows will converse with, draw upon, and extend so as to situate both the main argument I am advancing – i.e., for the value that oceanic thinking holds for blue finance interventions – and its primary methodological approach – i.e., an ethnographic practice informed by oceanic thinking. In other words, in this final section I am further charting the theoretical coordinates that animate, and orient, what comes after.

As introduced earlier, Philip Hayward’s ‘aquapelagic assemblage’ (2012a, 2012b) offers a useful entry point into several positions I am advancing here. Much like Steinberg and Peters (2015), Hayward works with assemblage theories (Deleuze & Guattari 2004) to foreground the land and sea spaces in island societies – and the multiple, layered interactions happening amongst them – as ‘fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group’s habitation of land and *their senses of identity and belonging*’ (2012a:5, emphasis added). They form a ‘social unit’ (*ibid.*) that Hayward is principally developing as counterposed to a persistent ‘ocean blindness’ (e.g. Stratford et al. 2011) that has featured in island studies and that tends to focus too narrowly on the landed spatial properties of islands and archipelagos. While I share Hayward’s position and, indeed, I employ in this work ‘aquapelagic assemblage’ in places to signify the ‘social unit’ that mainly Seychellois elite actors are at times pushing to leverage political power on a world stage – I am simultaneously cautious of limiting such an approach to only ‘their senses of identity and belonging’ (Hayward 2012a: 5). Instead, in practicing oceanic thinking, I am suggesting that those actors usually at the receiving end of development programmes are *actively* enrolling the watery territory of their countries – as forces, as histories, as livelihoods – to *create* political spaces and subjectivities to navigate multiple geopolitical axes of crisis. These dynamics are further explored in Chapter 4 where I will unpack questions concerning the governance of Seychelles’ outer islands and their surrounding waters. In short, with oceanic thinking I am stretching and reworking Hayward’s analytic beyond the cultural

politics of island societies that it is primarily focussed on, in the uncharted territories of contemporary blue (financial) geographies.

To do so, I will demonstrate that, especially when it comes to Seychellois state officials and elite actors (Chapter 4), these figures have practiced oceanic thinking to conjure up what Anna Tsing's calls an 'economy of appearances' (2000:18). This 'economy of appearances' is based primarily on 'performance', a performance that is both 'economic' and 'dramatic': if 'the making of a spectacle is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds [because] profit must be imagined before it can be extracted [then] drama itself can be worth summoning forth' (*ibid.*, emphasis in the original). In tracing the outlines of such an economy of appearances, I will tease out elements that inform it in, and for, Seychelles: for instance, the redefinition of the debt restructuring from the establishment of Marine Protected Areas to a fully-fledged Marine Spatial Plan, the scripting of Seychelles-based own vocabulary for this undertaking (e.g., *debt restructuring*, *marine protection areas*, new terms in Seychellois Creole for *seagrasses*), and the *re-scaling* of the country from a Small Island Development State (SIDS) to a Big Ocean State (BOS[S]).

Simultaneously, detailing the economy of appearances that Seychellois practitioners are configuring through oceanic thinking will also complement scholarly attempts at unpacking recent Seychelles' diplomatic efforts to reposition itself as important player on a world stage (e.g., Bueger & Wivel 2018; Saddington 2023). For instance, Chapter 4 will discuss Liam Saddington's (2023:8) work, based in Seychelles, on 'the construction and maintenance of multiple geopolitical imaginaries [as] an important component in understanding how SIDS engage in diplomacy'. Saddington demonstrates how state officials are promoting three socio-political imaginaries - that of a 'pristine island state', 'an island of experimentation', and a 'large oceanic state' - to leverage the ocean territory of the country in diplomatic settings to make claims particularly in climate change discussions. As I will argue, although such imaginaries successful capture some of the discursive articulations that state officials are making to raise political stakes - an aspect somewhat missing from Hayward's aquapelagic assemblage (2012a) - they fall short of fully interrogating the extent to which the lived, and material, qualities of the ocean are present (or not), in what capacities, and to what effect while, additionally, failing to relate them to the financial geographies of the blue spaces that are at the very heart of those imaginaries.

To further this last point - on the possibilities of oceanic thinking for geographers and allied scholars interested in blue and climate finance - in the final part of this work I will turn more closely to recent

debates within that financial space. Here I will first introduce some key literatures that have been preoccupied with the structural shortcomings, and consequent (potentially) harmful consequences, that financial instruments such as debt restructurings and blue bonds have to continue colonial legacies of neoliberal socio-nature exploitations and expropriations (e.g., Christiansen 2021, 2023; Kılıç 2024; Perry 2022). The value of these contributions is tremendous, and I share many of the concerns they raise on the fundamental – when not outright dangerous, certainly detrimental – inadequacies these instruments exhibit to achieve their supposedly triple win scenario of economic, social, and environmental well-being. Yet, at the same time, I am also foregrounding moments – however small, mundane, and unremarkable (compared, at least, to the *spectacular* conjuring of the economy of appearances) – where political spaces and subjectivities are formed with, for, or against the ocean *through* such novel financial instruments, either directly or less so. Emerging out of the ethnographic encounter, these moments could prefigure different relations of socio-environmental care to the prescribed neoliberal strategies of green and blue grabbing (Bennett *et al.* 2021; Fairhead *et al.* 2012).

In offering such an alternate reading of the political economy of blue finance instruments my aim is twofold. First, and most obviously, to complement the existing blue finance literature – both in Seychelles and beyond – with the potentially progressive, if most likely unplanned, political openings that these new instruments might generate and that are too easily glossed over in existing analyses. To be clear, the aim here is not ‘to romanticize’ (Stuelke 2021) these instruments, or these moments for that matter, as a panacea for crippling debt burdens, or socio-environmental harms. Instead, it is to offer multiple leverage points – complementing those offered by that same critical literature – where struggles for alternative claims and futures can be made. In this regard, my intervention is situated alongside others within the climate finance space that work ‘for and against climate capitalism’ on the assumption that ‘climate capitalism is the material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes’ (Webber 2023:17; see also Webber *et al.* 2022).

Indeed, the account I am narrating in the next pages comes as a direct response to the call that, among others, Sophie Webber and colleagues (e.g., Bryant & Webber 2024; Webber 2023; Webber *et al.* 2022) made urging scholars to not limit their engagement to a critique of ‘capitalist management of environmental and climate crises’, but also strive for ‘an approach that works towards reparative outcomes from contestations within, and negotiations with, climate capitalism’ (Webber 2023:15). It is precisely in delineating such an approach that works towards different outcomes ‘from contestations within, and negotiations with, climate capitalism’ (*ibid.*) that the second aim of my

alternate reading lies. Staying true to the *applied political ontology* that animates this work as well as Webber's (2023) 'approach' for articulating different outcomes within climate capitalism scholarship, I propose here 'oceanic thinking' as one such tentative analytical and methodological framework primarily for, but not limited to, blue financial geographies.

The example of seagrass politics discussed at length later (Chapter 5) encapsulates most of what is at stake with such a framework. For a start, seagrasses become a means for state actors to leverage scientific and financial support through its mapping exercise - further positioning Seychelles as an *ocean country*. Simultaneously, the very outcomes of that mapping exercise, coupled with the lived and historically sedimented relationships that coastal stretches have for the local communities, open up spaces for political contestations to question the proposed development trajectories that elite actors are pushing for Seychelles as an ocean country. Those contestations would perhaps never cross that threshold - i.e., they may not turn into fully fledged political movements, or alternate development agenda that the country strives for. Yet, that is not the point of the work I am proposing here. Instead, 'oceanic thinking' foregrounds a (methodological and theoretical) scaffolding where those spaces can be recognised, carefully cultivated, and eventually multiplied so that 'other kind of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17) can surface within, and beyond, the financial geographies of blue, and climate, capitalism.

With this provocation, a final note is in order. In this thesis, I am adopting an expansive definition of climate finance that holds together the multiple, sometimes discrete, threads of what counts as, among others, the usual remit of climate finance, conservation finance, and Blue Economy-related initiatives. This is a conscious choice. In its conventional designation, 'climate finance' 'narrowly refers to donor funding or development aid consistent with the principles of the United Nations Frameworks Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)' (Bridge *et al.* 2020:725) - pots of moneys that, at least in principle, should flow from Global North countries to the Global South(s) as additional to a more general development aid and specifically targeting climate adaptation and mitigation measures. From its very contested beginnings, the politics of 'climate finance' so defined remain today hotly debated within the international climate change agenda - as, for instance, demonstrated in the technocratic 'gap talk' that tries to quantify the funding needed to address climate change while also 'prefiguring' future scenarios (Knuth 2015, Knuth & Taylor 2023), or even the prominent role that private finance and non-governmental actors and institutions (could) have in the emerging climate change governance regime (Bigger & Webber 2021; Bracking & Leffel 2021; Bulkeley & Newell 2015).

Whilst acknowledging the heterogenous nature of this literature, in an effort to 'pluralize' (Bridge *et al.* 2020) understandings of climate finance within human geography and cognate disciplines so as to locate the potential for 'other kind of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17) within climate capitalism, I am following here Gareth Bryant and Sophie Webber's (2024:14, emphasis in the original) expansive definition of climate finance that moves beyond the narrow remits of UNFCCC's and associated (policy) talks towards its appreciation as the multiple '*strategies that mobilize financial ideas, instruments and institutions to reshape the relationship between capitalist economies and climate change*'.

In their analysis, such a definition allows to, first, situate climate finance within the broader political economy of the global financial architecture, rather than as a separate entity operating at somewhat discrete and different scales. If 'all finance is, in a sense, climate finance' (*ibid.*), because of the close entanglement between financial processes and their (projected) climate impacts, a more elastic and open definition begins to capture the manifold levels climate finance is operating on - a project that necessarily remains always partial given the impossibility of fully capturing all of these dynamics in a single endeavour. Second, and relatedly, it simultaneously allows to highlight not just the role of finance in addressing climate change, but the pressures and consequent (re)adjustments that a changing climate is putting onto the financial system. Finally, 'our definition of climate finance brings together adaptation and mitigation' (*ibid.*) strategies. As already introduced above, if this move is relatively minor for a place like Seychelles that has historically acted as a low-emitter country and hence is today primarily focussed on adaptation rather than mitigation efforts, it becomes particularly crucial when analysing global trends in climate change policy discourses that lump together both these goals as 'co-constitutive of climate pathways' (*ibid.*). Ultimately, as climate politics manifest as a contested arena where a constellation of actors and institutions fight more and more over the terrains of a so broadly conceived climate finance, 'finance is increasingly *positioned* as the solution to climate change [making it] an increasingly powerful indicator and mediator of possible climate futures' (Bryant & Webber 2024:153, emphasis in the original).

My adoption of such an expansive definition of climate finance in this work is not just an analytical position. Instead, it has been simultaneously informed by my own encounter of 'financial ideas, instruments and institutions' (Bryant & Webber 2024:14) in Seychelles, and with Seychellois. Indeed, as I have already argued in the previous sections, in Seychelles climate change is felt primarily as an oceanic matter (see also Chapter 3 and 4). In turn, from a state perspective, any (policy and financial)

intervention that today targets its Exclusive Economic Zone is, more often than not, couched into the vocabulary of climate change, especially in terms of conservation and adaptation measures. As a brief example, the debt conversion that kickstarted the Blue Economy agenda in the country is officially known as the *Debt Restructuring for Marine Conservation and Climate Adaptation Program* (Silver & Campbell 2018, emphasis added). This position is reflected also in the policy and institutional architecture that has been set up through these financial instruments. For instance, the Blue Economy Roadmap states, at its beginning, that the Roadmap 'is an integrated approach to ocean based sustainable development which brings together economy, environment and society consistent with [...] the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015)' - a point further reiterated in the many references devoted to climate change as a *strategic priority* that the Roadmap sets out (Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative n.d., emphasis in the original; see also Chapter 2). Equally, one of the three SMART Objectives that the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative pursues is to 'Address climate change adaptation' through 'develop[ing] climate change risk mapping for coral reefs and coastal protection to better understand the most important climate risks in Seychelles, and better understand options for adaptation measures and feasibility of implementing them' (see official webpage <https://seymsp.com/the-initiative/smart-objectives/>). Or even the newly created special purpose vehicle established to manage the proceeds of the debt restructuring, SeyCCAT, standing for *Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust* (emphasis added).

This is more than a simple institutional and policy agenda. My own engagement with practitioners in the country revealed that the remit of 'climate finance' are expansive, and expanding - where the effects of a changing climate happen with, in, and through the ocean making a differentiation between what counts as conservation, climate change adaptation, and development strategies in the EEZ an almost impossibility (as, for instance, the words of former UN ambassador Ronald 'Ronny' Jumeau punctuating Chapter 4 will most clearly demonstrate). Yet, my point here is not to argue that such a differentiation between these loosely grouped 'conservation', 'climate', and 'development' finance realms does not exist; or that, in fact, it would not be analytically productive to unpick the discursive mobilisations that each one serves. Rather, in situating this work within a literature that is primarily focussed on outlining a *critical approach* to climate finance and cognate disciplines - a critical approach that feeds into, and is extended by, the 'oceanic thinking' project as an *applied political ontology* - I remain aligned here to the ethnographic and policy encounter that merges these realms in unpredictable, but theoretically and politically generative, ways.

1.5. Chapters' Outline

Navigating these lines of enquiry, the work will be structured as follows. Chapter 2 will retrace the intellectual genesis of the present work situating the Blue Economy as the organising principle – and ‘heuristic device’ – that informed the beginning of this project. This is not by chance. Reviewing recent scholarly and policy interventions in, and about, the ocean shows the centrality that the Blue Economy occupies at the confluence of diverging social, economic, and environmental threads, especially for island nations in the Global South(s). In the second half of the chapter, I will detail my own methodological choices for this work and their translation in practice, noticing the somewhat unexpected lines of inquiry they opened – arguing for a repositioning of the Blue Economy as a primary empirical and analytical framework towards what I develop as ‘oceanic thinking’. Chapter 3 will offer a brief historical account of Seychelles, centring on some of the significant events where the ocean as a material, fictional, and lived space entangled with the socio-economic realities and imaginaries of the country – first as a colonial possession and then as an independent nation. Among others, the chapter will complexify tendencies towards ‘presentism’ in Blue Economy discourses while beginning to foreground elements of the Seychellois *créolité* as a historically dense, constantly re-made *oceanic formation*. Here, I will further delve into the articulation of the oceanic thinking project through an approach that is both ‘more historical’ and ‘more elemental’ (Steinberg 2025).

Chapter 4 will bring us back to the present-day interventions within ocean space that Seychellois elite actors perform on a world stage. Specifically, the chapter will first provide an account of the political negotiations that initiated the Blue Economy paradigm in Seychelles foregrounding moments of political agency where Seychellois elite actors enthusiastically articulated what the Blue Economy should look like for the country – with, for instance, their interventions in the MSP, the MPA, and the debt restructuring. Simultaneously, these were also moments when these actors created a space for themselves to articulate how the Blue Economy should be defined on, and for, a world stage. Although always partial and continually (re)negotiated, these instances will be further read as an active performative move that Seychelles’ state apparatus is pursuing in enrolling the watery portion of its territory to gain political leverage internationally – a move that has consequences for, among others, sovereignty, governance, *and* identity politics, as well as the livelihoods of Seychelles residents.

Finally, Chapter 5 will explore some of those same moments, but from a different angle. Specifically, it will dive into the political economy of the financial transactions supporting Seychelles’ Blue

Economy agenda. First, it will unpack the neoliberal, market-based environmental governance infrastructures, and accompanying logics, that characterise them. Then, the second half of the chapter will tease out potential openings that this blue climate finance space allows - pinpointing modes, whether real or imagined, that both state representatives and local people are (pre)figuring to work 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023). Ultimately, and in line with arguments advanced previously, these are all moments where the historical, the political, and the financial merge with the geophysical of the space they are entangled with - forming political spaces that may configure alternate 'modes of doing ocean management' (Peters 2020) and modes of living as political subjects of an *ocean state today* on a warming planet. Such is the value of 'oceanic thinking' to probe forms and practices of political mobilisations for those practitioners usually at the receiving end of development aid, but at the forefront of climate change. The concluding chapter will briefly revisit some of these key analytical takeaways while indicating tentative ways forward for future research agendas.

Chapter 2

Researching the 'Blue', Researching the 'Economy': The Republic of Seychelles, the Ocean, and some Methodological Reflections

2.1. Enter the Blue Economy

At the heart of the recent initiatives that successive governments of the Republic of Seychelles have been undertaking around their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), lies the concept of the Blue Economy (BE) – a concept, and a policy agenda, that Seychelles formally articulated in its Blue Economy Roadmap (Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative n.d.). The Blue Economy is a relatively novel development paradigm that has washed over the world's oceans in the last ten years or so. Its advocates claim that it represents a renewed appreciation of the value the ocean holds – in terms of, for instance, food security, maritime transport, renewable and non-renewable energy, mineral resources, tourism, biodiversity, biogenetic material, wellbeing and spiritual significance, and climate regulation – and that needs to be preserved and developed in the 21st century to achieve the triple-win scenario of environmental sustainability, economic prosperity, and social equity (Roy 2019). Simultaneously, such a triple-win scenario would offer a creative solution to adapt to, and mitigate, the multiple risks of living with the present and projected future realities of a warming planet (Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative n.d.). Building off the more established Green Economy (GE) framework that entered on the world stage the preceding decade, the Blue Economy received official institutional recognition in 2012 at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio (Rio+20). There participants, especially those hailing from island nations (and particularly SIDS), strongly voiced the need to think of the ocean in similar developmental models as those applied for GE-based landed discourses (Silver *et al.* 2015).

Since those early discussions in 2012, there has been a burgeoning interest in the Blue Economy from a diverse set of actors and institutions – from politicians and policymakers to civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to scholars and research institutes (for a systematic review of some of this scholarship see Midlen 2021; Silver *et al.* 2015; Voyer *et al.* 2018). In addition, that interest transversally cuts across scales as the BE is a moving target that has been, and is still being, adopted globally – as a country-level political agenda or an intergovernmental policy tool that is constantly being repurposed in its aims and objectives. In that regard, it is no coincidence that single countries – with the notable example of SIDS and their extensive EEZs, and Seychelles among those – have either established altogether new departments within their states' apparatuses or somehow altered their governance arrangements to specifically accommodate the demands of the BE (Voyer *et al.* 2022). Not just countries but also regional and international bodies are prioritising the 'blue' element in their development agendas, especially in the rebuilding of economies after the COVID-19 pandemic, as exemplified by Europe's Blue Economy sector or the World Bank-supported *Blue Economy for Resilient Africa Program*².

Researchers rooted in a wide range of disciplinary and institutional positions have since tried to grapple with the proliferating manifestations of the Blue Economy. In this thesis, I turn to three strands of literature that inform a nuanced understanding of such an emerging development paradigm: the first is strongly rooted in a marine governance framework that tries to articulate the details of, among others, the policy proposals, the governance structures, and the financial incentives of current and future BE interventions (e.g., Benzaken *et al.* 2022; Christiansen 2021, 2023; Cisneros-Montemayor *et al.* 2022; Fontana-Raina & Grund 2024; Haas *et al.* 2023; Louey 2022; Pouponneau 2023; Sumaila *et al.* 2021; Thompson 2022; Voyer *et al.* 2022; Voyer *et al.* 2018). The second moves more closely to a specific *geographical* orientation towards unpacking explanatory analytics within BE discourses such as space, place, territory, sovereignty, development and their (re)configurations (Choi 2017; Germond-Duret 2022; Gruby & Campbell 2013; Midlen 2023; Saddington 2023; Winder & Le Heron 2017). Acting as one of the foundational pillars of the second set of literature, the third strand – which could loosely fall under the umbrella term of 'critical ocean studies' – is less invested in dealing directly with the Blue Economy as a political project *per se* but, instead, engages more profoundly

² For the European Blue Economy sector, see https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/ocean/blue-economy_en; for the World Bank's *Blue Economy for Resilient Africa*, see <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/environment/brief/blue-economy-for-resilient-africa-program#1> [both websites accessed 29 June 2024].

with the ocean as a *material* space that is both lived in and lively, a biophysical space brimming with life (and death) that never stays put but exceeds its conventional boundaries – a space that, because of such material forces, provides us with an analytical scaffolding not just to think *about* the ocean, but also to think *with* and *from* it (e.g., Peters 2020; Peters & Steinberg 2015; Peters *et al.* 2023; Steinberg 2001; Steinberg 2025 Steinberg & Peters 2019). The next chapter will take a closer look at this third strand of work – and the more theoretical re-positionings it calls for – whereas at this stage I will focus primarily on the first two to demonstrate how Seychelles has somewhat moved beyond the 'Blue Economy' towards what I term 'oceanic thinking' to harness the political possibilities of situating the ocean at the centre of socio-economic development, at least from the institutional and stakeholders perspective that I ethnographically recount here.

'What is the Blue Economy? What is it supposed to achieve? What does it currently do instead? And how?' Over the past decade, the policy-infused scholarship and the more geographically inflected strands have been consistently confronting these, and other, questions – providing nuanced and at times, perhaps unsurprisingly given its malleability, contrasting accounts of BE practices worldwide (for excellent literature reviews on this see Midlen 2021, Voyer *et al.* 2018). For my purposes here, I draw attention to one of the earliest, foundational interventions within this space made by geographers Jennifer Silver and colleagues in 2015 (Silver *et al.* 2015). Practising 'collaborative event ethnography' at the Rio+20 Conference in 2012, they traced how the term Blue Economy came to prominence within the conference negotiations, who deployed it, how, when and to what effects. In short, they mapped the emergence of the term in the policy arena and the contours of the specific human-ocean relations it articulated during those pivotal early phases. Their analysis is illustrative of a tendency for the BE towards policy uncertainty, political tension, and ideological indeterminacy that, as other scholars have subsequently demonstrated, has only multiplied since their initial observations.

Indeed, they proposed that the Blue Economy emerged as a 'buzz word' (Voyer *et al.* 2018) in that forum: that is, a developmental paradigm that creates consensus with its general(ist), and hard-to-dispute, claims towards environmental sustainability, economic prosperity, and social wellbeing. Yet, such analytical fuzziness translates into political tensions when the details of the policy programmes, and the ideological baggage they carry, lean into the discussions. For instance, what industries are to be part of the Blue Economy, and in what capacity? Who should implement it locally – e.g., the state, a parastatal organisation, an NGO, or civil society? Who should lead it globally – e.g., SIDS, regional bodies, the Global North, international institutions? Who should finance it, and how? How

to balance economic exploitation with environmental protection? What role do MPAs play? And local communities? Then and now – likely even more today as the BE has been regularly institutionalised in numerous settings and discourses – these remain slippery talking points.

Related to that set of questions, Silver *et al.* (2015) identified four main discourses that configure the Blue Economy in somewhat differentiated manners. In the first instance, 'oceans as natural capital', the materiality of the ocean becomes entangled with, and co-opted by, the vocabulary, and underlying logics, of 'green' capitalism: actors began describing 'coral reefs' and 'mangroves' as 'natural infrastructural defences' against surging waves and unpredictable winds. As infrastructures, they can be restored, protected, and rehabilitated *only if* they are properly valued within market terms. For that to become a reality, what is needed is an 'ocean that capital can see' (Robertson 2006). Such an approach, it is worth noting, was not favoured by any specific group of participants. Instead, it was appreciated across the board – with a particularly strong support from Global North-based international organisations and heavily market-based environmental NGOs, such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

Less forward-looking than the 'oceans as natural capital' discourse and more rooted (so to speak) within well-developed ocean industries such as maritime transport and fishing, Silver *et al.* (2015) define the second discourse as 'oceans as good business'. Here, industry leaders partnered with mostly intergovernmental agency representatives to advance their own vision of a strong, sustainable ocean economy to reverse the harms perpetrated in, and against, oceanic spaces – harms that in most cases have been committed by those industries in the first place, as some of them conceded. To do that, they invoked sound partnerships with countries and especially international bodies, coupled with the right regulatory frameworks – options that are ultimately considered to be good business plans too.

In the third instance, 'oceans as integral to Pacific SIDS', the Blue Economy is constructively enrolled mainly by Pacific SIDS to leverage the integral role that the ocean plays within the socio-economic fabric of SIDS. One commentator at the conference noted, 'the marine environment is an important bedrock of the economy. It is not an extra, it is the very reason why ocean nations can survive and thrive' (Silver *et al.* 2015:147). In stressing the *vital* role the ocean has in their contexts, they called for the BE to be a means to, among others, a) combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) that disproportionately impacts SIDS' EEZs, b) financially support small island economies and ways

of life, and c) advance progressive benefit sharing agreements in established ocean sectors such as tuna fishing but also emergent ones such as biogenetic resources.

The final discourse that Silver *et al.* (2015) detected was that of 'oceans as Small-Scale Fisheries Livelihoods' (SSF). This discourse was most prominently advocated by a number of international associations (e.g., the World Fishermen Forum) and a few international bodies (e.g., FAO, World Bank) that highlighted the SSF's crucial contribution both for island states (not just SIDS) and coastal communities worldwide. In particular, they highlighted the importance of SSF for food provisioning, job security, and the associated socio-cultural values for millions of people. At the same time, these advocates also stressed the plight SSF are increasingly facing: declining fish stocks, financial insecurity, and climate vulnerability compounded by a more aggressive industrial sector. Although there were similarities around what these stakeholders advocated *against*, they simultaneously showed significant differences in what they advocated *for*: as an example, while fisheries associations were more inclined towards collective and community-based forms of stock management procedures, representatives from bodies like FAO and World Bank favoured instead rights-based approaches closely linked to enclosure, privatisation, and individualisation of fisheries resources.

The four categories provided by Silver and colleagues (2015) are not to be read as fixed instantiations of pre-conceived approaches to ocean governance in a Blue Economy world. Instead, they act more as heuristic devices, exhibiting porous boundaries that allow for cross-fertilisation and novel configurations. As their analysis demonstrates, actors themselves inhabited more than a single space opened by the various categories, sometimes while physically moving from one panel to the next during the conference. Simultaneously, these heuristic devices also produce political contestations that sometimes bubble to the surface - as the case of the SSF hinted at. In that regard, the Blue Economy that Silver *et al.* (2015) mapped, and that others have since articulated through further theoretical and case-specific insights - as a policy agenda, a political programme, a development tool, a branding initiative, a financial opportunity, a transformative approach, a rhetorical device, a neo-colonial plunder, or a de-colonial strategy (Choi 2017; Germond-Duret 2022; Gruby & Campbell 2013; Midlen 2023; Saddington 2023; Winder & Le Heron 2017) - features prominently a sense of 'precariousness'. In their analysis, precariousness translates into malleability in that actors and institutions, although differentially positioned in their power to negotiate, are somewhat able to influence the direction the nascent concept could take. They conclude, 'This suggests that opportunity remains to further adopt or subvert the term in ways that advance diverse objectives, progressive politics, and governance practices in the largest remaining contiguous common spaces

in the world' (Silver *et al.* 2015:153). I will directly take up this call in later chapters on the potential mobilisations that such an agenda could be tactically deployed for first by elite and state actors to leverage political power on a global stage (Chapter 4); and then by its more localised uptake for what are alternative and arguably more progressive visions of the multiple ways through which an ocean country, and its sustainable development, can be actualised (Chapter 5).

Grappling with similar questions, but through different sets of analytical lenses, the second, overarching Blue Economy-focussed body of literature has provided more theoretical entry points to unpick the current Blue Economy moment. From one side, Silver *et al.*'s (2015) intervention had already paved the way in that respect too: for instance, in the 'oceans as natural capital' discourse, they submit that institutionalising the Blue Economy would require a strong push towards, among others, Green Economy-based accounting mechanisms and ecosystem services approaches. To accompany such a move, a further parcelling out of ocean spaces and integrated ecosystems would be needed, aligning the ocean's biophysical properties to specific capitalist valuation techniques and accumulation principles. This market-led environmental governance approach to the watery portion of our planet, and its (re)imagining of society's relationships to it, are not limited to that discourse, but to varying degrees can also be appreciated in the 'oceans as good business' framing.

Building off this initial assessment offered by Silver *et al.* (2015), there has been since a surge in scholarship that has vastly contributed with both case-specific and more theoretical interventions to unpack the unfolding Blue Economy paradigm globally (for systemic literature reviews on some of these strands see Garland *et al.* 2019; Midlen 2021). Whether theorised through the lens of 'securitisation' (Childs & Hicks 2019), 'governmentality' (Choi 2017; Midlen 2021, 2023), 'assemblage thinking' (Bear 2017; Winder & Le Heron 2017), 'blue grabbing' (Barbesgaard 2018), 'space, place, and power' (Garland *et al.* 2018), 'sustainable (state) growth' (Steinberg & Kristoffersen 2019), 'de-growth' (Hadjimichael 2018; Ertör & Hadjimichael 2020), 'theory of access' (Andriamahefazafy & Kull 2019), the '*longue durée* [sic] of capitalism with the sea' (Mallin & Barbesgaard 2020), or 'blue justice and equity' (Louey 2022; Schreiber *et al.* 2022), the designation of a 'Blue Economy' agenda - in all the varied reconfigurations it demands, whether anticipated or actualised - does the generative, analytical work of catalysing attention around otherwise dispersed and fluid ocean governance arrangements in our contemporary world.

Within such a constellation of scholarship interventions, the present work attempts to make a first contribution through its methodological approach to the Blue Economy moment. Partly due to the

novelty of the BE itself that makes it a somewhat more *discursive* event and less an operationalised (development) agenda, the studies mentioned so far have been largely indebted to systematic textual analyses of a burgeoning body of official and grey policy literature connected to the BE, coupled with key stakeholders' interviews and focus groups as cases may require (with some notable exceptions, see Winder & Le Heron 2017). Expanding on those approaches and the insights they provide, I primarily engaged with the Blue Economy through long-term ethnographic practice in one of the first countries that officially endorsed *and* began implementation of the BE on a national level - the Republic of Seychelles. Adapting Ulrich Oslender's (2019:1694) critique of pluriversity discourses to the present research, I deemed that necessary as 'much of the debate on [the blue economy] lacks concrete ethnographic evidence to back up conceptual claims that are frequently shrouded in unnecessarily convoluted language. [Blue economy critiques] should be accompanied by meaningful ethnographic engagements with those invisibilized worlds to put flesh on [their] discourse and to enable a deeper, rooted decolonial engagement with the on-the-ground, lived experience'. Such an approach concurrently follows the footsteps of a vibrant body of work dealing specifically with entanglements of human and more-than-human histories in 'aquatic spaces' outside Blue Economy contexts (Oslender 2019, also Bear 2019; Bear & Eden 2011; Bull 2011; Probyn 2014; Todd 2018).

In cultivating ethnography as a methodological practice, I attempted to situate a mobile, discursive, and contested event - the Blue Economy - within a very real, turbulent, and materially dense space - the ocean - in conversation with the many stakeholders and practitioners populating the closed, air-conditioned rooms where it was discussed in Seychelles. Here I am following recent anthropological efforts to devise an ethnography attentive to 'the multidimensional crises of our times [...] that takes landscapes as its starting point and attunes itself to the structural synchronicities between ecology, capital, and the human and more-than-human histories through which uneven landscapes are made and remade' (Tsing, Mathews, & Bubandt 2019:186). What does it mean to take that methodological practice at sea, moving from uneven *landscapes* to turbulent *ocean(ic)*scapes? After all, geographers have long argued that the ocean is a socially constructed space, 'a space in which battles are waged but also a space across which power is projected' (Steinberg 2001:17); a space that, importantly, is fabricated *through* such battles and projections and does not pre-exist them. In ethnographically following the fabrication of that space with the Blue Economy - as a development space, a policy agenda, an affective intimacy - I begin mapping here the contours of 'oceanic thinking' as an *applied political ontology* simultaneously working as a scholarly intervention, a methodological approach, and a political orientation.

2.2. Enter the Blue Economy, in Seychelles

To situate what such an ethnographic practice has to offer to the current literature, it is first worth asking: How did Seychelles move from having less than 1% of its ocean territory protected to the designation of the 15% protected area described by Damian Carrington (2018) at the opening of this work, which doubled to 30% by 2020, in a short span of roughly five years (see Figure 2.1)? What processes were 'triggered by debt swap', as former minister Didier Dogley recalled? And what are their relationships with the Blue Economy introduced above? In this section, I intend to retrace several stepping stones within the socio-economic construction of Seychelles' ocean space through the latest 'buzz word' of the Blue Economy (Voyer *et al.* 2018). In doing so, I rely primarily on official and published literature, before offering a further dive into some of those moments through my own engagement with practitioners within (and outside) Seychelles in the next section. Such work will simultaneously be continued in the following chapters, particularly with the weaving together of the socio-political imaginaries of 'Seychelles as an ocean country' elite actors mobilised through the debt restructuring (Chapter 4).

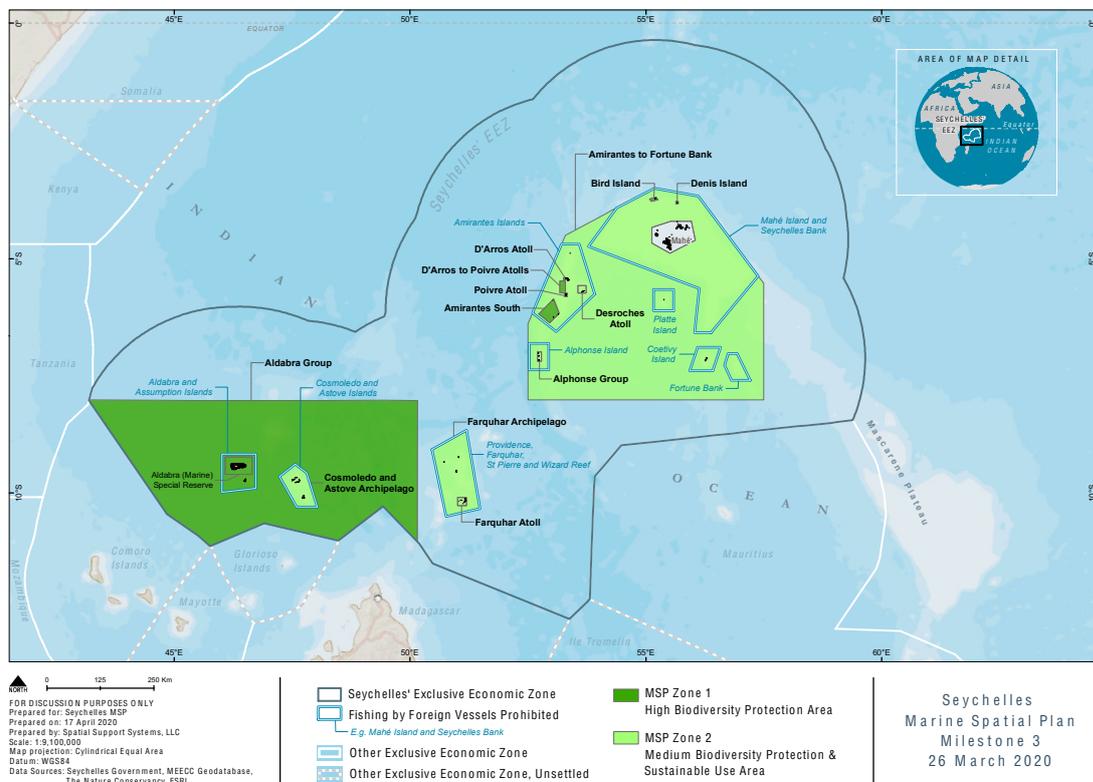


Figure 2.1. Milestone 3 of the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan detailing Seychelles' EEZ with the newly designated 30% Marine Protection Areas: Zone 1 (dark green) for High Biodiversity Protection Area and Zone 2 (Light Green) for Medium Biodiversity Protection & Sustainable Use Area. © Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative.

One of the earliest, official documents to mention the concept of the Blue Economy in the country was a 2013 unpublished report called 'Seychelles Concept Paper on the Blue Economy' where the Seychelles government laid the foundation for what would later become the publicly endorsed version of its flagship agenda (Carolus 2015). Located in the middle of the Western Indian Ocean, the Republic of Seychelles is officially an archipelagic state³ with 115 islands spread over 1.35 million km² of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) - the second largest EEZ in Africa. It has a population of approximately 100,000 people and is almost completely dependent socio-economically on tourism and fisheries - two industries heavily reliant on healthy marine ecosystems (Bueger & Wivel 2018, see Chapter 3). In such a light, Seychelles' recent fascination with its ocean territory may sound rather self-evident. Yet, as the introductory chapter has argued, adopting the Blue Economy framework allowed Seychellois political elites not just to turn to their EEZ as an obvious space of socio-political and economic development, but also to catalyse emerging geopolitical trends around the ocean-space for which Seychelles has been widely credited as one of the early starters and pioneers (e.g., Ernesta 2022a).

For a start, in developing an effective Blue Economy agenda, one of the fundamental challenges that the Seychellois government faced was to *define* what the Blue Economy is. Indeed, in the discussion so far, I have provided principles, examples, and general assessments of BE concepts and practices, but without offering any one definition of how it is currently identified internationally. The reason for that is that there is no agreed-upon definition of what makes an economy 'blue' (or, for that matter, what shade of 'blue' is economic-y enough), with sometimes similar, sometimes contrasting visions of what could or should be included within such a definition (Silver *et al.* 2015, Voyer *et al.* 2018). Scholars have already noted that such *indeterminacy* is conducive to policy murkiness that is detrimental to making the BE a sound policy agenda, while at the same time it may also be argued that it is exactly the malleability of what counts as BE that makes it a palatable selling point across the board - as Silver *et al.* (2015) showed. Regardless, indeterminacy in its core meaning(s) brings with it, as a first corollary, uncertainty when it comes to *operationalising* its principles too. For Seychelles, such issues had a further magnifying factor as it was one of the first to institutionalise the BE at a

³ Part IV of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines an "archipelagic State" [as] a State constituted wholly by one or more archipelagos and may include other islands'. With the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan initiative redrawing the country's maritime boundaries, the Seychelles government has gazetted the four archipelagic groups of Aldabra-Assumption, Astove-Cosmoledo, Farquhar-Providence-St. Pierre, and Mahé (*Maritime Zones (Baselines) Order, 2022*) - effectively claiming archipelagic status.

country level – laying the foundations, and setting examples, especially for other island states that have since followed its lead (Benzaken *et al.* 2022).

In the *Seychelles' Blue Economy – Strategic Policy Framework and Roadmap: Charting the Future (2018-2030)* (henceforth, the *Seychelles Blue Economy Roadmap* or the *Roadmap*; see Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative n.d.), the government officially delineated its policy agenda moving forward. The *Roadmap* defined the Blue Economy 'as a means of realizing the nation's development potential through innovation, knowledge-led approach, being mindful of the need to conserve the integrity of the Seychelles marine environment and heritage for present and future generations' (Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative n.d.:3). To achieve such a vision, the *Roadmap* identifies four pillars: 1) *economic diversification and resilience*, 2) *shared prosperity*, 3) *food security and well-being*, and 4) *integrity of habitats and ecosystem services, sustainable use, and climate resilience*. Along with these four pillars, the *Roadmap* further elaborates on seven principles that are to guide the vision: *economic efficiency, sustainability, social equity, good governance, resilience, research and innovation, and partnership*. With such a strategy, the *Roadmap* openly lays the foundation of what it terms the 'Seychelles Blue Economy Brand' (see also Benzaken *et al.* 2022).

In addition to the adoption of the *Roadmap*, at least two other moments proved crucial for the institutionalisation of the BE in Seychelles' governance structures. First, the creation in 2015 of the James Michel Blue Economy Research Institute (BERI) within the only higher education institution in the country, the University of Seychelles – named after the founder of the Institute and one of the BE staunchest advocates, the then-president of Seychelles James Alix Michel (Ceglia 2024). Second, the establishment of a Blue Economy Department in the same year, a department that after several government reshufflings now sits under the Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy. On the one side, BERI was designed to be an academic research and knowledge hub for environmental sciences, with a particular focus on a broadly defined ocean science. Conversely, the Blue Economy Department would act as a focal point for strategic synergies and coordinating inputs of Blue Economy-related activities. These components 'were seen as key drivers providing the basic "architecture" necessary for the implementation of a whole of the government blue economy agenda' (Benzaken *et al.* 2022:8, emphasis in the original)⁴. In short, to circulate as economically productive, the Blue Economy not

⁴ Dominique Benzaken and colleagues (2022) offer a unique insiders' perspective on the institutional construction of the Blue Economy governance structure within Seychelles (and, to my knowledge, still a one-of-a-kind account either in Seychelles or beyond). Indeed, right after the establishment of the Blue Economy Department in 2015, Benzaken was appointed on a two-year term (2016-18) as an international advisor to help

only requires an 'ocean that capital can see' (Robertson 2006). To be effectively operationalised, it also needs an alternate, possibly flexible governance infrastructure able to hold together, and make collaborative interventions between, politically charged ocean imaginaries and uncertain ocean materialities (Peters 2020) – infrastructures that could likewise generate novel state-level political prefigurations (Chapter 4) and grassroots climate futures (Chapter 5).

Yet, before the governance 'architecture' could effectively work to support a Blue Economy agenda, there remained an issue of financing that agenda in the first place. Indeed, arguably the most innovative components in the BE space in Seychelles – and what makes it such a palatable option for other small island and littoral states that have since followed Seychelles' example (e.g., OECD 2023) – are the *ad hoc* financing options put in place. At this stage, I will limit myself to providing a broad overview of otherwise messy political deals to orient directions within the 'Economy' element of the BE. The elements I will introduce here are those generally considered pioneering and unique features of Seychelles' deals within this blue climate finance space. In a later chapter (Chapter 5), I will untangle in more detail the political economy of these instruments, pinpointing potential shortcomings that scholars have already noted (e.g., Christiansen 2023; Kılıç 2024) as well as gesturing for grassroots' openings for alternate political practices that these blue climate finance could generate.

As *The Guardian* celebrated in the editorial piece that opened this work, a crucial moment in the actualisation of the BE agenda in Seychelles has been the designation of 15% of its EEZ as MPAs in 2018, an area that would then expand to 30% in 2020 – reaching over 410,000 km² of protected areas (The Nature Conservancy 2018). The process that led to those outcomes was officially initiated in 2015 when the Government of Seychelles closed the world's first-ever debt restructuring covering ocean spaces – the *Debt Restructuring for Marine Conservation and Climate Adaption Program*. Based on a 40-year-old model of 'debt-for-nature swaps', the deal was notable in its focus on ocean conservation and development (whereas previous 'debt swaps' were primarily geared toward land and, particularly, forest-related programmes) and the governance structure it established (Silver & Campbell 2018). Following previous IMF-led restructuring programmes in the wake of the country's default in 2008, the government decided to restructure US\$21.6 million it owed to a group of Paris Club countries. Among other conditionalities, it agreed to develop a Marine Spatial Plan (SMSP) for

the government set up its BE architecture. Another co-author, Angélique Pouponneau, was the first, now former, CEO of the *Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust* (SeyCCAT) – another key player within the local Blue Economy infrastructure that I will introduce shortly.

its EEZ, to protect 30% of its waters, and to set up an independent governance structure tasked with both overseeing these operations and disbursing funds to local entities for marine-related activities (Silver & Campbell 2018).

The deal was brokered by one of the biggest environmental non-governmental organisations in the world, The Nature Conservancy - who both raised the funds to finance the debt buyback through its investment arm, NatureVest, and set up the governance mechanism overseeing the operation locally, the special purpose vehicle trust fund *Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust* (SeyCCAT). Key financial transactions of this deal are: TNC provided loan capital to SeyCCAT of US\$20.2 million that the government then borrowed from SeyCCAT to buy back US\$21.6 million of debt from its Paris Club creditors. With the repayments from the government, SeyCCAT oversees a) the repayment with interest to TNC for its initial loan of US\$20.2 million, b) the disbursement of grant funding through its own Blue Grants Fund (BGF) to local stakeholders for marine-related activities, c) and the funding of the Blue Endowment Fund to support the activities of the trust in the long-term. The centre-to-right side of Figure 2.2 details these transactions.

In the context of this chapter, I draw attention to only a few features of this deal. First, it is notable that the amount effectively freed up to invest in marine-related initiatives is only US\$1.4 million - as the debt was purchased by the government at 93.5 cents to the dollar - whereas the remaining US\$20.2 million has still to be repaid by the government, through SeyCCAT, to TNC (Convergence 2017). Scholars have already noted that the reduced fiscal space opened up by the deal strongly limits the possibility for this instrument to act as a 'lifeline' to the ocean, as *The Guardian's* snippet opening this work put it - representing, instead, more a publicity campaign for mobile financial capital than an actual operationalisable solution at scale - a point that I will develop later in more detail (see Chapter 4; also Silver & Campbell 2018).

Not just scholars, but local practitioners as well are acutely aware of such a limitation - and they are pushing for a change in vocabulary to reflect what is actually at stake. From her privileged position within this evolving ocean institutional architecture, the Seychellois Helena Sims - SMSP project manager and TNC employee - has repeatedly stressed in the dozen or so presentations I attended during my stay in Seychelles, that the deal would be better defined as a 'debt restructuring' instead of a 'debt swap'. Indeed, she argues that 'debt swap' gives the false impression that a) Seychelles does not hold debt obligations to investors anymore; b) and, relatedly, that the capital available is higher than it currently is - misrepresenting the current funds Seychelles has to cover the extensive

activities required by the deal. In short, language matters - as policy travels with words it creates worlds capable of affecting, consciously and less so, imaginaries of what is (not) possible. Defining the terms of the Blue Economy agenda in Seychelles, and by extension reframing the value of those terms in an international setting, I suggest it is an indication of local, elite practitioners simultaneously exercising a form of political agency to assert their positionalities, and associated visions, within this space - a point that I will continue to build in detail in later chapters (Chapter 4 and 5). Redefining the terms of the conversation in this way assumes even more significance when performed by practitioners like Helena Sims - that is, a stakeholder who is both rooted in the local fabric (a self-proclaimed proud Seychellois environmentalist) *and* in international discourses (as a TNC employee who represents the Seychelles' deal internationally).

The second point I want to highlight here is the role that SeyCCAT has within the assembling governance architecture of the BE in the country, and by extension also that of TNC. SeyCCAT acts as a mediating interface between state bureaucracies, transnational NGOs, international financial institutions, and ocean ecosystems - a position that becomes particularly sticky considering the prominent role TNC has within the governance structure of the trust fund (Silver & Campbell 2018). Indeed, as per the establishing act of the trust - the *Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust Act, 2015* - TNC is vested with one of the two *ex-officio* directors' positions - the other being a government appointee (usually the Minister of Agriculture, Climate Change, and Environment) - that could *de facto* veto the decisions of the trust, and potentially steer its functioning (Silver & Campbell 2018). The ramifications of TNC's entrenched position within Seychelles' BE structure in terms of, for instance, the state's sovereignty over its ocean spaces or the undemocratic decision-making process it is putting forward, will be unpacked at a later stage (particularly in Chapter 4). Here, instead, I highlight TNC's capacity to, at the very least, influence, either directly or indirectly, the country's agenda of what counts as climate adaptation strategies, sustainable ocean development, or ocean literacy and outreaching activities - to name a few of the objectives that SeyCCAT actively provides funding for.

SeyCCAT's role was further deepened within the state-international finance nexus when Seychelles announced another world first: the Blue Bond (World Bank 2018). Modelled on the green bond structure, the Blue Bond was the first bond to raise funds specifically to target ocean activities (the left-hand side of Figure 2.2 shows the key financial transactions for the bond). It was placed by the government through private investors at US\$15 million, with a US\$5 million concessional loan from the Global Environmental Facility and a US\$5 million World Bank guarantee - effectively subsidising

much of the issuance. The bond was part of a broader World Bank's Third South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Governance and Shared Growth Project (SWIOFish3) focussed on sustainably managing the fisheries resources within the region, and in Seychelles particularly (on the convoluted histories of the fishing industry in Seychelles, see Chapter 3). The US\$15 million funds were to be disbursed through a dedicated Blue Investment Fund (BIF) located within the government-majority-owned Development Bank of Seychelles (DBS) for a total of US\$12 million, and the remaining US\$3 million through SeyCCAT's BGF.

Even from this brief overview of the ocean architecture taking shape in Seychelles via these novel schemes, it is worth noting the extent to which these two financial instruments diverge in setting up the governance structure regulating them, with one prominent consequence being the drawing of lines around what counts as Blue Economy and what doesn't, who deserves to be funded for that and who doesn't, who oversees those processes, and to what effects. With its more direct state involvement, the Blue Bond-funded DBS's BIF is tasked with providing loans on relatively favourable terms to the fisheries industry - targeting especially value-adding, land-based economic activities within the semi-industrial sector; a move that has not failed to attract criticism for perpetuating neoliberal market logics of resource extraction and undemocratic ownership (see Chapter 5; Kılıç 2024). Conversely, SeyCCAT's BGF provides grant money to local individuals, organisations (either civil society or conservation), institutions (state or para-statal), or potential businesses along the whole spectrum of what could be considered 'marine-related activity' - from potential commercial ideas to conservation measures, scientific research, or communication, outreach and education programmes.

Stretching this distinction, for the IMF-influenced, state-directed BIF, the ocean remains a place of resource extraction dominated by a single, traditional industry (fisheries) focussed on a few economically productive, but ecologically threatened species (with tuna topping the list), with the added possibility of novel, locally owned and land-based value-generating practices. Conversely, for the hybrid governance mechanism of TNC-mediated SeyCCAT, the ocean becomes a space of (controlled) experimentation where local communities are able to negotiate, to some extent, what Seychelles' ocean futures might look like. Later I will tease out possible future orientations of these more localised, grassroots trajectories (Chapter 5), but what is notable here is that the Seychelles state apparatus is already elaborating localised articulations of the four discourses identified by Silver *et al.* (2015) above: the 'oceans as natural capital' strongly features in its push towards expanding the fisheries sector with the BIF, whereas a mixture of 'oceans as natural capital' and 'oceans as integral

to Pacific SIDS' appears in SeyCCAT's BGF. Simultaneously, these elaborations are envisioned by a constellation of both national and international elite, political actors that are imagining, advocating for as well as against, what a BE-fuelled Seychelles' *ocean state* should look like today and in the future. Equally crucial, they sometimes overlap, sometimes diverge, and they are never free from contestations - both from the inside and out. These visions are currently co-existing in the political land-, and sea-, scape of Seychelles, and in teasing their differential logics out I am holding the space open for the potentially divergent, state-level future trajectories that they might be able to generate to be in conversation with each other, while stressing some of the work that the Blue Economy as a heuristic device does in the country.

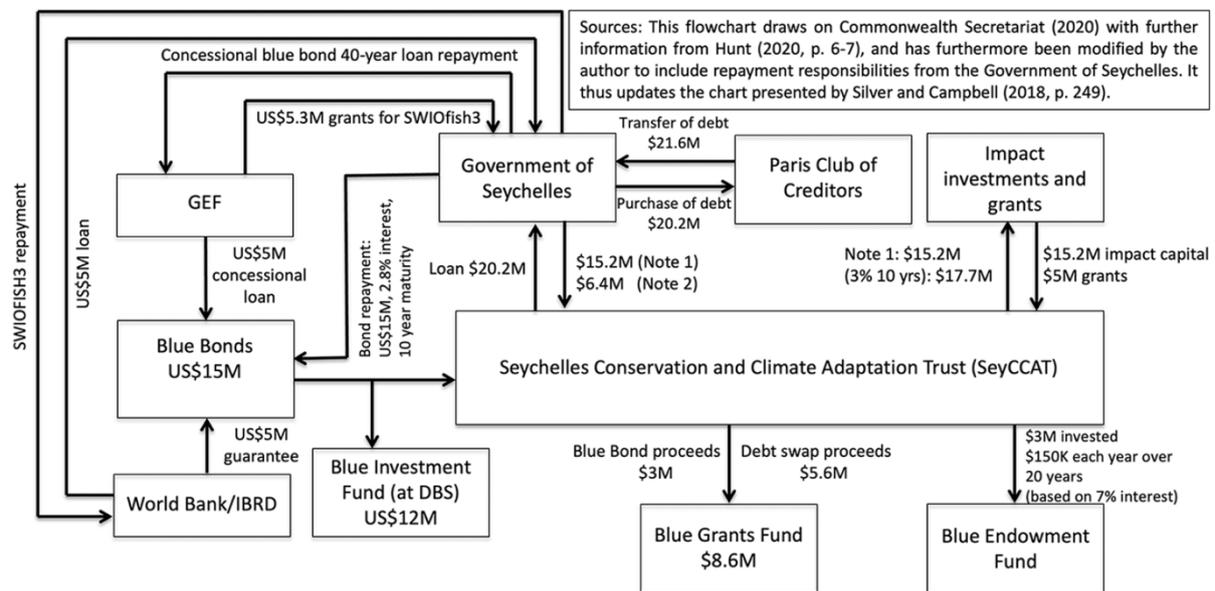


Figure 2.2. The financial transactions of the Seychelles debt restructuring programme (centre to right-hand side) and the Blue Bond (centre to left-hand side) as presented in Christiansen (2023).

To further consolidate this proposition, it is worth mentioning another critical position SeyCCAT holds in the BE structure in Seychelles - that is, that of providing partial funding and a coordinating role for the workings of the final component within the Seychelles' 'Blue Economy Brand' that I introduce here: the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative (SMSP). As briefly hinted in the introduction, the SMSP is nothing short of an attempt to spatially allocate *any* activity that happens, and could potentially happen, within Seychelles' 1.35 million km² EEZ (although, technically, not *all* of it yet⁵),

⁵ Defined by the Port of Victoria Boundary Area, there is a relatively small area in terms of size but the busiest in terms of human activities on the Mahé Plateau that is not covered by the SMSP at the time of writing. In Figure 2.1 that area is represented by the un-coloured polygon amid a massive light green polygon. As it became clear to me during the consultative meetings, that area was agreed to be left untouched by the Seychelles government with TNC support because of the anticipated, time-consuming difficulties in negotiating conflicts

and regulate conditions under which these activities should take place. The SMSP was also triggered by the debt restructuring - with TNC tasked with facilitating the process and providing mainly technical and scientific support - under the leadership of the government itself. The process has been running for almost ten years now and, as practitioners confirmed to me, it had an expected implementation date of December 2023 now moved to 2024. Considering the massive scope the SMSP is aiming for, it is easy to appreciate the crucial function it has within the assembling ocean governance structures in Seychelles. From this perspective, former minister Dogley's comment that, triggered by the debt swap, 'the marine spatial plan has started the process of thinking about these things' (Carrington 2018) resonates even more forcefully. Financially backed by (re)emerging instruments, structurally embedded within hybrid governmentalities, with the BE and the SMSP the ocean seeps into the cracks of political imaginaries and economic logics with rejuvenated force. It seeps, but only up to a point: everything still seems to remain rather dry (see Chapters 4 and 5).

2.3. Researchers Enter the Blue Economy in Seychelles

The previous sections have briefly retraced some crucial steps in the emergence of the Blue Economy through mainly institutional and official accounts - from its initial conceptualisations in Rio to its official public endorsement globally followed by the pioneering efforts that Seychelles made with establishing and implementing its strategies. Highlighting once again the 'initiating' role - or proof-of-concept, as it was formally recognised (Commonwealth Small States 2018) - that Seychelles played at these early stages, since it began to lay the groundwork for the development and implementation of its 'Blue Economy Brand' in 2015 an increasing amount of academic research has tried to assess exactly *how* the state and major non-state actors were trying to do that, and to what effects locally.

These scholars have adopted a number of lenses to make sense of the Blue Economy in Seychelles: some have researched it as a 'good governance framework' (Benzaken *et al.* 2022); some as a vehicle for (or obstacle to) local power production and circulation (Schutter & Hicks 2019) or as a 'hegemonic boundary object' (Schutter *et al.* 2021); some as the construction of a 'blue frontier' (Silver & Campbell 2018) or a broader 'island-ocean-climate' imaginary (Saddington 2023); others have narrowed down on the 'state-mediated rent and value production' aspect (Christiansen 2023), the legality of these 'blue' financial instruments (Kılıç 2024), or taken a more open justice-oriented

in such a high-use area. As practitioners revealed to me, the government would likely set up an *ad hoc* committee to address the issue once the SMSP is fully implemented.

approach (Baker & Constant 2020; Baker, Constant & Nicol 2023). An underlying, almost tacit element within all of these works is that the Blue Economy in Seychelles is *some thing* that is both *real* and *significant*. By contrast, as I elaborate below, my research revealed a process that is diluted, locally fractured, and *underwhelming*. Before developing that critique, I will sketch in the remainder of this section the implicit consensus among others of what the Blue Economy in Seychelles *is*. In doing so, I purposefully limit my discussion to only unpicking themes that these rich contributions raise around the Blue Economy - while leaving other recurrent topics (e.g., the role of foreign institutions and NGOs within state's governance structures, the critiques around the participatory processes, the sustainability of debt-fuelled development projects) for later chapters (Chapter 4 and 5).

Writing from such a variety of backgrounds and scholarly interests, it is almost staggering the level of convergence this literature has when it comes to describing the Blue Economy in Seychelles. With a note of caution for the specificity that they each have in their own interventions, there is a palpable sense that the Blue Economy in Seychelles is anything but the well-meaning, and well-defined, 'Brand' the government's Roadmap purports it to be. The issue partly stems from the inability (or unwillingness?) that Silver *et al.* (2015) identified at the very inception of the concept itself: not having a single agreed-upon definition with *operationalisable principles* that could translate into actionable strategic plans leaves the field open to competing and contrasting perspectives. And yet, it must also be stressed that such indeterminacy is at the same time able to manufacture consent through persuasion rather than coercion, or even resistance from within, as the Seychelles' case demonstrates (Schutter *et al.* 2021).

Schutter and colleagues (2019; 2021) have provided some of the most systematic analyses of the Blue Economy Brand, and its perceptions, in the archipelagic state. In their first intervention, Schutter and Hicks (2019) posited that stakeholders and practitioners moved between three broad perspectives when tracing their understanding of the BE in the country: a) supportive in principle, critical in practice; b) pragmatic and accepting; c) or idealistic. In the first 'supportive in principle, critical in practice' stance, Schutter and Hicks (2019) capture participants that show a general acceptance of BE ethos towards environmental sustainability, and specifically conservation practices, but are less content with the economic drive behind those practices. Particularly when it comes to the financial motives underlying these deals, they worry that environmental protection might be compromised at the altar of 'sustainable growth'. For participants in the second stance, 'pragmatic and accepting', there is a less critical position towards the marrying of environmental protection with

economic growth. They anticipate that the BE could potentially generate much-needed funding in the conservation arena, 'not by mainstreaming it into the economy, but by transferring funds' (Schutter & Hicks 2019:433). Here, MPAs for the preservation of Seychelles' marine environment could potentially co-exist with oil and gas exploration activities within the EEZ to foster social and economic prosperity. For the final stance, that Schutter and Hicks (2019) term 'idealistic', respondents propose a strong role for government involvement within the reorganisation of Seychelles' ocean space. For those participants, the BE in the country should avoid neoliberal market logics of environmental governance, but should instead focus on what they believe are more pressing considerations around social inclusion and cultural value across ocean uses and resources.

While contextualising the Blue Economy paradigm within Seychelles' local fabric, Schutter and Hicks follow the uneasy translation that policy discourses have in place, and the negotiating forces that shape their circulation. In adopting Silver and colleagues' (2015) four descriptors, they demonstrate that the localisation of certain ideas generates conflicting views that tend to be brushed aside in international fora. For instance, it is clear that, in Seychelles, Schutter and Hicks's participants share a broad sense of 'oceans as natural capital', but they differ in exactly where, when and how capital should be materialised: Should oil and gas exploration be factored in as 'sustainable development'? What to value as 'natural capital' – e.g., fish population, coral reefs, or seagrasses? Furthermore, they suggest that we must be attentive to power, its fabrication, flow, and distribution in BE discourses: in their analysis, although the 'supportive in principle, critical in practice' stance results as the most influential in terms of 'information network', it is the 'pragmatic and accepting' view that takes precedence when it comes to resource allocation. As a consequence of that, the potentialities of affecting change from the more critical agenda that those in the majority share – the 'supportive in principle, critical in practice' – wears off. Later I will return to some of these elements in my discussion of the potentialities of pre-figuring alternative development through Blue Economy-based, and climate finance-supported initiatives (Chapter 5).

Building off of this initial assessment, in a following contribution Schutter and colleagues (2021:2) further argue that Blue Economy in Seychelles acts as a 'boundary object': an object that is 'versatile enough to appeal to many different actors as an idea, [that has] a strong degree of plasticity in [its] meaning, [that takes] on the role of bridging boundaries – that is, [it] facilitate cooperation between different social worlds'. In keeping with their previous analysis, they propose that the term does have wider conceptual resonance and acceptance at large, but generates 'simmering discontent that is expressed only in private' (Schutter *et al.* 2021:3) when its content needs to be pinned down. And

yet, such a superficial consensus masks one way in which boundary objects exercise, produce, and establish power relations: in Seychelles' BE, for instance, 'consensus is achieved through absorbing challenges to the dominant socio-economic order by providing an attractive and internationally supported alternative narrative' (Schutter *et al.* 2021:3). Thus, power 'does not rely on coercion but on consent, and the 'common sense' created by international blue economy discourse relies heavily on presenting the blue economy as a rational and modern way of environmental governance. As such, the term carries agency, as local actors feel compelled to use it and perpetuate the discourse' (Schutter *et al.* 2021:4). Power through persuasion and acceptance has the further debilitating effect of rendering political debates likely a-political because of the very plasticity and vagueness that make boundary objects versatile (and ethereal) in the first place coupled with the technical and managerial approaches that generally accompany them. In conclusion, stretching between, and recomposing through, these many trajectories, the Blue Economy in Seychelles demands us 'to contemplate research into a plurality of (potentially multiplying) phenomenon [sic], often previously unrelated, but now being bound together' (Winder & Le Heron 2017:12).

2.4. I Enter the Blue Economy in Seychelles

Schutter and colleagues (2019; 2021) were among the first to thoroughly trace the contours of the emerging Blue Economy Brand in Seychelles from a local stakeholders' perspective - critical interventions that informed my understanding of it prior to carrying out research in the country. One of the underlying, either unconscious or less so, assumptions within that scholarship - noticeable to various degrees in more recent interventions as well (e.g., Christiansen 2023; Laing 2020; Saddington 2023) - is an apparently banal one: the Blue Economy transpires as a highly visible, self-conscious political project at the forefront of ocean conservation and development debates taking place in the archipelagic state. Therefore, in crafting the present research project around the social (re)construction of the ocean in Seychelles through its recent interventions in that space, I maintained a strong reliance on the Blue Economy itself as an overarching, guiding paradigm - a heuristic device - with its affordances and limitations, to help me navigate what I anticipated to be (real and imagined) political imaginaries once in the country. Little did I know, though, that I would have to change course as soon as my plane landed on Mahé.

I spent a total of just short of twelve months in Seychelles from the beginning of July 2022 to the end of June 2023, based primarily on the main island of Mahé with sporadic visits to other major inner

islands of Praslin, La Digue, and Curieuse⁶ (on the geography and geology of the country more in Chapter 3). During this time, the James Michel Blue Economy Research Institute (BERI) at the University of Seychelles (UniSey) hosted me with a desk space within their offices and a wealth of opportunities to explore a range of spaces and people that I would otherwise have had a much harder time accessing. Alongside the more scholarly element of my relationship with the Institute, BERI and UniSey were also a constant source of support, laughter, and occasional rants for me in my day-to-day interactions in Seychelles – from the never-so-much-talked-about boredom of doing long-term ethnographic fieldwork, to the changing weather patterns and monsoon seasons. Indeed, the weather was a particular central topic of our conversations. As I grew up in the mild temperate climate of the Mediterranean in Southern Italy, then moved to the Northern latitudes of Durham, UK (54 degrees north), before landing 4 degrees south of the equator on Mahé (Seychelles), I was frequently reminded that 'rewarded as intellectuals, anthropologists use their bodies' – and the affective, embodied experience of conducting research in these conditions, with its effects on knowledge production and exchange (Okely 2020).

As the previous section discussed, I understood the 'Blue Economy worlds' in the country in as expansive a manner as possible: as the *Roadmap* makes explicit, and the literature goes on to articulate with its differentiations, *anything* happening in, or around, the ocean could *virtually* be considered part of the Blue Economy Brand. Methodologically, I translated such an approach into anticipating the central role semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders would have. Several of these were part of the current central government institutions (e.g., Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy; Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment; Ministry of Finance, National Planning and Trade; PetroSeychelles) para-statal organisations (e.g., the Seychelles Fishing Authority); NGOs (e.g., The Nature Conservancy; Seychelles Islands Foundation; Island Conservation Society); various other organisational bodies (the SMSP team; SEYCCAT; the SWIOFish3 team; the Fisheries Transparency Initiative); business entrepreneurs within the semi-industrial fishery industry; and small-scale fisherfolks and fisherfolks associations' representatives.

Once in Seychelles, then, BERI acted as a gatekeeper in facilitating my entry within these local 'Blue Economy worlds', and its participants. As it will become clearer below, my affiliation with an official

⁶ This project has received full ethical approval from the Durham Geography Research Ethics Committee (application reference GEOG-2022-07-29T09_49_12-shnh26). Additionally, the government of Seychelles has also granted approval to conduct the present research through the Seychelles Bureau of Standards (application reference A0157).

gatekeeper and active stakeholders within those worlds undoubtedly facilitated my access to high-level meetings and key practitioners – investing me with political legitimacy and close proximity that would otherwise have been harder to negotiate. Indeed, given the relatively small pool of participants and institutions within the ocean policy space in Seychelles (see below), such an affiliation is deemed necessary to conduct especially long-term ethnographic fieldwork that requires constant contact (and information sharing) among high-level practitioners. Yet, such affiliation does not come without its drawbacks. As others have also documented (Schutter *et al.* 2021), I had to jostle between my own positionalities as locally associated with BERI, while simultaneously being a researcher from a Global North institution. Indeed, my being part of a UK institution tended to elicit at times answers that either avoided criticisms altogether so as not to put Seychelles under unwanted attention internationally, or instead used my positionality to amplify on a global stage (mostly) local political contentions or contrasting political agendas. Therefore, in each of my interactions, I had to carefully navigate, and account for, these various dynamics in conversation with all of my participants.

I held a total of 30 formal, semi-structured interviews ranging from 20 to 180 minutes through such sampling distributed mostly towards the end of my fieldwork in Seychelles for two main reasons: first, after spending an extended period in the country, and given the relatively small pool of actors within the ocean in Seychelles, the majority of people I interviewed were already familiar, if not with my research yet, probably with my face – something that facilitated my engagement with them. Second, and relatedly, I could tailor my discussion better towards the end of my fieldwork, while being able to select specific actors to speak with. This last point is particularly salient in a place like Seychelles which, given its small population, has a limited group of people working within the Blue Economy space that, in the last eight years or so, have been repeatedly targeted by researchers like myself. Participants themselves did not fail to note this 'interview fatigue', quipping that Seychelles is turning into a new site of 'parachute science' through its Blue Economy agenda – a concern that perpetuates long-standing power asymmetries in knowledge production and circulation in BE developments, with SIDS still positioned at the receiving end of the spectrum (Pouponneau 2023, but also Farbotko *et al.* 2021; Stratford *et al.* 2023). In that regard, and tying together all these points, stakeholders also noticed the extended period I spent in the country – a somewhat unique feature compared to previous interactions they had and that casted the present project in a more positive light to start with.

In building trust and good research practices, I also contributed when asked to throughout my time in the country and later: examples of that are the work I compiled in helping BERI establish itself as

a focal point in the Western Indian Ocean as part of the Ocean Knowledge Action Hub (OceanKAN, see <https://sites.google.com/oceankan.org/theoceankan>); presenting my project officially and unofficially in a variety of settings (e.g., the *Blue Financing: Transforming the Ocean Economy* webinar organised by BERI and the University of Antwerp); and returning to Seychelles to participate at the first ever *Seychelles Coastal and Ocean Symposium* in May 2024 - a highly anticipated event that was in-the-making while I was in Seychelles in 2023, intending to capture the breadth of scientific and academic research happening in or about Seychelles' ocean spaces.

And yet, formal interviews were only complementary to an ethnographic practice that had two main anchor points: BERI and conference rooms. As already mentioned, BERI provided instrumental knowledge about a wealth of marine-related projects and initiatives happening in the country. It was not uncommon for me to just sit at my desk and be suddenly dragged to the latest UN-sponsored climate-related talk happening next door. Less impromptu, I was also invited to participate in the activities the Institute itself was carrying out. For instance, the field trip with undergraduate students to Curieuse Island off the coast of Praslin was a steep learning experience in small-scale conservation projects on giant tortoises, endemic bird species, extensive mangrove forests, and expanding coral farming initiatives mostly run by the parastatal organisation Seychelles Parks and Garden Authority (SPGA) - in many ways a microcosm of the environmental governance framework Seychelles could implement on a larger, national scale. In addition, another valuable experience was the visit to the *Seychelles Aquaculture - The Broodstock Acclimatation & Quarantine Facility* at the Providence Fishing Port in Mahé where Seychelles is trying to experiment with its own low-volume, high-value aquaculture product as part of the Blue Economy agenda - experimentations that although not yet commercially viable, are already attracting contention (for instance, see Baker *et al.* 2023).

As importantly, BERI was pivotal for establishing long-term connections in the country and facilitating my access to consultative spaces of different kinds. Indeed, probably the most surprising element in the methodological journey of this project has been practising a particular type of ethnography that I had not really anticipated: *event* ethnography. With hindsight, it seems almost obvious: as the Blue Economy is still very much an unfolding event in the country (and, I would go as far as to say that it is likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future) and 'many projects are still being imagined' (Winder & Le Heron 2017:12), the meeting rooms where these imaginaries were cultivated were very much alive and populated with a mixed constellation of actors and stakeholders that hotly debated how to turn it into a reality. On one level, the timing just worked in my favour: coming at the end of a period of limited interactions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders' consultations returned in

earnest especially around the SMSP initiative that was nearing its completion and transitioning into the implementation phase. By the time I left Seychelles, I had attended a total of 27 high-level official meetings, covering a wide range of projects, organisations, and practitioners: notable examples include a series of SMSP Steering Committee with Technical Working Groups meetings, a series of SMSP workshops on the *Development of Management Plans for Sustainable Use Areas (MSP Zone 2) designated under the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative*; the SeyCCAT's workshop on the *Development of a Standardized MPA Management Plan Template*; a series of SWIOFish3's workshops on the *Seychelles Tuna Industry Development Plan* and the *Tuna Fisheries Management Plan*; the SFA's consultations on the newly drafted *Fisheries Act (2022)* and accompanying *Fisheries Regulations (2022)*; and the SeyCCAT's workshop on the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project.

These meetings share many characteristics that make them unique spaces for the present project. First, as already mentioned the 'Blue Economy world' in Seychelles does have a limited number of actors, especially in the higher and more managerial positions, which translates into the same people being targeted not just by researchers but also as stakeholders for consultative processes. Leaving aside for a moment the 'consultation fatigue' that some of the stakeholders lamented during these meetings, for the present research it had the unquestionable advantage of allowing time and space to familiarise myself with key actors within the BE world in the country, becoming a familiar face for many while at times turning into an active participant asked to discuss - and vote on - specific plans and management measures. Only half-jokingly one stakeholder remarked while catching my eye in the middle of one of the many sessions that we both attended in the consultation frenzy that characterised the end of 2022: 'You're everywhere!'. In another instance, another member of the organising committee, someone I had met and talked with multiple times before at that point, came up to me bemusing: 'You're writing a lot today, I hope that's positive' - a subtle reminder of the thin line walked as a researcher, partly yielding some form of power manifested in the apparent fear of my interlocutor (i.e., 'I hope that's positive'); while simultaneously, beneath the surface, reminding me of theirs (i.e., my presence there as an external observer only possible because they allowed me to)⁷. Still in another workshop, an organiser, with whom I again had had previous positive interactions, spontaneously offered me the possibility to distribute research material (e.g., questionnaires or the like) to stakeholders if that could aid my project. In remembering these snippets here along with the relationships I outlined above at BERI, I am pointing to the complex positionalities that I navigated,

⁷ I am grateful to Philip Steinberg for helping me analysing this remark.

and continue to navigate under different guises, while in the field – positionalities that I begin constructing in this chapter, but that will become increasingly evident in what follows.

In addition, being physically present in those spaces had two further advantages: first, I could follow these projects as they developed in time, in some instances over months – as in the case of the SMSP *Draft Management Plans for the Sustainable Use Areas*; second, and relatedly, these meetings happened on practitioners' own terms – or, at least, the organisers' terms – that were not researcher-driven. Through this practice, I had a glimpse into the (non)uses of Blue Economy discourses in practice, manifested in the spaces that have been, either directly or indirectly, 'triggered by the debt swap' (Carrington 2018). Attending to the specificities of not just the co-construction of policy discourses through consultative processes, but also the affective resonances that these meetings have on actors participating in them has allowed me to populate the previous academic accounts of the BE in Seychelles with novel insights into the transformative, and transforming, role the BE Brand now occupies in the archipelagic state. Indeed, in one of the many learning experiences that practising such 'arts of noticing' (Tsing *et al.* 2017) imparted on me, I was somewhat taken aback to discover that much of the *other* negotiations, and frankly as revealing discussions, happened during the 'unofficial' times of these meetings – i.e., the numerous coffee and lunch breaks punctuating these events never failed to provide avenues for sometimes heated, sometimes subdued, but never dull conversations between participants; conversations that I witnessed but was also asked to contribute to more often than I had expected (see also Koch 2023).

In line with the mixed methodological practice that I outlined here, I close with a brief note on the anonymity and confidentiality of participants who took part in this research. For formal, semi-structured interviews, given a) the close-knit, small community of practitioners working within ocean space in Seychelles that I outlined above; b) their background from usually highly visible, elite positions within political and/or managerial bodies; c) and their general familiarity with interview settings (again, see above); interviewees were provided with the option to stay anonymous or not. Conversely, all the other participants who contributed as part of the ethnographic practice have been automatically anonymised. This became central, for instance, during the event ethnography. In those settings, I always introduced myself to the whole room, my position and my research – even if I had already obtained prior permission from the organisers to attend in my researcher's capacity as an external observer, I also presented myself during the usual round of introduction at the start of the meetings, followed up by interactions in small break-out groups or an individual basis. On all of these occasions, I ensured that confidentiality would be maintained as best research practice, considering

that consent could not straightforwardly be obtained on a person-to-person basis. If needed, follow-up formal interviews were scheduled with key stakeholders. In what follows, participants who agreed not to be anonymous during the formal interviews will all be easily identifiable as they will be all introduced with their full name and position at the time of the interview. For all the others, I will provide a broad indication of the sector they work in to place them in context, and they will have only a pseudonymised first name.

2.5. The Blue Economy in Seychelles, Revisited

How do I construe, then, the Blue Economy in Seychelles? In keeping in line with the academic genesis that I traced so far in the chapter, I expected it to be a highly visible, self-conscious political project pervasive to the vast majority of loosely defined marine-related activities, and for the vast majority of actors partaking in those activities. Therefore, as soon as I arrived in the country, I framed the present research broadly around the topics of the Blue Economy, its associated ocean governance infrastructure, as well as its (re)conceptualisations of Seychelles' EEZ from both a state and a local stakeholder's perspective. In one of the very first conversations I had with what could undoubtedly be categorised as a 'Blue Economy practitioner', I vividly remember them suggesting that a better analytical framework for the project to engage practitioners with would be 'ocean management', as 'ocean governance' – and Blue Economy for that matter – 'is not really a term that's used here [in Seychelles]' to talk about the EEZ *in its totality*.

A first reading of that subtle shift from 'governance' to 'management' supports analyses made by other researchers on the Blue Economy as a means to *depoliticise* ocean space (e.g., Schutter *et al.* 2021): the technical aspect that the term 'management' evokes can serve to 'stifle debate around the difficult choices and trade-offs' (Schutter *et al.* 2021:2) that need to be made in relation to the ocean, choices and trade-offs that are always charged with political values. Adding to that reading, I also want to draw attention to what comes before 'management' – that is, the 'ocean' side of 'ocean management'. In suggesting reframing my analytics around 'ocean management' and not, for instance, on the 'Blue Economy' as the primary entry point for discussion, my interlocutor was at the same time also downplaying the role the BE occupies within that space: as our chat went on, an implicit boundary was drawn between ocean management as a framing able to capture the variegated uses of Seychelles' EEZ *as a whole*; and the sectoral, niche, rather opaque position the BE has within that.

As I began spending increasing time with stakeholders within what I had thought to be the 'Blue Economy worlds' in the country, those initial comments haunted me: for my interlocutors, the BE turned out to be not just a contested development agenda, but an altogether *minor* operationalisation of what ocean space in Seychelles could hold. As argued above, the *Roadmap* does offer a lofty, aspirational and, at least in theory, clear definition of what the Blue Economy is – a definition that was duly repurposed to me by representatives of the Blue Economy Department, as explained by the words of the Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Officer Gabriella Gonthier: 'For Seychelles, the Blue Economy would mean: How we use the ocean in the wisest manner possible to create that longevity, that sustainable development in the years to come. It's a union. It's a union between social, economic and environmental benefits. So for the social economy, it's that marriage between the economic gains, the social [and] cultural benefits as well as the environmental and ecological preservation that it can bring about.'

Yet, outside of those institutional settings, the Blue Economy remained an elusive and hardly identifiable concept. In the words of the Principal Secretary for the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment (MACCE), Dennis Matatiken, 'the blue economy is very subjective'; a quality that lends itself well to turn the BE into, as the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF) CEO Frauke Fleischer-Dogley put it, 'a magic word' able to conjure up *some thing*, something that is 'an opportunity, but it's also a danger'. In that regard, at least for now, the Blue Economy has not translated into either a development programme or an unfolding reality that not just local community practitioners, but even elite stakeholders working within ocean space are able to articulate (see also Laing *et al.* 2022). As SeyCCAT's manager for the *Seychelles Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project, Annike Faure, simply stated: 'In my day-to-day work schedule, I don't think of the Blue Economy. [...] It's [not] something that I'm like 'Ohhh today what I'm doing contributes to the Blue Economy' [...] Personally for me, I still don't 100% grasp it [the Blue Economy].'

Likely as central, if participants could hardly define what the BE stood for in Seychelles, they felt reasonably comfortable in identifying what it was *not*: a common refrain shared with me across the board was that the Blue Economy cannot be reduced to, or equated with, 'just fisheries, or just conservation'; instead, it regularly happens *somewhere else*, a place that, crucially, practitioners had a hard time locating. In addition, the compartmentalisation process taking over the BE in Seychelles does not simply reside in the stakeholders' understanding of it. Instead, the current state's 'institutional architecture' is structured with a 'Ministry of Fisheries *and* Blue Economy' (emphasis added). For one participant working within this architecture, such an arrangement signals both locally

and to the international community that the fisheries sector is separate from what concerns the BE, and its publicly acclaimed principles – something that, they argued, also contributed to several international institutions pulling support out from the country, either monetary or in-kind.

If these are instances of myself directly probing practitioners' interpretations of the BE in the country, what probably surprised me even more were the countless moments where I expected to encounter the Blue Economy – as a discourse, a political tool, a development agenda, a set of principles – but I did not. How to speak about an absence? A classic example of that is the numerous consultative meetings I attended. Many, if not all, of them could be classified as belonging to the state-sponsored Blue Economy agenda and yet, I rarely encountered any *visible* reference to that connection – either as a discursive reference point or as an embodied presence (i.e., a state representative of the Blue Economy Department). Except for the occasional short presentation that the SMSP project manager, and TNC employee Helena Sims delivered at the opening of, for instance, the SMSP workshops for the development of the Sustainable Use Areas management plans – where she traced the origin of the initiative which effectively allowed stakeholders to gather there – the silences I witnessed become more eloquent as time went on.

There was one event that crystallised many of the multiple facets that I am here weaving together. It happened during one of the SMSP workshops to draft the management plan for the *Sustainable Use Areas (Zone 2)*, the fourth I attended that took place in the span of two weeks. Again, there was a wide range of practitioners with backgrounds primarily in the conservation sectors, state representatives, parastatal organisations, and a strong presence of fisheries (mostly industrial and semi-industrial, but also sport fishing). Like me, at this point, they had taken part in the previous sessions and engaged extensively in these rather lengthy and bureaucratic processes. Building on standardised, international best practices, a major component of that workshop was to come up with inputs for the management plan of Sustainable Use Area (Zone 2) through the 'goals and objectives' exercise: that is, populating an ideal management template with an overall aim for the management plan that could then be further broken down into specific goals (e.g., economic, social, environmental) before moving into the 'objectives', and related 'actions', that should be operationalised to achieve those goals.

In formulating the 'economic goal' for this specific plan, one stakeholder that I will call Ann proposed to have 'Blue Economy' in it as, to their mind, the development of the BE agenda made particular sense in that objective. At that point, it was the first time in those four full-day meetings I openly heard

the Blue Economy coming up as a topic of discussion. That came as a surprise as, again, the BE itself enabled those meetings in the first place and, at least from a policy perspective, it held the underlying principles guiding them all – an irony that Ann too did not fail to note. And yet, the suggestion to include the BE within the goal was met with resounding, and seemingly collective, opposition swinging from sarcasm to outright rejection. The foreign consultants tasked with facilitating the workshops were among the first to question the usefulness of the concept. They argued that, in their home countries, the BE is automatically associated with unsustainable practices, so having that in the plan might already cast unwanted notice. For many participants joining from the conservation sphere, the local version of the BE was untenable mainly because of the presence of oil and gas exploration in the *Roadmap*. To correct that, they conceded a modified version of the economic goal could perhaps incorporate 'sustainable BE'. At that, Ann – ever so slightly exasperated then – replied that having 'sustainable' would just be tautological – as the BE already enshrines sustainability in its principles (see the *Roadmap* above). Another participant from the fisheries industry burst out laughing and observed that they might as well scrap the BE altogether and 'go back to the Green Economy' for their plans – pointing out the fundamental inefficiency of, and continuity with, past practices that inform the BE agenda to their mind – a remark that was wryly welcomed among those who captured the comment. After about a ten-minute commotion caused by Ann's suggestion, it came as no surprise that, ultimately, the 'Blue Economy' term did not make it into the final draft – a draft that instead preferred 'sustainable economic activities' in its place as the defining principle of the broader economic goal.

What to make of the Blue Economy in Seychelles today, then? In teasing out the complex positionalities the BE holds in the country at present, the temporalities of this research must be accounted for in relation to the previously discussed work on which it builds (Schutter & Hicks 2019; Schutter *et al.* 2021). Indeed, Schutter and colleagues carried out their research in the country between 2017 and 2019 using a mixed methods approach (e.g., semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, online surveys, and diary notes) as part of a larger research project. As they note, 'The timing of the interviews (in 2017–2019) had a positive impact [...] as blue economy policy-making was still in the early stages of articulating its aims and meanings. Although political tensions were present, they were less pressing than they later became, when elections were approaching, and implementation of the blue economy began to be more evident' (Schutter *et al.* 2021:3).

Fast-forwarding to today and the implementation process is about to start at the time of writing, the country has for the first time in its young history a new, opposition government at the helm, and has

fares a devastating global pandemic (Pouponneau 2019) and multiple climate change-induced disasters (Etongo 2019) – among other geopolitical uncertainties. In such a climate, I submit that Seychelles has somewhat moved *beyond* the Blue Economy – at least beyond the Blue Economy as a 'boundary object', if it was ever that – towards a broader, strategic mobilisation of its ocean territory that I term 'oceanic thinking'. The operationalisation of the Blue Economy in the country hints at its multi-faceted nature: on the one side, it is foundational to the radical overhaul sweeping over Seychelles' EEZ – as former minister Dogley reminded us in the introduction, the SMSP 'has started the process of thinking about these things' (Carrington 2018). On the other side, it only partially resonates with, and is fully absorbed by, many of the practitioners working within that same space – with their 'simmering discontent' that is now not anymore 'expressed only in private' (Schutter *et al.* 2021:3) as the snippet from the SMSP workshop demonstrates.

Furthermore, the BE has been circumscribed in its local configurations as oppositional to what other, well-established industries are not (e.g., fisheries, or conservation), while also taking on the role of coordinating and experimenting with what the ocean could potentially be with the right entrepreneurial mindset in place (see Chapter 5). And yet, the somewhat limited scope it enjoys among many local practitioners does not diminish Seychelles' strong international leverage for its pioneering role in adopting, and popularising, such a novel development agenda – a narrative particularly endorsed by the Seychelles state for its outside audience. As I will explore at length later (Chapter 3), at least for elite political actors, the BE and related initiatives (e.g., SMSP and MPAs) get practised as state-making exercises to leverage the archipelago's extensive watery spatial properties in a crowded geopolitical space. Such a performative move tries to assert independence through 'reckoning interdependencies well' (Clifford 2001:474), while strategically deploying the narrative around the perceived 'smallness' and 'vulnerabilities' of SIDS. Yet, as I have argued, such a project does not easily translate on the ground. It is precisely that tension, that uneasy translation – the fractures it opens and the spaces it enables (or not) around, for instance, development practices in the country – that I am holding up with the term 'oceanic thinking' as a theoretical and political orientation generative of new analytical inquiries (see, for instance, Chapter 4 and 5).

Methodologically, the fragmented, diffused, at times arresting and syncopated nature that encountering the BE as a lived practice handed back to me manifests a complementary and much-needed antidote to a prominent strand of policy-infused academic scholarship around the Blue Economy – in Seychelles and beyond – that tends to reify a (policy) reality, the Blue Economy, that it merely asserts to be describing. Instead, staying closer to the discursive and affective power it

provokes in Seychelles, once in the country I quickly recalibrated the centrality of what I had believed was a primary tenant in my research, the Blue Economy, and revalued its analytical usefulness to foreground ocean space as a *whole* in the archipelago, its social (re)constructions vis-à-vis its geophysical dynamics. Instead, in adopting 'oceanic thinking', I articulated an approach that is simultaneously more attentive to the ocean's discursive and geo-material qualities as advanced by practitioners in the country - of which the Blue Economy is but one component - as well as more attentive to recent debates within critical ocean studies (e.g., Steinberg 2025). Seemingly paradoxically, by using the Blue Economy *less* as an analytical scaffolding, I appreciated it *more* in its multi-faceted complexity, as a 'heuristic device'. In that sense, this research had at least two intellectual beginnings: the first, recounted here, when I imagined the Blue Economy to be the tailwind for the present project; and a second, articulated in what follows, when it merged more forcefully with place-based historical currents and future-oriented turbulent climate imaginaries.

Chapter 3

Between a Rock and the Deep Blue Sea: For a (Ocean) History of Seychelles

3.1. Introduction

"In March 1971 we saw the RAF Gan Hercules try the [airport] runway for the first time. And with its arrival gave us the green light that our job was done and the runway was ready," beamed a proud Rose, who commanded the Seychellois who were part of the team for their hard work. Soon after Rose returned home [in England]. "As I boarded the Kampalour for home I noticed four local girls bound for London ready for their training as future air hostesses." (Ernesta 2019)

It was 2019 when a then 91-year-old Norman Rose, British citizen, visited for the first time the Republic of Seychelles after 48 years. He was part of the team working on the construction of the British-led Seychelles International Airport on Mahé, the main island on the then-British-colonial possession of Seychelles. The Seychelles International Airport was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on March 20, 1972 - a pivotal moment that drastically changed the future trajectory of the soon-to-be independent archipelagic country almost overnight. It is hard to overstate the profound political, economic, and social implications that such an infrastructural project - strongly backed both financially and politically by the British government - had on the country: from being a relatively unknown British possession in the middle of the Western Indian Ocean, it soon transformed into a highly desirable geographical space invested with the allure and romanticism of a primarily Western, white, burgeoning tourism class.

A major force driving the British backing of the airport was the push towards creating alternative economic activities that would make Seychelles stand on its own, in preparation for the British

departure that was already becoming a political reality in London (Campling *et al.* 2011). As a never too-much-beloved first French, and then British, colony, Seychelles' plantation economy based mostly on guano, copra, and a variety of French-introduced spices started to falter amidst the reconfiguration of political and economic dynamics following two world wars, the decolonisation movement, and the establishment of industrialised economies of scale that strongly penalised places like Seychelles with limited land availability and labour force. In such a context, the British colonial class identified tourism as an industry with strong margins for growth. It is no exaggeration to say that Seychelles at the time was navigating in troubled waters: if the economic outlook was bleak, with the majority of the population living in dire conditions mostly on a subsistence level and little to no prospect of social movement, the political class seemed inadequate to provide a clear path forward (McAteer 2008). Indeed, politics in the country had been typically a preoccupation of the elite classes, mainly landowners and descendants of the first French colonisers (so-called *grand blancs*) that had as a primary interest the negotiation of better conditions for themselves with the British colonial government (as evidenced by, for instance, the policies advanced by the Seychelles Taxpayers and Landowners Association, see Robinson 2023). Yet, the situation began to change with the establishment of a more vibrant, cross-sectoral, party politics from the 1950s crystallised with the formation of the two major political parties, the Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP) headed by James Mancham and the Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP) led by France Albert René - the parties that were to dominate, under various political guises, the scene up to its recent past.

Many scholars have already provided detailed accounts of the rich, relatively brief, but certainly intricate history of human interventions in the archipelago: from its beginning as uninhabited islands acting as stopovers for Arabian sailors and Portuguese merchants in the 16th century, as a French and then British colony between the end of the 18th through to the 20th century, or its more recent past since independence in 1976 (Baker 2008; Benedict & Benedict 1982; Campling & Rosalie 2006; Campling *et al.* 2011; Franda 1982; Künzler 2018; McAteer 1190, 2000, 2008; Nicholls 2018; Robinson 2023; Scarr 2000). Building upon this body of work, this chapter aims at *re-searching* what are considered critical moments (e.g., the colonial encounter) and activities (e.g., the tourism and fishing industry) up to the more recent history of Seychelles, holding a specific geographic element, the ocean, at the centre of the narrative - along with the more theoretical orientations that such a space allows too.

At first, this move seems obvious: for an archipelagic state with 3,000 times more ocean than land area, focussing on its watery portion is nothing short of vital. Yet, the political-economic histories of

Seychelles have tended to place more emphasis on its landed spatial configuration away from an ocean that served, at best, as a supporting actor (e.g., a connecting surface or a resource ground) or, at worse, an isolating barrier for events that happened *somewhere else* (e.g., as carceral islands). Concurrently, foregrounding more forcefully the oceanic element as constitutive of, and constituted by, those histories follows recent attempts in critical geographical research to take the ocean seriously as an ontologically vibrant scaffolding that asks us to question land-based histories, politics, and associated theoretical foundations. As I introduced previously, moving beyond a superficial perspective made of points, surfaces, and planar politics, a 'turn to the ocean itself: to its three-dimensional and turbulent materiality, and to encounters with that materiality, [is] in order to explore how thinking *with* the sea can assist in reconceptualising our geographical understandings. In short, we propose a *wet ontology* not merely to endorse the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also to propose a means by which the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and reenlivening of a world ever on the move' (Steinberg & Peters 2015:247-248, emphasis in the original). Building off such a theoretical proposition, with 'oceanic thinking' in this chapter I am recentring, and analytically probing, the multiple subjects that - at various historical turning points - have strategically engaged with the surrounding watery territory of Seychelles' islands.

For that, I will first introduce a brief geological account of what today constitutes the archipelagic state of Seychelles, before moving on to explore three moments within its human history considered central for its current turn seawards: the colonial encounters, the development of the tourism sector, and the development of the fishery industry. If the colonial encounter has begun the permanent settlement of Seychelles' islands - *de facto* building a society profoundly marked by racial and imperial logics from the very start - the tourism and fishing sectors have catapulted Seychelles into the modern era as the two main socio-economic pillars of the country. A 'more elemental' and 'more historical' reading of all of these elements (Steinberg 2025), and their unique associated orientations, inform Seychelles' *créolité* as a historically dense, and perpetually co-constitutive oceanic formation; an identity refracted in the country's present strategic turn seawards that I am calling 'oceanic thinking', a turn that has variously been celebrated as the adoption of the Blue Economy (Chapter 2), the emergence of Seychelles as a Big Ocean State (BOS[S]) (Chapter 4), or as an innovator of novel (blue) climate finance interventions (Chapter 5).

2.2. *'We were landlocked, terrestrial, no marine': A Geological Singularity*

Why, then, placing the launch of the international airport as the opening story for this chapter? At first, it may seem counterintuitive as the geographical reconfiguration it achieved for Seychelles does not directly link to the perceived boundaries of its ocean space. Matching the globalising ethos typical of the 1970s, the rapid growth of long-haul flights coupled with the booming economies of the post-world wars era created a hungry-for-adventures mobile, wealthy, white middle class with disposable income primarily located in the Global North (Kothari & Arnall 2017). Enhanced technological mobility, reduced travelling time, expanded imagined geographies - these are some of the factors that converged in making tourism a global reality, and an economic juggernaut to be contended with. For the archipelagic state of Seychelles, the airport was the chief project that almost single-handedly put into motion the cascading socio-economic reconfigurations that the introduction of mass tourism in the country brought - reconfigurations that are today well entrenched in the local social texture, as further discussed below.

Still, if mobility through the element of air was to catapult Seychelles onto the world stage as a *desirable* geography to experience, the specific spatial articulations that made the country desirable in the first place were primarily anchored into the oceanic space that surrounded the over a hundred islands forming its archipelago. More specifically, it was the intermingling of land and sea in the coastal stretches that enthused the imaginations of many - particularly honed by tour operators and the like (e.g., Kothari & Arnall 2017). And yet, it must be remembered that that same space, for the relatively short human history it had, prior to tourism development had also been an *undesirable* geography to experience for much of then Seychellois population - undesirable because marking the disruptive and violent relationship forged through the colonial encounter (more on which later).

So, what is the geography of the Republic of Seychelles today? The 115 islands making up the archipelago can be roughly categorised into two groups: the so-called 'inner islands' and the 'outer islands' - with the inner islands forming the central nucleus of the archipelago, where today the majority of land and population (well over 90%) is concentrated, and the outer islands radiating out from that nucleus dotting the extensive 1.35 million km² of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) belonging to Seychelles (see figure 2.1). Famous for its imposing boulders that punctuate most of its inner coastal areas, geologically Seychelles' inner islands offer a unique history palpable when walking either in the dense forests in the north of Mahé or on the white sandy and rocky beaches of La Digue: the 'inner islands' are, indeed, the peaks of a submerged continental crust called the Mahé plateau.

This all became apparent to me as I watched Jean-Luc Mondon, senior geologist of the national oil company PetroSeychelles, enthusiastically narrating Seychelles' geological history at the headquarters of the company. Frantically jostling between his PowerPoint slides, rock samples, and bathymetric maps hanging around the big conference table, he explained: 'Seychelles' microcontinent was sandwiched between the north of Madagascar, or northeast, western India and between the Horn of Africa, somewhere between Somalia. It was sandwiched there. On a bigger scale, if you put this on a geological map on a Gondwana framework [the supercontinent dating back some 600 million years ago], this is where the Seychelles would fit in. So we were landlocked, terrestrial, no marine' (see Figure 3.1).

Running through some key geological events that broke up the Gondwana supercontinent setting in motion the tectonic plates to the present configuration, Jean-Luc illustrates how the reading of rock cores - unsurprisingly dug up for the most part by oil companies during their exploratory missions - indicates the introduction of the marine environment to what is today Seychelles' 'oceanic setting':

When you are looking at it [the marine environment] through the cores, boom. There is a gap, not a gap, there is almost an unconformity with oolitic limestone. This was when the marine environment was introduced in the Seychelles' rock record. As you go up, you can see the marine level was like shallow marine, shallow marine, shallow marine [and then] went up to a big thickness [with the] the Deccan volcanism. Then you still go up. It's much thicker carbonates, thicker carbonates, all indicating that the Seychelles moved from terrestrial shallow marine, restricted marine, [environment] to open deep marine [environment].

As Jean-Luc pointed out, the introduction of an oceanic environment over a previously dry land had further consequences. First, it suddenly prevented many landed species from (easily) moving between places, creating rich, circumscribed patches of endemic species (like the Coco de Mer, the palm tree with the largest seed in the plant kingdom, on Praslin and Curieuse). Second, these species were not only stopped from migrating, but the land itself on which they could thrive was reduced because of the introduction of that oceanic environment - further enhancing the unique biodiversity hotspots that are possible to appreciate today in the country.



Figure 3.1. From the 'supercontinent' Gondwana (top) to today (bottom): depiction of tectonic plates' movement as seen from the South Pole. PetroSeychelles, Mahé (Republic of Seychelles). Photo by the author.

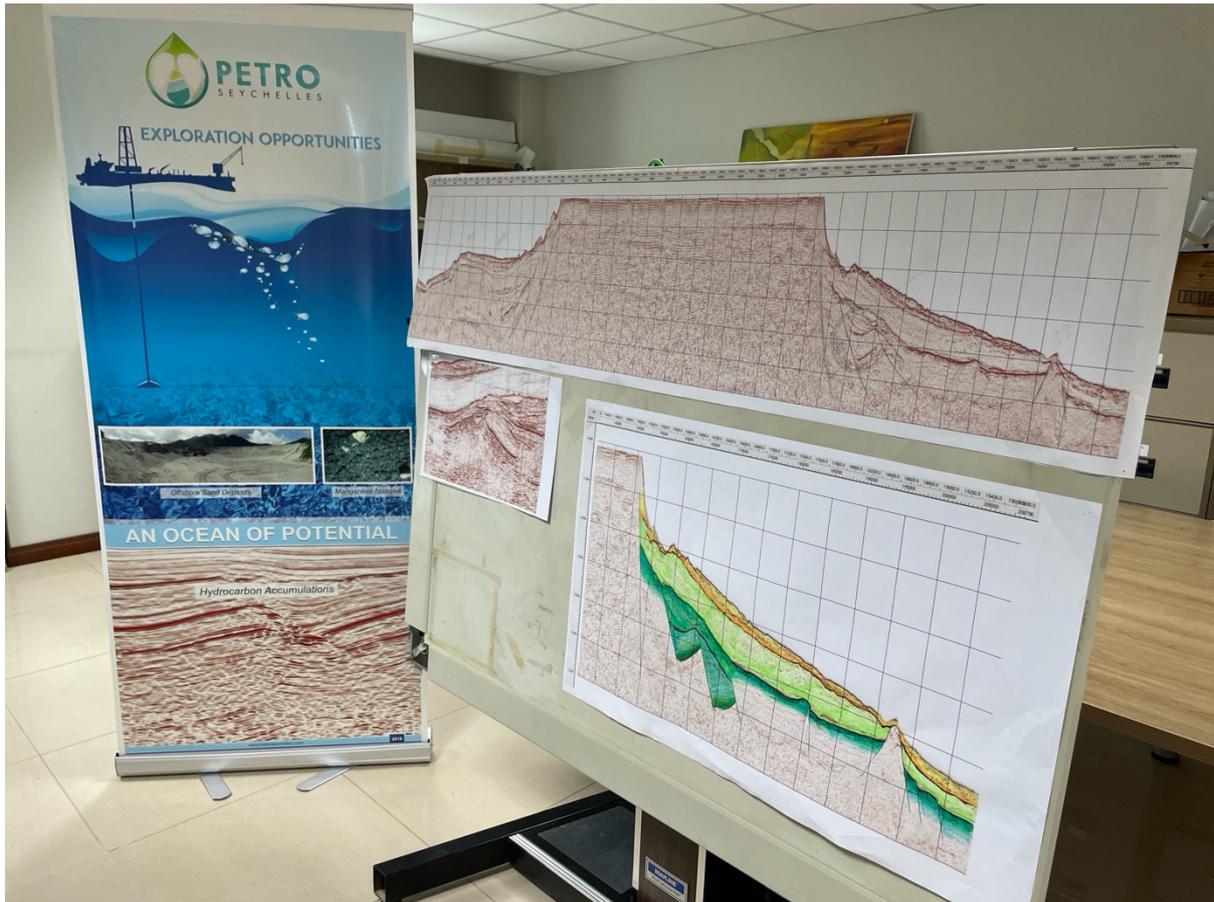


Figure 3.2. Jean-Luc's seismic line with the drop-off point of the Mahé Plateau, Seychelles. PetroSeychelles, Mahé (Republic of Seychelles). Photo by the author.

The inner islands, then, are unique in that they are the only known example of *granitic*, previously land-locked, islands situated today in the *open* ocean completely surrounded by deep waters. Indeed, the Mahé plateau itself, what geologically Jean-Luc defined as a 'submerged continental crust' and now is defined as a 'mid-oceanic shelf' (Robinson *et al.* 2005), has also a remarkable extension of around 40,000 square kilometres, but is relatively shallow with an average depth of approximately 70 meters (Robinson *et al.* 2005) and a maximum depth of '150, maybe 200 at a push' – as Jean-Luc told me. These granitic islands are, quite literally, 'fragments of an ancient continent dropped in the middle of the sea' (Kaplan *et al.* 2023) Yet, the Mahé plateau is simultaneously a steep-sided plateau that – just like its open air counterpart marking today's vulnerability of Seychelles' critical infrastructures recalled in the introduction – exhibits vertiginous depth rather quickly from all around its submerged borders, reaching 4,000 meters in depth right off from those edges. 'This is how steep the drop-hole for the gradient of the slope is of the plateau. This is a very distinct feature in the Indian Ocean', Jean-Luc emphatically stressed while pointing at the drop-off on the seismic line he has been working on for the plateau (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3).

Such geophysical articulations create unique environments in the archipelago that are worth bearing in mind as they help(ed) configure socio-political imaginaries both past and present, and are today highly debated in the quest Seychelles is making towards constructing itself as an ocean state. Later, for instance, I will discuss how historically the shallow and biologically rich Mahé plateau has been the preferred fishing ground for the local artisanal fisherfolk that rarely ventured beyond the plateau, whereas the deep waters were initially apportioned in the 1980s to the industrial fleets fishing for pelagic species. Simultaneously, as the next chapter will demonstrate, that same depth and its distribution that are 'very distinctive' of Seychelles' EEZ troubled recent attempts to map, know, and allocate that space with the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan (SMSP) - adding a further layer to the just described Jean-Luc's vision of the ocean as separating and parcelling out *landed* environments.

The geological singularities of the inner islands do not stop there though. Given their granitic nature - and hence their being less prone to subside and sink as atolls and volcanic islands do when, for instance, they move away from the plumes that created them - and their relative distance from either present or past ice sheets that could affect the 'Earth's shape caused by ice pressing down the crust', they represent an almost spotless environment to study climate change and specifically sea level rise (Kaplan *et al.* 2023). Because of these two characteristics, coupled with the knowledge that corals can only grow underwater, if any fossilised reefs were to be found on land in the inner islands it would provide strong evidence of the height of the ocean at the time of the fossil - that is, researchers could be relatively confident that the corals are located where they are today not because the land moved, but the sea changed. With this method, geologists like Andrea Dutton and colleagues have already ascertained that one of the oldest corals found in the archipelago - tucked between gigantic boulders, safe from damaging weathering, on the third most populous island of La Digue - dates back to the last interglacial period between 123,000 and 124,000 years ago at a height of over 7 metres (25 feet) above the current shoreline⁸ (Kaplan *et al.* 2023; see also Dutton *et al.* 2015). If Jean-Luc's rock cores retrieved from the deep blue sea index the moment(s) the marine environment first encountered Seychelles' dry land, Andrea Dutton's open-air fossilised corals tell the history of a more turbulent sea, in a changing climate. Coupled with the climate risks mapped in the introductory chapter, Dutton's history has at least one urgent message for the archipelago, but also the world at large: most of the flat, coastal plains of Seychelles' inner islands where the majority of the population

⁸ I cannot do justice here to the science behind these processes, for which I recommend the beautifully titled 2015 paper by Dutton and colleagues 'Tropical tales of polar ice: Evidence of Last Interglacial polar ice sheet retreat recorded by fossil reefs of the granitic Seychelles islands'.

currently lives, and the tourism industry thrives, not so long ago were submerged in a planet that was only so slightly warmer compared to our present-day average temperature.

In addition, the analysis of these fossils can yield even further information on earlier climate dynamics. Indeed, it can help scientists identify not just *the height* of the sea at the time, but *its spatial and temporal distribution* too. Because of what climate scientists call ‘fingerprint’ – which happens ‘when ice melts, its [the ice’s] gravity weakens, and the Earth’s crust is able to bounce back. The ocean falls near the poles, and water surges in the opposite direction’ (Kaplan *et al.* 2023) – sea level rise is not distributed equally around the globe. Recent estimates suggest that Seychelles will experience 9 to 24% more sea level rise than the global average regardless of which ice sheets melt – a projection that would affect more than 40% of the main roads on Mahé and the majority of its coastal infrastructures (Kaplan *et al.* 2023). In short, the granitic islands materially register in their geology *and* biology the multitude of pasts they lived – pasts that are there to be experienced today, but might as well soon disappear should we not heed the warning signs of a warming planet that the islands simultaneously exhibit. As Kaplan and colleagues (2023) note, ‘the geology of Seychelles defies such myopia [that climate change will happen well into the future, to *someone else*]. Here, the past is a fossil people can touch. The future is a wave already eating away at the shore.’

Moving out from the central nucleus of inner islands, the ‘outer islands’ are geologically more reminiscent of similar coralline formations in the Caribbean and the Pacific and attract today ultra-high-end luxury tourism with their exclusive resorts and biodiversity marvels. Within the constellations of the geographically dispersed five major groups that make them up (the Southern Coral group, the Amirantes group, the Alphonse group, the Aldabra group, and the Farquhar group), the jewel in the crown, I have repeatedly heard, is exemplified by the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Aldabra Atoll – the second-largest raised coral atoll in the world lying over 1,000 km south-west of Mahé. The managerial structure and socio-political developments of the outer islands will inform a later discussion (Chapter 4). In this context, I want to draw attention to the accounts of RAF-pilot-turned-adventurer (and later entrepreneur) William Travis who travelled Seychelles’ inner and outer islands between the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s⁹. He offers vivid narratives of rapidly changing worlds caught between the entrenched colonial logics of a plantation society and the local reverberations of an evolving, global politico-economic system. His description of Alphonse

⁹ Gratitude goes to Jeremy Raguain for introducing me to William Travis’ work – it has proved to be a fertile terrain of engagement in more than one instance.

Island, some 400 km south of Mahé, as the quintessential 'tropical island' (Travis 1990:48) reveals the characteristic experiential ethos of inaccessibility, exclusivity, and pristine natures that make these places economically viable today as tourism hotspots:

The first sight of that island was one which I shall never forget. Right up to its encircling reef the brilliant blue of the deep ocean continued. There it was slashed with white as the breakers curved up and crashed down again in a turmoil of foam. A majestic booming could be heard above the noise of our engine, the roar of everlasting war waged by the sea against the coral ramparts. But beyond that savage borderline lay a lake of translucent green water, the quiet lagoon, dapple with cloud shadows. On this surface Alphonse Island seemed to float, like a vessel in a sheltered anchorage. Casuarina trees, their dark green delicate plumes contrasting with the paler waters on whose surface they were mirrored, bordered the narrow white-sand beach along its entire length. Behind these could be seen the tops of tall coconut trees, whose stiff fronds formed a jagged fringe of the island's silhouette. (Travis 1990:46)

Once into the water, Travis gapes even more at the abundance of life both within and outside the coralline lagoon of Alphonse. Here, though, the feeling Travis evokes when diving outside the lagoon where 'Alphonse, in common with all these outer islands of Seychelles, plunges straight into the water of abyssal depths' is worth emphasising. Indeed, even if not directly describing Jean-Luc's 'drop-hole' of the Mahé plateau, it is reminiscent of the divers' turbulent emotions conjured by the plateau's edges that Jean-Luc himself articulated to me:

I slid over the side, well out from the breakers, in about fifty feet of water. Here was a different world from that which lay within the lagoon. The sea was crystal clear and cold. Colder by far than the sun-warmed shallows of Mahé. the immensity of the scene was frightening and I felt very insecure and small. I swam in towards the reef quickly, to start the search [for profitable green snails and shells] in shallow water. There, confidence soon returned, though each time I looked out and away from the reef face, towards where it slanted down and disappeared into the abyss, I felt a spasm of nervousness. It was the first time I had ever dived alongside such tremendous depths. I had expected the two-thousand-fathom to drop to fade away into deep gloom. Perhaps even inky blackness, but strangely enough, the reverse seemed to be the case. Looking downwards over the coral precipice it was as though way below, far out of sight, there lay some secret source of intense illumination that bathed the sea with faint light. This blueness radiated, not from the sunlit air above, but upwards out of the depths. As this light 'poured' up it became mixed with the sunlight and grew paler, so that the surface layer was hardly tinted at all with this miraculous colour. (Travis 1990:52-53)

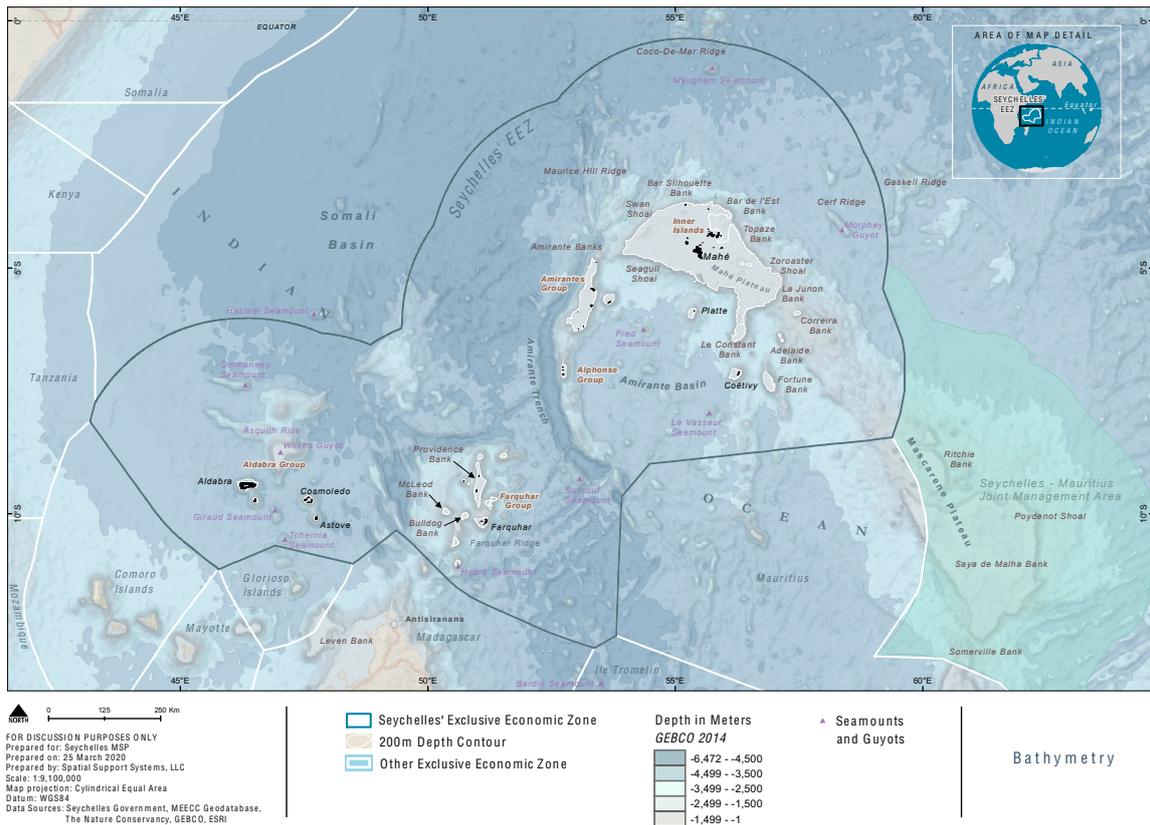


Figure 3.3. Bathymetry of Seychelles' EEZ. © Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative.

3.3. 'We're an ocean-locked state, if I can put it that way': An Isolated Colony, for a Global History

The geophysical peculiarities of Seychelles here only sketched are to be read in conjunction with the unique human history that characterised those islands. Except for the occasional sailors from Persia and Arabia and runaway pirates (McAteer 1990), not many have sailed the waters touching the shores of today's Seychelles, with the islands remaining virtually uninhabited until the end of the 18th century. In that regard, the remoteness relative to established sea routes and fairly limited landed extension of the granitic islands relative to mainland Africa kept Seychelles in isolation for the majority of human history - the contributing factor, along with its geophysical features, that partly accounts for the vibrant ecosystems both on land and in the sea for which the archipelago today is renowned. Without reducing it to any singular cause, in contrast to the navigated and vital sea lanes crisscrossing other oceanic regions of the world like the Pacific (e.g., Hau'ofa 1994), it is worth stressing that the spatial, fluid, extent of the Western Indian Ocean historically acted as a buffer zone (de)limiting the types of interaction taking place in and around Seychelles - both human and non-human as Jean-Luc reminded. In this regard, historians tend to agree that the ocean divided, rather than connected, Seychelles from the surrounding world for the majority of its history (e.g., Camping *et al.* 2011;

McAteer 1990, 2000). Navigating those sea lanes at the beginning of the 1960s, William Travis (1990:266) still described the stretch between Mauritius and Seychelles as '1,200 miles of deserted ocean, the loneliest trade route in the world'.

It was only at the end of the 18th century with the consolidation of European colonial powers towards the east that Seychelles' inner islands started to attract the interests of the French first, and then the British (Franda 1982; McAteer 1990, 2000; Scarr 2000). Landing there from the 1770s onwards, French imperialists were pleasantly surprised with the abundance of life, and consequently resources, that the land and surrounding ocean had to offer. Hence, the decision to establish the first permanent settlements on the biggest of the inner islands, Mahé, with a small French colony and a quickly growing number of enslaved African people that were transported from other French colonies on the East coast of Africa and Madagascar - laying the foundation for the varied Creole heritage that distinguishes Seychelles to this day.

Historians have long debated the role that Seychelles as a colony had within the circuits of the French (from 1771 to 1814) and then British (from 1814 until independence in 1976) empires (e.g., Franda 1982; McAteer 1990, 2000, 2008; Nicholls 2018; Scarr 2000). Although differences emerge in these histories, a recurring theme is that, in contrast to the relatively close neighbouring islands such as Réunion and especially Mauritius, Seychelles had always played a peripheral role within these empires. Tell-tale signs of this can be found in the British approach to the islands' governance and organisation: up to 1903, Seychelles had been administered as a crown dependency of Mauritius, indicating an unwillingness from London to get involved directly in its affairs; at the same time, the inherited French culture, institutions and social organisation had only received a light-touch treatment from the British, which resulted in the peculiar mix of British and French *métissage* that today make up Seychellois Creole identity, and Seychelles' institutional framework (see, for instance, Seychelles' legal *métissage* in Twomey 2017). Moreover, until well into the 20th century, with the creation of the airport and the establishment of the tourism industry as its peak, British socio-economic interventions had been only geared towards making the colony slowly self-sufficient so as to become less burdensome for London to maintain.

Yet, other historians have stressed two functions that Seychelles played within colonial-building projects that partly reinstate the archipelago's significance within colonial networks - charting the role of the ocean as an (involuntary) connector of peoples, lands, and histories (e.g., Kothari 2012; Nicholls 2018). For instance, Nicholls (2018) perceptively goes against the grain of more established

accounts in arguing that the colonisation of Seychelles by the French had been instrumental in consolidating and *expanding* the booming slave trade in the Mascarenes and the Southwest Indian Ocean more broadly. With the shifting of the slave trade from Madagascar to the east coast of mainland Africa, Seychelles turned into a profitable 'provisioning and acclimatisation centre' that reduced, among others, the mortality rate of enslaved people in their sea crossings towards their final destinations usually represented by Réunion or Mauritius. In addition, it acted as a 'recovery station' for those enslaved people who were not deemed physically ready to continue their journeys. Most commonly, French colonial administrators turned Seychelles' small and spread-out islands, notably those surrounding Mahé or Curieuse off the coast of Praslin, into quarantine centres to isolate slaves who fell ill during the sea crossings - an unsurprising common occurrence due to the dreadful conditions that prevailed in the overcrowded ships. With the British taking over control of Seychelles from France and the official end of slavery declared in London at the beginning of the 19th century, Nicholls goes on to highlight how, under British rule, the colonial territory of Seychelles renegotiated its role in the now 'illegal' slave trade - but still essentially acting as a quarantine, provisioning, and acclimatisation station for the whole region for the benefit of colonial administrators. In such a reconfigured political climate, the hardly accessible (and hence accountable for) outer islands were transformed into relay stations for the smuggling of illegal East African and Malagasy enslaved people to Réunion. In contrast, the inner islands exploited a legal loophole through the so-called 'transfer system' - which allowed those *already* enslaved people in the colonies to be moved around in their dependencies - to mingle existing with newly, imported enslaved people and transfer them to Mauritius.

With ebbs and flows, through a series of successive measures, the British government eventually curtailed the illegal slave trade in the 19th century. However, the socio-economic system established in that period persisted, with reverberations felt variously to this day (e.g., Choppy 2017). At the time, the system ran on a plantation economy primarily developed for subsistence, but that succeeded also in developing a modest export base in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. It was managed by a small, white, land- and property-owning class, and relied on a poverty-ridden, slave-descendent labouring class (Benedict & Benedict 1982). As explored more below and later (Chapter 4), although officially dismantled this socio-economic system would leave its legacies into the 'unwritten rules' that the then-President René established in its effort to turn the outer islands into tourist hotspots - so that they could contribute to the economically shaky foundations of the newly independent country.

The second prominent function that Seychelles came to occupy within British colonial circuits, which first coexisted with its relay station role during the slave trade and then supplanted it, was that of a detention centre for political exiles (Kothari 2012; Kothari & Wilkinson 2010). Primarily employed as a form of soft punishment for mainly high-visibility, anti-colonial political leaders from other British possessions, during the 19th and the 20th centuries, the British made extensive use of Seychelles as essentially a series of carceral islands - further imbricating the islands within the extended colonial geographies of the British empire. Although these prisoners enjoyed fairly lax restrictions and reasonable living conditions once on the islands, the limited mobility granted to them coupled with the virtual non-existent possibility of communicating with the outside world, made Seychelles a favourite option to contain many of whom the empire deemed as troublesome individuals. At the same time, in a bitter turn of events for their captors, these high visibility figures also allowed the otherwise mostly isolated Seychelles, and its population, to exchange knowledge and create solidarity networks within a wider British anti-colonial movement - sowing political imaginaries that were to sweep the country in the second half of the 20th century (Kothari 2012). Notable political exiles detained in the country were, for instance, Sultan Abdullah of Perak who arrived in 1877, King Nana Agyinian Prempeh of Ashanti in 1900, Egyptian nationalist leader Sa'ad Zaghlul Pasha in 1920, and the last exile sent to Seychelles Greek Cypriot leader Archbishop Makarios (Mihail Christodolou Mouskos) in 1957.

There is a common thread weaving together the diverse moments narrated here. Geologically, much of the uniqueness of Seychelles' inner islands comes from their being cut out of the same rocky cloth as mainland Africa and South Asia, among others, before making their way into the open ocean - and it is exactly that surrounding stretch of deep, turbulent, and lively water that generates much of that uniqueness. Yet, that same stretch has also more recently served as the material route of violent eradication, forced displacement, and destructive practices of bodies, cultures, and landscapes through the colonial encounter. In that encounter, Blackness is relationally produced and 'assigned to difference through a material colonial inscription, which simultaneously enacted the cutting of geographical ties to land and attachments to ecologies' (Yusoff 2018). Making sense of the Seychellois *créolité*, then as now, requires us to hold space open for all these narratives and others to be in conversation with each other. Even more, making sense of the Seychellois Creole identity as constructed through its relationality with the ocean requires us to do that. I am here drawing particularly from Christiana Sharpe's (2016) efforts to theorise what it means to live 'in the wake' of chattel slavery today where 'the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present' - a present that builds upon, perpetuates, and reduces Black lives and modes of being as both *a part of*

and *apart from* modernity (see also Gilroy 1996). Crucially for my argument here, 'wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them, they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory', but concurrently 'wakes are also the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow' (Sharpe 2016:21) – in other words, wakes index as both socially dense and materially (un)marked. A set of questions that such an approach generates, explored here and in the following chapters, are: What does it mean to live 'in the wake' of slavery in Seychelles? How to account for a society that was predicted upon, and forged through, racialised imperialist and capitalist logics? How do these narratives register in the socio-spatial entanglements of places and peoples?

Today, fragments of those histories are not so much talked about as experienced through material, embodied practices. Penda Choppy (2017) has provided one of the most comprehensive and recent accounts of attitudes toward slavery in Seychelles at present. She notes that Seychelles occupies a unique position not just within the network of Creole cultures spanning from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean, but even within the Indian Ocean itself, which is possible to trace back to the specific historical and geophysical conditions of the archipelago. Looking at the spatial features of the country, she argues that 'the lack of arable land made it unnecessary for a large labour force from the Asiatic mainland to be imported' (19) – a factor that, in her view, strongly influenced the concept of *créolité* – and the subsequent racial attitudes – in neighbouring Mauritius and Réunion. In addition, 'the isolation of the islands seemed to have made it easier to break the social taboos that reigned in more metropolitan areas' (20). These are considered some of the key factors for which 'in Seychelles, we appear not to have a problem with our creole identity, nor our African ancestry' (26). And yet, from the vantage point of her being Seychellois, she goes on to map the remnants of slavery and slavery-related traces within the local oral culture and folklore – with a particular focus on riddles, proverbs, and what was originally a transgressive dance form called *moutya* developed during colonial times by plantations' labourers. Her analysis demonstrates that the traumatic afterlives and the racial legacies that gave birth to Seychellois society are very much alive in both the linguistic heritage of today's Seychellois Creole and the highly charged performative gestures – as bodies, dances, and music – of *moutya*.

In the context of this chapter, I briefly draw attention to one song performed during the *moutya* that offers an entry point into the convoluted relationship between a plantation society, and those exploited by it, and ocean space. With this, I am following Paul Gilroy's (1996:36, emphasis in original)

intervention in understanding Black artistic expressions, and in particular music, as 'developing black struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational, [that] demands attention to both the formal attributes of this expressive culture and its distinctive *moral* basis'. The song revolves around the figure of the *makro* - its original meaning being *mackerel*, but indicative also of 'an employee who tries to curry favour with his employer' (Choppy 2017:137). For Choppy, in *moutya* lyrics this figure often refers to anybody who tried to impress the plantation owner by breaking 'the unwritten code of resistance by procrastination [...] when procrastinating on the job would be a matter of self-preservation or retaliation' - a figure that, in the worst cases, would act as a 'the master's henchman' (137). One section of the song discloses the feelings evoked by encountering the *makro*:

*Here comes the big 'makro' again
His thighs as big as palm trunks
If you hear of my death, my 'dada' [darling]
Bury me in the sweeping waves
Bury me in the sweeping waves
Where the mackerels do not swim*

Choppy offers two interpretations of this stanza: in the first, the singer expresses anxiety and trepidation at facing the *makro*, a figure that is additionally physically imposing ('his thighs as big as palm trunks') and, in the uncertainty of the encounter, the singer fears for their own life ('If you hear of my death, my *dada*/Bury me in the sweeping waves'). Conversely, in another reading, favoured by Choppy, the burial at sea represents a reasoned choice that the singer accepts 'to escape his miseries on land by suicide' (138). Such a reading is reinforced by a preceding line in the song where the singer, waist-deep in water, calls for their interlocutor (*dada*) to come and follow them ('Follow me, my *dada*/We shall go even with the water up to our waists'), to which the interlocutor replies 'I want to follow you my *dada*/It is a pity the sea wall bars my way' - indicating a clear unwillingness to follow the potentially extreme course of action the singer is embarking upon. Choppy concludes her analysis by stating that the "suicide narrative" might be linked to the belief of early African slaves that death meant a return of their souls to Africa' (138). There is a common element that, I believe, both readings share: the possibilities of rupture, redemption, or both that the ocean enables for the singer-slave. If the singer is killed in the confrontation with the *makro*, the burial at sea might bring their soul *and* their body to the original shores of mainland Africa. Even more disruptively, in the 'suicide narrative' the ocean's ability to take life is what ultimately makes the singer live: in reclaiming the course of his/her life with the extreme act of suicide in and through the ocean, s/he is capable of

arresting the colonial project – even if only momentarily. At the same time, those unruly, death-bringing, ‘sweeping waves’ might eventually free the singer and reunite his/her being, quite literally, to those places from which s/he has been violently uprooted.

The final verse of the stanza further reinforces the sense of the ocean as a material and lived geography to advance the singer’s political agency. Playing with the double meaning of *makro* as both the ‘master’s henchman’ and the fish, the singer’s testament of being buried ‘in the sweeping waves’ and being potentially transported via the ocean’s currents out into the open sea allows them to be in a space where ‘the mackerels do not swim’. Traditionally, in Seychelles mackerels are fished close to shore in shallow water through a technique called ‘net fishing’ where the fish are encircled with a net hanging from two or more pirogues and then pulled in onto the shore – a technique that even today I witnessed performed to the delight of tourists, especially in the North of Mahé. Reconfiguring their own body in relation to the oceanic depths away from a landed, inhumane reality the ocean provides a space where – though only fleetingly and certainly dangerously, the singer can locate a life *otherwise*.

Yet, the traces of those histories and the turbulent relationships they inaugurated between peoples and places tracked down by Choppy are not just sedimented in folklore and oral literature, but also survive in certain predispositions Seychellois have towards the ocean to this day. Zooming in from New York, where he is currently pursuing his postgraduate studies at Columbia University, Jeremy Raguain is part of a vibrant, international, and vocal community of Seychellois youth that is actively campaigning to make the voices of Seychelles, and Small Islands more broadly, register in global media and negotiating fora – as recently demonstrated by his participation with the Seychelles delegation to the meeting for the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction treaty held in December 2023. He is adamant on the value of the ocean for his personal wellbeing as well as that of all islanders: ‘As an Islander, as an African Islander, I think about Seychelles as 99% ocean. And for me, I think about my wealth, [about] my security, about my nurture and play. All these things are connected to the ocean for me. At the same time, I also realised I’m not in the majority in Seychelles’ in that a recent government survey showed that between 50 to 70% of primary and secondary students do not know how to swim. ‘I can see swimming in the ocean and being out there as just a critical part of being an Islander. But at the same time, I recognise that a lot of people don’t have that access or [the] ability to enjoy this as much. We’re an ocean-locked state, if I can put it that way. And that’s our strength as well as our weakness.’ When I pressed for what could be some of the influencing factors to that situation, his answer is worth quoting at length:

I think my view of it has been also influenced by living in the States, living in South Africa and having friends in the Caribbean. I would think there's a bit of a colonial legacy in the sense of people being brought to places over ships and these kinds of things. There may be a historical throwback to that. That is a theory and that may have some weight. I think that's also perceptions: Unless you're a fisherman, right? Unless you're going out into the ocean, why? Why are you going out there? Land is stable. Land is safe. It's a place where you are not dealing with some of the risks of the ocean as much. People can still go to the beach in Seychelles, people love going to the beach. They might go into 30 centimetres of water or more and not need to swim. But once you start going out there [in the open ocean], once you go beyond the island, that's [when] people are going to tell you: Why am I doing that? So I think generally speaking people may have a fear; but I also think how do you stop that fear from becoming the only thing? Because fear of the ocean should be a part of you and respect, more than fear, should be a part of your understanding of the ocean. But then there should be more association with adventure, fun and economic prosperity. [...] I think people haven't yet been able to, at a young age, swim. Therefore, if you aren't putting your eyes on the water, you're not able to see the value or the connection to yourself, right? If you're unable to see it, why are you going to care for it? If you can't care for it, why are you going to cherish it? Or protect it or let alone use it.

Elaborating on this last point, he then pointed to the related issues of accessibility - with only one swimming pool each on both the two most populous islands of Mahé and La Digue - as well as of trust - for instance, there have been incidents of kids drowning at sea during the physical education classes at school 'that left a huge impact on the community'.

Foregrounding the Seychellois Creole identity as a historically dense oceanic formation - forged through (in)human violence, capital exploitation, and racialised logics as well as fleeting solidarities, diasporic movements, and cultural liveliness (see also O'Gorman 2019) - builds upon critical interventions by Black and Caribbean scholars to theorise, among others, modern identity, cultural, and state politics 'in the wake' (Sharpe 2016) of the Middle Passage and the Black Atlantic as, among others, a 'counterculture' to modernity (Gilroy 1996). Locating in the Middle Passage a defining moment of modernity, these scholars interrogate the afterlives of 'the recent history of blacks, as people in but not necessarily of the modern, western world' (Gilroy 1996:29) and the alternate political sensibilities that such a position can engender, mainly across both sides of the Atlantic. For that, the analysis that I am here proposing does not simply travel across the shores of continental Africa from the Atlantic to reach the Western Indian Ocean. Instead, in centring the Seychellois *créolité* as a historical oceanic formation, I am also taking up recent calls that interrogate the geographical element at the heart of these seminal contributions (e.g., Steinberg 2025).

Foundational for such scholarship, Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' (1996) elaborates on the Middle Passage as a crucial moment that fundamentally ruptures taken-for-granted Western ideological and

political tenets such as the stability of the nation-state, the purity of ethnic identity, and the supremacy of white, enlightenment-inspired thinkers. Instead, 'the history of the black Atlantic [...] continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory' (Gilroy 2996:16). And yet, the geographical element of the ocean itself, so essential in the Middle Passage, assumes an ambivalent position in Gilroy's analysis that left many debating 'whether it is a rejection of the turbulent, felt space of flows that underpins the Atlantic world or a thoughtful reimagining of it' (Steinberg 2025). Expanding Gilroy's analytics to foregrounding the ocean, then, I follow Philip Steinberg's (2025, emphasis in the original) call to experiment with a perspective that is both '*more elemental*' and '*more historical*' to 'achieve the goal of thinking both *from* and *with* the oceanic environment'¹⁰. As anticipated previously, adopting a 'more elemental' approach requires us to theorise the ocean as a space of social, biological, and geophysical forces 'that necessarily exceed its liquidity' but continually (re)forms and (de)compose in relation to both land and atmospheric forces (Steinberg 2025:15) Concurrently, a 'more historical' reading is attentive to the '*different* spatio-temporality' that the ocean as a lived socio-historical space demands (Steinberg 2025:16).

Stretching Steinberg's reworking of Gilroy's ocean space in the Black Atlantic – as both 'more elemental' and 'more historical' – alongside Sharpe's vocabulary of 'the wake' – as both a socially dense and materially (un)marked condition – provides an analytical scaffolding for my own reading of the Seychellois *créolité* as a historically dense oceanic formation. The geological singularity that makes up what are today the most populous islands in the archipelago to a time when there was *no* ocean, the oceanic barrier leaving virtually unaltered most of its natural ecosystems by human interventions until very recently, the slave trade and its racialised and colonial logics reverberating in the archipelago's contemporary social fabric define moments where the 'elemental' and the 'political' of the ocean fuse with modalities of being 'in the wake' – in a past that is also a present where those sedimented histories get re-inscribed as either embodied predispositions or oral folklores. In continuing this thread that foregrounds the oceanic thinking approach as an applied political ontology, the next chapter will further tease out the oceanic element of this *créolité* – specifically with its contemporary political articulations in relation to sovereignty as a 'calculative technology' not just

¹⁰ For an initial elaboration on the distinction between 'thinking *with*' and 'thinking *from*' the ocean that Steinberg (2025) draws upon see Kimberley Peters and Mike Brown (2017).

to assert independence, but also reckon with interdependencies (Clifford 2001) – towards becoming an oceanic state.

3.4. *'A Race of Chambermaids and Page Boys': Mass Tourism in a Global Age*

And then came tourism. As the opening scene of this chapter has already noted, the construction of the airport and the inauguration of mass tourism radically shifted the socio-political imaginaries, both present and future, of the archipelago and the lived relationships between the ocean and its landed outposts. A few numbers could start painting the picture. Today, tourism is the major driver of Seychelles' economy. Even accounting for the tremendous impact COVID-19 had on the industry, with a loss of US\$3.8 million just during the first month of the pandemic between February and March 2020 (Pouponneau 2021), the sector has shown incredible resilience bouncing back to pre-COVID-19 levels quite rapidly: in 2022 the numbers were around 87% those of pre-COVID with tourist arrivals at 310,000 circa (more than three times Seychelles local population), with tourism-related industries worth one-fifth of the country's GDP and providing over a quarter of the employment (Bonnelame 2022; International Monetary Fund 2023). In 2023, tourist arrivals kept rising to an estimated 350,000 (National Bureau of Statistics 2024).

How did it all start? As mentioned at the beginning, from the British colonial perspective, the primary reason to push for the development of a mass tourist industry lies in the drive to diversify the economic outlook of a country that was struggling to find its footing within a growing and more competitive global economic system based on export-oriented economies of scale and service economies. In addition, such diversification was especially needed because London, caught in between the decolonisation movement sweeping the Global South(s) and its own internal reckonings after two World Wars, was already making plans to leave the colony (which declared independence officially four years after the airport opening, in 1976) – and without more reliable economic incomes the viability of Seychelles as an independent country was in question (McAteer 2008). Geopolitically, the airport was also to function as a military base aiding the British in maintaining their influence in the region – initially to be incorporated within the British Indian Ocean Territory as part of the Cold War regional strategy, although such a plan would never be realised (Robinson 2023).

From a local perspective, the construction of the airport became a sticky talking point for the nascent party politics that were to characterise Seychelles for the decades to come. Indeed, in many ways, the debates around the value of the airport are snapshots of the different trajectories that the two political leaders, James Mancham and his SDP and France Albert René with the SPUP, envisioned for the development of the archipelago (Robinson 2023). A staunch advocate of a British-integration stance, rather than complete independence, and closely reflecting the class interests of its electorate, Mancham was strongly in favour of the airport and the influx of foreign capital – both in the form of tourism investments and tourist spending. Conversely, uncompromising when it came to the complete independence from the British, the left-leaning, radical René was more cautious about the value of tourism – specifically on the effects it would have on the social fabric of the country and the risk of making Seychellois ‘a race of chambermaids and page boys’ (McAteer, 2008: 340). Deryck Scarr (2000:176) laconically encapsulates the two divergent political visions: ‘While Mancham pressed for an airport, tourism and an end to capital gains tax, Rene [sic] spoke for housing, education and care for the aged and [...] remarked that most people in the Islands kept going on sheer courage’.

With hindsight, René’s concerns were far from exaggerated. From its inception, the tourism industry exhibited key features – namely, private foreign investments in infrastructure development, changes in land ownership favouring foreign corporations, and little income retention from the sector as a whole – that were only to become more prominent as the industry established itself as the main economic pillar of the country, and that accelerated with the IMF structural adjustment programmes following Seychelles’ default on its own debt in 2008 (Campling *et al.* 2011). Arguing over two old, rusty and rumbling air conditioners that offered a fresh break during a more humid than usual Wednesday morning in one of MACCE’s meeting rooms on Mahé, the Principal Secretary for the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment (MACCE), Dennis Matatiken, visually painted the legacies of that foundational approach to the industry that are only more prominent today: ‘The way that I see tourism now it’s like: I take a sieve. I put some water in there. But no water stays in the sieve’. As further expanded below and later (Chapter 5), these early (and very much alive) approaches to development practices are today being questioned from the ground up through the recent climate finance interventions that Seychelles is pursuing (i.e., the debt restructuring programme and the Blue Bond) – one of the many unintended, splintering fragments emerging from the assembling ocean politics in the country.

Nonetheless, tourism did have a tremendous impact on the archipelago's socio-economic outlook from the beginning. Campling and colleagues (2011:17) report that tourist numbers rose from 490 in 1960 to 37,321 by 1975, with a GDP contribution from the sector rising from 8% in 1972 to 18% in 1976. In this light, the British colonial governor at the time was not far off the mark in observing that the tourism industry was 'a remarkable success story, and indeed practically the only example in the world of how well administered aid can in a relatively short time bring an under-developed country to the economic 'take-off' point' (McAteer 2008:342). Yet, at the same time, 'by 1975 more than 30 per cent of the land area of Seychelles was owned by non-Seychellois', and a 1976 survey of the four main hotels 'found that 56 per cent of the total income from these hotels left the country in the forms of direct return on investment, payment for imported goods and services, and compensation for expatriate staff' (Campling *et al.* 2011:17). At the very prominence of today's discourses around the type of Blue Economy Seychelles should work towards, the foreign-owned, tourism-led development paradigm very much at the helm of country's present trajectory has its roots into the socio-economic legacy of the British colonial period.

Yet, as today, even in the past that development vision had its fair share of contestation - especially from inside the country's political elite that had, at least nominally, alternate visions of what development to push for, and the role of the state within it. Indeed, with Seychelles' independence in 1976 and the *coup d'état* that brought him to power the following year, the ambivalent position that René held vis-à-vis the Mancham-style tourist industry taking shape in Seychelles was never fully resolved, but instead only deepened (Robinson 2023). In its 27 years in office, split between a one-party state period from 1977 to 1993 and then successive electoral wins in what was officially a multi-party democracy until 2004, René found it hard to balance his quest to advance a socially progressive agenda for Seychelles with an internationally driven tourist industry. Although he made attempts at, for instance, nationalising key hotel chains, he never really succeeded in steering the sector towards a full-blown locally owned one - reluctantly, but also pragmatically, accepting that tourism was the only sector bringing substantial foreign capital into the country (with fishing to a lesser extent), foreign capital that was desperately needed in a time when René's extensive social policies were essentially running on aid and debt (Campling *et al.* 2011). Indeed, it seems that, for René, the tourism and the fishing sectors, the main pillars then as now of Seychelles' (ocean) economy, were means he was willing to compromise to achieve the social development policies in other areas such as education, housing, and health.

In an almost paradoxical turn of events, if René's interventions were to be arguably successful in those areas (education, housing, and health), one of the most frustrating sectors in his agenda would remain agriculture and food self-sufficiency – partly due to the development of the tourism industry itself and despite the abundance of Seychelles' fisheries resources. As Robinson (2023:134) sums up, 'Reliance on imported food actually increased [during René's period] as agricultural productivity declined due to the loss of labour to tourism and the resumption of scarce flat land for construction. By 2017, after René had left office Seychelles was importing 97% of its food needs'. Yet, as already hinted at by PS Matatiken, the influence of René's approach to the tourism industry goes hardly unnoticed today: 'One of the profound ironies of René's career was that the Mancham model of tourism-based economy became the settled position agreed by all sides by the time René left office after twenty-seven years' (Robinson 2023:173).

Many scholars of politics and development in contemporary Seychelles have focussed on René's far-reaching social development policies and Seychelles' consequent high score on international indices like the Human Development Index or Gross Domestic Product as a 'success story' of African development (e.g., Campling *et al.* 2011; Künzler 2018; Robinson 2023). Others, instead, have equally stressed the fierce political repression – in the form of, for instance, kidnappings, murders, international organised crime, and youth indoctrination centres – that accompanied those progressive policies and their aftermath (e.g., Bake 2008; Benoit 2022; McAteer 2023; Robinson 2023). My focus here is somewhat different in that I try to navigate between these two shores and map the oceanic element in René's Seychelles, between social welfare and political repression, to historicise the recent interventions in the ocean described in the previous chapter and in those that follow. Indeed, the Seychelles' oceanic politics cannot be read in isolation from the broader, and more localised, affective and governmental infrastructure that René moulded during his time at the helm of the country – hence the necessity to recount the political climate that Seychelles experienced at independence.

The significance of doing such work became evident to me only after spending an extended time with practitioners in Seychelles who are participating in nothing short of a complete regulatory and managerial overhaul of the country's governance of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) through its Blue Economy agenda and the accompanying Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan (see Chapter 2). For instance, in its ten-year-long run, the SMSP had to go through – and still has to as an ongoing process – different phases in articulating not just *what* to include in its planning – i.e., the distribution, allocation, and regulation of marine spaces and activities most commonly associated with such

initiatives – but also the *how-to* build spaces and practices that are conducive to stakeholders' participation in what the organisers consider a meaningful way. Led by the Government of Seychelles and facilitated by US-based The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the SMSP is the flagship initiative of the Blue Economy project initiated in Seychelles and has already attracted scholarly attention for its governing structure and participatory practices (e.g., Baker & Constant 2020; Baker *et al.* 2023; Schutter *et al.* 2021). The historical backdrop of the SMSP and its significance in repurposing ocean space as a political technology will be discussed later (Chapter 4). Here, I recall a brief coffee chat I had during one of such SMSP stakeholders' consultation meetings with a senior member of the team leading the process. They remembered the unexpected negative feedback they received as the consultative process began. Indeed, there was a general unwillingness towards *openly* engaging in confrontation with others in the room, thwarting what was one of the main objectives of the meetings themselves – that is, managing disagreement, reducing conflict, and achieving a shared arrangement (relatedly, recall the previous early studies discussed in the previous chapter by Schutter *et al.* 2019 and Schutter *et al.* 2021). A potential explanation for that, my interlocutor suggested, could be traced to a not-so-far-back political climate of fear and distrust where divergences were not readily welcomed, but rather a dangerous liability, and where consultative processes themselves were unheard of.

Such processes facilitated by TNC with clearance from successive governments have already come under scrutiny for, among others, the influence of a large foreign NGO in the decision-making process, the inability of stakeholders to meaningfully contribute to the process, the performativity and laboriousness of the meetings themselves – themes my participants have also raised (e.g., Baker & Constant 2020; Baker *et al.* 2023; Kılıç 2024; Schutter *et al.* 2021). Yet, there is an element of novelty I want to tease out here: albeit skewed, a form of democratic participation in the marine realm, virtually non-existent in the past, was introduced and stakeholders themselves had to readjust their practices, modes of thinking *and* engagement with the ocean because of the SMSP itself. In the past, there had already been relatively positive examples of participatory processes for marine resources, as in the case of the co-management measures to preserve the booming sea cucumber industry from the 1990s (Robinson *et al.* 2005). Still, although that fishery was valuable in terms of economic returns as an export-oriented product, the SMSP is working on scale, complexity, and scope that far outstrips anything the sea cucumber consultative process has ever tried to achieve – making the SMSP a *de facto* novel development not just in Seychelles, but in the region as a whole.

In other words, the SMSP and the related management plans that are running in parallel to, but building upon, it – such as the *Mahé Plateau Trap and Line Fisheries Co-Management Plan*, the *Seychelles Tuna Fisheries Management Plan* and the *Seychelles Tuna Industry Development Plan*, the new Fisheries Act currently being drafted – should also be understood as exercises in shared responsibility and decision-making in a place (Seychelles) that historically lacked them, and enabled by a space (the ocean) that, at least in theory, is more amenable to modes of collective governance and action (Peters 2020). Although scholars have long debated, and continue to debate, the potentialities and shortcomings of the MSPs taking place worldwide (e.g., Clarke & Flannery 2020; Flannery et al. 2018), my claim here is somewhat different. Read through the lens of its history, I am here suggesting that the present, reinvigorated, ocean politics in Seychelles might generate, in sites like the SMSP and related projects, spaces that could potentially coalesce around ‘wet’ political sensibilities more attuned to the current oceanic repositioning of the archipelago as an aquapelago. Neither necessarily progressive nor regressive, these are spaces where identities can be configured, as the articulation of a locally specific and historically dense *créolité* above began to hint at; where political re-scaling, and state-making, performances can happen (Chapter 4); or where development practices can be contested (Chapter 5).

3.5. *‘We can't just think about development anymore. We've got to think about: How you now manage better what you've already developed?’ – The Beginning of a Fisheries Saga*

If the flagship initiative of the SMSP is an overarching reorganisation of Seychelles’ marine spaces and relative sectorial uses, the accompanying major management and legal plans that I briefly mentioned above are significant in that they cover mainly one specific marine industry – that of fisheries. Numbers may vary slightly based on the exact metrics used and statistics measured. Still, the fishing industry represents the second most important economic sector, after tourism, contributing roughly 17% to the country’s GDP, employing around 15% of its workforce, and with over a staggering 90% of fish and fish-related products making up the total value of domestic exports in 2019 (Seychelles Trade Portal 2024). And yet, the numbers alone make it hard to capture the centrality of fisheries within Seychelles’ socio-political life – as both a highly emotive and a highly contentious terrain of political struggle today – as Jeremy’s comments have already highlighted.

Since its very first settlements in the 1770s, the country has been reliant upon its rich, and easily accessible, fish resources – remaining even today one of the countries with the highest fish consumption per capita (iOS Partners, Inc. 2024). For the majority of its history, the activity in

Seychelles has been primarily carried out on an artisanal scale with paddles-powered traditional wooden canoes – locally known as ‘pirogues’ – as the main vessel type that rarely ventured far out away from the shorelines. Although Seychelles’ vast 1.35 million km² EEZ ‘is characterized by a wide range of marine habitats, including shallow water fringing reefs, granitic reefs, bank and plateau shelves and drop-offs, atolls, lagoons, seamounts and pelagic habitats’ (Robinson *et al.* 2005), the fishing efforts had been concentrated either on the Mahé plateau – that, with an average depth of approximately 70m represents a major component of the only 4% of EEZ shallower than 200m (Wakeford 2000) – or in the lagoons and fringing reefs making up a huge part of the inhabited outer islands.

Indeed, the variety and abundance of these habitats, coupled with the relatively low fishing effort that they historically experienced, made fishing an established trait of the socio-political life in the archipelago that seldom attracted the attention of colonial governors. Only from the 1960s onwards did the fishing sector begin experiencing progressive changes that reshaped its outlook and profitability, especially at the artisanal level. Although by the end of the 1950s, there was still ‘no commercial refrigeration in the Seychelles’ (Williams 1990:236) to help, for instance, with the provision of frozen baits prior to multi-day fishing trips, changes in the composition and number of the vessel types, better construction materials, and especially the introduction of engines to power the boats turned fishing into an expanding and profitable *commercial* enterprise for both local and foreign entrepreneurs. The commercialisation of the industry was also compounded by the growing demand from previously untapped global markets, such as the East and Southeast Asia markets, for specific products of which Seychelles waters were rich – like shark fins and sea cucumbers as mentioned before. And yet the preferred fishing grounds remained rather stable around the Mahé plateau and a few other shallow banks, with only a few adventurers who attempted the uncharted, dark oceanic depths that held feelings of respect mixed with fears of the unknown from the local fisherfolks (Williams 1990).

With hindsight, such a reluctance to move offshore, coupled with the technical limitations (e.g., the fishing gears and vessel types) required to move towards deeper areas and hence develop an alternative pelagic fishery, resulted in a mix of consequences that are shaping the contours of fisheries discourses in the country to this day. At first, indeed, when the global industrialising fishing industry set its course on to the fertile waters of Seychelles from the 1980s onwards, they could exploit its resources virtually as they pleased considering that the local industrial sector was non-existent, with regulatory frameworks and scientific know-how weak (Robinson 2023:137). With the

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) officially agreed upon in 1982 – for which Seychelles’ President René himself took an active role in negotiating on behalf of his country (Robinson 2023) – and the official delimitation of maritime boundaries designated with the EEZ, a huge portion of one of the most highly productive tuna migratory area in the world within the Southwest Indian Ocean went suddenly under the control of Seychelles. European (mainly Spanish and French) purse seiners, quickly followed by Southeast Asian (mainly Taiwanese) longliners, were the first to close access agreements to fish for tuna with the newly independent, and internally troubled, Seychelles’ government. As tuna is primarily a pelagic species, these foreign vessels were mostly cruising the deep waters outside the plateau and the shallow banks, so that fishing activities at the time were spatially distributed roughly along the lines of industrial vessels plundering the oceanic depths of Seychelles’ EEZ and artisanal fisherfolks concentrating their activities within the shallower Mahé plateau with occasional forays into the surrounding banks such as the Amirantes and Fortune Banks extending west of Mahé.

Especially in this initial period of power consolidation and focused development of Seychelles along progressive socialist lines, René ‘was far less allergic to foreign investment’ (Robinson 2023:137) when it came to the exploitation of the fisheries resources – particularly tuna and tuna-like species – compared to the tourism industry. Initially, the growth of a foreign-led, industrial tuna fishery was neatly incorporated into René’s wider political agenda: firstly, the foreign vessels were not in direct competition with the local fisherfolks as they both fished for different species in different areas; secondly, the fishing agreements and licence scheme put in place provided much-needed foreign exchange for what was relatively little effort on the part of the government – *de facto* establishing economic logics of rent extraction from the resource that is very much alive, and discussed, to this day (Andriamahefazafy & Kull 2019; Andriamahefazafy *et al.* 2019a; 2019b); thirdly, the development of the fishery at sea also provided an opportunity for the government to create local economic development *on land* in the form of, for instance, an export-oriented canned tuna industry, fish processing, stevedoring, ship chandling and repair.

In terms of economic results, it is hard to deny the impact the development of the fishing industry had on the country during this period. By 2001, fisheries and fisheries-related activities accounted for US\$232 million, or over 40% of Seychelles’ foreign exchange earnings, with tuna-related exports making up 87% of the total export value. The Victoria-based, 40% government-owned and 60% HJ Heinz European Seafood-owned Indian Ocean Tuna Ltd. (bought in 2006 by Lehman Brothers, which precipitated the default of the country after the bank itself defaulted in 2007) cannery quickly

became a prominent player globally, supplying over 14% of the EU market for canned tuna imports in 2005 (Campling *et al.* 2011:36). At the same time, though, the cannery also intensified labour patterns that were contrary to René's social policies of local ownership and social protection, but were only to become more marked in the following years – especially in the tourism and construction sectors. Indeed, the cannery heavily relied on a foreign labour force principally for two reasons: first, sourcing workers from South Asia (e.g., Sri Lanka) or mainland Africa (Kenya, but also Madagascar) proved to be cheaper in terms of wages and social benefits; secondly, Seychellois were perceived to lack an “industrial heritage’ [that] reduced both the productivity and reliability of the local workforce’ (Campling *et al.* 2011:36).

Even with such strings attached, from an economic perspective of revenue generation and employment, the approach to the fisheries industry outlined proved initially successful. Yet, contemporary to such economic development, and likely as a consequence of it, the environmental sustainability of the sector as a whole began to be questioned. Two factors are worth mentioning here. First, as Seychelles lacked not just a local industry for pelagic fishing, but also the expertise and scientific knowledge to manage its fledgling tuna industry from a managerial side, from the beginning the government turned for advice to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). FAO quickly jumped onto the opportunity to help Seychelles develop its tuna industry, but ‘FAO priority was on food production, not conservation or sustainable national revenue. FAO at the time was neither capable of assessing the sustainable harvesting limits on the Seychelles tuna stock nor disposed to prioritise the issue’ (Robinson 2023:138). That was a bleak prelude to what was to come. Today the sustainability of the tuna fisheries by the FAO-approved, intergovernmental Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) has hardly shown any sign of improvement, with the yellowfin tuna – one of the most highly prized in the region – being ‘currently the worst managed yellowfin stock in the world, by the industry’s own admission’ (Rattle 2019).

Second, recall that, from the 1960s onwards, the local artisanal fleet also underwent a process of industrialisation that made vessels safer, faster, better equipped, and hence capable of catching more for less effort. These improvements – coupled with an increasing population, a rising number of local fishing boats, and a booming tourism industry with its demand for freshly caught fish for its guests – put massive pressure on the Mahé plateau and its closest banks that quickly was reflected in declining catches. To relieve such pressure from the Plateau, and to further diversify the local fishery, the René government implemented a series of financial and regulatory measures for the local purchase of bigger and more powerful vessels – so that a new, local semi-industrial sector could be

established exploiting more distant and diverse resources. The results of these policies have been mixed: on one side, today there is an economically vibrant, locally owned, semi-industrial longline sector primarily targeting pelagic fish populations (with tuna and tuna-like species on top) that nonetheless adds pressure to fishing grounds targeted also by industrial vessels, with potential ecological as well as geopolitical anxieties among local stakeholders (more on this in next chapter). On the other side, such a set of measures have not really achieved their primary objective of giving respite to the fisheries populations on the Mahé plateau that have, instead, continued experiencing declining catch rates (Christ *et al.* 2020; Wakeford 2000).

From the newly built offices in the industrial area on the East coast of Mahé, the project manager for the national implementation of the World Bank's Third South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Governance and Shared Growth Project (SWIOFish3) in Seychelles, Jan Robinson, neatly traced the historical contours of the development of the 'fisheries economy' in the country to me as:

Seychelles really only understood and realised the potential of its fisheries resources towards the mid to late 70s. It was pretty much tuna, in terms of volume and value, that was the real potential. Seychelles was very wise in the early days. Still, when it was a British-administered jurisdiction, they looked at the possibility of doing things like deepwater trawls, demersal trawls similar to [what] they have on continental shelves and in the UK and Northern Europe, and realised that there wasn't a great potential for that, but also that the environmental impacts are going to be large. They took a very wise step early on to say: right, no trawl fishing, no bottom trawl fishing in Seychelles. But they did realise around that time like the 70s, there was a potential for the tuna fishery and as we saw from the early 80s, that tuna fishery has grown and grown and grown and is now the second most valuable fishery globally. And Seychelles is the main service provider to that fishery. So the Seychelles' development of fisheries has very much been in parallel to the development of that tuna fishery. But I think that there was a mindset for many years, especially when I started in fisheries here [in the mid-90s], that fisheries were still developing, that the sector was still developing. But very early on I started to understand that really, in terms of capacity development, Seychelles had pretty much already peaked, certainly from the case of the tuna. [...] There wasn't really any room for Seychelles to develop further its capacity. We can look at development in other ways, looking at equity and looking at beneficial ownership. But in terms of really catching more fish, producing more fish, there was not much scope for that. And I would say towards the end of the late 90s it was happening also in the demersal, in the traditional artisanal fisheries where the fleet size had grown. There was and now there's a major problem with too many boats for the available production. And there's a big problem of overfishing for some stocks. So, it was trying to get Seychelles to change their mindset and think: we can't just think about development anymore. We've got to think about: how you now manage better what you've already developed? [...] So very much pushing towards fisheries management became a focus and realising that there were no management plans in Seychelles, no fisheries were being managed in what was considered the conventional way or best practice of having a management plan with clearly defined objectives and targets and measures and so on.

3.6. Conclusion

If the previous chapter has interrogated not just the uncertainty usually related to Blue Economy discourses and practices in Seychelles, but also the consistency of their value as explanatory analytics to make sense of local practitioners' lived realities of the a development paradigm, ultimately arguing for a move beyond the Blue Economy as *both* an analytical and political lens towards 'oceanic thinking', the present chapter has added a further layer to the story. In *re-telling* a brief account of the country holding the ocean, its geophysical peculiarities and associated social constructions up until the recent past at its centre this chapter further complicates a tendency towards 'presentism' that much of the BE literature shares (Ceglia *et al.* 2025). The human story of Seychelles has always already been a story of the ocean - an ocean that has both divided and connected, that has presented both resource riches and scarcity. Today, the lifeblood of the country, tourism, rests on the inner islands being geological singularities - back to a time when there was *no* ocean to being an 'ocean-locked state' - whereas the outer islands serve as 'pristine and untouched places' because of their remoteness and relative inaccessibility - a partially historically inaccurate account for sure, but economically productive as a marketing strategy nowadays. In addition, Seychelles' socially central and ecologically rich support system, fisheries, thrives on the biologically prolific migratory routes surrounding the central 'submerged continental crust'.

Simultaneously, those same routes have acted as material conduits for the expropriation, exploitation, and destruction of peoples, places, and cultures through the violent logics of the colonial encounter - essentially building a society from the very beginning on a racial and colonial grammar. Yet, foregrounding a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' reading further complicates such narrative: for instance, in the blurring of any clear demarcation between land and sea (and atmosphere) enacted by those bodies that did not survive the horrific conditions on slave vessels and have materially entered the ocean life cycle with their 'residence time' (Sharpe 2016:41). Or, more directly prefiguring the ocean as a space of emancipatory and life-affirming politics *mediated* by its own possibility of taking life away - as demonstrated by fleeing the '*makro*' in the *moutya* lyrics. Holding the space open for all of these conversations to continue begins to articulate Seychellois *créolité* as a historically sedimented, continually (re)composing oceanic formation.

If the stories I narrated here can be chronologically read through a seemingly linear progression - from the deep time of geology to the present-day fast-moving political events - thinking them with a temporality more attuned to the spatiality of ocean demands something more from us. The marine

environment suddenly inundating Jean-Luc's rock cores, the 'residence time' of enslaved bodies, the migratory patterns of tuna populations - they overlap but do not necessarily share time and its affectual qualities equally. Disturbing linear, progressive, and static notions of landed time, such an ocean-sensitive 'time, as expressed through *assembled* matter, is nonlinear and fluctuating, and matter is mutable and leaky—part of a process of ongoing reformation' (Steinberg & Peters 2015:256, emphasis in the original). From a state perspective, how to govern with and for the intricate, multi-layered, and dense spatio-temporalities of the ocean with the resources of a small island, on a warming planet? We now turn to recent efforts from Seychelles political elites to do just that.

Chapter 4

From 'Small Island Developing State' to 'Big Ocean State', and Back: Performing a Nation

4.1. Introduction

If you live on an island and you go to the water's edge, where the ocean meets the land, turn your back on the ocean. All you see is limitation and that's it. Wow. We're small. How are we going to survive? [Instead, when you] Turn your back on the island and look out.' In a sleek movement, the over 60-year-old former Seychelles' Ambassador Ronald 'Ronny' Jumeau stares at me, stretches his arms in a semicircle over the table that divides us, and slowly picks up force as he speaks. *'Look up. Wow. It's not the boundary, it's called the horizon. It's just the curvature of the earth. It just goes on and on (see Figure 4.1). Consider the difference in painting now as a Big Ocean State. As they say, boats are made to sail not to be tied to the port, and unless you're a person of the ocean and the island it's difficult to see. So, we are not 455 km² of islands. We are 1.3 million km² of ocean. Run by 100,000 people. On 455 km² of islands.'* As an experienced orator, he pauses for a moment - waiting for the sentence to sink in. *'And as we were developing [the Blue Economy], some people asked me: You are forgetting you are a small island state? I said'* Daftly raising his index finger right in my face. *'The smallness is in your mind, not in mine. I don't know what you're talking about.*

And because you think as a small island state, in the climate change [meetings] that's how they treat you: 'The small islands, oh they're vulnerable, oh they're going to sink oh' like kids.

One of the things we did with the debt swap was the MSP [Marine Spatial Plan]. When we added the MSP to the debt swap, it was no longer about the debt swap. That's when we began going into the 'economy' concept of the Blue Economy and, for me, the MSP is the backbone of the Blue Economy.

There is one name that repeatedly came up whenever I had conversations around the early developments of, and drivers behind, the Blue Economy in Seychelles - that of former Seychelles ambassador to the United Nations Ronald 'Ronny' Jumeau. This is not by accident: former ambassador Jumeau was 'the only Seychellois in the room' in New York when the idea of a debt restructuring was first informally presented to any official representative of the Seychelles' government back in 2010. Since then, he acted as a 'facilitator' and 'strategic thinker' to bridge the novel proposal between TNC first, the multiple constellations of international actors involved later

and the local realities of Seychelles' (ocean) politics. For my interlocutors, the former ambassador represented the go-to person for two primary reasons. First, and most obviously, considering his role in the deal he was likely the best-positioned actor to tell the debt restructuring story from a specific Seychellois perspective – something that in the country was felt as sorely missed in the current infatuation with Seychelles' 'success story'¹¹. Second, in his long political career spanning over three decades, as part of René's government first and then moving onto the international stage, he acquired a formidable reputation for himself as a charismatic leader and gifted orator advocating on behalf of Seychelles and Small Island States more broadly.



Figure 4.1. With my back turned on the island I look out, at 'the curvature of the Earth'. La Digue, Seychelles. Photo by the author.

I first met the 'semi-retired, independent consultant' Ronny Jumeau on a warm but cloudy November afternoon in one of the new cafés on Eden Island – a privately developed piece of reclaimed land on the Eastern side of Mahé that now hosts, among others, a five-star luxury resort, a high-end residential complex, a deep-water marina, and TNC headquarters in Seychelles. Inaugurated with the airport construction, since independence, the Eastern coast of Mahé underwent major infrastructural projects that profoundly changed its geo- and bio-physical composition at the interface between

¹¹ To partly counter-act the situation, SeyCCAT has recently launched a freely available, full-length documentary to tell their own version of the story of the debt restructuring titled *The Story of the World's First Ocean Debt Conversion* (2024, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIVYXh5VUcQ>. Accessed 02/11/2024). Additionally, the documentary was accompanied by a case study of the same deal, *The Seychelles Debt-for-Nature Swap - A Case Study* (2024, available at: https://seyccat.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/SeychellesDebtSwapCaseStudy_webversion.pdf. Accessed 02/11/2024).

land and sea. Unprompted during our conversation, the former ambassador, who was Minister of the Environment at the time Eden Island replaced the existing coral reefs' ecosystems in the area, did not fail to notice the irony surrounding our meeting place:

For reclamation, we had to destroy the coral reefs along the East Coast of Mahé. However, if we didn't destroy the coral reefs and build on reclamation, show me on the island where you put all this. It would have gone into the hills and some things you cannot build on the hills. [...] Perseverance housing complex, the largest housing complex in Seychelles [on a reclaimed island in the North East of Mahé], show me where would you put all those? What I say internationally is [that] much of our protected land is under Trois Freres. That's our water towers where the water is. And I say: to save our mountains, we destroyed the reefs. If we didn't destroy the reefs, if we didn't reclaim, we were building into the mountains. And if you're building into the mountains you remove the trees, you lay down concrete and tarmac roads, you increase the volume of water that's flooding onto the coast with silt and sedimentation, which will kill the reef anyway. Because you're clearing the forest. So instead of it being absorbed, it's running off. So you end up killing the reef anyway. Then I ask my audiences how many of your countries have to make a decision like that? How many of you? You build this inland because you have flat land. We have no inland; and in the coral islands, the inland is the other side of the island. We cannot move back, we have no retreat from sea level rise. There is no retreat.

Today, in a time when a warming ocean casts existential threats to much of the socio-economic life on the inner islands, both the existing and especially the anticipated Blue Economy-related projects proposed along the coastal stretches – projects that are always already, both directly and less so, entangled with climate change adaptation strategies as these are primarily an *oceanic matter* in the aquapelago (see also Chapter 1 and 3) – are acquiring novel intensity locally (see also Chapter 5). If the first chapter has resituated the Blue Economy as a diffracted, underwhelming, and sectoral *lived* reality locally, this chapter will further complexify that narrative with an analysis of the scalar-making practices that mainly elite actors in the country strategically deployed to reposition Seychelles away from the limiting categorisation of a 'Small Island Developing State' (SIDS) to that of a 'Big Ocean State' (BOS[S]) on the international stage.

Developing through that same Blue Economy agenda, with such a performative move the structural and systematic vulnerabilities of being a *small island* are still not completely resolved but constantly renegotiated, as the outer island governance structure will demonstrate. Additionally, the turn to BOS[S] will further theorise the historically sedimented Seychellois *créolité* discussed in the previous chapter as an 'oceanic (in-)formation' that entangles more forcefully with the present, actively pursued plunge towards enrolling ocean space to acquire political leverage, scientific support, and financial backing. Such a move, in turn, would serve to 'change the narrative' around the island state – to be, in the analytical vocabulary I am employing in this work, a self-defined aquapelagic

assemblage. After all, if as the former ambassador eloquently remarked, a country like Seychelles 'cannot move back, it has no retreat from sea level rise', its liveability is dependent upon turning seaward – enrolling its watery space as both materially rich to ensure socioeconomic development, and politically valuable to counterbalance 'narratives of smallness' on a global stage. Ultimately, and continuing the thread woven previously, the analysis advanced here further foregrounds Seychelles' elite actors' move beyond the 'Blue Economy' towards 'oceanic thinking' – a more holistic and active political mobilisation of their ocean territory to reframe those narratives of smallness and vulnerability towards becoming a 'BOS[S]'. In turn, that move simultaneously prefigures spaces for elite actors where political agency can be exercised so as to become, in the words of the former ambassador Jumeau, 'incubators of solutions' for a warming planet *in the here and now*, as there is 'no retreat from sea level rise'.

To do so, I will first provide an account of the political jostling that initiated the debt restructuring programme for ocean space – arguably the constitutive element that kickstarted the Blue Economy in Seychelles, while catalysing momentum globally. Second, I will tease out in more detail some elements of Seychelles' turn seaward assembled during the construction of its Blue Economy agenda – specifically its push for a Marine Spatial Plan (MSP), the 30% target of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and the underlying economic aspect of the deal. *Performativity* here – in the form of dramatic and speculative performance (Tsing 2000) – will serve as a primary analytical scaffolding to theorise the productive discursive and material circulation of these elements. These stories will then be merged to ask what happens to the sovereignty of an aquapelagic state like Seychelles when it goes to sea – or rather, when its sovereign rights are actively extended to make sense (and use) of its watery territories to not just assert independence, but also reckon with its interdependencies (Clifford 2001).

As a whole, the stories recounted in this chapter will be punctuated with the words of former ambassador Ronny Jumeau – a primary figure that has had a substantial impact on the narrative shifts here analysed, both in his institutional capacity as (many times the only) state representative within the negotiating rooms and in his personal capacity as a charismatic leader and gifted orator. In conclusion, this chapter will empirically foreground active forms of political agency – with their openings as well as limitations – that Seychellois elite actors enacted, and continue to enact, in their territorialisation of the country's ocean space. Such is the practised mode of 'oceanic thinking' that I am advancing in this thesis – a move that is simultaneously articulated by political actors as I encountered them in my ethnographic account and an analytical orientation that I am proposing to allow forms of political agency and subjectivities to emerge so that, perhaps, alternate political

spaces can be cultivated. Indeed, if the ocean is 'a space in which battles are waged but also a space across which power is projected' (Steinberg 2001:17), political actors in Seychelles are today actively moving in that direction to leverage political and economic influence primarily on a global stage. In the process, such a turn towards a performed Big Ocean State further articulates Seychellois identity as constantly *in-formation* between transnational sociopolitical architectures and its lived, wet (and still largely unknown in this case) space.

4.2. The Debt Restructuring for Marine Conservation and Climate Adaptation Programme: A Historical and Political Account

The tension between a bounded, landed territory that Seychelles is provided with to accommodate a growing population, a booming tourism and fishing sector, and ancillary socio-economic activities co-exists and partly reinforces Jumeau's opening lines to 'turn your back to the land and look up at the curvature of the earth' over the ocean as a canvas of opportunities waiting to be explored – so that the country could ultimately move away from being a '*small island state*' towards becoming a '*big ocean state*'. Soon into our three-hour-long conversation and multiple drinks on Eden Island, I came to appreciate the rhetorical power and captivating attitude for which the former ambassador is renowned – a testament to his ability 'to speak without speeches, without notes' with such a force that is now breeding a new generation of young Seychellois, as Jeremy Raguain and the former CEO of SeyCCAT Angelique Pouponneau fondly put it to me. The former ambassador narrated the beginning of the debt restructuring story as:

It all began in 2010 when I was chairing the annual meeting of the Global Island Partnership (GLISPA) Steering Committee in Washington, DC. We were discussing how to raise funds for nature conservation on islands in the wake of the 2008 global financial and economic crisis. During a break in the discussion, someone sitting next to me leaned across and quietly asked, "Ambassador, would Seychelles like to do a debt swap?"

It was Rob Weary, senior conservation finance and policy advisor at the Caribbean Programme at The Nature Conservancy (TNC). He was at the time looking for islands in the Pacific and the Western Indian Ocean to join a debt swap package TNC was trying to put together for the Caribbean.

Knowing that debt for nature swaps were, to a certain extent, controversial, especially after some countries had in the past diverted the funds raised to uses other than those they had agreed to in the debt agreements, I asked Rob what he had in mind. He was aware that Seychelles had fared poorly in the 2008 financial crisis and was looking for ways to alleviate its crippling debt burden. Meanwhile, the debt swap he was proposing would seek to address all the issues that had made some past deals controversial. Most interestingly, the proposal was to leverage one resource islands have a lot of, the ocean, to raise funding for ocean conservation, resilience, sustainability, development, and climate action.

I told him I'd have to put the idea to the relevant authorities back home but would need more details first.

As Jumeau recalls, Seychelles was not the only, and certainly not the first, country that TNC approached to work on the novel debt restructuring programme. Instead, the Caribbean had been its first port of call, especially in light of its long involvement and established networks in the region. Yet, none of the countries there, or the Pacific, readily welcomed the idea mostly due to the poor track record that the financial instrument – the debt restructuring – held in recent memory: first tried out in the Caribbean and Latin America during the 1980s, especially for forest-related projects, such 'swaps' quickly came under harsh criticism mainly due to a mix of poor environmental records, state entities diverting funds towards other activities, and poor accountability mechanisms (Reilly 2006). Tellingly, according to Jumeau from that very first conversation TNC had already planned how to 'address all the issues that had made some past deals controversial'. With hindsight, the primary innovative governance structure tasked with dealing with the past controversies around debt restructuring took shape in the special purpose vehicle of SeyCCAT. As introduced in the second chapter, SeyCCAT is an *independent* public-private trust fund with its own, recently amended, legislative act (*Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust of Seychelles, Amendment Act 2022*) that indicates its purpose(s), management structure, and realm of activities. Its independence from the state ensures that the funds raised and transferred by TNC to the trust are effectively channelled into the agreed-upon restructuring's aims and objectives, an oversight further solidified by the mixed governance structure that is shared between TNC and the Seychelles' government plus a board of members from the civil society, business organisations, and the conservation sector. As the former ambassador recollects the frenzy around negotiating the details of the debt restructuring and SeyCCAT:

Perhaps the most important document of all was the draft legislation for SeyCCAT. Seychelles' Paris Club creditors [with which Seychelles was trying to close the deal] wanted assurance that the proceeds of the debt swap would be used for the environmental objectives of the deal and not be diverted or siphoned off by the Government. At the same time, the philanthropic partners who would provide the funds to buy back the debt through NatureVest, TNC's investment arm, generally did not give their money directly to governments. The money not only had to go straight to stakeholders and communities on the ground, but the stakeholders, in turn, would have to access the funds without going through the Government. The Government would, however, be able to access funds for projects that met the environmental objectives of the agreement.

Questions around the possible infringement of the country sovereignty rights, and negotiations over it, will be examined in the last section of the chapter. Here, instead, it is noticeable that Rob Weary's initial preoccupation in approaching Seychelles, and arguably the overall TNC approach to small islands and littoral states, was primarily driven by an urgency to relieve the crippling debt burdens

that those countries had in the aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown. Historically, small island and littoral states are among the most indebted countries in the world – not least because of a global capital system that is built upon, and prospers on, their continued structural exploitation (King & Tennant 2014). As the previous chapter briefly recalled, President René's expansive social policies since taking power at the end of the 1970s were essentially running on foreign aid and increasingly unsustainable borrowing practices, especially with the end of the Cold War and the waning geopolitical interest in the region. With the precipitous rise of food and fuel prices in 2008 'public debt spiralled out of control [and] the Seychelles economy was probably one of the most highly indebted in the world' (Campling *et al.* 2011:98). In October 2008, then, the government defaulted on its debt and had to turn to the IMF for (re)establishing economic sustainability in the country – initiating the second, most profound socio-economic transformation that the young country went through after the airport construction in the 1970s. 'The [IMF] package came with conditions: the government laid off 1,800 public sector workers, floated its currency, lifted foreign exchange controls and sold off state assets. [...] The country was transformed overnight' (Campling *et al.* 2011:98).

The breath, pace, and overall success of the 'shock doctrine' (Klein 2007) that moved Seychelles 'from a highly distorted and restricted economy in crisis to an open, prosperous, market economy' (The World Bank 2013) were such that they became a case study for The World Bank itself on 'how classic policies restored sustainability' (The World Bank 2013). Alongside the overhaul of the domestic economic policies, in the immediate aftermath of the IMF-led package commentators have additionally noted that 'the government's economic reform programme has also intensified on the regional and international planes. This appears to be driven by the twin objectives of deepening Seychelles' integration in the world economy and, in the context of a narrow industrial and agricultural base, further moving away from attempts to achieve domestic economic development through import substitution policies' (Campling *et al.* 2011:101). Therefore, in furthering integration in the world economy, it is no coincidence that the first persons within the government that Jumeau contacted for the deal were 'Vice President Danny Faure, then also the finance minister, his finance principal secretary, Mr. Ahmed Afif, and my boss, Foreign Minister Jean-Paul Adam. PS Afif would, in his reply, bring Central Bank Governor Pierre Laporte into the discussion'.

In other words, flaunted with re-imagining the potentialities for capital intervention within the ocean at the service of 'vulnerable' island countries, the initial thrust towards reviving a dust-filled, forgotten financial instrument rested primarily with TCN's concern around debt sustainability, a concern that was shared by Seychelles' government when assessing the possible viability of the scheme in the

first place. In that regard, in their seminal contribution to its political-economic background, Silver and Campbell (2018:2) rightly note that the debt restructuring 'is a product of, and inseparable from, a much longer geopolitical and political-economic history of SIDS, economic globalisation, debt and "sustainable development". In this sense, TNC has taken the SIDS debt crisis as the opportunity to breathe new life into the nearly 40-year-old "debt-for-nature" model on the grounds that oceans are an urgent and novel conservation and development frontier'.

Although I share their positioning of Seychelles' experimentations (their paper only referred to the debt restructuring, but that can be extended to the accompanying Blue Bond) within a broader neoliberal history of liberalisation policies, debt burden, and intensified market penetration within environmental governance, I am also cautious of reducing the political openings that such repositioning can generate for the country itself. The next chapter will delve more in-depth into the political economy of both the debt restructuring and the Blue Bond - complementing the analyses that scholars like Silver and Campbell (2018) are providing around the limitations of these deals with the simultaneous, perhaps progressive, spaces these instruments are potentially opening up for local communities and grassroots civil organisations that I encountered in the country. Instead, here I want to draw attention to the forms of political agency that such instruments afford, at a state level, to a country - Seychelles in this case, but equally to other archipelagic and coastal nations - that inherited a system structurally predicted upon its 'smallness' and 'vulnerability'; forms that are mediated by the ocean through its strategic - material, lived, performed, imagined - discursive mobilisations. However momentary, mundane, or inconsequential, these forms of political subjectivities open up moments for manoeuvring, negotiation, and future imaginings that are at times either glossed over or downplayed within narratives of, for instance, debt bondage (Perry 2021) or market-based neoliberal environmental governance (Kılıç 2024).

After that initial pitch in 2010, in 2011 Seychelles began working on the technicality and political feasibility of the debt restructuring right at the time when the preparatory meetings for the upcoming Rio+20 conference were also taking place. As detailed in the first chapter, that conference was the official endorsement of the 'Blue Economy' as a development agenda to mirror its Green counterpart (Silver *et al.* 2015). And yet, the connection between the debt restructuring and the BE was still not spelt out, mostly on the account that the many representatives in the negotiating body for SIDS - the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) - were 'suspicious' of the revamped financial instruments to be tested in what were, metaphorically as well as literally, uncharted waters. Yet, Seychelles had

already embarked on the journey to plan with, and for, its ocean territory with the debt restructuring. As Jumeau explained:

Four months after Seychelles' Rio+20 commitment, on 23 October 2012, the Minister for Land Use and Housing, Mr Christian Lionnet, officially opened the first workshop in Seychelles to develop a debt-for-adaptation swap for the country. The Minister's October 2012 speech made several references to the need for spatial planning for the more than 99 per cent of Seychelles' territory covered by the ocean. As a result, spatial planning for Seychelles' entire exclusive economic zone (EEZ) joined the blue economy early in the debt swap discussions. [...]

In 2013 I was in Washington DC for another meeting of the GLISPA Steering Committee. I met with the TNC CEO Mark Terceck and two of his senior officials to discuss the progress of the debt swap negotiations. While he was happy with how the financial side of the negotiations was going, I told him Seychelles had a problem choosing the 30 per cent of the Exclusive Economic Zone to be protected when we didn't know what we had in our entire ocean space. "We cannot choose the 30 per cent we want to protect until we know what's in the 100 per cent," I said.

However, it so happened that Seychelles would be embarking on a marine spatial plan for its entire EEZ. The sooner TNC helped Seychelles with the MSP, the sooner we would be able to identify the 30 per cent to be protected by the 2020 deadline. I also said we could not focus on just the 30 per cent without considering the surrounding ocean, as the protected areas' success, viability, and credibility would depend on how the surrounding 70 per cent was managed and used. So TNC got involved with funding and helping build capacity for not just the 30 per cent of protected waters but an all-encompassing marine spatial plan that covers the entirety of Seychelles' maritime space. [...]

We cannot make informed and science-based decisions without the correct information and science. Without that information and science, we risk destroying what we don't know we have before we know it! How can we protect or exploit what we don't know we have? To truly own our entire territory for the first time, which the MSP will allow us to do, we must understand what we own. (Emphasis added)

To know is to own, for former ambassador Jumeau¹². To own, then, is to intentionally allocate space for designed activities and actors. With that move, the ocean is reconfigured as a political technology of and for sovereign (re)appropriation, a space where the Seychellois state is able to exercise 'for the first time' a strong degree of control on an otherwise historically and materially slippery territory – the consequences of which I will turn to in the last section. Although today it has become an established conditionality of the debt restructuring programmes inaugurated on the TNC model – as the recent cases of Belize, Barbados, and Gabon demonstrate (e.g., The Nature Conservancy 2022) – the MSP process that accompanies the restructurings was not an integral element in TNC's initial plan. The Minister of the Environment at the time, Didier Dogley, confirmed in our conversation that Seychelles had already been considering a marine spatial plan, prior to TNC's proposal, as part of

¹² And for political ecology and cognate disciplines too. There is a rich literature on the entanglements of state-making and resource-making experiments as part of the capitalist project of rendering nature(s) 'neoliberal'. For a review of some of these trends in human geography, see Bridge 2014.

the longer and deeper post-2008 IMF-led restructuring programme to diversify and strengthen its economic outputs.

If you look at the whole story of Seychelles as far as the Blue Economy is concerned, you will find a lot of bits and pieces. There's a friend of mine who always said 'it was like trying to fly a plane while you're still building it', we're still putting the parts together and still trying to fly it. [...]
We were working on the Blue Economy independently of the debt swap, of SeyCCAT, and the MSP. It was later on that some of us were: 'When you look at all and look at everything together, all these things fit together'. Because when we were talking about the Blue Economy, most people were talking about the economy, economy is about finance. [...] Whereas when we talk about the blue bonds and the debt swap, it was more about conservation. But it was later on, when we really sat down and said that these things fit together, they were all part of the same plan. But not while we were working on it at the beginning, it was two different things. The blue economy was doing that thing and the debt swap was doing its thing. One was conservation and the other one was more about: How do you create opportunities for economic development?

Sometimes lost in the official accounts concerned with the Blue Economy in Seychelles (e.g., Silver & Campbell 2018), in threading together the debt restructuring with the marine spatial plan and its ancillary pillars (e.g., MPAs), the Seychelles government fundamentally repurposed the political value that the programme could hold - both for itself and for TNC. In such a repurposing, TNC itself became an opportunity for the government to benefit from much-needed scientific and technical expertise that it was largely lacking in the country to design, implement, and operationalise its economic and political expansion in and through ocean space. In short, Seychellois state officials were able to imprint a homegrown life of their own to the post-2008 IMF-influenced plans of economic development by pulling together their seaward aspirations - a space up to that point quite loosely organised and managed - with their recovering economy, and the novel opportunities offered by one of the largest environmental NGOs in the world. More broadly, these definitional moments where elite Seychellois actors were able to actively, even if partially, capture and define 'for the first time' in many instances the role Seychelles' ocean should have in and for the country allowed them to simultaneously *practice sovereignty* in their territory as well as create the economic and managerial foundations to fully mobilise the ocean's resources.

On the other side, TNC had to readjust the range of operations related to the environmental element of its fledgling programme to include what was effectively a more time-consuming and resource-intensive process - i.e., the marine spatial plan - compared to the anticipated marine protected areas network. TNC's Director for Ocean Planning and Mapping, and Seychelles' MSP Process and Science Lead, Joanna Smith remembers her experience joining the SMSP:

Between late 2013 and early 2014 the government [of Seychelles] went from 'Let's do marine protected areas and expand' to 'Let's do a full marine spatial planning'. And that's why one person at The Nature Conservancy was leading initially and they had a lot of protected area experience, but not marine planning experience, like for all sectors. So that's where I entered in 2014. It was because I started as the global lead from marine spatial planning, so then I was asked if could I assist with Seychelles as an MSP expert as opposed to just MPAs. So it had started as an MPA project and then morphed into 'No, it's more than an MPA. It's Blue Economy, it's climate, it's fisheries, it's tourism'.

Not just by mobilising TNC's techno-scientific capabilities to productively 'know and own' its ocean territory, but also by actively pursuing the elusive 30% target of MPA within its MSP Seychelles proved to exercise a degree of political agency that fundamentally 'rewrote how we [the world at large] do marine conservation', as Ronny Jumeau persuasively put it. As in the case of the MSP, the 30% target of marine protected areas for a country's EEZ – either as one conditionality of debt restructurings or as a more general conservation target in the international discourse (e.g., the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework) – has become so institutionalised that it almost goes without any notice. Yet, that 30% figure encapsulated in the catchy '30x30' slogan promoted by the 2030 Agenda of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) can be traced back to murkier beginnings, at least in the Seychelles' case.

Indeed, another ocean scientist who participated in the conversations around the environmental aspect of the debt restructuring, whom I will call Mark, described the 30% target of MPAs as primarily a political negotiation driven by Seychelles' state agenda backed by a rather weak international scientific consensus. He recalls that at the time Seychelles and TNC were preparing the deal, the CBD framework with the Aichi Target 11 anticipated a 10% protection goal for both land and water (fresh and salt) – a goal that was strongly supported by scientific models like the species-area curve describing the relationship between the geographic extension of a habitat and the species distribution within it accounting for variables such as optimal survival and reproduction rates. Yet, Mark recalls how Seychelles had already over 40% of protected land and so 'it was trying to be just really ambitious for the ocean' in tripling the 10% Aichi target and, in so doing, boosting the marine protected areas on par with their landed counterparts. In addition, there was a general campaign promoting the 'one third for the planet' slogan claiming to set a third of the planet aside for nature that was 'loosely science-based'. According to Mark, the main problem faced by TNC and the government in claiming 30% protected areas in the ocean was that in 2014 'the science [was] strong for near-shore habitats [... but was not] well defined in deep water' – as those species-area models had yet to be tested offshore. As Seychelles' EEZ is well over 90% deep waters distributed over a vast area and a large diversity of marine ecosystems (Chapter 3), Seychelles' government decision not

just to expand the protected areas from 10% to 30%, but also to do so through a marine spatial planning exercise for the entire Exclusive Economic Zone, pushed TNC out of its depth. As Mark neatly summarised, 'One of the challenges we had here is: What was the government basing a protection goal all the way out into the deep water and the full EEZ on 30%?'

In short, the history of the debt restructuring here narrated brings to the fore moments when Seychellois political actors were able to navigate, and steer to their preferred objectives (e.g., the SMSP and MPAs), complicated economic (e.g., with the 2008 World Bank's structural adjustment programmes) and political (the uncertainty around the 30% target for MPAs) positionalities that fundamentally shaped the current structure of debt restructuring programmes globally. With this brief political account of those early discussions in mind, I now turn to tease out the wider theoretical interventions that accompany such a move, and their finer empirical details.

4.3. Performing the Ocean State: Some Elements of Seychelles' Watery Territory

Initiated as an economic relief for its burdened finances, with the development of an MSP and a 30% protection target Seychelles leveraged its EEZ as a political technology to reconfigure its position within an emergent 'blue consensus' exemplified by the performative move to switch from a 'Small Island Developing State' to a 'Big Ocean State'. As for SMSP project manager Helena Sims's careful rephrasing of the 'debt swap' to 'debt restructuring' detailed previously, here too 'it matters what thoughts think thoughts' (Haraway 2016). While conversing with former ambassador Jumeau that November afternoon on Eden about what exactly is at stake with that switch, I once slipped into calling Seychelles a 'Large Ocean State' - a move reminiscent of even contemporary literature on the subject (e.g., Saddington 2023). He raised his hand to stop me right away, slowly took a sip from his drink with practised theatricality, looked straight into my eyes and said 'I wouldn't call Seychelles a Large Ocean State, but a Big Ocean State. You know why? Because the acronym for a Large Ocean State is LOS[S], for a Big Ocean State is BOS[S]. We are not LOS[S]. We are BOS[S]'. For Ronny Jumeau, such a discursive rearticulation must follow an act of 'political will. *It's refusing to be categorised*. It's accepting, as President [Danny] Faure said when he addressed the G7 in Canada, that we've been categorised as a 'highly developed country' and high on the Human Development Index. That's where we are. In fact, it's a sign that we've done things well. But in doing that, economically and financially, we box ourselves into a corner. So we're saying 'Embrace it, accept it, and let us find a

way' (emphasis added). As the next chapter will explore, such a political will further come with its own ethical position as an aquapelagic state.

The political performativity exercised with oceanic thinking and resulting, among others, in by swapping a *geographical* referent (the island) for another (the ocean) - to become more attuned to Seychellois *créolité* as a historically dense, continually re-made *oceanic formation* (Chapter 3) - actively mobilises watery political imaginaries that translate into political potentialities that only in the last few years have begun to be realised for the country (e.g., with the political leverage of such a move turning into novel financial opportunities). Notably, the BOS[S] narrative is predominantly performed by elite actors (in this case, the former ambassador) for what is perceived as an outside audience (in this case, myself as a European researcher from a UK institution). Becoming an oceanic formation as an act of political affirmation on a global stage requires active world-making practices that are scale-making too. In such a reconfiguration, in the hands of elite actors, the debt restructuring that jump-started the Blue Economy in the country acts as a form of Anna Tsing's (2000:118, emphasis in the original) 'economy of appearances':

Performance here is simultaneously economic performance and dramatic performance. The "economy of appearances" I describe depends on the relevance of this pun; the self-conscious making of a spectacle is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds. [...] in speculative enterprises, profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors. The more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment frenzy. Drama itself can be worth summoning forth. [...] Dramatic performance is the pre-requisite of their economic performance. (emphasis in the original)

In addition, for Tsing, the possibility of conjuring up spatialities, materialities, and their countless combinations with human and more-than-human actors makes such projects fundamentally *scale-making* projects: the contingent articulations that they ask us to imagine, and the scales at which they require us to do so, do not pre-exist those encounters but are tentatively produced in and through each of them. If 'scale is the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view, whether up close or from a distance, microscopic or planetary, I argue that scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted' (Tsing 2000:120; see also Marston 2000). Scale is contested, culturally and historically specific, as well as politically contentious; is continually made, un-made, and re-made; is a 'tentative moment in a particular history' (Tsing 2000:120).

In contrast to Gruby and Campbell (2013, emphasis added) who argued a 'oceanic Pacific region' that could bring together small island states in international policy arenas through the Pacific scholar Eveli Hau'ofa's (1994) theorisation of the region as 'a sea of islands' - a move to transcend perceived smallness and associated vulnerabilities - I suggest that Seychelles' *créolité* as a historical oceanic formation is indicative of a deeper mobilisation of its watery territory that elite actors in the archipelago are performing almost single-handedly in the Western Indian region as a form of oceanic thinking. From a policy perspective, for Bueger and Wivel (2018:183) Seychelles' expansion of its foreign influence on a global stage represents a form of 'Creole diplomacy' - an effort from Seychellois policymakers to leverage 'location, expertise, culture and smart strategies' to counteract narratives of microstate as lacking influence in international discourses. For them, the Blue Economy serves as one area where Seychelles has been able to exercise such Creole diplomacy through an 'ocean diplomacy' repositioning itself as a focal hub for emergent discourses around ocean conservation and sustainable use. In other words, the integrated and *active* enrolment of its watery territory to carve out a space of geopolitical influence on the world stage registers what I call, building upon Hayward (2012a, 2012b), a form of state-level practiced oceanic thinking developing as an aquapelagic assemblage - that is, a holistic theorisation *of*, and emerging *from*, the variegated, fragmented, sometimes fortuitous, sometimes planned relationalities between the land and water territories of island spaces that state elites are *purposefully* deploying to navigate present geopolitical and climate scenarios.

An example of this state-making aquapelagic assemblage deployed to leverage its 'ocean diplomacy' position on a global stage is represented by Seychelles' critical role in the fight against Somali piracy. Somewhat preceding the Blue Economy discourse, and partly running in parallel with it later on, the rapid appearance of Somali piracy since 2008 suddenly put Seychelles back on the geopolitical map of the international community - particularly in regard to maritime security (Bueger & Wivel 2018). Indeed, from 2008 the unpatrolled waters off the coast of Somalia became the favourite target for pirate activities that seriously threatened the ever-bustling shipping lines of the Red Sea - calling for a concerted global counteraction to ensure that the circulation of capital (and) resources continued undisturbed. Although not necessarily the closest or well-endowed country to act as a central hotspot for anti-piracy activities (for that, Kenya, for example, would have likely been a better option), Seychelles' diplomatic efforts to take on the coordinating hub for the international maritime forces as well as its willingness to prosecute pirates, quickly turned the archipelago into the beneficiary of generous monetary and non-monetary donations. For instance, it received capacity-building programmes from the EU, one offshore patrol vessel and two maritime reconnaissance

aircrafts from India, a new coast guard facility from the UAE, a coastal surveillance system from the US, and substantial other funding for the provision of new and the refurbishment of old facilities (e.g., the prison centre or port facilities).

In short, along with maximising its strategic position and establishing stronger ties with multiple partners at both regional and international levels, 'once piracy was substantially contained from 2012, Seychelles had emerged as one of the leading countries in the field of counter-piracy from the Western Indian Ocean, as a reliable partner to international actors and as a significant voice in the broader maritime security debate' (Bueger & Wivel 2018:179; see also Larsen 2023). Today, maritime security remains a top priority for practitioners involved in the Blue Economy agenda - although attention has moved to other matters. Less concerned with piracy itself, issues like waste disposal, drug trafficking, and above all Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing never failed to make an appearance in consultative workshops - usually accompanied by references to the human, financial, and logistical constraints that the Coast Guard daily faces to tackle them. Contrary to piracy, these emerge as internal issues to Seychelles - although global in nature and extension (e.g., IUU) - that once again underlie the complex positionalities the country occupies in its quest to become a *big ocean* state that inherited a system structurally predicted upon its 'vulnerability' as a *small island* state.

Building upon Bueger and Wivel (2018), Liam Saddington (2023) additionally argues that Creole diplomacy by itself does not wholly explain Seychelles' repositioning in the geopolitical sphere today. Based on his work with elite actors in the archipelago, he posits that Creole diplomacy must also be complemented by 'the construction and maintenance of multiple geopolitical imaginaries [as] an important component in understanding how SIDS engage in diplomacy' (Saddington 2023:8). He identifies three such geopolitical imaginaries that are actively promoted in the country *for* an outside audience: a pristine island state, an island of experimentation, and a 'large oceanic state'. As scalar- and world-making projects, these imaginaries do not necessarily always sit comfortably together - as in the tension between being a 'small island state' suitable for experimentation and risk-taking and the 'large ocean state' tasked to preserve and develop large oceanic expanses (see also Pugh & Chandler 2021). Yet, these multiple 'competing binary imaginaries' serve Seychelles' political actors to navigate complex geopolitical terrains and to turn 'threats [e.g., climate impacts, conservation and ocean governance] into a governable and, economically profitable, phenomena' (Saddington 2023:8).

Both Bueger and Wivel (2018) and Saddington (2023) provide telling accounts of the multiple, contested ways Seychellois political actors are rearticulating the archipelago's geopolitical position in recent times, with a special emphasis on the discursive enrolment of its watery territory. Still, their accounts fall short of further interrogating the material conditions, whether real or imagined, that allow such a reconfiguration in the first place and the associated scalar politics constituting around, and constituted by, it. In foregrounding the 'more historical' as well as the 'more elemental' (Steinberg 2025, see also Chapter 1) aspects of Seychelles' turn seaward through 'oceanic thinking' as a contingent, geologically and historically situated (series of) encounters (Chapter 3) I complicate what is perhaps a too generalist trope of 'Creole attitude' as an explanatory analytic of Creole diplomacy (Bueger & Wivel 2018:182). At the same time, the term 'imaginaries' alone does not fully capture the turbulent materialities producing, and produced by, such 'imaginaries'. In that regard, I further suggest attending to the material (com)positions that circulate along with the discursive articulations of 'imaginaries', a point that will be also illustrated with reference to the SeyCCAT's *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project in the next chapter. In turn, such a foregrounding can also allow us to ask a critical set of questions now inflected with more nuanced theoretical entry points: What, if any, alternate, geographically informed modes of governance become possible (Peters 2020)? How does an *ocean* territory become visible for the state - a political technology 'to know and own', as former ambassador Jumeau put it? To what extent through such practices does 'sovereignty' itself become a calculative technology in the hands of state entities, and to what effects?

4.4. Performing the Ocean State: Between Environmental Over-Performance and Economic Under-Performance

At face value, the story I narrated so far on the comings-together of Seychelles' debt restructuring programme with TNC seems to contradict any 'more elemental' (Steinberg 2025, see Chapter 3) reading of the financial transaction. By all accounts, at the onset the Seychelles' ocean was a secondary and *abstracted* element to be incorporated into the reality of the debt relief as a palatable add-on to potential creditors - that is, the ocean circulated as a discourse, its wet materiality never really impregnating the technicality of the (political and financial) interventions forming around it. It was primarily the political jostling of Seychellois actors - 'persons of the ocean' as Jumeau put it - that pushed for tying together the parallel MSP to the debt restructuring and eventually the Blue Economy as a whole, while being 'ambitious' in expanding MPAs to 30% of its entire EEZ. From a state perspective, to manage is to control, and to control is to own. To own, then, is to exercise *active* - albeit at times distributed, as the next section shows - sovereignty over its territory; a political

strategy 'where control over territory can be seen to signify power [...] the spatial expression of power' (Storey 2001:172; see also Delaney 2005). A political strategy that is, for Seychellois state's officials, always about leveraging sovereignty *and* laying the foundation for a (ideally sustainable) resource-extracting project. Ultimately, the SMSP, and likely even more the designated 30% MPAs, are meant to achieve just that. Looking particularly at the spatial distribution of those MPAs it is possible to appreciate the degree to which the archipelago becomes a BOS[S] through stretching and extending, while also partially *limiting* and temporally *relinquishing* its active sovereign powers over its ocean territory. Yet, before turning to the construction of such an environmental performance, it is worth first considering its operationalisation following, and despite, the economic *under*-performance of the debt restructuring from which it originated.

Indeed, at the time the debt restructuring was discussed, the 30% target was judged by many as *too* ambitious. I have already discussed in the previous section the extent to which such a target was deemed as perhaps *too* ambitious given the state of deep-sea ocean research globally. Still, questions were raised not just from the scientific community, but also from their political and financial counterparts. As another stakeholder confessed, at some point 'there was a discussion whether they [the Seychelles government with TNC] should do [the deal] or not based on the fact that there was a significant reduction in the amount [to be restructured]'. Indeed, Seychelles sat at the table with an original US\$80 million package in mind which, in the end, turned out to be US\$21.6 million - mainly because of the previous IMF-led adjustment programmes following the 2008 default discussed previously, when Seychelles had fared almost *too positively* to ask for a further discount with this new deal (Silver & Campbell 2018). Even so, the viability of the deal was still open to debate until COP21 in Paris. Bearing in mind that over 40% of the debt involved was owed to France, former ambassador Jumeau remembers:

Fast forward to COP21 in Paris. Following the debacle that occurred at COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, there was no guarantee going into Paris that there would be an [climate] agreement. In fact, we still didn't have an agreement two days before the COP was scheduled to end. France was therefore looking for, in the lead-up to the COP, other tangible outcomes should there be no agreement. Seychelles offered the debt swap as one. France could claim to have been instrumental in creating an innovative mechanism to help finance the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, and the SDGs - which you will recall were concluded the same year, 2015, before Paris - and a future climate agreement.

But for that to happen, the debt swap had to be agreed upon by COP21!

As hosts of COP21, the French were in demand everywhere as they frantically tried to get a climate deal by the end of the conference, but they made sure to send a representative to the Seychelles side event announcing the debt swap.

If such a dramatic performance was enacted in a space as highly emotive and charged as a COP, its economic performance became somewhat subsumed under the political value of the deal for the international community. In other words, there is a fundamental de-coupling between the dramatic (read: political) performativity of the debt restructuring and its ability to conjure up an 'investment frenzy' through an economic performance – a decoupling that manifests itself both in its economic *under*-performance and environmental *over*-performance.

The political economy of such a delinking will be further expanded on in the next chapter, where a closer look at several features of both the debt restructuring and Blue Bond will demonstrate that the fundamental engineering of these deals made them waterproof from the very beginning. Instead, here I want to emphasise how both of these performative elements are vividly embedded within the 30% commitment to marine protected areas: the reduction in the principal to be restructured, which caused the deal to be almost called off, was eventually resolved with the inclusion of a specific provision in the contract agreement between TNC and the Seychelles government. Although my requests to access the official legal contracts of this and the Blue Bond deals were consistently turned down due to confidentiality obligations (see also Standing 2023), during the dozen or so of official presentations that I attended at high-level consultative workshops the SMSP project manager, and TNC employee, Helena Sims provided useful background information on them. Crucial for the present discussion, she repeatedly stressed that 'what is often missed in media reports [on the debt restructuring] is that the commitment was to protect 30% [of the EEZ] *conditional to raising funds*' (emphasis added) – that is, the 30% target could be legally put on hold should the funds be deemed not sufficient for the required activities, a provision likely introduced because of the reduction in the principal.

Concurrently, and partly because of that economic under-performance, the 30% commitment to MPAs resulted in an *over*-performance as it promised to achieve a scientifically uncertain target for a quite literally uncharted space – that is, Seychelles' Exclusive Economic Zone; again, two outcomes (the MSP and the 30% target for MPAs) pushed for by Seychelles actors and not anticipated by TNC itself. Yet, 'spectacle is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds' (Tsing 2000:118) and the political ambition to exceed internationally agreed goals (i.e., the 10% target) was part and parcel of Seychelles becoming a 'Big Ocean State'.

There was a lingering question that remained, though, around *where* and *how* to select the areas to protect, what type(s) of protection were to be put in place and where, conversely, to apply

management measures to actively exercise control of spaces, users, and resources. Eventually, the SMSP built upon a previously commissioned study that identified different protection scenarios based on ecologically sensitive key areas and key species (Klaus 2015). Expectedly, the study primarily gathered existing information from the (industrial and semi-industrial) fishing industry and environmental organisations that focussed mostly on the biologically rich and environmentally monitored waters around the archipelago's outer islands. There is an unmistakable resemblance between the boundaries of those initial projections and the final designations agreed upon with the SMSP (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3.). Yet, a marked difference is also visible between the two: the SMSP has opted for what I will call a 'protection gradient approach' to the designation of the 30% MPAs. In Figure 4.3. those are marked as two different gradients of green, light and dark green. Defined as Zone 1 High Biodiversity Protection Area and Zone 2 Medium Biodiversity Protection Area & Sustainable Use Area (with the remaining 70% of EEZ as a Zone 3 Multiple Use Area), the zoning design legally established different regulatory measures for the allowable activities in those areas - from oil and gas exploration to recreational fishing. The SMSP Process and Science Lead, and TNC employee, Joanna Smith describes those foundational discussions as:

What's the rationale for why any government would look, or any people would support, the 30%? Whether that has to be fully protected, then that's the other part of the conversation. And that wasn't specified. So really in the initial days, it was just 30%. And so with the stakeholders the aim, working through the goals, was that there was keen interest to have half that was fully protected, which we ended up calling high protection. So that's Zone 1.

Essentially, the gradient approach established a distinction between Smith's 'fully protected' areas and the other half of that 30% which I would define as 'fully managed' areas - areas where the majority of activities (notably all types of fishing and oil and gas exploration) are allowed *conditional* to the requirements that are now being drafted in the management plans for those areas¹³. Multiple stakeholders have confessed to me their perplexity around such an arrangement: if that 15% becomes fully managed in Zone 2 - with relative permissible restrictions for the allowable activities - what does that mean for the remaining 70% of Seychelles' EEZ? Could that 70% be fully exploited with even more lax management measures? How would those Zone 2 measures differ from the ones regulating Zone 3? These questions are far from puzzling only local stakeholders, but also (foreign)

¹³ At the time of writing, only provisional Zone 2 Draft Management Plans are openly available on the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative website (<https://seymsp.com/>). I base this section on those documents as well as the preparatory discussion documents I had access to during the consultative workshops I attended in the country.

consultants and leading practitioners within the SMSP and ancillary plans are still trying to grasp the full extent of such an approach.

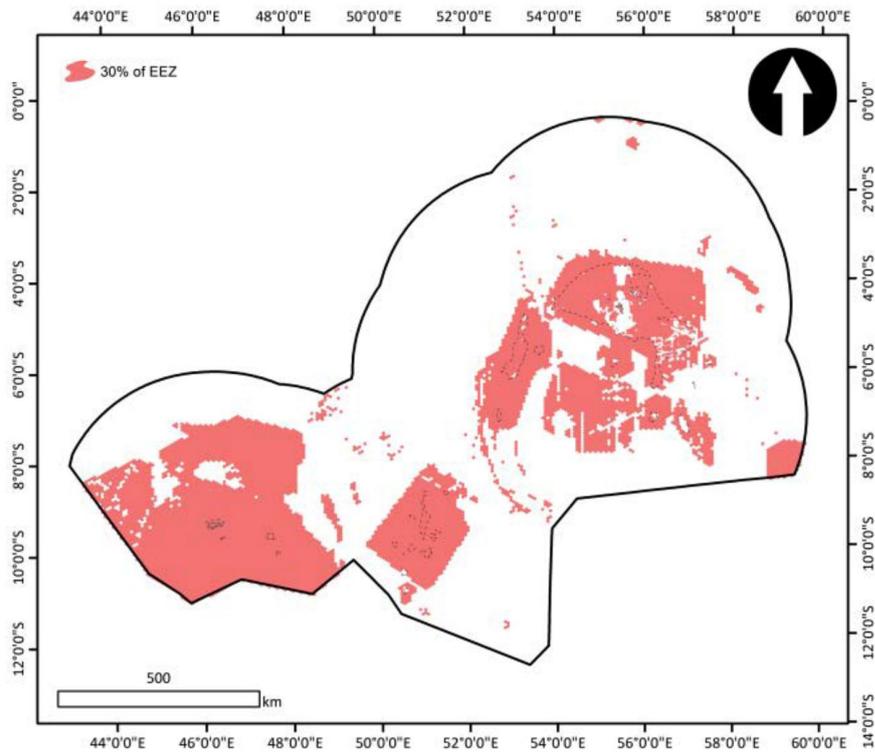


Figure 4.2. Proposed protected area expansion for Seychelles using targets of 30% sea and 50% land under the GoS-UNDP-GEF project "Strengthening Seychelles' protected area system through NGO management modalities" (Klaus 2015).

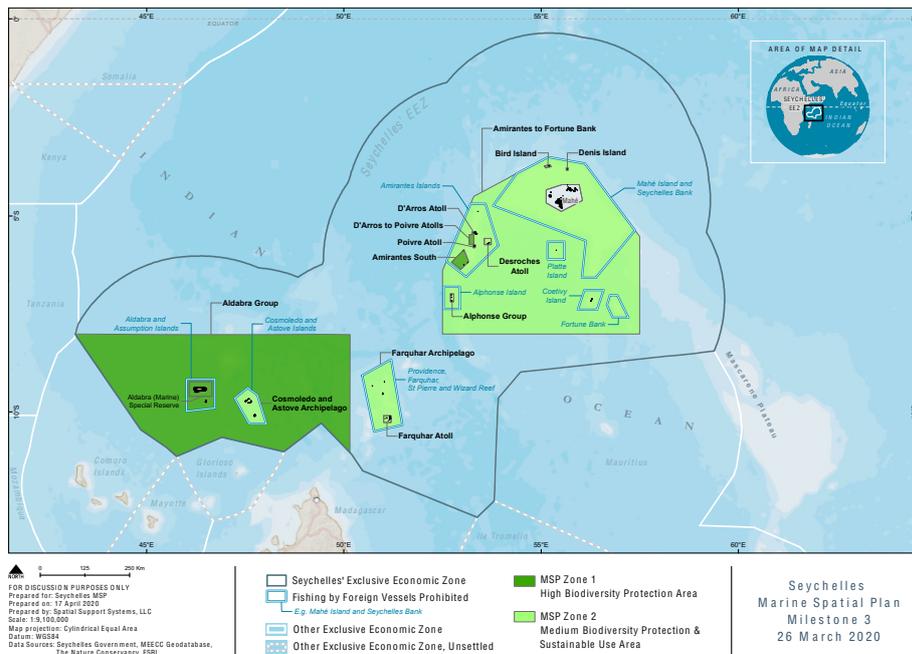


Figure 4.3. Milestone 3 of the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan detailing Seychelles' EEZ with the newly designated 30% Marine Protection Areas: Zone 1 (dark green) for High Biodiversity Protection Area and Zone 2 (Light Green) for Medium Biodiversity Protection & Sustainable Use Area. © Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative

Moreover, as Figure 4.3. shows, there is a clear-cut division between Zone 1 and Zone 2. Except for relatively small Zone 1 areas (e.g., D'Arros to Poivre Atolls, Amirantes South), Amirantes to Fortune Bank makes up almost all of Zone 2, along with the Farquhar Archipelago and Cosmoledo and Astove Archipelago in the Southwest of Seychelles' EEZ. Conversely, the 15% Zone 1 High Biodiversity Area, 'fully protected', is represented by a massive polygon in the Southwest of the EEZ surrounding the UNESCO World Heritage Site Aldabra Atoll and bordering with the Comoro Islands' and Madagascar's EEZs, among others.

From the purely bio- and geophysical accounts on which the SMSP team based most of their discussion for the designation of the MPAs, there is little to no difference between the richness and liveliness of Zone 1 and Zone 2 areas (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3, also Klaus 2015). Yet, the socio-economic analysis commissioned for the SMSP reveals a different picture with high-intensity activities, especially fisheries-related, happening around what are today designated as Zone 2 areas (Chassot, Guillotreau, Gastineau 2018). Indeed, the TNC-commissioned study found that 'the reduction in tuna fisheries catch and licensing revenues resulting from the 15% [Zone 1 High Biodiversity Protection Areas] developed through the MSP would have very limited effects on the economic activities and Gross Domestic Product of the Seychelles' (Chassot, Guillotreau, Gastineau 2018). As the second contributor to the country's economy (see Chapter 3), it is unsurprising that the fisheries sector occupied a prominent role when drafting the SMSP. What is perhaps more surprising, at least to local practitioners engaged both in the fisheries and ancillary sectors, is the role that the industrial tuna industry - all of which is foreign-owned - had in the drafting of the SMSP and related management plans¹⁴. In the balancing act aimed at reducing conflict between multiple stakeholders

¹⁴ An extended analysis of the processes surrounding Blue Economy-related consultative meetings would take us too far away from the topic at hand (for initial inroads into those discussions see Baker *et al.* 2020; Baker *et al.* 2023; Schutter & Hicks 2019).

Yet, as briefly traced also in Chapter 2, tuna politics in the archipelago is one of the most, if not the most, tense topics within the wider ocean industries. As an example of the tensions emerging from these consultative processes, Gregory Berke, Director of Conservation and Science at the Island Conservation Society (ICS), laconically put to me the involvement of foreign industrial tuna companies within Seychelles' planning efforts as: 'A good example would be the MSP plans. You were there when they were doing it [lobbying for less stringent environmental regulations], and you had the entire [foreign tuna] fleet as a stakeholder. It's called the Seychelles Maritime Spatial Plan - why are there the French and Europeans two of the biggest drivers behind this plan? In that case, it should not be called the Seychelles Maritime Spatial Plan; it could just be called something else'.

At that point, Norman Weber, CEO of ICS who was also present at the interview, sarcastically quipped '[it should be called] The European Maritime Spatial Plan, not the Seychelles'.

and activities that characterise any MSP process, for Seychelles, the material flow (of both local *and* foreign ships, of tuna) must constantly circulate to fuel the economic engine of the country – even though such activities must take place 'sustainably' as the ocean territory in question is legally designated as 'protected'.

An underlying question to these discussions could be simply framed as: What does it mean 'to protect'? If the 'fully protected' Zone 1 does impose strict restrictions on the allowable activities in the areas (restrictions usually associated with the MPA 'no-take' zones), Zone 2 Medium Biodiversity and Sustainable Use Areas propose a rather tolerant set of regulations reminiscent more of a managerial and technocratic attitude to ocean governance than the internationally recognised conservation principles of MPAs. As I have already noted, such a paradox does not escape practitioners in Seychelles who question the modalities and assumptions underlying the 'protection gradient approach'. As a response to that, practitioners are simultaneously advancing ways of capturing the shift envisioned in that approach. Indeed, I have so far freely moved between defining MPAs in Seychelles as marine *protected* areas and marine *protection* areas. Yet, in light of the paradox just described, I repeatedly witnessed local stakeholders in Seychelles strongly pushing for the use of *protection* rather than *protected*: indeed, they reason that the noun *protection* conveys an open-endedness that is lost with the adjectival use of the past participle *protected*. Marine *Protection* Areas are dynamic, flexible, and adapting; Marine *Protected* Areas are fixed, locked in space-time, and unchanging¹⁵. In turn, the SMPS has duly adopted the stakeholders' suggestion – as Figure 4.3 demonstrates – although this has not failed to attract a lingering dissatisfaction internationally. As practitioners have cautiously shared with me, there have been times when they 'were roasted' in international settings for such a gradient protection approach – where a full 15% of MPAs is effectively open to almost any activity, albeit conditional to (at the time of writing, not yet) established regulatory

Berke continued: 'But you saw that some of the most vocal and committed [opposition] comes from the [foreign tuna] fishing fleet. And yet why are they the ones making decisions on a Seychelles Maritime Plan? To me, it makes no sense at all. It should be the Seychelles that makes the decisions, and the Europeans follow them; not the Europeans telling us how we're going to fish within our own waters. And, currently, that is what is happening.' Similar issues were raised with the recently launched (2023) first-ever consultative process specifically targeting the tuna industry – that is, the *Seychelles Tuna Fisheries Management Plan* and related *Seychelles Tuna Industry Development Plan* – for which I attended the first series of workshops in the country.

¹⁵ Such a shift is not just a discursive one. The recently gazetted *Nature Reserves and Conservancy Act (2022)* – prepared specifically to institutionalise the newly established MPAs and their associated novel categorisations – makes provisions for a 'Seasonal *Protection* Status Order' (emphasis added) wherein an area could be declared legally 'protected' on, and for, pre-determined spatiotemporal terms. This is a *de jure* institutionalisation of the inherent properties, extended to their most logical *and* dramatic consequences, practitioners in Seychelles associated with 'protection' rather than 'protected'.

measures. This comes as no surprise: in the global imagination, MPAs are largely regarded as *protected* areas – loosely defined as 'no-take' areas devoted to only conservation purposes (Myers & Dobush 2023).

In (re)forming its own positionality vis-à-vis its ocean territory, questions around what it means 'to protect', how, for and from whom are not limited to SMSP as an institutional proposal, but are also mobilising novel, likely unplanned, engagements between the local community and Blue Economy-related projects – as the next chapter will detail. Here, instead, I draw attention to the extent to which, once again, Seychelles' (elite) 'ocean people' partially ride the global wave around MPAs and partially re-purpose it as a governance mechanism for their benefit. Along with the other moments I identified before, this too might seem a rather mundane and banal provocation. Conversely, I posit that the performativity of all these elements, and others to follow (e.g., SeyCCAT's *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project), merges to foreground the contemporary articulations of Seychellois *créolité* as a historical oceanic formation. In other words, ocean politics allows for '*articulated sites*' of *créolité* that are neither 'primordial, transhistorical attachments', nor an invented "'postmodern" identity politics' (Clifford 2001:472, emphasis in the original); but continually, and relationally, *in-formation* through its sedimented histories (Chapter 3) and its present (re)imaginings. For that to happen, discursively resituating 'marine protected areas' as 'marine protection areas', 'debt swap' as 'debt restructuring', 'small island developing state' as 'large ocean state' and eventually 'big ocean state' offers a novel *vocabulary* – an oceanic vocabulary – through which Seychelles can reclaim, internationally as well as locally, the political (re)scaling towards becoming an ocean state. To circulate as spectacle, 'the economy of appearances' needs a script – and Seychelles is creating its own.

4.5. Performing the Ocean State: Sovereignty Gone Seawards, and Back

Turning more closely to the scalar politics underlying the protection gradient approach, how to read it in relation to *practised or evaded* sovereignty? I suggest that the proximity or distance of the different 'protection' zones from where political power emanates, and is physically located, is indicative of the state's strategy to exercise sovereignty otherwise. Within such a strategy, not just the ocean becomes a frontier of state territorialisation (Steinberg 2018), but sovereignty itself becomes a frontier (Duffy 2006) that is tactically deployed – sometimes partially limiting it, sometimes actively extending it, at other times diluting it – to ultimately allow the state to exercise forms of political agency both locally and internationally previously unachievable. From a state perspective, TNC itself

and its techno-scientific capacities are becoming actively enrolled in this project to compensate for what is perceived as missing expertise and technology in the country – as I have already argued above. Simultaneously, local NGOs and para-statal organisations¹⁶ are increasingly entangled within the emerging web of blue governance to help the state negotiate the complexities of a vast ocean space in times of human, financial, and scientific constraints. Importantly, such devolution of state powers to local organisations does not necessarily represent a new trend in the aquapelago, but is instead rooted in a longer history of the state's practices of managing a *big ocean state* with the resources of a *small island state* – although such practices today assume renewed connotations.

For a start, in selecting the first 15% to be protected, TNC short-circuited, and abstracted, the unmapped, deep territory of Seychelles' ocean space by massively extending the 'no-take' area primarily around the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Aldabra Atoll. As Figure 4.3 shows, Zone 1 is situated the furthest away from the inner islands. In addition, it relies on decades-long, and internationally robust, successful conservation programmes in the Aldabra Atoll run by the longest not-for-profit organisation working on nature conservation in the archipelago, The Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF). Although SIF has jurisdiction only on the land territory of the atoll up to the high-water mark – whereas from the high-water mark moving seaward the SMSP, and state jurisdiction, applies – the physical presence of the staff on the islands and their conservation efforts would ideally turn them into proxies of state's presence and environmental ethos, 'the eyes and ears of the state' as it were (Duffy 2006:740), for the whole Zone 1. During consultative workshops, I repeatedly experienced the frustration of NGO representatives due to the pressure that such a devolution of state responsibilities onto non-state and para-statal institutions places on them – especially in light of the financial and human constraints that their organisations face (see also Clifton *et al.* 2012; Clifton *et al.* 2021).

If such a strategy is particularly burdensome in the Aldabra case as it is a vast Zone 1 area, the same governance structure, scaled down to fit other oceanic patches, becomes the *de facto* default setting for managing primarily outer islands' coastal stretches – coastal stretches that are either Zone 1 or

¹⁶ In a classic theory of the 'developmental state', 'as hybrid public-commercial entities [parastatal organisations] are unlike other elements of the state bureaucracy, both acting on and participating in the sphere of private enterprise' (Bowman 2020:400). For a state with limited financial and human resources like Seychelles, para-statal organisations have historically acted as either a nominally independent, but *de facto* extension of state powers (e.g., during René's authoritarian regime; see Robinson 2023), or more recently as decentralised governance structures to free up space on the state's balance sheet and 'favour private investment' (e.g., following the 2008 World Bank's structural adjustment programme; see Campling *et al.* 2011).

Zone 2 MPAs and that exemplify biological marvels on which luxury tourism activities depend (from the more accessible snorkelling and scuba diving, to the multi-million dollars recreational and sport fishing). To begin with, the governance of the outer islands (i.e., their land territory to the high-water mark) represents intricate and opaque political negotiations that few, even in Seychelles, consider to fully grasp. Multiple times stakeholders lamented the 'unwritten rules' and 'monopolistic tendencies' regulating the daily realities of these quasi-territories. Indeed, these places can be quite literally isolated from the inhabited inner islands - the best-connected might have weekly charter flights, others have weather-dependent days of sea-crossing voyages, with effects not just on human mobility but also resource storage and distribution; while other territories might have weak-to-no phone signal with only satellite phones available - a situation that further complicates the governance of, for instance, maritime security issues mentioned earlier.

For many, the opaque managerial structures and nepotistic practices date back to the independence period when the then-president France-Albert René had a virtual monopoly on the politics of the country and could allocate with relative ease who was in charge of these places - in itself a legacy of the capital-colonial structures inherited in the independence era (see Chapter 3). René himself was born on an outer island in the Farquhar archipelago and, hence, knew these realities intimately. When he took power, the islands were experiencing a transition period. As recounted in the previous chapter, during colonial times they were primarily exploited for their natural resources or used to establish plantation systems for a short-lived lucrative spice trade at the turn of the 19th century. Yet, those plantation economies quickly turned unproductive during the 20th century leaving behind destroyed landscapes, disrupted social fabrics, and barely any bright prospects either for the islands or for those living on them. In an effort to revive and make these economically and socially viable places, René once again turned to tourism as the primary means for his ends. For Jeremy Raguain, it is that forced migration for economic reasons from the 1970s onwards - triggering a dramatic demographic shift from the outer to the inner islands, where now over 90% of the population lives - that transitioned the local population from being 'Creole - dependent on us living an island lifestyle, not imported things, not necessarily being tourist providers, but living off the land, living off the ocean, being in tune with nature' to becoming 'more Seychellois, in the sense of, as a nationality' - a country dependent on, and embedded within, geopolitical socio-economic infrastructures.

Today, the remnants of those past plantation societies have been completely transformed by remaking the outer islands catalyst for conservation projects and ultra-high-end tourism activities, following the example of the 'jewel in the crown' of the Aldabra Atoll. The basic governance

mechanism for these hotspots consists of a series of agreements between a) the Seychelles government, b) a para-statal organisation developing the built infrastructures on the island, c) a second para-statal or non-governmental organisation in charge of conservation programmes, d) a potential fourth (private) stakeholder tasked with tourism activities. Within this constellation of actors, the Islands Development Company Ltd. (IDC) plays the crucial role of being charged with the infrastructural developments of most of the islands (16 outer islands and 1 inner island). Gregory Berke - Director of Conservation and Science at the Island Conservation Society (ICS), a key NGO running conservation programmes on several of these islands - schematically explains the intricate governance structure

ICS, Island Conservation Society, is an NGO that operates conservation activities and also does some science on a number of different islands. We currently have seven islands that we work on, and most of those are islands that are managed by the Island Development Company IDC. So IDC manages most of the other islands of Seychelles, and on certain of those islands where there's activity, say tourism activity and other activities taking place, then ICS is contracted as the conservation management body. So we take the role of ensuring the conservation activities take place on the islands, mainly it is turtles, sea turtles, sea birds and also to a limited amount marine monitoring projects. But a lot of the work we do is actually terrestrial at ICS. We do some marine stuff and we do work quite heavily with FADs [Fish Aggregating Devices], simply because we have a large issue with FADs on the outer islands, we have large numbers of FADs washing ashore. [...]

IDC is a para-statal. So it's part of the government, but it's also independent, so it pays dividends back to the government and everything else and it is given the role by the Seychelles government to manage a number of different islands. Then how we as ICS operate on those islands, as I said, we then go into an agreement with IDC to manage those islands and usually with other stakeholders as well, and the other stakeholders would be whatever development there is on the island. For example, whatever hotel there is on the island, what happens is that then we create a Foundation for each island with the different stakeholders and they give us direction and oversight of the activities, and the conservation activities being conducted on the different islands. So the Foundations also allow us to have funds available through an environmental levy for us to conduct new or different research activities.

Even from such a brief account, what emerges is that the governance of the outer islands - from independence, but even before through colonial structures - is indicative of a historically rooted tendency for the Seychelles' state to distribute, or at least partially dilute, its sovereign rights onto non- or para-statal organisations to ensure the socio-economic viability of those territories for the state itself (e.g., revenue generations from tourism activities, but also less tangible benefits such as political leverage within the international community due to local conservation programmes); while simultaneously managing political and financial risk.

To face the vast expanses of a Big Ocean State, sovereignty itself becomes a calculative risk that the state strategically 'proposes, practices, and evades, as well as takes for granted' (à la Tsing 2000) in

its quest to know, own, and control its land and ocean territory. For a *big ocean* state with the limited (human and financial) resources of a *small island* state, sovereignty as praxis is then less about enforcing strong territorial claims, militarily securing borders or exercising the same degree of autonomous governance and geopolitical influence as other 'big sovereign states' (Steinberg & Chapman 2009). Rather, it is more reminiscent of a strategy deployed not just to assert, more forcefully, independence; but primarily 'to negotiate interdependencies. For a small country like ours, independence means reckoning interdependencies well' (Clifford 2001:474) - as the New Caledonian independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou said in the context of Indigenous self-determination in New Caledonian. In this regard, former ambassador Ronny Jumeau's rebuttal to concerns informally raised to him during an international meeting around TNC co-opting Seychelles' development space assumes renewed intensity: 'Someone once said to me: TNC has an agenda. And I replied: So do we.' He continued:

When TNC said to us 'Would you like to go with debt swap?', we said: Why not trying? And, in the process, we rewrote the debt swap as the world knew it. Because we had to find out why there were some countries that did not want to do debt swaps. Australia was very against debt swaps because their debt swap with Indonesia went wrong, and they said this is what you need to do. And when you look at some of the things they said we have to do, they were asking national sovereign governments to take actions which many governments did not want to do. We stepped out there and said 'Yes'. For example, [with] the SeyCCAT trust fund which the government can't touch. In a sense, they were saying to us: To guarantee that you're going to use the buyback for the ocean, I want it in a fund where the minister [of Finance], when the money comes in, cannot take it. What you're asking us to do, in a sense, in an EEZ of 1.34 million km² [with] protected areas the size of Germany, you're asking us to give up sovereignty, to a certain extent, in that how the money is going to be used in that 30% [the government] can't control. I have a say, but I can't control it. How many governments would agree to that, in a huge industrial fishing [country]? We took a leap of faith. Yes, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Fisheries, Minister of Environment, they have a seat on the board of SeyCCAT. But it doesn't answer the government. They said when people apply for grants to SeyCCAT, they shouldn't go through government, where there's no control. The government have a say, but the board takes a decision. And there have been murmurings in ministries where they're not used to it. Because one thing you got to remember about the ocean, the difference between the ocean and the land is that when you do conservation and that sort of action on land, land is owned - it can be owned by the private sector, it can be owned by communities, it can be owned by government. The entire ocean is not owned by anyone. The global ocean is a common heritage. It's public domain. That's the difference. It's all government. And in Seychelles [it] is all government up to the high watermark. There are no private beaches in Seychelles. It's public domain. People have to remember that when an investor comes into the ocean in Seychelles is going into public [domain], there is no private ocean. (emphasis added)

To another extent, then, with the recent blue governance interventions the state's sovereign powers are not *fundamentally* disrupted. Instead, they are re-mediated, they may even turn out to be extended - territorialised in a space where they previously had only nominal, or at best seriously

limited, control and virtually no knowledge of, in the sense of both a vibrant biophysical *and* socio-economic space. This is not a wholly new phenomenon. Writing almost twenty years ago about the neighbouring island state of Madagascar, Rosaleen Duffy (2006) argues for a reconceptualisation of the nation-state more attuned to the Global North-South power axis of the twenty-first century along the sprawling 'post-conditionality' environmental politics that mixes (local and international) non-governmental organisations, transnational finance bodies, and state institutions in the re-making of the environmental governance in the Global South(s). In her analysis, 'the sovereign frontier is formed through a series of practices which are defined by an interaction of forces rather than by the delimitation of one geographical space versus another (in the form of a nation-state); in this new form of sovereignty boundaries are turbulent, and they are neither wholly national nor completely global, but are instead a complex mix' (Duffy 2006:734). Notably, this 'system of practices and regulations [...] are still emergent and incomplete' (Duffy 2006:743); it is contingent, transient, and open to criticisms and negotiations - from the inside as well as the outside.

Duffy bases her analysis on forms of landed spatial configuration - that is, the constellation of actors that coalesced around the environmental governance of national parks within the Malagasy state. Here, I want to mobilise her arguments for a quite literally different spatiality, the ocean, focussing on two terms that she employs to describe the morphing nature of state sovereign powers - that of 'frontier' and 'turbulence'. Recently, there has been a wealth of scholarly interventions theorising 'frontiers', 'borders', and 'state territories' in relation to the marine space (for instance, see Havice *et al.* 2018; Havice & Zalik 2018; Hung & Lien 2022; Steinberg 2018). In contrast to a 'border' - construed as 'a division line between two equivalent entities' (e.g., that of two sovereign states) - a frontier is 'a zone of declining power, less a line that divides one "inside" from another, equivalent, "inside" than an area of diminishing authority within which the "inside" gradually becomes an "outside"' (Steinberg 2018:1).

Somewhat paradoxically, although juridically always already under the state's authority, since independence Seychelles' EEZ has stretched between a space of partial (state) control - as in the case of fisheries (Chapter 3) - and only nominal sovereignty - as security issues like Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing and drug trafficking mentioned above. If the global ocean has historically been a frontier space in that regard (Steinberg 2001; Hung & Lien 2022), the Seychelles' case is distinctive for three reasons: first, the territorialisation of the ocean frontier is occurring in a space that is *already* under state control; second, such a move is happening through forms of distributed sovereignty - partially due to the aquapelago being, Jumeau recalled, '1.3 million km² of

ocean. Run by 100,000 people. On 455 km² of islands'; and third, it is also taking place through novel (blue) climate finance configurations. As a set of practices, then, sovereignty is not simply held by the state; it needs to be imagined, performed, and exercised in a frontier space. In doing that, 'the ocean as a *geographic* frontier will require the opening of new *regulatory* frontiers [that, in turn,] will mandate an engagement with new *ethical* frontiers, as decisions are made regarding who gets what, through what mechanisms, and for what ends' - in a movement that is simultaneously an 'opening' (e.g., for resource extractions) and a 'closing' (e.g., the dispossession of existing users) of the ocean frontier(s) (Steinberg 2018:2, emphasis in the original).

Exercising 'mobile state powers' (Hung & Lien 2022) through the territorialisation of its ocean frontier, Seychelles transforms itself into a 'voluminous state' (Billé 2020) - a political configuration of state authority that actively enrolls the three-dimensionality and volumetric nature of its space (be it ocean, but also land, or air) to mobilise an alternate, potentially wider influence as a geopolitical force. In the process, Duffy's (2006:734) characterisation of sovereign boundaries as 'turbulent', I suggest, stands as particularly appropriate to indicate the entanglement of fixed, grounded conceptualisations of state control with ocean space; a definition even more significant considering that Duffy is writing from the landed territory of national parks. If 'matter suggests metaphor, and metaphors matter', *turbulence* has acquired a favourite position in recent years among critical theorists to produce (pluralistic, queer, decolonial) knowledge(s) more attuned to the very materialities of the sea itself: 'While the ocean's unique materialities deserve attention, they cannot be simply counterposed to those on land, and ocean turbulence cannot be simply understood as the opposite of the stability of land (which itself is of course an illusion). Rather, we note the ways in which patterns adhere in and emerge from turbulence, and the ways that turbulence itself is transformed across different registers, scales, and types of matter, raising the specter of radical indeterminacy' (Lehman *et al.* 2021:193-194). Such a project is nothing less than continuing to, and focussing on, thinking *with* and *from* the oceanic environment through one particular conceptual unit in what I am theorising in this work as 'oceanic thinking' informed by a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' approach .

In the Seychelles' story narrated so far, turbulence as metaphor registers in the continuous reformation(s) of the debt restructuring - as a financial relief valve, a conservation project, a development agenda; in the SMSP tentative approaches to stakeholders' consultation in the archipelago; in the Blue Economy under-whelming and fragment performance locally vis-à-vis its spectacular performance overseas. Instead, as a material condition of the oceanic environment in

Seychelles, turbulence indexes as an absence - or, rather, as a condition that needed to be abstracted to generate politically valid forms of knowledge of the ocean, for the state and the international community. In the political jostling that initiated the Blue Economy moment in the country and globally, the turbulent materialities of Seychelles' ocean have only received serious attention in their *unknowability*, as Mark reminded us - with scientific practices that only recently started to catch up, and now partially question some of those initial assumptions (Blanluet *et al.* 2024). Still, such 'radical indeterminacy' has also been conducive to political regimes that embed 'turbulent sovereign boundaries' more attuned to the materialities of the (as of today, largely unknown) ocean space *and* the socio-political history of the country - as, for instance, exemplified with the outer islands' governance structure. Whether real or imagined, repurposing *turbulence* as a proxy for a materially dense space and the accompanying political regimes 'to know and own' its internal ocean frontier opens up 'new governable spaces' (Choi 2017) for the Seychelles state. Simultaneously, such a move could also mobilise potential alternate 'territories of governance' (Peters 2020) both for the state and communities - as the next chapter will detail.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has retraced pivotal moments that shaped, to varying degrees, the final outlook of the world-first debt restructuring covering ocean spaces in the archipelagic state of Seychelles. In threading together the stories of actors and practitioners, both from Seychelles and abroad, that participated in its making, a primary aim of the chapter has been to flash out instances when Seychellois elite actors have exercised forms of political agency that are perhaps too easily glossed over in recent accounts examining the Blue Economy agenda the country is actively not just pursuing, but contributing to (e.g., Saddington 2023; Silver & Campbell 2018; Schutter & Hicks 2019). Crucially, these moments are all situated within the overall move that, I contend, the country is pushing beyond the Blue Economy and towards 'oceanic thinking'. The expansion from only a Marine Protected Areas network to a full-blown Marine Spatial Plan as part of the debt restructuring; the inclusion of, at the time, a 'scientifically loose' 30% target for MPAs in the deep ocean; the enrolment of TNC to conduct the scientific research and coordinating activities for those targets; the creation of its own oceanic vocabulary with, among others, the move from *protected* to *protection* to better suit stakeholders' (and state's) vision of what a 'sustainable use' of the ocean should look like are some of the elements that performatively turned Seychelles from a SIDS to a BOSS. As detailed, none of them is free from either contestation or negotiation, from both inside and outside - as, for instance, demonstrated in

the *protected-protection* debate or through what I termed the environmental over-performance, but economic under-performance of the debt restructuring.

Yet, the political subjectivities that are being articulated in the process foreground analytical interventions that are worth teasing out more. The next chapter will look more closely at the structural, political-economic limitations that contemporary (blue) climate finance instruments demonstrate, while also gesturing towards the spaces for contestation and negotiation that their operationalisation has opened for the local community and grassroots organisations. In this chapter, instead, I focused on the state's modalities of making sense, and use, of its ocean space - and, conversely, the extent to which that materially dense, deep, and largely unknown space affects those modalities. In short, I foregrounded the 'more elemental' aspect of the oceanic thinking project in understanding state's practices. In the scale-making process that turned Seychelles into a BOS[S], for instance, the state had to deal with the resources and inherited structural vulnerabilities of a SIDS. For that, it deployed its sovereignty as a calculative technology that, adapting Tsing (2000), gets 'proposed [in the SMSP], practiced [in Zone 2], and [partially] evaded [in the outer islands], as well as taken for granted [in the EEZ as a whole]'; not so much to assert strong independence, but more likely to reckon with its 'interdependencies well' (Clifford 2001:474). In short, against tendencies towards 'presentism' in Blue Economy discourses (Ceglia *et al.* 2025; see also Chapter 3), the ocean politics emerging in, and from, Seychelles' watery territory allows for novel, albeit turbulent 'articulated sites' (Clifford 2001) of *créolité* as historically-sedimented and continually *in-formation* - at a state level, as this chapter has demonstrated, but also at a local level, where we now turn.

Chapter 5

(Re)Pairing with Water: Ocean, Finance, and the Possibilities of Care within Climate Capitalism

Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible. It just depends what you want to consider.
David Foster Wallace (2005)

Capitalism is not a context; it is a project.
Hannah Appel (2019)

5.1. Introduction

Alongside the recent scholarly interventions that critically question the possibility of contemporary climate finance initiatives to provide socio-economic sustainable ways forward, is it possible to further read those same climate finance initiatives against the grain to complexify that picture? Does such a move even matter? Why?

This chapter directly responds to recent calls by critical geographers to take seriously the potentialities to work 'for and against climate capitalism' in an effort to move beyond 'capitalist management of climate change and its impacts' towards 'outlin[ing] an approach that works towards reparative outcomes from contestations within, and negotiations with, climate capitalism' (Webber 2023:15). If the previous chapters have articulated different facets of the 'oceanic thinking' framework at work through a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' approach (Steinberg 2025) to recent interventions in the marine governance realm in Seychelles - e.g., drawing attention to the (in)consistencies of a political project such as that of the Blue Economy in Seychelles (Chapter 2), to the historical backdrop of the archipelago as marked by the crossings through and appropriations of its ocean territory and resources (Chapter 3), and to the contemporary political re-figurations of the country's nature as fundamentally an oceanic formation (Chapter 4) - this chapter will focus more closely to the affordances and limitations facilitated (or not) by climate capitalism with Seychelles' move towards becoming a Big Ocean State.

In doing so, following Hannah Appel (2019:3), I will posit that ‘the work required to create the “as ifs” on which capitalism has long relied: abstraction, decontextualization, and standardization’ make capitalism circulate as a seamless political project ‘generat[ing] durable material and semiotic effects in the world’. Yet, these effects can also spur novel ‘strategic dynamic interface[s]’ (Webber 2023:15) between capitalism and uncertain climate futures. If market-based neoliberal logics remain the default setting to deal with a changing climate – not least because of centuries-long histories of colonial exploitations of peoples and landscapes, especially in the Global South(s) (Perry 2021) – ‘rather than prompting a binary argument either for or against, the idea of a contingent dynamic interface invites strategic engagement with climate capitalism’ (Webber 2023:15). Ultimately, and zooming in on the specifics of the financial instruments that kickstarted the recent turn seaward of the country, this chapter continues foregrounding the value that oceanic thinking holds for contemporary climate finance interventions in the marine governance realm – especially for the political spaces such an approach allows to (pre)figure for those actors and practitioners usually at the receiving end of development practices, but at the frontline of climate change.

Where does this ‘contingent dynamic interface’ happen? As for the (felt and projected) effects of a changing climate (see Chapter 1 and 2), in Seychelles, such a ‘contingent dynamic interface’ is primarily an oceanic matter. In the reconfigurations of spaces, people, and (flow of) resources that the recent influx of financial capital has orchestrated, the ocean acts at the same time as the mediator of, and catalyst for, various imaginative forms and practices of what an ocean country can and *should* look like on a warming planet. At the same, as I argued at the beginning of this work, finance itself is ever more ‘positioned as the solution to climate change [making it] an increasingly powerful *indicator and mediator* of possible climate futures’ (Bryant & Webber 2024:153, emphasis added; see also Knuth & Taylor 2023). Contemporary scholarship has mostly theorised such forms of ocean-focussed climate finance as perpetuating a capitalist mode of (social re-)production interested in moving capital into a ‘last frontier’ of resource appropriation and exploitation, while continuing unequal and deep-rooted paths of economic dependency through, for instance, debt bondage (Kılıç 2024; Perry 2022). While I share the concerns raised by this literature – and indeed, many of those have become apparent during my own time in the country too – I also want to suggest a further reading that locates political openings – as forms of care – within those practices spurred by such novel financial instruments. In other words, the work I am proposing foregrounds more forcefully matters of oceanic care as matters of political responsibility ‘for and against climate capitalism’ – attempting to complicate narratives that tend to foreclose too quickly apertures for ‘different kinds of outcomes’ that could be configured in the unfolding of these projects (Webber 2023).

To do so, the chapter will proceed in two parts. First, building upon the previous discussions (particularly Chapters 2 and 4), it will sketch in more detail the precise structures of the two financial instruments at the heart of the Blue Economy moment in Seychelles – the debt restructuring and the Blue Bond. It will proceed through a discussion of the latest literature analysing the politico-economic contours of these mechanisms (e.g., Benzaken *et al.* 2024; Christiansen 2021, 2023; Kılıç 2024; March *et al.* 2024; Silver & Campbell 2018). Reviewing this literature alongside my own insights from the country, one contention of this section is that the productivity of (international) financial capital in marine spaces has less to do with the direct commodification of resources *per se*, but is instead more dependent on its ability to remain ‘dry’ – where environmental performance is de-linked from the state’s ability to repay what are essentially debt instruments. Yet, following Anna Tsing’s (2000) ‘economy of appearances’, such an ability for financial capital to stay dry – that is, its ability to generate financial returns independently from any current (or planned) activities at sea – *and still* be productive is only possible so long as the *dramatic performance* of the spectacle on which it is built continues to circulate (for a more political economy take on the relationship between capitalism and crises, see Harvey 2010). In other words, Seychelles’ story must keep travelling in its current form as economic under-performative and environmental over-performative for these novel financial instruments to remain conducive to capital accumulation.

In addition to such a material environmental and economic de-linking, as they are constructed on the Seychelles’ model, these instruments further demonstrate that what is at stake is not only ‘conservation’, but the overall ability to create ‘governable spaces’ (Choi 2017). Although geographers have already noted that the Blue Economy is primarily a ‘governmentality project’ (e.g., Choi 2017; Midlen 2021; Winder & Le Heron 2017), the tensions and ambiguities between such a project and the international financial architecture that sustains it, especially in the Global South(s), has been less explored – and when it has been subject of scholarship, it has been mainly analysed as impact investing and blended finance going into *conservation* (e.g., Christiansen 2021; Enrici *et al.* 2023; Mallin *et al.* 2019; Silver & Campbell 2018). Borrowed from Gareth Bryant and Sophie Webber (2024:14), the expansive definition of climate finance that I am adopting in this work – as the diverse ‘strategies that mobilize financial ideas, instruments and institutions to reshape the relationship between capitalist economies and climate change’ – partly serves to move beyond understandings of ‘conservation’, ‘climate’, and ‘development’ finance as discrete realms, but rather begins holding together their unpredictable interactions and the multiple (mis)uses their operationalisation allows for practitioners and institutions.

From such a setting, the second part of the chapter will turn to ask: Is it possible to think of these emerging 'climate finance' configurations in Seychelles with alternate 'critical spatial practices' (Millington 2019) of, care for exploited ecosystems and socio-ecological relations (e.g., seagrass meadows and their associated values for local communities)? Building from the theoretical and political position that 'climate capitalism is the material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17), this section will look for practices and relations of socioecological care - moments of imagined, performative, or mundane work emerging at the 'dynamic strategic interface' (Webber 2023) in Seychelles' turn towards an ocean socio-politics. It will locate these moments at different temporal and spatial scales to tease out the multiple sites where actual and potential configurations for care work are possible against more extractive neoliberal logics dominating the current climate finance space (Baker 2022; Bracking & Leffel 2021). In doing this work, what I am proposing is nothing less than the value of oceanic thinking for locating, and cultivating, these emerging spaces and practices both as a scholarly and political orientation. I deem such work necessary as an 'alternative reading' to the body of scholarship I discuss in the first part of this chapter - a body of scholarship that offers critical and invaluable analyses of the shortcomings these financial instruments have, but falls short of noticing potential sites of struggles that are nonetheless configuring amidst profound structural inadequacies. Ultimately, and in line with that same literature, such an approach serves to complement and multiply strategies and points of leverage towards 'mak[ing] claims for other kinds of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17).

Specifically, one such first moment is identified in the very composition of the debt restructuring programme in Seychelles: building on the background stories that I have retraced in the previous chapters, I will posit that the drive for establishing a Marine Spatial Plan as part of the debt restructuring - and in contrast to TNC's initial pitch to focus solely on Marine Protected Areas - foregrounds Seychelles' political agency in knowing its (ocean) territory as an active form of care work. Second, I will move to the SeyCCAT's managed Blue Grants Fund (BGF) - the revolving fund that is capitalised through the proceeds of both the debt restructuring and the Blue Bond. In detailing the operationalisation of the fund, I suggest that the BGF has opened up a space for socio-ecological and economic experimentation that was virtually non-existent before in Seychelles. Although it is not without its critics and contestation especially from within the country, in its successful set-up for disbursing funds locally it has brought the ocean (back) to shore - potentially (re)composing alternate ocean-mediated climate imaginaries now that, as one semi-industrial businessman lamented, 'fishing isn't sexy anymore'. Finally, moving away from the BGF, I will take a

deep dive into SeyCCAT's *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project as a window into, first, the tensions inherent in SeyCCAT's position within the ocean architecture in the country - that between a grant allocator or project coordinator. Second, the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project additionally signals the apertures of doing science 'in the wild' (Callon 2006) that climate finance allowed; ultimately gesturing more forcefully that the ocean is not just brought back to shore (as with the BGF) but also that it is turning into, likely for the first time in the country, a *political space* for the local community - one where care work can seep into the cracks of what counts as a 'redevelopment project', how to do it, and for whom.

As a cautionary note, there is a danger in theorising such practices as *care work*. None of the examples discussed are *necessarily* progressive, nor would they turn out to be in their future configurations that I tentatively anticipate below. As the next section details, (blue) climate finance has profound shortcomings and deficiencies - among which, are increased exposure to economic shocks, debt bondage, dubious democratic participation, path dependency, and (potential) deepening climate vulnerability. I do not mean to brush over or downplay any of these risks, as many of them became apparent during my own research too. Instead, my contention is that if 'climate capitalism is the material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17), we must be able to attend to capitalism as a (racial, imperialist, exploitative) world-making project *while simultaneously* being attentive to contemporary prefigurations that could animate 'other kinds of outcomes' - both from within and outside. Without such work, we risk perpetuating a 'stark distinction between the reparative and the revolutionary [that] leaves little space for practice' (Webber et al. 2022:938). In this vein, my intention is rather to *multiply* sites of *real, potential, or imagined* contestations where what I foreground as care work - as part of a broader orientation towards oceanic thinking - could take place against socio-ecological relations of neoliberal destruction and exploitation.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that in this thesis I am adopting the expansive definition of 'climate finance' recalled above in order to outline a *critical approach* to work with recent financial interventions in the marine governance realm as part of the broader oceanic thinking project (see also Chapter 1). This is not to argue that a distinction between, for instance, 'climate', 'conservation', and 'development' finance does not exist; or that, indeed, it would not be analytically generative were this type of analysis put forward (i.e., on the differential political mobilisations of each of these realms). Yet, here I stay close here to the institutional and policy articulation as well as the ethnographic encounter that, like the critical scholarship introduced above, favours an expansive

definition of what counts as ‘climate finance’ as part of a political position informed by oceanic thinking and aimed at leveraging specific visions of what an ‘ocean country’ should be – both at the state and at a community level.

5.2. Blue Finance, Turbulent Waters: Seychelles and the Political Economy of Financing the Ocean

The first chapter has already introduced some elements of the two ‘firsts’ that financially initiated the contemporary move seawards of Seychelles: the 2015 debt restructuring programme and the 2018 blue bond. Although discussed primarily in relation to the role of SeyCCAT within their assembling financial ‘environmentality’ (Fletcher 2010), I have noted there that the deals are financially limited (US\$21.6 million for the debt restructuring and US\$15 million for the blue bond) and served primarily as ‘proof-of-concept(s)’ to demonstrate the viability of such operation on a larger scale – and, indeed, it is no coincidence that TNC has organised multiple debt restructurings since the Seychelles’ case that have involved a total refinancing of more than US\$1 billion of debt (Commonwealth Small States, 2018; OECD 2023). In addition, I also pointed out the distributional aspect that characterises these deals: while the funds from the debt restructuring are financially managed only by SeyCCAT into its Blue Grants Fund (BGF) and Blue Endowment Fund (BEF), the blue bond proceeds are split between the government-owned Blue Investment Fund (BIF) and TNC-mediated SeyCCAT’s BGF. To help visually navigate the financial transactions involved in both mechanisms, I am reproposing here the flow chart of Chapter 2 (see Figure 5.1).

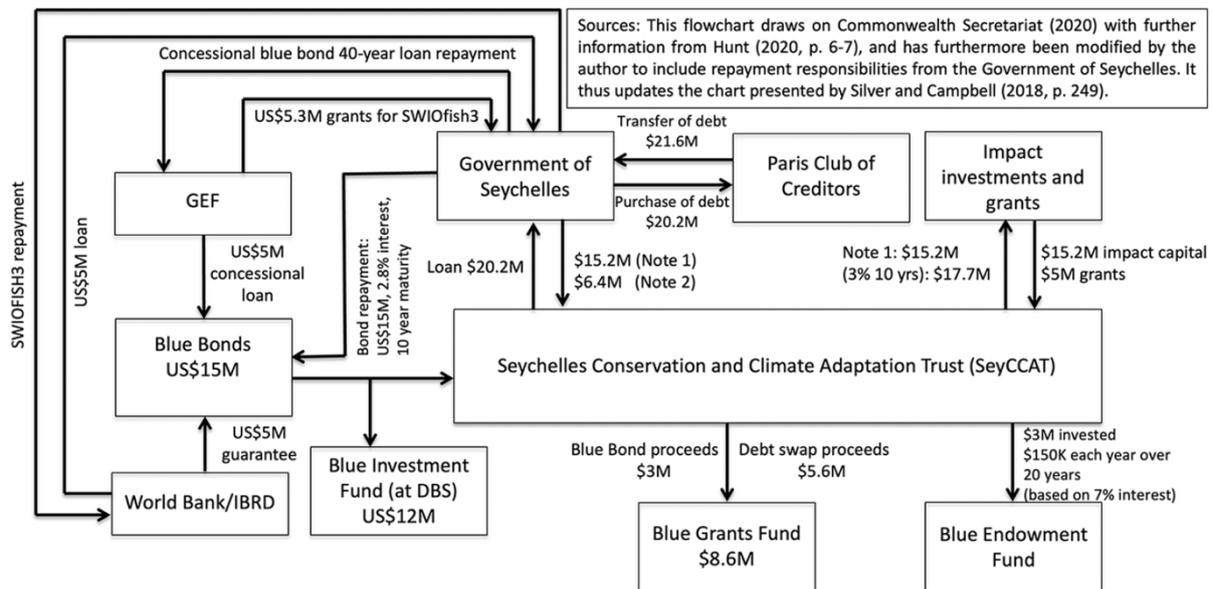


Figure 5.1. The financial transactions of the Seychelles debt restructuring programme (centre to right-hand side) and the Blue Bond (centre to left-hand side) as presented in Christiansen (2023).

Of late, there have been an increasing number of critiques unpicking the political-economic logics at the heart of these transactions (Benzaken *et al.* 2024; Christiansen 2023; March *et al.* 2024; Hunt 2020; Kılıç 2024; Silver & Campbell 2018; Standing 2022). Who is driving the agenda? Why? What are its effects, for both local context and international development agendas? How is it operationalised? In this section, I want to draw out points of critique that scholars have raised around interventions that could potentially undermine ideals of a triple-win scenario (environmental, social, economic) and perpetuate long-standing unequal power asymmetries along a North-South (development) axis.

In their seminal contribution on the 2015 debt restructuring programme, Jennifer Silver and Lisa Campbell (2018) raise the issue of where the figure of US\$21.6 million came from, and the role the environmental component played in it. Indeed, the official literature undoubtedly stated that the Seychelles official sat at the negotiating table aimed to obtain both a higher amount of debt restructured (US\$80 million) and a higher discount rate (75 cents to the dollar, instead of the final 93.5 cents) (e.g., Convergence 2017). In the end, Seychelles had to settle on these drastically revised terms because of already *too successful* structural reforms that accompanied the 2008 default recounted previously (see Chapter 3). In their words, ‘the Government of Seychelles’ rapid restructuring and liberalisation efforts and success in paying down debt emboldened Paris Club creditor countries to require 93.5 cents to the dollar’ – as the country had not just recovered from default, but through those reforms had also built a sound fiscal system partly reflected in its promotion as a high income country in 2015 (Silver & Campbell 2018:251). I have already discussed the political implications of these terms for the 30% MPA target in the preceding chapter, with some participants questioning the entire viability of the deal when they were first proposed. Yet, for the present discussion, I draw attention once more to the complete de-linking that the debt restructuring had from the environmental component (i.e., the establishment of the 30% MPAs and the development of an MSP) for which it is globally praised. Thinking after a ‘thought experiment’ on the potential costs of running the newly designated MPAs, Silver and Campbell (2018) note that even at the low end of the spectrum (considering only the 15% no-take MPAs) the figure needed for proper management would be double that of the current debt restructuring (US\$52.5 million) – although bearing in mind that effectively only slightly over US\$1 million of the restructured debt would eventually go into marine-related activities. They conclude, ‘there is a real risk that the US\$21.6 million figure will now be seen as a sufficient baseline for spatially reorganising conservation and development objectives throughout a country’s entire EEZ’ (Silver & Campbell 2018:11).

I have already suggested that TNC and the Seychelles government had never intended the debt restructuring to provide the necessary funds to design *and* implement the new MPAs (Chapter 4). The SMSP project manager Helena Sims is adamant that ‘the commitment was to protect 30% [of the EEZ] *conditional to raising funds*’ (emphasis added). Instead, my point here is to stress once more that the debt restructuring has been first and foremost an *economic* transaction based on, and built around, the financial outlook of Seychelles at the time of the negotiations – with the ocean component entering the picture as only a blue sweetener that could leverage the performative circulation of the story in more spectacular terms. Several figures that we have encountered in earlier chapters that actively participated in the negotiations – former ambassador Ronny Jumeau, former Ministry of Environment Didier Dogley, SWIOFish3 project manager Jan Robinson – all confirmed the essential decoupling, what I previously described as the economic *under*-performance and environmental *over*-performance, of the deal.

On a similar note, with the 2018 Blue Bond the government of Seychelles raised US\$15 million from three private investors (Calvert Impact Capital, Nuveen, and U.S. Headquartered Prudential Financial, Inc.) to finance fisheries-related activities in the context of the World Bank’s Third South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Governance and Shared Growth Project (SWIOFish3). As for the debt restructuring, with the blue bond too, the repayment of the principal and interests depends on the government’s central fiscal spending and is not tied to any environmental outcome per se. As the SWIOFish3 project manager Jan Robinson put it to me:

Well, [the investors’] return on their investment, that’s a commitment of the government. The government pays the coupons. There’s no link between what we do with the money and paying back the investors. [The link] is broken. It was never intended to be that way [for the coupon’s repayments to be dependent on the return from projects’ activities]. So they get their returns from the government on the understanding that the government would be investing this money. The government would be getting [money] anyway in the longer term, more revenue from taxes and from whatever other investments are happening in the future economy.

Working within a Marxist political economy framework of fictitious capital and value creation, Jens Christiansen’s (2023) analysis of the rationales driving what is effectively a thematic, ‘blue’ bond shows the high stakes for the state’s fiscal and environmental planning when it comes to managing the de-coupling of debt repayment *and* profit-generating activities. Ultimately, in his analysis ‘the state remained a critical mediator of rent and value relations when private finance was applied’ (Christiansen 2023:2). In that regard, the Seychelles state took ‘a leap of faith’ (Christiansen 2023:7): it secured the finances well before it had put in place the operational and planning architecture that

could extend the now-available credit to the target businesses. Indeed, only in 2023, five years after the closing of the bond, the Development Bank of Seychelles (DBS) – in charge of managing 12 of US\$15 million as low-interest bearing loans – approved the first loan to a local fisheries-processing business for, among others, an expansion of its plant facility and equipment upgrades (Bonnellame 2023). Among the major factors inhibiting the uptake of these loans, scholars have detailed high transaction costs, lengthy and cumbersome application processes, low publicity within the local community, land allocation issues, poor coastal infrastructural facilities, and ambiguous environmental regulations (Christiansen 2023; Kılıç 2024). Therefore, the blue bond has failed to deliver the anticipated, fictitious return through, for instance, promoting local commodity production, expanding export value, raising the tax base that ‘would indirectly benefit the state by supporting the broader economy’ (Christiansen 2023:8).

At the heart of the SWIOFish3 project, and the financing opportunities grabbed by the Seychelles government with the bond, is the transition towards sustainable fisheries within the Western Indian Ocean – supported by stronger management plans and more efficient fishing activities in the water, while diversification of the sector on land can be achieved through, for example, incentivising value-addition, post-harvest fish processing plants able to offer high-end products for exports (Benzaken *et al.* 2024; Kılıç 2024; March *et al.* 2024). Although far from being able to deliver these outcomes, as I have just recalled, scholars have also recently raised multiple concerns on the possibility of such a deal perpetuating neoliberal tendencies to finance resource extraction through indebting government’s coffers; while simultaneously reinforcing the inherent vulnerability of small states to external (economic) shocks as well as reproducing path-dependent economies (Benzaken *et al.* 2024; Kılıç 2024).

As a way of example, with an analysis of its legal documentation coupled with key stakeholders’ interviews, Kılıç (2024) shows that the blue bond has been *designed* with only the fisheries and ancillary sectors in mind as viable opportunities to expand the state’s economic revenues in times of climate and economic uncertainties – with a special focus on expanding fishing capabilities in the traditional sectors as well as investments in the novel area of aquaculture. In effect, the high costs associated with developing a business *and* environmental plan capable of meeting the stringent World Bank’s safeguards to receive the loans *de facto* made them inaccessible for small-scale, and even a wide majority of semi-industrial, fisherfolks¹⁷. In addition, because of the operational

¹⁷ To partly address this issue, in a recent change to the eligibility criteria for the blue loans the government scrapped the local ownership requirement, instead opening up the fund to ‘companies with a non-Seychellois

objectives agreed in the bond's deal, the government was tied to use the proceeds for only fisheries and fisheries-related activities – without being able to divert the funds to other, 'blue' sectors that, at least at the time, stakeholders felt to be more ecologically attuned, less resources intensive, and economically future-proof than fisheries (e.g., marine renewable energy) (see also Benzaken *et al.* 2024). For Kılıç (2024:4), advancing a development model that facilitates external capital flight, intensive resource extractions, and limited local accountability 'is not due to deficiencies in the implementation of a well-structured project. Rather, the dissonance between the local fisherfolk's vision for sustainable fisheries and the blue bond flows from its legal and financial structure.'

Put differently, with the halted, somewhat pre-determined operationalisation of the blue bond and its de-coupling from the state's fiscal responsibility to repay it, scholars have identified a reinforced pattern of debt 'bond-age' (Perry 2021) – one that shifts not just the financial, but also the climate mitigation and adaptation burden to already vulnerable countries (Benzaken *et al.* 2024; Christiansen 2023; Hunt 2020; Kılıç 2024). Here I believe two contentions are worth teasing out in more detail. First, the material decoupling between the financial and the environmental aspects is not limited to the blue bond. Instead, it is a defining feature also of TNC's revamped debt restructuring programme, as briefly argued above and earlier (Chapter 4). In the vocabulary I am using in this work, following Tsing (2000), these are forms of economic under-performance and environmental over-performance that are becoming paradigmatic when it comes to *blue* climate finance.

To be sure, from a purely economic standpoint, the debt restructuring and the blue bond are two profoundly different instruments: as a rule of thumb, the former represents the conversion of *existing* debt the country owes to creditors into more favourable terms for the borrower; the latter adds *new* debt burden to the state's balance sheet, which usually adds a further layer of fiscal responsibility. For these reasons, practitioners have already noted that countries need to carefully choose blue financial instruments that are better aligned with their economic outlooks (e.g., Benzaken *et al.* 2024). Indeed, for coastal and island states in the Global South(s), those outlooks most likely favour the debt relief provided by debt restructurings over new debt issuances (temporary, but not always insignificant – see Belize debt conversion for instance, The Nature Conservancy 2022) – as revealed by the geographies of the deals closed in the last decade or so that unsurprisingly map closely to

majority of shareholders [...] as long as they are registered in Seychelles' (Kılıç 2024:5). In other words, the state is betting on foreign companies as more likely to bring in the required high level of capital and industrial expertise to put the loans to work.

Global North:blue bonds||Global South:debt restructuring cartography (Bosmans & de Mariz 2023; Thompson 2022).

Yet, what these instruments do share is their 'thematic', or rather *spatial*, focus on ocean and ocean-related activities. My contention here is that, as development practices to 'escort' private capital (Gabor 2021, Mawdsley 2018) into the 'last frontier' of ocean space along a Global North/South axis, their circulation as *productive* financial instruments is predicated upon, and predictive of, spectacular environmental over-performances separated from their more mundane economic under-performances. In other words, financial capital's ability to remain dry in these deals - that is, its ability to generate financial returns independently from any current (or planned) activities at sea - is a feature, not a bug, of its infrastructure. If 'accumulation here is spatial, temporal and co-dependent on the performance of the non-material, the spectacle and the ephemeral' (Bracking 2015:2353), Seychelles' blue finance experiments co-produce, *contra* Robertson (2006), a nature that capital cannot, and crucially *should not*, see to keep the circulation moving. Circulation, here, of both the narrative spectacle that makes the abstracted oceanic element appealing globally (recall *The Guardian's* opening story as well as the debt restructuring negotiations traced in Chapter 4), and the underlying financial flow that only partially links to it. Such is 'the work to create the "as ifs" on which capitalism has long relied: abstraction, decontextualization, and standardization [that] generate durable material and semiotic effects in the world' (Appel 2019:3). It is not surprising, then, that a recent review of global blue finance initiatives in the wake of the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda's (SDG) 'funding gaps' found that 'it is unclear what money flows currently exist under the banner of the blue economy and whether they are optimal use of public and private resources when pursuing sustainable development in oceans. We find that financing is skewed toward business development and offshore wind in Europe and Central Asia, with "red flags" for social equity in 35% of cases, showing that investment currently does not "leave no one behind" (the central promise of the SDGs)' (Schutter *et al.* 2024).

I contend that the unfolding relationships between financial and ocean geographies, at least as development practices in the Global South(s), that I am tracking here through a 'more elemental' (Steinberg 2025) approach to their socio-political configurations deserve close scrutiny from critical scholarship on both sides of that spectrum. For one, these relationships reinforce the argument proposed previously (Chapter 4) that what is at stake with these deals is less the direct commodification of ocean resources *per se*, but rather the (re)articulation of governance and management aspects in an effort to create 'governable spaces' (Choi 2017) - with its concurrent

jeopardy over sovereignty rights. Consequently, the blue finance moment that accompanies such governmentalities attempts also reveals a 'capitalist project' (Appel 2019) that works beyond the traditional remits of 'marine conservation' - the area that attracts most of the scholarly work to date (e.g., Mallin *et al.* 2018; Enrici *et al.* 2023). With some notable exceptions (e.g., Mallin & Barbesgaard 2020), there is a need to unpack more critically such an evolving political-economic formation between financial capital and the governability of ocean space - moving beyond the usual spotlight over marine conservation projects towards the articulations of a 'capitalist project' as a 'governability project' at sea. Such a need is even more pressing considering that, although financial capital's ability to remain dry and productive is dependent upon the circulation of the dramatic performance sustaining it (in this case, the Blue Economy as environmental and societal saviour), the climate risks of a warming ocean for Seychelles are very much real and intensifying - requiring urgent and wide-ranging solutions (see Chapter 1).

Yet, to be fully viable as financial instruments the de-linking between environmental and economic performance needs at least a further element: financial safeguards to hedge against the *novelty* of the instruments themselves. As part of the process that Christiansen (2023:7) defines as 'composing faith in the circuit of capital', to hedge against the risk of Seychelles' being insolvent a series of primarily financial incentives were implemented in both the debt restructuring and the blue bond to 'compose faith' in the repayment capabilities of the archipelago. A look at Figure 5.1 indicates what they consist of: for the debt restructuring (centre to the right-hand side of the graph), the Seychelles government received US\$5 million in grant funding from philanthropic organisations (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, Waitt Foundation, China Global Conservation Fund) that helped cover transaction and repayment costs (Convergence 2017). As for the blue bond, the government benefitted from a US\$5 million loan guarantee from the World Bank - which *de facto* not just financially, but politically backed the bond ensuring its viability - and a US\$5 million concessional loan from the Global Environmental Facility - a loan that with its 40-year low-interest maturity rate subsidised the 10-year blue bond repayment period, lowering the blue bond's interest payment from the official 6.5% to 2.8% (Hunt 2020).

Although these blue initiatives are fundamentally divergent financially, as noted earlier, their composition through a mix of public and private capital, with measures such as loan guarantees and grants, and the interplay of a wide array of international, financial and non-financial actors is indicative of a shift within development geographies of what scholars and practitioners now call 'blended finance' (Christiansen 2021, Mawdsley 2018). With the drying up of traditional channels of

development assistance – for instance, in the case of Seychelles with its graduation to a high-income country in 2015 and the consequent inability to access Official Development Assistance (ODA) (Silver & Campbell 2018) – blended finance approaches are being called upon to mobilise the much-needed funding to close the SDG’s ‘funding gaps’ (for a standard analysis of blended finance approaches to ocean financing see Sumaila *et al.* 2021). If the tools being employed to catalyse such massive investments – in the forms of loans and guarantees – may not necessarily represent a *new* approach, what stands out with blended finance is its ability to align ‘different actors that see development as largely a question of aggregate investments and an attempt to attract investments as based on quantifiable risks and returns’ (Christiansen 2021:97). Key words here are ‘risks’ and ‘returns’. As argued above, the investors’ returns are highly contingent on the state’s capacity to manage its fiscal budget directly detached from, while indirectly dependent upon, the environmental planning of its land and ocean spaces.

Still, even before the investors’ and state’s anticipated returns could potentially be actualised, the *perceived* and *real* risks associated especially with such novel undertakings need to be hedged against (World Economic Forum & OECD 2015). In practice, such blended instruments attempt to do just that: catalyse the expected high volume of private capital through the use of public – and internationally backed, as in the case of Seychelles – finances that effectively *de-risk* private investment. For Daniela Gabor (2021:431), such a move is nothing less than ‘development as de-risking’ – in particular for this case, ‘making development ‘investible’ requires [to] reorient the fiscal and monetary arm of the state into de-risking development asset classes, to ensure steady cash flows for investors’. In this framework, the de-risking in mitigating risks is geared ‘primarily [towards] those of the investors, and not those of the countries, communities or individuals at risk’ (Mawdsley 2018:270). In other words, such a de-risking of development practices falls squarely within the broader conjuncture of ‘rendering development investible’ – an effort aimed at ‘both increasing the *legibility* of development contexts to the needs and interests of private capital, while seeking to deeply reshape and transform recipient states and their financial systems’ (Taggart & Power 2024:6, emphasis in the original).

At the same time, Jack Taggart and Marcus Power (2024) also warn of any easy categorisation within such de-risking and, more broadly, development practices that ‘escort capital’ in the Global South(s) that pits international and multi-stakeholder organisations against receiving countries, questioning where and how to locate political agency in this current global development architecture. They argue that ‘perhaps, even, the ‘rendering investible’ rationality afford greater agency to recipient

policymakers than earlier and more paternalistic iterations of Development. However, much of the literature portrays financialisation as an external imposition on communities, with less attention to the active strategies these communities might use to leverage global business and finance for their benefit. For those keen on navigating the 'rendering investible' waters, discerning such strategies will be paramount' (*ibid.*:17). It is in these waters, both metaphorical and literal, that we now dive to tease out the strategies Seychelles' local actors are deploying to navigate turbulent seas with care.

5.3. Blue Finance, Riding the Wave: Seychelles and the Political Economy of Financing the Ocean, Revisited

The analysis proposed so far 'follow[s] a productive, yet well-trod formula' (Webber *et al.* 2022:935) within critical geographical scholarship interested in the political economy of climate finance. It starts with the definition of a problem (in this case, the role of the ocean to the island and coastal economies and ways to mitigate the risks associated with them on a warming planet); followed by empirical examples combined with theoretical entry points to unpick the rationales, consequences, and (potential) dangers of leaving these climate-sensitive operations in the hands of (financial) elites and (market-friendly) government agencies (for our purposes, Seychelles' blue finance initiatives); and it concludes with what a more hopeful, progressive future might look like were other strategies be taken onboard (e.g., were the Blue Bond not earmarked to only the fisheries sector, but opened up to novel start-up ideas with less capital intensive needs). The value of such analyses is tremendous: as I hope to have gestured above, in the Seychelles' case they provide critical discussions of, and insights into, the pitfalls and limitations of engineering novel socioecological spaces in times of state's fiscal constraints, surplus capital in biodiversity conservation (even if not yet productive capital, see Dempsey & Suarez 2016), and historical colonial legacies of multiple vulnerability axes (Perry 2022).

If this literature - both the one focussed on Seychelles, and the wider critical geography focussed on similar initiatives - offers compelling and variegated analyses of the logics driving such climate change-inflected development projects especially in the Global South(s), they show an uncanny convergence in their conclusions: in most, if not all, cases these development projects exhibit *failure* as one of their constant characteristics (Taggart & Power 2024). Here, failure is understood as either the inability to raise the (often private) funds expected through for instance blended finance model (e.g., Dempsey & Suarez 2016), or more likely in the detrimental socioecological reverberations they bring about (e.g., Kılıç 2024). If, from a neoliberal governmentality standpoint, market-based environmental approaches to 'natures' have already been proven to 'fail forward' (Fletcher 2023), in

this section I want to draw attention to “failure’ as a core expectation and subject of theoretical analysis from the beginning’ (Taggart & Power 2024:2) – that is, I ‘take the usual endpoint [of the above script] as our starting point’ (Webber *et al.* 2022:935). Specifically, my intention here is to flash out the ‘durable material and semiotic effects in the world’ (Appel 2019:3) that capitalism as a seamless political project generates in Seychelles; and to do so through expanding the ‘failure’ script with the vocabulary of *care work*.

In proposing an alternative reading of Seychelles’ financial initiative through the vocabulary of care work inflected by the oceanic thinking approach, I am responding to calls from critical geographers to take seriously the possibilities of working ‘for and against climate capitalism’ from within the openings, as well as the foreclosures, that such a political-financial infrastructure allows for (Bryant & Webber 2024; Webber 2023; Webber *et al.* 2022). For Sophie Webber (2023), existing critical scholarship on climate finance has been far more attentive to tease out the inconsistencies, limitations, and precarious consequences of capitalist management of environmental and climate crises than foreground engagements beyond it. In her account, she proposes ‘an approach that works towards reparative outcomes from contestations within, and negotiations with, climate capitalism’ (Webber 2023:15). Such an approach is needed in that, at least in the short term, ‘climate capitalism is the material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes’ (Webber 2023:17).

Insisting on practices of care or repair work – even if mundane, localised, unscalable – within the present climate-finance conjuncture acts as a performative configuration for other, alternate (imagined) futures that could *potentially* emerge from that oceanic, material base. There is no certainty that they will (or should) emerge in that current, or even different, configuration – yet that is not the point. Instead, the point here is to locate multiple sites of struggles, resistance, and (progressive) cracks that could disrupt the entrenched racialised, imperialist, and exploitative logics on which many of these development projects are predicated. In doing such work, this framework aims to complement the pivotal contributions discussed in the previous sections on the systematic shortcomings of blue finance initiatives through cultivating these multiple sites of potential care and struggle, attentive to the affective capacity these instruments have, perhaps indirectly, generated for local communities. Additionally, reframing these instruments through oceanic thinking also aims to connect with other political projects that argue for more radical solutions that directly call into question the current political and economic system – as, for instance, in recent interventions around tax and debt justice based on climate and historical grounds (e.g., Dempsey *et al.* 2022; Táíwò &

Bigger 2022), or more specifically in relation to reparation funding to promote the Sustainable Development Goals (Perry 2021)¹⁸.

Take, for instance, the story of the debt restructuring recounted in the previous chapter. As I have detailed, the initial pitch that TNC's Rob Weary made to Seychelles' ambassador Ronny Jumeau regarded the possibility of converting a portion of Seychelles' public debt in exchange for establishing new MPAs. Although the possibility of creating protection areas within their EEZ struck a chord with Seychelles' political elites, they were simultaneously considering strategies to diversify their economic outlook and explore what was effectively well over 95% of their territory - their unknown ocean space. In our conversation, the then Minister of Environment Didier Dogley remembered how those processes ran parallel until the ministerial working groups began joining the dots to integrate them within an overarching policy and governance agenda. As I have demonstrated throughout this work, the end product of such a plan is now well-known: TNC's debt restructuring programme represents today a tried-and-tested mechanism primarily resting on a) restructuring a country's (public or private) debt, b) the establishment of an independent public-private trust fund, c) and the creation of a network of MPAs *in parallel to* planning for the zonation of a country's marine space (MSP).

Proposing a Marine Spatial Plan does not in itself represent either an innovative or a progressive strategy - more often than not, MSPs the world over have drawn quite a vocal set of critiques for undermining mostly local and Indigenous communities' access to marine spaces while at the same time favouring exploitative, massive ocean industries (e.g., Clarke & Flannery 2020; Flannery *et al.* 2018). I had first-hand experience with the issues raised by this strand of literature during the numerous Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Steering Committee and consultative meetings I attended in the country. For instance, stakeholders, primarily from the conservation sectors, lamented the inclusion of the oil and gas industry within the SMSP (also recall the snippet on the wordplay between Blue-Green Economy recounted in Chapter 2); conversely, industry representatives argued against what they considered as strict environmental provisions in the Plan with little recognition for the 'Economy' element in the Blue Economy; or the small and semi-industrial fishery sector contesting

¹⁸ Developed across a variety of different geographical, political, and theoretical scholarly traditions, what counts as *care*, *repair*, or *reparations* represents a contested terrain. For the present purpose, I side with Webber's (2023) definitions of *care* and *repair* as practices primarily oriented towards (re)establishing *relations* of support and maintenance of socioecological systems in a world ridden by multiple crises; whereas *reparation* refers more narrowly to the *financial* reparations accrued through centuries of colonial expropriation and exploitations that devastated territories and peoples around the globe.

the terms of the local fisheries community's engagement in the SMSP process and the perceived privileged position granted to the foreign-owned industrial tuna fisheries (I briefly elaborated on several of these issues in Chapter 3 and 4; but see also Baker *et al.* 2020; Baker *et al.* 2023; Schutter & Hicks 2019).

Yet, momentarily shifting the focus away from the (skewed) operationalisations of the SMSP, my contention in proposing an alternate reading of Seychelles' blue finance practices focuses instead on the SMSP as a strategic objective of Seychellois political actors *at the very onset* of the debt restructuring process - that is, leveraging the watery spatiality of their territory to actively steer, if not discipline, environmental and financial practices as they were proposed by one of the biggest environmental NGO globally, TNC. I suggest such a move to be a form of *care work*: within dwindling financial and development assistance networks, planetary breakdowns (at the time, the 2008 financial crisis, today the COVID-19 with its toll on the country's tourism industry), and mounting climate instabilities; the urge to know so as to care - where planning becomes a caring practice to 'sustain worlds' (Carr 2022) allowing for, among others, the establishment of MPAs, environmental regulations, and zoning designs - exhibit a degree of political agency (and associated political possibilities) that too often goes unnoticed in more mainstream critical account of Blue Economy initiatives. The SMSP is currently still underway and 'other kinds of outcomes are still possible' (Webber 2023:17). Nonetheless, my focus rests on the SMSP itself as a strategic dynamic interface that indexes, following Judith Butler (Butler & Worms 2023:30-31), the possibility of *care* as the establishment of 'intersubjective institutional conditions [that would allow the] social and institutional provision for a livable [world]'. Importantly, this and the following examples 'focus on their situatedness within capitalist structures [...] in ways that potentially subvert these structures for reparative and decommodifying ends' (Webber *et al.* 2022:936).

Such instances are not necessarily grand, spectacular, or easy to locate - a point of departure from geographical literature I am drawing upon here such as Webber *et al.* (2022) and Webber (2023). Indeed, their work zooms in more specifically on forms of repair, decommodification, and community organising facilitated by financial tools and grounded primarily in climate *infrastructures*, within usually an urban context. In that regard, their analyses gesture more openly to latent political configurations with the potential to disrupt, or at least mould from within, climate financial initiatives towards other socioecological ends. Others have variously categorised these strategies as 'environmental stopgaps' or 'transitional demands' - temporary and partial measures deployed to counteract immediate harms and 'buy time' in working towards long(er) term solutions for complex

environmental and systemic problems (Buck *et al.* 2020; Irvine-Broque *et al.* 2022). Ultimately, taken together, what I am flashing out here is a constellation of moments that register ‘ongoing experiments to build other worlds with the materials at hand’ (Webber *et al.* 2022:938) – experiments that do not guarantee a departure from neoliberal market formations, but chart tentative routes spurring from multiple sites within.

In doing such work, scholars working in the ‘reparative turn’ have also warned against the tendency to romanticise what could be defined as merely survival practices, and their overall progressive capacities that are sometimes too hurriedly bestowed upon them (Stuelke 2021). While this risk is ever present, in (re)valuing and making space for instances of political mobilisation ‘for and against climate capitalism’ (Webber 2023), I agree with Webber *et al.* (2022:938) that a ‘stark distinction between the reparative and the revolutionary leaves little space for practice’. After all, as former ambassador Ronny Jumeau articulated to me, Seychelles performed a shift away from ‘thinking just as victims, but thinking [instead] as incubators of solutions’ – a shift that further provides *ethical* legitimacy to islanders, because they are not simply ‘going to blame you [Global North for the historical responsibility of climate change, but] I’m going to shame you. I’m going to give you a solution to the problem that I did not create, but that you created’. In this way, ‘the next time Seychelles comes in [the negotiating rooms] it changes the way they see you, in that [the Global North] thinks: We can reason with this tiny little country. They’re not going to come in and bash us with our hands. They are going to accept their debt and say look, the debt is the debt. I’m not going to say historically, colonialism, neocolonial – I could run that story. It’s not going to get us out of the hole. Well, the hole is already there.’ As ‘strategic thinkers’, the lived realities of a warming planet going awry impose an urgency that demands to act in the here and now ‘to get us out of hole’. Such is the care and repair work that could cautiously but steadily orient us towards alternate conditions for liveability in the present predicament – and ‘by “we” I mean anyone: common people where they are, how they are, people who will bear the brunt of climate change, people who already needed the world to end yesterday’ (Wakefield 2020:19).

5.3.1. Case One: The Blue Grants Fund

At the end of our hour-long conversation, as good research practice requires, I asked the current CEO of SeyCCAT Marie-May Jeremie if there was anything she would have liked to share that we hadn’t covered in our discussion. I quote her answer in full:

I guess we could have spent a bit of time talking about the BGF, the process and the impact it has had and how that then translates to the whole, because you've got to be able to make the link between the intent from the time when the debt for nature swap was first conceptualised to now on delivering on the ground. I think that's truly how you can gauge impact, and over the years the Grants Fund has been extremely successful. It is the first such mechanism for financing projects in Seychelles that has lasted this long. We used to have the Environment Trust Fund on a much smaller scale that was operating, but now it's under the Ministry of Environment so it's not operating on the same level of transparency. I think there's a lot to show for in the BGF and there's always a lot of room for improvement. We are currently reviewing our strategy looking at how we can improve the application process, how we [can] engage with the applicants [better]. We currently have a consultancy in-house that's just doing that. So yeah, I just want you maybe to reflect a little bit about the overall process and impact and that would be good.

As I unconsciously perpetuated during my discussion with CEO Marie-May Jeremie, perhaps a bias inherited from my own engagement with the Blue Economy in Seychelles (see Chapter 2), the Blue Grants Funds (BGF) have remained a somewhat blind spot within the critical scholarship dealing with the recent blue interventions in the archipelago. This is also somewhat surprising, as the BGF is one of the only two mechanisms established to locally disburse the new financial flows generated by Seychelles' Blue Economy initiatives. As I have detailed in the previous section, the other mechanism – the Blue Investment Fund (BIF), operated by the Development Bank of Seychelles – has already been critiqued for its inability to deliver the expected loans to local businesses, with a range of issues identified from the lack of transparency and clarity during the application process to the mismanagement of land use and infrastructure provisions (Christiansen 2023, Kılıç 2024).

Conversely, the BGF has consistently been able to provide grants for local projects since its inception, building a strong architecture to guide potential grantees throughout the application process. Supporting activities offered during the annual 'requests for proposal' include one-to-one sessions, capacity-building workshops, networking with previous grant holders, and WhatsApp group chats¹⁹. As various applicants shared with me, these activities allow for space to navigate the bureaucratic maze that could at times be daunting – especially for a single individual or small organisation not necessarily well versed in the language of, for instance, budgeting costs or monitoring and evaluation frameworks. In turn, such an approach results in a high uptake of the available funds. As a 2020, World Bank-supported review states, 'Overall, SCR 19.1m or US\$1.1m has been distributed in Blue Grant Funding over three years. This is roughly consistent with the US\$281,000 received each

¹⁹ A full list of supporting activities provided pre-, during, and after the application process can be found on the SeyCCAT official website (<https://seyccat.org/>).

year by SeyCCAT since the 'Debt for Nature' transaction, plus income earned on the US\$3m received from the Seychelles Blue Bonds funds' (Hunt 2020:13).

At its core, the BGF is a revolving fund capitalised through the debt restructuring and the blue bond proceeds (see Figure 5.1), as well as new sources of finance that SeyCCAT is exploring in its attempt to diversify and support the viability of the scheme in the long-term - for instance, with the latest Blue Alliance and Oceans5 funding opportunities. As a guiding vision, the BGF official webpage states that it 'offers grants to impactful Seychellois-led projects that advance marine conservations, sustainable fisheries, development of new and existing Marine Protected Areas and Sustainable Use Zones, and select other blue sectors [notably, the climate change adaptation-focussed projects]. Every year, the BGF opens a 6-week application window (usually in April) when all Seychellois, Seychelles-based NGOs, government entities, parastatal organisations, and businesses registered for more than one year are invited to submit the project proposals for BGF funding' (<https://seyccat.org/blue-grants-fund-2/>). For each round of applications, SeyCCAT selects several strategic objectives from the five listed (marine ecology, fisheries sector, climate change, business proposals, and marine zoning) for which funds will be allocated - either as small grants (up to SCR 100,000), medium (up to SCR 1 million), and large (up to SCR 2 million). As SeyCCAT CEO argued, within the integrated architecture envisioned through the various blue financing mechanisms in the archipelago, the BGF would be the incubator where experiments can take place in the more relatively safe environment afforded by grant money - before moving on to 'riskier' loans on capital markets. This is also a strategy to directly diversify and expand the economic and business prospects in the country - especially within the ocean-related sector where, as one semi-industrial business owner wryly commented to me, 'fishing isn't sexy anymore' for the local population and, more worryingly for him, for the younger generations.

Even from just this overview, what stands out is the high degree of experimentation that it is possible to finance through the scheme. A glance at concluded or ongoing projects readily available online (<https://seyccat.org/projects/#completed>) reveals the vast range of opportunities followed²⁰: from

²⁰ Along with the projects' information provided on SeyCCAT's official website, as is often the case many of the data generated specifically during the projects' duration are additionally incorporated into other parallel or subsequent case studies. I could appreciate the extent of these practices at the University of Seychelles and James Michel Blue Economy Research Institute's *Seychelles Marine Science Symposium* - the first of its kind in the country aimed at gathering the breath of research happening in, on, or about Seychelles' waters, and the first time I returned in the country after my fieldwork. A list of talks with abstract can be found at <https://unisey.ac.sc/beri/science-symposium/#> [Accessed 10 June 2024].

the recreational fisheries catch-and-release impacts to the targeted fish species in the outer islands (BGF round #1, large grant), to the sociocultural wellbeing of artisanal fisherfolks on the inner islands, to the 2D/3D coastal mapping of the main island Mahé (BGF#4, medium grant) or the ocean literacy and awareness activities such as clean-ups (BGF#3, large grant), a children book (BGF #4, small grant), or Aldabra's communication campaign (BGF#4, large grant). Collaboration is a central feature of all these projects: especially for the large grants, virtually all of them require a degree of cross-pollination and coordination between institutional settings, research bodies, and civil society organisations across multiple scales. As an example, the 'Spatial ecology and response to catch-and-release of recreationally targeted fish species on St. François and Alphonse Atolls' project just mentioned had as main partners the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Carleton University, Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, Seychelles Fishing Authority, and raised on top of the SCR 1 million grant it raised a further SCR 3.8 million in co-financing (SeyCCAT n.d.).

Further research is needed to assess, among others, how these projects unfold in the long term and with what consequences; to what extent they fit into, and remake, Seychelles' Blue Economy vision; and their broader impacts on the local socio-cultural fabric of financing the realities of assembling an 'ocean state' through novel market instruments. Instead, my contention here is that, at least in contrast to the BIF, the operationalisation of the BGF allows for (financial) space to be opened where the ocean can seep within the wider sociocultural fabric of the archipelago – potentially articulating 'experiments to build other worlds with the materials at hand' (Webber *et al.* 2022:938). These experiments are not necessarily progressive, and could also lead to ecologically precarious practices – for example, the most recent BGF#8 had as two of its three strategic objectives a strong push towards the development of a research and economic base for aquaculture in the country, a sector that has already attracted its fair share of critics on the islands (see, for instance, Baker *et al.* 2023). Nor are they to be considered outside local and international politics – several have voiced their disappointment with their applications being rejected, with one applicant wryly noting that funds are mainly being delivered to 'a couple of rasta-men going on a boat to pick up trash'. Yet, my point here takes on a somewhat different trajectory: having the possibility to hold such disparate conversations together – what to value within the Blue Economy, what to care for, what is amenable to repair or not, on whose conditions – indexes the formation of a political space constituted through climate capitalism as the 'material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17).

5.3.2. *The Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change Project: An Introduction*

'I think the role of SeyCCAT has changed. I don't know if changed is the right word - or it has adapted rather over time', it was a warm and windy June morning in the café overlooking the state-of-the-art marina in Eden Island where I met Annike Faure, SeyCCAT's manager for the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project. 'Once the debt swap agreement is completed and the government has paid back its loan, will BGF still be SeyCCAT's bread and butter? Because that's what it is at the moment. [Or, instead] SeyCCAT [will primarily] serve as the middleman, an established legal middleman' that could act as a bridge in bringing in funds that donors and international organisations are reluctant to provide directly to the government? In that regard, the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project stands as a microcosm of what SeyCCAT could become, and the simultaneous spaces for care and repair work that could be held open in the process.

As Annike went on to recall during our conversation, the project came out as a direct consequence of the 2015 Paris Agreement and its focus on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). During COP21, The Pew Charitable Trust approached the Government of Seychelles to pitch the idea of including blue carbon contributions into its NDC. Although Seychelles was known to possess a huge extent of what are considered blue carbon ecosystems - specifically for the archipelago, mangrove forests and seagrasses meadows - at the time there was virtually no in-depth study that either quantified their extent (and hence their carbon storage potential), or their ability to act as adaptation tools against a warming climate²¹. Therefore, the project aimed at a) collecting country-specific data to assess and ground truth the capacity of seagrasses to act as carbon sink for the entirety of Seychelles; b) inform Seychelles' NDCs and related policy plans (e.g., the SMSP); c) raise awareness at the local level of the environmental and socioeconomic values of seagrass habitats, with a special focus on their ability to act as 'nature-based' solutions for climate adaptation²².

Numerous collaborators have been involved at various stages in the project along with SeyCCAT and The Pew Charitable Trusts - mainly the Government of Seychelles, TNC, the University of Oxford, The University of Seychelles with BERI (UniSey-BERI), and a plethora of local organisations trained in

²¹ The *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project focuses only on seagrass meadows as blue carbon ecosystems. Running somewhat parallel to it, another SeyCCAT-funded project is tasked with researching specifically mangrove forests' carbon sequestration potential (see Palacios *et al.* 2022).

²² Fieldwork data for this section have been complemented with additional informational material freely accessible on the project's official webpage <https://seyccat.org/coastal-wetlands-and-climate-change/> (accessed 07/06/2024).

research methods to map, collect, and classify seagrass habitats. The project can be roughly considered as consisting of two interlinked arms: one manned by the University of Oxford and its local partners, primarily UniSey-BERI, tasked with the science component; the other coordinated by SeyCCAT that works at the science-policy interface linking, or rather translating, the science component mainly to government entities, local civil society, and wider international groups. As Annike likes to describe these two components, they are like ‘two ships passing in the night but going to the same destination, that’s how I referred to these two projects. Two very different ships with the same aim, going towards the same port’.

Even with the world coming to a partial halt during the COVID-19 pandemic – a grinding halt for a project like this one, as Annike reminded me, depending on cross-country and especially in-country movements, for instance with the ground-truthing exercise – the project has been able to deliver on almost all accounts. To mark the end of Phase One of the project, then, in August 2022 SeyCCAT organised a two-day workshop that served to retrace the steps taken up to that point, to celebrate some of the achievements, and to chart the route forward. The air was buzzing with excitement at the event, particularly because of one of the major attractions in the rooms: the unveiling of the first ground-truthed maps of seagrass habitats within Seychelles’ entire EEZ (see Figure 5.2). Only now have peer-reviewed studies been published detailing the methodological approaches adopted in the exercise (e.g., Lee *et al.* 2024) as well as the possible policy recommendations for Seychelles (and other coastal and island states) to develop a blue carbon market (e.g., Bennett *et al.* 2024).

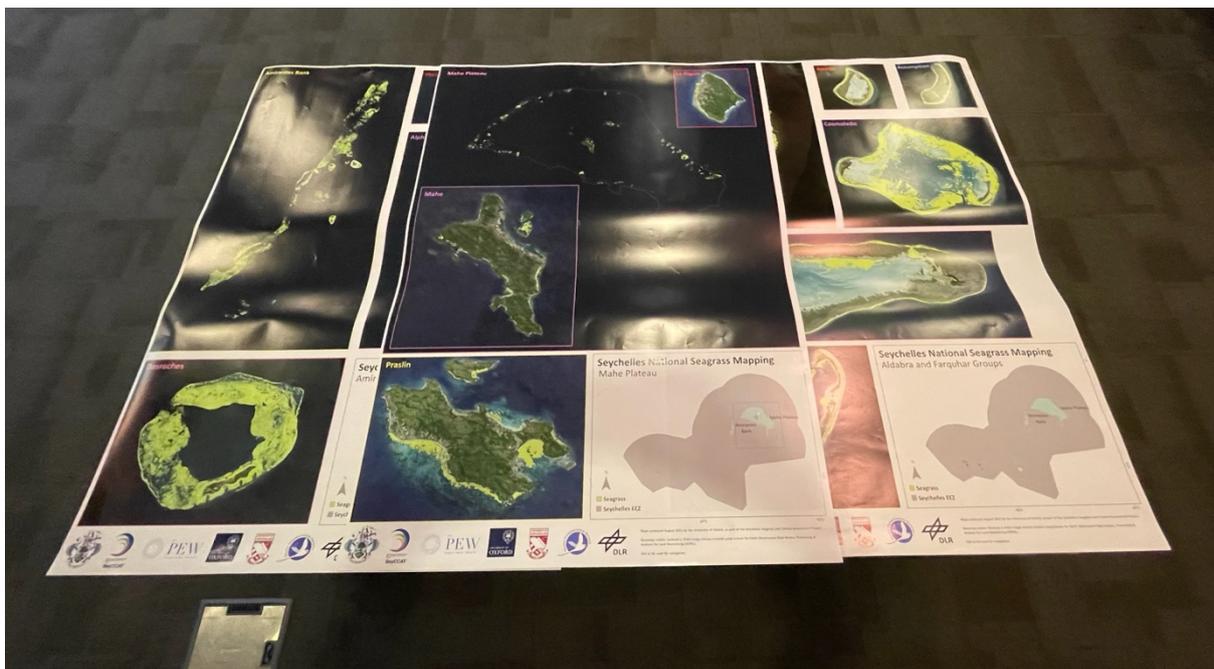


Figure 5.2. Unveiling of the first-ever ground-truthed maps of Seychelles’ seagrass habitats extent within its entire EEZ as part of the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project. Mahé, Republic of Seychelles. Photo by the author.

Carbon credit schemes have already come under scrutiny on several grounds – from their inability to effectively achieve their ultimate goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, to deepening unequal access to resources accompanied by enclosure and appropriation strategies (e.g., Cavanagh & Benjaminsen 2014). In their seminal contribution systematising the constellations of current practices emerging around ‘green grabbing’, James Fairhead, Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones (2012) construe mechanisms such as carbon offsetting as an ‘economy of repair’. Working from a Marxist political theory of accumulation and commodification, their account of ‘repair’ within this economic framework allows for a ‘double valuation of nature’ – that is, nature gets first valued for the bounty it offers in the form of raw resources (e.g., oil and gas); and then for the possibility of ‘repairing’ the devastating socio-ecological consequences of a capital growth-model based on those resources through embedding previously un(der)valued ecosystems within its circuits (e.g., seagrass habitats and mangrove forests for their ability to capture oil-produced atmospheric carbon dioxide). They argue that ‘mercantile optimists had perhaps thought creating markets for repair – pricing carbon, offsets and so on – might put a brake on growth [...] But things do not seem to be working out that way. Prices are settling in such a way as to maximise both economies – of growth and repair – with the intent of getting the very most out of nature and with maximum efficiency’ (Fairhead *et al.* 2012:242). In the process, the social nature articulated through such an economy of repair tends to be coupled with novel forms of enclosure, appropriation, and privatisation that further marginalise local community access and ownership to these ecosystems (e.g., Bryant 2019, Fairhead *et al.* 2012).

There is no denying that these inherent risks associated with existing carbon credit schemes could be materialised, in either that or a mix of other configurations, within the assembling blue carbon realities in Seychelles – and practitioners in the country seem to be acutely aware of that. To provide a notable example, the Minister of Agriculture, Climate Change, and Environment Flavien Joubert confessed to me that ‘blue carbon is an interesting subject. A lot of people when they've seen the extent of seagrass after some confirmation we have done, the first thing that comes to mind is “Yeah, let's talk about blue carbon.” My personal point of view is that we have to be very careful about this and we also have to make sure that we use this resource in a way to achieve real results when it comes to private commitments. We should not allow ourselves to get tied into this thinking that it's all about money. Just making money from this and that and calling up on somebody to trade your blue carbon stock.’ He continued with a list of recent scandals that caught the public eye around carbon offsetting schemes, most notably the world-leading VERRA programme (e.g., Greenfield 2023), and the

moniker for Seychelles to be cautious in pursuing such market opportunities before the required regulatory and socio-ecological safeguards are in the place in the country.

Yet, in proposing the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project here within a framework that works 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023), I am tracing somewhat alternate trajectories that the operationalisation of the initiative has configured; ones where forms of care work – realised in, for instance, the knowing, naming, and circulation of seagrasses-as-valuable-ecosystems detailed below – can spur socioenvironmental relations of repair away from, or at least questioning, the market-based 'double valuation of nature' described above. As Fairhead *et al.* (2012) themselves remark, processes of 'green grabbing' (or rather 'blue', as this example could be classified, e.g., Barbesgaard 2018; Bennett *et al.* 2021) do not abide by any linear narrative that goes from some idealised untouched and conflict-free commons period to the current race to privatise dwindling and ever-more precious resources. Instead, these processes are always politically turbulent, rarely pre-determined in their outcomes, and never independent of the 'unruly ecologies' they are supposed to tame. It is at the intersection of these various trajectories that, they posit, a 'counter-politics of nature' could be located – one that brings 'more complex, non-equilibrium understandings of unruly ecologies and human-ecological relations to bear [to counter-act] contemporary valuations and appropriations of nature' (Fairhead *et al.* 2012:254). In the vocabulary of this work, I locate this 'counter-politics of nature' as configured in and *through* Seychelles' blue (climate) finance initiatives as enabling practices that I define as *care work* – an attempt to foreground both the continuous and active *work* required for these practices to happen, and their latent potentialities to disrupt – at least momentarily – market-based logics through attuning to the 'unruly ecologies and human-ecological relations' with *care-fulness*.

5.3.3. *The Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change Project: Knowing, Naming, Exchanging*

Fairhead and colleagues (2012:246) rightly note that 'markets operate on the speculative promise of science, not its findings. Technology expectations therefore march ahead of technological realities, but provide the basis for raising funding, and the assertion of value. The argument is not that the science co-produced within this new economy of nature is necessarily 'wrong' (although it clearly bears this economy's conceptual imprint and framing), but that it is through this financial-scientific-policy nexus that nature comes to acquire its economic value'. As discussed, in Seychelles, the 'economic value' that is currently being conjured up (Tsing 2000) within the financial-scientific-policy nexus of the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project represents a *virtual* reality in that the

establishment of a carbon credits market is still 'a good five to ten years' away, as Annike anticipated. Yet, the realities of its policy and scientific undertakings are already materialising in the country generating multiple, likely unplanned, potentially contentious political trajectories – some of which I will detail in this and the next section. For a start, I want to turn to one element that became apparent to me at the two-day SeyCCAT workshop to celebrate the end of Phase One that I introduced above: the performative element of 'doing science' in the field – a scientific counterpart to what Michel Callon (2006) would call 'economists in the wild'. As the workshop participants recalled – sometimes fondly, sometimes less so – the ground-truthing exercise also called for a massive capacity building locally: learning the correct sampling strategies; the know-how of using scientific equipment; the logistical labour of acquiring that equipment, not rarely from overseas, and moving it around between the islands (as the project covered the entire EEZ, several outer islands were sampled too); and the related coordination and management efforts between the huge numbers of stakeholders involved were highlighted as challenging hurdles the project had to overcome.

Yet, it also gave rise to unexpected encounters. In his presentation, a local NGO member, whom I will call John, shared the somewhat unpredictable responses he and his team received during the sampling process. Especially when moving between different locations on the more populated Mahé – where there are vast expanses of seagrass habitats especially on the eastern and north-eastern side – local community members more often than not cast cautious but curious looks. In his account, they were intrigued by the unusual sampling instruments, diving gear, and special clothing equipment, carefully loaded on and unloaded from trucks, his team was deploying. In the eyes of the local communities, it was primarily the embodied techno-futurist allure of the scientific equipment, John posited, that provided legitimacy to the team's research practices. Unwittingly then, the NGO members conducting the research were simultaneously questioned on their research practices and the rationale behind them. As John put it in his presentation, such encounters become an improvised 'mobile learning school' – encounters where the sampling activity did not just create (future) knowledge of a marine habitat through the sampling, but simultaneously allowed for knowledge of that habitat to be circulated within the local community during the encounter itself. In the grammar I am advancing here, these moments act as a form of ocean literacy; a literacy that in the exchange between scientists and community members could also perform as a care work. Although almost accidental in this case, in establishing the conditions to hold space open for those seemingly mundane conversations to take place, there is a simultaneous possibility to make present the ocean more forcefully on shore – something that the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project is also pursuing directly.

In that regard, one of SeyCCAT's primary roles in the project was communicating the knowledge being collected, tested, and quantified within the scientific laboratories in Seychelles and abroad. Still associated with nuisance in popular imagination rather than resource even compared to mangrove forests, on the account that, as Annike reasoned, 'mangroves have a bit more attention, people are aware of what it does. But seagrasses, I think because people can't see it, then for them it doesn't register that it's there' – SeyCCAT launched a countrywide series of initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the socioecological values that seagrass habitat holds. They included community workshops, mass media communication both in print and digitally, television and radio with a strong focus on youth engagement – through, for instance, school outreach programme *Wonders of Gomon [seagrass] Roadshow*, the primary and secondary activity books *The Wonders of 'Gomon Lanmer' in Seychelles*, and the art and poem competition for secondary school students titled *Voice of Seagrass Meadows*. Arguably a crucial hurdle that SeyCCAT had in making seagrasses part of the conversation lay in the seemingly simple realisation that no formally accepted name existed in Seychellois Creole for any seagrass species. The colloquial term in use was *gomon* – a term that translates to 'slimy and plantlike' and that referred to both seagrasses and macroalgae²³. To address the problem, SeyCCAT instituted an *Emerald Advisory Committee* with linguists and scientists coupled with public outreach activities and surveys, particularly targeting local artisanal fisheries with in-depth knowledge of those habitats, to shortlist a list of potential names for the 12 seagrass species found in the archipelago. Eventually, the final names were officially approved by *Lakademi Kreol* – the Seychelles Creole Academy, the national authority on Seychellois Creole – and are now part of the official Seychellois Creole Dictionary (Alberts 2022).

As I have heard multiple times during the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* workshop, it is impossible to care for what is not known (hence the science component), but neither is possible to care for what you can't name. The institutionalisation of newly created terms for seagrass species – along with the exhaustive process that led to it – continues the route traced in the previous chapter: in its move towards becoming a Big Ocean State, Seychelles is configuring its territory as an oceanic formation with the articulation of its own oceanic vocabulary. Yet, if the vocabulary I have composed in Chapter 4 was primarily an *elite* attempt at translating Seychelles as a BOS[S], here I retraced steps taken – metaphorically, but also quite literally in this case – by local actors on the ground; steps that

²³ In contrast to seagrasses that put roots in the seabed and are flowering vascular plants, macroalgae (or seaweeds) anchor mainly onto rocks using holdfasts and transport nutrients through the body by diffusion.

only the specific operationalisation of Seychelles' blue finance initiative allowed. Fairhead *et al.*'s (2012) market-based 'economy of repair' is not necessarily arrested with such moves, and could easily form the basis for a fully-fledged carbon credit scheme in the (near) future. Yet, these configurations simultaneously open up political spaces and imaginaries virtually non-existent before - imaginaries that, as the next section details, are already materialising into forms of resistance locally.

4.3.4. *The Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change Project: The ex-Reef Hotel Redevelopment Project*

Along the East Coast of Mahé in Anse aux Pins, right past the district's fish market, the crumbling, but still imposing infrastructure of what was once the Reef Hotel stands tall - now slowly being reclaimed by the lush green vegetation on one side, and the sandy beach on the other. While driving south along the road, Marie, a local resident in her early 70s, remembers with glimmering nostalgia in her eyes the early days at the Hotel: 'We used to come here to dance when I was young, there were live bands. It was beautiful'. The history of The Reef Hotel reflects a microcosm of, and is intimately intertwined with, the multiple lives that Seychelles has experienced in the last 50 years or so.

The Reef Hotel was the first tourism establishment of international standards in the archipelago, opened in 1972 in conjunction with the international airport in 1971 to welcome the new influx of (wealthy) visitors that the then-still-British colonial administration of Seychelles expected to receive (see Figure 5.3; Mathiot 2017). Its history is woven into the socio-political fabric of the archipelago that I traced previously (Chapter 3): its two-storey, 150 rooms, reception area, offices, bars and restaurants were constructed as part of the British strategy to provide sound economic diversification in preparation to independence, and it was financed through a consortium of international (mainly French and British) investors that 'placed their bets a thousand miles from anywhere' (Mathiot 2017). The local population was employed first as workforce, and then trained in the hospitality sector - fuelling the would-be president France Albert René's concerns of turning Seychellois into 'a race of chambermaids and page boys' (McAteer, 2008: 340). From the early beginnings then, the tourism industry exhibited signs of the visual picture I recalled before painted by the Principal Secretary for the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment (MACCE), Dennis Matatiken evoked in our conversation: 'Tourism now it's like: I take a sieve. I put some water in there. But no water stays in the sieve'.



Figure 5.3. The Reef Hotel captured from the shoreline in 1974, not long after its opening in 1972. Mahé, Republic of Seychelles. Picture from Nicette 2022.

From the early 1970s until it officially closed down in the 1990s The Reef Hotel has lived many lives: its ownership changed numerous hands; it welcomed thousands of tourists, movie stars, and athletes for whom it expanded its luxury facilities (notably, the first 9-hole golf course in the country and a swimming pool); and experienced the tumultuous years of the one-party state with a bomb blast and an armed robbery (for a brief history of the Hotel, see Mathiot 2017). Simultaneously, the coastal stretches around it were also experiencing fast transformations. As I described in previous chapters (2 and 3), the Eastern Coast of Mahé has been profoundly reshaped to accommodate the extensive human and industrial needs of the fledgling country: the land reclamation for Eden Island, the construction of the airport, the expansion of port Victoria, the development of the industrial area in Providence, and the residential buildings at Perseverance Island are several of the infrastructural projects that in the last few decades were carried out at the interface of the land and sea, on the coastal plain of the main island. One consequence of these undertakings has been that the local population's access to public beaches has been gradually eroded on that side of the island - with the stretch in front of the ex-Reef Hotel now standing as a closely guarded, lone reminder not just of a time past, but also of a present where public spaces are quickly diminishing. As Marie fondly explained during our drive, and as Jeremy also noted (Chapter 3), the availability of public beaches for the local residents holds enormous socio-cultural value - especially visible during the weekends

when extended families and friends spend the day away in between char-grilling, a drink and laughter recharging for the week ahead.

As former ambassador Jumeau elaborated (Chapter 4), all these development projects massively disrupted the coastal ecosystems along the way – taking a particularly heavy toll on coral reefs, seagrass meadows and mangrove forests that were almost all destroyed in their wake. Yet, in mapping the seagrass extent in the entirety of the archipelago, the SeyCCAT's *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project documented that the inner islands still house a surprisingly rich variety of seagrass meadows – with the patches along the ex-Reef Hotel taking a major share of that because they remained relatively untouched in the last few decades (Bennett *et al.* 2024; The Ocean Project Seychelles 2022). To mark the end of the mapping project, the current President of Seychelles Wavel Ramkavalan pledged at the 2022 COP27 in Egypt that Seychelles would be moving to protect 100% of its mangrove and seagrass meadows by 2030 conditional to external support – a move that puzzled many in the country in light of the sensible areas, such as the ex-Reef Hotel, where some of these patches are located (Bennett *et al.* 2024; Ernesta 2022b).

I had a glimpse of the tensions generated by the announcement at the SeyCCAT's workshop celebrating the ending of Phase One. As the final sessions in the two-day workshops approached and the question of 'What now?' loomed large in the room, many lamented the impossibility of effectively 'protecting' 100% of seagrasses and mangroves because of their locations in high-use areas, calling out the President's announcement a public stunt with little to no teeth. As discussions progressed, it became apparent the somewhat different trajectories that pitted stakeholders' conceptualisation of 'development' against 'protection': any form of planned development – not just on the coastal areas, but even inland infrastructural projects that would eventually reach the ocean (e.g., through sewage) could potentially pose a threat to protecting 100% of those blue habitats. The arguments there were reminiscent of those I narrated in the previous chapter around the definition of the 'P' element in MPAs: for the majority of stakeholders at the SeyCCAT's workshop that 'P' meant *protected* – i.e., a vision where those interface, blue areas would become virtually no-take zones – whereas others were pushing for the 'P' as *protection* – zones where a gradient approach to what activities can happen and under what conditions would be applied. The seeming paradox was laid bare during these debates: whereas the seagrass mapping exercise could now be leveraged globally to raise 'climate (development) finance' (in the form of, for instance, nature-based solutions against coastal erosion), its stated aims could simultaneously be disrupted through other development strategies (e.g., land reclamation projects that deeply affects, if not completely eradicate, those some

ecosystems). In navigating the contested waters delineated by stakeholders in the room – and leaving the space open if not for a possible reconciliation, at least a peaceful co-existence of these alternate trajectories – one of The Pew Charitable Trusts representatives closed the session on a positive note: ‘We need to be realistic, it’s bold but not unreal’.

Although these negotiations might at first seem to be delimited to the stakeholders’ meeting rooms, they are already being played out on the ground – and in the water. In 2019 the now-opposition government sold the decaying infrastructure of ex-Reef Hotel to a Mauritian investor for a new tourism establishment re-development project: among others, the proposed resort would have 200 rooms, restaurants, bars, a new tennis and golf court, an infinity pool, and, most contentiously, two 12.000 square metres reclaimed islands for floating villas and an open restaurant (Nicette 2022). The old hotel was acquired for US\$6 million, with an anticipated investment of US\$58 million and an expected US\$50 million to go directly to the government as taxes (Nicette 2022). Since that initial proposal, community organisations and local residents have voiced strong dissent for the hotel re-development project (e.g., The Ocean Project Seychelles 2022) – particularly deploying many of the blue political imaginaries assembling around Seychelles becoming an ‘oceanic formation’.

The Ocean Project Seychelles – a local NGO working on active community engagement, outreach, and ocean literacy programmes – has been among the most vocal in registering perceived shortcomings that such a re-development project might suffer from (The Ocean Project Seychelles 2022). Employing lines of arguments that I described above, they raised concerns over the adverse impact that the project will have on ‘the high sociological value to the local population who visit the beaches adjacent to the ex-Reef Hotel for recreation and sporting activities’; the flawed Environmental Impact Assessment that ‘did not provide clear and accessible information to the general public [and,] as a result, prevents the general public from formulating an informed and accurate opinion’; and the favouring of the government of private interests, not public ones, with the authorisation of land reclamation over and above the foreshore and the seabed for the floating villas (land that, constitutionally, belongs to the public domain, see also Bennett *et al.* 2024). Equally crucial for the present purpose, The Ocean Project posits that the reclamation project ‘will destroy the largest remaining seagrass meadow adjacent to Mahe and one of the few healthy and easily accessible meadows in the inner islands of Seychelles’ in direct contradiction to the stated 100% seagrass and mangrove habitats protection that the government pledged, a move that would simultaneously weaken ‘the natural line of defense [sic] and impact coastal stability’; while putting

the livelihoods of local artisanal fisherfolks who depends on fishing within the meadows especially during the rough weather of the South-East monsoon at risk (The Ocean Project Seychelles 2022).

With the redevelopment project currently stalled, the fate of the ex-Reef Hotel remains uncertain, although still promises to continue its long history as a canvas into Seychelles' sociopolitical fabric well into the future. Yet, for the purpose of this chapter, the imaginaries that local groups like The Ocean Project have been capable of organising index material and political spaces that working 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023) allows - spaces that might generate a 'counter-politics of nature' (Fairhead *et al.* 2012:254). Scientifically backed by SeyCCAT's ground-truthing mapping exercise - as well as its concomitant care practices of *knowing*, *naming*, and *exchanging* the multiple values of seagrass habitats - 'development-as-usual', in the form of 'yet-another' foreign-led tourism project, becomes a contested political object; a contested object generating resistance from below that more broadly questions what counts as 'development', *how-to-do* development, and for whom. None of this would *necessarily* arrest 'development-as-usual' - or any other form of development, for that matter. Yet, at a minimum, the SeyCCAT's *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project has turned the ocean, or at least some of its elements, political again - or rather, following my earlier discussion (Chapter 3), has extended the reach of the ocean politics to previously excluded members. Such is the partial, fragmented, and at times unremarkable work that, I posit, must be attended to, and cultivated with, *care-fulness* in order to locate multiple sites of as-of-yet unrealised, or only bubbling, forms of resistance and struggle *within* 'climate capitalism' that might prefigure alternative articulations to standardised, neoliberal strategies of environmental governance and development.

5.4. Conclusion

The present chapter began with a question - namely, whether it is possible to provide an alternate reading of Seychelles' climate finance initiatives to offer further modes of engagements to work 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023). For a start, such a question is aimed at directly taking up calls from critical geographers to work with 'climate capitalism [as] the material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17; see also Webber *et al.* 2022). Secondly, the question also tries to complement recent empirical scholarship that closely examines the socio-political and legal architecture of Seychelles' deals - a scholarship primarily focussing on unpacking the structural limitations, colonial legacies, and future potential harms generated through these deals (Benzaken *et al.* 2024; Christiansen 2023; Kılıç 2024; March *et al.* 2024; Silver & Campbell

2018). In weaving together scholarly interventions that demand us to engage more forcefully with the realities of living with, and thriving under, market-based logic of 'climate finance' with an ethnographic account from Seychelles, this chapter gestured towards multiple sites of *actual*, *potential*, or only *imagined* resistance and contestations located within - while, crucially, simultaneously prefigured by - 'capitalist structures [...] in ways that potentially subvert these structures for reparative and decommodifying ends' (Webber *et al.* 2022:936). As the first part of the chapter detailed, such compositional practices of what I term oceanic care work are not meant to reduce, gloss over, or erase the structural, historical, and spatial inequalities these debt-based financial instruments perpetuate. Instead, in tracing their early operationalisations on the ground, and in the water, they map out the unplanned, unremarked, at times spectacular, work that 'capitalism as a project' generates in Seychelles - and its 'durable material and semiotic effects in the world' (Appel 2019:3).

The practices of oceanic care described here, then, signal the messy, wet spaces opened up by Seychelles' blue climate finance initiatives - spaces that are for the first time in the brief history of the archipelago *openly political*, while simultaneously populated by local stakeholders, or just 'concerned citizens' (The Ocean Project Seychelles 2022), previously excluded from the conversation. These practices analytically and politically co-constitute the traces of the 'oceanic thinking' project that I have been articulating so far in the thesis: if that significant turn from SIDS to BOS[S] marks a predetermined effort from elite actors to enrol the watery spatial configuration of the country to exercise political leverage on a global stage, the practices retraced here register the lived realities that are being configured by that same assembling oceanic formation. And yet, similarly to those of the previous chapter, these realities are always partial, speculative in their future imaginings, and contested both within and outside the archipelago; they are 'tentative moment[s] in a particular history' (Tsing 2000:120).

Flipping the 'productive, yet well-trod formula' (Webber *et al.* 2022:935) that tends to converge on development projects as 'failing' (Taggart & Power 2024) on multiple socio-political grounds, I took 'failure' itself as the analytical starting point in the second part of the chapter asking what blue finance in Seychelles allows us to do that could prefigure socioenvironmental relations 'otherwise'. By 'failure' here, I meant specifically those structural flaws discussed raised by critical interventions in the first half of the chapter that indicated the perpetuation of a market-based, neoliberal environmental governance framework. For instance, critical scholarship has demonstrated how the state within Seychelles' finance initiatives has primarily become a mediator of (anticipated, if not yet realised)

rent-producing activities (Christiansen 2023); while turning into a 'de-risking' entity to escort private, international capital into frontier spaces (Kılıç 2024; Mawdsley 2018) - ensuring that such capital remains 'dry' in the process, as long as its dramatic performance keeps circulating. Yet, as the controversies around the ex-Reef Hotel redevelopment project demonstrate, the state's practices of what counts as development, for whom and by whom, are simultaneously called into question by community organisations through climate finance-mediated encounters and spaces. If 'capitalism is a project' (Appel 2019), it is always a contested one; and the unfolding of Seychelles' blue finance initiatives is articulating the formation of political subjectivities *and* political spaces mediated by the ocean - in its material, performed, and projected configurations - to work 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023) in a multitude of sometimes expected, sometimes spontaneous ways.

Chapter Six

Conclusion(s)

The threads animating the present work have been oriented by one guiding question: *Informed by its variegated human and more-than-human pasts, what is the value of 'oceanic thinking' for understanding Seychelles' recent interventions into its blue spaces on a human-induced warming planet?*

But also, and conversely: *What can the history of Seychelles' recent interventions into its blue spaces tell us about the value of 'oceanic thinking'?*

6.1. Seychelles and the Blue Economy

Loosely grouped under the catch-all term of the Blue Economy (BE), the previous chapters have investigated several oceanic elements mobilised by the Republic of Seychelles into its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under the BE paradigm as one of the first countries to officially adopt *and* implement the BE at a state level after the enthusiastic welcome it received globally to ensure both socio-economic well-being and climate change adaptation and mitigation solutions. Informed by my ethnographic practice, I developed an *applied political ontology* that I termed 'oceanic thinking' to empirically track the modes through which the (lived, imagined, material) ocean entangles with, and is mobilised through, the many histories of the country so as to conceptually map it as a space where political subjectivities are formed in relation with, for, or against it.

Moving beyond, or rather drifting alongside, the official statements of what the BE *is* or *should be* in the archipelago, and the daily inflexions practitioners articulated of the term, with this oceanic thinking approach, I first complement Blue Economy scholarship with a much-needed ethnographic account of an unfolding BE programme *in place and time*. Second, this ethnographic account

unpacks the scalar politics of the BE demonstrating its reality more as a policy reification at a state level rather than a fully-fledged, and fully embraced, development agenda on the ground - while articulating the state's efforts to move beyond the Blue Economy towards a form of 'oceanic thinking'. Third, and relatedly, such an ethnographically informed oceanic thinking approach contributes with a reading of the (perhaps progressive) political openings that contemporary blue climate finance instruments may allow, especially for local communities. Finally, this account simultaneously advances a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' reading of the Blue Economy in Seychelles - that is, a reading that carefully attends to the affective and material potentialities the ocean has always had to either reinforce or disrupt particular political configurations. Ultimately, this thesis argued for the value that oceanic thinking - as an *applied political ontology* that (re)centres the subject(s) thinking *with* and *from* the oceanic environment as an act of political mobilisation - holds for contemporary climate finance interventions in the marine governance realm. More specifically, it posited the value of such an oceanic thinking for prefiguring (perhaps progressive) political spaces where collective subjectivities and agencies are formed for those actors usually at the receiving end of development practices, but at the forefront of climate change.

Practising an ethnographic method, I have first argued that the Blue Economy as a lived reality acts as a diluted, locally fractured, and underwhelming development paradigm. Contrary to the well-defined, plastic quality it acquires in official documents as a triple-win (social, economic, and environmental) policy agenda (Schutter *et al.* 2021; Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan Initiative, n.d.), by following its actualisation *in place and through time* I proposed that the Blue Economy functions more as a heuristic device for state officials to situate themselves at the forefront of contemporary fascinations around ocean conservation and sustainable development on a global stage; but it almost completely disappears, when not openly contested, when it comes to fabricating what 'conservation' and 'sustainable development' (should) look like in the archipelago. As a policy tool, then, it exists more as a reification of academic and non-academic discourses - and institutional arrangements that are still under negotiation - than an unfolding, fully embraced and locally owned paradigm of sustainable use of ocean resources and conservation.

In defining the Blue Economy as a 'heuristic device', I adopted Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler's (2021:xii) work in island studies that takes an analytic approach less focussed on 'advocating what island thinking and practices should be, and more [focussed instead on] heuristically drawing out and analysing the ways in which these conceptualisations are today being developed'. Complementing the growing body of scholarly work that tries to systematise *what* the Blue Economy

is tasked with achieving (see Chapter 2), in employing ethnography as a methodological practice I call for researchers to simultaneously attend to the complex and generative work that the BE does and does not do for *all* practitioners in their daily operations beyond the officially endorsed statements. In short, my contention here is that the Blue Economy does not simply pre-exist its encounter(s) in the field, nor does it land as a fully formed policy agenda from the outside or top-down. Instead, it is continually (re)produced through all its multiple entanglements with local, trans-local, and multi-faceted histories. Importantly, in this constant process of (re)production the Blue Economy lends itself to more as well as less of the creative work than it is currently accounted for in critical literature. Consequently, as researchers, we should carefully attend to its multiple mobilisations and manifestations to tease out these nuanced realities. In practising ethnographic attentiveness to the BE mobilisations, I have argued that state officials in Seychelles have moved somewhat beyond the 'Blue Economy' as a framework for political leverage towards what I term 'oceanic thinking' as a more holistic articulation of the relation between their watery and land territories and their positions in the current geopolitical and climate scenarios.

Yet, shrinking the primacy that I attributed to the Blue Economy as a policy agenda to affect ocean governance arrangements for practitioners in Seychelles did not translate into limiting the *political* value it holds within and outside the country. The co-construction of particular scalar imaginaries assumes renewed force in this context. As a heuristic device, Seychellois state officials have endorsed the Blue Economy as a 'Brand' (see the *Roadmap*) that the country is considered to be well-placed to deliver to an *outside audience* to leverage their claims in marine- and climate change-related matters *despite* - or, rather, while actively *challenging* - perceived and real notions of 'smallness' and 'vulnerability' that are usually attached to 'Small Island Developing States' (SIDS). Poetically encapsulated in the rhetoric of former Ambassador Ronny Jumeau, Seychelles is not a *Small Island Developing State*, but a *Big Ocean State* (BOS[S]). Simply put, with a 1.34 million km² EEZ and marine protection zones covering a surface area bigger than Germany, geography matters. And with that, geographical matters form the foundation for making political claims on a world stage. In other words, planning with and for the watery portion that makes up 99% of its territory, the novel development paradigm of the Blue Economy allows Seychelles to *perform* more and more as a BOS[S] - a performance for which Seychelles' practitioners are scripting their own vocabulary.

Yet, in a political-economic system that is still predicated upon Seychelles (and similar island and coastal states) being a SIDS, questions of smallness, vulnerability, economic dependency, limited human and infrastructural resources, and untenable levels of debt, among others, cannot be easily

resolved through the performativity of an alternative political imaginary. In that regard, the Blue Economy Brand endorsed by Seychelles' state apparatus for an outside audience is not simply meant to directly *challenge* what are very real human, logistical, and infrastructural constraints the country is bestowed upon in the current global socio-economic architecture. Instead, it functions more as a tactical deployment of a form of 'oceanic thinking' to actively resituate, and further reinforce, Seychelles' role globally as an *ocean* country - caught in between the need to protect and develop its expansive ocean territory and the inherited limitations and exploitative colonial legacies of the current system.

Read through 'oceanic thinking', I theorised Seychellois state's efforts to enrol the volumetric nature of its watery territory (e.g., as coastal stretches to be protected, as seabed resources to be mapped, as tuna migratory flows to be allocated, as shipping lanes to be safeguarded) as a further development of what Hayward (2012a, 2012b) defined as *aquapelagic assemblage* that the country is pursuing in the current turbulent and sensitive (socio-political) climate(s). Accounting for what is perceived to be an 'ocean blindness' in the field of island studies (e.g., Stratford *et al.* 2011), an aquapelagic assemblage serves to more forcefully foreground the watery territory that makes up the space around the island(s) and its capacity to affect (or not) directly and less so the socio-material relations taking place in those places. Importantly, it is exactly this constant exchange and (re)forming double movement between human and more-than-human actors and processes that is central to an aquapelagic assemblage. For my purposes here, then, the concept of the aquapelago, along with that of the heuristic device, acts as a first entry point to analytically foreground the oceanic element within the current Seychelles' Blue Economy paradigm as well as within its socio-political antecedents.

Returning to the words of then-Minister of Environment Didier Dogley who opened this work, the Blue Economy (and its two crucial associated initiatives of the debt restructuring and the Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan) offered Seychelles an internationally accepted - if still tentatively emerging at the time - development agenda to effectively reposition itself as an aquapelagic assemblage globally. Yet, this is not an easy transformation. As I have argued, and pushing further Hayward's aquapelagic assemblage theory into the uncharted territories of contemporary climate politics and finance, Seychelles had to exercise careful political manoeuvrings to navigate these waters. As one of the first countries to officially endorse *and* operationalise the Blue Economy paradigm, Seychelles made a dent in setting the parameters of what exactly a debt restructuring could look like - for instance, requesting The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to support its plan to establish not just MPAs,

but a full-blown MSP with the subsequent logistical, scientific, and political uncertainties around mapping and protecting *deep* waters; a move further complicated by state officials setting the MPA target at 30% when the global consensus was still focussed on 10% of *coastal and internal* waters. My point is that, in retracing in the first three chapters the historical and political articulations of the Blue Economy Brand in Seychelles as a specific state-making aquapelagic assemblage, I foreground forms of political subjectivities that are also forms of political agency opened up by 'novel' blue financial instruments entangled with particular mobilisations of the watery relationalities present in the country. Below, I will elaborate more on this move to historically situate recent BE narratives and what that means for Seychellois *créolité* as an oceanic formation. Here, instead, I submit that teasing out the political subjectivities relationally formed with Seychelles' BE agenda through oceanic thinking serves to complement and complexify more recent scholarship that (quite rightly) focuses on the structural inefficiencies and shortcomings that, for instance, a debt-based instrument such as the debt restructuring carry for climate change adaptation and mitigation and economic sustainability for a country already burdened with the legacy of a colonial history (e.g., Kılıç 2024; Perry 2022).

Indeed, my own analysis has highlighted many such instances where these configurations left state officials with little space to manoeuvre, consequently setting them up to negotiate difficult positions vis-à-vis socio-economic global pressures. For example, Chapter 4 has discussed at length what happens when *sovereignty* is moved seawards; or rather, when sovereignty has to jostle the vast expanses of an aquapelago, reconfigured through the terms of the Blue Economy paradigm, and exercised with the limited human and economic resources of a *small* state. As former Ambassador Ronny Jumeau reminded us, Seychelles was effectively asked to partially forfeit its full sovereign rights with SeyCCAT; a gamble that state officials agreed on as the perceived benefits of it were understood as far outweighing their shortcomings. But more importantly for the former Ambassador, even with that deal the ocean in Seychelles still remained *public domain* – i.e., SeyCCAT and its mixed governance structure have a say, among others, regarding to whom, for what purposes, and how funds and finances can be disbursed; but constitutionally the ultimate control of the ocean rested with the state (within the limits set by UNCLOS too). In that regard, Seychelles has been *practising* sovereignty within its aquapelago taking into full account the challenges and opportunities to plan with and for the ocean and its turbulent nature that does not lend itself to neat categorisations usually applied on land (e.g., what counts as public/private, owned/controlled) (e.g., Ceglia *et al.* 2025; Peters 2020; Steinberg & Peters 2015).

In the vocabulary that I developed in the previous chapters, following Philip Steinberg's reworking of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic theorisation of ocean space (Steinberg 2025), sovereignty as a calculative technology deployed by Seychelles' state officials can be teased out with a 'more historical' reading to indicate the historically layered strategy that Seychelles' state officials adopted to govern the vast expanses of their ocean territory. As argued in Chapter 4, such a use of sovereignty is not an entirely new phenomenon. Indeed, it is partially rooted in colonial legacies that were then transposed into the newly independent Seychelles to manage far-off places with limited resources. Seychelles has historically governed its outer islands through forms of 'distributed sovereignties' where, first during colonial times *gran blancs* families, and then as an independent nation, multiple NGOs and parastatal entities have effectively acted as the 'eyes and ears of the state' (Duffy 2006:740) to productively and sustainably manage these outposts for the central - first colonial, then independent - government. In making space for these modalities of state governance - modalities that are ultimately state-making as well - I do not simply push against the tendency to reduce, or even erase, forms of political subjectivities that 'small nations' are able to put forward within a supposedly 'external international' agenda, especially in a Global South context. Instead, I simultaneously caution against a tendency towards 'presentism' characterising Blue Economy discourses - a tendency that fails to interrogate the historical continuities as well as discontinuities that these novel development interventions exhibit on the evolving relationship between capitalism and the sea (Ceglia *et al.* 2025) - while warranting closer, historical, and place-based examinations of those same discourses.

Continuing to question this 'presentism' within BE discourses with historical, place-based explorations of Seychelles' practised aquapelagic sovereignty, I further tied it to the turbulent years of the second half of the 20th century. For instance, building upon the writings of explorer and businessman William Travis (1990), Jeremy Raguain has persuasively argued that a pivotal moment in Seychellois history has been the dramatic demographic shift from the 1970s onwards due to global socio-economic pressures of a changing world system that drove the local population - first forcibly moved there to sustain a barely productive colonial cash crop economy - to abandon the exploited landscapes of the outer islands and instead populate the main three inner islands of Mahé, Praslin, and La Digue. With that relocation, Seychellois stopped being 'Creole - dependent on [them] living an island lifestyle, not imported things, not necessarily being tourist providers, but living off the land, living off the ocean, being in tune with nature' to become 'more Seychellois, in the sense of, as a nationality'; a relocation that also coincided with Seychelles gaining independence from the British in 1976.

For a small, newly independent, and socio-economically distressed nation thrown into a world in geopolitical turmoil, the possibility of being a self-sustaining socio-ecological aquapelago where people have an intimate connection with their surroundings that Jeremy proposes – ‘living off the land, living off the ocean’ – might have been a fantasy. Yet, my argument here is that at that historical juncture, rather than patrolling and imposing strong borders and dictating political agendas, Seychelles’ independence was already geared primarily ‘to negotiate interdependencies. For a small country like [it], independence means reckoning interdependencies well’ (Clifford 2001:474). Crucially for my argument here, that reckoning was partially dictated by the specific *oceanic* nature of the country’s territory – where the difficulties in navigating, metaphorically and literally, the vast and deep stretches between the islands generate certain political practices. Yet, those practices are today also, for the first time, being questioned locally and *openly* in the country – as the inner-outer discussion recalled shows – another example of the climate change-mediated, ocean-articulated politics generated by the Blue Economy agenda to potentially orient the state-led capitalist project otherwise.

From a state perspective, and in keeping with the scale-making and state-making threads of this work, sovereignty as a calculative technology to ‘reckon interdependencies well’ has been one of the lenses adopted in Chapter 4. Indeed, there I have argued that the Blue Economy and associated initiatives acted as one conduit that directly reframed ocean space as a *political technology* capable of gathering enthusiasm from a constellation of actors and institutions to further make claims on a global stage. Yet, I additionally suggested that not just *sovereignty* acted as a political technology to ‘reckon interdependencies well’; but at the same time the *ocean* too became a lived, imagined, and aspirational space to do just that. The oceanic history of Seychelles retraced in Chapter 3 demonstrated the extent to which the ocean has *always already* been a historic element within the country; an element through which Seychelles has historically (dis)articulated its nature and that, conversely, has historically acted upon that (dis)articulation.

Staying with the more recent history as an independent nation, Seychelles’ ability to emerge consistently at the very top of many international socio-economic indicators in Africa and beyond (granted those indicators’ shaky foundations) following the footsteps of Renée’s far-reaching social policies has only been possible because of two marine sectors: tourism and fishing. Still, as previously argued, the *role* that such an ocean politics had throughout Renée’s years was a mixed and opaque one, for the most part, secondary to the personal, dictatorial and *landed* aspirations that Renée had for the fledgling nation. The point here is that a ‘more elemental’ and ‘more historical’

theorisation (Steinberg 2025) of Hayward's aquapelagic assemblages (2012a, 2012b) further contributes to unpicking the tensions that have historically marked the ocean politics surrounding the state-making practices of independent Seychelles – from the hidden and uncontested ocean as a 'cash cow' for resource extraction during Renée's years (e.g., tuna fishing), to the vast, politically sensitive 'no-take' protection areas for the world to enjoy of contemporary Blue Economy initiatives.

Expanding such a historical account of those elements co-constituting Seychellois *créolité* as an *oceanic* formation, Chapter 3 has additionally retraced the geological as well as colonial multiple pasts of the aquapelago to foreground the ocean's affective capacities to form (collective and singular, state and community) subjectivities while repositioning current narratives about Seychelles turning into a BOS[S]. Take, for instance, the legacies of a country that had no Indigenous population and was forged through the racialised logics of imperialism and colonial domination. For historians, the ocean as a colonial space acted as a buffer zone – a liminal space that isolated Seychelles' islands serving primarily as convenient stopovers towards first the more lucrative slave and economic trades with Mauritius, Réunion and India; and then as carceral geographies for troublesome (to the colonial authorities) individuals. In short, a space of disconnection. Concurrently, as the *moutya* lyrics poignantly revealed, for the enslaved people forcibly uprooted from their families, cultures, and territories, the ocean was at the same time a terrifying place charged with the violence and uncertainties that those trades signified *and* a space that could allow enslaved subjects to arrest the colonial project – even if temporarily – securing a fleeting moment of freedom. In short, a space of (dis)connection.

Complementing the analysis offered above, then, Seychelles' oceanic thinking does not only emerge through the multiple interactions of its marine and land territories as a historical, performed, real and imagined (colonial and independent) *state-making* formation. Instead, shifting the focus from state officials looking outwards to a global audience, those oceanic elements simultaneously (in)form local articulations of what it means to be Seychellois both today and in the past – something that I posited makes up Seychellois *créolité* as a historically dense, constantly re-made *oceanic formation*. As an oceanic *créolité*, living 'in the wake' of historical violence and slavery (Sharpe 2016) registers in the bodily predispositions recalled by Jeremy that Seychellois manifest towards the open sea ('*Once you go beyond the island, that's [when] people are going to tell you: Why am I doing that?*'), or the profound mystical respect mixed with fear that fisherfolks have historically held for the deep ocean outside the geological boundaries of the Mahé plateau (Travis 1990). All the while, following former

Ambassador Jumeau, as 'pragmatic ocean people' that Seychellois *créolité* is today strategically deployed to advance the state's elites own political agenda.

Hardening the boundaries that are in reality of a very malleable and porous nature, the last section of this thesis has drawn attention away from the 'Blue' (read: historical, cultural, political) part of the Blue Economy directly taking up the second component of the agenda, the 'Economy'. More specifically, it has provided an account of the limitations as well as the affordances that oceanic thinking allows for probing the (perhaps progressive) political openings that contemporary blue climate finance instruments are able to generate - in a time when the risks associated with a changing climate are ever on the rise, and the vulnerabilities of the country are laid bare for all to see. Specifically, I zoomed in on the possibilities those instruments allow for local communities as forms of political agency, and *care work*, that could potentially question the internationally sanctioned, state-led, capitalist project the BE is currently flushed with. To do that, I have first taken onboard the shortcomings that became apparent during my own engagement in Seychelles and that other scholars have already made critical contributions to around the supposedly 'novel' financial instruments in charge of raising funds towards the conservation and sustainable use of ocean spaces (e.g., Christiansen 2023; Kılıç 2024).

For example, analysing the debt restructuring programme that initiated the Blue Economy moment in Seychelles (and arguably globally), I posited that such debt instrument relies on what I termed, following Tsing (2000), 'environmental overperformance, and economic underperformance' - that is, the environmental demands it makes for the debtor country are not commensurate to the economic provisions creditor countries are willing to concede; *de facto* jeopardising the credibility of the deals, its environmental credentials, and its economic sustainability in the name of keeping capital circulation 'dry'. Such a situation where - at least as it currently unfolding with the 'novel' debt restructuring programmes - capital only glides over the water, but never really plunges into its wet and turbulent materiality, is not by chance. Indeed, in terms of maintaining the productivity and circulation of financial capital within what is by all accounts still a risky and uncertain development paradigm (e.g., the Blue Economy, the buzzwords of 'sustainable ocean economy' and 'ocean conservation', and the present and future trajectories of a warming planet), I have argued that financial actors - as multilateral development institutions, NGOs, creditor countries, and even philanthropic organisations - are now moving away, or at least expanding from, primarily funding mainstream ocean activities such as small-scale fisheries and conservation projects (in the forms of, for instance, MPAs) towards funding the seemingly more secure *governance architecture* tasked with

managing a wide range, if not the entirety, of a country's EEZ. This is a significant shift that is happening not just in Seychelles, but at least in all the other countries adopting Seychelles' debt restructuring and Blue Economy model (OECD 2023) that, I suggest, requires further attention by scholars and researchers as the model travels more and more widely.

Such an 'environmental overperformance, and economic underperformance' represents only one of the several political-economic trade-offs that Seychelles' state officials had to negotiate in their quest to strategically deploy the country's expansive ocean space to 'reckon interdependencies well' during uncertain climate presents and futures (Clifford 2001:474). Yet, in the final part of this thesis, I asked whether, with these new financial instruments, it is simultaneously possible to work 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023) - that is, what are the potentialities of these instruments to open up political spaces, or constitute political subjectivities, capable of even only partially re-orienting capital logics less in terms of resource extraction, land (and sea) dispossession, and undemocratic processes towards caring practices for, and by, local communities and ecosystems.

To do so, I moved the analysis away from the scalar imaginaries mobilised by elite actors with the heuristic device of the Blue Economy to reposition Seychelles as a Big Ocean State on a global stage, towards instead pointing to the multiple ways these financial interventions are currently unfolding locally - an area that academic scholarship has been slow in taking up. The SeyCCAT's *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project is an example of the anticipated, but even more so mostly unexpected, configurations that the assembling governance infrastructure around Seychelles' ocean space - coupled with a fresh influx of funds - is able to generate. 'Scientists in the wild' turned into involuntary 'mobile learning schools' that brought the ocean back onshore to the local communities; outreaching activities translated into children's books and newly coined terms for 'seagrasses' - as it is not possible to care for and protect what is not known *and* named; ground-truthed scientific maps of coastal stretches and ecosystems served as powerful tools to hold the government accountable for official statements made on a global stage (e.g., protecting 100% of seagrass habitats) as well as proposing alternate, more socially and environmentally sustainable, development practices.

Along with the others recounted, I contend that all of these practices can, and crucially should, be foregrounded as forms of *care work* that local practitioners, perhaps inadvertently, articulate to potentially learn to do (climate) capitalism differently. Answering recent scholarly calls to take seriously the possibility of working 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber *et al.* 2022; Webber 2023), I located then not just foreclosures but parallel potential affordances that blue climate finance

generates in Seychelles. Such a move also continues to spin the thread recounted above that foregrounds the agential capacity that Seychellois elite *and* grassroots practitioners are able to exert with their assembling ocean politics, further complicating narratives of 'smallness', 'vulnerability', and 'political subjugation'. Additionally, as an aquapelagic assemblage, this analysis expands Hayward's (2012a, 2012b) initial theorisation in that it further foregrounds it as the entangled formation of historical, political, cultural, *and* financial moments between human and more-than-human entities across the liminal spaces and scales of these 'aqueous territorialities' (Campling & Colás 2021).

Still, the local practices of care work I have described in the last part of this work also complicate the analysis offered at the beginning of what exactly the Blue Economy is - or, rather, does. Indeed, I posited that, locally, the BE manifests as an underwhelming, diluted, and fragmented agenda that seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time; a policy reality that is conjured only the moment officials take it up to frame their agenda for an outside audience. Yet, all of the instances of care practices recalled thereafter can be traced back to a certain extent to the Blue Economy and associated initiatives prompted by the debt restructuring - although practitioners might not necessarily consider themselves as contributing to any of those agendas in the first place. While the heightened political aspirations the BE is charged with from a state perspective are abundantly clear - as evidenced by the powerful rhetoric of former ambassador Ronny Jumeau - those same aspirations seem to disintegrate when articulated locally by practitioners - mostly on account of the external actors those agendas are usually associated with and the historically fraught relations they are perceived as founded on (e.g., the outer islands governance structure).

Therefore, in following the four-pronged approach sketched out above, I foregrounded the BE as a political project starting from an ethnographic practice to help us make sense of this apparently contradictory situation. Indeed, with that methodology, I was able to witness the construction of both those imaginaries and their associated scalar politics as well as the historical and affective imprints these recent interventions bear today. A significant contribution from this results in the ability not to conclusively define what the Blue Economy is or should be; but rather to hold the space open for all of its multiple, at times contradictory, occasionally detrimental, as well as potentially progressive permutations to be in conversation with each other. Ultimately, if the BE in the country is diluted, fractured, and underwhelming that does not translate into it not doing *any* work on the ground and in the water. Instead, I contended that whereas its self-contained and expansive character is fabricated only in the elite (re)scaling of Seychelles from a SIDS to a BOS[S], the Blue Economy concurrently, and somewhat awkwardly, acts - or could act - as a futuring tool for rethinking

alternatives to, and within, climate finance for local communities and beyond. Crucially, all of these orientations that the BE is capable of leaning towards co-exist simultaneously – cross-contaminating each other sometimes directly, sometimes less so to generate still uncharted configurations. With that empirical encounter, I then argued for the move beyond the ‘Blue Economy’ and towards ‘oceanic thinking’ to be able to track, and hold the tension between, such an apparent contradiction – a move that is simultaneously a political orientation (e.g., of practitioners on the ground) and a scholarly practice (e.g., of researchers foregrounding a ‘more elemental’ and ‘more historical’ approach to critical ocean studies).

6.2. Beyond Seychelles, Beyond the Blue Economy

So far, I have mostly focused on the first question opening these concluding reflections – *what is the value of ‘oceanic thinking’ for understanding Seychelles’ recent interventions into its blue spaces on a human-induced warming planet?* In this final section, instead, I want to turn more specifically to the second query – *What can the history of Seychelles’ recent interventions into its blue spaces tell us about the value of ‘oceanic thinking’?* Along with the specific contributions this work has generated – e.g., on sovereignty at sea, the (non-)value of policy realities, the scripting of an ocean vocabulary, the identity politics of *créolité* as an oceanic formation – here I indicate broader analytical trajectories that could orient future research agendas. As a cautionary note, if any such discussion is necessarily speculative in nature, not least because of Seychelles’ unique socio-political and geophysical features, I believe it is also politically urgent – as Seychelles’ debt restructuring model travels more and more widely (OECD 2023; The Nature Conservancy 2024) – and scholarly overdue – to partly counteract the ‘ocean blindness’ that geography and cognate fields have long been couched in (Hayward 2012a; Steinberg 2001).

For a start, I previously proposed that the confluence of Blue Economy-related initiatives and supposedly ‘novel’ financial instruments for ocean conservation and development, especially in the Global South(s), signals an evolving relationship between capitalism and the sea that warrants further investigation. Although there is a robust body of scholarship that unpicks the political economy of that relationship from a historical, industry-focussed angle (for a classic example, see Campling & Colás 2021), with fisheries being the prominent example (e.g., Campling & Havice 2014), **there is a need to more systematically analyse the contemporary trend that moves financial capital away from – or rather, alongside – traditional ocean industries and remits (e.g., conservation see Mallin et al.**

2019) towards capturing the institutional arrangements tasked with managing those (new) 'governable spaces' (Choi 2017, a notable exception in this regard is Mallin & Barbesgaard 2020).

My advance here is that such a trend needs to be read in conjunction with a move that I termed 'environmental overperformance and economic underperformance' - a move that indexes the different (lived, material, juridical) spatiality of the ocean where 'development practices' can be actualised. If 'development as de-risking' represents the go-to current policy agenda, what I am calling for here is an expansion of our understanding of 'de-risking' (investors' concerns) that looks beyond the re-tooling of fiscal and institutional capacities of the recipient state (Gabor 2021), towards an appreciation of the material spaces and practices that are enrolled in that same 'de-risking' project. If the empty (and *emptiable*) ocean resembles a favourite strategy that has historically made capital accumulation possible in the first place (Steinberg 2001), today's novel configurations of that same strategy demand renewed, creative critical engagements.

Articulating the 'oceanic thinking' approach as an *applied political ontology* the (re)centres the subject(s) thinking *with* and *from* the ocean as both a socio-political and geomaterial space as an act of political mobilisation served as a tentative way forward for achieving just that novel creative engagement. In this thesis, oceanic thinking as an applied political ontology manifests as a three-pronged approach indicating the multiplicity of thinking-subject(s) it is simultaneously speaking to, and with. Indeed, it is first a scholarly project aimed primarily at debates within the field of 'critical ocean studies' and 'climate finance'; or, to rework Steinberg and Peters (2015:261), an approach aimed at bringing the sea to climate finance, and climate finance at sea. Second, it foregrounds the affordances as well as limitations generated by harnessing the ocean as a space for socio-economic development for political actors usually at the receiving end of development practices, but at forefront of climate change. Third, and foundational to both these interventions, the oceanic thinking approach signals the possibility that ethnography as a methodological practice holds for attuning ourselves as researchers to the more politically oriented ontological spaces configured by a 'wet lens'.

My turn towards a 'more elemental' and 'more historical' (Steinberg 2025) analysis of BE interventions in Seychelles - as part of the broader 'oceanic thinking' project - mapped the initial empirical contributions of this work. A first, seemingly banal question for a 'more elemental' approach led me to ask, 'Where is the ocean in these deals?' - that is, at what point do development practices take account (or not) of the turbulent materialities and accompanying realities of the spaces they are

meant 'to develop'? The answer: *nowhere* - at least not in the initial iterations of those discussions. Following that thread, I located moments where primarily local stakeholders and practitioners have called on specific aspects of that ocean - e.g., as seagrass meadows, as tuna schools, as eroding waves - to advance political visions of what they believed an ocean country should be like. In short, **situating these development practices within a real and lived space could perhaps 'afford greater agency to recipient policymakers [and local communities] than earlier and more paternalistic iterations of Development' did** (Taggart & Power 2024:17).

Resisting an ever-present pitfall of 'fetishizing it [the ocean] in its alterity, or reducing it to a metaphor, or diminishing it to an environment that provides resources, or bypassing it as an intervening space in the middle' (Steinberg 2025:2), ethnographically staying closer to of the multiple, different manifestations the ocean presents in Seychelles - e.g., as a juridical space prone-to-privatisation but always state-owned, as an affective element of simultaneously life-bringing and life-taking force, as a discursive device to be *re-politicised*, as a historical factor all too often *de-politicised* - I recomposed a picture (partial, to be sure) of the Seychelles ocean-scape that is ripe for both further capital exploitation (Christiansen 2023; Kılıç 2024) *as well as* fugitive moments of potential rupture of those same logics. **I contend that the very nature of ocean-based development makes for such destabilising moments of capitalist capture to bubble to the surface. Their imagined realities won't necessarily be actualised, but I urge us as researchers to be attentive to such possibilities, let them seep into our scholarship, so that they might perhaps refract and amplify across multiple stories.**

In this regard, a 'more historical' (Steinberg 2025) account of contemporary ocean-based development practices - as I proposed it here - is at the same time a history of the past (Seychellois *créolité* as an ocean formation), a history of the present (BE intervention), *and* a history of the future (the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project and the projected climate scenarios). A history of the future is, indeed, a pressing demand especially for island communities disproportionately exposed to the risks of a warming planet not just in some imagined time ahead, but today. **If capitalism and climate change are co-produced at a 'contingent dynamic interface', I propose the geographies of climate finance interested in building 'anti-capitalist futures' (Webber 2023) to be expanded beyond the techno-utopianism and urban fetishism typical of the field, to multiply points of leverage for more abundant climate futures.**

Conversely, the more justice-oriented Blue Economy and ocean-focussed literature could expand its reach if it were to be in conversation with that climate finance literature, and take seriously the

possibility that 'climate capitalism is the material basis against which to make claims for other kinds of outcomes' (Webber 2023:17). Indeed, such an approach could offer a much-needed addition to marine researchers interested in the loosely defined 'blue justice' that tend to primarily focus on either descriptive or prescriptive policy recommendations with a usual narrative that too narrowly pits 'vulnerable-coastal-communities-against-big-states/corporations' (e.g., Bennet *et al.* 2021). Instead, as I have repeatedly stressed, **the 'oceanic thinking' practice I have outlined throughout this thesis adds value for simultaneously tackling the political economy of current ocean financing attentive to both 'an approach that works towards reparative outcomes from contestations within, and negotiations with, climate capitalism' (Webber 2023:15) and the geographically informed 'modes of doing ocean management' (Peters 2020:3) that that negotiations from within could endanger.**

To be clear, the more prescriptive policy approach of the 'blue justice' literature remains vital. The same goes for the climate finance literature providing critical insights into the colonial legacy and exploitative accumulation logics that debt-based instruments perpetuate to 'solve' the multidimensional crises of our time. There can be no climate justice, or blue justice for that matter, without 'debt justice for climate reparations' (Táíwo & Bigger 2022). In that vein, as I have noted throughout, in situating this work within a literature that is primarily focussed on outlining a *critical approach* to advance alternate political positions within the climate finance space (Webber 2023, Webber *et al.* 2022), my aim with 'oceanic thinking' has been to articulate an applied political ontology to do just that in a space - the ocean - that is only recently emerging as an arena of scholarly debates within political economy of climate finance. In advancing such a tentative approach, I adopted Gareth Bryant and Sophie Webber's (2024:14, emphasis in the original) expansive definition of 'climate finance' as the multiple '*strategies that mobilize financial ideas, instruments and institutions to reshape the relationship between capitalist economies and climate change*'. Informed by my ethnographic practice, this definition has allowed me to analytically hold together, among others, the 'conservation', 'climate' and 'development' finance realms while staying closer to the political mobilisations that these realms served for my interlocutors in Seychelles. Yet, in continuing this work, **further research could analytically tease out in finer detail the work that each of this 'conservation', 'climate change', and 'development' realm does, for whom, in what circumstances, and why - building upon, and adding granularity to, the oceanic thinking approach I am proposing here.**

In that same vein of flashing points for future investigation, **a second, major thread that calls for more sustained and long-term engagement is the changing role that non-governmental organisations - and philanthropic, multi-lateral development, and financial institutions - have in the policy realm of sovereign countries.** Although not completely new (e.g., Duffy 2006), the intensities and the modalities with which transnational institutions are taking on that role are staggering. Other researchers have raised questions about the accountability and democratic transparency that an international, non-governmental organisations (in the case of Seychelles, The Nature Conservancy) have in a country's entire development space (in this case, its Exclusive Economic Zone). While sharing these concerns, my findings suggest more mixed results. Stakeholders and practitioners generally welcomed the scientific capabilities and political leverage that such big organisations could bring - especially in areas where Seychelles was perceived as lacking (e.g., the scientific expertise for deep-sea ocean research or GIS mapping) - while trying to leverage TNC's name to support their own political projects (e.g., Jumeau's account).

Yet, the capacity of these international organisations to still reframe what 'development' and 'conservation' should be must continually be interrogated. For instance, SeyCCAT has recently launched a consultancy call 'for supporting development of a five-year strategy for TNC in Seychelles' where it is stated that 'TNC has been supporting the Government of Seychelles in a facilitation role to develop the SMSP, an oversight role with a seat on the board, finance and technical committees of SeyCCAT, and technical support for improved fisheries management in-country. [...] TNC has an MoU with the Government of Seychelles to deliver the SMSP and a cooperative agreement with the SFA [Seychelles Fishing Authority]' (SeyCCAT 2024). The ability of a single organisation to be so deeply entrenched within an evolving financial and governance structure deserves more attention in the long run.

Relatedly, the Seychelles government relies not just on TNC for making sense of its ocean space. Consider the role that The Pew Charitable Trusts has in the *Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change* project discussed in the previous pages, a role through which they are strongly pushing for the establishment of a blue carbon market now that Seychelles' seagrass meadows have been mapped and their blue carbon potential quantified (Elizabeth & Derjacques 2024). For a small-island, big-ocean state, what are the stakes of enrolling international organisations as one, partially forced, strategy of practising sovereignty today, on a warming planet? What are its affordances and limitations - drifting between the 'given', fixed, and primarily extractive modes of ocean management

that many of these organisations promote, and more flexible, perhaps more equitable, territorialisation of ocean space countries and communities might be willing to pursue (Peters 2020)?

By now, it should be evident how the research agendas that I have outlined – on **the evolving relationship between capitalism and the sea, the deep-seated role that international organisations are acquiring in ocean governance and financing, and the potentiality that oceanic thinking may allow for locating political agency and alternative outcomes for climate futures** – are ripe for more sustained academic engagement. Yet, these agendas are even more pressing when considering the dizzying pace at which the Seychelles’ model is travelling around the world. The Nature Conservancy has just announced the closing of the fourth debt restructuring deal in The Bahamas following the pioneering case (and model) of Seychelles (The Nature Conservancy 2024). Its press release proudly boasts: ‘[The Bahamas deal] will be the fifth Nature Bonds project for TNC, alongside those in Seychelles (2016), Belize (2021), Barbados (2022), and Gabon (2023). Combined, the five projects will support governments to reach new protections or improved management of nearly 238 million hectares of ocean and a total of USD 1.5 billion of debt refinanced. Importantly, these projects are expected to generate more than USD 535 million of new funding for conservation, and they demonstrate how quickly this approach is scaling around the world’ (The Nature Conservancy 2024). Although initiated by TNC, the debt restructuring model is also currently travelling across multiple geographies and institutions that are adapting it to their own ends (OECD 2023) – an expansive drive that, just to stay with TNC, is exemplified in one respect by TNC’s vocabulary shifting from *Blue Bonds* (The Nature Conservancy 2023) to *Nature Bonds* (The Nature Conservancy 2024) to capture the scalability of the model beyond the ‘ocean’.

If the Seychelles’ case was only a ‘proof-of-concept’ (Commonwealth Small States 2018), the subsequent deals have vastly expanded the reach of political, financial, and local partners and number of transactions involved – ranging from massive commercial debt restructurings (e.g., in Belize), to new private investors and multilateral development banks axes (e.g., in The Bahamas), or innovative co-guarantee structures (e.g., in Barbados) – all the while leaving the basic political and governance infrastructure assembled in, for, and by Seychelles virtually unchanged. My point is rather simple: as Seychelles’ debt restructuring model travels globally – sustained by the dramatic circulation of its story based on environmental overperformance, and economic underperformance – multiple sites for engagement can be located to assess the waters of the research agendas I am outlining here – to interrogate its limitations, and test its possibilities.

Assessing these research agendas brings me to the final point I want to draw attention to - the methodological practice underpinning much of the present work. I opened this thesis by stating that one of its contributions lies in being one of the first, to my knowledge, long-term ethnographic accounts of any Blue Economy project globally that seeks to interpret the construction of its paradigm as an integrated development-conservation-financing programme. In doing that, the aim was to simultaneously offer a tentative account to not just think *with* and *from* the ocean, but also ethnographically write *with* and *from* it. There is no such thing as a 'one-size-fits-all' research methodology, and long-term ethnographic fieldwork is far from that. It can be mentally exhausting in jostling researcher-participant relationships both when in the country and not, logistically challenging, time-consuming, and fairly onerous - all features that do not bode particularly well with the accelerated pace of life in academia and beyond. Equally crucial, and quite obviously, the types of research questions we are interested in don't necessarily make long-term ethnography an always apt choice.

Yet, as I hope to have demonstrated, ethnography as a methodological praxis is simultaneously an exhilarating and rich experience capable of not just generating the more expected, but many other times surprising, insights; while simultaneously shedding light on the process of reflexively co-producing knowledge in the field. Here, I am reminded of Anna Tsing's (2005:xii) considerations on her time spent in Indonesia, 'My ethnographic involvement with activists taught me habits of restraint and care: There are lots of things that I will not research or write about. I do not mean that I have whitewashed my account, but rather that I have made choices about the kinds of research topics that seem appropriate, and, indeed, useful to building a public culture of international respect and collaboration.' **The value of such a practice, then, lies in its ability to remain close to both the discursive articulations of policy and development agendas 'branded' in global settings as well as to its ability to affect (or not) - and in what capacity - the local realities they are supposed to touch.** Given that process messy, mostly contested, and largely indeterminate nature, it allows us to appreciate how political subjectivities and collective agential formations are relationally co-produced with their surrounding spaces and histories (see also Tsing *et al.* 2019). With such an ethnographic attentiveness, I was able to articulate 'oceanic thinking' as a historically sedimented and relationally attuned political orientation that actors and practitioners in Seychelles are honing to navigate geopolitical presents and futures, while extending recent scholarly debates on the possibilities of thinking *with* and *from* the oceanic environment. After all, nurtured by 'habits of restraints and care', the choices we make are able to 'put flesh' on policy and development claims 'to enable deeper, rooted decolonial engagement with on-the-ground, lived experience' (Oslender

2019:1694) – a much-needed addition that we, as researchers working across the politics of governing, financing, and living on a warming ocean, must add to our methodological toolkit.

Traditionally a space foundational to states' territorial powers, though hardly acknowledged as one, as well as to economic circuits of unfettered capital movement, with the Blue Economy the ocean has come to occupy once again the slippery mantle of saviour for communities, environments, and economies. Centring Seychelles as a geologically layered, still in-the-making aquapelago and its *créolité* as a historically (re)marked, continually composing *oceanic* formation has allowed us to delve below the shiny surface of both the Blue Economy as a seemingly singular, straightforward development paradigm praised internationally, and the parallel rigid critiques raised by scholars and policymakers on its guiding logics. Instead, this work has foregrounded forms and practices of 'oceanic thinking' that take seriously the possibility of contemporary climate finance interventions in the marine governance realm to prefigure (perhaps progressive) political spaces where collective subjectivities and agencies are formed for those actors usually at the receiving end of development practices, but at the forefront of climate change. If climate capitalism is not just a project (Appel 2019), but historically an oceanic one (Campling and Colás 2021), here I have mapped the real and imagined (caring) trajectories that current ocean-based development paradigms open up (whilst alert to others foreclosed) to work 'for and against climate capitalism' (Webber 2023). In doing so, I held the 'geographically informed mode of thinking' (Peters 2020:4) ocean governance demands from us – while being attentive to its material properties (Steinberg & Peters 2015) – to make space for less politically and environmentally exploitative practices towards potentially alternate blue climate futures.

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