In September 1971, two months after the opening of the Seychelles International Airport, cargo ships began arriving in the Seychelles packed not with tourists but with people forcibly removed from the Chagos archipelago. For the next nineteen months, cargo ships left more than two hundred Chagossians on the docks of the Seychelles’ largest island, Mahé. During the deportations, British agents gave the people the ‘choice’ to go to Mauritius or the Seychelles. With no choice to remain in their homeland, most of the Chagossians decided to go to Mauritius, where some had kin connections or other social ties. A smaller group, composed mostly of Chagossian women and their children travelling with Seychelles-born men who had worked in Chagos, decided to go to the Seychelles.

To the extent that there has been any attention paid to the islanders’ exile—which was systematically hidden from the world by the US and UK governments—most studies have focused on the group in Mauritius. Those in the Seychelles have been almost completely ignored. This then is the first significant account focused specifically on the experience of Chagossians in the Seychelles. It is part of a larger body of more than eight years of research and writing about the Chagossians, including more than a month of ethnographic and quantitative survey research conducted over three visits to the Seychelles between 2002 and 2004.¹

¹ Some of the material in this paper draws upon Vine 2009 and Vine, Sokolowski, and Harvey 2005. Thank you to the following individuals and groups who helped conceive, plan, and execute research contributing to the chapter: Chagos Committee (Seychelles), Janette Alexis, Bernadette Dugassee, Jean-Claude Mahoune, Julienne Barra, the Seychelles National Heritage Museum, Gabriel Isaac, Patrick Nanty, Chagos Refugees Group, Kamarad de Resers, Olivier Bancoulit, Lisette Aurélie Talate, Philip Harvey, S. Wojciech Sokolowski, Shirley Lindenbaum, and Satinder Ragobur. Thanks especially to Liam Campling for encouraging me to write the first draft of this chapter, and to Sandra Evers and Marry Kooy for their comments and assistance in making significant revisions. Methodological note: In addition to the relatively brief period of research conducted in the Seychelles, this chapter and the analysis herein are hampered by the extreme lack of social science research about a country that is one of the least populous in the world.
Juliette Bernard² was one of the last Chagossian women deported to the Seychelles around 1973. Juliette was born in Peros Banhos in 1944 and gave birth to five children in Chagos. One night, with lightning illuminating the sky, her husband, a Seychellois who had come to Chagos to work as a labourer, told Juliette they had to board a boat to leave Peros Banhos. Juliette only had time to gather her children and a few of their belongings. As she and her family steamed away from Chagos, Juliette left behind her house and most of her possessions, her land and property, the place of her birth and her children’s birth, and the place where many of her ancestors were buried.

Like other Chagossians, Juliette’s family counted five generations in Chagos.³ In addition to her and her children, Juliette’s parents were also born in Peros Banhos. Two of Juliette’s grandparents were born in Peros Banhos. Two of Juliette’s great-grandparents worked and created homes in Chagos.

Soon after Juliette and her children arrived in the Seychelles, Juliette’s husband left her for a Seychellois woman. Juliette and her children were forced to move from place to place. From neighbourhood to neighbourhood, Belvedere to Les Mamelles to Anse aux Pins to English River, they lived wherever someone would let them make a small home. Claude Bernard, Juliette’s youngest child, remembers their 4 metre by 4 metre room at Belvedere, with its straw walls and tin roof. They used the toilet at the home of the woman who owned the land. They bathed in the river and carried drinking water from the river on their heads. Juliette supported the family on 20 Seychelles Rupees a day (about $3.60 at the time). “It was not nice, you see?” said Claude of those first years in the Seychelles. “You came to a place. You don’t know anyone. You see. And where will you go? You don’t know where you will go. Left? Right? Front? Back? Up? You don’t know.”

According to statistics maintained by Chagossian groups, Juliette is now one of about 550 Chagossians who were exiled to the Seychelles or born there since the expulsion (representing about one-tenth of the group’s estimated total population of approximately 5,569) (Sheridans

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² All the names used for Chagossians living today are pseudonyms, except when an individual explicitly requested the use of her real name.
³ As Juliette’s case shows, Chagos-born islanders often intermarried with Mauritians and to a lesser extent Seychellois who migrated to Chagos and settled there, gradually becoming part of the Chagossian community.