

P R E F A C E

Looking at Indian Ocean Multiple Forms of Slavery

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*Our skin re-traumatizes the sea
They mock us
For not being able to throw ourselves into something that was instrumen-
tal in trying to execute our extinction.
For you, the ocean is for surf boards, boats and tans
And all the cool stuff you do under there in your bathing suits and goggles
But we, we have come to be baptised here
We have come to stir the other world here
We have come to cleanse ourselves here
We have come to connect our living to the dead here
Our respect for water is what you have termed fear
The audacity to trade and murder us over water
Then mock us for being scared of it
The audacity to arrive by water and invade us*

Koleka Putuma, "Water," 2016¹

In this poem South African poetess Koleka Putuma beautifully captures the strong emotions that black peoples attach to the sea. From the sea came the slavers, the colonizers, the soldiers, the merchants and the missionaries, and most did not have it in mind to engage in peaceful encounters. And though the routes and roads of enslavement are not exclusively maritime, the sea has been associated with exile and deportation in the hold of a ship, and the ship with despair, with stench and with death. However, whereas Paul Gilroy could speak of *the Black Atlantic*,² the "broad geographical space spanning multiple locations of the Indian Ocean world" and the existence of varying degrees of bondage "from eastern Africa to the Philippines" requires a strong

multi-directional and multi-layered approach. Hence the astute and insightful choice of the co-editors, Alicia Schrikker and Nira Wickramasinghe, for “a variety of disciplinary approaches”.

Growing up on Réunion Island, once a French slave colony and now an overseas department, I never heard of slavery at school. I learned about slavery at home and while listening to *maloya*, the music, performance, oral poetry and ritual to the ancestors created by the descendants of slaves from Madagascar and Mozambique, enriched by sounds of the Indian indentured workforce. In Mauritius, the “sister island”, which had also been a French slave colony, the history of the slave trade and slavery was long ignored and the very existence of Afro-Mauritians denied. In both former colonies, the white elites downplayed the existence of bonded labour which built their wealth and racism played its role in undermining the importance of slavery in the making of Creole societies. Slavery is not yet an important topic in schools and universities around the Indian Ocean. Movements for a reappropriation of that history came from the anti-colonial and anti-racist front in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, memorials have been built around the Indian Ocean, and publications, exhibitions, documentaries, conferences, novels, songs and poems have brought to light the history and memories of enslavement. The archaeology of slavery in this region of the world, which is in its infancy, will certainly reveal more and there are archives still to be looked at. A lot remains to be uncovered. The vast Indian Ocean, which carries the memories of enslaved and indentured workers, still has much to say about the lives and afterlives of slaves.

This is why *Being a Slave. Histories and Legacies of European Slavery in the Indian Ocean* is an important volume. The variety of its authors, topics and approaches contributes to a rare intra-disciplinary conversation on enslavement in the Indian Ocean.

Notes

1. Koleka Putuma, “Water” *Pen South Africa*, last modified 15 June 2016, <https://pensouthafrica.co.za/water-by-koleka-putuma>.
2. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and the Black Consciousness* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).