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The African Oceans—Tracing the Sea as Memory of Slavery in South African Literature and Culture

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ABSTRACT

This essay traces images of the Indian and Atlantic oceans in South African literature and art for their evocation of the country's history of slavery. I argue that turning one's gaze to the sea recovers evidence of slave lives otherwise erased from folk memory, as well as the decisively modern character of slave practices subsumed behind picturesque portrayals of the Cape. The essay reveals an alternative modernity crafted by enslaved people in practices of language, religion, and food culture in South Africa. The approach taken in this article follows studies by Pumla Gqola and Cheryl Hendricks on discourses of slavery and sexuality, Noeleen Murray on the meanings of slave burial sites, and Martin Hall on colonial architecture in mapping the profound influence of slavery and slave resistance on South African culture. The theme of the two oceans in South African literature, art and the practices of Malay food constitute a subversive archive that testifies to the presence and subjectivity of enslaved people at the Cape, and takes its place among African memories of slavery.

the sea is so heavy inside us
and i won't sleep tonight.
i have buckets of memory in a jar
that i keep for days and nights like these.

—Mxolisi Nyezwa, *Song Trials*

Daar kom die Alibama, die Alibama, die kom oor die see
Daar kom die Alibama, die Alibama, die kom oor die see
(Here comes the Alabama, the Alabama comes over the sea)

—Folk song in Cape Town about the American Confederate ship the Alabama which sailed into Table Bay in 1863

When ships entered Cape Town harbor, you could tell what they were carrying by smell—spices or slaves.

—Cass Abrahams, personal interview

Sunday 17—We saw the coast of the Cape.
Tuesday 19—Another slave died.

—Hendrik Frappe, journal of the slave ship Leijdsman returning from Mozambique, November 1715, cited in Weston and Armstrong

INTRODUCTION: A VIEW OF THE SEA

Standing on Signal Hill above Cape Town, one looks down at the city along neat grids of streets and buildings that stretch to the curve of Table Bay. In the seventeenth-century, the harbor city of Cape Town was a halfway point on the spice route from the Dutch East Indies to Europe and the slave route to the Americas. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company established a colony at the Cape to provision its ships engaged in the spice trade. From 1658, slaves were brought to the Cape to provide labor for the settlement, and soon the trade in slaves and spices jointly drove the shipping routes from the East. The vantage point on Signal Hill was a look-out for the city, and a site from which many nineteenth-century landscapes of Cape Town were painted (see Murray). It is also the oldest slave graveyard in South Africa, called Tana Baru, "New Place." In the twentieth century, the Cape Colony would eventually meld with other colonial possessions to form South Africa. The colonial city represented in such picturesque paintings was founded on slave labor, but these views of Cape Town also rendered that labor invisible. In this paper I explore the possibility of recovering memories of slavery by reading images of the sea anew in recent literature and art from South Africa.

The nineteenth-century panoramas of the Cape painted from Signal Hill directed the gaze away from the sea toward the city with its detailed divisions, the looming height of Table Mountain with its crags and hiding places, and the bodies whose signs of labor or leisure signaled whether they were slaves or slave-owners. The sea, infinite yet prettily contained, recalled the endless distance to Europe and Asia, but in these paintings, the eye turns away from the ocean, drawn by the imposing presence of the mountain and the architecture of the city. This has something to do with colonists' preoccupation with land—with its possession—and their sense of belonging in it (see Baderoon, "Ambiguous Visibility"). Because land is the great obsession of the settlers and the sign of anguished loss for the indigenous Khoi-San, the carefully observed, regulated presence of land is everywhere in South African literature and art, and it has been possible in this picturesque view of the Cape to turn away from the sea.

But this absence is weighted and meaningful, and it signals something too, because, in fact, the sea is all around. To the Khoi-San, Table Mountain is Hoerikwagga, "the mountain that rises from the sea." Cape Town is a city on the peninsula, a piece of land projecting into water. If we turn to face the water, what do we see? I propose in this paper that an "alternative modernity" made by slaves in the Cape becomes visible through the theme of the sea. Following C. L. R. James's assertion that in the Atlantic world, "slaves become the first modern people" (cited in Hofmeyr 5), a careful reading of the image of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in colonial and contemporary South African texts can recover evidence of the subjectivities of slaves and enserfed indigenous people.

How does this slave-made modernity become visible through the theme of the sea? I argue below that such a modernity is recoverable by looking obliquely at the culture of the powerful and probing it for the subsumed histories of slave presence and agency. The two African oceans play a critical role in this process of recovery. In a major review of the theme of the oceans in South African literature and culture, African literature scholar Isabel Hofmeyr observes that "the Atlantic seaboard [is] the site for the emergence of capitalist modernity as a transnational system" and that we may see "the Indian Ocean as the site per excellence of 'alternative modernities'" (13). My approach here is not to shift the focus from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean in South African narratives about slavery, but to attend to both sites. In this vision, both the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans are the oceans of middle passage, but also of cosmology, memory, and desire, tracked in the movement, language, and culture of enslaved and dominated people. I argue in this article that the descendents of slaves and serfs in South Africa made a new place where the two African oceans meet.

If Paul Gilroy's conception of the Black Atlantic leaves Africa largely untouched (Hofmeyr 6), due to its own slave culture, a South African view of the Black Atlantic recovers a memory of loss, as slaves are transported from Asia and Africa to the Americas (Da Costa and Davids 3), but also of return, exemplified by the return of Sarah Baartman's body from France in 2002 to be buried in South Africa (see Abrahams). I discuss a further example of this dual vision of the Atlantic found in the poetry collection *Castaway* (1999) below. In addition, I explore the Indian Ocean through the register of the private, and through the novel *Unconfessed* (2006) and the poetry collection *Imprendehora* (2009). By focusing on representations of the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans in recent South African literature and art, I trace in this article the signs of alternative modernities generated among enslaved and enserfed people in South Africa through what I term a "two-ocean" consciousness.

By this, I mean a modernity crafted outside the dominant order of the slave-owning society at the Cape, and therefore largely invisible to it, or, if visible, a slave modernity. Such a modernity takes various forms within an aesthetic regime of the picturesque. The tradition represented by the paintings alluded to above organizes the Cape landscape to render indigenous and enslaved people as marginalized but compliant with colonial desires. Slaves, known as Malays, were portrayed through a longstanding tradition as submissive, skilled, and reliable (Silva 141), while indigenous people who resisted Dutch conscription were described as "idle" (Coetzee 28). The tradition of portraying the picturesque and submissive "Malay" generated an image of slavery at the Cape as "mild" in comparison to

the new world (Keegan 16). To overlook the brutality of slavery would therefore be to cede to the picturesque discourse of portraying slaves as complicit with the system that dehumanized them. Instead, following Fredric Jameson's observation that "[h]istory is what hurts" (102), I trace signs of slave and indigenous resistance through marginalized and despised modernities at the Cape. Such disparaged forms of modernity at the Cape are evident in the labeling of Khoi-San resistance to Dutch conscription to labor in the settlement as "idleness" (Coetzee 28); in the slave-created creole language, Afrikaans, that was dismissed as a "kombuis taal," or kitchen language (though one that was later appropriated by Afrikaans nationalists resisting British colonial rule), and in the racialized contempt of European travel writers in accounts of the physically intertwined lives of Dutch settlers and their slaves (Ribeiro 40).

Another form of alternative modernity may be found in the survival and growth of Islam among slaves at the Cape. Slavery and Islam are intricately connected in the colonial history of the Cape because the majority of slaves at the Cape were brought from India, Southeast Asia, and East Africa, and many of them were Muslim (Bradlow and Cairns 81–104). In addition, there was a high rate of conversion among indigenous people at the Cape, since Islam offered "a degree of independent slave culture" separate from that of slave-owners (Worden 4). Under the Statutes of India through which the Dutch governed the Cape Colony, the public practice of Islam was punishable by death, so Islam survived through hidden practices of subversion by slaves, shaping communal relations, language, and food rituals that survive among descendents of slaves even today. The modernity of Islam at the Cape is evident in the form of the religion, which shows the influence of both the Sufist origins of Muslim slaves from around the Indian Ocean and the impact of slavery and conversion. Islam at the Cape has taken a notably tolerant form in relation to women's roles, it may be argued, in response to the enforced prostitution and sexual slavery to which enslaved women were subjected.

I am aware of the danger that the approach of excavating "despised" modernities and hidden areas of subaltern culture runs of recuperating a version of hybridity complicit with the segregationist fantasies of apartheid. A similar critique has been made of the notion of "intimacy" in South Africa. Such an argument would point out that the term "Malay" was used as a racial category under apartheid, and as Shamil Jeppie shows in his article "Reclassifications: Coloured, Malay, Muslim," during apartheid, a progressive political project affirmed a Muslim rather than "Malay" self-identity. I accept this shift, yet I contend that the latter term has an older history that precedes apartheid, and its role under slavery evokes a linguistic and geographical memory that is crucial to recovering a narrative of slave agency and presence. To avoid the danger of reinforcing precisely the racist vision that my discussion of a "two-ocean consciousness" wishes to resist, I look to Pumla Gqola and Muhammed Haron, respectively, in their nuanced discussions of "Malayness."

The complex realities that lie beyond the image of docile slaves and picturesque landscapes have been evocatively explored in contemporary South African art and literature. A recent video work by the Cape Town-based visual artist Berni Searle offers a provocatively different way of looking at land and sea. *Home and Away* (2003) is a video piece set far from South Africa in the Mediterranean Sea between Morocco and Spain, a border of immense significance, given the

millennia-long traffic between the continents and current patterns of migration by poor Africans seeking work in Europe. In the video, two projections opposite one another open in one screen with a shot of a body floating serenely in water and, in the other, of an anonymous reach of sky. A whisper comes over the sound of the sea—intimate, as though we are close to the mouth of the speaker, disclosing to our ears a confidence: The voice whispers "I love . . . I fear . . . I leave." We do not know *who* is loved, *what* is feared and left. The sea and the land in both scenes are borderless and unidentifiable. The camera moves away from the body and pulls back to show the expanse of ocean. A thin strip of land becomes visible in the distance. *Home and Away* draws comfort from neither Morocco nor Spain. Neither landmass labels itself, nor gives the solace of familiarity. Each is strange, each strip of land is strangely similar to the other; each is near, and far. The certainties of place, of nationality, of identity dissipate.

Home and Away embodies a complex view of the sea. If we take the lesson of the video to look from the sea to the land in South Africa, what do the two oceans tell us? Cape Town, the birthplace of Berni Searle, is said to be the place where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. I contend that they tell us about history. The Atlantic and the Indian Oceans do not actually meet at Cape Point, the southernmost part of the Cape Peninsula on the False Bay, but at Cape Agulhas, four hours to the east. The name for False Bay—false because of its duplicitous calm and violent, unpredictable storms—alerts us that the sea is an ambiguous theme.

As a result of the spice trade, a crucial link between the African oceans was slavery. The first slaves at the Cape Colony were brought by the Dutch West India Company from Guinea and Angola on Africa's west coast (Westra and Amstrong 5). The Atlantic was also the route of traffic in goods and slaves from Africa to Europe, which was the path taken by Sarah Baartman, the woman known as the "Hottentot Venus" to Europe (see Abrahams). In memory, art, and literature, the connection between slavery and the Atlantic Oceans in South Africa takes many forms. Here, I consider not only memories of crossing the oceans, but what it is like to live next to them, from them, in the art and literature of South Africa.

Where does one find the sea in South African literature and art? Recent writing has envisaged the sea through themes of memory and intimacy. The South African poet Mxolisi Nyezwa writes of the sea as memory "heavy inside us." (62). In his poem "Walking," from the collection *Song Trials,* the speaker reveals a charged nearness to the sea: "i see the unstable dark sea, furious/ and on my back, my spine, the vertebral sky" (18). In the poem the weight of the ocean orients the speaker's body, but the roiling water and sky also oppress him, as the "furious" ocean maps itself onto his body. Ocean, sky and body are intimate and continuous. In this way the poem suggests that the individual relation to the sea is weighted with history.

In the poetry collections *Castaway* and *Imprendehora*, the South African poet Yvette Christianse portrays the history of the island of St. Helena in the southern Atlantic through fractured narratives about its famous exiles like Napoleon, but also by tracing the life of her grandmother, a grandchild of enslaved St. Helenans. In *Unconfessed*, Christianse's novel on slavery in the Cape published seven years later, the sea also appears as a prominent theme—the treacherous, ungiving sea of Table Bay witnessed by the protagonist, the enslaved Mozambican woman Sila van de Kaap, who is imprisoned for the murder of her son on Robben Island. The

visual artist Berni Searle, in her video work *Home and Away* shows how the sea troubles the certainty of borders and national belonging, and in *Colour Me*, how the brutal reality of slavery is subsumed under the luxury and aesthetics of spice.

CASTAWAY: THE SEA AS DISTANCE AND DESIRE

The linked poems of *Castaway* tell the story of St. Helena, an island in the South Atlantic off the coast of South Africa whose primary meaning for Europeans was distance. In fact, during the colonial period, the island was used as a place of punishment and exile, from its first inhabitant in the sixteenth century, the disgraced and mutilated Portuguese soldier Fernao Lopez to Napoleon, for whom St. Helena was his final home, from 1815 to 1821 (Christianse 11).

Surrounded by the immensity of the Atlantic, the small island emphasizes the power of the sea, perpetually present and audible even when shrouded in mist. Christianse's beloved grandmother was born on St. Helena and *Castaway* conveys an intimate view of the island in some poems, where the sea is the route to certainty and origin. Thus, in "The Island Sings Its Name," a circle / of elders . . . replenish themselves / like waves in a slate-green sea" (Christianse 6). However, her grandmother was the grandchild of slaves, and because of the island's history as part of the slave trade, the sea also symbolizes cruelty and loss of humanity.

Some of the most powerful poems in *Castaway* evoke the experience of slaves taken from St. Helena to the Americas. In the poem "Eclipse," the speaker looks at the sea and testifies "I saw the great silver- / backed, shark-tipped ocean open / and those men and women—yes / there were children too—opened / their eyes and their lips were silver with waiting. . . . / I heard them. I heard them (77). Through the poem's insistence on listening to the hidden sounds within the "hull's own song," it suggests that the role of slavery in building the contemporary world must be asserted in the places that disavow it.

UNCONFESSED: THE TWO OCEANS

Both in its form and in the power of its narrative, *Unconfessed* by Yvette Christianse is a groundbreaking novel about slavery in South Africa. The novel writes its narrative about the life of an enslaved Mozambican woman at the Cape against a stubborn silence about slavery in South African culture. This silence has a complex history. The literary theorist Zoë Wicomb argues that memories of slavery among descendents of slaves in South Africa have been comprehensively suppressed by the "shame" that enslavement and sexual exploitation induced in indigenous and enslaved South Africans (100). As a result, despite decades of historical scholarship, South African relations to slavery are marked by "amnesia." Recent historical novels that deal with the brutal realities of genocide and slavery during the colonial era have begun to trace the ground covered by historians. Yet it has taken until the late twentieth and early twenty-first century to imagine the "middle passages" about the Indian and Atlantic Oceans for enslaved people in South Africa. (Even the more recent diaspora constituted by South African Indians, who arrived from 1860 as indentured laborers and free merchants, has generated a muted relation to the Indian Ocean. The diaspora scholar Pallavi Rastogi notes that many South

African Indian writers insist on an African identity and underplay their Asian heritage.) *Unconfessed* is therefore a novel of great import. Its protagonist is Sila van den Kaap, an enslaved Mozambican woman who had been kidnapped and brought to the Cape as a child. Because stories about slavery among the descendents of slaves have been largely suppressed, *Unconfessed* is remarkable for Sila's memory of her life as a child in Mozambique before the slave raiders arrived, through which the novel gives her a beginning that precedes an enslaved existence: "I remember my mother—my mother from whom I was born—and her dancing when the day had grown late" (67). In writing *Unconfessed*, Christianse drew on two decades of research into the archives of the Cape Colony. Journals kept by slave ships recount the raiding and slave-buying expeditions to Mozambique and only emphasize that the views of slaves are almost irretrievably absent in the historical record (see Westra and Amstrong).

The sea plays a crucial role in *Unconfessed*. When the novel opens in 1823, Sila has been imprisoned by the colonial authorities for the murder of her son Baro. Incarcerated on Robben Island, the prison island in the Atlantic that also later housed Nelson Mandela, Sila looks out on the sea, and in the scenes of moving across the water to Robben Island from the city, *Unconfessed* gives her a deadly "middle passage" during which she and her daughter almost drown: "I came out of that water a woman who lost too many things," she confides to the ghost of her dead son (42). The sea in this vision is a "Cape of Tears, Cape of Death, Cape of Struggles," whose contagion spreads inland (66).

Here, the sea embodies the cruelty of slavery, through which Sila's freedom is stolen successive times. We learn that her freedom had been granted by her former owner, Hendrina Jansen, but the latter's will, in which this freedom was given, was stolen by Jansen's son, and thus Sila was sold onward from farm to farm, until she arrived in Cape Town. This portrayal of the ugliness of the passage of slaves across the sea is a notable development in the aesthetic history of the Cape, where the history of slavery has in the past been subsumed behind a depiction of leisure and beauty.

In other parts of the novel, however, the sea offers something else to Sila. Looking at the sea, she has a vision:

> I *am* a small boat bobbing just there off Cape Town. . . . I have come to pick up Hester and her babies. She waked into the water with her children so that they would escape this country. But cruelty of cruelties, she and one child were pulled free of the water. . . . Kom, Hester. I am your boat. . . . We are bound for the place where sun and sky hide a gate that only we will be let through. Come, Hester. (76)

Here, the sea is an "escape" from "this country." The Atlantic that imprisons Sila on Robben Island also promises to release her from slavery by carrying her memories back to Mozambique, her place of origin in another ocean, the Indian Ocean. Slavery binds these two bodies of water, but the oceans are also a connecting tissue to memories of a life before and outside of slavery.

THE INDIAN OCEAN

Fernando Ribeiro maps an extensive realm in his description of the Indian Ocean: "[H]istorically the Indian Ocean is actually a much broader expanse than is usually meant by the term . . . it is actually an Afroasian sea, starting in Japan and ending at the Cape of Good Hope, where it blends into the Atlantic" (45). Given the limited number of South African stories about slavery, how is the Indian Ocean portrayed in memories of the colonial era? In fact, the record in literature is meagre. Pumla Gqola reminds us that though the historical record is marked by absences and deliberate erasures, narratives about slavery are powerfully rendered in the imaginative record ("Slaves Don't Have Opinions"). Even that imaginative and cultural record can be characterized by the deformations and oppressive representations, and Toni Morrison's call to "re-member," or construct lives in the realm of the imagination, indicates the importance of attending to shifts in the tropes through which slavery is portrayed in art and literature.

A PRIVATE OCEAN

Where is the Indian Ocean in South African memories of slavery? To find the Indian Ocean, I turn to the register of the private. As Christianse shows in *Castaway*, the register of the private can open a path to history. It can deliver what Isabel Hofmeyr has called a "homemade cosmopolitanism" (qtd. in Samuelson 81).

In my family's memories, the Indian Ocean is the sea of pilgrimage. My grandparents' hajj was undertaken by ship along the East African coast, and letters from Mecca traveled back along the same route. I was born in Port Elizabeth (named after the wife of a colonial officer, but now called the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan authority), a port city on the Indian Ocean five hundred miles to the east of Cape Town and portrayed in Mxolisi Nyezwa's poetry discussed above. Like every other South African seaside town, PE, as we called it, had segregated beaches. Beaches for blacks were often less scenic and more dangerous than those for whites, but they were also sites of fishing, beauty, and pleasure for black people. The writer Zakes Mda, in a novel titled *The Whale Caller* (2005), set in Hermanus along the southern coast of South Africa between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, recalls the historical meanings of the beach and fishing for indigenous people:

> When the whale caller is in a happy mood, he can see the weather-beaten fisherman shrouded in the mists of time, taking to the sea in their fleet of small boats. . . . He can see even deeper in the mists, before there were boats and fishermen and whalers, the Khoikhoi of old dancing around beached whale. Dancing their thanks to Tsiqua, He who Tells His Stories in Heaven, for the bountiful food he occasionally provides for his children by allowing whales to strand themselves. (2)

Mda's conscious evocation in such writing of a complex and rich relation by indigenous South Africans to the natural world counters the assumption that nature can only be viewed through contemporary Western environmental tropes. In this passage Mda extends the view of history to a time before apartheid and colonial settlement and recalls that the fishermen were "weather-beaten" in their small boats, but that a generous deity occasionally "allow[ed] whales to strand

themselves" for their benefit. *The Whale Caller* reclaims a relation of bounty, reciprocity and ritual to the sea in South Africa.

Yvette Christianse's newly published poetry collection *Imprendehora* explicitly links the two African oceans in a series of poems about the slaving ship Imprendehora (the name is a version of the Spanish word for "enterprise"), which plied its trade between the Indian and Atlantic oceans. The collection, in which Christianse revisits the resonant themes of her family's origin in the St. Helena as well as the island's role in the slave trade, is divided into two sections: "Atlantic," the longer of the two, and "Indian." In the poem "Abundance," part of the "Atlantic" section, the epigraph quotes an article published in the *St. Helena Register* about seven slaves who "in a fit of despair" escaped the island in a small boat (15). Despite its brevity, the report is given depth and poignancy by the observation of the "despair" of the enslaved people. In recounting this element of the interior lives of the escaped slaves, "Abundance" acts as a memorial to them. The poem imagines their journey after the escape, precisely what cannot be known from official records. The tasks of sailing are divided among the seven people: "Two to hold the water still / Two to leap, two to climb, / One to put his face to sea." "The length of waves" and "stern" water evoke the scale of the task of they have undertaken. The poem envisions the posture of their bodies engaged in the task of surviving. "One man calls, wind to shore. / One man waves, a crane's wing" (15). To name the man's call the "wind," and envision a wave as a "crane's wing" gives these small, passing gestures a larger weight, offering the possibility that they will continue and return, like the wind and birds. Through the poem, we hear the shocked breath of its protagonists immersed in the cold and vast Atlantic: "One to gasp, one to tread." Combining an attentiveness to the physical as well as the metaphysical, the poem ends with the description of one of the slaves "Singing to slake his thirst" (15). By concluding with an image of song, these last words in effect defer an ending. The poem allows the song to resound and continue, creating a memorial to unnamed slaves about whom there are no other traces.

The collection as a whole becomes an act of memory, explicitly so in the last section on the Indian Ocean. Here the poem "Ship's Register" rewrites official records. At first, the poem relays only the functional details in a ship's register that constitute an archive of loss and pain. Yet, as in "Abundance," the records sometimes offer glimpses of lives that are otherwise almost impossible to retrieve. Inscribed alongside utilitarian details, the multiple, phonetic attempts to spell an African name—"345 Male Samuel Age 4, Stature 3 3/ Mother Neammhoo? Neammorhoo?"—may be as close as we come to the sound of that name spoken by the boy or his mother. The poem therefore acts as a calling out of such names, but expands the functional, dehumanizing list of the ship's register to speak also in the voices of the enslaved. Returning to the trope of poems as songs, and to the silenced memories they convey, the speaker in "Ship's register" urges her daughter to "Sing, sing these words— / they are alive" and "do not forget," in the last stanza of "Ship's register" (93). The last lines of the collection embody the task of memory, as the speaker envisages that memory will create a new history: "Make a dawn for them/ in the reds and yellows / of remembrance" (93).

While it is only recently that the Indian Ocean has been written about so powerfully in the artistic record on slavery in South Africa, there are other sources in which allusions to the ocean can be found. Pumla Gqola, who wrote a

ground-breaking dissertation on representations of slavery in South Africa, points to the retention of the name "Malay" as a category of identity among descendents of slaves in South Africa. "Malay" refers not to geographical origin of enslaved people brought to the Cape (and under apartheid, an assertion on the part of the state of racial origin), but to a larger geographical reality—that is, during the colonial period, slaves were brought from many territories around the Indian Ocean, and among slaves, Malay was a lingua franca. The name "Malay" therefore came to refer to "slave," and also "Muslim."Among Muslims today, the term is still a familiar adjective, such as "Malay school" for madressa (historically these were the first schools in the country for blacks), and "Cape Malay food," a creole cuisine marked by historical influences of Asia, Africa, and Europe (see Baderoon, "Catch with the Eye"). Gqola argues that the use of the term "Malay" as a self-identifying term among Muslims indicates the retention of a memory of slavery. I would add that it is also one of the signs through which a memory of the Indian Ocean is retained.

Other etymologies also hold historical lessons. The word "Kaffir," originally used by East African Muslims for non-Muslims in southern Africa, and which later became a notorious racist term in South Africa, attained these meanings in moving from the Indian Ocean realm of East African Islam to the two-ocean realm of South Africa (see Baderoon, "Ambiguous Visibility"). These etymologies point to language itself as an archive of meanings drawn from the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. As noted earlier, Afrikaans is a creole language created by slaves in the Cape colony out of a combination of Malay, Arabic, indigenous Khoi-San languages and the European languages of the colonists. As research by Achmat Davids showed, the earliest Afrikaans texts were written in Arabic script, compelling evidence that Afrikaans originated as the language of the kitchen. However, the relations of power should not be subsumed into a reified vision of mutual influence in the slave kitchen. Indeed, the language spoken by the descendants of slaves was derogatorily termed "kitchen Afrikaans," as Laurens van der Post recalls (128). The highly elaborated and separate set of understandings about the same food renders more complex the notion of "intimacies" manifested in food and language.

CAPE MALAY FOOD

> 'Ideology is externalised in food.'
>
> —Timothy Morton, 11.

The slave-holding society at the Cape led to the creation of new foods that fused African, Asian, and European customs. One of the most famous of these creole cuisines created in the dangerous context of the slave-owner's kitchen is known as Cape Malay food. Yet for hundreds of years, Cape Malay food has been used to domesticate images of slavery in South Africa. Colorful images of food at Eid or weddings have been used to efface the brutality of slavery and the dangers of the slave-owner's household. This paradoxical use of the cuisine to displace its origin during slavery gives it an "ambiguous visibility" in South Africa (see Baderoon

115). Examples of the ambiguous visibility of Malay food include George French Angas's *The Kafirs Illustrated* (1849), which presents the cuisine as a colorful spectacle, highlighting the "table groaning beneath the weight" of food, spices—"pots of preserved ginger and nutmeg," and the sociality of "feasting" and "singing" (10). Hildagonda Duckitt's *Diary of a Housewife* (1902) further entrenched this picturesque idiom, describing the market in Cape Town as "presided over by Malays in their bright-coloured dresses" (65). Constricted by this picturesque view, "Malays" are entertaining, solipsistic and harmless, an image that elides the place of slavery in their history.

In the mid-twentieth century, I. D. du Plessis, an Afrikaans academic who cultivated a position as "expert" on the "Malay," attempted during apartheid to have them declared a racially separate group (Jeppie 84). This ultimately unsuccessful but damaging attempt to implicate "Malayness" in the racial separateness of apartheid has had a lasting impact on the meaning of "Malay" as a term of identity in South Africa. Du Plessis's foreword to *Traditional Cookery of the Cape Malays* by Hilda Gerber (1954) is typical of the use to which dominant society has tended to put Malay food. In it, du Plessis proclaimed, "No aspect of Cape Malay life has been more closely interwoven with life at the Cape than Cape Malay cookery" (n.p.).

In contrast to this tradition, my interest in what follows is how representations of Malay food can also encode other, dissonant meanings. There is another way of reading "Malay food"—as a way of recovering the presence and the modernity of slave lives. Instead of being exotic and solipsistic, Malay food, with its combination of European, Asian and African traditions modified by local practices and ingredients, is one of the ways enslaved people incorporated both indigenous and imported elements into creolized cultures of food and religion that embedded them in Africa.

THE SLAVE BOOK

Two recent works indicate how food described can encode resistant meanings. Rayda Jacobs's historical novel *The Slave Book* (1998) depicted the lives of slaves in the Cape. In *The Slave Book*, the place where food is made is also the site of a brittle, dangerous intimacy between slave-owners and slaves, where any encounter may turn suddenly perilous. Yet precisely because it is the location of everyday exchanges, the kitchen is also the space of overheard information, of shared food, of secret knowledge such as healing potions among slaves—the site of small resistances encoded into tastes, sound, touch, glances, and smells. Here slaves learned not only how to survive but gathered a small store of subjectivity and resistance. Rachel, a slave who has been on the Zoetewater farm for twenty-two years, comforts the newly arrived Somiela: "[I]n the kitchen you hear many things" (30). The kitchen is where the slaves on the farm attain presence, stare silently back at the slave-owner, or reclaim time by carrying out their orders at a pace that infuriates their masters. The slave Somiela cooks the way she is accustomed to, and speaks back to the masters through the codes of taste and smell that the latter eventually come to desire. Andries, the owner of the farm and its slaves, speaks to his wife Marieta about arrangements for supper:

> I told [Somiela] to make some of that food for tonight that she made the other day.
> "Someila can't cook."
> "She can. She's the one who made the—what's it called again?" he asked Somiela directly.
> "Cabbage bredie, Seur," Rachel spoke up for Somiela, sensing Marieta's hostility.
> "Well, whatever it is, we won't have it," Marieta said with finality. "Not for guests. Rachel will cook what I tell her to cook, and we'll serve what we usually serve—roast meat and potatoes and carrots. (65)

Though Marieta discerns "with finality" a clear distinction between "what we usually serve" and "whatever it is" that Somiela makes, eventually such boundaries between slave and masters would become porous. Both "Malay" and Dutch, later Afrikaans, cooking would come to manifest the intertwined legacy of the slave kitchen. Because of the suppression of memories of slavery and the lingering effects of apartheid, the various food cultures in Cape Town remain largely insulated from one another, and therefore the fact of such similarities and the reasons for them are unexplored. The legacy of slavery can be seen today in the similar dishes within the two traditions with different names, such as the cinnamon-spiced milk drink known in Muslim cooking as "boeber" and as "melkkos" in the Afrikaans tradition (Abrahams, *Culture and Cuisine* 46). A further phenomenon indicating connections between the two food traditions is the use of the same names for different dishes, for example, the plaited sugar-glazed doughnut-like sweet in Afrikaans cooking known as the "koeksister" and as a "koesister" in Muslim cooking.

Though excluded, the unsettling connotations suppressed by the picturesque remain close to the surface of Malay food. An instance of this occurs in *The Slave Book*. When, after the scene related above, Marieta whips Somiela in unprovoked fury, Somiela contemplates her response in the language of the kitchen:

> Tasting the saltiness of her own blood, she promised herself that she would make this monstrous woman pay. The first opportunity she had she would pee in her coffee, poison her food. . . . (68–69)

The image of the skilled and compliant servant shares space with her double—the slave woman who exercises the dangerous power of the kitchen to "gool," or conjure, by adding insidious, undetectable ingredients to food to form magic potions or, worse, poison (van der Post 146). This fear, derived from the proximity of slaves, and later, of their descendants, circulated in the Cape long after the end of slavery. Lady Duff Gordon refers to the myth in her letters:

> [H]e compelled me to drink herb tea, compounded by a Malay doctor for my cough. I declined at first, and the poor old man looked hurt, gravely assured me that it was not true that Malays always poisoned Christians, and drank some himself. Thereupon I was obliged, of course, to drink up the rest; it certainly did me good, and I have drunk it since with good effect; it is intensely bitter and rather sticky. The white servants and the Dutch landlady where I lodge shake their head ominously, and hope it mayn't poison me a year hence. 'Them nasty Malays can make it work months after you take it.' (37)

Such anxieties reveal that, despite its appealing surface, food in the Cape was incontrovertibly linked to slavery. Cooking and other domestic work was the most common reason for keeping slaves; in the 1820s and 1830s two-thirds of the approximately six thousand slaves in the Cape performed domestic work (Mason 108). Furthermore, "slaves who had knowledge of this kind of cookery commanded a far higher price than other domestic chattels" (Leipoldt 18). Thus, not only the food but the figure of the highly skilled Malay cook carries echoes of the history of slavery. Examples of such women occur in the text and illustrations of most books dealing with Muslim food in South Africa before the 1980s. Furthermore, the dishes themselves and the rituals that accompany them carry traces of this history. The evening meeting called a "merrang," which continues to be held among Muslims today, arose out of the periods when slaves met while their masters were at church (Abrahams, *Culture and Cuisine* 69). A joke about "affal wat vleis geword it" 'offal that became meat' refers to the fact that slaves made their own food from the parts of the animal that the master discarded (Abrahams, interview).

COLOUR ME

As the extract from *The Slave Book* suggests, the use of spice in Malay cooking is also an element that escaped the control of dominant society in the Cape. The most famous description of the use of spices in Malay cooking is that of C. Louis Leipoldt:

> Malay cookery, whose outstanding characteristics are the *free, almost heroic*, use of spices and aromatic flavouring, the prolonged steady, but slow, application of moist heat to all meat dishes, and the skilful blending of many diverse constituents into combination that still holds the essential goodness of each (11; emphasis added)

An allusion to this association with spices is found in the *Colour Me* exhibition by Berni Searle 1999, which engages with the legacy of a colonial gaze that rests on picturesque and exotic bodies. *Colour Me* is an installation of photographs of Searle's naked body covered in a plenitude of spices, such as yellow turmeric, red chili, and black pepper. The spice trade in the Cape is a clear allusion in the work. In the *Colour Me* photographs the prone body of the artist appears to re-enact all the conventions of availability that slavery and colonialism had designated for bodies such as hers. She is naked and ornamented with the deep colors of spices. The covering of yellow, brown, and red powders both hides and outlines her body. All of these tropes—accessible yet covered, veiled yet available—code her body in familiar ways. However, the artist enacts those positions so *deliberately*, she so evidently enacts the requirement to-be-looked-at, that the act of looking is itself made part of the effect of the artwork (Mulvey qtd. in Lewis). In this way, her body "gazes back."1 Repeating the trope of abundant spices famously associated with Muslim cooking by Leipoldt, the silent object of the gaze insistently renders observable the mechanism of *visibility* and its connection to the past.

Literary and artistic works such as those by Jacobs and Searle point to the stratified meanings that result from such subversive uses of the familiar. *The Slave Book* and *Colour Me* suggest that the presentation and rituals of food do not evade

memories of violence and resistance. If one follows the model offered by Jacobs's and Searle's work to examine what tropes shape the perception of Muslim food, and read them differently, what might we *see* in food? Leipoldt's description of the "free, almost heroic" use of spices by Malay cooks attains a new meaning when read as expression of agency by the enslaved women and men who worked in colonial-era kitchens.

READING COOKBOOKS

Arjun Appadurai's "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India" (1988) argues that Indian cookbooks written in English and directed largely at a middle-class audience helped to craft a national cuisine in postcolonial and postindustrial India. Appadurai asserts that the "interplay between regional inflection and national standardization" is a mechanism of middle-class and national identity (240). The exchange of recipes across barriers of language, caste, and ethnicity becomes a site for the "loosening" of old bounds and the creation of a cultural space for the urban middle-class (240). We can follow Appadurai's model of intensive attention to the form and social relations signaled by recipes, and, further, read South African cookbooks for their representations of "Malayness" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Muslim food in South Africa can be found in the earliest collections of recipes published in the country, under the categories of "East Indian," "Malay," and later "Cape Malay" cooking. Early cookbooks are an important source of South African images of slavery and Islam. Dating from traveler's tales from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "Malay" slaves were commonly associated with food in representations of the Cape. The earliest cookbooks published in South Africa are A. G. Hewitt's *Cape Cookery* (1889) and Hildagonda Duckitt's *Hilda's "Where is it?" of Recipes—containing, amongst other practical and tried recipes, many old Cape, Indian, and Malay dishes and preserves; also directions for polishing furniture, cleaning silk, etc., and a collection of home remedies in case of sickness'* (1891), both of which contained "Malay" and "East Indian" recipes such as "breedee" (stew) and "blatjang" (chutney). The next significant figure in the production of published knowledge about Muslim cooking is the poet, doctor, and botanist C. Louis Leipoldt, whose *Leipoldt's Cape Cookery*, published in 1976 (though the manuscript was written in 1947), is a source of enduring tropes about Muslim cooking in South Africa, including an almost magical skill in the use of spices and being famously protective of food secrets (11).

I found the most interesting features in these books were not the recipes themselves, but the introductions, prefaces, forewords, and illustrations. I. D. du Plessis, in crafting a position as an authority on Malays, uses Muslim names as an authenticating detail. For instance, in the foreword to Hilda Gerber's book, he acknowledges "the revision of some details by Sheikh A. Behardien, President of the Moslem Judicial Council." Gerber's own text is more interesting, and her approach to the recipes themselves is especially notable. Not only does she record the names of the women who provided her with their recipes and the area in which they live, which has allowed descendants of these women to trace their contributions,[2] but she also includes more than one version of the same dish, indicating a sensitivity to the varied, shifting practices of such cooking. However, the illustrations in Gerber's cookbook, drawn by Katrine Harries, participate in the tradition

of visual images of Islam established during the colonial era: both women and men are portrayed as unvaryingly amiable and submissive in their demeanor and clothing. Focusing on its visible aspects, seen as exotic and colorful, this approach neglects the food's complexity or shifts over time, and contradicts the approach taken in the written text.

Laurens van der Post's writing on Muslim food highlights the exotic, emphasizing the Asian element of the "Cape Malay" cuisine and underplaying its African and creole aspects. He describes an Eid plate of "brightly coloured cakes a la Javanese," claiming that "on feast days, what is purely Malay in their cooking tends to assert itself" (130–32). Published in 1977, Betsie Rood's *Maleier Kookkuns* (Malay Cooking) contains assertions about unvarying practices typical of this vision of Muslim life. A recurring feature is the use of the third person; for instance: "the Malay has a love of sweet, colourful drinks" (3), "the woman remains submissive and obedient" (4), and "The Malay seldom if ever has any knowledge of the nutritional value of food" (4).

Renata Coetzee's *The South African Culinary Tradition* (1977) renders slavery absent in different ways. Martin Hall notes that Coetzee uses anachronistic, elevated terms, such as "rissoles in vine leaves" and "watermelon preserve," for what are effectively peasant recipes (25). This affectation of a genteel Cape past, based on a highly circumscribed view of history, erases the violence of the colony's founding. In contrast to Rood and Gerber, whose subject was cooking by black South Africans and whose authority came from indexing their access to black people, Coetzee's vision of a "South African culinary tradition" elides the history of slavery.

COOKBOOKS BY MUSLIM AUTHORS

The recipes in the books described above were often gathered through the authors' experience of having "Malay" servants and cooks. The recurring theme of the skilled but silent woman in the kitchen was radically revised by the arrival of cookbooks written by Muslim women. The first book on Muslim food written by Muslim authors in South Africa was the best-selling *Indian Delights* by the Women's Cultural Group in Durban, chaired by Zuleikha Mayat (1961). *Indian Delights* is a communal book and was a spectacular publishing success, generating successive reprints and sequels. It is not solely a book of recipes, but also "projects a fascinating dimension of cultural history" (Govinden 155). Govinden notes that the audience for the book is "the Indian community itself," reflected in its format of recipes interspersed with "numerous vignettes, nostalgic family anecdotes, convalescence remedies, giving the book a valuable intertextual and social character" (156).

Subsequent books by Muslim authors, like *The Cape Malay Cookbook* (1988) by Faldela Williams and *The Culture and Cuisine of the Cape Malays* (1995) by Cass Abrahams, explored the way food traditions articulate history and culture. They all portrayed Muslims in positions other than as servants or informants. The most important publication in this genre, *Cass Abrahams Cooks Cape Malay* (2000), is particularly attentive to the history of slavery in the cuisine. Abrahams, in contrast to van der Post, argues that the location of the Cape is crucial to "Cape Malay" cooking—including the contribution of indigenous Khoi and San people who, during the colonial period experienced labor conditions similar to slavery, and shared

their knowledge of indigenous food resources. According to Abrahams, this combination of ingredients, histories and traditions makes "Cape Malay" cooking a "food from Africa." This description is distinctively "modern," proposing that in its origins in a slave-holding culture, Malay cooking created a new "African" cuisine.

However, despite this distinctive new language for talking about Malay food and the publication of books written by Muslim authors, regressive earlier patterns of talking about Malay food at the level of spectacle continue to appear in cookbooks. Instead, familiar tropes appear in retrogressive views of Cape Malay food:

> With their soft, caramel skins and wide smiles, the Cape Malay people are a prized and proud element of the South African culture. . . . I cannot think of a dried apricot without the image of a caramel coloured woman, grinning widely, a wooden spoon in her hand, gently stirring a pot of simmering curry and fruit. Splendid! (Grebe)

Grebe's language returns us to the picturesque, its stereotyped images suppressing the history to which Malay food points. In its deployment of the language of "local color," this particularly flawed example uses an assumed familiarity with "the Cape Malay people" to give authority to her recipes. Her description of "caramel skins" conflate people and food, and the characterization of "Cape Malays" as a "prized and proud element" suggests that the descendents of slaves are themselves an ingredient of South African culture. A similar tone is found in Sonia Allison and Myrna Robins's *South African Cape Malay Cooking* (1997). The foreword by Sidney Bond relies on broad and unchanging generalities: "The Cape Malay people are friendly, caring and enjoy life to the full" (6).

Such stereotypes overwrite the fact that domestic work was the most common form of labor carried out by slaves at the Cape, and therefore Cape Malay food developed in the perilous intimacies of the slave-holding household. Dishes cooked by descendents of slaves as well as slave-owners that overlap in name or contents suggest that slaves created out of dominant traditions a new language of food that also came to be desired by slave-owners. Thus, Malay food signals the dissonant and stratified meanings of the slave kitchen, as *The Slave Book* and the *Colour* Me exhibition suggest. The picturesque, through which Malay food is customarily portrayed, with its emphasis on pleasing surfaces, can be read for meanings that lie beyond the visible. The cuisine, with fusing of African, Asian, and European elements in practices that elude the control of the dominant, can be read as a space of subjectivity and freedom during slavery and an archive of a two-ocean consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Tracing the metaphor of the sea in South African literature and art subverts the over-determined exclusions of the picturesque Cape and evokes the history of slavery in South Africa. New literature and art, as well as an oblique reading of dominant practices, allow us to uncover evidence of slave agency. No longer discreetly disavowed behind a panoramic view of the Cape landscape, the presence of slaves becomes visible through images of the sea. Turning one's gaze to

the two African oceans recovers the elusive yet decisively “modern” character of slave practices subsumed behind the polished surfaces of the city. Such a reading reveals the “modernity” of practices of language, religion, and food cultures among enslaved people at the Cape.

The approach taken in this article follows studies by Pumla Gqola and Cheryl Hendricks on discourses of slavery and sexuality, Noeleen Murray on the meanings of slave burial sites, and Martin Hall on colonial architecture in mapping the profound influence of slavery and slave resistance on South African culture. The theme of the two oceans in South African literature, art and the practices of Malay food therefore constitute a subversive archive of the presence and subjectivity of enslaved people at the Cape, and takes its place among African memories of slavery.

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NOTES

1. This photograph, untitled, appeared on the back cover of the Cape Town Festival’s *Returning the Gaze* publication (2001), with that logo printed across the photograph. See Smith.

2. Mrs. Jorayda Salie informed me in an interview I conducted with her in June 2002 that a relative of hers had provided a recipe to Gerber.

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