

Ocean and Island Studies

REGIONAL DRIFT

REMAPPING AFRICA'S SOUTHERN OCEANS

Edited by
Pamila Gupta and Caio Simões de Araújo



7 Porous Futures in Indian Ocean Africa

Oceanic Flows and Insular Socio-Ecologies in Mauritius

Pedro Pombo

Introduction

This chapter engages with the concept of “porosity” through the social and natural landscapes of Mauritius. Following two apparently disconnected events, the installation of the new Intercontinental Slavery Museum and the afterlives of a recent ecological disaster on the southern coast of the island, this research observes how past and present circulations deeply inform the actual social and environmental conditions in Mauritius, becoming a case study on the junctures among flow, history and the Anthropocene in Indian Ocean Africa.

Both events, despite their radical differences, ask old questions regarding the history of the country, the relationships between society and territory and contemporary debates regarding the economy, social development and environmental sustainability of the country. Both events bring, thus, interrogations regarding the past, the present and the future.

I aim to connect the installation of a museum and an oil spill by anchoring my reflexions and observations on the conceptual possibilities of the notions of porosity, thinking on porous consequences of historical processes and their contemporary embodiments in the social and environmental landscapes of the island.

The Indian Ocean African islands have been locations of intersection in the transoceanic networks that shaped Afro-Asian worlds,¹ forming a geography that gradually progresses from the African mainland to the ocean, from river deltas and shallow waters to islands and coral reefs that punctuate the sea and produce a region made of creole histories and cultures.

In contemporary times, the African Indian Ocean islands illustrate the complexities of chronological frames, as colonial and postcolonial, and of the geographical correlations between the regional and the global. In political maps, while Seychelles and Madagascar retained their insular integrity with independence, Comoros and Mauritius were fragmented: the Comorian island of Mayotte became a French Overseas Department in 2011, while the Chagos archipelago was amputated from an independent Mauritius as British Indian Ocean Territory. The island of Reunion, forming with Mauritius the

Mascarene Islands, became a French Overseas Department in 1946, having also France the Overseas Territory of French Southern and Antarctic Lands, incorporating several atolls in the Mozambican Channel.

This translates the economic and strategic value of the ocean: despite the small size of most of these islands, their geography should include their territories' vast exclusive maritime zones, important for contemporary international power maps as also extremely rich regarding blue economy activities.²

In another perspective, the Indian Ocean is also a fundamental location for materialities of the Anthropocene: its sea level rises faster than other oceans, and few Maldivian atolls are at risk of submerging; estuaries and shallow water coasts are slowly being engulfed by changing tidal currents, and the patterns of the monsoon system are increasingly irregular.

Mauritius is the eastern-most African country (with the island of Rodrigues) and presents unique creole cultural and natural landscapes made of centuries of Afro-Asian movements³ under European colonial domain. While past human displacements configure the local contemporary society, earlier transoceanic economic systems have metamorphosed in contemporary maritime shipping routes, flow of capital and service industry, cruise tourism and large-scale infrastructure as harbors, new urban precincts and coastal luxury resorts.

Porosities

Analyzing together the installation of the Intercontinental Slavery Museum and the effects of the recent disastrous oil spill on the southeastern coast of the island, this research relates social and natural ecologies and contemplates how worldwide circulations interfered, and still affect, the social and natural landscapes of the country.

These elements – heritage, society, mangroves and coral reefs – are understood as mnemonic structures, in the sense that they are elements, or dimensions, through which events and historical processes permeate, where their memory is engraved, sensed and observed. As mangroves and coral reefs absorb polluting materials, making the oil spill and its consequences observable and accounted for, heritage elements and social contexts percolate historical processes of enslavement and racial segregation, bonded labor and socio-economic landscapes that persist until today. Human bodies, as well as natural elements, experience and personify the history of this archipelago.

A conceptual tool often connected with spatial studies, “porosity”, has been the lenses of a wide scope of reflections across different fields of research. From analyses of architecture and living urban spaces,⁴ borders and place-making,⁵ philosophy and social sciences⁶ or to the effects of anthropocene in planetary systems,⁷ the concept of “porosity” elucidates the qualities of “bodies and substances”⁸ that absorb and allow people and living entities, processes or polluting elements to permeate through space and time and to move across materialities.

Following the inspiring notion of “chair corail” (coral flesh) by Khal Torabully,⁹ the coral reefs and the flesh of generations of descendants of enslaved persons can be seen as living porous borders between history and present, the local and the global. Here is relevant to bring the notion of the “geo-physical and geo-political materialities”¹⁰ of maritime stories of displacement of people and commodities, in the past as well as in the present.

In the case of the oil spill, one unexpected dimension that illustrates the concretedness that “porosity” can gain was seen during the first popular initiatives to control the spill. Campaigns were widely shared across social media for donation of human hair to build makeshift absorbent floaters (since human hair is an efficient oil absorber) using vernacular knowledges of dealing with polluting events. This was a powerful moment, highlighting human bodies’ and landscape’s porosities facing an oil spill.

In the case of this text, if porosity is clearly understood in relation to the coastal landscapes – sand absorbing the water, capilar mangrove roots absorbing nutrients and connecting water and soil and coral reefs creating worlds of intricate voids where ocean currents are filtered and slowed down, it is also a powerful concept to see how past socio-economic contexts permeated through time unto the contemporary. And it is a useful conceptual direction to analyze the consequences that both these events, oil spill and creation of a new museum, have and will have in the future. Public debates regarding both events permeate discussions on economy or social inequality, coastal appropriation by tourism-based investment or lack of adequate infrastructure. Discussions on the development and social inequalities in the region affected by the oil spill happen simultaneously to an increase of mentions of slavery and the history of the archipelago in the media. The social and economic pasts come to the fore in thinking about the present and proposing possibilities for the future.

Unpredictable Synchronicities: A New Museum and an Oil Spill

The Intercontinental Slavery Museum has been in the works for a long time. From 2020 is installed in the 18th-century Military Hospital, in the capital Port-Louis’s waterfront, and opened its inauguration Prefiguration Exhibition in September 2023. This museum originates from several projects concerning slavery in Mauritius and from the heavy historical and social weightage carried by creole identities, as well as from the recommendations made in the fundamental work of the Mauritius Truth and Justice Commission (since 2012). The museum is, thus, supported by decades of efforts from scholars from national and international institutions dealing with archival, material and intangible heritages of slavery and indentured labor specific to this island’s history.¹¹

These efforts have been recognized by UNESCO with the listing of the *Aapravasi Ghat* (in the vicinities of the future museum), memorializing the arrival of indentured migrants, and the *Cultural Landscape of Le Morne*,

fundamental reference to the histories of slavery and maroonage in the country. The constitution of such a museum is a privileged location to observe how the past permeates the contemporary and how promoting public discussions informs the renovation of the building, the selection of objects and choice of exhibition narratives, and how the museum will engage with the present (and future) cultural, social, economic and political landscapes of the country. Reflexions on “issues and challenges concerning representations of slavery in museums” were, in fact, theme of a relevant publication by the Centre for Research on Slavery and Indentured of the University of Mauritius under the UNESCO Slave Route Project in 2020.¹² The relevance of Mauritius in regional and interoceanic slave routes is assumed in the title of the museum, recognized in the use of “intercontinental”, calling attention to the vast networks of slave trade that connected Mauritius with the rest of the world and to the role of the museum as integrating a network of similar museums across continents. On 20 October 2020, the museum was officially launched with its inaugural temporary exhibition “breaking the silence”, the event being live streamed on the Facebook page of the national television and a recurrent theme of television and newspaper coverage (Figure 7.1).

The celebration was intended to be connected with the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition on August 23, but was delayed due to an environmental disaster that occurred on the southern shores of the island.

In the first days of August 2020, the MV Wakashio bulk container ship was stranded off the coral reef in the Southeastern coast of Mauritius. The subsequent oil spill became the worst marine disaster in the history of the



Figure 7.1 Images of the exhibition at the Intercontinental Slavery Museum in February 2022. From left to right: banner introducing the aim of the museum, outdoor mural “I was there on that day” and banners visually explaining the outcomes of the public hearing.

country and an international case, and a devastating illustration of the perils of unsafe contacts between local ecologies and international maritime trade systems. On August 7, the day after the *Wakashio* became stranded on the reef, the government declared an environmental emergency, while on the 15th of the same month, the ship broke into two, and oil began to spill into the southeast coast of Mauritius (Figure 7.2). This region is marked by an extensive coral lagoon system comprising reefs, sandy beaches and mangrove forests, with a remarkable rich ecosystem and providing livelihood to several fishing communities.

In this case, the coral reefs and the mangrove forests acted as porous borders: the dangers of transoceanic shipping across fragile ecologies would be slowly absorbed, in a degradation process that will take decades to fully recover. At the same time, the local social and economic landscapes would also reflect this event: the fishing stock would be affected and, with it, the livelihoods of fishing communities, while the impact on tourism, especially after a world pandemic, would bring ruinous economic consequences (Figure 7.3). The aftermath of the oil spill created, nevertheless, grassroots efforts to protect and clean the shores, in a wide movement for unity of all citizens who were also particularly attentive to the government's response to the disaster.

After the oil spill was circumscribed, it was decided to sink the stem section of the ship in the deep sea off the reef, an operation which was completed on 24 August 2020. The main clean-up activities were provided by the companies *Polyeco* and *Le Floc Depollution* employing local community members,¹³ with one kilometer of absorbent booms being placed around the lagoon. In the beginning of February 2022, I could observe the last materials of the cleaning finally being removed from Pointe Jérôme, near Mahébourg town.

The Japanese company responsible for the *MV Wakashio* has instituted M.O.L., a Charitable Trust dedicated to fund projects connected with the consequences of the oil spill, and on 10 December 2021, it presented the awarded initiatives projects of its annual funding for cultural and local initiatives.

Both the Intercontinental Slavery Museum and the oil spill translate, in diverse ways, the condition of borderlessness of global flows of things and people and the ruination processes they can origin.¹⁴ They also connect the past with the present, in particular, and incisive ways.

The space of the museum will, hopefully, become a location for discussions surrounding past forced displacements and enslavements that are recognizably embodied in the social fabric and the history of the country. The *MV Wakashio* ship personifies globalized trading routes (being Japanese owned, Panama flagged and navigating from Singapore to Brazil) and their interference on world ecosystems. This shipwreck participates in a long history of ships sinking on the reefs of the island, but what this one brings for the first time is the level of polluting matter and toxicity that it carries. While during previous historical epidemics the ships stayed in quarantine off the

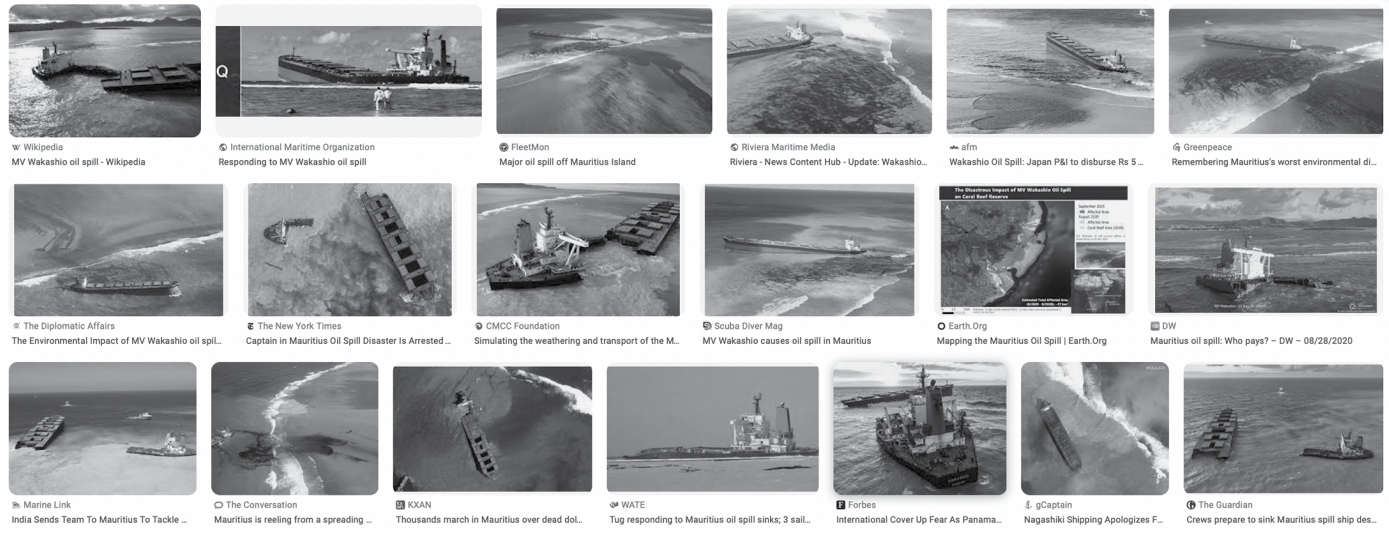


Figure 7.2 Image Google search with the key words “Wakashio oil spill”. The chromatic contrast between the turquoise blue of the lagoon waters and the opaque black of the oil is evident, becoming one of the most powerful imageries of the environmental tragedy.¹⁵

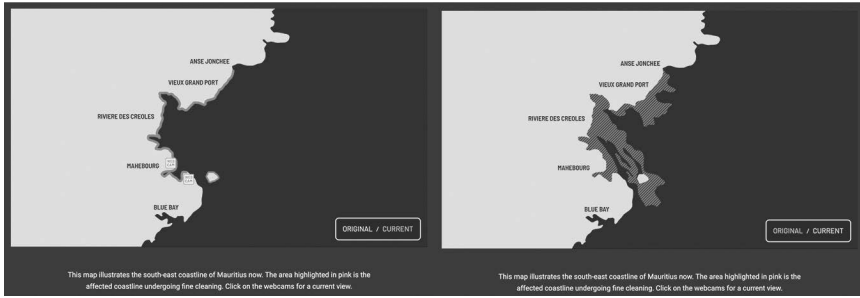


Figure 7.3 Information on the Mauritius Tourism website, showing the state of the affected area by the oil spill in September 2020 (on the left) comparing to the initial amplitude (on the right).¹⁶

harbor, containing the possibilities of infection, in this case, the toxicity was not contained with the immobility of the ship.

Porous Archives

In this section, I analyze how both the oil spill and the museum implementation have reverberated in the social and natural landscapes of the country, and how they have been represented, analyzed and discussed in visual and affective ways, expressing the feelings and interrogations of the population who almost simultaneously experienced the inauguration of a museum that speaks of difficult pasts and their present reverberations and a never-seen environmental catastrophe that darkened the usually turquoise and clear lagoon waters that they envision on a daily basis.

Both provoked large (and long) discussions, being the oil spill, for obvious reasons, a matter of public outcry and a rarely seen civic mobilization that, it is thought, will become a remembered episode in the recent history of the country. In the days and weeks that followed the oil spill, besides the constant news in the national and international television channels and newspapers, the most striking elements were the powerful images that inundated social platforms, becoming remarkable visual documents in their own right.

Facebook pages and personal posts, or newspaper articles, shared the work of amateur and professional photographers, illustrating the horror of the pollution and the efforts, and commotion, of the population.

Makeshift oil booms filled with sugarcane *bagasse* (leftovers of the cut canes) and human hair were placed in the lagoon, standing among the most powerful and internationalized images of the popular action in the first days of the spill. Images as those collected in a Forbes article, grouping the work of 14 local photographers,¹⁷ highlight the sheer chromatic contrasts between the materialities of the lagoon ecosystems, human bodies and the viscosity of the oil. The expression of agony of volunteers in hazard suits recovering

the oil from the surface of the water, the number of barrels filled with oil, documented with a striking viscerality the shocking reality of those days. Never-seen gestures, as picking up oil from the surface of the water, and an unprecedented blackness over the liquid horizon, with the viscous and poisonous oil floating on the sea, turn these images even more powerful and provide a sense of urgency and shock. Facial expressions also capture the impossible to photograph foul smell reaching the shores, expressing the anguish and terror of those who saw their coast invaded by a previously unimaginable danger (Figure 7.4).

These visualities became archives of the oil spill and its afterlives, social, economic, political and environmental consequences, illustrating a significant event of the contemporary history of Mauritius.

Since the accident until the last quarter of 2021, when Mauritius opened its borders without mandatory quarantine, the region affected by the oil spill experienced very slow improvements in the socio-economic context. Despite the progression of cleaning activities on the lagoon and mangroves, tourism, fishing and sea-based activities were on halt for a long period, having dire consequences for the population.

The most important assessment of the socio-economic impact of this oil spill is the report by the Mauritian research center *Dynamia*, written in collaboration with Stanford University. Published in October 2021, 14 months after the spill, the report aims “to provide interested stakeholders with an initial understanding of the socio-economic situation and needs of the villages in the region”.¹⁹

One of the most impacting consequences of the conjunct pandemic context and the oil spill was the loss of almost 50% of the household earnings in the



Figure 7.4 Expressive photographs by Daphney Dupré from his Facebook album “Sov nou Lagon” (in Mauritian Creole: Save our lagoon), documenting the popular movements to clean the lagoon.¹⁸

region affected by the two events, with those engaged in seasonal labor, fishing and gleaning suffering losses of up to 71%.²⁰ The coastal areas affected by the oil spill also showed a progressive decline in income over time, while other regions of the island showed a slow improvement after the lifting of the strictest lockdown rules, showing that the oil spill has porous consequences that linger over time.

A second report, focusing the events leading to the accident and its management and submitted to the government by the Court of Investigation, which had been tasked by the national government in July 2020 to assess the accident, was not made public by decision of Council of Ministers on 23 December 2022. This decision was never justified by the government, raising accusations of “totalitarianism”,²¹ and might be related to the government’s will of avoiding discussions on how it handled the incident since its first hours. This decision aggravated an already negative public image of the government attitude and became another topic of public discussions, leading to protests from several segments of the society, reflecting the relevance that the spill still has for the population of the country.

In 2021, marking the first anniversary of the oil spill, another set of archival material coming out of the Wakashio’s spill combines visual arts and text, in a series of publications, from children’s books to poems and visual arts, echoing the depth with which the oil spill was felt across the country and providing an important archive of this event.

The book *Ecrire, peindre, peut-être?* organized by Issa Asgarally, writer and literature professor at the University of Mauritius, contains works of several Mauritian visual artists and writers, based in the country or in diaspora (Figure 7.5),²² as well as the book *Contemplations*, organized and funded by the diaspora association *Ansam Nou Pli For* (local creole: together we are stronger), with works of several artists, most of them from younger generations, as well as some poems by well-known writers (Figure 7.6).²³ The Mauritian barrister Anita Bacha published a children’s book rightly titled *Wakashio*, illustrating the story of the oil spill through the experience of two Mauritian children being, up to now, the only work specifically designed for children about the Wakashio (Figure 7.7).²⁴

Another powerful medium used to comment the oil spill and its consequences in the livelihoods of the local populations is the documentary cinema, with several events marking the first and second anniversaries of the accident and commenting its socio-economic consequences.

In 2021, two documentaries were released online: *Le fantôme du Wakashio*, written by a team from Radio Plus and directed by Jean-Luc Émile and Roshan Choony²⁵ and *Grat lamer pintir lesiel*, directed by David Constantin.²⁶ While the first film portrays the daily lives of the fishermen, tourist agents and the population in the affected coast, the second film captures how several persons affected by the disaster cope with its consequences through slam and poetry, entering private spaces and intimate conversations with its protagonists.²⁷



Figure 7.5 Images of the publication *Ecrire, peindre, peut-être?* edited by Issa Asgally, with texts and drawings side by side. Images by the author.

On 6 August 2022, marking two years of the accident, the political movement *Rezistans ek Alternativ* organized the premiere of the documentary *Wakashio – lespar odela marenwar* (In Mauritian creole: *Wakashio – the hope beyond the black tide*) produced with the *Centre for Alternative Research and Studies – Care* and the organization *Rising Ocean*.²⁸ The event was organized by the three associations in Mahébourg, the epicenter of the ecological disaster, premiering the film both in person and online.²⁹

The *Wakashio* disaster seems to have opened a Pandora's box: since the event several container or oil ships have seen similar faith in other parts of the island in September 2020, March 2021,³⁰ first semester of 2022 and September of the same year,³¹ creating a strong reverberation in public opinion, local newspapers and television channels, and raising questions on the repeating patterns of these potential ecological disasters, showing that the *Wakashio* accident was not forgotten.

On another dimension, the social dynamics seen during the oil spill resurfaced in 2021, with 1,800 people filling a motion asking to be heard in court regarding the *Wakashio*'s liability in the oil spill, following the motion filled in the Supreme Court by the *MV Wakashio*'s owner company, the O.M.C. (Okiyo Maritime Corporation) with the argument that its liability should be around \$16.3 million.

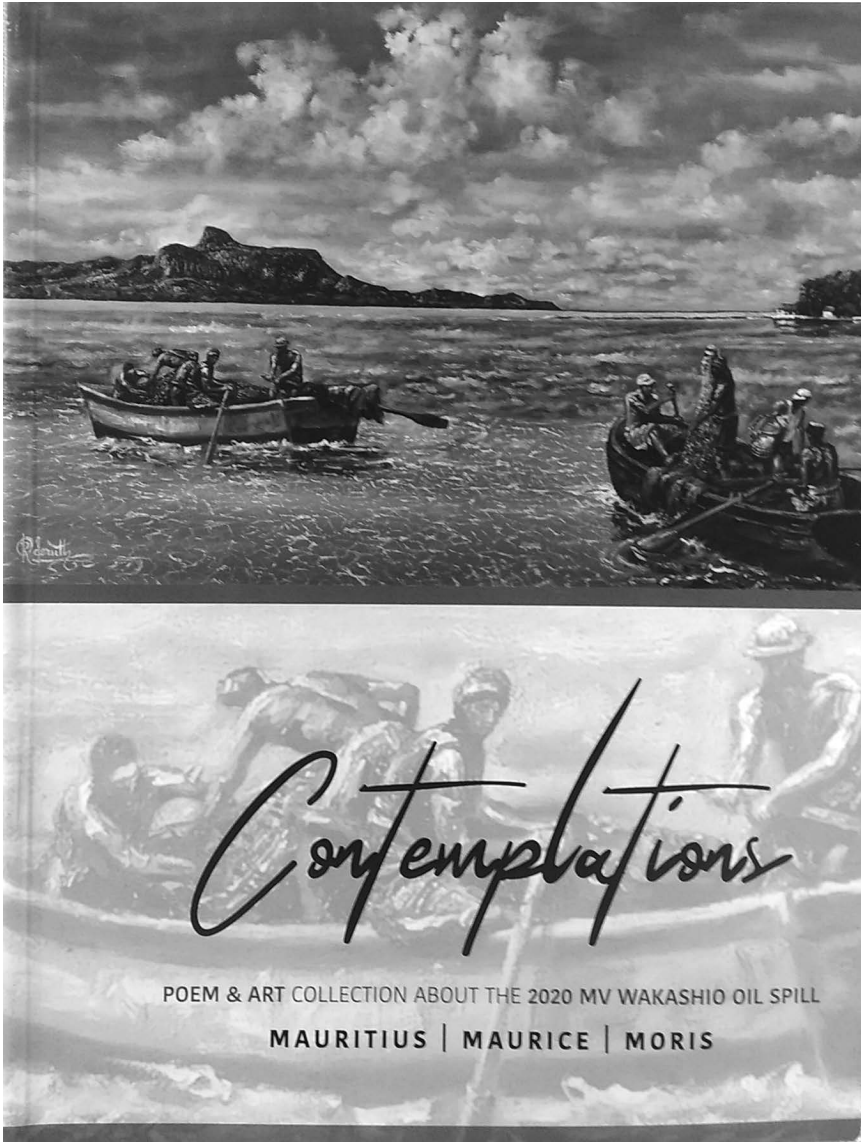


Figure 7.6 Cover of the book *Contemplations*, published by Mauritian Diaspora platform *Ansam Nou Pli For*. Image by the author.

This is the most visible of many other claims that the national government has received since the disaster. In July 2021, the Mauritian Minister of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping, shared with the national parliament that by that date they had received more than 4,500 claims, while the government was preparing a “solidarity grant” of \$230 to

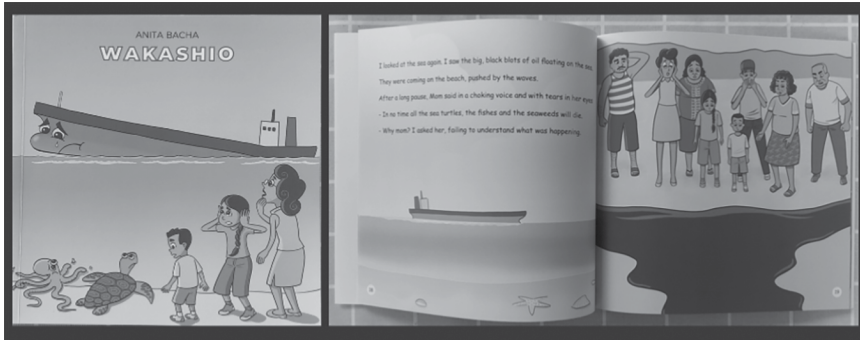


Figure 7.7 Cover and spread of the children's book *Wakashio*, authored by Anita Bacha.

the fishermen and fishmongers affected by the oil spill. In December of the same year, the owners of MV *Wakashio* agreed to pay \$2.500 to those who applied for compensation.³²

New Museum, Old Discussions

On 20 October 2020, the Ministry of Arts and Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Mauritius launched the new Intercontinental Slavery Museum, along with its inaugural exhibition “breaking the silence” in the south wing of the old Military Hospital. The aim of the museum was clearly mentioned as being a “Site of Conscience”.³³

One of the objectives of the inaugural exhibition was to generate a public auscultation on what the Mauritians desired the museum to be, and what questions, problematics and exhibitions should happen in that space. Inscribed in its guiding lines, this initiative wished to represent a “bottom-up” approach and community involvement since the inception of the institution.³⁴ For this consultation (from 21 October 2020 to 20 January 2021), with around 3,000 persons visiting the inaugural exhibition, were used diverse methodologies as focus groups discussions and ethnographic interviews, besides the most usual questionnaires, allowing in-depth understandings of how the population engaged with the museum and the emotional and sociologic attachments with the theme of slavery and its consequences in contemporary society. For the focus group discussions, participants were chosen from several regions with a high density of creole population, in a total of 59 participants between 15 and 60 years old.³⁵

In October 2021, the museum released the analysis of this public consultation, assuming this process as a route book for the implementation of the museum and expressing the ethical role of museums and how this one in particular has as main objective to “gather, make dialogue and reconcile all

Mauritians with a painful sequence of their history: slavery and slave trade”, reflecting “the questions that cut across the social world”.³⁶

One of the most important themes was the cultural identity of the descendants of slaves and the creole population, significantly transcribed in its original Mauritian creole, asserting a cultural belonging that is important to acknowledge. Particularly relevant is the section with the recommendations by the researchers based in the visitor’s feedback, highlighting the humanization of the history of slavery, the pedagogic dimension of the museum, which should be open to everyone and work with local communities, relevance of accurate historical facts and enabling dialogue and reconciliation as a form of reparation.³⁷

This report constitutes a central document of the first phase of the museum and highlights public sentiments with regard to how this new space can be a catalyst for renewed discussions on the past and the present of the Mauritian society. The several exhibitions, seminars and events have been timely shared in the museum’s Facebook page and theme of newspaper pieces, contributing to a wider impact and visibility.

One important mode of turning visible the work of generations of enslaved people in the island is through the history of the building itself, with one project funded by the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation and the U.S. Embassy in Mauritius: the restoration of one of the entrance structures by a local team of apprentices in the technique of *argamasse* (lime paste) prepared with experts from Pondicherry (former French India). Renovating this section of the building following the original techniques turns visible the work of enslaved populations in building the colonial Mauritius cities and infrastructures. The connection between build materialities and social inheritances is powerful and may enable crossed conversations concerning the links between erasing historical built heritage and the silence regarding still prevalent social consequences of slavery.

Drifting Vocabularies

One of the intentions of this research is to not dissociate the two research sites, the oil spill and the new museum, with the objective of understanding the porous relations between territory and society, history and present, local and global. This follows a conceptual intention, understood as flowing between different materialities – coral, sand and mangrove constituting the coral lagoons, oil and its poisonous viscosities, human bodies and their gestures and emotions, historical processes and their contemporary social remains – and having the ocean and insular existences as a possibility of seeing differently. Or, as Melody Jue writes in the preface of her book *Wild Blue Media*, to “thinking through the ocean as an environment for thought”³⁸ XI).

Here, I consider how “porosity” allows dialogues between territory and society, landscape and history, local and international, Indian Ocean waters

and insular realities, social structures and coastal landscapes and their exploitation, change or conservation.

A crucial dimension concerning the oil spill is the cultural heritages related to the ocean and their emotional and sensorial attachments with the ocean, a source of livelihood and a fundamental factor in cultural identities and narrative.³⁹ In this way, not only the spill is about environmental degradation, and the subsequent livelihoods endangered by it, but also about long and profound connections with the landscape and its biodiversity, embodying senses of self and community history. Histories were documented and shared in the public consultation and group discussions surrounding the inaugural exhibition of the Intercontinental Slavery Museum.

The toxic oil spill can be understood as impacting the natural porosity of the coast, invading the lagoon and poisoning all the coastal elements: coral, sand, mangrove, vegetation, oceanic animals, birds, boats, the wooden pillars of piers and sea walls. It also entered into the social fabric, livelihoods, relations with the ocean and the lagoon, the survival ability of so many people and porous to the toxicity of the spill. What happens to the territory happens equally to the people, not only in the moment but in the long run: the water is toxic to bath, the fish is toxic to eat and the shellfish is forbidden to be caught or sold.

The new museum project openly speaks about a past that is still active in the landscape and society of the country. Slavery's afterlives are sensed in the porosities of the social structures, poverty levels of certain segments of the society and social stigmas or cultural landscapes. The past has drifted into the present, finding currents that did not sufficiently changed old economic and social structures that became visible also in territorial uses. Historical questions relating to land possession, and dispossession,⁴⁰ seen as afterlives of slavery and colonial histories are, even if often silenced, in the background of public discussions concerning the coastal urban and touristic development and the massive scale of new real-estate projects across the island.⁴¹ In this way, debating the territory and its landscape means to also debate their historical contexts and social and cultural implications.

This brings us back to the relations between the oil spill as an environmental disaster and the new slavery museum. Territory and natural resources (and the actual oceanic shipping routes that Mauritius integrates) are deeply engrained in colonial histories, which, in turn, take us to histories of slavery and their contemporary social and economic remnants.

Land and people, territory and history, landscape and human body: they are not dissociated in a context as Mauritius and other previously colonized insular territories. Most of the fishing communities affected by the oil spill are creole families, descendants of African and Malagasy enslaved populations and most often landless. The southeast region, despite being desired for tourism for its remaining patches of wild coastal landscapes and extensive lagoon, is seen as less developed than the north and northwest of the island. Historically, communities of maroons and descendants of slaves inhabited

the coastal regions of the southeast and southwest of the island. This segment of the population still suffers from poverty and racism, fact pointed out in the final reports of the Mauritius Truth and Justice Commission in 2011.⁴²

The chromatic contrast mentioned in the beginning of this text between the blue of the lagoon waters and the black of the oil can inspire us as a conceptual immersion into these relations between landscape and slavery history. Race, and racism, resurfaces often in Mauritius, and it is indissociable of conversations regarding the creoleness of the local society.⁴³ Thus, blackness can equally represent “black histories” and the “black body” inherited from a past of slavery, and their connection with ecological and economic histories.

The Wakashio spill ignited renovated discussions regarding racial discrimination and poverty contexts in the country, which are perceptible in many different ways, as the outcry over a song sung by college students in March 2023 with offensive language toward the creole Mauritians demonstrates.⁴⁴

Impacted Landscapes

The landscape says so much about social history, while the social context expresses so much about the territory and its historical ecologies. Museum and oil spill are, in the end, intimately linked with both society and territory. An oil container ship, a powerful symbol of what is seen as globalization, hits the easternmost African territory, a precise and localized coral reef, disturbing the local ecological balance and the social and political situation of the country. This extremely localized event is part of vast interoceanic flows of commodities, as past slavery in Mauritius was part of intercontinental flows of enslaved persons displaced as commodities.

Both the oil spill and the discussions surrounding the museum can be inserted in precise temporalities, but surely there will be porous continuities and afterlives. The oil will take years to completely disappear from mangrove roots and coral reefs, while the social impact of the spill will also take time to be overcome. The oil spill and the installation of the new museum become, thus, important locations to think Mauritius through the concepts of porosity, connecting land and ocean in particular ways. The dialogues opened by the new museum will also hopefully reverberate in the near future, enhancing changes in the way the past is understood, and reconciled, with the present.

Porous historical processes leave their imprint in the social and environmental landscapes of the island, while oceanic currents and atmospheric systems connect it with permanent aquatic flows that turn the landmass of the island a part of vast and permanent oceanic movements. Neither historical events nor the oceans are static, and the modes they reverberate today in Mauritius’ social and environmental biographies can be perceived how this new museum and the oil spill were, and have been, experienced and discussed by the local citizens.

The events, discussions and representations here explored point out how the African continent, geographically connecting Asia, Europe and the Americas, has been experiencing long histories of extraction of natural resources and human labor and the accumulation of the remains they have produced. The debris of internationalized flow of capital and raw materials establishes continuities from past colonial interventions to contemporary supranational pressures. In the case of Mauritius, the progressive destruction of the endemic forests for sugarcane plantation (and the slow death of most of the corals of the island) is intimately linked with the oil spill by being both histories of radical environmental exploitation.

The temporarily darkened coral reefs, shallow lagoons and mangroves of Mauritius act as powerful, and heavily impacted, materialities of how porous political and ecological borders can be, as well as often the most vulnerable segments of society carry the burden of ecological disasters provoked by the global flow of capital and trade.⁴⁵ Both the displacement of bounded labor and the routes of maritime trade direct us to critically engage with the disastrous effects of what is otherwise considered the root of the Indian Ocean world: circulations and flows.

In this mode, looking from the African continent, the Anthropocene questions and complexifies the concepts of circulation and free flow, as well of time. It is the proper concept of Anthropocene, and island ecologies under this epoch, that is being observed: in islands as Mauritius, the Anthropocene started long ago, and its social and ecological consequences are visible and experienced from within but also from outside its borders.

It is, also here, on the shores of the African archipelagos in the Indian Ocean, that the international economic webs impact the African continent. If the African Indian Ocean islands have circulations and displacement in their cultural DNA, the history shows us how concepts of flow and movement have to be critically dismantled to recognize their unfathomable impacts on landscape, human and natural lives, and in the local social and environmental ecologies.

Notes

- 1 Tor Sellström, *Africa in the Indian Ocean: Islands in Ebb and Flow* (Brill, 2015); Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Michael Pearson, eds., *Eyes Across the Water – Navigating the Indian Ocean* (Unisa Press and Penguin India, 2010); Julia Verne and Markus Verne, “Introduction: The Indian Ocean as Aesthetic Space,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 314–320; Ruth Barnes, *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies* (Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies, 2004); May Joseph, “Old Routes, Mnemonic Traces,” in *Cultures of Trade. Indian Ocean Exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 62–75.
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