Elliot Wailoo

Once enslaved Black laborers could no longer sustain the British Empire they were 'emancipated.' This forced imperial officials to invent a new system of cheap, expendable agricultural work. They created indenture, under which workers agreed to renewable five- or seven-year stints on plantations growing crops like rubber, sugar, cotton, or tea. For a labor source they looked to India. From 1834 until 1917, millions from the subcontinent 'consented' to contracts of indenture and were shipped across the Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans to places they had never heard of: St. Vincent, Mauritius, Samoa, Trinidad, KwaZulu-Natal, Fiji, British Guiana. The majority never returned.

A century after the system's abolition, the descendants of indenture are still scattered across continents and oceans, many still living at endpoints of indenture and others in diaspora in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. We are disconnected from each other physically by geography and mentally by the passage of four, five, six generations. These same forces — distance and time — stand in the way of 21st-century descendants hoping to understand the conditions of indenture and its long-lasting impacts on families. To exploit efficiently, Empire kept little record of individual laborers beyond ship logs, plantation inventories, and the occasional photo. Names were knowingly bastardized and reassigned. Papers were stolen by wind, lost in bureaucratic rearrangements, rotted by tropical mildew. In many cases memory is all that remains and all that can be shared. But how do we account for memory's flaws, gaps, and elisions? How does memory compare to the unshakeable authority of History? And what's the point of remembering, anyway?

These questions guide the 28 nonfiction essays, short stories and poems collected in *We Mark Your Memory: Writings from the Descendants of Indenture*, the first international anthology of creative work from descendants of indenture, published in 2018 by the University of

London's School of Advanced Study to mark the centenary of abolition. In the volume, editors David Dabydeen, Maria del Pilar Kaladeen and Tina K. Ramnarine compile works by descendants of indenture across the globe. Each writer takes up the call to contribute differently, and the resulting array of works is engaging to read. The success of the anthology's "international" aspirations become clear as themes are artfully recycled throughout, regardless of geography: plantation killings and dynamics with British overseers, motherhood and childbearing, relationship to the sea. Most works strain against what contributor Gitan Djeli calls in her poem *Mother Wounds* "the hypervisibility/Of glorified facts and dates" to imagine the full lives of erased ancestors. But even motifs repeatedly change form. nearly all writers obsessively mine memory for meaning, but while some stories depict parents or grandparents or anonymous beachside drunks passing memories to a child, in others the near-reverse is true when a child excavates the past for a sickly father, a dying great-uncle, or for herself. The editors' and contributors' most difficult balancing act of all, though, is to inject a near-empty archive with a thoughtful, thorough, and disruptive collection, knowing that it will either hold up as the beginning of an era of collective thinking and writing among international descendants of indenture, or crumble as an early attempt to transcend Empire-enforced provinciality and assert global significance. For the most part, balance they do.

There are stumbles in the quest for a coherent narrative. An early one is the "Editors' note on the word 'coolie,'" in which Dabydeen, Kaladeen and Ramnarine vaguely summarize the slur's history without commenting on acceptable contemporary uses or drawing connections from the word to their editorial choices. The closest thing to a rebuke comes in the note's final paragraph, when they state that in addition to laborers or 'coolies,' "priests, sepoys, artists and performers were all recorded as participants in the indenture system in the Caribbean" — that since not everyone was

a laborer, coolie is a historically inaccurate term. This unsatisfying engagement leaves much open for discussion, but is the only such instance in the short editor-penned sections. Most other editorial flaws are moments when they should have pushed back against angsty, overwrought poetry, however, the most glaring mistake is the inclusion of *The Heist*, a difficult-to-finish story by Deirdre Jonklaas Cadiramen. Cadiramen, "a Sri Lankan of Dutch-Burgher heritage," is not a descendant of indenture but unconvincingly explains in her contributor biography that her "first-hand insight into indenture" comes from "her childhood on Ceylon tea and rubber plantations," sustained by seven family retainers. *The Heist* includes the corny description of a scared servant, "nerves aquiver with multitudinous anticipated terrors," the indecipherable sentence "Bachelors in planting circles outnumbered females, so when tipplers gravitated towards the bar, others evened out as dance partners," and the following dialogue, between three Tamil workers and their gracious master Ron, after a bullet strikes their car windshield "with a sound like a pistol shot" (*What* could have possibly made that noise?):

> "'What's that?', asked Muttiah.
>
> 'Maybe falling fruit', replied Karthelis.
>
> 'But there aren't remnants of pulp', said Ron.
>
> 'Maybe struck by a bird in flight', suggested Karthelis.
>
> 'There are no traces of feathers or blood.'
>
> 'I'll go check, Master Sir.'"

Cadiramen's childish, stupid South Indian servants rely on the planter Ron to guide them to rational conclusions. (The big reveal at the story's end is that one of them is not so stupid after all). Even read generously, her writing is overdone, fake deep, and unimaginative. It's regrettable but perhaps inevitable that racist tropes slipped into the anthology — I suspect *The Heist* was included only to 'represent indenture' in Sri Lanka. In any case, it makes the volume worse. Its

only positive contribution is to an argument that future anthologies should stick to writings *from* the descendants of indenture.

Outside of the aforementioned missteps, the anthology rarely veers into overexplication, oversentimentality, or overrepresentation of violence. It is a thoughtful, well-executed book. Since the editors make no announcements of genre distinctions, readers are forced to infer what is 'real' and what is 'imagined.' This is a smart choice. Ideas, feelings, and experiences stand for themselves rather than mediated by naturally flawed historical understandings of 'accuracy.' *Writing is writing*, the editors seem to be saying, *and this is what we have to show*.

Three standout essays contributed by Gaiutra Bahadur, Brij V. Lal, and Anita Sethi synthesize oral history, critical analysis of colonial archive (and lack thereof), and physical journeying to sites of arrival and survival into thought-provoking pieces that reflect and challenge what is "known" about people who experienced indenture and what followed. "From my scarce notes and fading memory, I recall imperfectly stories these men heard under the Tamarind Tree about the labyrinthine world of Girmit," Lal, a prominent Indian-Fijian historian writes in *The Tamarind Tree*, using a Hindi word for indenture. "They are the partial, private recollections of old men, but they are all I have (perhaps all they had too)." Lal admits the failure of memory, even his own, but suggests that what he remembers is enough to include.

The best works of third-person storytelling in the volume, *Paradise Island* by Priya N. Hein and *Famished Eels* by Mary Rokondravu, both involve sharing memory between generations. In Hein's story, a drunk old man tells clustered young Mauritian children about the experience of a young boy, years earlier, growing up on the nearby Chagos Archipelago until he was removed with his family to the Mauritian 'mainland,' casualties of as an imperial transaction. Her narrative choices and stylistic risks pay off well at the end. Rokondravu's piece, which spans three continents

but takes place in Fiji is the most moving work of the anthology. (It's also a reprint from *Granta*.) *Famished Eels* is spare, smart and immersive. It is well-titled — "my earliest memory of a story is my father's about eels," the unnamed narrator announces to begin the story's fourth segment of seven — and when it's done, the audience has no choice but to re-read and re-think.

Half of the works in *We Mark Your Memory* are poems. Many engage specifically with the experience of indentured women: pregnant women, mothers, and maternal. This is one of the anthology's overall success — it centers on and even obsesses over recreating the potential interiorities of women who are conspicuously absent from archives and patriarchal family histories. One of these is the engaging *'I go sen' for you'* by Fawzia Muradali Kane. Two speakers, Rasheedan and Boodhanie, trade two-line stanzas, each recounting their own indenture, fragile marriages, and quiet aspirations. "I walked with him along two hundred miles/of railroad tracks, from the mountain to the sea," Rasheedan says. "I raised my cutlass each half year, bent my back/to plant ratoons, before the dry season ended," Boodhanie replies in turn. "The child in my belly bucked more than the ship that sailed over black water," Rasheedan responds. In an appended note — or, maybe, the end of the poem — Kane divulges that the speakers are her great-great-grandmothers: Rasheedan, who left "Uttar Pradesh to elope with a married man," and Boodhanie, "who was abandoned at the end of the contract, left to bring up her married daughters alone." Without the note, the poem already sophisticatedly contrasts divergent experiences of women in indenture — one labors and one doesn't, one has daughters and one sons, one is reunited with a brother after ten years, the other left behind by her husband — but as an product of memory and telling of family history it is electric.

Across genre, one of the most salient threads in *We Mark Your Memory* are the disparate, varied grapplings with ideas of 'homeland': sometimes Guyana, Fiji, or Mauritius, but often India.

Towards India there are feelings of abandonment, longing, displacement, reverence, betrayal, amnesia, repulsion, and complete disconnect. These emotions are often connected to vivid images. In one poem, *india has left us* by Eddie Bruce-Jones, India is a decaying relic: "a riddled hanuman ... silently peeling skin/into sacred dust." In another, *Rights of Passage* by Patti-Anne Ali, India is "muddy cows" and traditionalist elders who force the protagonist to commit ritual suicide after the death of the husband who she married at eight. In her next life — in Trinidad — "the elders/rumble in discontent/pretend she does not exist./She smiles at her executioners." Ali creates a layered, remarkable moment of disobedient joy. Her protagonist has fled and can now disobey India, smiling.

The most jarring treatment of homeland comes upon the rare return. In the memorable — and what is the goal of *We Mark Your Memory* if not to be memorable? — short story *Homecoming*, Suzanne Bhagan tells of Indo-Trinidadian Gita, who "can't believe she's in Kolkata. All she knew of the city was that her great-great grandmother got on the ship here for Chinidad, the land of sugar." Gita hates Kolkata and can't wait to leave. She doesn't even want to go outside her hotel room. As she walks around, "she prays and prays for tall buildings but only sees shacks." The images of *Homecoming* are some of the anthology's strongest embodiments of the emotional complexities that descendants of indenture feel towards the place they understand to be their long-distant homeland.

In the volume's most moving moments, contributors reference obliquely the unarticulated or inarticulable — the things that might not be *meant* to be remembered. In *Great-grandmother, Ma,* Jennifer Rahim names 'the unspoken *before*," and forces her reader to either follow or miss her unsaid meaning. "i wonder whether he dreams in silence at night," Kama La Mackerel asks about his mute father in *Building Walls*, who in one scene pores over a menu so he doesn't have to talk to the writer. These brief phrases gesture towards important, unspoken questions: Which

stories will never be told and will never make it into an anthology? Which *should* be lost to time? In an anthology obsessed with preserving memory, which gaps are from oversight, which are from erosion, and which are intentional?

As the editors note, bringing works from international descendants of indenture together is novel, and that task alone is laudable. But straining against the anti-relationality of Empire and leaning into their attempted pivot from provincial to global raises new questions. One of the most significant of these is: What does it mean that Indian indenture is inherently an afterlife of African slavery and Blackened racialization?

The contributors vary in ability and desire to answer this. Some struggle earnestly to imagine the meanings of transport and transplant into anti-Black societies, often among the descendants of the enslaved. Others don't. In *Pepsi, Pie and Swimming Pools in-the-sky*, a memoirish essay, Indian-South African Cynthia Kistasamy traces uncritically how she learned to define her social worth relative to white wealth. Black Africans are completely absent from her story. As a child her "dad's blue Peugeot would motor along past picture-perfect houses with palisade fences and iron gates" and young Kistasamy would count the swimming pools through the slats. She notes her own family's racial subordination: her father is a carpenter for a white family that often requests her mother to cook curry for them as a favor with little notice. She does not mention any Africans doing demeaning work. In the end, Kistasamy says, she has escaped her parents' fate by becoming an engineering project manager and plans her imminent move to Johannesburg where she tells every realtor she must have a house with a swimming pool, thereby completing her aspiration towards white wealth. She might even hire a Black servant — but she definitely won't write about it. *My Father the Teacher*, an essay by Prithiraj R. Dullay, also takes place in South Africa, and understands Afro-Indian relationality as more foundational to his

existence. The writer describes how a Zulu woman "fed [his] dad on one breast, while her own newborn suckled on the other." So begins the life of his father, who was conversationally fluent in Zulu, four South Asian languages, and English. In the essay Dullay's father gallantly helps poor Black neighbors and supports Black resistors. From his father Dullay learns "that racism was horribly wrong" and in college he becomes smitten with Steve Biko's Black Consciousness. In his contributor biography Dullay discloses that he spent more than a decade in political exile from apartheid South Africa. In spite of this, the essay is disappointingly committed to an empty, gleeful "solidarity" between Blacks and Indians. In Dullay's universe, not only do they receive the same breast milk but they also receive the same racist treatment. He unsatisfyingly fails to critically interrogate a single way in which South Africa's Indians and Black Africans, while both living under white supremacist rule, had divergent experiences.

Another work from the African continent disrupts and expands the definition of indenture: "Mama Liberia," a poem where Angelica A. Oluoch's speaker has either finished her indenture in Virginia and is now back home in Liberia, or was born into slavery in Virginia and then was allowed to settle in Liberia following emancipation. Regardless, she "returned with nothing/Nothing but new names to gift our hands no longer bound by shackles:/Negro./Nigra." The poem is spare and ambiguous; Oluoch reminds the reader how indenture and sister systems can be a permanently Blackening process, too. By placing this poem early in the book, the editors challenge any working definition of indenture essentialized as Indian, or located in a historical vacuum. Oluoch pushes the racial boundaries of 'indenture' and the collection is better for it.

Some of the most complex and volatile contemporary Afro-Indian relationships are found in the Caribbean, especially in countries like Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana where the vast

majority of citizens are descendants of enslaved Blacks, indentured Indians, or both. The anthology's contributions engaging this region reflect these intricacies; the naivest Afro-Indian imagination comes in "Chutney Love," a poem by Gabrielle Jamela Hosein, which reads like the lyrics of a poorly written song. (It's written in Trinidadian Creole, but the songwriting is bad, not the syntax. No creole shaming!):

> Now one last last, last ting before I go bout how
> Indians and Africans does fight an buse each other so
> Is one set ah noise for a lil political power
> But we both cross water for empire
> And ever since we lan up here together
> Is with only one history that we grow
> Now I watching all kinda people feel we music for so
> An everybody coming to see that we was one people
> From since long ago

Hosein's speaker celebrates that Indians and Africans can now revel to the same music, but she also suggests that they have "only one history" on Trinidad and collapses any actual historical difference between how the groups got there ("we both cross water for empire," she says). Slavery and indenture could be considered to be *of* one history, but the two systems had hugely divergent conditions and outcomes. Hosein's speaker then simplistically denigrates tensions attributable to colonial systems and ongoing neocolonial processes as "noise for a lil political power." The poem's message is that Indian Trinidadians make chutney music and now "Not just Indian but African singing chutney/And in Hindi." In this image, music is ethnically distinct and even essentialized as belonging to Indians, and becomes shared with Africans rather than creolized and polycultural. Black people are finally appreciating Indian music!

In "Tales of the Sea," an essay that seems to respond directly to "Chutney Love," Indo-Guyanese American writer Gaiutra Bahadur is unafraid to entangle and disentangle what connects her with her Afro-Trinidadian friend Lauren. When Bahadur visits Lauren at a writer's retreat in

Greece, Bahadur misunderstands a Syrian boy, who she thinks is asking them if they are "joined." (He was asking if they were "enjoying.") In an essay that flows from memories of her dying great-uncle, an early emigré from Guyana to London, to her present thoughts about Brexit and research at the National Archives in London, to excerpts from poems written by Lauren, Bahadur probes how "joined" she and Lauren really are. She does not flinch from noting historical inflection points, calling out the CIA for sponsoring "incitement of tensions between blacks and Indians" in 1960s Guyana. (How's that for "a lil political power?") Later, she draws an explicit, grotesque comparison:

> Slave traders threw pregnant women, among other captives overboard to claim insurance money for the loss of their lives. Indenture was a successor form of trafficking... Like slave voyages, indenture voyages provided a stage for high mortality, sexual assault, and suicide. But pregnant indentured women were not thrown overbroad; unlike slave traders, their traffickers were apparently paid enough per head to land each alive ... Pregnant 'coolie' women did, however, occasionally jump overboard.

Here, Bahadur appears to interrogate differences Hosein would rather elide. She is exacting and methodical in responding to the boy's misunderstood question — which may have been a question she already had been asking herself. At the end of her essay, she brings up a pair of Hindi phrases mentioned at least ten times throughout *We Mark Your Memory*: *jahaji bhai*, "brother of the boat," and *jahaji bahen*, "sister of the boat," terms denoting those who crossed the ocean together to begin their indenture and are therefore linked by the shared voyage. Bahadur also describes shipmate synonyms in other parts of the Caribbean used by enslaved Africans: *batiment* in Haiti, *malongue* in Trinidad, *mati* in Suriname. Unlike the other contributors, who see *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bahen* as bonds of the past, Bahadur asks the reader to imagine a flexible present drawing on the past but moving beyond it. How hard is it to "make the concepts of ship sister and shipmate more symbolic and malleable?", she asks. To make "every descendant of indenture [throughout the world] ... a jahaji and *every descendant of slavery* a shipmate?" Bahadur raises a set of questions that should be explored in any future global anthologies. Here are some more: How do we understand racial

"mixing" and adulteration among the descendants of indenture? What about queerness? What about caste? For all its successes, *We Mark Your Memory* failed to engage with these topics in any depth. If, and when, the next volume's editors are looking for some new descendants — hopefully sometime sooner than the 2117 bicentennial — I'd be happy to contribute.