

“Amphibious histories”: An Interview with Isabel Hofmeyr

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Isabel Hofmeyr is Professor of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research interests include postcolonialism, African literature, Southern African literary studies, oral history and literature, John Bunyan, seventeenth-century studies, textual transnationalism, Africa-India interactions, Indian Ocean studies, histories of the book and print culture, and histories of reading and writing. Her current work focuses on Africa and its intellectual trajectories in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. In particular, her work addresses questions of Africa's intellectual place in the world and the material and aesthetic history of texts and their transnational circulation. Hofmeyr has served as Acting Director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (www.cisa-wits.org.za), which she helped to establish.

In this interview, Professor Hofmeyr lays out clearly some of the key features of the field generally known as Indian Ocean Studies, and especially the ways in which the focus on land from the perspective of the oceanic revitalizes the terracentric thinking of much postcolonial theory. Appended at the end of this interview is an initial reading list for those encountering the field anew.

AM: Please tell us, Prof. Hofmeyr, some ways in which Indian Ocean Studies helps to refine/reform some of the basic assumptions/tenets of Postcolonial Studies. For instance, given the entrenched terracentrism of mainstream Postcolonial Studies, there is, to my eyes, a profound challenge that IOS poses especially to the assumption of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of collectivity.

IH: It is now well known that Indian Ocean Studies gives us a more capacious sense of time and space. Postcolonial theory is implicitly premised around the temporality of European empires and their aftermaths. Its default settings cohere around questions of anti-colonialism and resistance, arising from post-independence revisions of colonial thought. The Indian Ocean arena by contrast offers us a much longer temporal arc, stretching back millennia and offering forms of trans-oceanic, long-distance exchanges and imaginaries that can relativize European imperialisms. As I have argued elsewhere: “At every turn the

Indian Ocean complicates binaries, moving us away from the simplicities of the resistant local and the dominating global and toward a historically deep archive of competing universalisms” (“Universalizing” 722).

In terms of space, it is now well known that the Indian Ocean world offers us a way of thinking about histories that exceed the nation-state. By turning our attention to merchant networks, slave routes, penal transportation, indenture, trans-oceanic sacred geographies, the histories of the nation-state become unsettled, mobile and dispersed.

These interactions shift one’s understanding of the shape of national history. In South Africa, a turn to the Indian Ocean draws in histories of slavery at the Cape and indenture in Natal. These open the national narrative to its multiple inheritances and shift the story away from that of settler and ‘native’.

AM: For our readers, would it be possible to briefly point to some major writers and thinkers of the field in the past three or four decades, especially from the non-literary fields? Part of the challenge, I think, for literature scholars is the necessity in Indian Ocean Studies to look closely at the work of geographers, ethnographers, and maritime historians, among others, not simply as context to the diverse literary cultures of the ocean and the coast but as co-texts. Would you agree that the Cultural Studies methodology implicit in much postcolonial thinking itself expands and amplifies in the case of Indian Ocean Studies?

IH: The field of Indian Ocean studies is rich and vast, and it would be difficult to pull out only a few names from the last three to four decades. One can now learn about the IO arena through studies of drugs, print culture, oyster beds, the migration of plants, fashion and fabric, dance, the arms trade, photography (the list could continue), all of which throw new light on the larger themes of early modern trade, empire, nation and diaspora. There is much in these works that can assist literary scholars beyond context. Paying attention to how social scientists narrativize these various commodities and their trajectories provides a useful counterpoint to how these objects appear in literary texts. An obvious example in this regard is Amitav Ghosh’s use of Clare Anderson’s work on penal transportation in *Sea of Poppies*. [Please see the select bibliography appended at the end of the interview.]

AM: The IOS, I think, makes an important claim that, indeed, the welfare of our waterways and oceans is an important theme in literature and the arts. That is, these are not the foci of trade and national policy-making alone. What do the humanities have to offer IOS, and in turn, what does IOS offer, in your opinion, to the humanities in the twenty-first century?

IH: This question of oceans and waters is important and raises a current critique of much oceanic studies, namely that what passes for oceanic studies in fact mainly deals with the surface. Such histories track human movements at sea, but the ocean itself recedes as background. With rising ocean levels and the Anthropocene, there is an urgent sense that we need to produce forms of literary scholarship that do more than turn the sea into backdrop. Contemporary literary scholars have responded to this challenge with an array of concepts like amphibious aesthetics; littoral form; tidalectics; monsoon assemblages; hydropoetics; submarine aesthetics; and sea ontologies, all ideas which open up new ways of reading the sea in literary works. The lively ocean with a materiality of its own moves to the foreground, suggesting new epistemologies and methods of interpretation. Humanities can hence offer us a way of engaging or re-engaging with the materiality of the ocean.

Like all ocean space, the Indian Ocean offers a challenge to the humanities to come to terms with its oceanographic forms, to start tracing and understanding the lively materialities of the ocean while thinking about how to factor these into cultural and literary analysis.

AM: One of the main problems faced by scientists and climate change activists is the issue of scale (and perhaps that of velocity as well): the environmental fallout is so massive and perhaps irremediable that it is difficult to fathom what human measures can equal the scale (and force) of the problem/s that face the planet. How do we in the humanities respond to the question of scale?

IH: This is of course a difficult question that confronts us across the academy. I do think it represents an opportunity for literature which has always been about the management of scale. To learn to read closely is also to read as at many levels as possible and hence to approach problems of scale. It seems that we could incorporate debates on scale more into our teaching of literature.

Like all oceans, the Indian Ocean represents particular problems of scale, namely, how to think about the deep ocean. This engagement with the 'undersea' has been discussed by Lindsay Bremner in an article "Fluid Ontologies in the Search for MH370," which tracked the disappearance of the Malaysian airline. The article uses the international search operation for the airline in the Indian Ocean as an occasion to speculate on remote and deep ocean space, "a privileged, if tragic, moment to see beyond a world constructed by humans and to get a little closer to understanding the properties of the ocean itself" (9).

Likewise, Jahnavi Phalkey's work on the history of oceanography in the Indian Ocean arena is an important step which can help us understand how the deep ocean has been visualized and conceptualized.

AM: This is a great way to rethink “depth” – an aspect closely wedded to reading strategies as you say. We in literature studies look for “deeper” meanings when we read and teach poems and prose, even as, in an opposing way, Edward Said reflectively spoke about the “power of surfaces” in arguing that surficial readings proliferate all the time and make up an important discursive structure of hermeneutics. In your own work, how have you read the Indian Ocean as presenting a method that goes beyond the play of surfaces against depths?

IH: The question of depth needs to be thought about materially rather than simply metaphorically. Caribbean theorists have long furnished us with traditions of thinking about the imperial ocean hydro poetically. Whether through ideas of tidalectics, the haunted ocean, or the sovereignty of the drowned, these thinkers have offered a rich range of ideas for thinking with and through water. Elizabeth DeLoughrey discusses the “heavy waters of [Atlantic] ocean modernity” and the waste that it produces both in the form of drowned slave lives and in the current militarized pollution of the Atlantic on whose seabed rest several nuclear reactors and warships.

There is a body of emerging work which seeks to make visible the deep-seated land- and human-orientations of much research. Terming these “dry technologies,” this scholarship seeks to “immerse” concepts and theories to produce new modes of analysis. This immersion takes different analytical forms. Some scholars literally go underwater, using experiences of diving to relativize land-based epistemic perspectives (Jue, “Wild”). Others travel underwater analytically (rather than actually) in order to “conceptually displace” technologies like writing, photography or databases to estrange “dry” ideas of inscription and archive (Jue, “Wild” and “Submerging”). A related strategy involves “thinking with” species like kelp, starfish or coral, to generate new viewpoints on old topics (Hayward on Starfish, Khal Torabully on “coral imaginaries” [Ette]).

In terms of the Indian Ocean, scholars of the Indian Ocean have started to explore more material approaches: Lindsay Bremner’s idea of “monsoon assemblages” investigates the inter-linked environmental, oceanic and infrastructural histories of Indian Ocean cities; Charne Lavery’s work analyses how the depths of the Indian Ocean have been encountered, imagined and represented. The project which I run with Charne Lavery, “Oceanic Humanities for the Global South,” explores these techniques and themes (www.oceanichumanities.com).

AM: IOS works with almost a new language of intervention (one that is, by no means, unique to it): anthropocene, blue economy, wetness, “amphibious histories” (your evocative term), littoral historiography, and much more. Such a language taps into older and more ancient discourses

of cross-cultural contact – showcasing a kind of linguistic cosmopolitanism, if you will. Literature, of course, is interested in such linguistic dynamism (as Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy or the novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah amply demonstrate). How, in your view, is this language radical, or is it?

IH: The concepts you outline are of course indebted to and reference the patterns of littoral cosmopolitanism and exchange around the Indian Ocean arena. They do, however, carry more of an ecological freight than some of the existing historical scholarship on these exchanges allows although the question of different ecological zones in the Indian Ocean world has always featured in broader histories of the ocean. As mentioned above, much scholarship on the Indian Ocean arena treats the sea and indeed the littoral as backdrop for human exchange. Ghosh's and Gurnah's works are of course different since their texts display distinct forms of ecological investment (albeit informed by different sensibilities), which is interwoven with questions of linguistic cosmopolitanism. This is also a theme taken up by Sunil Amrith's *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, which considers the encounter of languages as part of ecologies.

AM: Prof. Hofmeyr, one of the buzzwords in academia recently has been "resilience" – by which a whole discourse has emerged which shifts the onus of social remaking on to the shoulders of individual actors while the heavily corporatized, consumerist state continues its macroeconomic climb to a narrowly national/istic prosperity. This double-bind marks much state-sponsored environmental rhetoric in India where even as mining companies buy large swathes of forestland for billions from the nation-state, the PM of the country runs an expensive, high-visibility campaign for cleaning up the nation ("Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan"), which shifts the onus of "cleaning up" to the individual, the family, and the neighbourhood. "Resilience," when used in political discourse, has this strongly paradoxical double-standard, as opposed to its very specific, even technical, use in the discourse of ecological disaster management. The trickle-down effect of such concepts of "resilience" in literary studies is, indeed, a depoliticization of the term and its banal usage for understanding "resilient" characters in novels, drama, poems, etc. In contrast, a truly subversive word-idea, "resistance," gets de-emphasized. IOS is implicated at the cross-section of scientific and aesthetic discourses where considerable borrowing of words and terminologies can effect powerful solidarities, but there can be dangerous slippages as well. What is your view?

IH: The discourse on resilience has not been especially strong in South Africa, so I am not entirely familiar with it. The question of ecological

resilience has of course been insightfully discussed by scholars like Anuradha Madhur and Dilip da Cunha in works like *Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary* – here questions of ecological resilience become important in questions of design. To transport the term to other domains does of course raise problems. Using resistance may be one route to follow, but it does surface the question of what ‘resistance’ under late capitalism could be.

AM: What are some of the challenges facing scholars working in Indian Ocean Studies? What kinds of collaborative projects can you envision for postcolonial studies scholars working with the nation-state and centre-periphery models, in which so much postcolonial academic work still remains invested?

IH: The Indian Ocean is often discussed as an inter-regional arena, a model that presents those working in one nation state to resituate themselves. An excellent example is Samia Khatun’s recent *Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey* which draws Australia into Indian Ocean networks, languages, stories and intellectual traditions. Another fascinating research experiment comes from Kai Kresse who works on the Swahili coast and Edward Simpson who works on Gujarat. These two scholars changed research sites to see what new angles they could gain on trans-oceanic networks.

AM: Professor Hofmeyr, does India still have a tendency to dominate IOS? In terms of its “geopolitical significance,” successive Indian governments have tended to desire such dominance, including the current dispensation. Such efforts have been challenged by China, and the recent crisis in Maldives has brought to the foreground the ways in which the political skirmishing between India and China strains the whole region. It seems to me that, *geopolitically*, a newer form of twenty-first-century neocolonialism is set to arise in the Indian Ocean (a rudimentary Google search reveals such titles as “Great Game in the Indian Ocean” in an alarming evocation of Kipling’s colonial story-worlds). What are the responsibilities of writers and academics in such a situation?

IH: The question of India’s dominance in IOS may well be true, but it also depends on where one is located. In South Africa, for example, Indian Ocean studies tend to be dominated by discussions of Cape slavery and Indian indenture in Natal with South Asia rather far in the background. Much IOS is regionally shaped and one’s view of the field would depend on this intellectual location.

With regard to the emerging geopolitics of the 21st century, scholars might usefully trace out some of the pre-histories of these new formations. Such a task would involve relativizing the view of the IO as a space of

cosmopolitan exchange and anti-colonial solidarity which shaped Bandung and its afterlives. These strands of solidarity are important to keep in view, but one equally needs a clear grasp of the multiple fault-lines and competing interests that enable and disrupt regions around the Indian Ocean arena. In his discussion of In Koli Jean Bofane's novel *Congo Inc.*, Duncan Yoon provides a reading of how the text "represents Africa-China relations through its hustling entrepreneurs, the half-Pygmy Isookanga and the Chinese national Zhang Xia," holding this up as a compelling instance of the Global South novel. Elsewhere I have referred to these new mutant forms as Indian Ocean *kitsch*: multilateral fashion shows, slapstick films set between South Africa and India, cricket extravaganzas drawing together different IO countries (along with Bollywood glitz) ("Styling Multilaterism"). This cultural space seems worth watching.

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