

Introduction: The Contours of a Field: Literatures of the Indian Ocean

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Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory?
Sirs, in that grey vault.
The sea.
The sea has locked them up.
The sea is History.
(Derek Walcott, "The Sea Is History")

Land crabs re-emerge
from the undergrowth
to devour new layers of leaf litter,
Council-workers and house owners
kick through the wreckage,
recaptured boats sail reefwards
where gorgonian fan corals
wave delicately
& the Indian Ocean settles
like amniotic fluid around
The myth of origin.
(John Kinsella, "Indian Ocean Ode")

Derek Walcott's famous poem "The Sea is History" is a powerful reminder of the ways in which the sea and the ocean function as repositories of cultural memory and social practices. Walcott's work is, indeed, trenchantly water-centric, based as it is on the intersections of personal stories about and collective histories of maritime journeys, migrations, and travels. But what is it about the ocean that makes it as an analytical category or critical paradigm distinct from land?

Indian Ocean Studies (IOS) is itself part of a larger and historically robust field of scholarship on the sea ("thalassography" and "thalassology," from *thalassos*, the Greek word for sea) which has, in the past three decades in particular, undergone a reorientation that has several ramifications for students of history, literature, and cultural and materialist studies. In this two-set Special issue of *Postcolonial Text*, I am excited to be a part of what is both an ongoing conversation between maritime geographers, historians, and social scientists as well as an extension of this conversation to the domain of literature and literary studies. A few orientating comments at the outset.

There are many useful introductions to IOS in general, but drawing upon the writings of Michael Pearson, Isabel Hofmeyr, Rila Mukherjee, Lakshmi Subramanian, Sugata Bose, Sara Keller, and Philippe Beaujard, among others, I will try to outline the lineaments of the field. Firstly, *what is significant about the Indian Ocean?* The third-largest of all oceans on Earth, the Indian Ocean covers about 20% of the earth's total ocean area and connects three continents (Asia, Africa, Australia) and 36 countries, out of which barring only one (Australia), all boast developing economies. The Observer Research Foundation's entry on the Indian Ocean provides an overview of the historically ancient and abidingly significant role played by the Indian Ocean and its waterways: "[t]he Indian Ocean hosts one of the most important global maritime routes connecting Far East with Europe that passes through the South China Sea, Strait of Malacca, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Suez Canal and Mediterranean until the Atlantic, and carries [a] majority of the ultra-large containerships. The Ocean's maritime routes are pivotal for the worldwide supply of energy. It is estimated that almost 40% of energy supply is transported from the Persian Gulf to Europe and Asia through its waterways" ("Indian Ocean").

Even within the larger field of the oceanic, marked so influentially by the work of Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean presents sharp geographical contrasts that has ramifications for the very different cultural history of the region. As André Wink has argued:

[w]hat is striking in the lands of the Indian Ocean. . . is the great variety and abundance of river landscapes along an immense coastline, running from the Zambezi in East Africa to the Euphrates and the Tigris, to the Indus and its tributaries, the Ganges and the Yamuna, the Brahmaputra, the rivers of the Indian peninsula, and, beyond, to the Irrawaddy, Chao Phraya, Mekong, the Solo, and the Brantas and other rivers in its eastern parts. Even more striking is that many of these rivers are of extraordinary magnitude and reach deeply inland. In sharp contrast to the Mediterranean, most of the civilizations that arose in the Indian Ocean area from protohistoric and ancient times onwards were typically alluvial river- plain and delta civilizations. (417)

Wink's work is pivotal in the distinctions it draws between the overwhelming privileging in Mediterranean studies of *cities* and *urban modernities* that "tallies with the much broader current of social and economic thought represented by, among others, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Max Weber—which has elevated towns and cities generally into a highly distinctive significant category" (426). In contrast, medieval histories of the Indian Ocean lands present, he argues, numerous examples of largely *agrarian* agglomerations underwritten by the littorally based historical traditions of cross-continental maritime trade and traffic, such that "the Indian city as such was certainly not the privileged locus of sustained and cumulative social change" (431). Already, then, it is possible to see how the Indian Ocean posits a powerful genealogical

challenge to the metropolitanist and terracentric premises of both European modernity and its postcolonial responses.

One of the pioneers of the field now known widely as the Indian Ocean World (IOW) is Michael N. Pearson whose numerous books and articles helped define the field and especially the role of the Portuguese in Western India. Pearson's work has influenced the writings of numerous scholars that came after him, giving us a range of terminologies and methodologies that continues to animate Indian Ocean Studies as a domain of knowledge of increasing significance in the twenty-first century. In an influential essay written in 1985, "Littoral Society: The Case for the Coast," Pearson defined the littoral "as an organizing principle for coming to grips with the essential character and unity of the Indian Ocean world" (qtd. in Alpers 13). He argues in the essay:

[a] study of littoral society is much more holistic than that of port cities, and forces one to concentrate much more on the sea, thus avoiding the temptation to which many port city studies have succumbed, that is, the tendency to stray inland to distant markets and influences, and ignore the sea altogether" ("Littoral Society" 1).

Furthermore, Pearson suggests that "if one focuses on the sea, and the littoral, then on-going themes and trends become clear and one can escape the shackles of a largely European-derived documentation" (1-2). In his later work, Pearson clarifies that the littoral needs to be seen in counterpoint (and not necessarily in opposition) to land (societies): "what exactly is a maritime or littoral economy or society, and is it necessarily different from a landlocked one? Is it only coastal? A moment's reflection will show first that littoral society is very similar to some land-bounded societies, and second, that the littoral is not restricted to the shores of the ocean" (*Port Cities and Intruders* 38). Thus, Pearson proposes that the littoral allows for a translocality that transcends terracentric boundaries of the nation-state; as he puts it, "Surat and Mombasa have more in common with each other than they do with inland cities such as Nairobi or Ahmadabad" ("Littoral Society" 354). To study the littoral "in gradation" from the terrestrial is to, in fact, adopt "an amphibious approach" to land and sea, argues Pearson, employing a metaphor that marks all his work on the littoral and its various manifestations. Pearson's method speaks to this Special Issue's own emphasis upon transmodernity as an organizing principle for understanding the multifarious ways in which globally vast and historically ancient networks of circulation impinge upon our collective sense of the world in the twenty-first century.

This Special Issue on IOS brings forth two interviews—one, with leading Indian Ocean Studies scholar, Isabel Hofmeyr, and two, with the Tanzanian-UK novelist, Abdulrazak Gurnah—that will, I hope, clarify for the reader both the ambit and significance of the field of Indian Ocean Studies and its literary manifestation in one of the most important writers

of our time. Hofmeyr indicates the efflorescence that marks IOS and the “amphibious” collaborations possible for the postcolonial scholar interested in decentering and recentering locations of analysis from land to sea, inland to littoral. The interview also brings to the fore the numerous, competing foci of a field that takes the oceanic as a historical unit for analysis: while Hofmeyr’s own work is Africa-centric, she cites the work of scholars based in China and Australasia as providing new impetus to the field. Her point that the Indian Ocean is both place and method provides a new way for us in literary and cultural studies for rethinking the methodologies that have tended to ossify around the centre-periphery model of European modernity and reactionary postcolonialism. Gurnah’s interview with Datta and myself presents a literary illustration of the exceptionalism that Hofmeyr argues for the Indian Ocean. Gurnah’s novels have that teeming multiplicity of “creolized cultures,” as Gaurav Desai puts it, that has historically characterized such places as Zanzibar, the port city of Gurnah’s birth, that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “found itself at a crossroads of commerce and culture” (Desai 714). I leave it to the reader to interpret Gurnah’s self-understanding of his place as a writer of the Indian Ocean (he is also an academic specializing in postcolonial studies) and read it alongside his novels.

The opening essay of the Special Issue, “Maritime Transmodernities and The Ibis Trilogy,” examines Amitav Ghosh’s decade-long enterprise, *The Ibis Trilogy*, as a case-study for exploring the limits and possibilities of the idea of transmodernity as theorized by the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel. In the essay, I argue that Ghosh remains an atypical member of the postcolonial club (as it were) because of his insistent focus upon the sea (rather than land) as the locus for viewing/understanding the historical and cultural encounters between the West and the East. Such encounters are but segments of longer and deeper instances of maritime global contact made possible by the ocean. Indeed, where much postcolonial writing remains centred on issues of land, dispossession, and diaspora, Ghosh has shown remarkable dissidence in his interests in the sea and, in what I, adapting Dussel, call, “maritime transmodernities” in order to launch his critique of both Eurocentrism and its equally problematic *agon*, academic postcolonialism. Through a close reading of the littoral and maritime in the three novels that comprise the *Ibis Trilogy*, I show the ways in which Ghosh’s interest has subtly shifted from land and territorial structures for articulating and critiquing contemporary political events (*The Calcutta Chromosome*, 1995; *The Shadow Lines*, 1998) to the sea and to maritime frameworks for understanding the deeper, more genealogically complex currents of human interaction across time and space, a move that marks such works as *In An Antique Land*, 1992; *The Hungry Tide*, 2004; and the *Ibis Trilogy*, 2008–15. Such a move has entailed the transformation of the postmodern novel

into what I call the “the transmodern novel.” My structuralist reading of the changing dynamics of the twenty-first-century novel will, I hope, help draw new frames for understanding the genre, even as we remain aware of intersections and overlaps. In the essay, I also put forward the idea that transmodern novels tend to be demanding in terms of reader response, requiring readers to be interested in multiple historiographies and languages, and to, in fact, put into motion “transmodern reading practices” that are comparatist, anti-hierarchical, and polyvalent in hermeneutic method.

To extend the emphasis on the Indian Ocean as an anchor for a new horizon of cultural description and literary analysis, James Mulholland’s essay turns to British occupation of Java between 1811 and 1816 to argue for the importance of local and regional registers, not just oceanic and imperial ones. Java, the largest island of the Indonesian archipelago, was the primary location of the Dutch East India Company (the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC) and its headquarters in Batavia (now Jakarta). After the British occupied the island of Java, they published the *Java Government Gazette (JGG)*, which ran between 1812 and 1816. The *JGG* was a multilingual newspaper that reprinted European news, but also included original contributions on the relationships between the sexes, military matters, literary and theatrical culture, lotteries, and satires of local life. It also included poems that show the fault-lines and aesthetic possibilities of mixed-race, multilingual colonial public spheres. The poetry published in the *JGG* was submitted from around the island of Java and was often in Dutch, English, and occasionally in Malay. Some of the poems celebrated Dutch triumphs over Napoleon while others drew attention to the complex English-Dutch-indigenous artistic heritage. These poems debated the relationships between the indigenous colonial culture and the anglophone culture of the British occupiers, especially in a series of poems centered on “Lopes” who writes Dutch but is identified as a “brown poet” whose verses are described as a “hurly-burly.” Mulholland’s account is a description of this colonial “hurly-burly” that shows how the fringes and margins of the Indian Ocean might point scholars toward new archives and new histories that alter our sense of the Indian Ocean world as a method of literary and cultural analysis.

Sreya M. Datta’s essay takes forward the methodological approach that I outline in my essay on Ghosh by reading Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Indian Ocean novels alongside Dussel’s conceptualisation of transmodernity. The essay advocates for a definition of community as a relational practice of thought and living. Datta’s analysis follows Hofmeyr’s interpretation of the Indian Ocean as “method,” extending the argument to read the Ocean as a method of relation and as the condition of relation itself. This understanding of the Indian Ocean as the very condition of relation places emphasis on the endurance of local(ised)

knowledges and their communal creation. Communal creativity implies that “local” littoral knowledges are necessarily and always already in relation with other world knowledges without losing the imperative and urgent power of their own cultural systems. Building on an investigative axis that takes Dussel’s philosophy of transmodernity—a corrective to the expropriating and normative mechanisms of European modernity—as a critical entry point, the essay goes on to interrogate how the literary form of the novel performatively and creatively enacts transmodernity’s main claims. Datta’s work extends and refines the category of “the transmodern novel,” examining especially the idea that the transmodern novel is particularly invested in exploring intercultural and interregional identities that go beyond national and continental frames. The essay explores how Swahili transmodernity is not the avowal of a singular, autonomous Swahili identity or modernity, but is an inherently capacious engagement both with other “peripheral” modernities as well as with the hegemonies of European modernity. After providing a broad overview of Indian Ocean studies and critical work on Gurnah within this field, the essay discusses how vernacular concepts such as “mahali” in the Swahili language allow us to interpret the Indian Ocean in Gurnah’s works (three novels in particular: *the Sea*, *Desertion*, and *Gravel Heart*) as a simultaneous embodiment of definite place, indefinite space, and the “time” of an alternative modernity.

Just as the Atlantic Ocean had been witness to the dark history of the slave trade, the Indian Ocean carried Indian indentured labourers to replace African slaves in the British Empire. Works of Afroasian imagination are an outcome of this historical event. In the Indian Ocean territories of France, the consequences of the encounter between these forced migrants and the colonizers have been theorized with concepts such as “indianoceanism,” “coolitude,” and “creolity.” Nathacha Appanah, who comes from Mauritius and shares this inheritance, deals with postcolonial migration in her award-winning novel *Tropique de la violence* published in 2016. Set in the tiny island of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, the novel revolves around two boys - the migrant Mo and the native Ismael alias Bruce. Both their lives are sacrificed on the altar of violence in their respective struggles for agency. Geetha Ganapathy-Doré’s essay on Appanah’s novel scrutinizes the motivations of the move to this poverty-stricken overseas territory by metropolitan dwellers and the pressures of migration in Mayotte with the view to interpreting the politicization of the migratory phenomenon. Ganapathy-Doré examines the negligence of peripheral island territories by mainland France as a case of democratic dysfunction and explores the putting to test of the sense of humanity and human rights on the European continent by the author through a realistic representation of the humanitarian crisis in Mayotte. Appanah’s novel forms part of World Literature written in French and provides in this issue

(largely focused on Anglophone works and traditions) an important co-voice from the Francophone literary world. Such a move instantiates the ways in which the Indian Ocean World provides room for seeing overlaps and continuities between traditions that are usually thought of as linguistically and culturally distinct wholes.

Amrita Sen's essay turns to the gendered politics of staging a massacre in the Indian Ocean region. John Dryden in his play *Amboyna, or the Cruelties of the Dutch to the English Merchants* (1673) stages the execution of ten English East India Company merchants at the hands of the rival Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) in 1623. As the play unfolds, however, the events of the massacre appear secondary to the central love plot between the three main characters who stand in for the major stakeholders of the early modern spice trade: Ysabinda, the native of Amboyna; Gabriel Towerson, chief factor of the East India Company (EIC); and Harman Junior, son of the Dutch governor. The essay explores how the European race for the Moluccas and the accompanying violence gets scripted onto the sexualized body of Ysabinda. Sexual consent and rape thus become metaphors through which metropolitan England decodes its rights upon the commercially lucrative regions of the east. It reads the re-enactment of the events in Amboyna as symptomatic of the growing importance of the East Indies in English imagination, especially in light of the economic and strategic advances of the EIC in the post-Restoration period. It argues that the play sifts memory, colonial anxiety and sexual violence to arrive at an understanding of European politics in the Indian Ocean Region that challenges paradigmatic postcolonial narratives of "willing" or even "voluntary" submission of the Spice Island. Sen's examination of an early modern text to understand the ways in which the oceanic informs and transforms imperial ambition presents a new way for postcolonial studies scholars to re-engage the canon (and its misfits), this time from the perspective of the ocean and as she argues, "[t]hough sometimes overlooked in favor of the developments in the New World, it was the Indian Ocean World and its material commodities, especially spices, that helped broker the rise of capitalism and its accompanying social and technological changes." Sen's insightful reading of Dryden's rather neglected play also actualizes what I call a "transmodern reading practice" in my essay when she argues that *Amboyna* "alerts us against the impetus to read colonial histories as originating in the nineteenth century, reminding us instead of the *longue durée* of European colonialism in the maritime worlds of Asia."

This double Special Issue also presents to the reader two short stories set in the ocean: the first by Tathagata Som that re-interprets the historical figure of the lascar—a term for sailors from South and South East Asia as well as the Arab countries who were employed to work on European ships

from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Written in a distinctly modernist idiom, and an innovative style that mixes prose and poetry, the tale refracts its historical view of the lascar through the Bengali protagonist's volatile and unstable presence in the modern world in ways that mimic the ebbs and flows of the ocean itself. The second story by Janet Swinney illustrates how the seeming stability of a modern, urban British couple's life is undermined by a trip to a coastal town in India. Here too, but differently, the idiom is strikingly modernist as unlike world-views clash and refuse to resolve into harmony. Swinney's tale skirts the edges of allegory but with its thickly descriptive prose, it captures a powerful sense of worlds in contact and conflict.

Together, all the essays in this Special Issue call for the need to reorient postcolonial literary and cultural studies from the perspectives of the oceanic and the littoral. As Hofmeyr argues evocatively in her book *Gandhi's Printing Press* (2013): "The Indian Ocean has long been a site for utopian imaginings: peaceful cosmopolitan trade, *mare liberum*, island utopia, pirate republics, and, more recently, a series of transoceanic dreams, whether of theosophy or Greater India, followed by ideals of nonalignment and Afro-Asian solidarity" (32). Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* provides literary scholars with a new opportunity—no less momentous than the kind offered by *Midnight's Children* in 1981—to read histories and literary traditions *deeply and vastly*. Such a view requires, as Dussel has argued, that we interrogate European modernity in sweeping and granular ways, and, as I hope this issue will show, the transmodern trenchantly undermines the stabilities of terracentric thinking. At least from the 1990s onwards, a host of literary works produced in the Indian Ocean World—Anglophone, Francophone, Creolephone—testifies to the vibrancy and significance of the field, such that is not fungible with or collapsible into the postcolonial. A partial list of writers, *sans* nationality, whose works centre on the Indian Ocean would include Amitav Ghosh, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Moyez Vassanji, Bahadur Tejani, Peter Nazareth, Ahmed Essop, Ronnie Govender, Deena Padayachee, Muthal Naidoo, Kriben Pillay, Imraan Coovadia, Achmat Dangor, Farida Karodia, J-M.G. Le Clezio, Nathacha Appanah, Amal Sewtohul, Daniel Honoré, Monique Agénor, Lindsay Collen, and Marie-Thérèse Humbert, among others. Dussel's transmodern cosmology provides us with a way to imagine these writers from their disparate locations—both geographical and intellectual—as tied *transversally* by the continuities and solidarities offered up by the Indian Ocean. To look for formal symmetries between the literary works of these writers is to pursue the same chimeras that bedevil many academic course syllabi of postcolonialism, where a sampler method of including texts from disparate locations but thinly hides an implicit checklist of notionally common features and superficial equivalences imposed from the, in fact, disaggregated and heterotopic

experience of empire. This Special Issue, thus, makes a call for deploying Dussel's notion of transmodernity to understand what makes literatures of the Indian Ocean World depart from the well-established itineraries of the postcolonial and the postmodern. An attention to the transmodern can also help to revive the ways in which a collective consciousness of "Indian-Oceanness" (Mauguière 580) resuscitates the "productive... universalisms" (Hofmeyr, "The Complicating Sea" 585) of transoceanic contact and cultural exchange.

Calls for "planetarity" from within Postcolonial Studies have struggled with a paradox inherent to that field: while a stabilized timescale for European colonialism in the last four centuries has provided a powerful platform for the consolidation of an Empire that can, post-decolonization, "write back," "strike back," the disaggregated experiences of colonialism have not erased or neutralized the histories of prior contact and exchange. In the "semi-imperialisms" of the new world order of the twenty-first century (Burton 151), we have to find new ways of understanding ancient connections. And as Isabel Hofmeyr has argued, this will entail connection and contradiction, the latter being even more significant than the former (589). In Netflix India's first webseries *Sacred Games* (2018-2019), a runaway hit based on Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel of the same name, the central character Ganesh Gaitonde, a don of the Bombay underworld, is shown in Series Two as capitalizing on the transoceanic trade routes between Bombay and Mombasa in establishing a drug and real-estate cartel that held sway in the 1970s, '80s, and the early '90s. While numerous Indian films have deployed Africa as exotic background, *Sacred Games II* is significant in highlighting the Indian Ocean connection in such a visible, successful way. Series Two's heavily Africa-centric emplotment suggests in its own way that any postcolonial understanding of "the Bombay underworld" cannot be locationally remote from Bombay's oceanic networks that tied it to Mombasa and Cape Town, among other port-cities on the eastern African coast, presenting the face of a transmodern crime syndicate, as it were, that is far too often represented in Bollywood cinema as a fully inland, territorial phenomenon. With its focus on the littoral, the series, as Tarek Chaudhury writing a review for *Flamingo* says, has been iconoclastic and path-breaking such that "on the other side of it, waiting to flood, is an Indian Ocean."

As the essays in this issue show, the challenge for scholars working with the oceanic is not only spatial but also methodological, and the pitfalls to be avoided are many: from a simplistic fetishization of the local and regional, as Dussel warns, on the one hand, to the facile assumption that a focus on the ocean can somehow be politically neutral. In their pioneering book, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000), Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell posited what was new and radical in the great story of the Mediterranean, a reassessment that we in

this issue are imaginatively and critically in concert with: “Sea and ocean history is more novel than it sounds. It admirably exemplifies a new historiography of large areas... Both its scope and methods are so distinctive as to make it an exciting—and unpredictable—area of reflection and research” (722). But it is imperative to keep Alexis Wick’s warning in mind: “The focus on nonterritorial spatialities runs against a well-established historiographical tradition that has reinforced forms of nationalist politics by assuming and therefore naturalizing conventional geographies. This does not make maritime history politically neutral. Can historical discourse ever be?” (9). Pearson’s rumination on the problems a historian (and I would add, a literary scholar of transmodern texts) faces in *defining* the littoral (or the oceanic) in contradistinction to inland or the territorial presents an evocative commentary on what was for him a lifelong commitment to understanding the “thousand frontiers” of the sea: “A concern with definitions, a rumination on the nature of a particular sort of history-writing is obviously not a substitute for writing ‘good’ history. Rather it is a groundwork, a preliminary action before the real history is written... Historians are too much inclined to write on [sic], their assumptions and underpinnings un-explicated, their methods unexamined, their individual sociologies of knowledge un-revealed or even denied in a claim to objectivity” (“Littoral Society” 7). These challenges face the reader and student of transmodern texts as well and a way out of aporetic paths is to actualize and hone a truly transmodern reading practice that is receptive to multiplicity, heteroglossia, and polyvalence.

As James Mulholland posits in his essay in this issue “Outpost Aesthetics,” “[i]magining the Indian Ocean as a method consciously draws from Kuan-Hsing Chen, who has defined Asia as an ‘imaginary anchoring point’ from which Asian societies might define ‘alternative horizons and perspectives’ that push postcolonial studies beyond what he calls its ‘obsessive critique of the West’ (212, 1). At the same time, an examination of Indian Ocean transmodernities presents us, as Sreya M. Datta argues in her essay on Swahili transmodernity, with many opportunities to “make viable forms of collective thought and action that caution against the perils of a racist modernity as well as those of strident cultural nationalism and identity politics.” Even as Geetha Ganapathy-Doré’s reading of Appanah’s novel draws “attention to the limits of the postcolonial imaginary in mainland France as its peripheries battle environmental vagaries and political apathy in a heightened way in the new century,” Amrita Sen’s essay revisits the 1623 Amboyna Massacre, and Dryden’s retelling of it fifty years later in a play titled *Amboyna* in order to challenge “the usual postcolonial models of resistance versus complicity, or even colonial paradigms of savage/premodern versus European modern.” This Special Issue critically explores the centrality and significance of the Indian Ocean via various representational texts

converging upon the transmodern. But it is to the redolent image of the Indian Ocean in John Kinsella's poem cited in the epigraph of this introduction that I turn for my last word: in his ode, that most ancient of forms sung by our oldest travellers, Kinsella imagines the Indian Ocean quite veritably as the "amniotic fluid" that invisibly surrounds that profusion of life (from "leaf glitter" and "coral fans," to "land crabs," and "council workers" and "house-owners") that we call the world itself.

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