



Aquatic Cartographies: Oceanic Imaginaries, Histories and Identities

Ratnakara. Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures

Universitat de Lleida, Catalonia (Spain)

21-22 July 2022

Confirmed Plenary Speakers:

Tina Steiner, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Kumari Issur, University of Mauritius, Mauritius

Imraan Coovadia, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Despite the conventional reading of maps which foregrounds land masses, oceans and islands feature prominently, but the aquatic medium tends to be downplayed and even rendered as treacherous and alienating. The monsoons enabled transoceanic travel and trade on the Indian Ocean rim and these trade networks were consolidated and promoted by the spread of Islam in the Indian Ocean from the eighth century onwards. Thus a series of cosmopolitan port cities were established which in turn constructed the Indian Ocean as a *rhizomatic* cultural and historical network endowed with a natural sense of transnationalism rather than as discrete geographical regions. Following Vink (2007), the key terms in any analysis of Indian Ocean studies must take into account the porousness, permeability, connectedness, flexibility, and openness of spatial and temporal boundaries in this area. Colonial and postcolonial histories which have tended to focus on the Atlantic are being seriously called into question when Indian Ocean scholarship complicates the issue by showing that the academy is still dominated by

national and regional frameworks (Nuttall, 2019: 30). Indian Ocean scholars have revealed how European powers did business with violence while the people of the Indian Ocean shores – from as far away as Malaysia - sought to assimilate with the locals and trade with them. Clearly transnationalism – the new buzz word for postcolonial studies – has made interdisciplinary work between Africa and India and/or Africa and America more appealing and vibrant.

Amitav Ghosh - one of the great Anglophone writers of the Indian Ocean World has called for a reinstatement of the exchanges and conversations that had been interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance and this conference seeks to unravel a more nuanced understanding of transnational and oceanic forms of analysis by highlighting what Isabel Hofmeyr (2022) has conceptualized as “hydrocolonialism”, that is to say, colonization by way of water. Abdulrazak Gurnah, the recent winner of the Nobel prize for literature, explores the darker side of Indian Ocean history, ranging from the Omani to the German and British transoceanic trade networks, with slavery and ethnic rivalry included. Other writers who we classify as being Indoceanic – such as the Sri Lankans Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Guneskera, the former exploring the creole histories of his country while the latter focusing more on the healing of the rifts between the communities; Imraan Coovadia, who explores the more bizarre sides of South African life; and Lindsey Collen, whose novels disclose the ethnic and class divisions hidden under the apparent postcolonial Mauritian miracle – invariably observe the ocean as the ultimate linking factor. Therefore we see oceans far from separating people but instead the means to unite them and what we aim to explore in this conference is transoceanic connectivity and to disclose the shared (post)colonial history that maps an aquatic cartography. Slavery lies at the root of these transoceanic experiences, which Marlene NourbeSe Philip encapsulates in her phrase, “always what is going on seems to be about water” (2008, 195) in reference to the Middle Passage evoked in her poem, *Zong!*. Paul Gilroy, in his groundbreaking study on the Black Atlantic, reminds us that Western modernity has to be located at “the junction point of capitalism, industrialization and political democracy” (1993, 16). Likewise, in her study of the Pacific Ocean communities, Michelle Keown (2007) describes the islands as being linked by the ocean rather than being separated by it and this notion of the interconnectedness of land and sea has drawn us to hold this scholarly meeting. We aim to tease out the ways the diverse oceans, the Indian Ocean but also the Atlantic and

the Pacific can unite people and their experiences. In accordance with this transnational and transoceanic spirit, we invite papers to discuss any of the following topics:

- Historical memory and imperialist discourses
- Overcoming the traumas of history
- Oceanic identities and ambivalences
- Islandness vs dominant national narratives
- Gender constraints in Oceanic societies
- Reassessing the slave past of East Africa and the Mascarenes alongside the Middle Passage
- Travel narratives of the Atlantic, Pacific or the Indian Oceans
- Applying Gilroy's chronotope to the Indian and/or Pacific Ocean
- Oceanic underworlds: smuggling, piracy and political resistance
- Life writing as a means of expression of communal identity
- Rhizomatic communities in aquatic cultures
- Territorial Waters: Nation, Governance and Power
- "The Sea is History" (Walcott, 1969)
- Ecocritical readings of Oceanic literatures
- From ship to shore: copyright, censorship and print culture (Hofmeyr 2022)
- Translating oceanic writing: constraints and latitudes

Works Cited

- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso Books, 1993.
- Hofmeyr, Isabel. "Styling Multilateralism: Indian Ocean Cultural Futures", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 2015 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.993565>
- Hofmeyr, Isabel. *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House*. Duke University Press, 2022.
- Keown, Michelle. *Pacific Islands Writing*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- NourbeSe Philip, Marlene. *Zong!*. Wesleyan Poetry, 2008.
- Nuttall, Sarah, Pluvial Time, Ocean Ontologies and the Heterochronicity of the Present, *English Studies in Africa*, 62:1, 2019: 28-39.
- Vink, Markus P.M., "Indian Ocean Studies and the 'New Thalassology' ", *Journal of Global History*, N° 2, 2007: 41-62.

Abstracts (200-250 words) plus a **bionote (max. 150 words)** should be sent to Esther Pujolràs-Noguer and Felicity Hand at the following email address:
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Deadline for submissions: **31 May 2022**

