theories and methodologies

Universalizing the Indian Ocean

ISABEL HOFMEYR

IN 1966 AUGUSTE TOUSSAINT, THE MAURITIAN ARCHIVIST, WROTE ONE OF THE FIRST HISTORIES OF THE INDIAN OCEAN, A TOPIC HE described as "neglected" (1). Four decades on, circumstances have shifted, and the Indian Ocean now compels our attention. Audacious Somali pirates astound international media audiences. The new economic superpowers, India and China, exert palpable global influence. Their internecine competition plays itself out in the Indian Ocean, where the two Asian powers squabble for control of shipping lanes and oil supplies and for dominance of African markets and minerals (Vines and Oruitemeka; Broadman). Al-Qaeda continues to operate around the Indian Ocean littoral: its targets have included United States interests in Tanzania, Kenya, Comoros, Indonesia, and Yemen. United States imperialism itself persists in the Indian Ocean world, waning in Iraq but entrenched in Diego Garcia, the United States–occupied atoll from which bombing raids on Afghanistan and Iraq were launched.

As an arena in which these developments intersect, the Indian Ocean offers a privileged vantage point from which to track a changing world order. The view from the Indian Ocean permits us to look back to the lingering effects of the cold war and forward to what some are calling a "post-American" world (Zakaria).

Among post-cold-war legacies, the spillover from failed states like Somalia in the absence of cold war policing, on the one hand, and Sino-Indian prominence and competition, on the other, raise pressing questions for older ideas of Third World unity, Afro-Asian solidarity, and nonalignment, ideas associated with the Bandung Conference (the anticolonial gathering held in Indonesia in 1955 with delegates from twenty-nine African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries). Recent transnational histories of the twentieth century point to Bandung as a central but underappreciated event in which the key themes of the last century coalesce—colonialism, decolonization, Third World nationalism, the cold war, and United States imperialism (Burton, Espiritu, and Wilkins; Denning). Bandung

ISABEL HOFMEYR is professor of African literature and was acting director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her first monograph, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That Is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (Heinemann; Witwatersrand UP; Currey, 1994), was short-listed for the Hersovits Prize. *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of* The Pilgrim's Progress (Princeton UP; Wits UP, 2004) won the 2007 Richard L. Greaves Award. She is working on textual circulation in the Indian Ocean.

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was fundamentally an Indian Ocean event: its poster showed a dove of peace above the Indian Ocean, the bird's body and wings covering the geographic reach from which the gathering was drawn (Wirajidu 29).

While some post-cold-war scenarios predict the unilateral dominance of the United States, others point to a multilateral post-American world. The mounting power of India and China (as well as the "rise of the rest," like Southeast Asia) dramatically exemplifies the latter position. The historical depth of the Indian Ocean world provides a unique perspective on these shifts. As Engseng Ho brilliantly demonstrates, the Indian Ocean—home to the world's oldest transoceanic long-distance trading systems—folds together old diasporas (like the five-hundred-year-old Hadrami network from Yemen, which Ho analyzes [*Graves*]) with a range of Western imperial formations, including those of Portugal, Holland, Britain, and the United States. The interaction of old diasporas with modern empires produces what Ho describes as a "tight embrace of intimacy and treachery, a relationship of mutual benefit, attraction and aversion" ("Empires" 212). Western imperial structures weaken and reenergize older diasporic networks in the Indian Ocean, in interactions that feed into forms of indigenous capitalism, one of the long-term trajectories behind current Asian economic successes (Ray; Bose 12–15; Subramanian, *Indigenous Capital*).

As transnationalism and associated models like oceanic studies gain momentum in the academy, the Indian Ocean obliges us to extend our axes of investigation. It requires us to relativize the Atlantic, which has become normative, especially in slavery and African diaspora studies. Analyses of domination and resistance, colonizer and colonized arise from postindependence revisions of colonial history. These in turn draw on Atlantic readings of slavery where the boundary between enslaved and free is unequivocally demarcated and racialized. In the Indian Ocean this boundary blurred, and race and slavery were not associated in any marked form (Campbell).[1] 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.

Without the State: Rethinking the Nation-State through the Indian Ocean

Influenced by Fernand Braudel's work on the Mediterranean and by world-systems theory, Indian Ocean historiography accelerated from the 1980s, producing rich work on the historical unities, commonalities, and discontinuities of this early maritime world (Vink): monsoon and trade winds, port cities, littorals (Pearson, *Port Cities*, *Indian Ocean*, and "Littoral Society"; McPherson), ships and seafarers (A. Gupta), religion and trade (Risso), long-distance commerce (Chaudhuri; A. Gupta; Subramanian and Mukherjee), and the Portuguese presence (Pearson, *Port Cities*; Subrahmanyam).

One strand in this skein informs current debates on transnationalism—namely, the notion that the early modern Indian Ocean world supported transregional trade without the state.[2] Discussing how the Hadrami diaspora engaged with the Indian Ocean, Ho notes:

> Their enterprises overseas were not backed by [a] . . . mobile, armed state. The Portuguese, Dutch, and English in the Indian Ocean were strange new traders who brought their states with them. They created militarized trading-post empires in the Indian Ocean, following Venetian and Genoese precedents in the Mediterranean, and were wont to do business at the point of a gun. Hadramis and other non-Europeans—such as Gujaratis, Bohras, Chettiars, Buginese, and Malays—did not. Rather than elbow their way in, they comported themselves to local arrangements wherever they went. (*Graves* xxi)

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T. N. Harper puts the point succinctly: "The globalization of European imperialism was an extension of the nation state. The globalism [of diasporas] was not" (158).

This precedent of transoceanic trading systems uncoupled from a militarized state has proved productive for rethinking the nation-state today. Three prominent writers on the Indian Ocean—Amitav Ghosh, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Engseng Ho—explore these old trading diasporas of the Indian Ocean world as a way of relativizing the nation-state. For Ghosh the cosmopolitanism of the older diasporic networks offers a counterpoint to the narrowness of the modern nation-state system. For Gurnah the nation-state is subsumed into the transnational networks above it and the loyalties of lineage below it. For Ho the nation-state is overshadowed by more epic entanglements as the universalistic ambitions of old diasporas and new empires encounter each other.

Cosmopolitanism Then, Nationalism Now

Amitav Ghosh's famous *In an Antique Land* is one of the great books of the Indian Ocean, a historical travelogue-cum-ethnography that signals an ongoing concern with the region. Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, has a strong Indian Ocean emphasis: its protagonist moves from the border of West Bengal / East Pakistan (on the cusp of becoming Bangladesh) across India and the Indian Ocean to an unnamed Gulf oil state and then on to Algeria. His later novel *Sea of Poppies* is a self-conscious Indian Ocean epic. Set in the 1830s, its plot takes shape at the intersection of the opium trade, the end of Atlantic slavery, and the large-scale movement of indentured labor from South Asia (mainly into the Indian Ocean region) that abolition engendered.

In an Antique Land contrasts the old diasporas of the Indian Ocean with the modern nation-state. The travelogue tells two narratives. One recounts Ghosh's anthropological fieldwork in Egypt in the 1980s and his interaction with a peasant community many of whom are forced to migrate to the Gulf states to survive. Their difficulties in crossing national frontiers and their investment in nationalism itself stand in opposition to the mobility and cosmopolitanism displayed in the other narrative. It captures the twelfth-century Indian Ocean world through the travels of a Cairo-based Tunisian Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, and his slave, Bomma, including a sojourn on the Malabar coast, where Ben Yiju enters a second marriage, with an Indian woman.

Above and below the Nation-State

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* unfolds in Zanzibar, Dresden, and a British seaside town and tells the story of two characters, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud. Their fates are yoked together by Hussein, a dashing Persian trader from Bahrain who seduces Latif's brother and mother. As surety for a business deal, Latif's father cedes the family's house to the trader, who sells the deeds to Saleh. The trader disappears, followed by Latif's brother, and Saleh repossesses the house. With Zanzibari independence, the tables are turned. The family finds political favor, and Latif studies in Dresden before making his way to London. Saleh ends up in prison in Zanzibar, before fleeing as a refugee to England, where the two encounter each other.

The novel charts overlapping transnational vectors: old trading diasporas, Muslim networks, slavery, waning British imperialism, Zanzibari independence and African Arab violence that followed it, cold war politics, and international regulation of refugees. These transnational systems are compacted on one island (an important theme in Indian Ocean historiography),[3] where they become resources for pursuing the business of lineage and family loyalties. Diasporic practices project lineage loyalties beyond the island into a bigger arena

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but likewise feed off the fault lines of the family. Unsentimental about Indian Ocean networks, Gurnah demonstrates how the weakest (generally children) are sacrificed to long-distance plunderers like the suave Persian trader (or Uncle Aziz, who compels a father to pawn his child to pay a debt in Gurnah's earlier novel *Paradise*). In such narratives, the nation-state is easily manipulated by these older networks.

Old Diasporas Meet United States Imperialism

Extending his work on the Hadrami diaspora, Engseng Ho examines the question of al-Qaeda, the Indian Ocean, and United States imperialism. This relation is cast in a longer trajectory of the encounter between Muslim diasporas and Western empires and the entanglements of their universalistic ambitions. The resulting "Euro-Islamic condominium" produces patterns of "intimacy and treachery . . . mutual benefit, attraction and aversion" (Harper 144; Ho, "Empires" 212).

Emerging from a notable Hadrami family with links to Saudi royalty and the Bush family, Osama bin Laden is intimate with United States imperial power and universalistic Islamic ambitions (product of a proselytizing Hadrami diaspora dominated by sayyids [male descendants of the Prophet]). These orientations are well suited to contesting United States imperialism. In its current form, it is "an empire without colonies," an "anti-colonial imperialism" (Ho, "Empires" 237, 225). This new mode of near-invisible domination subsists in the "projection of political power across large space" by means of "mercenaries, gunboats, missiles, client elites, proxy states, multilateral institutions, multinational alliances" (225). The 11 September attacks unmask this geographically ambitious but invisible form of power by resorting to hyperspectacle.

As Ho explains, al-Qaeda's interest is less with the United States as nation-state than as empire. Its agenda is to unseat the United States in the Middle East in order to reestablish the caliphate abolished in 1924. Again, the nation-state in the Indian Ocean is subordinated to older diasporic aspirations.

Indian Ocean Public Spheres and Semi-imperial Fault Lines

While the initial impetus in Indian Ocean historiography was toward medieval and early modern trade and diaspora, more recently there has been a growing emphasis on nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories (Bose; Metcalf; Ewald; Vergès). A productive strand in this scholarship concerns the notion of Indian Ocean public spheres emerging between the 1880s and the First World War. These public spheres were rooted in the intellectual and religious activities of the crosscutting diasporas that gathered in the port cities of the ocean, as Mark Ravinder Frost's work has demonstrated ("'Wider Opportunities,'" "Asia's Maritime Networks," and "'That Great Ocean"'). Dedicated to reform, these intelligentsias pursued a variety of universalisms (pan-Islam, pan-Buddhism, theosophy, imperial citizenship, Hindu reformism), which they formulated by sharing ideas in periodicals and with visiting intellectuals (Arya Samaj missionaries, Sufis, pilgrims, and scholars). Pan–Indian Ocean publishers like the Cairo-based Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, established in 1859, printed Islamic religious works that traveled to Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Bang). Publishers like al-Halabi, alongside networks like the Basra-Bombay-Poona-Calcutta nexus that supported Hebrew printing (Green 146–47) and other activities in printing and book publishing in India (Chatterjee; Anindita Ghosh; Gupta and Chakravorty; Pinto; Shaw, "Cuttack Mission Press" and "Printing"; Stark, "Hindi Publishing" and *Empire*) point to the Indian Ocean as a productive site for rethinking global histories of print.

Using the growing communication channels of empire, these networks operated most

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visibly in the many periodicals produced and circulated in these "information ports" (Cole 344). These journals quoted one another avidly, enacting a quoting circle around the ocean (Hofmeyr, "Indian Ocean Lives" 18–21).

The textual fields established in and between these periodicals will enable us to understand the trajectories of Indian nationalism in new ways. Take *Hind Swaraj*, the seminal work Gandhi produced in 1909 as he returned from London to Johannesburg. Written in Gujarati and translated into English, the book is a key statement of his political philosophy and his thinking on industrialization and violence. The standard interpretations of the text regard its major addressees as the revolutionary Indian "extremists" whose methods Gandhi abhorred as a mirror image of colonial violence ("*Hind Swaraj*"). However, the early editions of the text show that he also had another group of addressees in mind: readers of the newspaper *Indian Opinion*, which Gandhi had started in Durban in 1903. This perspective from the periodical press reminds us of the oft-made point that Gandhi's Indian nationalism was shaped not just in India but also in South Africa and other parts of the Indian Ocean region (Markovits 78–84).

These periodicals constituted an experimental site in which ideas of nationalism and diasporic discourses could be explored in relation to one another. An apt example is diasporic ideas of Indianness evident in terms like *overseas Indian*, *colonial-born Indian*, *Indians abroad*, and *Greater India*. A glance at the idea of Greater India reveals the complexity of these terms. As Susan Bayly demonstrates, this idea was first articulated in the 1920s by French-influenced Bengali scholars and focused on the ancient cultural diffusion of Hinduism and Buddhism from India into East and Southeast Asia. This idea of India as an early and benign colonizer appealed to a range of constituencies: Indian Indologists seeking to claim an active role for India; Hindu supremacists wanting evidence of ancient Vedic glories; anticolonialists like Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army and Ghadarists like Taraknath Das, who saw their military activities as armed wings of Greater India; and, finally, those interested in the Indian indentured diaspora, or what was known as the new Greater India as opposed to the ancient. Greater India could provide an idea of nationhood that stretched diasporically across time and space and, importantly, could be anticolonial and colonizing at the same time.

This tension between anticolonialism and colonial aspirations (however muted) points to the fault lines in Indian Ocean public spheres. Antoinette Burton has termed these fault lines "semi-imperialisms" ("Cold War Cosmopolitanism" 151), and they are perhaps most evident in the unequal relations between India and Africa. The fault lines are likely to become more important as the post-American world takes shape, but at present their histories are difficult to write since the subject tends to be avoided. Where it is discussed, it is mediated through historiographies of extremity that stress either too much Afro-Asian anticolonial solidarity or too little, playing up African-Indian conflict.[4]

The circumstances dividing this terrain are legion. They include a cold war area-studies map and national paradigms that separate the study of Africa and India. Further back are imperial legacies that drew Europeans, Africans, and Indians into competitive triangulations of white, black, and brown (Burton, "Tongues"). Reinforcing such structures were discourses of civilizationism that ranked civilizations in a hierarchy with Africa at the bottom. Important too is the way in which "Africa" functions as a disavowed boundary of Indian nationalism, a configuration emerging from Gandhi's early thinking on imperial citizenship and on India's place in empire. In line with turn-of-the-century moderate Congress thought, Gandhi imagined India as part of an empire of the

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civilized, its boundary marked by the "native," or African, who stood beyond the pale of civilization (Hofmeyr, "Idea").

Exacerbating these tendencies has been the avowedly nationalist character of Indian studies, which until recently showed little interest in its own indentured, diasporic peripheries. Where such interest exists, it exhibits what Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie describes as a one-way problem, focusing almost exclusively on the movement of people and goods from India to Africa. There is little work that tracks reverse movements of Africans to India or asks what are the implications of indentured diasporic flows for the mainland. There is a body of work on Siddis, communities descended from African slaves, soldiers, traders, clerics, bodyguards, and sailors from the thirteenth century onward (Jayasuriya and Pankhurst; Ali). This work is often mistaken as the only evidence of African movement to India. More recent flows of students, intellectuals, and exiles await serious investigation.

This picture is fortunately starting to change rapidly. John Kelly and Tejaswini Niranjana demonstrate the centrality of debates about indenture, and about the position of Hindu women in it, to the growth of Indian nationalism. Thomas Metcalf examines colonial India as a subimperial power whose clerks, soldiers, indentured laborers, and traders extended Indian influence and enabled the spread of British rule in Malaya, East Africa, southern Africa, and parts of the Middle East. These works extend revisionist postcolonial debates on empire (which argued for an integration of center and periphery into one space) to India as a subimperial power, enabling us to better integrate the Indian metropolis and its indentured peripheries.

Other scholars have started to reverse the flow of analysis, examining ideas of Africa in India. P. K. Datta has analyzed the political meanings of the Anglo-Boer War in India, while I have tracked the representation of Africa in the Indian periodical press ("Idea"). Also significant is work that brings together the mutual shaping of African and Indian nationalism. Jon Soske probes the conflict and cooperation that shaped the interaction of African and Indian nationalism in Natal (see also Raman). Robert Muponde examines the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's depictions of Gandhi, demonstrating how the dismissive portrayal of the Mahatma reveals the masculinism of African nationalism.

One factor prompting this integrative work is the new intellectual networks that have grown between India and South Africa since the latter's 1994 political transition. The chair of Gandhi-Luthuli Peace Studies at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, in Durban, is partly funded by India, and in 2008 the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, established the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, the first such center on the continent (cisa-wits.org.za). Such circuits between the two countries have prompted new scholarship on lateral connecting histories in the Indian Ocean.[5]

Yet the fault lines and semi-imperialisms will continue to play themselves out, especially as new alliances and competitions emerge in the post-American Indian Ocean. In this changing arena, unexpected lateral cultural forms will take shape. Hindi film continues to make its way to many parts of Africa and finds new audiences there (Larkin). Flows move in the other direction as well. The South African film *Mr Bones*, by Leon Schuster, the king of South African slapstick, has been circulating in India. Its plot concerns a white boy who falls from an airplane, grows up in a tribe, and becomes a "witch doctor." Translated into a range of Indian languages, the film has been a runaway success in cinemas and on television.

In some senses, the popularity of *Mr Bones* is to be expected: slapstick stereotypes travel easily. Yet such examples seem counterintuitive; they unsettle the elevated moral agendas of south-south cooperation, in which slapstick does not really belong. Equally out of place is

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the growing trend of south-south spying, a phenomenon that is now routine in the Indian Ocean: since 2007 India has opened up listening posts in Madagascar and Mozambique to track shipping lanes. As a post-cold-war and post-American world coalesces, understanding south-south slapstick and south-south spying will become increasingly important.[6] The best vantage point from which to do it will certainly be the Indian Ocean.

Notes

1. There are continuities between slavery in the two oceans, resulting from the transport of slaves from the Indian Ocean into the Atlantic world (Allen).

2. This point is sometimes confused with the claim that the Indian Ocean trade was entirely peaceful, a claim that is now rejected (Wink 439). Some historians dispute the contrast drawn between empire and diaspora, one backed by a military state, the other not. While not supported by states per se, diasporas are backed by other forms of polity and network (Subramanian, *Medieval Seafarers* 39–66).

3. Debates on Indian Ocean islands address their status as early modern models of utopia (Grove 42–47) as well as the patterns of creolization they support and how the patterns differ from those of the Caribbean (Vaughan; Lionnet; Carter and Torabully).

4. See V. Gupta and the controversy around Mbongeni Ngema's 2002 anti-Indian song "Amaindiya" in South Africa.

5. See the following special issues of journals: *South Africa–India: Re-imagining the Disciplines* (Hofmeyr and Dhupelia-Mesthrie), *India in Africa* (Vines and Sidiropolous), and *South Africa–India: Connections and Comparisons* (Hofmeyr and Williams). India is also linked to Australia, where the University of Technology Sydney hosts an active group in Indian Ocean studies, which is undertaking innovative cultural studies work (Ghosh and Muecke).

6. This effort could involve reconciling the extensive scholarship on Indian Ocean security and international relations with more cultural forms of analysis, a pattern evident in the new cold war studies.

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