

# Thalassological Worldmaking and Literary Circularities in the Indian Ocean

JUST BEFORE THIS special issue went to press, the Swedish Academy named Abdulrazak Gurnah as the winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature for his “uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents.”<sup>1</sup> Consistent with its world-literary ideology, the academy clearly delocalized Gurnah’s authorship, making sure that the citation’s language was “purified of identifiable local content or topical references” (Damrosch 202). Curiously enough, nearly all the celebratory remarks in the aftermath of the announcement of the prize profiled Gurnah as an Anglophone postcolonial writer, while completely sidelining the fact that he has in fact been one of the most prominent narrators of the Indian Ocean (through a Joycean concentric cognitive mapping of Zanzibar, Tanzania, Africa, Britain, and the world). Gurnah himself has not forgotten the formative impact of the Indian Ocean on his writing journey:

When I first started writing, I was writing with the refugee issue very much at the center of my thinking. But overriding all that I’m describing were the monsoons. From as early as I could remember as a child, there are late months of the year from around November, December or so. So the arrival of dozens of ships of all sizes from different parts of the Indian Ocean. They would be from the Arabian Peninsula, from the Gulf, from India, and occasionally even further away—the huge ships that sometimes came from as far away as Thailand. And the sailors and the traders on these ships sprawled themselves and their wares among us, beside us, everywhere. It was impossible not to know that you were part of a wider world, a wider world with its own center of gravity, a cosmopolitan world if you like and that we were networked in a shared cultural and historical community. (“Discussion”)

Gurnah fathoms the Indian Ocean as a network that produces “patterns” and “rhythms” in an ecological as well as imaginary space that constitutes a wide variety of “subjectivities” of people (Gupta 520). Gurnah’s Indian Ocean world, moreover, is not only made by climate and trade cycles but also literary circularities.

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<sup>1</sup> Nobel Prize Outreach AB, “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2021,” October 9, 2021, [www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/summary/](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/summary/).

These circularities capture a dynamic cross-cultural traffic, exchange, and encounter across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East through a rich range of genres, including epics, story cycles, travelogues, memoirs, poems, and novels (Bose; Desai; Green; Hofmeyr; Ricci; Vierke).

Following the creative work of Gurnah and other writers, this special issue brings together articles on world literatures of the Indian Ocean as a site for studying mobile networks of capital and labor, diasporas generated by European imperial expansion and its aftermath, and cultures that bind together places and peoples. Literary scholars active in the field of Indian Ocean studies participate in tracking such circularities that urge us to “[move] away from relative immobile, essentializing ‘trait geographies’—values, languages, material practices, ecological adaptations, marriage patterns, and the like—towards ‘process geographies’ with various kinds of action, interaction, and motion (travel, trade, marriage, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytization, colonization, exile, and so on), in which regions can be conceptualized as both dynamic and interconnected” (Vink 52).

Although the study of Indian Ocean literary circularities is a relatively new and dynamic field, it calls for alternative paradigms for global literary history in light of the nascent conversation between comparative world literature and oceanic studies. Although it is self-evident that continents and languages have been shaped by “oceanic routes” (Bystrom and Hofmeyr) for millennia, both old and new comparative literature has been remarkably territorial. The polysemic nature of the Indian Ocean invites the following question: what would world literature look like if we unsettled terracentric biases of the field? In other words, how does the thalassological poetics of the Indian Ocean also remap approaches to literary categories themselves? The Indian Ocean’s literary waves and the generic wateriness they create offer a set of analytical categories as they rescale narrative as a living, moving, recombining, recycling practice of memory, connection, and connectivity. As such, the historically connective capacities of the Indian Ocean and the process geographies of oceanic flows not only “enable different ways of seeing and writing the world” but also track “movement across national and linguistic boundaries, taking in experiences and ideas from diverse latitudes and longitudes” (Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2). The essays in this issue critique the privileging of the North Atlantic in the world-literary canon and in the critical discourses of oceanic studies by attending to literatures of the Indian Ocean and the routes and circulations that they narrativize without exceptionalizing them.

Possibly the most distinctive feature of Indian Ocean literary circularities is the extent to which they operate through an aesthetic sensorium of objects from distant “elsewheres.” Clarissa Vierke’s semiotic and topographic reading of the fifteenth- to eighteenth-century Swahili poems attributed to the master poet Fumo Liyongo foregrounds these intimate aesthetic sensory experiences with cultural objects and luxury goods arriving on the Swahili coast. Traditionally performed through *gungu* dances on special occasions, the Liyongo poems feature objects evocative of transoceanic connections and interregional circularities across the Indian Ocean world such as the betel plant. The fluid aestheticization of the betel quid—an Indian Ocean plant par excellence—in those poems illustrate the various kinds of economic circulation that have historically animated the Indian Ocean (Sheriff)

and the confluence of material culture and sensuous aesthetics along the Swahili coast. Vierke argues that a study of literary production on the precolonial Swahili coast—a space defined by liminality and in-betweenness—will allow us to appreciate the physical manifestations of cosmopolitanism and move beyond what one simply *imagines* cosmopolitanism to be. The self-fashioning role of these objects for a rising merchant class—especially in culturally and religiously sensitive matters—is a case in point. At the heart of Vierke’s close readings of the Liyongo poems is a keen understanding of the role of circulation in the formation of Creole cosmopolitanism as a practice of active construction of cultural semantics through mobile things from multiple elsewhere (Lionnet). To say that a given artifact or plant is “native” or “indigenous” to a region is to dismiss millennia of cross-pollination across a very heterogeneous littoral space. Royal ornaments, porcelain or glazed ware, and furniture on the Swahili coast have historically been formed within a shared ecology of circulating cultures, languages, and artistic forms (Meier). The object-oriented, sensuous imaginaries of the Liyongo poems, then, are quintessentially cosmopolitan as they draw on exterior forms to produce an iterative intimate aesthetic that forms layered, sensational seascapes.

Through a “liquid reading” of Gurnah’s *By the Sea*, Vilashini Cooppan takes Indian Ocean circularities to the theoretical waters of object-oriented ontology, genre theory, narrative spatiotemporality, and phenomenological relationality. Cooppan’s looking back, out, and in to circularity as an Indian Ocean method is embedded in language—in words that are evocative of the intimacies of subject-object relationships. *By the Sea*’s object-words become carriers of subject histories, connectivities, and memories. Cooppan’s orientation toward object-words is accompanied by a discussion of the chronotopes of the Indian Ocean, as the latter require us to move beyond our preoccupation with trade-related links across the littoral and instead look to the narrative forms that have taken shape at the intersection of many regional, overlapping Indian Ocean worlds. While there are multiple layers of unity in the Indian Ocean, emic imaginations of its space are in flux. Indian Ocean historians’ preoccupation with elements of “deep structure” (Pearson) posits rainfall distribution, monsoons, and climate changes; north and north-westerly winds; and ocean currents, tidal flows, and tumultuous waves as the primary ecological and structural factors that governed how, where, and why people traveled across the Indian Ocean. Yet these elements of deep structure vary dramatically according to both the region and time of the year, thus creating a certain rhythm of movement and interaction across the oceanic space. As historian Jeremy Prestholdt argues, a closer look at the social worlds of the Indian Ocean reveals the role of emic (intra-regional) and etic (extra-regional) actors in historically producing regional “affinities”—perceived forms of continuity across littoral societies. Prestholdt emphasizes that disaggregated cultural hybridity in the Indian Ocean was an essential feature of the precolonial era, while conceptions of “unity” have, since the nineteenth century, been colonial or etic impositions on littoral societies to, for instance, transport bonded slaves from East Africa across a seamlessly colonized space. As such, Prestholdt urges us to understand contemporary ideas of unity and cohesion as layered and fraught with tension vis-à-vis longer standing, albeit marginalized, histories of racial, religious, and cultural difference. By the same

token, Cooppan pushes back against the structuralist study of the Indian Ocean as an integrated totality or as what Prestholdt calls a “meta-culture” (26).

Cooppan responds to the structuralist problem of relationality by repurposing Franco Moretti’s account of the “trees and waves” that respectively explain patterns of literary distribution and circulation. Gurnah’s *By the Sea* provides a model for literary studies by its very grafting and intermeshing of spoken languages, family histories, individual lives, and goods (rhizomatic trees) in the larger palimpsestic histories of migration, slavery, indenture, trade, empire, and globalization (waves). For Cooppan, the metaphoric work of trees and waves also explains the circulatory economies of Indian Ocean literatures, as in the case of the relationality between *The Arabian Nights* and *By the Sea*, where the latter simultaneously develops a branching tree of its own *and* opens itself to the figurative waves of stories of the former.

Moretti’s world-systems thinking views waves as “uniformity, engulfing an initial diversity” (60): but waves drift. If the homogenizing impulse of the colonial archives in the histories of the Indian Ocean was geared toward presenting monolithic narratives of the complex multilingual communities and toward some form of domesticated translation, contemporary novelists of the Indian Ocean world such as Amitav Ghosh and Abdulrazak Gurnah attempt to drift narrative away from such presumed authority. Kritish Rajbhandari names this acting of snatching the past from colonial structures of power as anarchival drift, and analyzes how Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise* not only critically rewrite the past differently from colonial genres of dictionaries and travelogues but also imaginatively create and translate new historical documentary material to give voice to the various subaltern subjectivities silenced by the normative archive. Drifting anarchically away from colonial texts, these novels circle their readers back to the multivalent, multilingual, translative worlds of the Indian Ocean by showing circularity in how words gain new definitions and are absorbed into other languages and cultures. At the same time, they do not assume absolute authority and allow for continuous reinterpretation. From this perspective, Ghosh and Gurnah illustrate what it entails to be a writer of the Indian Ocean by taking on multiple intersecting roles of chronicler, translator, archivist, editor, and publisher.

Another name for what Rajbhandari identifies as the multiplicity of linguistic registers and the translative processes that are subject to transoceanic historical forces is Creolization. Theorizing Creolity as a matter of (un)translatability, Françoise Vergès and Carapin Marimoutou write: “There is no creolization without loss, just as it cannot happen without inequality because creolization demands or requires room to manoeuvre where tensions and conflicts are resolved without being dissolved” (15–16). Rejecting the placing of the subjects of Creole Indias on the negative, deficit end of the continuum of cultural hybridity and mobility (as subjects defined by cultural and historical loss and subjugation), Ananya Jahanara Kabir reads Franco-Tamil novelist Ari Gautier’s *Le thinnai* as a creative work that is able to capture the many Creole ways in which we can speak of and study the porosity and heterogeneity of the Indian Ocean littoral. In Gautier’s novel, the space of a *thinnai*—the veranda on the ground floor of Tamil homes—is *a world* in which people of many races, ethnicities, and religions meet and mesh together, allowing for perpetual Creolization. Not only do the novel and the architectural space host these togethernesses in an archipelagic form, but so does Pondicherry,

which acts as India's *thinnai* due to its situatedness as a contact zone where foreign and native encounters begin. In narrating the *thinnai* as a Creole space, Gautier aims to free it from language, caste, and gender-based hierarchies. It is rather conceived as a heterotopia, a place, in other words, of difference and otherness. The trespassing figure is the novel's only speaking female character, Lourdes, who accesses the *thinnai*, while also fashioning a complex social identity. Lourdes enters the *thinnai*, traditionally limited to males and high castes, as a Bas Créole servant only to release dormant memories of Pondicherry's Creole history as it is embodied in her lineage, cuisine, language, and conduct. This is not history in the usual sense of the term but what Kabir calls "archipelago of fragments," an affective epistemology and sensorium of Creole lived experiences at the intersections of transoceanic and littoral circuits.

Even so, the Creole archipelagos and littoral enclaves of the Indian Ocean have been seriously tested by the contemporary effects of postcolonial migration crises. In particular, the forced and voluntary movements across the ocean have directed the thematic orientation of the contemporary Indian Ocean novel toward human and ecological loss, trauma, and violation (Poddar). In invoking global empathy toward the lesser-known, ultraperipheral Mayotte's Mahoran migrant crisis, Mauritian author Nathacha Appanah's *Tropique de la violence* draws on a comparative reference to the Mediterranean refugee crisis, a presumably familiar case. But what are the stakes of such comparisons? asks Nikhita Obeegadoo in her contribution to this issue. In employing ironic comparison to make a statement about the invisibility of clandestine migration from the Comoros to the French island-territory of Mayotte in the global media, argues Obeegadoo, Nathacha Appanah's novel runs the risk of reproducing the very ironic situation that she criticizes: "Should the novel be lauded for drawing attention to an invisibilized part of the world, or criticized for turning human suffering into literary raw material?" As the current precarities and volatilities facing Indian Ocean littoral societies enter the narrative domain, the ethics of "relational comparison" (Shih)—of bringing into relation seemingly distant entities, issues, terms, or (con)texts for comparison—becomes a more pressing methodological issue. Appanah's use of "comparable" crises to invoke empathy and her presentation of migration as essential to humanity's story comes with the ironic risk of producing "literary violence" toward the refugees themselves.

The appeal to comparative ethics, moreover, straddles the line between opposing and inviting the foreign gaze. Appanah's novel centers on a rarely acknowledged issue but does not give a voice to the voiceless; that is, Mayotte's refugees. Different from the Rabelaisian polyglossia that Rajbhandari and Kabir trace in the novels of Ghosh, Gurnah, and Gautier, Obeegadoo characterizes Appanah's migrant narrative with "incomplete polyphony," observed in the difference between French-speaking characters who express themselves vocally and the subalterns who struggle with French to the extent that other characters (and readers) do not understand them or "hear" their lived experience. Similarly, in its invocation of the ironic relationship between Mayotte and France (namely, Mayotte is French in name, but not French in everything else), Appanah's novel offers a critique of the metropolitan silence over the Mahoran refugee crisis but only, as Obeegadoo aptly remarks, vocalizes it through French characters expressing their shock at the bad state of

France-Mayotte, laying bare the ironies of underdevelopment as well as class difference along the center-periphery axis.

In response to the entanglements of Indian Ocean migratory circularities in irony, comparison, and silence, Weihsin Gui directs us to the alternative trajectory of “small narratives” in “the global creative economy” (Lionnet and Jean-François). Shifting the focus from single-author novels to literary anthologies of the Indian Ocean, Gui makes a compelling case for collections of multiple narratives by multiple authors as a more fluid and diverse form of reading. Different from the terra-centric cartographies of mainstream anthologies, the anthologies of Perth’s Centre for Stories—*Ways of Being Here* and *Wave After Wave*—embrace the ocean *as form*. Like a vast body of water, they flow, ripple, move, and reach to the shore, bringing with them stories from distant shores. Gui adopts Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Braithwaite’s tidalectics to refer to the anthological iterations of back-and-forth exchanges between coast and sea. The tidalectical aesthetics and polyphonic form of Indian Ocean literary anthologies generate hybrid, syncretic, archipelagic circulations of narratives, tropes, and interweaved experiences, while enabling authors, readers, and stories to move across time and space.

Produced by Australians of Indian Ocean heritage, *Ways of Being Here* and *Wave After Wave* also deconstruct the singular nation-state discourse of a white Australia, presenting an intermixed, transnational story of a multicolored Australia. Through this narrative shift to Afro-Asian Australia, they highlight the issues of diaspora, race, and migration as well as questions of belonging, assimilation, exclusion, and inclusion. The two anthologies weave Australia and the Indian Ocean through circular writing and interconnected themes that address Indian Ocean heritage and the complexity of belonging to a new space bound by nation-state lines.

While migration is a major mode of contemporary Indian Ocean circularities, an oft-overlooked aspect of postcoloniality is the resurgence of new, specifically Asian, hegemonic powers. As critical geographer Sharad Chari cautions, postcolonial infrastructures of capitalism and resource extraction systematically disadvantage African societies, turning them into extractive enclaves for a so-called rising Asia: “If the ‘gatekeeper state’ was an institutional form forged in the wake of Africa’s incomplete decolonization from European colonialisms,” writes Chari, “we do not yet have a vocabulary for Asian corporate-imperial power and influence in Africa or in the Afro-Indian Ocean” (97). Neelofer Qadir’s essay aims precisely to construct a critical lexicon by tracing a narrative genealogy of the present in “the long space” (Hitchcock) of the trilogy form. Through a paratactical reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy and Kevin Kwan’s *Rich* trilogy as Indian Ocean narratives, Qadir dismantles Orientalist notions about Asian wealth as a “miracle” of some recent decades and shows how it is in fact a manifestation of a prolonged circular relationship between racial capitalism, colonialism, and accumulation. These multigenerational sagas are haunted by the specters of colonial capitalist structures and trade networks into which Asian elite classes adapted themselves, laying the groundwork for today’s wealth in the interregional space of the Indian Ocean. The inheritance romance that undergirds these narratives, Qadir states, becomes the symptom of the intimate “desire for wealth” and “practices of ensuring its accumulation across generations of their families.” The political unconscious of these novels gives itself away in the moments of heightened anxieties of the elite classes

losing their inherited economic status due to world-historical events in the Indian Ocean such as the Opium Wars. While this narrative practice enables the emplotment of Asian wealth accumulation on the Indian Ocean's *longue durée*, the romance of "commerce with the universe" (Desai) reifies into what Qadir calls "a desire for dominant position, not one that seeks to interrupt the machinations of an already robust global capitalism."

This oscillation between romance and reification (Jameson) is a long siren call from Joseph Conrad, arguably the first *novelist* of the Indian Ocean. In circling back to Conrad past Gurnah and Ghosh, one becomes alarmed with the extent to which the comparative ground of Anglocentric world literature has been based on the binaries of modern/premodern, value/nonvalue, reason/faith, individual heroism / group action, goal orientation / submission all along. This dualist perspective informs the narrative techniques, figurative strategies, and imaginative horizons of the twentieth-century novel as a teleological narrative of the destruction of traditional cultures and a symbolic form of absorbing the violence that modernization and imperialism have caused on earth. In that regard, the mode of reading world literature as an archaeology of lost worlds, historical remnants, and archaic marvels remains within the aforementioned teleological framework. In this framework, world literature functions merely as the mourning house of the violently and tragically destroyed social forms and practices, or the cultural enclave of a heterogeneous and different universe whose anachronisms could be dramatized only in fiction.

If we were to revisit *Lord Jim*, one of Conrad's Indian Ocean narratives, Jim's quest for a world away from rational capitalist Europe in the "great circular solitude" of the Indian Ocean ultimately leaves us with the scandal of the Conradian *plot*. If, as Fredric Jameson observes, "Jim's crisis requires him to have put lives in danger" (246), those lives are portrayed as entirely *unaware* of the plot into which they are inserted, not even more aware of it than the "screw-pile lighthouse, planted by unbelievers on a treacherous shoal, [which] seemed to wink at [the pilgrim ship] its eye of flame, as if in derision of her errand of faith" (Conrad 12). This setting offers a convenient ground for Jim's pseudosublime:

He stood on the starboard side of the bridge, as far as he could get from the struggle for the boat, which went on with the agitation of madness and *the stealthiness of a conspiracy*. The two Malays had meantime remained holding to the wheel. *Just picture to yourselves the actors* in that, thank God! unique, episode of the sea, four beside themselves with fierce and secret exertions, and three looking on in complete immobility, above the awnings covering *the profound ignorance of hundreds of human beings, with their weariness, with their dreams, with their hopes, arrested, held by an invisible hand on the brink of annihilation.* (70; emphasis mine)

Jim experiences great aesthetic ecstasy at this moment of the possible annihilation of the pilgrims. He does not even pay attention to them—not even "one single glance." Being "a gifted poor devil with the faculty of swift and forestalling vision," he takes pleasure in the idea of "the suspended menace discovered in the midst of the most perfect security" (70). But Conrad's vision of the sublime can no longer afford the comfortably detached vantage point of the Kantian aesthetic paradigm—not in the new geopolitical situation of the imperial age. In Natalie Melas's astute observation, Conrad's sublime becomes "the sublime incomprehensibility of catastrophic turns" (50). The specter of *Patna*, I would argue, haunts our times in the many ships filled with the dispossessed and disenfranchised

immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees who are abandoned and left to vanish in the middle of the seas and oceans of the world.

And yet, at the heart of almost all Kojèvean narratives of the twentieth century such as Conrad's is the spectral presence of plebeian agencies who perpetually refashion their being-in-the-world *not* "in a geopolitical space that conjures up a tabula rasa or the utopias associated with desert islands" (Lionnet 26). Rather, they assert themselves into the flow of the objectivist history and operational logic of capital to interrupt its totalizing thrusts and expose its *failure* in mediating the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the world's times and spaces (Chakrabarty; Aravamudan). Françoise Lionnet's afterword to this special issue assures us that although the Indian Ocean has been increasingly challenged by the ecological, geopolitical, military, and economic furies of our times, its writers and artists continue to stand and fight against them by imaginatively and creatively incarnating the watery and airy spirit of Ariel.

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