

Durban and Cape Town as port cities: Reconsidering Southern African studies from the Indian Ocean

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This special issue arose out of a workshop titled ‘Durban and Cape Town as Indian Ocean Port Cities: Reconsidering Southern African Studies from the Indian Ocean’, held at the University of the Western Cape in September 2014. The volume is located at the intersection of southern African studies and Indian Ocean studies, and explores this exchange as a site for enriching southern African transnational historiographies.

This introduction begins with an overview of emerging transnational trends within southern African studies, and locates Indian Ocean studies within this field. Until recently, southern African studies fell outside the remit of work on the Indian Ocean world on two counts. First, the region is located outside the monsoon zone, which constitutes the canonical core of Indian Ocean studies; secondly, Africa as a whole has been marginalised by South Asia in the field.¹ For some time, then, southern Africa has been considered as a belated arrival both chronologically and historiographically in the field of Indian Ocean studies, drawn into the latter arena only during the age of European empires.

This collection complicates this picture, exploring the effect of pre-colonial Indian Ocean slave and trade networks on southern African colonial formations. These re-configured geographies, in turn, open up possibilities for drawing new linkages among different southern African historiographies. The articles articulate land- and sea-based systems of labour migration and control, suggesting connections between the inland historiographies of mining and migration, on the one hand, and maritime port cities, on the other (and indeed, between these port cities themselves). The volume raises questions of method and scale, and the introduction touches on problems associated with an oceanic approach (how to factor in the ‘sea-ness of the sea’). In concluding, the introduction asks how best to switch between region or area and a global perspective.

Southern African Studies and Transnationalism

The field of southern African studies is no stranger to transnational work and has long enabled scholarship with a global inflection. Themes include slavery, black transnationalism and the transatlantic connection, indentured labour, diasporic studies, European imperialisms, migration, medicine and healing, crime, radical international movements (communism,

¹ The famous ‘Africa-phasic’ work is K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Conclusion: Beyond the Indian Ocean?

One theme across several of these articles is how global networks outstrip the limits of the Indian Ocean: migrants from both east and west who land at Cape Town, or a south-east African slave trade that funnels captives to the Caribbean and Brazil. As scholarship on global systems expands, so too does the recognition that such processes exceed hemispheric, oceanic, continental or indeed any other intellectual boundaries, undoing the myths of continents, oceans and empires. These shifts in turn shake up previously ‘settled’ areas, be these ‘southern Africa’, ‘Africa’ or indeed Indian Ocean, or for that matter the Atlantic, both a kind of area studies at sea.

Yet to abandon these categories in favour of the global would promote bland and placeless historical narratives. Instead we need both regional and global perspectives, or, to extend Sugata Bose’s much-quoted phrase, we need to think in terms of ‘inter-regional arenas’.⁴⁸ The essays in this collection offer a range of methods for switching between these different levels. Some article follow people and commodities as they move through space, tracking slave ships, merchants, smugglers and gold. Others, by contrast, focus on one site, such as the port city, to examine how these channel a range of global mobilities. Together these articles offer ways of articulating areas of southern Africa that have largely remained discrete: migration on land, forced labour and migration by sea, colonial governance, maritime border-making, pre-colonial transoceanic trade and slave routes, the mining revolution, and finally the ocean itself – both its surface and its depths.

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⁴⁸ Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, p. 3.