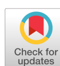

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BOOK FORUM

Stories of the Port: Response to Isabel Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House*

Neelam Srivastava

Newcastle University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK
Email: neelam.srivastava@newcastle.ac.uk

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Isabel Hofmeyr's latest book begins with stories around and about the colonial port, though the initial spotlight is on decidedly nonnarrative texts such as classification lists of cargo items, customs handbooks, and what she intriguingly calls the "book-as-form," namely diaries and registers. These, she says, "offered one unwitting model of colonial writing in which a template from the metropolis was filled with local scribblings" (12). The port is, by definition, a liminal, watery, zone, with uncertain borders between land and sea, but which often acts as the site of border policing that regulates entry into and out of the colony and nation-state. It is a powerfully evocative place around which to set Hofmeyr's ambitious and wide-ranging book, and the port's polysemous implications allow her to intervene across a series of disparate fields: climate humanities, postcolonial studies, object-oriented ontology, South African literary histories, and studies of custom and copyright. It is a masterly and original revisioning of what it means to do book history, offering a radically new method of reading. Even more importantly, it proposes a new definition of the book as object: as customs cargo, as charismatic "thing" that creates literary canonicity far from the metropole, and as an epidemiological vector of "contamination" in the mind of the colonial customs official on the alert for seditious or obscene texts, among other suggestive meanings.

The port as both metaphor and material environment extends Hofmeyr's pioneering work in book history of the African continent onto its shores, with a particular focus on the seaport of Durban in South Africa. Her approach to the book as object has long structured her innovative theorizations of reading, as she

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explores in her discussion of Gandhi's idea of slow reading, against the pressures and regimented schedules of industrial-capitalist time.[1] Her work sheds important light on the interdependency between reading practices and the book as object.

Hofmeyr presents two related critical/theoretical approaches in this book, which she develops from her study of the Custom House archives in Durban. One is the idea of "dockside reading", that is, the reading practices of customs officials who had to "read" cargo that came into the port in order to ascertain its provenance, legitimacy of entry, and its classification as object for the purposes of customs tariffs. Dockside reading also comprises the reading practices of these officials: they read the books or "assayed" them for possible obscene or otherwise objectionable content, and Hofmeyr spends some time examining their reading methods and what this can tell us about the importation of literature and periodicals into the colonial state. She calls the wider theoretical framework she develops around dockside reading "hydrocolonialism," a view of colonial discourses and practices that moves away from land-based epistemologies to consider the coast, the shore, and the sea as spaces for exercising and defending imperial power over the colony. Hydrocolonialism, with its focus on maritime contexts, acts as a hermeneutic for exploring the role of borders and control of entry and exit within/from the imperial system. It also connects to a growing interest in water and oceans stemming from climate humanities scholarship. Hofmeyr uses it to think through the ways monsoons and cyclones, for example, "offer ways of defining literary regions and generic structures" (17).

Hofmeyr's hydrocolonialism builds on a recent tendency in postcolonial theory "to move away from colony/metropole binaries and to trace multidirectional empire-wide interactions" (17). This comparative approach resonates with two bodies of scholarship. The first is the work of Shu-Mei Shih, who urges us to reimagine world literature in terms of a relational arc stretching across various angles of the globe and forging unexpected connections: "Instead of aiming for global synthesis, the notion of a literary arc links multiple nodes, and a text can enter into relation with other texts anywhere along it, illuminating specific issues within a time period or across time periods."[2] Shih is thinking of the Chinese coolie trade and its representations in world literature, which connects in interesting ways to Hofmeyr's focus on Indian Ocean literature, which spans continents, bodies of water, and diasporic populations. As Shih remarks, the relational arc of this new comparative literature can represent a truly anti-Eurocentric approach, one that "should scatter all centers rather than replace one center with another."[3] Hofmeyr's explorations of the "shore-shaped literary formations" that arise around port print cultures defy the reconstitution of "national" literatures after the end of colonialism. In her final chapter, she establishes the South African farm novel's hidden connections to ports and coasts as a way of questioning national literature's firm anchoring on land.

[1] See Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[2] Shu-Mei Shih, "World Studies and Relational Comparison," *PMLA* 130.2 (2015): 434–35.

[3] Shih, "World Studies and Relational Comparison," 435.

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The second body of scholarship that came to my mind as I read her fascinating book was that of Leela Gandhi and Priyamvada Gopal, who both, in their own different ways, seek to question imperial binaries between colonizer and colonized by drawing attention to shared networks of resistance across European/Western and non-European actors.[4]

Chapter 1 acts to establish the setting and historical context of the book, by focusing on colonial Durban's Custom House and on the career of George Rutherford, who was a customs collector in Durban and in other parts of the British Empire, including Jamaica. This view from the Custom House gives an account of its power over land and sea and its central role in empire-building. Chapter 2 offers a rich overview of the myriad ways in which objects were read and scanned by customs officers in order to ascertain their provenance, determine their customs tariff, and deliberate on whether they could be allowed into the country. Great attention is given to the texturality of the objects under focus: customs officers had to "close-read" objects in order to do their job properly. Conversely, they read books as objects, scanning or assaying them for questionable content (e.g., reading paragraphs or covers, rather than the whole book, to get a sense of the whole).

Chapter 3 focuses on how the checking of copyright informed customs practices and simultaneously acted as a form of policing of literary prestige. In the colonial era, it was mainly books printed in the metropole (and thus presumably by white authors) that could hold copyright, though there was provision for copyright in some colonies. This prevented most colonized subjects from claiming the right to authorship, so "proper" books were inherently constructed as white. As Hofmeyr says, "Books with British copyright carried a reassuring mark of origin, a type of racial trademark that raised them above suspicion" (58). She further explains that copyright "functioned as a way of validating colonial settler knowledge," and its restrictions in the colony helped to patrol the borders of civilization (60). It's not surprising, therefore, that African writers aspired to claim a British copyright on their books in order to assert themselves as rights-bearing subjects in the anticolonial era. Hofmeyr ends this chapter with an intriguing point. She remarks that a dockside view of copyright, from the view of customs officials who were in charge of checking the mark of origin of books and thus of policing the colonial maritime frontier, adds much to the flourishing critical debates on copyright as a way of conferring personhood and intellectual property onto an individual writer: "the author as genius, originality, literary property" (61). This attention to copyright as the mark of origin of books veers away from a focus on the author to a focus on the text and confers a material basis to the idea of authorial ownership of a work of art. It also traces the colonial origins of authorship by showing how dockside readings by customs officials aimed to expel "bad" copies or imitations of

[4] See Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019); Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

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metropolitan originals, much like suspect origins of goods being imported into the South African colony posed the threat of embargo over such cargo. In this respect, Hofmeyr's book reminded me of Joseph Slaughter's recent work on colonial plagiarism in the context of West African mythological tales and objects. In a forthcoming essay entitled "Recirculation: Plagiarism and the Print Life of Oral Tradition," Slaughter examines how colonial travel writers appropriated Ashanti oral histories about the Golden Stool passing them off as their own anthropological discoveries. In actual fact, many of these oral accounts were derived from printed colonial sources, in a dizzying round of recirculation. Like Slaughter, Hofmeyr unpicks monolithic notions of authorial originality by showing how plagiarism has always underpinned such constructions and connects the question of copyright to the question of (human) rights under imperialism.

Hofmeyr deftly interweaves her research into customs documents with environmental and postcolonial theory, animating what is usually perceived as a dull or colorless archive through semantic resignification. As she reminds us, "Customs and Excise is an obscure and little-studied institution" (26). This aesthetic-literary approach to forms and documents is enabled by the print cultures field in which the book is situated, where literary texts and less obviously "literary" materials are studied alongside one another. It is an angle she shares in common with younger scholars such as Priyasha Mukhopadhyay, who has turned her attention to colonial archives as proximate or cognate textual bodies to those of literature. Both Hofmeyr and Mukhopadhyay, who has clearly been much inspired by Hofmeyr's work, argue persuasively for an extension of the idea of literary reading, literary readerships, and literature itself beyond canonical genres and conventional (literate/educated) audiences. Such an approach also makes a strong case for the expansiveness and affordances of close reading as a critical methodology for researching material objects in the colonial archive.

Conversely, Hofmeyr established a pioneering approach to postcolonial literary scholarship that would become a major trend in the twenty-first century. It moved from the decades-long focus on exclusively theoretical analyses of subalternity and resistance to explore these questions in the context of book history and archival studies.[5]

In Chapter 4, Hofmeyr moves briefly from South Africa to Australia, and from copyright to censorship, interpreting the latter as yet another form of customs control that sought to regulate the contents of (literary) material entering the country. She analyzes the censorship practices in the port of Sydney, before turning back to South Africa as the main focus of the chapter. Peter MacDonald's *The Literature Police* provides Hofmeyr with a significant antecedent for her explorations of the history of literary censorship and its significance for

[5] See Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press*; Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literature, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Anjali Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture*, 1st ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016); Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave, 2007); and Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

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literature's institutional practices.[6] However, MacDonald's book and website look at a later period, that of apartheid-era South Africa, whereas Hofmeyr trains her gaze on the *longue durée* of colonial censorship across the British Empire. She connects the censorship of the apartheid regime to earlier histories of censorship practices relating to material of suspect morality, with overtly sexual content or politically seditious, arguing that "the logics of Customs' reading, shaped by its daily protocols and the exigencies of the port, opens new vistas on ideas of censorship" (65). She provides a fascinating potted history of censorship across two specific moments: the first in early-twentieth-century South Africa where military censors targeted pro-Boer material, and the second in the 1920s and 1930s, when customs officials targeted material deemed "communist." As she argues, "This formation laid the groundwork for subsequent censorship regimes in South Africa, which drew on these protocols while also attempting to present the censors as professional readers in contrast to the rank amateurs of the Custom House" (64).

Hofmeyr highlights an interesting discovery in her reading of the censorship reports and correspondence: customs officials at some point became fed up with acting as censors. They felt that reading literary material for content considered politically seditious or sexually suggestive/obscene required a level of sophistication and nuance that went far beyond their job description. As one official observed, "Customs officers are not protectors of public morals" and suggested it might be preferable for the Department of the Interior to undertake this complex close reading.

Such debates trace what Hofmeyr calls an "epidemiological hermeneutic" around literary works, underlining the perceived relationship between suspect plants and animals and suspect books. Then the apartheid regime took this hermeneutic a step further: it started applying censorship to works being produced within South Africa itself, whereas previously customs officials only scanned books coming in from outside. "As a system, apartheid itself aimed to locate, isolate, and in some cases, exterminate internal dissidents" (74).

The conclusion to Hofmeyr's book draws attention to the ways in which the reading of customs officials of the book as object trained the spotlight on the text rather than the author. This focus, she argues, was later seized on as a strategy by anticolonial and anti-apartheid activists, "who deployed books and pamphlets to confront authoritarian systems head-on." And given that such material was usually anonymous, this further cemented the charismatic aspects of the book as an instrument of subversion, redirecting its potential threat "not to its readers but to the state that sought to suppress it" (79).

Hofmeyr's book is hugely suggestive for the multiple different pathways it opens up: a radical exploration of the book as object and as perceived epidemiological threat, an analysis of reading habits as a customs process, censorship as a continuation of the customs process, and finally, the delineation of coastal themes, "calibrating genres across land and sea" (81). She rethinks major works

[6] See Peter MacDonald, *The Literature Police: Literary Censorship in Apartheid South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also the accompanying website: "The Literature Police," at https://theliteraturepolice.com/.

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of postcolonial literature by reading them from the vantage point of the port and even rereads Olive Schreiner's farm novel, long considered "a dry form," as intrinsically linked to the sea and to the port via a colonial genealogy. It is a short and compact, but extremely dense book, brimming with Hofmeyr's signature brilliance and superb grasp of her material. My one desire, in reading this book, would have been to hear *more* about her case studies; clearly, this material makes extremely intriguing contributions to postcolonial theory and to print culture studies, and I would have loved to hear more about the wealth of archival material uncovered here.

The book sketches out a relational arc of literary texts (to borrow Shu-Mei Shih's formulation) defined by the coastal genre. It offers suggestions for future scholars to group texts as part of this "shore-shaped formation," such as Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels, which are briefly mentioned in *Dockside Reading.* His latest one, *Afterlives* (2020), comes to mind as an obvious choice, situated as it is in a port town, Stone Town in Zanzibar.[7] Hofmeyr alludes to Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019) as well—as a narrative of the Indian Ocean, again it could suggestively supplement the fascinating readings of the nonnarrative genres she explores in the archives.[8]

Equally, the potential avenues of inquiry opened up by the idea of hydrocolonialism—empire as and through water—could be developed in the future as an approach to reading Amitav Ghosh's Indian Ocean trilogy. The book provides analyses of what is conventionally known as literature, while also applying literary-critical methods to customs documents. The insights of the book can be used to consider accounts of imaginative literature alongside Hofmeyr's wonderfully coined "dockside genres" of the customs lists, the forms, and the handbooks.

Hofmeyr's book exudes a real interest in, and love for, unfashionable archives that yet reveal much about the colonial past, engaging fully with the archival turn that has come to such prominence in contemporary art. While reading her book, I was powerfully reminded of Zarina Bhimji's work. Bhimji is a Ugandan-born British artist who has made several film installations and photographs that seek to revisit the moment of the forced expulsion of South Asians from Uganda in 1972 by Idi Amin, while also documenting the broader history of the South Asian diaspora in Africa and Britain. Her work is based on an affective reflection and recuperation of the postcolonial past and on her focus on the archive as artistic source and inspiration, emerging across her diverse use of visual and aural mediums.

Bhimji as an artist has always been interested in the documents and archives that contain the untold history of forgotten peoples, especially migrants and colonized subjects: the official letters, the documents, the visa stamps, the material and printed symbols of officialdom whose innocuous-looking aspect as mere paper in fact wield huge political power. In a text she wrote as part of her latest work, *Lead White*, Bhimji records her experience of archival violence: "The

[7] Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Afterlives* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).
[8] Namwali Serpell, *The Old Drift* (London: Vintage Books, 2019).

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purple ink was terrifying. It was like opening exam results. She could feel in her hands the power of an authority that could quite easily get rid of her and wipe away any evidence, an authority that could rewrite an event with a different account and she would just have to accept it. It was the terror of authority."[9] In the same piece, she mentions that she has decided to be a "historian of visual culture,"[10] interested in the psychology of the archive, by which she means its affective pull and its emotional effects on those like her, who enter it with the aim of finding out about the occluded past of their community.

We feel this affective pull of the archive in Hofmeyr's carefully crafted stories of customs officers and their doings in and around the port. This is much more than symptomatic reading, or reading against the grain; in fact, one could say that this is its opposite. It finds the object-oriented and pragmatic readings of the customs official a matter of great interest in understanding how literary value was constructed in the colonial era and how the development of national literary borders took place.

Competing interest. None.

Author biography. Neelam Srivastava is Professor of Postcolonial and World Literature at Newcastle University. She is the coeditor, with Toral Gajarawala, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, and Jack Webb, of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Postcolonial Print Cultures* (forthcoming, 2023). She is the author of *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930–1970* (2018) and coeditor, with Baidik Bhattacharya, of *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (2012). She has published widely on the cultural history of Italian colonialism, South Asian literature, anticolonial and antifascist writing (Antonio Gramsci, Sylvia Pankhurst, and Frantz Fanon in particular), and the publishing histories of third-worldist thought.

[9] Zarina Bhimji, *Lead White* (London: Heni Publishing, 2018), 107.
[10] Bhimji, *Lead White*, 69.

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