

THE REVISIONARY AND THE ASSERTIVE MODES IN INDIAN OCEAN STUDIES

REVISÃO E AUTOAFIRMAÇÃO NOS ESTUDOS DO ÍNDICO

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Indian Ocean Studies comprise a multilayered platform of research, which enables you to focus on different themes or topics within a regional set of locations. The novelty is the transdisciplinary approach on networks of business, migration and cultural exchange, beyond specific national questions. My contribution, which serves as an introduction to the dossier *Narrating the Indian Ocean*, highlights the diverse perspectives and research engagements with this platform through different but complementary modes.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Studies, postcolonial self-assertion, deconstruction, Eurocentrism

Os Estudos do Índico abarcam uma multifacetada plataforma de investigação, a qual pode focar-se em diferentes temas ou tópicos dentro de um amplo contexto regional. A novidade é o interesse transdisciplinar por redes de comércio, migração e troca de influências culturais, para além de específicos contextos nacionais. Este contributo, servindo de introdução ao dossier *Narrando o Índico*, sublinha a diversidade de perspetivas e investimento nesta plataforma, consoante a localização do investigador. Advoga-se, no entanto, que esta diversidade é complementar.

Palavras-chave: Estudos do Índico, autoafirmação pós-colonial, desconstrução, Eurocentrismo

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Although globalization is a model of world dynamics that tends to perpetuate, both symbolically and in terms of politics and economic exchange, the idea that the West still holds as the centre of a global network, this vision is questioned and confronted by scholars and artists situated outside the *Old World*, with complicit reverberations inside Western academy.⁽¹⁾

For the West, the impact of Indian Ocean Studies is revisionary, situating Europe in a changing world order where multiple centres of power are emerging. Besides, in a society increasingly aware of ecological and sustainability issues, local and global are linked by mutual necessity, and this awareness also requires alternative models of reciprocal organization across distant geographies. The knowledge provided by the humanities may be the key to achieving the necessary dialogue and balance.

For researchers situated in, or affiliated with the geo-cultural co-ordinates of the Indian Ocean, their own research pursues self-assertive aims, directed at recuperating a regional history that has not been as widely known, or as adequately studied, as it should be. In both cases, although serving different priorities, this kind of revisionary and self-assertive knowledge provided by Indian Ocean Studies is gaining momentum within the field of the humanities, consolidating an international academic platform.

As an academic working in Europe, I perceive Indian Ocean Studies as a subject within Postcolonial epistemologies. Its theoretical model can either zoom in on micro-situated contexts or be applied to wider regional frames. Regardless of scale, the knowledge provided must be translated into more balanced and adequate political, ethic and economic decisions. As Gayatri Spivak puts it:

One must fill the vision of literary form with its connections to what is being read: history, political economy – the world. And it is not merely a question of disciplinary formation. It is a question also of questioning the separation between the world of action and the world of disciplines. (Spivak, 2008: 128)

It is this committed and critical view of the world, mediated by the humanities, that we tried to promote at the II Summer School organized by CEHUM titled *Narrating the Indian Ocean: Mappings and Itineraries* (1-4 July 2012). The Summer School was designed to integrate young scholars in the international academic debate on the Indian Ocean, its history and dynamics. Students and researchers were expected to work with our guest

(1) See for example works by Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakravarty, Partha Chatterjee and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. See also work by Achille Mbembe.

lecturers via an epistemological model based on the deconstruction of established references, the integration of alternative sources of information, and the re-configuration of new knowledge. Often, this process implied a comparative platform between different periods of time and across geographical space, considering national, transnational or intra-national dimensions, as well as migrant ramifications of concrete communities.

On account of the possibility of innovation proposed by Indian Ocean Studies, either as a revision of Eurocentrism or as an assertive platform to promote and establish the study of regional dynamics across the Indian Ocean, I welcomed my colleagues' commitment to engage with this subject⁽²⁾ and co-organize a Summer School on Indian Ocean Studies.

To think through the debate centred on the Indian Ocean is to think about answers the Atlantic does not provide. In a way, Paul Gilroy and his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) became the model to think cultural contributions by Afro-European and Afro-American communities to the West, understood as the product of a dual affiliation, to past and present, to local and 'away', to multiple (often imaginary) places and the local constraints of negotiating successful ways to be 'at home' at the margins of Eurocentric spaces. But Gilroy's work also recovers a silenced history of massive, forced displacement of African people, across the Atlantic, during European maritime expansion from the 17th century onwards. To research historical dynamics in the Atlantic has meant to recover a whole history of colonial exploitation based on a triangular route connecting Europe, the Americas, the Caribbean and the western coast of Africa. The recuperation of this silenced memory has had its own corrective effects in terms of the world's historical archive, with direct implications for current politics. For example, it establishes the continued and massive presence of African peoples in Europe and the Americas for centuries, inscribing the right of Afro-American and Afro-European people to 'belong' to these societies, not only on account of their continued permanence on those places, but because of their effective participation and contribution to these societies. Finally, this recovered history provides a foundational narrative of displacement, a diasporic basis for the political and cultural self-assertion of African communities across the world.

(2) I would like to thank Marie-Manuelle Silva, Andreia Sarabando and most especially Elena Brugioni for challenging me to participate in the debate centred on Indian Ocean Studies, in the context of the organization of this Summer School. I thank Mar Garcia and Nazir Can for having introduced me to the subject during the conference *Hybridity in Indian Ocean Literature* (UAB – Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, April, 2009). See Mar Garcia *et al.*, *Indicities/Indices/Indícios* (2010).

When a postcolonial epistemological model is applied to the Indian Ocean, to explore its history and the people involved, very poignant connections become immediately apparent. The contrast with the dynamics of the Atlantic Ocean during colonialism (as explored by Gilroy for example) is revealing. In terms of global perceptions of contemporary dynamics, the most challenging and groundbreaking alteration brought about by thinking in terms of the Indian Ocean is precisely the move towards a universe where, among other cultural flows, Islam is a powerful element. The Ottoman Empire, Imperial Persia, the Sultanates of the Arabian Peninsula and the Nizams of Hyderabad represented a Muslim constellation operating in the Indian Ocean which preceded, endured and bypassed the height of the European presence. Although some sea routes might have been controlled by European peoples, these never managed to stop Arabs, Indians, Chinese and Malay from trading among themselves. In fact, the history of trade in the Indian Ocean is much older than that of European expansion. In this context, Europe cannot be read as having been the main exclusive source of power in the Indian Ocean. It more accurately dominated for a period of Eastern history, as other empires did, before, during and after the period of European expansion.

In *African Identity in Asia* (2009), Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya compiles references to several routes of the African slave trade towards the markets of Antalya and Constantinople, in the Ottoman Empire. In this study, the author also highlights routes from Africa's central regions to the market of Zanzibar, which provided coveted slaves for Persia and for the Indian kingdoms. Thus, a whole network that was invisible from the perspective of the Atlantic becomes observable in the Indian Ocean. Secondly, in Persia and the Indian kingdoms, a history of military power and warrior ability (totally absent from the trans-Atlantic record) explains the preference for Africans as trusted bodyguards, elite soldiers and military advisers. Connected to this proximity to politics, there are records of social mobility among African slaves whose work proved invaluable for their royal masters. Thus, Shihan Jayasuriya's research also provides an account of acknowledgement of African contributions to societies around the Indian Ocean as pilots, traders, soldiers, musicians and sorcerers, in ways that were almost completely denied in the trans-Atlantic history of African slaves (with the exception of music). This is a telling example of the alternative history of the Indian Ocean, one that is still little known and researched in the Western world.

For researchers situated within the regional frame of Indian Ocean Studies, to publish, teach and circulate knowledge on the history and dynamics of the Indian Ocean is urgent and strategic, making the archive

of world history and world heritage more representative and nuanced, by presenting themselves to the world in their own terms. Simultaneously, local societies will be negotiating visibility and agency in relation to one's neighbours, across the water, across borders, and within the national space. Thirdly, Indian Ocean Studies can contribute to consolidating and steering local societies, by addressing internal tensions and discussing alternatives.

In both modes, the revisionary and the assertive, a key aspect of the debate around the Indian Ocean is the possibility of a Western absence (something that research on the Atlantic did not provide). This is a platform that works South-South, while postcolonial studies centered on the Atlantic still think across a North-South divide, even if the Atlantic route is a triangular one. Considering the margin of innovation implied in Indian Ocean Studies, it is timely and relevant that this debate should be promoted within the Portuguese academy, and that was one of the objectives that guided the organization of a Summer School on Indian Ocean Studies at CEHUM.

Lastly, it is important to bear in mind that Indian Ocean Studies are a universe where the Western scholar is a late arrival, in an ex-centric position. In a way, the tone was set in the 1980s, in India, by the Subaltern Studies Group. The West followed the challenge by this group of academics to acknowledge peasant and vernacular knowledge as valid sources of information to confront and reframe official narratives. This at the time that Marxist criticism was at the centre of (Western) literary criticism, although its objects of research remained very much 'highbrow'. Eventually, Postmodernism, revelling in irony, deconstruction, chaos and subversion proved a better ally to scholars situated outside Western contexts, creating room for converging perspectives in the process of desecrating canons and provincializing Europe.⁽³⁾ In a global world, researchers based in the West (such as our students) need a greater perception of the dynamics operating in the Indian Ocean today, but contemporary regional dynamics have a history of their own which it is necessary to trace back and understand. Once this knowledge is acquired, expertise on the Indian Ocean must be directed to the world of politics and decision making, as suggested by Spivak above. It is up to postcolonial studies scholars to seek this kind of participation in other dimensions of contemporary society. At the same time, other areas of knowledge and work must value and learn to apply the knowledge provided by this field of the humanities.

(3) This concept was coined by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 2007).

After the Summer School on *Narrating the Indian Ocean* it was considered necessary to contribute with a publication to support researchers interested in this subject, inserting our academic community (mostly Portuguese and Spanish) into this international debate. Hence, this dossier aims at providing an introduction to the central issues addressed by Indian Ocean Studies. It starts with a set of theoretical approaches to insular contexts: Ute Fendler discusses Creolization as a process of becoming, where multiple layers of history and identity have to be continuously negotiated in a relational balance; Mar Garcia describes the dynamics of ethnicity and Creolization in Mauritius, framing that insular society as a fragmented whole where diverse ethnic identities compete for acknowledgement and representation; Marie-Manuelle da Silva explores a graphic novel from La Réunion (*Île Bourbon 1730*) as a means to interrogate French official historical memory. The relevance of exploring plural imaginaries and representations ensues from the political implications in managing competing collective memories.

A second set of articles addresses Mozambique as a key case study within the dynamics of Indian Ocean Studies. Jessica Falconi invokes the representation of Mozambican identity in poems about the Island of Mozambique, as a particularly charged literary motif that projects Mozambican identity outwards, towards the Indian Ocean and the wider, multiple connections across the water. Likewise, Nazir Can asserts the strategic importance of inscribing, in national Mozambican literature, the presence of Indian communities within Mozambican society, as a means to break with a tradition of representation that tends to turn inwards, isolating Mozambique from the region around it. Elena Brugioni's article offers a theoretical reflection on the Eurocentric principle underlying the (near) absence of Indian Ocean Studies in established postcolonial studies, especially if one compares this absence with the attention lavished on the South Atlantic and the European role in colonial history. Brugioni relates such academic practices to a Eurocentric epistemological tradition and its marginalizing effects.

India and Goa, or rather, Goa in *Bollywood* are invoked in this dossier by Francisco Veres Machado, who recovers the careers of Goan musicians in Mumbai, as Jazz bands, and later in the film industry. Machado's contribution is all the more interesting for the political borders it blurs, revealing how people moved and interacted of their own accord, creating alternative cartographies that elude colonial and postcolonial national frames. We wish to thank Rosa Perez for her Preface, where she acknowledges the innovative potential of Indian Ocean Studies and a certain inaugural dimension in the

publication of this dossier within the frame of the Portuguese academy. Her encouragement and support are most rewarding.

Finally, John Mateer contributed with two poems, an artistic note that echoes and enhances the critical perspective of the academic contributions. Andreia Sarabando, who has translated John Mateer's work extensively, translated these poems into Portuguese, thus expanding their audience. We also want to thank John Mateer and Andreia Sarabando for the poetry session that followed Mateer's talk on his poetry in connection to the Indian Ocean; Susana Sardo, an ethnomusicologist, for having discussed some features of Indian music and its ritual meanings, and Francisco Veres Machado for showing his film *The Other*, on Goan multiple identities.

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