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BOOK FORUM

Reader Response to *Dockside Reading*

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Abstract

This piece responds to the three pieces on *Dockside Reading.* It provides background on the making of the book, its experimental nature, and discusses the ways in which the three responses extend the book's reach and implications. The piece concludes with a description of the author's new project, *Elemental Reading.*

Keywords: *Dockside Reading*; book history; oceanic studies; elemental media studies; elemental reading

Many adjectives have attached to the term *reader*: *ideal, model, informed*, even *super*. The reader in these formulations is assumed to be virtual or hypothetical rather than real. In these three generous, considered, and acute responses, we encounter actual readers who possess all these heuristic superpowers. For a book about reading, this volume could not have landed in a more perfect interpretive community. I am deeply grateful to Stephanie Jones, Kate Highman, and Neelam Srivastava, postcolonial readers extraordinaire. My warmest thanks as well to Jeanne-Marie Jackson for convening this forum.

Dockside Reading started in one intellectual life and ended in another. The book arose in the wake of *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading.* One minor theme was Gandhi's opposition to copyright, which he regarded as a form of private property. Having completed the book, I wanted to explore this theme further. Was Gandhi's position unusual or not? What was the situation with regard to copyright?

Rather surprisingly, this search led me to the dockside and the Custom House because, as I discovered, it was this department that had overseen copyright. Printed matter coming from outside the colony had to be funneled through the port city, where Customs officials checked to see that it was not pirated, seditious, or obscene. Customs hence became the part of the colonial state that oversaw both copyright and censorship.

Had I done this project ten or fifteen years ago, I would no doubt have written a "dryer" book, focusing only on the print culture implications of copyright and censorship in the Custom House without considering its littoral location. Although *Gandhi's Printing Press* situated itself in the field of Indian Ocean studies, like much scholarship on the maritime world, there was not much actual sea involved. Instead, the ocean featured as a backdrop for human movement at sea, more surface than volumetric depth. Over the last decades, rising sea levels and climate catastrophe have impacted powerfully on oceanic studies itself, which now grapples with how to go below the waterline and to engage with the materialities and ecologies of the marine world. *Dockside Reading* is an attempt to embed print culture in this new oceanic studies, to put water and paper closer together.

This was of course easier said than done, and the challenge became how to integrate the "dry" case studies on copyright and censorship with the maritime materialities of the colonial port city. On the face of it, copyright and censorship seem to have nothing to do with the port city, indeed to be almost its opposite. Or, as I argued in the opening of *Dockside Reading*: "We think of copyright as a quiet and dry institution, moving through registry offices with the barely audible rustle of paper. In a similar vein, censorship is generally imagined as silently sinister with anonymous bureaucrats burrowing away in Soviet-style buildings. Yet, in the colonial port, copyright policy and censorship protocols took shape in the clamor of the waterfront and its imbroglio of incoming cargo."

In attempting to integrate these domains, my first strategy, which I termed *dockside reading*, was to pay detailed attention to customs procedures in the port, tracking books, documents, and printed matter as closely as I could to see where and how they were unloaded, stored, checked, consulted, scanned, read, and at times, dumped in the ocean (the fate of some banned books). A second strategy was to place these shore-shaped practices of reading in a wider framework, which I termed *hydrocolonialism.* Based on the term *postcolonialism* with its wide remit, hydrocolonialism brings together land and water, empire and environment. The concepts explore the literary implications opened up by overlaying the hydrological cycle onto imperial and post-imperial cartographies. This move requires us to think laterally, vertically, and contrapuntally between different water-worlds and hydro-imaginaries while exploring how such circuits have been or may be narrativized. It is intended to be a portable term that can be applied to a range of contexts, and the idea has in fact been taken up enthusiastically in a range of literary and social science fields.[1]

Dockside Reading experiments with putting together the wet and the dry, and, as with all such ventures, one can never be certain of the outcomes. The three responses gathered here have recognized and embraced the exploratory nature of the volume, extending its reach and implications.

[1] The idea has been taken up in a wide range of postcolonial literary contexts: Irish studies, studies of Australian literature, the black Mediterranean, Latin American literary traditions, South Asian studies, and Southern African studies. In addition to oceanic studies, the idea has been deployed by scholars in history, anthropology, applied linguistics, religious studies, and art history.

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Stephanie Jones discusses *Dockside Reading* as an "oceans-oriented contribution" to debates on law and literature, explaining how it "offers a model for future literary critical mediations between the small grey everyday detail and the larger force of the law." Moving away from the tired picture of literature as a humanizing force vis-à-vis the law, Jones reads the book as interweaving "paralegal" and "paraliterary" worlds. The tariff manuals and handbooks of the Custom House played an infrastructural and imaginative role in the port, assisting in landing goods and passengers (of the right class and race) while reinforcing the image of the port as a site of colonial development that overcomes the specter of shipwreck and ushers settlers toward their landed destination. As such, this paralegal work looks toward and unites two key colonial narrative modes: the story of the shipwreck and the farm novel.

Both Jones and Highman consider how the boundary-making work of the Custom House has implications further inland. Discussing the figure of the customs inspector, Jones notes, "In her analysis of Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), [Hofmeyr] suggests this figure as *itself* a method of postcolonial reading: that looking for characters or narrators who behave 'like' a customs examiners can allow us to apprehend further links between apparently distant literary formations and the imperial law on and beside the water."

Similarly, she points out that "'the dock' or 'the customs officer' might be just as powerful a paradigm as 'the ship' or 'the lawyer.'"

Highman similarly takes *Dockside Reading* inland examining the implications of how the work of customs establishes the book as a racialized and boundary object: "'The colonial book' operates as a stand-in for whiteness, and as such becomes a site of contestation given all that whiteness is held to signify in the imperial imaginary, but which does not in fact belong to it: authority, authorship, ownership, property, propriety, originality."

Her account of the establishment and working of the South African chapter of PEN from the 1920s onward, based on her detailed archival research, demonstrates this racializing work. As she indicates, the de facto whites-only organization deployed the idea of "the book" to limit membership, admitting only those who had published at least two books and were hence presumptively "white'." Yet, as Highman demonstrates, several members had either not published anything or had publications with titles such as *What Every Dental Surgeon Should Know About Income Tax*, *What Every Farmer Should Know About Income Tax, Every Man His Own Tax Consultant*, So *You Want a House: A Guide to House Building in South Africa.*

These titles in fact continue a long tradition of "the book" that emerged from the dockside, namely a publication that closely resembled a form (for customs officials the ideal type of publication, which could be easily scanned and read, with no whiff of subversion). The bulk of what entered the colony and was published within South Africa were manuals of this type: "Christmas annuals, letter-writing guides, cookbooks, seed catalogues, horse-training manuals, fruit growers' guides, farmers' yearbooks, ostrich feather—ready reckoners, handbooks for mounted infantry, bankers' and insurance agents' diaries, freemasons' directories, timetables, and tide tables." As *Dockside Reading* indicates, such publications enacted a model of the colonial book: a template from elsewhere

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filled with local content. The PEN Club was hence carrying forward one of South Africa's great anti-intellectual traditions.

Like all generous and closely attentive readings, Srivastava's response highlights aspects of the book that I hadn't quite thought of myself. Her account of customs officials using both close and distant reading is a wonderful formulation that I wish I'd used. She also locates the book in the field of postcolonial literary and cultural studies, specifically attending to questions of how texts undo a metropole/colony binary. Referencing Shu-mei Shih's idea of the literary arc along which texts can interact in unpredictable ways, her response highlights the literary alliances of *Dockside Reading.* Her response further explores how hydrocolonialism might be applied as a literary methodology to a range of Indian Ocean texts. She also references Leela Gandhi and Priyamvada Gopal's work on networks of resistance that operate across metropole and colony, although my book doesn't explicitly delve into questions of resistance. It does focus on dockworkers in passing but doesn't center them, something that a rich historiography on maritime labour has long done, focusing on its global networks of worker organization and militancy.

Srivastava is a sharp-eyed reader and points to the passage where some customs officials resented acting as censors because they felt this went beyond their job description. The model that they proposed was that of the plant inspector who checked to see that incoming flora were not infested or diseased in any way. Once the inspector had given the all clear, customs would then undertake their work on reckoning tariffs. As I finished *Dockside Reading*, this plant inspector interested me more and more because in invoking this figure, customs officials were in effect thinking about books as a type of plant, or more properly an invasive species. Across the course of writing the book, I had also become interested in thinking beyond water to the elements in general and had explored the wonderfully rich material on elemental media studies and allied fields (on clouds, ice, atmospheres, air, and so on).

Since completing the book, I have been thinking of a new project tentatively called *Elemental Reading*, comprising four short essays, on books that end up in water, books that are buried, books that are burned, and books that are affected by the atmospheres in which they are stored. I have started work on the latter topic and have become interested in airborne insects in colonial archives and how, and with what chemicals they were fumigated (often a miniature version of larger colonial government strategies of fumigation and pesticide use). Initially, the task of dealing with insects that had taken up residence in archival volumes was assigned to the Department of Immigration (because they worked closely with the port health authorities on fumigating people and cargo). From the late 1890s in the Cape, a government entomologist was appointed and his department was then tasked with fumigating the archives. The entomologists discussed this assignment in terms of their normal routines, which was to think about insects in relation to plants. In their deliberations on how to fumigate the archive, documents are implicitly imagined as plants. As Stephanie Jones notes, my work has long explored the book as "a broad and endlessly fascinating category," and as Highman indicates, my explorations have roved from orature,

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to periodicals, to hard-bound books, to coastal waters. I've now got my sights on books as plants. Let's see how that garden grows.

Competing interest. None.

Author biography. Isabel Hofmeyr is Professor of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand and was Global Distinguished Professor at New York University from 2013 to 2022. She has worked extensively on the Indian Ocean world and oceanic themes more generally. Recent publications include *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (2022) and a coedited special issue on "Reading for Water" in *Interventions* 24 (3) 2022. She codirects the project Oceanic Humanities for the Global South with partners from Mozambique, India, Jamaica, and Barbados (www.oceanichumanities.com).

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