Mann, Michael; Phaf-Rheinberger, Ineke (Hrsg.):  

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The book brings together a diverse selection of essays, which share the interest in exploring cultural constructs of the world’s oceans. The „line,” as editors Michael Mann and Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger explain in their introduction, refers to an imaginary divide between northern and southern hemispheres, deeply ingrained in the European psyche over the last five centuries since the onset of seaborne imperial expansion, and frequently reproduced in contemporary politics, historiography, literature, and the culture industry. From this narrow world view, all that lies „beyond the line” appears as the unknown, an expanse of territories inviting conquest, exploitation, adventure, and, at best, exotic ideals of an „earthly paradise.” Considering the fictitious yet real divide between north and south, the work presented in this volume looks to foster horizontal dialogues between experiences normally obscured through European and North American lenses.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, academia has turned its attention to the effects of colonial structures in society and culture, establishing well-known areas of research such as postcolonial and cultural studies. However, these disciplines often ignore the role of oceans, seen merely as trade routes and boundaries rather than spaces that generate particular types of cultural interaction or contact zones, a problem this book seeks to explore primarily from historical and literary perspectives. This approach is reflected in the arrangement of two sections, titled „Studying the Ocean” and „Narrating the Ocean,” which contain four essays each. Despite this general organization of disciplines, all the work included draws on a wide range of material and methodologies, testifying to the multidisciplinary character sought out by the editors. The diversity of topics covered in this project emerged from an international workshop held in Berlin in June of 2012.

In the opening chapter, Georg Berkemer offers reflections on the task and methodology of historians, illustrating power relations in the production of scientific knowledge, which he calls the „The Archive” after philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Berkemer presents more of a personal story than a case study—though no less documented—narrating his attempt to determine whether the 1938 „discovery” of the Coelacanth was in fact the first time the fish’s existence had been documented on paper. Furthermore, he argues that Western scientific discourse revealed its hegemonic infrastructure by ignoring any previous knowledge of the species among fishermen and market vendors around the Indian Ocean and Indonesia, the fish’s natural habitats. A thought-provoking piece that uncovers the social implications of a seemingly nonsocial issue, this essay effectively combines research and discursive strategies from a variety of disciplines, serving as a logical segue into the following chapters.

Michael Mann’s article ventures a contribution to maritime social history, reconstructing details of the lives of those who traveled and were forced to travel the seas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The meticulous description of ship life, including claustrophobic quarters and work spaces, inescapable dampness, and a variety of sea-related superstitions among Europeans, Arabians, Africans, and Indians, provides a rich backdrop for discussing the proposed problems of subaltern subjects vulnerable to such conditions. Mann finds that eighteenth-century maritime culture in the Indian Ocean contrasts significantly to that of the Atlantic in several respects, and he highlights the blurred hierarchical lines among ship workers living in the lower deck, whether they were slaves, freedmen, seamen, lascars, or wage laborers. Regardless, on European ships especially, racial hierarchy became ever more defined throughout the century. Another interesting point stressed concerns Europeans’ disregard of treaties, laws, and other sociocultural norms „beyond the line,” attesting to the constructs of „civilized” and „barbarian” worlds.

The following chapter plunges deeper into
the oceans’ past, shining light on the murky representations of pirates. Derek L. Elliott and Sebastian R. Prange argue that European colonial powers persistently applied the label of piracy to Indian states as a strategy to delegitimize their actions, while simultaneously claiming their own large-scale conquests to be legitimate political and economic enterprises. The authors defend their claims through two case studies of European intervention in western India. The first discusses sixteenth-century Portugal’s naval presence along the Malabar Coast, while the second looks into the eighteenth-century British conflict with the Maratha Empire. Together, the examples display how European forces attempted to criminalize indigenous political and economic enemies in a move to gain monopolies over strategic territories, both on land and sea. Such depictions can deeply influence contemporary perceptions and demand historic revisionism since, as the article suggests, in many areas around the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese were considered as cruel ship-bound bandits: in other words, pirates. Ultimately, the work presented here advocates for broader perspectives in the writing of maritime imperial history, especially from those underrepresented and often ignored voices.

For Margret Frenz the ocean constitutes a vehicle for transferring radical ideas in the context of anti-colonial movements in India and East Africa. She first outlines the contributions of specific actors involved in anti-colonial movements, primarily focusing on two intellectuals of Indian descent: Joseph Murumbi and Pio Gama Pinto. Tracing Murumbi’s travels from Kenya to India and the UK, where he took asylum from 1953 to 1962, Frenz argues that such transnational mobility not only enabled pressing issues of Kenya’s independence to receive greater international visibility, but also strengthened cooperation between Indian and African political bodies. The second half of this chapter focuses on the role institutions such as political parties, the press, and trade unions played in circulating pro-independence ideas. Influential organizations, such as the East African Indian National Congress (EAINC)—Kenya’s first political party, founded in 1914—and the Kenya African Union (KAU), brought discussions of a multiracial and multicultural society into the public sphere. Indeed, advocating for equality between Africans and Indians became a pivotal strategy for the Kenya nationalist movement, stemming primarily from their shared experiences of colonialism under the British Empire, an idea useful in understanding the complexities of Africa’s vast heterogeneity and south-to-south dialogues aiming to achieve a true swaraj, or self-governance.

Though the following chapter marks a shift towards literary studies, it relates to the preceding studies in examining relations between Asia and East Africa. Frank Schulze-Engler contextualizes insufficient parameters afflicting Indian Ocean Studies, such as romanticized generalizations of solidarity among nations of the „global south,“ an indictment of First World academia’s complicity in perpetuating simplistic representations of formally colonized peoples. In exploring essays, oral stories, and novels, the author seeks to supplant antiquated binary perceptions of India-East Africa relations, including overlooked cultural syncretism that complicated essentialist constructions of nationhood in the newly formed African states of the 1960s. These issues arise in Peter Nazareth’s novel „In a Brown Mantle“, read as an allegory of Uganda’s experience leading up to independence and its aftermath. On a theoretical level, Schulze-Engler also outlines useful concepts for discussing the complexities at hand, such as „Afrindian“ literature and identity, which attempts to distance itself from traditional diaspora categories.

In a further effort to dismantle cultural and linguistic barriers, Ute Fendler establishes links among the work of African poets and narrators in „Fabulating the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Network of Imaginaries?“ Broken down into three sections that analyze literary accounts of the sea from an island (Mauritius), a continent island (Madagascar), and a continent nation-state (Mozambique), the chapter reveals how the selected authors working from different languages and genres—mainly poetry and narrative—deal with the task of rewriting their peoples’ history and memory, largely obliterated in the face of
hegemonic colonial rule from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Fabulation, that is, drawing on cultural storytelling traditions as opposed to historic „facts,” lays the basis for these authors, with whom Fendler coincidentally offers parallels to several Caribbean authors, such as Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Edouard Glissant, displaying how shared experiences that reach beyond limitations of national boundaries and language are at the core of this research. The comparative perspective with the Caribbean is quite refreshing and reveals similar motifs as well as political concerns present in contemporary literatures written on opposite sides of the world.

Ana Sobral associates the symbolic importance of the sea with past experiences of trauma and the Atlantic slave trade in her study of Angolan Poetry and Rap Music. With a corpus organized into three historic phases from the 1950s to the present, Sobral’s critical perspective effectively incorporates the social and political realities surrounding each author discussed. The first phase encompasses poetry written during the anti-colonial struggles leading to independence in 1974, when many authors were directly involved in political organizations, such as the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). This is the case of Agostinho Neto, independent Angola’s first president, whose poetry invokes the sea as a site of past and ongoing anguish related to the slave trade, yet a decisive key for building solidarity within the African diaspora. Angola’s post-colonial period plunged into a new stage of violence with a civil war lasting intermittently from 1975 until 2002, the stage for the second phase of poetic analysis. Here, the sea appears as a barrier, a force isolating the country from the rest of the world, destroying any hope for change. From the turn of the century onward, in the post-civil war years, rap music emerges as a new popular form of expression and communication. During this third period, rappers and poets depict the ocean in a similar manner as during the anti-colonial movements, though with less optimism, associating its role with the severing of wealth, culture, and identity under colonial control over the past 500 years. Sobral argues that these perspectives convey an ongoing struggle against neocolonial exploitation in which the sea remains a pivotal instrument of memory.

The only chapter that directly addresses literature from the Americas is the one by Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger who offers a panoramic view of how the ocean has been dealt with in recent literary productions across the Atlantic. This thorough comparative study argues that urban modernity cannot be fully comprehended without taking into consideration an „oceanic dimension,” which in the case of the selected countries and their major port cities (Salvador da Bahia and Luanda) implies examining the consequences of the intercontinental slave trade. In this context, modernity is considered a state of constant change and mobility. Among the novels analyzed is Brazilian author Ana Maria Gonçalves’ Um defeito de cor (2006), which reconstructs the fictional life of Kehinde, an enslaved African woman in the nineteenth century forced to make several trips across the Atlantic. Issues dealt with in the novel include gender relations, the importance of names in regards to memory and social status, racial tensions, and intertextual dialogues with Brazilian and Portuguese literature, all influenced by interoceanic exchanges. From Angola, Phaf-Rheinberger selects a larger corpus of authors including Pepetela, Arnaldo Santos, José Eduardo Agualusa, Manuel Rui, and Tazuary Nkeita, most of whom also explore historic narratives. The chapter places strong emphasis on the shifting attitudes towards African religious beliefs, themselves altered—though not obliterated—by migrations, colonization, and contemporary urban living spaces.

The bulk of work collected in this book focuses on dialogues between Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia, leaving aside a large part of East Asia and the Americas, aside from Brazil. It might have been useful to specify such a geographical emphasis in the title, clarifying what part of the „Southern Oceans” are actually dealt with. Also, the critical work gathered here would have been enriched by a more balanced group of authors from or working in institutions within the southern hemisphere. Regardless, such details constitute minor detractions in a larger project intended to generate more dialogue.
concerning the oceans’ often ignored role in socio-cultural representations. This focus contributes to better understanding how “northern” alienating discourses have evolved up to their present-day manifestations, often clustered under what Edward Said first called Orientalism and later applied to a variety of geopolitical cases. Researchers interested in such issues and recent turns in historic and literary studies will find useful material in this comprehensive volume.