Sea Changes, Dark Tides and Littoral States: Oceans and Coastlines in Post-apartheid South African Narratives

Meg Samuelson

Abstract

This article surveys representations of ocean and coastline in post-apartheid South African narratives, focusing on how they come to articulate a nation in and after transition. It finds that a restored sense of connection in the wake of the exceptional land a-part is one of the notable sea changes of the post-apartheid order as South Africa is re-imagined at the conjunction of Atlantic and Indian Oceans in the neoliberal global order, while various dark tides continue to transport and haunt the post-apartheid imagination. Some narratives plumb the ocean depths in search of metaphors of literariness, conceive of it as housing memory or evoke the littoral to imagine anti-dualist states. Others emphasise the sea as a 'material space of nature' or suggest it summons ways of knowing that accommodate the mystery abjected and repressed by the enlightenment rationality that docked on South African shores during the long colonial encounter.

Keywords: South African literature, ocean histories, sea metaphors, ecological discourse

The sea speaks in many voices to articulate a nation in and after transition[1]. This article surveys some of its notable tones and discourses in various

---

[1] The allusion is of course to Braudel's 'The Mediterranean Speaks with many Voices' (1972:13).

fictional and (auto)biographical narratives representing ocean and coastline in post-apartheid South Africa. Taking my initial bearings from Ariel's song in *The Tempest*, I engage in particular the transformative and transforming character of the sea, finding it a medium eminently suited to the expression of change – whether of discourses of nation or those of the sea itself – while accommodating in its depths the 'rich and strange' (Shakespeare 1. 2. 402).

A restored sense of connection in the wake of the exceptional state of the land a-part is one of the notable sea changes of the post-apartheid order; others are conveyed in the dark tides that transport and haunt the post-apartheid imagination. This dark tide bespeaks also the meeting along South African shores of the 'black Atlantic' and the 'black water' ('*kala pani*') of the Indian Ocean: re-imagined at the site of their imbrications, the nation takes on new conceptual forms, or reanimates earlier ones abandoned under the urgencies of apartheid, while past structures of oppression and displacement, or memories thereof, seep across the temporal rupture posited in the 'post' into a disavowing present.

Conjugating local and global in expressions of a new post-apartheid worldliness, many narratives reassert the sea's social function as a transport surface connecting distant and dispersed landmasses, or evoke the oceanic ontology of connectedness (cf. Mack 2011: 37). Others plumb the ocean depths in search of metaphors of literariness or conceive of it as housing memory – as an alternative archive of the variety imagined by the St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott. Walcott's famous formulation – 'the sea is history' (1986) – refuses the binary of historical land versus ahistorical ocean that informs the conception of the sea as smooth surface that, in the wake of Hugo Grotius's *mare liberum* treatise, imagines it lying outside of human sociality and external to human law: a vast, boundless void (cf. Mack 2011: 16; Steinberg 2001: 14). The reclamation of the sea as a location of human history can, however, deny or repress other ways of reading it. As Philip Steinberg reminds us, though certainly a 'socially constructed space', the ocean 'is also a material space of nature' (2001: 209). Walcott's refusal is accordingly extended beyond the category of the human in engagements with littoral zones as sites of anti-dualist thinking (cf. Martin 2005), or in the pantheon of sea-creatures that populate post-apartheid fiction and demand a reading of the ocean as living presence. Insisting that the emergent 'blue

cultural studies' be like the ocean itself tinted 'green', such narratives dive beneath the sea as surface of travel and/or reflective mirror to find in its depths far more than an archive of human history. At the same time, while the black sea is rendered a sign of ecological crisis, the dark tides that muddy the littoral zone and the murky waters of the deep – a region that 'has withheld its secrets more obstinately than any other' (Carson 1961:n.p.) – summon ways of knowing that accommodate the 'strange': the mystery abjected and repressed by the (early to post) enlightenment rationality that docked on South African shores during the long colonial encounter.

<p align="center">************</p>

Evoking the sea as surface over which human history advances, a number of post-apartheid novels revisit Cape Town's origins as 'tavern of the seas' and 'oceanic crossroads' within the imperial network of the Dutch East India Company (Ward 2003). On this historical stage they re-enact the encounter between autochthon and seafarer, while shifting from the conceptual dominance of the 'black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993) to a re-articulation of South Africa at the intersection of Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. The imaginative purchase of the Atlantic Ocean remains palpable in South African letters; but increasing attention is being paid to the nation's other flanking ocean, and the diverse elsewheres to which it connects, producing in the process new geopolitical and cultural imaginings.

This sea change enables us to 'relativize the Atlantic' model that, as Isabel Hofmeyr (2010: 721) notes, has become overly 'normative' in southern African studies, leading to particular conceptual occlusions. No longer exclusively fixated on the Euro-American dominated and driven histories that have produced the Atlantic world, it allows for a critical reorientations from which to begin reading what some are describing as the 'post-American' world (Zackaria 2011) or 'Asian century' (Kaplan 2010). While providing an illuminating vantage point on the emergent, this sea change also urges re-readings of earlier work previously engaged through the analytic lens of the 'black Atlantic', which re-emerge as negotiating a worldliness poised or pivoting between Atlantic and Indian Ocean arenas. A compelling example is provided by Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom* (1954). Explicit in its Atlantic references and modes of redress and to date read

within that rubric, *Tell Freedom* also surfaces various Indian Ocean entanglements, not least in the figures of Abrahams's parents – an Ethiopian seaman and a 'member of the Cape Coloured community' produced in 'the Cape of Storms … where a half-way house to the East' was established (1954: 10 - 11) – and most powerfully in its final sequence, in which the autobiographical protagonist wades into the Indian Ocean off the shores of Durban one night, nearly drowning in its currents before he embarks by ship the next day on his journey to 'tell freedom'.

Such complex forms of worldliness imagined through the connective tissue of the oceans are opened up once more post apartheid. No longer conceptualized as a state of exception and a land apart, nor simply as an extension of the Atlantic economy, South Africa after apartheid comes to inhabit a connectedness inflected by its emergence into the neoliberal global economy following the end of the cold war. The sea looms large in narrative negotiations of this new state, whether in dystopian futures, contemporary crime thrillers or novels trawling the historical past.

Dan Sleigh's *Islands* (2004) and Russel Brownlee's *Garden of Plagues* (2005), for instance, bring into central focus the sea, 'that player on the Cape stage ... so readily overlooked' (Sleigh 2004: 385), as they write the seventeenth century Cape settlement into an archipelagic framework that, paradoxically, departs from the 'notoriously insular' (Worden 2003: 42) historiography of the Cape, and of South Africa more generally, in favour of rendering it a 'node' in the 'fluid state' of the Dutch East India Company network (Ward 2009, Brownlee 2005: 17). The context in which the occupation of the Cape occurs is the 'shift of historical existence from firm land to the sea' that for Karl Schmitt (1997: 46) defines the early modern era. Sleigh emphasises this 'surge towards the sea' (Schmitt 1997: 19) in his cast of characters who wash up on the shores of the Cape like so much flotsam, each having 'heeded the voices from the sea that swept through Europe, calling farmers from their lands, clerks from their desks and bakers from their ovens' (Sleigh 2004: 74). Hailed from all corners of the Atlantic world are a 'motley crewe' (Gordon) of characters: 'I had to go to the sea, the sea had to have me' (Sleigh 2004: 304), says Hans Michiel from Germany; captured in Timbuktu by Arabs and sold to Portuguese traders on the West African coast, the slave Jan Vos similarly reports that the 'sea called me from far ahead; it wanted me. I had to go' (326).

Reflecting on the emergence of modern South Africa as an encounter between land and sea, *Islands* initially performs a bifurcated gaze, shifting between the perspectives of the indigenous and the seafaring, between those whose eyes are turned toward the interior and those who look out across the ocean. In this, it follows the historical understanding put forward by Kerry Ward (2003) that 'the orientation of indigenous societies in the region was not towards the sea'; even those called *'strandlopers'* (lit. 'beach-walkers') 'were not a people whose myths and economic being was shaped by the sea'. *Islands*, however, troubles this distinction between terrestrial and maritime, indigenous and interloper, showing how the founding of the settlement rather than the indigenous gaze draws the boundary between the land and sea. Here it echoes the Schmittian thesis that 'the emergence of a (Eurocentric) global order' founded 'the new distribution of our planet … in the separation of land from sea'; the former are divided into state territories while the latter 'are free: they know no state and are not subjected to any state of territorial sovereignty' (Schmitt 1997: 46).

Similarly to Ishtiyaq Shukri in *The Silent Minaret* (2005), what Sleigh seeks to recover from the early Cape encounter are in contrast amphibian or littoral subjects who embody what Michael Pearson describes as 'a mixture of maritime and terrestrial influences' (2006: 354). For Sleigh, Pieternella, the daughter of Krotoa and Pieter van Meerhoff and thus the product of the first marriage between African and European at the Cape, exemplifies this new subjectivity. It is one that stands athwart the borders first materialised in the Bitter Almond Hedge of Jan van Riebeeck's Cape settlement and subsequently avidly policed by Dutch East India Company and Dutch/British colonial orders. For *Islands*, the elaboration of this state that in turn casts Pieternella as '*baster*' (Sleigh 2004: 747) is rendered in the recession of the sea from the edges of the settlement, and the drying out of the land. Writing against the impermeable, ordered fortress city of twenty-first century Cape Town, Henrietta Rose-Innes redeploys this symbolic vocabulary in *Nineveh* (2011), where she evokes the ambiguous frog, wetlands and mud as subversive emblems against this settled state.

A different historical stage is set for the encounter between autochthon and seafaring stranger in the mid nineteenth century Eastern Cape in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000). Here the sea is overdetermined: its waves are said to have cast 'the cursed white conquerors

… onto the lands of the amaXhosa' and the successful fulfillment of Nongqawuse's prophecies would have seen the European interlopers driven back to sea; at the same time, the prophecies portend that the ancestors will 'emerge from the sea' (Mda 2000: 87, 94). The prophecies remain unfulfilled and the dead do not rise to return the world to its original, uncontaminated state, yet the novel appears to draw out of Nongqawuse's legacy an otherwise much submerged indigenous orientation toward the sea. In the post-apartheid present, the character Camagu is surprised to find women harvesting mussels and oysters, a practice that dates back to the days of Nongqawuse when, after the failure of the prophecies, starving survivors began to 'eat shellfish, which was not regarded as food at all' (2000: 212). Thus does the novel advance its thesis that the 'amaXhosa are not a museum piece. Like all cultures their culture is dynamic' (2000: 286). The co-operative society Camagu forms with the women sea-harvesters in turn becomes the cornerstone of his vision for the village: to preserve its autonomy and sustain its resources for local use while simultaneously inserting it into the global economy (cf. 2000: 59).

In the final pages of the novel, the two narrative threads – set respectively in the time of the prophets and in the post-apartheid present – become entangled along the littoral. Two Qukezwas – one from the time of the prophets, the other her present-day descendent – try to entice their sons, both named Heitsi, to enter the sea. The first Qukezwa returns to her Khoikhoi heritage, becoming a 'strandloper' following the failure of the prophecies, while her son reveals 'some aversion to the sea' (2000: 317). The second also unsuccessfully seeks to introduce her son to the ocean: 'Oh, this Heitsi! He is afraid of the sea. How will he survive without the sea? How will he carry out the business of saving his people? Qukezwa grabs him by his hand and drafts him into the water. He is screaming and kicking wildly. … 'No, mama! No! This boy does not belong in the sea! This boy belongs in the man village!'' (2000: 319-20). Although taking readers to shipwreck sites that materialize the sea as archive, the novel, gendering heritage as female and the national future as male (cf. Samuelson 2007: 71) and having established a strong association between women and the sea, ultimately reinstates the binary of historical land versus unhistorical sea.

Further complicating the binary of seafaring settlers versus sons of the soil by recalling the historical ocean that effects the most devastating sea change – one in which a young girl is remade as commodity – is Yvette

Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006). The slave ship that transports Sila from the Cape functions as a 'factory', producing 'the commodity called "slave" to advance the "accumulation of capital"' (Rediker 2008: 44, 45). Sila recalls the voyage with an evocative turn of phrase: 'the world tilted and we were scooped up like so many coins from the edge of a table' (Christiansë 2006: 324). Yet if the sea is here the site of inconsolable loss, it is simultaneously figured as medium through which are ferried 'survivals of cultural practices' (Harries 2005: 92), such as ancestor veneration, that render the boundary between the living and the dead as permeable as that between land and sea.

Zoë Wicomb's ocean is equally ambiguous: *David's Story* (2000) critiques the refusal of nineteenth century Griqua leader Andrew Le Fleur to acknowledge the entanglement of his indigenous Khoikhoi origins with those of his European ancestors 'from across the waters' and the slaves transported on 'ships from Madagascar and Malaya' (2000: 52, 88). But Wicomb does not sentimentalise the sea or deny the claims of the land-born. Revealingly, the first glimpse of the sea offered in the novel is one in which Sarah Bartmann appears on 'the mirror smoothness of the ocean', her 'delicate face severed' from her 'vast buttocks' (2000: 38). Even as the sea in this text troubles the politics of autochthony that produce their own forms of terror and violence, its surface reflects histories of racial terror and gender violence: echoes here of Paul Gilroy's (1993) post-national/post-racial project that yet depends on the memory of the middle passage. *David's Story* and Wicomb's later novel *Playing in the Light* (2006) both figure the sea as an archive of stories suppressed and drowned out by official narratives and a textual space able to articulate unspeakable loss, while writing towards littoral states and amphibian subjects.

The symbolic grammar structuring representations of the Indian Ocean passage to South Africa is equally muddy. Retraced in a series of family narratives are the routes through which Indian South Africans are transplanted into national soil. A new subject – of South Asia but translated by the ocean crossing – is forged on the *kala pani* ('black water'); such sea-changes raise questions about where India and South Africa begin and end, while locating national imaginings in transoceanic travel. This is allegorically rendered in Praba Moodley's *The Heart Knows No Colour* (2003), which opens in mid-ocean with the character Ganga in labour. Exemplary also are the novels *The Lotus People* (2002) and *The Revenge of*

Kali (2009) by Aziz Hassim; *Song of the Atman* (2006) by Ronnie Govender; and *The Wedding* (2001) by Imraan Coovadia (cf. Samuelson 2010). Extending across the eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean, Darryl Accone's auto/biography, *All Under Heaven: The Story of a Chinese Family in South Africa* (2005), mediates the author's sense of 'living in perpetual bifurcation' (Accone 2005b) by drawing China and South Africa into a shared narrative frame. The act of writing, of tracing the voyage out in reverse, becomes a form of return by the prodigal grandson, an expiation for past ancestral loss and displacement, yet one which turns east not in order to depart from South African shores, but rather to insert into the national narrative the bifurcated realities of those for whom 'Home is here, at the tip of Africa, but also across the sea' (Accone 2005b).

****

Seeping across borders and acting as connective tissue, the sea transports national subjects to and from various imagined homelands and points of departure and disembarkation. The post-isolation worldliness that it conceptually opens up is inflected by the neoliberal global order whose emergence coincided with or was the condition for that of the post-apartheid state. These new configurations of local and global are, as Jean and John Comaroff observe, suggestively encoded in and negotiated through crime fiction, an increasingly popular genre that in trawling the 'dark underside' of the postcolonial, post-totalitarian state of economic liberalisation (Comaroffs 2005: 2) provides a compelling imaginative vector for thinking through the relation between nation-state and global order. It is figured also through another global genre filled with local content (cf. Moretti 2000): cyberpunk. Some of the crime fiction written in and around Cape Town, in particular, returns to the coastal littoral on which was staged the meeting of autochthon and stranger. Such texts recast the shoreline as a theatre for thrillers of transnational trafficking that speak in a post-cold war register, anxiously reflecting on permeable national borders, while Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* (2008) engages the state of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) in which post-apartheid South Africa seeks its bearings.

Crime thrillers such as Margie Orford's *Like Clockwork* (2006), Mike Nicol and Joanne Hichens's *Out to Score* (2006) and Andrew Brown's

Coldsleep Lullaby (2005) mark the sea and the rivers connecting it to the hinterland as sites of danger: strewn along the shore and river banks are clues through which to read the nation's relation to the transnational in an era of neoliberal global capital. Border anxieties are figured through the violated bodies of women and boys found in littoral sites (boathouses, dunes, rivers) as the novels articulate crime in the post-cold war register while the Cape Town seaboard, like the Mediterranean of which Iain Chambers writes, serves 'to underline the paranoia and amplify the moral panic that modern migration disseminates' (2008: 679).

At the same time, the littoral bespeaks the porosity between past and present as the city's origins as Company settlement are seen seeping into its present structures of corporate governance (cf. Samuelson forthcoming). *Moxyland* reveals this continuity by extending the Cape's foundational position as node in the Company network into the twenty-first century 'network society' that transforms the nation-state 'into an agent of global capital flows and of the global institutions that try to manage these flows' (Alexander 2001: 135). The unimpeded flows of 'liquid' capital across the city's ocean-like 'friction-free' surface (Steinberg 2001: 165) are signalled in the 'corporate line' that 'shushes through the tunnels on a skin of seawater, overflow from the tide drives put to practical use in the clanking watery bowels of Cape Town' (Beukes 2008: 1).

Out to Score dives into these bowels to tease out different threads of the South African story, starting with the exile from the sea of fishing communities under apartheid and inadequately redressed by the post-apartheid state, which it presents as fuelling abalone poaching in the postcolony. As the focalising PI Mullet is drawn deeper into a web of crime, he begins untangling two transnational syndicates flowing, respectively, along South-East and South-North axes and intersecting at the Cape. A Chinese Triad abalone poaching syndicate operates through the antagonist Jim Woo along the South-East axis, while the North-South axis channels clientele to Woo's elite 'urban hunting safari' for wealthy northern businessmen, who pay dearly for the opportunity to hunt street children (in a narrative shorthand that collapses the north-south flows into South Africa for (il)licit hunting safaris and the more submerged market in under-age sex tourism). This subplot renders visible the 'entanglements that tie postcolonial graft to the metropolitan scramble for tropical spoils' (Comaroffs 2005: 10)

and refuses a discourse of South African exceptionalism that, in this instance, functions not to isolate the country from its continental location, or its histories from those of other nodes in the Dutch East India Company network, but casts South Africa, and the postcolony more generally, as zones of lawlessness in contrast to an ordered, developed north. At the same time, the intersection of these two axes reveals the ways in which Cape Town's historic function as 'oceanic crossroads' continues to shape imaginings of both city and sea, while indexing the shift from a bi- to a multi-polar world order (cf. Zakaria 2011). '[R]oar[ing] and thrash[ing]' as they meet at the Cape, like the Atlantic and Indian Oceans (Wicomb 1987: 75), are various residual and emergent imaginaries**.**

<div align="center">**********</div>

Poised on the fulcrum of the Cape (cf. Mbembe *et al.* 2011), *Out to Score* reveals the staggering costs of the paradoxical interweaving of deregulated trade and quota systems that fail to recognize local claims on the sea: abalone breeding grounds face extinction while the crystal meth ('tik') that flows in along the South-East axis in return for this illicit harvest unravels the fabric of entire communities on the Cape Flats. Performed along the seashore, poaching produces ripple effects that infiltrate into communities exiled from the sea – an exile that this novel indicts for fuelling abalone poaching (cf. also Steinberg 2005). Endemic to South Africa shores, the abalone or perlemoen species *Haliotis midae* is under threat of extinction from transnational poaching rackets.

Southern Right whales, in contrast, migrate annually through the Pacific and Indian oceans, but their breeding patterns are site specific. Set in the breeding ground off Hermanus, Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005) offers an extended reflection on human-animal relationships forged on this littoral as his Whale Caller enters into an erotic relationship with a Southern Right whale, Sharisha, whom he summons and courts with his kelp horn. As in other fiction, the sea holds a memory of violence – in this instance man's violence against his animal others that wafts ashore in a 'two-hundred-year-old stench' (Mda 2005: 18). The oceans inhabited and traversed by Sharisha are moreover in a state of degradation: during her annual migration, she has to brave ships' propellers, fishing gear entanglements and explosives from

oil explorations, among other hazards. While recalling the meeting of Atlantic and Indian trade routes at the Cape, Mda focuses on deep ocean crossings to challenge human exploitation of the sea's resources and of its surface as a medium for travel.

Sharisha's tragic end is a direct result of the human presence in and on the seas and of the overdevelopment of the shoreline. The sea's 'black … rage' (279) against the town's tourist economy takes the form of a freak wave spewing 'flotsam' across the streets and destroying luxury sea-front accommodations. In this dark tide, Sharisha, 'mesmerized' by the Whale Caller's horn, cannot 'distinguish the blue depths from the green shallows' and crosses the line into the bay, beaching on the human-inhabited shore. Lacking an indigenous mythology of the sea through which to mediate the relationship between human and whale, the Whale Caller, in contrast to the Maoris in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, is unable to save her. While he insists that the Khoikhoi shared the Aborigines' love for Southern Rights, he claims they did not have their own stories to connect them to sea-life, or to negotiate the littoral zone and the human-animal crossings Julia Martin (2005) imaginatively locates along it. Such stories instead cross 'the vast Indian Ocean', and are imbibed by the Whale Caller during his wanderings along the coast: stories travel, but the novel suggests that only autochthonous ones have efficacy. While offering a keen ecological consciousness of the sea and its creatures, then, *The Whale Caller* unfolds in the register of the local and the located. Unlike Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, with its evocative reference to the dugong as an invitation to the human subject to enter into enlivening travel beyond the 'far south' (Wicomb 2006: 186), it does not appropriate the sea-creature as a figure for human movement but rather articulates, in a different register, the border-anxieties engaged in crime fiction.

Whereas Mda presents an ultimately devastating communion between man and whale and concludes with an instructive turn away from the ocean that recalls the ending of *The Heart of Redness*, Ann Landsman's *The Rowing Lesson* (2007) takes as leitmotif the 'transitive' (Clingman 2009: 47) medium of the river, establishing various connections between land and sea; human and animal; the local and the global; and the unborn, the living and the dead. The second structuring motif of the novel is the coelacanth, the ovoviviparous Indian Ocean fish that shares a common ancestral branch with

land vertebrates, rendering visible the continuum between terrestrial and marine life. Restored to its rightful position as cradle of life on the 'terraqueous globe' (Cohen 2010a), the sea in this transitive novel is simultaneously a site and source of social history, as evident in its representations of Tweede Nuwejaar celebrations and songs such as '*Daar kom die Alibama*'.

This social history is recalled also in *Thirteen Cents*, K. Sello Duiker's novelistic presentation of an abused and exploited child living on the streets of Cape Town. The sea is once more ambivalently cast as source of danger, contamination and predation and of protection, purification and strength. Late in the novel, Azure climbs Table Mountain, where he performs shamanistic trance dances and plays with fire, drawing on both autochthonous and transoceanic Cape histories prior or resistant to the colonial order – those of the Khoikhoi and escaped slaves. From the mountaintop, Azure, in an apocalyptic vision, watches the 'unsettling' spectacle of 'the sea coming alive' (Duiker 2000: 162). The deluge destroys the town that has accommodated his abuse, just as it accommodated and depended on the exploitation and destruction of indigenous Khoikhoi and imported slaves, and Table Mountain returns to its prior state as 'Hoerikwaggo' ('Sea-Mountain'). Land and sea are drawn together within the indigenous perspective, but for Azure in this post-apartheid present from which there is no return, the effects of this conjunction are terrifying and compound his sense of loss.

Gordimer's 'Loot' (2003) also evokes a deluge to render visible hidden histories. The story opens with an earthquake so powerful that it 'tipped a continental shelf' (Gordimer 2004: 3). Rather than flooding the land, the sea pulls back to expose '[t]he most secret level of our world' before the tsunami strikes, claiming the treasure seekers who rushed forward in an orgy of looting. In conclusion the story alludes to *The Tempest* and the 'sea-change' (2004: 4) of the imagination – pushing it beyond political allegory, and suggesting the limitations of attempts to know the past through non-protean registers. Readers are urged not to join the deadly search for self-identity, looting the sea or the ocean floor for confirming reflective surfaces and transparent allegorical meanings, but are instead enjoined to negotiate the alterity of the submarine world and of the literary imagination itself.

Another sea-change is referenced in the natural disaster that drives this story, as well as that of *The Whale Caller* – the kind that oceanographer and environmentalist Sylvia Earle documents in *Sea-Change* (1995) and *The World is Blue* (2009) in which the source of life on the planet, already punctuated with 'dead zones', is transforming into a plastic soup (cf. also Roberts 2007). Acknowledging and averting this condition requires in turn a sea-change in conceptions of the ocean. As Earle notes, 'Deeply rooted in human culture is the attitude that the ocean is so vast, so resilient, it shouldn't matter how much we take out of – or put into – it'. From Grotius's claim to the 'freedom of the seas' that underwrote the Dutch occupation of the Cape in the seventeenth century to the Romantic imagination of the boundless ocean extends what Earle (2009: n.p.) describes as 'the presumption that the ocean was an inexhaustible resource'; that it was, in Grotius's terms, 'limitless' (1916: 28)[2].

Patricia Schonstein's *The Master's Ruse* (2008) engages the consequent and increasingly urgent condition of the seas while reflecting on literary production against the backdrop of a repressive regime that has joined 'the global military federation', produced *Homo guerre* – a humankind who no longer hold in their bones the 'memory of fish and marine cartilage' (Schonstein 2008: 6) – and effected the 'death of the ocean … by overfishing and ... the endless, indiscriminate dumping of military and industrial waste' (2008: 4). The 'black ocean' (2008: 51) that fills the void left by the previously spiralling and enlivening gyres suggestively references the 'black Atlantic' and the *kala pani* ('black water') traversed by subjects in bondage in previous centuries while articulating the looming environmental crisis of the present[3]. Significantly, this destructive regime pits itself also

---

[2] Lawrence Buell (2001) notes at the start of this century 'how swiftly the dominant image of the sea shifted ... from inexhaustibleness to fragility'.

[3] On reading this movement in terms of global problematics, see Buell (2005): 'WEB Du Bois predicted that the great public issue of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. In the century just begun, that problem shows no sign of abating. But ultimately a still more pressing question may prove to be whether planetary life will remain viable for most of the earth's inhabitants without major changes in the way we live now'.

against literature – purging intellectuals, burning books and banning writers. Literariness, then, is associated with the 'vibrant and pulsing' sea that once 'spiraled and plunged colourfully around the globe in hot and cold currents, forming unpolluted gyres as they met, dancing, then moving on to caress the outer edges of the land' (2008: 5). Now, however, 'the ocean is … forlornly moving between the land masses, searching for lost meaning' (2008: 5)[4].

The environmental crisis articulated through the sign of the 'dark tide' evokes a different response in *The Master's Ruse* to that proposed by *The Whale Caller*: here regeneration is shown to lie not in a human retreat from the sea but rather in a protean literariness that, written from the 'marine cartilage' of embodied human memory, resurfaces a deep relationship between human and ocean. Schonstein's narrator starts 'working on plots to undermine the regime' (2008: 143). At first she is inspired by the belief in a messiah, who 'will be fetched from 'the other side' by a griot, a story teller … to bring freedom to the oppressed' and 'restore the oceans'. But she is cautioned that 'the very concept of messianic energy required betrayal' (2008: 60). When she tries again, 'a second energy intruded. It too was messianic… It had to do with water. It had to do with flood and fury'. This force, she reflects, '*use*[s] the oceans' to 'redeem the earth from human dominion'. As in the vision that concludes *Thirteen Cents*, it 'creates tsunamis, which slammed the shorelines, tossing dolosse aside and pouring through coastal cities and towns. They engulfed skyscrapers and highways, drowning their human prey in the very oils and solvents that had brought about oceanic demise' (2008: 123). Yet, confesses Schonstein's narrator, echoing Azure: 'I am afraid of the storm …. I am afraid of the sea bursting and drowning *all life*. I am afraid of the black waves' (2008: 125). When the ocean is *used* once more, even to cleanse the earth, it threatens rather than sustains life.

---

[4] Schonstein's lyrical descriptions of the ocean gyres match those of Rachel Carson's *The Sea around Us*. While initially stressing the 'vastness' and 'changeless eternity' of the sea, Carson's ode to the ocean was updated with a preface on reissue in 1961 to draw attention to the ways in which the sea has 'invited the attention of those who have the problem of disposal' rendering it a 'dumping ground' and site for military tests.

Emerging 'shaken from these apocalyptic torrents' (2008: 125), the authorial figure does not write the envisaged novel with its messianic and Judas figures, nor the haunting 'vision of the bursting oceans', but rather a love poem to the terraqueous globe. This, ultimately, is the role carved out for literature: to 'create the absolute of beauty with which to open the collective unconscious and instil peace therein … to extinguish ignorance and break the cycle of war … to end regimes and their concurrent genocides' (2008: 132). As she casts her imagination 'afloat upon a pristine ocean vital and alive with fish and water creatures', the narrator realises that 'the eulogy, the poem itself, the poem of love, was the messiah' (2008: 133). Salvation, the novel suggests, will not come from the sea; rather, it falls to art to salvage the sea – to protect its ecological diversity and cherish rather than puncture the veil of unknowability that mocks the pretensions of post-enlightenment rationality.

****

A mere 5% of the ocean depths are mapped, measured and known (cf. Earle 2009)[5]. Even while subject to the exploitative relations ferried to the Cape along with the cartographical imperative on the fleets that follow Bartholomew Diaz's caravels, the excess – the remaining 95% – cannot be conveyed in the scientific register and instead, as Schonstein presents it, find their voice in literary art. On this point, *The Master's Ruse* finds itself in agreement with *The Whale Caller* and other narratives such as *Garden of the Plagues*. The enlightenment project of domination over nature and other humans (cf. Adorno & Horkheimer, in Cohen 2010b: 55) that Brownlee presents arriving at the Cape in the late seventeenth century is in these texts confounded by the excess of the sea and its denizens even as it exposes its limits.

The whale, in particular, becomes a sign of the 'ocean's mysterious, radical, ambiguous otherness' (Buell 200: n.p.) as well as of its bounded and

---

[5] Earle's *The World is Blue*, similarly to Carson's earlier study, unwittingly reveals the extent to which scientific knowledge production on the ocean is complicit in and dependent on the military and extractionist processes that now clearly threaten its future.

exhaustible state. In *Garden of the Plagues*, the 'creeping horror' of the 'dark ocean' that the 'Men of Science' seek to stop up beaches on the shores of the Cape in the body of whale (Brownlee 2005: 182, 50). They 'dismember it ... count the tons of its flesh and number its bones' and proclaim that 'In the end we have the whole of it there in our barrels. We have the sum of this whale, and there is nothing at all that can be said to be missing' (2005: 66 - 67); yet, bemoans the narrator, having 'abstracted ourselves from the world of the nameless gargantuan and the holy terrors' we 'yearn to find a way back in. Something is there, something missing whose name we cannot say' (2005:100). Similarly, in Mda's conclusion, the 'rational explanation provided by scientists' regarding Sharisha's fate 'is demonstrably inadequate' (Huggan & Tiffin 2009: 199). Seeking other voices in and of the sea, these texts surface ways of knowing that turn back from the construction of the world as 'a curiosity, a thing separate from ourselves that can be subjected to experiment, named, described, and claimed as a possession'' (Brownlee 2005: 99).

Ultimately, the 'unnatural history of the sea' (Roberts 2007) shows up the limits of this world-view. The whale hunts Mda recalls 'lubricated the wheels of industry' (Roberts 2007: 87, 95), which in turn soon produced the 'Anthropocene Age' in which humans have become a force of nature, a geological force, no longer able to maintain the conceit of holding themselves apart from the natural world (cf. Chakrabarty 2009). The breaching of whales into these texts further collapses the binary between human and nature, or human and non-human animals, so fundamental to (post)enlightenment rationality. If whales today continue to seem 'uncannily other', notes Lawrence Buell, this uncanniness is 'increasingly seen to reside in the 'fact' that despite dramatic differences in scale and autonomy and habitat they are so much like us'(2001: n.p.), as *The Whale Caller* dramatises in its plot of repressed maternal memories and trans-species sexual enrapture.

If (post)enlightenment rationality conceives the sea 'as a *great void* outside society' or its 'wild antithesis', and accordingly casts it as an arena in which 'to test and affirm its own level of civilization, whether through annihilating the marine 'other' or through scientifically analyzing it', the deep sea, as Steinberg notes, offered forms of connectivity that saw it 'idealized as an empty transportation surface' (Steinberg 2001: 112, 113). Advancing new visions of the oceans and of the nation around whose shores

the Atlantic and Indian meet, this set of narratives, when read together, demand a bifocal lens that both gazes across this surface, appreciating the 'centrifugal' force of the sea (Cohen 2010b: 11) and the global currents that comprise the local, while apprehending the life – and death – beneath it.

References

Abrahams, Peter 1954. *Tell Freedom*. London: Faber & Faber.

Accone, Darryl 2005a. *All Under Heaven: The Story of a Chinese Family in South Africa.* Cape Town: David Philip.

Accone, Darryl 2005b. Living in Perpetual Bifurcation. *Seeing/ Being Seen* Project. Available at: http://www.see.org.za/xsite/za_dac1.htm.

Alexander, Neville 2001. The Politics of Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa. In Muller, Johan, Nico Cloete & Shireen Badat (eds): *Challenges of Globalisation: South African Debates with Manuel Castells*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.

Bauman, Zygmunt 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Beukes, Lauren 2008. *Moxyland*. Johannesburg: Jacana.

Braudel, Fernand 1972. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Volume 1. Reynolds, Sian (trans). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Brown, Andrew 2005. *Coldsleep Lullaby*. Cape Town: Zebra Books.

Brownlee, Russel 2005. *Garden of the Plagues*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.

Buell, Lawrence 2001. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the US and Beyond*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Buell, Lawrence 2005. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Carson, Rachel L [1950] 1961. *The Sea Aound Us*. New York: Open Road.

Clingman, Steven 2009. *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2009. The Climate of History: Four Theses. *Critical Inquiry* 35: 197 - 222.

Chambers, Iain 2008. *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Christiansë, Yvette 2006. *Unconfessed*. New York: Other Press.

Comaroff, Jean & John Comaroff 2005. Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction. In Comaroff, Jean & John Comaroff (ed): *Law & Disorder in the Postcolony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cohen, Margaret 2010a. Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe. *PMLA* 125,3: 657 - 662.

Cohen, Margaret 2010b. *The Novel and the Sea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Coovadia, Imraan 2001. *The Wedding*. London: Picador.

Duiker, K Sello 2000. *Thirteen Cents*. Cape Town: David Phillips.

Earle, Sylvia A 1995. *Sea Change: A Message from the Oceans*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Earle, Sylvia A 2009. *The World is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean's are One*. Washington: National Geographic.

Gilroy, Paul 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.

Gordimer, Nadine [2003] 2004. Loot. In *Loot and Other Stories*. London: Bloomsburg.

Gordon, Lady Duff 1921. *Letters from the Cape*. eBook transcribed by David Price.

Govender, Ronnie 2006. *Song of the Atman*. Johannesburg: Jacana.

Grotius, Hugo [1633] 1916. *The Freedom of the Seas; or, The Right which Belongs to the Dutch to Take Part in the East Indian Trade*. Van Deman Magoffin, Ralph (trans); Scott, James Brown (editor). New York: Oxford University Press.

Harries, Patrick 2005. Making Mozbiekers: History, Memory and the African Diaspora at the Cape. In Zimba, Beningna *et al.* (ed): *Slave Routes and Oral Tradition in Southeastern Africa*. Maputo: Filsom.

Hassim, Aziz [2002] 2003. *The Lotus People*. Johannesburg: STE.

Hassim, Aziz 2009. *Revenge of Kali*. Johannesburg: STE.

Hofmeyr, Isabel 2010. Universalizing the Indian Ocean. *PMLA* 125.3: 721-29.

Huggan, Graham & Helen Tiffin 2009. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London: Routledge.

Kaplan, Robert D 2010. *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House.

Landsman, Anne 2007. *The Rowing Lesson*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Mack, John 2011. *The Sea: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books.

Martin, Julia 2005. On the Sea Shore. *Scrutiny2* 10,1: 70 - 77.

Mbembe, Achille, Sarah Nuttall, Grace Musila & Meg Samuelson 2011. Scandal of Beauty: The Cape Must Embrace its Rich Mix. *Cape Times* 7 June: 9.

Mda, Zakes 2000. *The Heart of Redness*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Mda, Zakes [2005] 2006. *The Whale Caller*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books.

Moodley, Praba 2003. *The Heart Knows No Colour*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Moretti, Franco 2000. Conjectures on World Literature. *New Left Review* 1: 54 - 68.

Nicol, Mike & Joanne Hitchens 2006. *Out to Score*. Cape Town: Umuzi.

Orford, Margie 2006. *Like Clockwork*. Cape Town: Oshun Books.

Pearson, Michael 2006. Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problem. *Journal of World History* 17.4: 353 - 73.

Rediker, Marcus 2008. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. London: John Murray.

Roberts, Callum 2007. *The Unnatural History of the Sea*. London: Gaia.

Rose-Innes, Henrietta 2011. *Nineveh*. Cape Town: Umuzi.

Samuelson, Meg 2007. *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition*. Pietermartizburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Samuelson, Meg 2010. (Un)Settled States: Indian Ocean Passages, Performative Belonging and Restless Mobility in Post-Apartheid Fiction. *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 36,2: 272 - 287.

Samuelson, Meg (forthcoming). (Un)Lawful Subjects of Company: Reading Cape Town from Tavern of the Seas to Corporate City. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*.

Schmitt, Karl [1954] 1997. *Land and Sea*. Draghici, Simona (trans). Washington: Pluto Press.

Schonstein, Patricia 2008. *The Master's Ruse*. Cape Town: African Sun Press.

Shakespeare, William 1979. *The Tempest*. London: Methuen.

Shukri, Istiyaq 2005. *The Silent Minaret*. Johannesburg: Jacana.

Sleigh, Dan 2004. *Islands*. Brink, André (trans). London: Secker & Warburg.

Steinberg, Jonny 2005. The Illicit Abalone Trade in South Africa. Institute for Security Studies. ISI Paper 105. Available at: http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/papers/105/Paper105.htm.

Steinberg, Philip E 2001. *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walcott, Derek 1986. The Sea is History. *Collected Poems, 1948–84.* New York: Farrar.

Ward, Kerry 2003. 'Tavern of the Seas?' The Cape of Good Hope as Oceanic Crossroads during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. 'Seascapes, Littoral Cultures, and Trans-Oceanic Exchanges' conference, Washington, 12-15 August. Available at: http://www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/seascapes/ward.html.

Ward, Kerry 2009. *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East Indian Company*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wicomb, Zoë 1987. *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*. London: Women's Press.

Wicomb, Zoë 2000. *David's Story*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Wicomb, Zoë 2006. *Playing in the Light*. Cape Town: Umuzi.

Worden, Nigel 2003. Cape Town and Port Louise in the Eighteenth Century. In Campbell, Gwynn (ed): *The Indian Ocean Rim: Southern Africa and Regional Cooperation*. London: Routledge.

Zakaria, Fareed 2001. *The Post-American World, and the Rise of the Rest. Second Edition.* London: Penguin Books.

Meg Samuelson
English Department
University of Cape Town
meg.samuelson@uct.ac.za