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INTRODUCTION BORDERS, ECOTONES, AND THE INDIAN OCEAN¹

Markus ARNOLD, Corinne DUBOIN and Judith MISRAHI-BARAK

Borders, whether physical, geopolitical, social, or cultural, are ontologically ambivalent. Both ‘barriers and bridges’,² they are conceived of as dividing lines between two distinct elements, the inside and the outside, belonging and unbelonging, normative and subversive practices, ‘we’ and ‘they’—the Other, the foreigner. They are inner and outer margins that determine categories and differences; they delineate the contours of individual and collective identities—whether territorial, national, ethnic, ‘racial’, religious, linguistic, gendered, etc. As social constructs, borders can be erected and controlled, imposed or negotiated, contested and transgressed or bypassed, remapped or abolished; they reflect fluctuating, at times conflictual power relations and shifts in self-representations, or reconfigurations of the place and more largely the world we live in. Borders are initially imagined and drawn as clear-cut, fixed lines that reorder the world and construct it through exclusion more than inclusion.³ They may appear as the hard edges of nation states, keeping people in or out.

However, boundaries complexify, if not destabilise, the very space they shape and segment, as exemplified by the arbitrary division of colonial Africa and the Partition of India, the Iron Curtain and

1. Our thanks go to Thomas Lacroix for his active reading of this volume and for the constructive suggestions he made for this Introduction.

2. WILSON, Thomas M. and Hastings DONNAN, eds. *A Companion to Border Studies*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012; 3.

3. LE BLANC, Guillaume. *Dedans, dehors. La condition d'étranger*. Paris: Le Seuil, 2010.

the Berlin Wall, or the sealed border between North and South Korea. Some remain unstable for decades and continue to exist as loose demarcation lines and objects of constant disputes between two nation states.⁴ Some check points transforming emigrants into immigrants are more transient than permanent. Borders can be more blurred, fuzzy and subjective than one may think.

Besides, following the path of rivers or mountaintops, traversing deserts or crossing seas, borders are more often than not ecological ecotones as well as sites of experimentation and cultural innovations. They are thresholds that can be crossed, liminal spaces that allow interactions, passage and flow of people, migrants, refugees, goods and capitals, knowledge and ideas, cultures and identities. Borders are borderlands, thick contact zones into which people, whose journey has been interrupted by legal and physical fences, find refuge in border towns or gather in shabby camps waiting for an opening. Others settle there for generations and live on cultural, economic and social discontinuities. From the chars of Bengal to the disputed post-Partition borders of Pakistan or Bangladesh, from the trading city of Abu Dhabi to the forest encampments in Mayotte, those borderlands have a rich history of both relegation, mingling and conflict. They are also sites of encounters, agony and regeneration.

From post-Partition borders to the US-Mexican border, writers, poets and artists have explored the multifarious dimensions of borders, revisiting their myriad political and emotional aspects and inviting people to refashion a new world, one that would straddle borders. As early as 1987, Chicana scholar and poet Gloria Anzaldúa was already putting 'borderlands' at the heart of her creativity and engendering a 'border culture' whose impact is as influential in 2020 as it was thirty years ago.⁵

The current globalisation period seems to have erased many borders in a 'liquid', hyperconnected, transnational, transcultural world. In the wake of the decolonisation era, the vertical centre-periphery model has given way to new conceptions of North-South and South-South relations. Cultural and Postcolonial Studies have contributed

4. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) has been at the heart of the Sino-Indian border dispute between India and China since 1962. Clashes erupt regularly, violence flares up, threatening to escalate. The most recent incident led to the death of Indian soldiers in June 2020.

5. ANZALDÚA, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987; 25.

to rethinking cultural borders, to highlighting the complexities of multiple, at times intersecting, 'modernities' besides the West, and to reconsidering 'roots' vs. 'routes', thus indicating the significant role of mobility in the process of identification and the construction of Otherness. Furthermore, the production of multi-ethnic diasporic literatures together with postcolonial 'world literature' have offered alternative perspectives, innovative 'contrapuntal' narratives that reimagine a rhizomatic, creolised cultural environment that expands beyond national borders. In today's multicultural world, postcolonial literature brings to light the undetermined identities of communities and individuals who live in transition: 'These days we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid. Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions', claims Black British novelist Caryl Phillips.⁶ Transnational writers, who cross geographic, cultural, and aesthetic borders, have become cosmopolitan figures.

Besides, with climate change in the Anthropocene era, mass migrations including climate refugees, food safety, emerging infectious diseases, pollution and environmental disasters due to human activity such as deforestation and the 2019 Amazon rainforest fires linked to soy agriculture in Brazil are not considered mere domestic affairs, but global concerns and challenges. Yet, recent events throughout the globalised world—the migrant crisis in Europe; President Trump's border wall project; Brexit and the Irish border question; new human-trafficking routes in the Indian Ocean and the deportation from Reunion Island of Sri Lankan illegal immigrants in early 2019; the growing protectionism, the resurfacing exclusionary populism, and identity discourses of some political leaders in both old and new democracies; or the rise of religious radicalism and nationalism—all show that in spite of, or even because of, increasing global circulations that transcend and obliterate binary boundaries, new national, social, economic, and cultural borders have appeared in contemporary fractured societies.

In his *Theory of the Border*, Thomas Nail argues that 'the border cannot be properly understood in terms of inclusion and exclusion, but only by circulation. (. . .) borders have always leaked. (. . .) In fact, one of the main effects of borders is precisely their capacity to produce hybrid transition zones'.⁷ These borderlands are intrinsically fluid,

6. PHILLIPS, Caryl. *A New World Order*. London: Vintage, 2002; 6.

7. NAIL, Thomas. *Theory of the Border*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; 7–8.

heterogeneous, transformational zones that give rise to new forms of identities. Anzaldúa used the borderland as a metaphor to portray her own difficult experience as a bilingual Mexican-American *mestiza* facing discrimination and having to cross many borders so as to come to terms with her marginal identity, between two divergent yet intermingling cultures. She opposed the border to the borderland, which she defined as 'a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants' (25). To her, borderlands 'are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other (. . .)' (19). Then, cultural borderlands can also be understood as intricate 'ecotonal' spaces in a metaphorical way.

The ecotone concept has been used by ecologists to describe transitional zones between two ecosystems such as the forest-savannah transition, or the marsh-mangrove between land and sea. The term, derived from the Greek words '*oikos*' (household) and '*tonos*' (tension), was introduced by botanist Frederic E. Clements to define 'the tension line between two zones' or habitats.⁸ Clements noted that 'the stress line' (277) or 'the ecotone between two formations is never a sharp line, but it is an area of varying width' (281). The more recent and most frequently cited definition is that of Eugene Odum who further clarified the concept:

An ecotone is a transition between two or more diverse communities (. . .). It is a junction zone or tension belt which may have considerable linear extent but is narrower than the adjoining community areas themselves. The ecotonal community commonly contains many of the organisms of each of the overlapping communities and, in addition, organisms which are characteristic of and often restricted to the ecotone. Often, both the number of species and the population density of some of the species are greater in the ecotone than in the communities flanking it. The tendency for increased variety and density at community junctions is known as the *edge effect*.⁹

In 1988 an international group of researchers, who stressed the impact of global climate change on ecosystems and ecotonal biodiversity, suggested a revised definition of the ecotone as a 'Zone of transition between adjacent ecological systems, having a set of characteristics

8. CLEMENTS, Frederic E. *Research Methods in Ecology*. Lincoln, NE: The University Publishing Company, 1905; 316.

9. ODUM, Eugene P. *Fundamentals of Ecology*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1971; 157.

uniquely defined by space and time scales and by the strength of the interactions between adjacent ecological systems'.¹⁰

As 'landscape boundaries' or 'edges' in their many different forms, ecotones are thus not strict borderlines that separate two distinct ecosystems, but are fluid, impermanent, liminal spaces that connect, induce change and generate diversity through mixing, merging, overlapping, and shifting processes, cross-fertilisation, exchanges, interferences, competition, disturbance, and resilience. Based on these characteristics, the ecotone concept can be broadened to other fields of study in Social Sciences and Humanities and be fruitfully applied to the analysis of social and intercultural dynamics, as Florence Krall suggested:

Cultural ecotones are the pluralistic contexts out of which conflict and change emerge; they are the places where society smooths the wrinkles in her skirt. (. . .) The ecotone, which, in the natural world provides a dynamic interchange, becomes exceedingly complex as a cultural metaphor and may represent a barrier that blocks some people from their rightful place in the scheme of things.¹¹

A 'cultural ecotone' can thus be understood as an interstice or interval, an alternative 'Third Space'¹² that generates oppositions, clashes and other frictions, but also promotes cultural mixing, renewal and diversity, the emergence of new 'composite' entities/identities,¹³ hybrid alterities. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha insists on 'the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. (. . .) We should remember that it is the "inter"—the cutting edge of translation and

10. DI CASTRI, Francesco, Andrew J. HANSEN and Marjorie M. HOLLAND. *A New Look at Ecotones. Emerging International Projects on Landscape Boundaries, Biology International*. Special Issue 17 (1988): 4. For a chronological overview of the definitions of ecotone, see: HUFKENS, Koen, Paul SCHEUNDERS and Reinhart CEULEMANS. 'Ecotones in vegetation ecology: methodologies and definitions revisited'. *Ecological Research* 24.5 (Sept. 2009): 977–986. DOI 10.1007/s11284-009-0584-7. Accessed Aug. 5, 2019.

11. KRALL, Florence R. *Ecotone: Wayfaring on the Margins*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994; 4–5.

12. For Homi Bhabha, 'the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to [him] is the "third space" which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority (. . .)'. See Jonathan RUTHERFORD. 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', in Jonathan RUTHERFORD, ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990; 211.

13. GLISSANT, Édouard, *Poétique de la relation (Poétique III)*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture’.¹⁴ To focus on cultural ecotones thus implies looking into the process of transculturation related to migration, the processes of diasporisation and creolisation, borrowing, syncretism, and cross-pollination; it also implies examining cultural divides and identity cleavages, vulnerabilities, modes of opposition and resistance, as well as avoidance strategies.

Besides, ecological and cultural ecotones may intersect: ecotones such as seashores and deltas can be privileged transitional life zones where human communities interact. Centring on seaports, Terrel Gallaway has shown that,

(. . .) while ports of trade are shaped by culture and institutions, they cannot be understood outside their ecological context. While they are disparately shaped by social and ecological factors, their *raison d’être* is ecotonal on several levels—taking simultaneous advantage of multiple cultural, ecological, and economic systems.¹⁵

Likewise, historian John Gillis who views seacoasts and shores as ecotones that ‘have long been a symbolic resource and stimulus to cultural development’,¹⁶ contends that islands in the Indian Ocean should also be thought of ‘as ecotones’, natural and cultural points of intersection and meeting within a larger oceanic system or network, instead of remote, isolated, and bounded territories. For Gillis, ‘island environmental history must be a history without borders, a history in depth and breadth, where earth, wind and water are in constant motion and interaction, and humankind plays a key role. Such a history will be more liquid, but still grounded in the actual experiences of islands and islanders’.¹⁷ In this perspective, Edward Soja’s notion of transformative, othering ‘Thirdspace’,¹⁸ that resonates with Bhabha’s

14. BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994; 38.

15. GALLAWAY, Terrel. ‘Life on the Edge: A Look at Ports of Trade and Other Ecotones’. *Journal of Economic Issues* 39.3 (Sept., 2005): 722.

16. GILLIS, John R. *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012; 29.

17. GILLIS, John R. ‘Not Continents in Miniature: Islands as Ecotones’. *Island Studies Journal* 9.1 (2014): 157.

18. ‘Thirling’ introduces ‘a critical “other-than” choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness’. As defined by Soja, ‘Thirdspace (. . .) is both a space that is distinguishable from other spaces (physical and mental, or First and Second) and a transcending, composite of all spaces (Thirdspace as Aleph)’. SOJA, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; 61, 62.

own concept, can also be a useful tool for reconsidering the ambiguous, multidimensional ecotone as a 'fully lived space, a simultaneously real and imagined, actual and virtual, locus of structured, individual and collective experience and agency'.¹⁹

In the midst of these interplays between the natural environment ('spatiality'), its conceptualisation ('sociality'), and the history of the ecotone as a lived experience ('historicity'), the notion of vulnerability (individual and collective exposure, as well as social and political vulnerability), in opposition to agency within the ecotone, must also be foregrounded. This fragility can be perceived as a source of potential risks; it can also lead to greater resilience, which requires awareness of this very fragility. The urgency of protecting endangered ecosystems must not make us forget that populations, that are also at risk, are closely linked to these ecosystems. As Rob Nixon argues, the inattention to slow ecological disasters and their impacts on the *longue durée* is detrimental to the 'environmentally dispossessed', 'poor' populations in the Global South who are the main victims of what he calls 'slow violence', an invisible violence 'of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, (. . .) that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous'.²⁰

Our objective is to further study the multifaceted notions of 'border' and 'ecotone' from cultural and literary points of view, with a particular focus on the Indian Ocean as a space of mobility and a 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1991). This volume literally emerges from two different locations in the Indian Ocean since some of the chapters were originally presented at a conference held on Reunion Island (France), while others were presented in Kolkata (India).²¹ Both conferences were organised within the wider series of academic events 'Ecotones:

19. Soja, Edward. *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 11.

20. Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011; 3–5.

21. The conference 'Indian Ocean: Ecotones, Contact Zones, and Third Spaces' was organized at Université de La Réunion in June 2018, in partnership with Observatoire des Sociétés de l'Océan Indien (OSOI), the research centres Déplacements, Identités, Regards, Écritures (DIRE), Laboratoire de recherche sur les espaces créoles et francophones (LCF), and Centre de Recherches et d'Études en Géographie de l'Université de La Réunion (CREGUR). A reading was organised with Shenaz Patel and Barlen Pyamootoo at the Bibliothèque départementale de La Réunion, in Saint-Denis. The conference 'Partitions and Borders' was hosted by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta (CSSSC) in December 2018, in partnership with Concordia University, Montreal.

Encounters, Crossings, Communities' (2015–20), a series convened and coordinated by Thomas Lacroix (MIGRINTER, Université de Poitiers), Judith Misrahi-Barak (EMMA, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3) and Maggi Morehouse (Coastal Carolina University, SC).

With the recent developments in Oceanic Studies, the Indian Ocean has been examined as a regional sociocultural entity in a changing global context. Historians (Alpers, Bose, Pearson, Vink) have shown that, from precolonial times to the twenty-first century, the Indian Ocean has long been a space of renewed circulations, overlapping routes, cultural interactions and exchanges between diverse peoples living on the ocean rim and deltas, on islands and archipelagos, travelling or migrating—either voluntarily or forcibly—within and beyond the fluctuating limits of this vast body of water. Yet, as aptly pointed out by Presholdt, 'rather than flows alone, it is the shifting apertures, closures, and frictions that define the contours of the Indian Ocean'.²² In that sense, the exploration of indo-oceanic sociocultural edges, borders and ecotones as critical, fertile yet fragile transitional environments across time and space, together with the examination of the shifting processes of border-making and border-crossing contribute to forging new cartographies that shed light on the specific complexities of the Indian Ocean as both lived history and space.

Besides, in the same way as Paul Gilroy takes the Atlantic as 'one single, complex unit of analysis (. . .) to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective',²³ and in opposition to Sugata Bose's vision of the Indian Ocean as an 'interregional arena',²⁴ Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal consider that,

(. . .) the Indian Ocean region possesses an internal commonality which enables us to view it as an area in itself: commonalities of history, geography, merchant capital and trade, ethnicity, culture,

22. PRESHOLDT, Jeremy. 'Locating the Indian Ocean: Notes on the Postcolonial Reconstruction of Space'. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9.3 (2015): 442.

23. GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993; 15. Isabel Hofmeyr has shown the potentials and limitations of the Black Atlantic as a conceptual framework and model for analysing the Indian Ocean world as a unit, given the sociohistorical similarities and differences. See: HOFMEYR, Isabel. 'The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South—Literary and Cultural Perspectives'. *Social Dynamics* 33.2 (2007): 3–32.

24. BOSE, Sugata. *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006; 15.

and religion. (. . .) We prefer to treat the Indian Ocean region as one, among many, liminal spaces of hybrid evolution, an area whose boundaries are both moveable and porous (. . .).²⁵

In *Amarres* (moorings), Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou take a similar stance and argue that 'The Indian Ocean is a *space without any precise supranationality or territorialisation*. It is a cultural space overarched by several chronotopes, where temporalities and territories are constructed and deconstructed. An ocean linking continents and islands'.²⁶

The Indian Ocean world is one and plural. The exploration of its borders and ecotones, perceived not as mere lines of demarcation and fracture, but also as in-between spaces where interpenetrations and tensions are both at work, highlights the porosity and instability of the geographical, political, and sociocultural boundaries of the region in a changing world.

In this context, how do the writers of the Indian Ocean world and its diasporas rethink the ocean and revisit its precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history? How do they (re)invent an archipelagic space in which the littoral and islands are ecotonal sites that are at the same time matrices, points of rupture, fusion and passage, and the vectors of identity? We need to interrogate the ways they produce a hybrid aesthetic that appropriates and reworks dominant literary models and languages through the art of *métissage* and the process of creolisation.

In her analysis of the literary production in and on the Indian Ocean rim, Meg Samuelson argues that the coast 'exceeds an idiom of in-betweenness and liminality, the littoral is an ecotone in which the elements of earth and water ceaselessly overlap and draw apart. It does not simply mediate terrestrial and maritime studies, but encourages us to think quite differently about continents and oceans

25. MOORTHY, Shanti and Ashraf JAMAL, eds. 'Introduction: New Conjunctures in Maritime Imaginaries'. *Indian Ocean Studies—Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2010; 4.

26. 'L'océan Indien est un espace *sans supranationalité ni territorialisation précise*. Il est un espace culturel, à plusieurs espaces-temps qui se chevauchent, où les temporalités et les territoires se construisent et se déconstruisent. Océan qui lie les continents et les îles'. VERGÈS Françoise and MARIMOUTOU Carpanin. *Amarres. Créolisations india-océanes*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005; 26. Trans. by Muecke Stephen and Vergès Françoise. 'Moorings: Indian Ocean Creolisations'. *Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9.1 (Jan. 2012): 14. <https://doi.org/10.5130/porta.v9i1.2568>. Accessed Sept. 8, 2019.

and how they inter-articulate'.²⁷ She thus proposes to engage in the study of the poetics of coastal and maritime spaces as ecotones and exposes the conflation of the texts' specific littorality and literariness—the 'Amphibian' aesthetic of 'littoral literature' in world literature (16). In *Routes and Roots*, a 'comparative study of Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures in English', Elizabeth DeLoughrey borrows Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite's notion of fluid tidalectics and 'takes geography as a starting point to argue that the land/sea relationship has been conducive to complex patterns of migration and settlement, creating literatures of diaspora and indigeneity that complicate the colonial vision of isolated tropical isles'.²⁸

New approaches are indeed needed to re-examine the works of authors writing from the ecotone and across borders, to delve into current issues, and to understand how the Indian Ocean region can offer insights into the evolution of the world in which we live at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with its processes of 'deterritorialisation' (Appadurai, 1996) and 'minor transnationalism' that invite comparisons, with a focus on 'lateral and nonhierarchical network structures' instead of 'binary and vertical relationships',²⁹ in the same way as Bose explores historical 'latitudinal connections' instead of the 'longitudinal axis that linked metropolitan Britain and colonial India' (23).

Written in English and French, the fourteen essays in this volume are organised around three main sections, followed by an interview with author Shenaz Patel from Mauritius. The first part, 'Between Land and Water', focusses on the notions of movement, flow and displacement, which are central parameters in the maritime and terrestrial geographies of the Indian Ocean region. Meg Samuelson opens with a rhythmic, alphabet-like reflection on the coast mimicking in its methodology the features of the littoral environment and the shore: fluctuance, non-linearity, transition, erosion, dis/reappearance, re/assemblage. . . With its both systematic and seemingly arbitrary structure of words starting with the letter 'C' and constituting

27. SAMUELSON, Meg. 'Coastal Form: Amphibian Positions, Wider Worlds, and Planetary Horizons on the African Indian Ocean Littoral'. *Comparative Literature* 61.9 (2017): 17.

28. DELOUGHREY, Elizabeth. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007; 4.

29. LIONNET, Françoise and Shu-mei SHIH. *Minor Transnationalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005; 2.

key features of what the author calls 'coastal thought', her essay not only offers an insight into the rich and multi-layered fabric of the Indian Ocean historical, cultural and literary archive. In its compositional and heterogeneous character, Samuelson's text also constitutes an experimental prelude to the multifaceted, diverse and yet often interrelated contributions of the volume.

In the second essay, Ritu Tyagi examines the prize-winning novel *Made in Mauritius* (2012) by Francophone Mauritian writer Amal Sewtohul through theories of both spatiality (space, place) and performativity. In her analysis of the central motif of the container in the novel, which she reads as a 'site of polymorphous, transversal networks' and a 'creative terrain on which minority subjects act and interact in fruitful and lateral ways', Tyagi demonstrates how the novel proves an intricate proposition about the plural and evolving nature of (post)diasporic belonging and globalised identities.

While this ultimately becomes a reflection on historic and contemporary Indian Ocean cultural dynamics at large, the following chapter by Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo offers a productive different perspective, which opposes any idealist reading of maritime space. Against the backdrop of the relational and 'tidalectic' poetics of Caribbean thinkers, the author reads the works of several novelists from Mauritius, Madagascar and the Comoros Archipelago where complex convergencies around the tropes of migration and death, as well as the submarine imaginary can be found. She discusses how these texts, which are focussed on 'disposable people', attempt to 'transform the abject into aesthetic forms', but also argues that they create significant 'new unities' through their 'amphibian poetics' or 'hydropoetics'. Not only are these literary fictions then a reflection on the state of today's world and on the representation of islands and the sea, but they also raise ethical questions for literary creation and analysis. Therefore, as Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo puts it, ecotones can be read here as 'spaces of encounter made of conflicts, instability and tensions, producing fragile relations of ideas and of local and global temporalities rather than grand narratives'.

The circulation of ideas and the connection of topographies in the Indian Ocean are also at the heart of Elisa Huet's essay which explores contemporary texts from India, Madagascar, Mauritius and Reunion. Informed by a 'geocritical' approach (Westphal, 2007), the author considers the cultural density of the Indian Ocean and questions the oceanic imaginary and the historic, often diasporic relations between

territories. While Huet's focus on lived island place and on (real or imagined) origins allows for fruitful echoes with the contributions from Tyagi and Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, she ultimately proposes the idea of an 'Indian Ocean cartology', a 'multifocal' reading paradigm for the literatures of the region.

The partly Indian perspective of Huet's comparative analysis offers a transition to the last chapter of the section, where Pallavi Chakravarty deals with the sensitive historical issue of the 1947 partition of the Indian sub-continent on its western and eastern borders. Since this geopolitical transformation in the wake of Indian Independence led to different patterns of migration and refugee identities/identifications, the author shows the conflicting significations of the term 'refugee' in this specific historical context, where material and symbolic dimensions collide, and where marginal groups try to contest and resist official government narrative and doctrine. Using the ecotone as a metaphor, Chakravarty eventually claims the term 'Partition refugee' to differentiate the Indian experience from its European counterpart and to possibly distinguish it from more contemporary forms of exile into the subcontinent.

The second part, 'Individuals and Communities', is about the relation between people in the ecotone and the encounter between the human and the nonhuman. It opens with an essay by Annu Jalais who discusses how different communities negotiate shared space when ideas about the animal and the human differ. Focussing on Bangladesh and (Indian) West Bengal, the author shows how the politicised Hindi middle class advocates a particular understanding of 'nature' for socio-political control purposes, which contrasts with the more 'ecotonal' environmental modes experienced by the subaltern Bengali majority. Jalais' examination of the antagonistic and contradictory forces at play in the 'socio-cultural' or 'socio-environmental ecotone' of the Bengal region is not only area specific. It invites for a more comprehensive approach of connecting debates around environmentalism in the context of South Asia to issues of caste and religious marginality.

The following chapter by Debdatta Chowdhury echoes the larger identity frictions around land and resources in the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin, yet giving specific insight into communities who seem particularly vulnerable, since they inhabit deltaic sandbars (so-called 'chars') whose territorial identity between land and water is by definition unstable, transitory and ambiguous. The author discusses the

‘fluid’ existence of these char-settlers who live in constant tension—between the certainty of a home and the uncertainty of displacement—which becomes all the more complex and conflicting when the chars are located on riverine borders between national territories. She also shows how these marginal communities voice their political concern *via* symbolic and cultural production. While Chowdhury’s text contributes to an understanding of the oppositional and shifting dynamics at play around land claims and belonging in a distinctive ecotonal space, her consideration of recent migratory crises also allows connections with the following essay by Nicolas Roinsard.

The sociologist explores indeed another sensitive border issue in the South-West Indian Ocean: the case of Mayotte, located in the Comoros archipelago, which became in 2011 a French overseas department. The author discusses the relation of this new political and economic ‘double boundary with the much more porous geographical borders between Mayotte and the three other Comorian “sister-islands”’. And, by examining the alliances between the French citizens and Comorian foreigners, who are often considered ‘illegal immigrants’, he shows that national otherness is a central, yet ambivalent factor within the island’s intricate societal context. While Mayotte arguably constitutes a unique socio-political and ethnocultural territory in the Indian Ocean region, Roinsard’s idea of ‘borders of variable geometry’ encourages a more inclusive interpretive framework, reading political and economic factors in conjunction with historical, social and cultural ones.

In the last two chapters of the second part, the discussion goes back to the literary perspective with emphasis on contemporary Anglophone texts from India. In the first essay, Marianne Hillion reads several fictional and nonfictional works by writers such as Amit Chaudhuri, Saikat Majumdar and Indrajit Hazra, who reflect in their texts on Calcutta as a hybrid metropolis where the urban and the modern meet the rural and the traditional. The author focusses on the real and imagined locality of the ‘para’ (the Bengali term for ‘neighbourhood’) which, as ‘a threshold between public and private space, village and city practices’, can be considered as a geographically and semantically fluctuating ecotonal space. Hillion’s chapter not only sheds an informative gaze on a metropolis whose polycentric identity contrasts with the North-South divide imposed by colonial city planning. She also shows how literary texts contribute to redefining

the imaginative contours of postcolonial urban spaces by challenging conventional and official notions of cultural identity.

Finally, Laurence Gouaux-Rabasa offers an analysis of Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1982). She sees the writer's mixed cultural and territorial identity (between India and Germany) reflected in the novel and offers a close reading of the protagonist's quest for a non-normative hybrid sense of belonging. Structured around the notions of 'liminality' (Bhabha, 1994) and syncretism, Gouaux-Rabasa's essay investigates into the numerous resonances between Christian and Hindu symbols in Desai's 'echo-text' and argues that the novel's multi-layered signification progressively unfolds, leading to the creation of what she calls 'discursive ecotones'.

The third part, 'Here, There and Across', finally comprises four literary and historical contributions about several ecotonal environments from a micro and a macro perspective, putting the productive and conflicting relationship between geographies at the heart of their interpretative endeavour. J.U. Jacobs opens the section with his essay on the historical novel *Islands* (2004) by South African archivist Dan Sleight, which deals with the Dutch East India Company's colonial settlement of the Cape of Good Hope and its outposts, such as Mauritius, Ceylon and Batavia. The author discusses the novel's zones of narrative and generic permeability (between historiography and fiction, and fiction and metafiction) and analyses three historical figures in the text whose interlinked stories show the ethnocultural plurality that has emerged in the Cape colony. Informed by cultural theory about ethnicity and hybridity, Jacobs reveals first and foremost a 'complex poetics of crossing in the Cape ecotone'. However, by looking at the Cape's diasporic relations to other island ecotones, his contribution gives further insight into the Dutch colonising presence in the Indian Ocean during the second half of the seventeenth century; and, more widely, into an intricate space of 'unequal engagement between different but comparably heterogeneous Northern and Southern peoples'.

The following text by Pierre-Éric Fageol and Frédéric Garan engages with emigrants from Reunion to Madagascar during the colonial period (1880–1960). The two historians argue that the migration of this Creole population of French descent led to various social groupings with a manifest consciousness of their specific identity arising in their new cultural and political environment. They show that this particular group—whose complexity can be seen in the ambiguity

of the term 'creole', and who experienced both rejection and integration—did not correspond to the conventional colonial pattern. Fageol and Garan's essay thus aptly demonstrates how a hybrid diasporic population—torn between ambitions to take root, engaging in racial mixing, but yet associated with the coloniser—proved a subtle, but remarkable contribution to turning the colonies into contact zones of newly emerging identities.

Finally, the section closes with two comparatist approaches, extending perspectives from the Indian Ocean towards Polynesia and the Caribbean. Cécile Do Huu examines the representation of archaeology in the novels *Voyage à Rodrigues* (1986), by French-Mauritian J.M.G. Le Clézio, and *Hombo* (2002), by French Polynesian Chantal Spitz. By looking at the motifs of ruin and landscape, she shows how archaeology becomes a quest for the memory of these islands, and also explores the porosity of linguistic, generic and narrative boundaries in the novels. In her analytical endeavour to compare works from two utterly different island locations in the Global South, Do Huu ultimately argues that the ecotone as a zone of contact should also take into consideration contact with 'what remains silence or invisible', via the 'ruin' and the 'trace'.

In the last essay, Laëtizia Saint-Loubert offers a sociological angle by focussing on interconnected and lateral phenomena pertaining to 'minor' literary fields. In order to discuss 'archipelagic' or 'trans-local' publishing initiatives, she introduces data collected from *in-situ* research conducted with publishers, authors and (self-)translators located in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. She addresses the issue of translation within these multilingual island realities using Édouard Glissant's notion of the 'inter-dit'. Saint-Loubert's contribution therefore aims at rethinking book markets in terms of ecotones where alternative pathways to a planetary literary ecosystem can be identified. It ultimately joins many other essays of the volume in the call for intensifying critical scrutiny of complex, yet often fragile postcolonial environments and for encouraging comparative and transversal perspectives, which may allow for renewed and sustainable inter-/transnational, transpelagic and transoceanic solidarities. With her focus on publishing and translation, Saint-Loubert sets the stage for the conversation with Shenaz Patel, a Francophone writer who was born and lives in Mauritius. Patel explores the tensions and pulsations at work in the Indian Ocean, across the multiple genres of the novel, the short story, the play, or the fairy tale. Yet another ecotone.

As this volume is being finalised in Spring 2020, there is an irony that was not lost on the co-editors. In an attempt to protect themselves from the COVID-19 pandemic, countries across the world have closed their borders, millions of people have been *locked down* for weeks, sometimes months. It is not clear at this stage how long it will take for the world to revert to its pre-pandemic state, if it ever does, when trains were running and planes were flying. In a cruel twist of language, the other word that has outlined this unprecedented period is *confinement*, with people being *confined* inside their countries, inside their cities, inside their homes. The virus is the new enemy, invisible but dangerously close. The etymology of the word *confinement*, from the Latin root *finis* / *fines*, the limit(s), takes us back to the border, the boundary. But even as the world has been removed away from our touch and each one of us is potentially, but very literally, *untouchable*, one can still hope that the Latin prefix *cum* will prevail and suggest new ways of being *together*.

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