

BOOK REVIEWS

Charne Lavery and Sarah Nuttall (eds), *Reading from the South: African print cultures and turns in Isabel Hofmeyr's work*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, (hb – 978 177614 837 1, pb – 978 1 77614 836 3). 2023, ix, 227 pp.

This slim volume is a Festschrift (though the word is never used) for the South African scholar Isabel Hofmeyr, who has changed the way scholars, in and beyond the global South, think across traditional disciplinary boundaries about subjects as varied as literature (written and oral), the history of the book, oceanography, popular culture and environmental studies. She has taught us to think in new ways about what we mean by concepts such as 'diaspora' or 'Black Atlantic' (does concentration on Black Atlantic detract from Africa? What is gained by shifting focus from Black Atlantic to Indian Ocean?). She calls us to think again about our understanding of space, place, boundaries, materiality and global interconnections.

The volume begins with an Introduction and ends with a poem – a praise poem – by Gabeda Baderoon. In between come thirteen reflective and analytical chapters, grouped thematically in four parts. The authors, mostly of Indian and/or African descent, mix the academic and the personal in their essays. The list of contributors is evidence of Hofmeyr's unsurpassed influence as a teacher, supervisor, mentor and friend. Later in the book, Antoinette Burton speaks of 'Hofmeyr's rare combination of scholarly firepower, intellectual generosity and quiet charisma' (154).

Hofmeyr is deeply rooted in the Department of African Literature at Wits. Early in her career she helped to establish that Department as a separate unit, breaking down traditional canons and frameworks. Many years later she helped establish the ground-breaking Centre for Indian Studies in Africa. Unusually, she has spent almost her entire academic career in one university but, if her roots are local, her networks are shifting and worldwide.

The Introduction, by the co-editors, is both biographical and bibliographical, dealing with personality and publications. It is illustrated with photographs showing Hofmeyr engaging with protest, outreach, teaching, creating her own art works and with the natural environment. Lavery and Nuttall trace Hofmeyr's early academic and political activism in late apartheid South Africa. She was tried and acquitted for editing a magazine deemed blasphemous, indecent and a threat to state security; in England she sat in with Greenham Common women. Back home she facilitated the studies of imprisoned students and gave lectures on a packed commuter train. She took up art. Her practice

... arose from the problem of having too many books. Tired of taking yet another load of books to the charity store, she began to use books in an art class ... First she used books as paintbrushes, grasping the spine of the book, 'buttering' the fore edge with acrylic and then sweeping the book across the paper ... Understanding books as printed matter, Hofmeyr uses them as

stamps to make prints, as paintbrushes to apply paint to paper, and to make ephemeral frozen sculptures of pages in ice. (20–2)

Increasingly interested in environmental issues, she took classes in Oceanography.

Hofmeyr's scholarly reputation and influence is based on numerous articles and book chapters and on four major monographs:

'We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told': oral historical narrative in South African chiefdom (1993)

The Portable Bunyan: a transnational history of The Pilgrim's Progress (2004)

Gandhi's Printing Press: experiments in slow reading (2013)

Dockside Reading: hydrocolonialism and the Custom House (2022)

In the words of her admirers (Sarah Nuttal and Charne Lavery), 'Hofmeyr has produced a major work in every decade since the 1990s, each pushing our thinking across disciplines . . . Isabel Hofmeyr is a lodestar: a person who serves as inspiration or guide, like the star used to guide the course of a ship.' (30)

In addition she has edited or co-edited twenty-nine special issues to date. It is a great shame that this volume does not contain a full bibliography of her work, including YouTube and other online appearances.

The editors identify three broad themes in the chapters that make up the bulk of the book, and the contributors show how Hofmeyr's ideas and insights can be taken in many directions:

'High, Low and In-Between' – African popular culture and orality

'Portable Methods' – fluid, diasporic and transnational methodologies

'Oceanic Turns' – connecting and ecological oceans. (25)

These chapters range beyond South African and Indian Ocean. Karin Barber's chapter on 'Oral genres and home-grown print culture' takes key Hofmeyr themes such as the encounter of oral and written genres and the material contexts of production and transmission and teases them out in relation to Yoruba language newspapers in 1920s Lagos.

Madhumita Lahiel's chapter applies Hofmeyr's ideas, especially that of 'slow reading', to an analysis of the 2015 Booker Prize winner, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, by the Jamaican, Marlon James.

Lakshmi Subramanian in 'Seeing waters afresh: working with Isobel Hofmeyr' shows (in relatively accessible language) how the awakening of interest in the Indian Ocean (previously neglected compared to Atlantic, Pacific and Mediterranean) opened up new ways of thinking in history, literature, anthropology, cultural studies and more, collapsed boundaries between disciplines and suggested new ways of interrogating the archives. Area Studies in the late 1990s, she argues, were in crisis, compromised by American Cold War perspectives, inadequate to understand global migration and South-South connections. Hofmeyr initiated 'oceanic turns', leading to greater understanding of polyglot pre- and post-colonial worlds. Post-apartheid South Africa was re-contextualised in the global South. Indian Ocean studies were no longer centred on India.

The volume as a whole is not an easy read for the general reader. Occasionally I got lost in a (sea) mist of metaphors and favoured adjectives ('watery', 'liminal', 'littoral',

'amphibious', 'ecotonal', 'generative' and more). But sometimes a striking comment or image shifted my thinking, for example the deceptively simple statement that the

[e]lemental distinction between North and South, the ratio of sea to land in the Southern hemisphere is four to one part, whereas in the Northern Hemisphere it is a mere one and a half to one part. (163)

Other times I wanted to know more, as when Rimil Bhattacharya introduced me to the elderly Chinese pilgrim scholar, Fahian (also known as Faxian), and his 'wondrous arc' of travels on land and water in search of Buddhist texts and relics in the fourth to fifth century C.E. (177). If the lack of a bibliography is a disappointment, generous endnotes and references to each chapter enable old and new admirers to go on thinking Hofmeyr's thoughts after her and following her leads into new areas of research.

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Sabata-mpho Mokae and Brian Willan (eds), *Sol Plaatje's Mhudi: history, criticism, celebration*. Woodbridge and Auckland Park, James Currey and Jacana (hb £80 – 978 84701 276 0, £80; e-book – 978 18470127842020). 2020, xxii + 248 pp.

This beautiful text, illustrated throughout with reproductions of covers of *Mhudi* and 'woodcuts from the artist Cecil Skotnes [from] the Quagga Press edition of *Mhudi* published in 1977' (xxi), presents a comprehensive assessment of contemporary critical issues arising in the study of the novel, *Mhudi*, by 'foundational author' Solomon Tshekededi Plaatje (134) in celebration of the centenary of its completion in 1920. The book contains an introduction by the editors, renowned Plaatje scholars Mokae and Willan, whose combined expertise in and familiarity with Plaatje's entire oeuvre and this novel shine through; twelve end-noted chapters of the highest calibre, comprising one poem, criticism, and fiction; a bibliography of all editions of *Mhudi*, a list of contributors and an index. These lively and innovative readings will be most interesting to all scholars of Plaatje and southern African literature as they engage the multifarious critical concerns and enduring political questions raised within the pages of *Mhudi*.

Like *Mhudi*, this collection is a first of its kind, as recognized in its joint win in 2020 in the category Best Non-Fiction (Biography) at the South African National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences Awards. The text presents a new way of presenting critical theory, using knowledges created in fiction, non-fiction and poetry as complementary if different discursive traditions. The book opens with a poem in Xhosa by Siza Nkosi-Mokhele, 'Bra Sol Othandekayo.' Every chapter comments on the prescience of Plaatje's choice of fictive content for *Mhudi* in its enduring resonance and relevance, and, affirming Plaatje's position as pioneer South African intellectual, committed cultural and word worker. Several chapters interrogate Plaatje's innovations