

Oceanic Imaginations: Fluid Histories and Mobile Cultures May 6-8, 2021

Please register at ircpl.columbia.edu/calendar/oceanic-imaginations to receive the Zoom link.

Day 1: Thursday, May 6

9 am – 11 am EDT

- 9:00 – 9:10 am **Mana Kia & Debashree Mukherjee** (Columbia University)
Introductory remarks
- 9:10 – 9:30 am **Samia Khatun** (SOAS, University of London)
Dariya the Slave Girl: The Ocean in Bengali Oral Poetry
- 9:30 – 9:50 am **Katherine Butler Schofield** (King's College, London)
The Oceanic Voyages of the Indian Ghazal and the Limits of Sympathy: A View from the Straits Settlements, c. 1830–60
- 9:50 – 10:00 am Respondent: **Ananya Jahanara Kabir** (King's College, London)
- 10:00 – 11:00 am **Discussion**

Day 2: Friday, May 7

8 am – 10 am EDT

- 8:00 – 8:10 am **Mana Kia** (Columbia University)
Introductory remarks
- 8:10 – 8:30 am **Meg Samuelson** (University of Adelaide)
Containerized and Inundating Oceans: Thinking from the Cape and Through Blue Focalisation
- 8:30 – 8:50 am **Natasha Eaton** (University College London)
In the Eye of the Ocean: Art, Labour, Tears in South Asia
- 8:50 – 9:00 am Respondent: **Celina Jeffery** (University of Ottawa)
- 9:00 – 10:00 am **Discussion**

Day 3: Saturday, May 8

9 am – 11:30 am EDT

- 9:00 – 9:10 am **Debashree Mukherjee** (Columbia University)
Introductory remarks
- 9:10 – 9:30 am **Samhita Sunya** (University of Virginia)
Contraband Media in the Indian Ocean: Piracy, More or Less?
- 9:30 – 9:50 am **Karen Pinto** (Loyola University Maryland)
All the World is an Island: Seas Imagined, Depicted, and Crossed in Islamicate Maps, Geography, and Art
- 9:50 – 10:00 am Respondent: **Sebastian Prange** (University of British Columbia)
- 10:00 – 11:00 am **Discussion**
- 11:00 – 11:30 am **Roundtable**

Abstracts & Bios

Samia Khatun, SOAS, University of London

Dariya the Slave Girl: The Ocean in Bengali Oral Poetry

This paper will examine the motif of a slave called Dariya (sea) who plays a key role in one of the most well-known Mymensingh Gitikas—a well-known corpus of orally transmitted romances from East Bengal. Using the character of enslaved Dariya as an entry point into the epistemes structuring popular poetry in 18th and 19th Bengal, this paper will explore the possibility of harnessing Oceanic imaginations in South Asian literature for the purposes of researching and writing 'history from below.'

Samia Khatun is a feminist historian of race relations, focusing on the life worlds and experiences of colonised peoples across the British Empire. Her first monograph, *Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia* (2019) won the Scholarly Non-Fiction Book of the Year in the Educational Publishing Awards Australia. She is currently Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS, University of London.

Katherine Butler Schofield, King's College, London

The Oceanic Voyages of the Indian Ghazal and the Limits of Sympathy: A View from the Straits Settlements, c. 1830–60

If one considers a musical genre like the Johor gazal, whose earliest basic ensemble included tabla, sarangi and harmonium, it seems obvious that North Indian performers must have travelled to the Malay world at least as early as the nineteenth century and had an impact upon local musical culture, producing an exciting example of connected cultural history across the eastern Indian Ocean. But tracing the history of such performances is difficult due to the predominantly subaltern status of North Indians in British colonial Malaya, and the lack of sources in North Indian languages for the Malay world. In this paper I will take a stereophonic and paracolonial approach to evidence contained in the early English-language Penang and Singapore newspapers for performances of a range of North Indian music in the Straits Settlements, which shed light on the role of sepoys, convicts, and nautch girls in the transmission of Hindustani music to the Malay world c. 1830–1860. In doing so I uncover an unexpected and rather disconcerting narrative concerning the sympathy of the coloniser for the colonised, its lack, and its loss, in one of the most naked sites of unequal power in the British empire: the penal colony.

Katherine Butler Schofield is a historian of music and listening in Mughal India and the paracolonial Indian Ocean, based at King's College London. Through stories about alluring courtesans, legendary maestros, and captivated patrons, she writes on sovereignty and selfhood, affection and desire, sympathy and loss, and power, worldly and strange. In 2011–16 she was the Principal Investigator of a European Research Council grant (no. 263643) that looked at the ways in which music and dance in the eastern Indian Ocean were transformed in their transitions to and through European colonialism, c. 1750–1950. Katherine is the co-editor of two volumes of essays: *Monsoon Feelings; A History of Emotions in the Rain*, with Imke Rajamani and Margrit Pernau (Niyogi, 2018); and *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India* (Open Book, 2015), with Francesca Orsini. Her latest book, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India: Histories of the Ephemeral, 1748–1858*, will be out with Cambridge University Press in 2022. Katherine is a keen podcaster, and you can listen to her Histories of the Ephemeral series on iTunes, Soundcloud, and GooglePlay.

Meg Samuelson, University of Adelaide

Containerized and Inundating Oceans: Thinking from the Cape and Through Blue Focalisation

A vital set of emergent methodologies and conceptual vocabularies for thinking through the ocean are being elaborated around practices of “submergence”, particularly in relation to the “submarine” arts of the Caribbean and other “black Atlantic” worlds. Equally concerned with the ways in which both black life and the oceans have been contained, commodified and consumed, this paper takes its conceptual bearings instead from the Cape peninsular of South Africa. From this vantage point, it begins to elaborate the material metaphor of inundation in search of a vocabulary and methodology with which to respond to the containerization of the global economy that has obscured the links between production, consumption and disposal as well as to the materiality of the ocean itself. Rather than performing a descent into the ocean's depths, inundation manifests its volume and turbulence on shore in ways that

expose the “unevenly universal” nature of the condition that has been named the Anthropocene. It is suggestive also of nonrepresentational practices of knowing the world in and through art. This paper pursues these early insights by thinking through the blue focalisation of the novel *Thirteen Cents* (2000) by K. Sello Duiker.

Meg Samuelson is an associate professor in the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide and associate professor extraordinary in English at Stellenbosch University. She has published widely in Southern African literary/cultural studies, (Indian) Ocean studies and South Studies, including most recently essays and chapters on ‘coastal form’ and ‘coastal thought’, the ‘oceanic south’ (with Charne Lavery), photography in Zanzibar (with Pamila Gupta), sharks as uncanny figures of racial terror in the Anthropocene, maritime world literature, ‘thinking the Anthropocene South’, ‘blueness and light in the art of Gail Jones’, and JM Coetzee’s ‘literatures of the south’. She coedits the Palgrave Macmillan series ‘Maritime Literature and Culture’ and is joint CI with Mandy Treagus on the ARC funded project ‘Between Indian and Pacific Oceans: Reframing Australian Literatures.’ Her books *Claiming the City in South African Literature* and *Sea and Shore in South African Literature: Tidelines* are forthcoming from Routledge and Palgrave.

Natasha Eaton, University College London
In the Eye of the Ocean: Art, Labour, Tears in South Asia

What does it mean to think of tare and tear regarding the oceanic imaginaire? This paper seeks to explore the wash of the shore, the lap of the tides and the eye of the saline through the work of artist-activist Ravi Agarwal. Agarwal is well known for his activist concerns with waste, ecology and loss. As the founder of NGO Toxics Link Agarwal’s own artistic practice has been concerned with the flow, the ebb of the sands and the abject and embracing rusting sense of trash. This allows us to think about the ontology of oceanic rubbish washed up and by the sea which is busted by salt, left to rot. How does video practice in itself speak to legacies of filmic ontologies (Deleuze on Renoir on riverine flows for instance)? What might be the immersive notions of the oceanic in relation to artists’ practice in South Asia? Here I am thinking of Agarwal in relation to the work of Raqs Media Collective who have also been concerned with the politics of aqueous imagination through their work on the anachronism of the diver and the space for the Kala Pani. The Kala Pani is the forbidden ocean which Hindus (often as indentured labourers) could not cross. The ocean then is a space of ontological rupture.

Natasha Eaton is Reader in the History of Art, UCL. She is author of *Mimesis, Art and Empire: Artworks and Networks in India, 1765-1860* (Duke University Press, 2013); *Colour, Art and Empire: The Nomadism of Representation* (I.B.Tauris, 2013); *Travel, Art and Collecting in South Asia: Vertiginous Exchange* (Routledge, 2020).

Samhita Sunya, University of Virginia

Contraband Media in the Indian Ocean: Piracy, More or Less?

This paper outlines some of the methodological and theoretical stakes of a new project I have begun, titled *Agents on Location*. With a focus on Indian films in the latter half of the 20th century, the project explores South-South histories of location shooting and espionage genres, as intertwined with clandestine and informal practices of film distribution. By weaving together archival histories of location shooting and time-sensitive oral history interviews with film distributors across Indian Ocean contexts, I am interested in the conceptual and historical category of *piracy* as it straddles maritime and media worlds. As a maritime metaphor that has been transferred to debates over media circulation, piracy allows one to connect ‘continuities of power’s dealing with its others in a capitalist world system’, as Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwarz note in their introduction to *Postcolonial Piracy* (Eckstein and Schwarz 2014: 4). They caution, however, that drawing such a line may risk ‘understat[ing] the difference between maritime piracy that is framed around tangible goods and labour, and of cultures of the copy that invest in the infinite reproducibility of increasingly intangible content’ (Eckstein and Schwarz 2014: 4). At the same time, scholars of media infrastructure have emphasized the inseparability of ‘intangible content’ from the extraction of material resources and labor that buttress digital and analog mass media systems alike. In convergences between maritime and media worlds of the Indian Ocean, I am interested in a twentieth-century account of (media) piracy as a fraught question of representation, visibility, and practice. In espionage genres of Indian media, this comes together *on location* in places like Beirut (pre-1975), Hong Kong, Singapore, and Dubai, on the one hand; and through narrative representations of clandestine, multinational operators within zones of exception, on the other. These multinational actors range from agents of espionage and surveillance, who remain above the very law in whose name they operate; to figures like that of the smuggler, who similarly depend upon subterfuge as a tactic of transoceanic mobility.

Samhita Sunya is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures at the University of Virginia. Supported by a Mellon Humanities Fellowship and residence at Yale University’s MacMillan Center, she is completing a monograph titled *Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema Via Bombay* for University of California Press. She has guest co-edited a recent “South by South/West Asia” special issue of *Film History*. A second book-length project, titled *Agents on Location*, explores South-South histories of location shooting and espionage genres, as intertwined with informal and clandestine practices of film distribution.

Karen Pinto, Loyola University Maryland

All the World is an Island: Seas Imagined, Depicted, and Crossed in Islamicate Maps, Geography, and Art

Seas outline and order landmasses and remind us that our world is but an island. Maps rely on seas to define land. Seas compete with deserts for crossings, imaginings, measurings, and depictions. Due to their vast aqueous nature the seas can never be fully grasped and retain through time and space the draw of mystery and awe that is manifested in wondrous imaginings of conquests attempted but never fully realized. In key texts and images from the medieval Islamic past the seas emerge as

conflicted hierophanic spaces of good and evil. These extremes manifest themselves in aquatic representations in geography, cartography, and art. This paper seeks to focus on the dual themes of insularity and good and evil entwined in Islamicate depictions of the seas in maps, geography, and art. In particular, I seek to understand how good and evil merges in the seas to create and reinforce the insularity of the world. A rich array of images will be drawn upon from a range of medieval Islamicate manuscripts containing maps, geographical discussions, and miniatures incorporating the seas.

Born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan, of Indian, Russian, and French-stock, educated at Dartmouth and Columbia, **Karen Pinto** is into maps of all kinds and sizes. She specializes in the history of Islamic cartography and its intersections between Ottoman, European, and other worldly cartographic traditions and has spent the better part of two decades hunting down maps in Oriental manuscript collections around the world. She has a 2000-strong image repository of Islamic maps—many that have never been published before. Her book *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* was published by The University of Chicago Press in November 2016 and won a 2017 OAT (Outstanding Academic Title) award from Choice. She has won numerous grants including a 2013-14 NEH fellowship for her work on Islamic maps of the Mediterranean. She has published articles on medieval Islamic and Ottoman maps and is working on books on “Islam-Christian Cartographic Connections” and the “Mediterranean in the Islamic Cartographic Imagination.” Along with her work on Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, she is interested in Digital Humanities and Spatial Studies and encourages students and scholars to contact her if they are interested in these subjects.