

Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House.

Isabel Hofmeyr.

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022. 136 pp.
ISBN 9781776147625.

Dockside Reading is a fascinating and important book that makes a valuable contribution to literary scholarship whilst speaking much more broadly. In this review I will provide an overview of the book, before exploring what I believe is its most interesting and provocative deliberate absence: that of the digital.

Dockside Reading begins with a curious list of “Prohibited and Restricted Imports and Exports” from South Africa in the 1950s, when apartheid was becoming entrenched as a political system. Hofmeyr reveals that in South Africa at that time, copyright, trademark, books, printed matter and censors were all subject to particular forms of governance, reading and power. Her book tracks “printed matter as it made its way from ship to shore and through the regulatory regimes of the Custom House” (2) and explores how the rules that shaped the material transmission of knowledge and imagination were subject to the personal, political and practical whims of emerging nation-states and geopolitical orders in the 18th, 19th and

20th centuries, with a focus, in particular, on copyright and censorship.

Hofmeyr uses two key terms throughout the book—‘dockside reading’ and ‘hydrocolonialism’—with which she creates a frame for reading and interpretation. “Port cities”, she observes, “aim to pave the ocean and assert sovereignty over the conjuncture of land and sea. Yet they are unstable spaces [...]” (4). By considering the management and regulation of commodities *and of people* in these unstable dockside sites, Hofmeyr explores what she categorises as objects, bodies, books and reading.

“Categories have their uses,” writes Lochlann Jain (6), continuing, “[t]hey enable concepts and organize perception, and in so doing, they constitute those who devise them, those who are ensnared by them, and the worlds in which they move together.” In this construction of categories that lays over centuries of similar processes, Hofmeyr tells a remarkable story of the intersections of people, property, and politics. Through this she is able to interpret narrative from the edge of a fluvial shore. The book “investigates shore-shaped methods of reading that crystallized around the Custom House and raises larger questions of literary formations across land and sea” (15).

‘Hydrocolonialism’ is a term invented by Hofmeyr in which one finds the ripples of colonisation, postcolonialism, the paradoxical territorialisation of water and geopolitics (see Starosielski’s *The Undersea Network* and Hillman’s *The Digital Silk Road*). “Water sculpts political authority”, Hofmeyr (16) writes, and water is implicit in shaping the ‘hydrosocial’ cycle of human interaction with capital, the environment and power. ‘Hydrocolonialism’ is invoked as a tool with which to make sense of the impact of aquatic environments that shape the circulations of knowledge and objects.

The introduction is dense and rich, and filled with literary references, neologisms and insights which can be read at a multitude of depths. It also includes a comprehensive summary of the arguments that follow.

The first chapter begins with a striking image from Port Elizabeth in 1878. Ten black men in loincloths stand between the ocean and the shore, their backs bent under heavy sacks. A white man in a pith helmet and jacket observes their labour. Here Hofmeyr considers both the processes of the legal admission to the territory of the content of the sacks, and also the labour of both transportation and codification of documents. Hofmeyr describes the procedures of landing and marking, the handbooks, legislation and practices of reading that guided this process, and the

contradictory claims that could be made that spoke to origin, ownership, language and script itself. Here we discover the origins of the ‘Made in X-country’ that will be so familiar to consumers today as to be almost invisible. Hofmeyr asks the reader to think seriously about how objects become not just things, but things that exist in semiotic, legal and material categories that allow for their regulation.

Chapter Two, “Copyright on the Hydrocolonial Frontier”, explores how copyright was developed, policed and enforced—with the same varying degrees of success as we experience in today’s digital sphere. Sailors were apparently enthusiastic consumers of printed matter, from the serious to the solicitous, and port authorities spent huge amounts of energy trying to catch up. The chapter shows how this process was almost as impossible as it is today for those who try to keep a few steps ahead of the ‘torrents’ of contemporary digital exchange—much of which happens in entirely unregulated domains.

Custom Houses around various empires cooperated and at times colluded with publishers, politicians, merchants and authors to regulate what was read, in what format, and by whom. The picture Hofmeyr paints is one of an exhausting array of conflicting information, trickery, profit and plans that left customs officials “hewed to their own practices” (55). That she herself is able to identify the proverbial fish in what she calls the “galaxy of inscriptions circulating on the dockside” (56) is remarkable. It is a fascinating entry point to understanding how colonial knowledge was validated through copyright, which in turn became what Hofmeyr called a “racialised process” (61) not dissimilar to the ways in which algorithms—another form of knowledge organisation—are invoked and applied today (see Benjamin’s *Race after Technology*).

In “Censorship on a Hydrocolonial Frontier” (Chapter Four) Hofmeyr shifts her focus from South Africa to Australia, where, as she writes, the “White Australia policy went hand in hand with zealous maritime boundary making, immigration restriction, and censorship” (63). She tells the stories of young men working in cramped offices “reading books as bars of soap” in their efforts to classify and control them, following logics and ways of reading that “rendered” acceptable moralities of the mid-20th century. This, Hofmeyr (65) argues convincingly, is a process that has much to teach contemporary readers. Using carefully curated stories, Hofmeyr illustrates the almost random power of censorship decisions, which at times were radically out of sync with unfolding history but shaped local and transnational imaginations in startlingly

similar ways to today’s ‘information bubbles’ enabled by social media (see Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*). An intriguing comment is the practice by which ‘inappropriate’—or censored—content was “donated to lighthouse keepers” (71)—a provocative phrase with the potential for interpretation at many levels of metaphor. The ‘lighthouse keepers’ perhaps played a particular role in South Africa, where in addition to managing information from beyond the borders, the apartheid state took it upon themselves to censor from within. The chapter interrogates the ways in which the combined external and internal regimes “placed the dissident author in its crosshairs, while drawing on a Customs-style hermeneutic of the book as an object of contamination” (74). “Dockside reading” concludes Hofmeyr here, “had longer lives than one might initially anticipate” (75), and indeed this chapter opens understanding of the genealogies of reading.

The conclusion, “Dockside Genres and Postcolonial Literature”, is satisfying. Several models of the book, Hofmeyr shows, emerged as possible in the 20th century, and it was the power of regulation, copyright and ‘winning’ bureaucracies that consolidated it as an entity by the 20th century (though Ashleigh Harris’s work shows us that such processes are far less stable than we might imagine). In this section, Hofmeyr imagines the “epidemiological models of the book” (82) which enabled the utilisation of text as a tool of disruption, counter narrative, and interruption—the latter how books were perceived by the customs officials who had to deal with their complexity in the flow of objects for processing.

Short reflections on landings, on the farm from the perspective of the port, and on quarantine, wrap up the reflection on “dockside hermeneutics” which flows as a thread throughout the text. The ‘dockside hermeneutics’ were “shaped hydrocolonially, by the elemental politics of the port, by the epidemiological and ideological prerogatives of the colonial maritime frontier, and by the books themselves” (84). The conclusion ends with a call for other literary scholars to “venture down to the dockside” and take a look.

I am not a literary scholar, though I believe that literature infuses imagination and has a way of seeping into other disciplines. Nonetheless, the questions that this text provoked resonated with my own scholarship and to some extent with my life as a citizen in the 21st century. These questions all had to do with the chaotic, murky parallels between the attempted regulation of printed matter on boats and the attempted contemporary regulations of digital media in pirated forms. Is Netflix’s recent attempt to stop ‘users’ sharing

passwords the same as the behaviour of 20th century port officials?

If there were one thing the text leaves out, it is perhaps the pirate figure, who may not have berthed in Port Elizabeth, but who no doubt had something to do with ‘content management’ on the open sea. Henceforth, when I read a “pirated” text downloaded from the online oceans of the digital world, or watch a movie accessed via a torrent, I will reflect on the vain attempts at regulation of some digital equivalent of a sweaty colonial official trying to work between land and sea. Now, as before, occasionally carrying viruses that are hard to entirely protect against, but that each one of us, in our capacity as Personal Customs Official, chooses to let in or out through a series of mundane, but consequential, actions of regulation.

Work cited

Jain, Lochlann. *Things that Art: A Graphic Menagerie of Enchanting Curiosity*. U of Toronto P, 2019.

Jess Auerbach

jess.auerbach@uct.ac.za

University of Cape Town

Cape Town, South Africa

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9064-1474>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i2.14272>