

## The Indian Ocean: narratives in literature and law

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This project examines how the Indian Ocean has been represented in literary and legal narratives. It begins with the proposal that a high period of legal theorizing began in 1497 with Vasco da Gama's voyage across the Western Indian Ocean. This and subsequent European voyages of the 16th century prompted a search for textual authorities that did not prohibit certain actions, but rather justified activity that promoted unlimited access to lands, goods and markets—a rhetoric that was more often buoyed by reference to literature and myth than grounded in legal precedent. Permissive rather than forbidding, this nascent international law sanctioned the sporadic oppression of African and Asian coastal peoples and piracy by State-funded adventurers—and from there moved to accommodate the strategic expansion of Dutch, then Portuguese and French colonial rule in the Indian Ocean.

From the early sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, the Ocean appeared to represent what might be described as the lawful lawlessness of early capitalism and European colonialism. However, with the decline of the Dutch East India Company in the late eighteenth century and British triumph in the wars against France, a new power moved to dominance over the Indian Ocean—one with an agenda that entailed a desire for moral authority and more complete management of the waters surrounding its dominions. This shift from mercantilism towards the free trade capitalism of the 19th century was registered in legal and literary texts. Within these works, the Ocean as a trope of lawlessness takes on a different meaning. It now reads as a response to the difficulties of administering the Ocean world, of mastering its peculiar temperament. It points to anxiety about local knowledge that, while altered by the entry of Europeans, continued to traverse the Ocean beyond their apparent authority. Lawlessness comes to signify the unique locality—a worried or exuberant (depending on the writer's perspective) recognition of how the vast distances between island groups, currents and weather connect and periodically isolate diverse ways of living. Rather than describing international law, this trope emerges to confound prominent theses of globalization and promote different measures of cosmopolitanism. This might explain why creative works in English that represent the Indian Ocean have not yet been acknowledged as a group or explored as a distinct imaginative tradition.

This project aims to gather narratives from the mid-1600s (when the first fictional imaginings of Indian Ocean locales written in English were published) to the present (in which postcolonial writers are retrieving their Indian Ocean heritage). When placed together, it is remarkable how the pivotal moments of these stories often involve reflections upon the rule of law or the absence of a rule of law. At the same time, investigating how places of the Indian Ocean have been narrated in court-rooms and legislation reveals the ongoing importance of literary notions to the meaning of the Ocean within the law.

This project aims to generate a more imaginatively aware and legally useful understanding of the modern Indian Ocean. The project will generate an interdisciplinary network of scholars and other professionals with an interest in the Indian Ocean. But the work of this project will also be targeted inwards, at academic practice and curriculum. It is hoped that both the study of the Indian Ocean as a field within the humanities and the inter-discipline of literature and law might achieve greater prominence in the UK academic environment.