The Oceanic South

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Abstract This essay proposes the category of the oceanic South. It presents the Southern Hemisphere’s blue expanses as one of its defining features and elaborates from this a framework that brings into agitated contention the extractive economies of the North, the persistent legacies of settler colonialism in the South, and other interlocking human and more-than-human itineraries. Tracking a drift into the Southern Ocean in the fiction of J. M. Coetzee, the essay takes this “most neglected of oceans” as a vantage point from which to draw the contours of the oceanic South and engage its troubled surfaces and lively depths. Thinking through the roiling and hostile, fecund, and unbounded nature of this ocean, the essay follows “the lives of whales” in novels by Witi Ihimaera and Zakes Mda. Sounding the ocean’s imaginative depths, these fictions offer illuminating ways of thinking the South while maintaining an unsettling planetarity.

Keywords critical ocean studies, the South, Elizabeth Costello, The Whale Caller, The Whale Rider

The southern region of the globe is most readily conceived of as what is bound by the longitudinal lines of imperial and metropolitan domination or described by the curvier Brandt line as comprising the “poorer nations.” But it might also be defined by the relatively vast maritime expanses that distinguish the Southern Hemisphere: 80 percent of its surface area is composed of seas and oceans, compared to 60 percent of the North. In emphasizing the oceanic composition of a hemisphere that is “south in more ways than one,” we seek to situate these conceptual grids in a fluid and lively framework that is both “three-dimensional and turbulent.” This framework brings into agitated contention the extractive economies of the North and the persistent legacies of settler colonialism in the South, along with the questions of intrahuman and more-than-human justice that flow between them. It registers the wakes of south-south connectivity that have been drawn across bodies of water to grant substance to normative imaginings of the global South while impelling attention to the ocean as a “material space of nature.”

We bring the oceanic South into focus by tilting the conventional axis of southern thought to center Antarctica and its encircling Southern Ocean. This is to perform a gesture of what Gayatri Spivak calls “planetarity,” which is to inhabit
the planet as “the species of alterity” by effecting the “defamiliarization of familiar space.”’ While the sea is essentially alien to humans, the Southern Ocean is particularly so. It is the only body of water in which waves circulate without encountering intervening landmasses, thus growing gargantuan in size and ferocity. Even though the velocity of its winds connected the three land-bound oceans by the express Clipper Route during the age of sail and of empire, the roaring, furious, and screaming latitudes remain daunting to maritime traffic. The Antarctic Convergence—where icy currents meet warmer sub-Antarctic waters and of which there is no northern equivalent—supports an abundance of marine life, but, like the icebound continent itself, it has not nested human habitation.

The nature of this ocean—simultaneously roiling and hostile, fecund and unbounded—suggests ways of redrawing the contours of the South and engaging both its troubled surfaces and its lively depths. Because it uniquely flows into the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, the Southern Ocean opens up possibilities for tracking the intersecting currents and itineraries that compose the oceanic South. It enables us to sketch out the oceanic South as a category that draws together the dispersed landmasses of the settler South, the decolonized and still colonized South, the “sea of islands” comprising Indigenous Oceania, and the frozen continent of Antarctica. Within this category, the geographic and material conditions of the Southern Hemisphere are interfused with the “normative force” of a postcolonial or global South that dreams of new worlds to come and likewise with the numinous worlds of the Indigenous South. At the same time, this tumultuous roadstead fogs up any aspiration to conceptual clarity. Our initial attempt to elaborate the oceanic South from the defamiliarizing perspective that it offers is thus necessarily, but also in principle, tentative and even wavering. Establishing the Southern Ocean as a vantage point for articulating “southern theory” or “theory from the South,” we forgo both the stability of being “grounded” and the lucidity of a privileged position on global processes in favor of indicating ways of reading that are alive to turbulence, drift, refraction, and the more-than-human materialities of the oceanic South.

“The Most Neglected of Oceans”

Fiction by the South African–Australian author J. M. Coetzee leads us into the Southern Ocean in appropriately digressive and disorienting ways. Both the novels that Coetzee wrote under the states of emergency in late apartheid South Africa—Foe (1986) and Age of Iron (1990)—imagine drifting “southward” to the “bleak winter-waters of the most neglected of oceans.” Cast as inhuman and ahistorical, the Southern Ocean appears to offer a retreat from the tyranny of the times. But in these works, as well as in the more extended reflection on this ocean that is presented in the later Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons (2003), it is instead shown to induce unsettling reckonings.

Foe reprises the maritime mercantile triangle that Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) had traced through the points of England, South America, and West Africa. Shifting from the horizontal to the vertical axis, its conclusion stages a dive into the depths in which the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott has located a “subtle and
submarine” alternative to the history contained in the “monuments and martyrs” of the colonizing world. Many readers have followed Coetzee’s narrator into these warm waters to sift through the murky sediment accumulating on the seafloor and investigate the contents of the wrecked ship. We wish instead to track the rowing boat from which the narrator slips overboard. Abandoned on the surface, the boat “bobs away, drawn south toward the realm of whales and eternal ice.” This transient scene is elaborated in Coetzee’s subsequent novel, Age of Iron. Sickened by the inferno she has witnessed in the militarized townships of apartheid, and soiled by her complicity in that state, the narrator, Mrs. Curren, expresses a longing to cast off from that land and sail to the “latitudes where albatrosses fly, and there to be “lash[ed] . . . to a barrel or a plank” and left “bobbing on the waves under the great white wings.”

The movement in both of these scenes is indicated in the reiterated action of “bobbing.” Simultaneously an up-and-down motion and an uncharted lateral drift, it is an action that floats vertiginously away from the conceptual anchor provided by the ship. In Foe this is the vessel of the triangular trade that commodifies human life and erases biodiversity to prop up the global North with profits extracted from southern plantations that were cultivated with slave labor; in Age of Iron, it is the “worm-riddled” “sinking ship” of the late apartheid state. Both narratives certainly address themselves to these mercantile and geopolitical structures, but the undulating movement of the two scenes also unmoors them from such conceptual frameworks. Drifting into the realm of the whales and beneath the circumpolar itineraries of the wandering (or white-winged) albatross, they offer an orientation on the planet that—by virtue of remaining all at sea—is both defamiliarizing and confounding. The bobbing action that is so pronounced in the heaving Southern Ocean reminds us that the sea is not simply “a space that facilitates movement—the space across which things move—but . . . is a space that is constituted by and constitutive of movement.” This inherent motility encourages a drifting and unsettled mode of reading, whether of the text or of the world.

In her inquiry into the concept of “world,” Kelly Oliver observes that the etymology of planet “is from the Greek planetes, meaning ‘wanderer.’” Asking what it might mean to consider ourselves “wanderers on this wandering planet that is our home,” Oliver refers to Julia Kristeva’s expression that “we are strangers to ourselves” and locates the possibilities of the “struggle for social justice” in this roving and unhomely state. The condition of this exposure to planetarity is implicit in what Paul Gilroy has recently described as a “lowly watery orientation” that resists the “high altitude theorizing” of universalizing conceptions of the Anthropocene that smooth over racialized fractures in the category of the human. Gilroy turns to the Mediterranean to elaborate his proposed alternative figure of an “offshore humanism,” but he approaches this figure by first evoking Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick, with its “passionate planetary ontology,” and the “unsettling story” of Benito Cereno. Both works point us toward the oceanic South as offering a generative fetch for “sea level theory.”

Mrs. Curren’s drift into the Southern Ocean in Age of Iron also embodies “sea level theory.” Rather than presenting northern traffic in southern waters, it conveys...
the unsettling implications of the Southern Hemisphere. In a telling exchange, Coetzee responds to a reading of *Age of Iron* as offering “absolution” to its author-narrator Mrs. Curren (whom Coetzee here calls Elizabeth) by describing the novel as “more troubled (in the sense that the sea can be troubled).” The reference is presumably to Isaiah 57:20: “But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.” Mrs. Curren’s imagined recourse to the Southern Ocean does thus not acquit her of the barbarities in which she is complicit by virtue of her situation in the apogee of settler colonialism that was apartheid South Africa. Instead, the albatross that wanders into this novel from Coleridge’s *Rime* suggests the interminable atonement that the violent betrayal of southern hospitality demands. Reflecting on what the proper relation to the history of that betrayal should be on the part of “a representative of the generation in Africa for whom apartheid was created,” Coetzee has tendered the “dubious and hesitant” response of “liv[ing] out the question” in his writing.

Coetzee elaborates this question in the Southern Ocean in “The Novel in Africa,” the second “lesson” (or chapter) of *Elizabeth Costello*, which ranks among the most neglected works in Coetzee’s oeuvre. The eponymous protagonist of *Elizabeth Costello* is—like Mrs. Curren—an authorial figure. The scenario of the second lesson is that Costello, the “famous Australian writer,” is appointed to deliver a lecture on the “The Future of the Novel” as part of the entertainment and education program of a cruise ship, the SS *Northern Lights*, as it makes passage across the Southern Ocean from Christchurch to Cape Town via the Ross Ice Shelf of Antarctica. Sandwiched between her address and a subsequent talk billed as “The Lives of Whales,’ with sound recordings” is the lecture on “The Novel in Africa,” which is presented by the Nigerian novelist Emmanuel Egudu. Following the drift of Coetzee’s earlier allusion to Coleridge, *Elizabeth Costello* churns interspecies justice into the question that is “lived out” in its pages, while the exchange between an African and an Australian writer on the *Northern Lights* stages an encounter between the global South and the hemispheric South that remains unresolved in this troubled narrative.

Costello declares herself drawn to the voyage by the prospect of visiting Antarctica and “feel[ing] what it is like to be a living, breathing creature in spaces of inhuman cold.” Egudu, in contrast, having been displaced by the underdevelopment of the global South and the northern slant of the global literary marketplace, is on a perpetual lecture circuit. The dichotomy that is apparently set up on the Southern Ocean is between the shared creaturely life of this planet and the uneven distribution of global goods that determines Egudu’s position. This dichotomy is, however, neither shored up nor dissolved in the narrative; instead, its binary terms are left fluctuant. The eight lessons of *Elizabeth Costello*, after all, chart Costello’s own peripatetic journeys on the global lecture circuit: in the first lesson, during which she delivers a lecture on realism, Costello has cause to respond acerbically to the North American presumption that she inhabits the “far edges” of the globe while describing herself as one of the “late settlers” on that “vast” continent who are “only fleas on Australia’s backside”; and the final lesson brings her to account for colonial “atrocities” in Tasmania, the southernmost state of the “South Land.”
Whereas Costello oscillates between the Southern Hemisphere and the global North, Egudu voices the more determined critique that issues from the global South in his lecture “The Novel in Africa.” Addressing the Northern Lights’ wealthy passengers, who style themselves as “ecological tourists,” Egudu draws attention to the “global system” in which “it has been allotted to Africa to be the home of poverty.”

Egudu remarks that his audience (who hail from both hemispheres but enjoy membership in the endowed North) are cruising toward “one of the remoter corners of the globe,” while quoting Paul Zumthor on how “Europe has spread across the world . . . ravaging life forms, animals, plants, habitats, languages.” Indicting the world-destroying and planet-deranging appetites of the North, his lecture extols the enlivening breath of African orality. This, too, is proffered for consumption on the cruise ship. The entertainment program of the Northern Lights presents a microcosm of the global market in which Egudu suffers exoticization while being in turn required to peddle his alterity to remain in circulation. “Even here,” Egudu concludes, “on this ship sailing towards the continent that ought to be the most exotic of all, and the most savage, the continent with no human standards at all, I can sense I am exotic.”

Costello, who comments caustically on the seductions of exoticism, nonetheless admits that Egudu’s is “the one black face in this sea of white.”

The dazzling whiteness of the icy ocean in which his “black face” appears “exotic” reflects the invasive and devouring histories of European expansion into the Southern Hemisphere and the construction of Antarctica as the “last frontier” of imperialism. As she dwells on this ocean, Costello recalls Edgar Allan Poe’s description of strange Antarctic natives with dark skin and black teeth. Elizabeth Leane accounts for Poe’s portrayal by noting that, “for English-speaking novelists, the proximity of Maori peoples to the Antarctic was clearly suggestive and often became one ingredient in an incoherent jumble of exoticized images of indigeneity that were drawn upon in populating the southern continent.”

Responding perhaps to this allusion in his short story “Meeting Elizabeth Costello,” the Maori writer Witi Ihimaera inserts his alter ego, called Wicked, into the scene on the Northern Lights. Adding to the entertainment program, Wicked delivers a lecture on “The Indigenous Novel in Antarctica” in lieu of his planned presentation on the “Maori Eden.” The lecture that he does not present would have celebrated “the lyricism and life-affirming literature of his own people,” supported by clips from the film Whale Rider—a reference to the film adaptation of Ihimaera’s earlier novel, which was greeted with a rapturous reception in the North and to which we turn in the next section. Instead, Wicked delivers what Costello describes as a “rant.” But, after establishing a counternarrative that would seem to anchor alterity, Ihimaera’s story concludes with another confounding turn as the familiar figure of Costello is refracted across a series of mirrors as if scattered across the icy surface of the sea.

Whereas the ocean through which the Northern Lights plows reflects an unrelieved whiteness, its depths are shown to be both vivid and more-than-human. During the dinner that follows Costello’s and Egudu’s lectures in “The Novel in Africa,” the conversation turns from the problem of exoticism to the “tiny beings, tons of
them to the square mile, whose life consists in being swept in serene fashion through these icy waters, eating and being eaten, multiplying and dying, ignored by history.” Waking early as the ship approaches Macquarie Island, Costello peers over the rail to observe a sea that is “alive” with penguins, “large, glossy-backed fish that bob and tumble and leap in the swell.” Here the bobbing action that we have highlighted in Foe and Age of Iron plunges beneath the surface to open up a three-dimensional, multispecies view. From this perspective, the agitation of the ocean is enlivening. These lively waters have, however, not been “ignored by history.” The polite dining-room scene convened on the Northern Lights is premised on the histories of consumption that have buoyed up the global North and that fuel this pleasure cruise. When Costello recognizes that the seething mass of life she contemplates from the deck is composed of a raft of penguins, she recalls that Macquarie Island was a nineteenth-century hub of the penguin-oil industry and that thousands of penguins were clubbed to death and boiled down on these shores. This “most neglected of oceans” is thus rendered into the “story of global resource colonialism” that has constituted and incorporated the South in its world-historical form.

“‘The Lives of Whales,’ with Sound Effects”

Mentioned but not represented in “The Novel in Africa” is the slated lecture “The Lives of Whales.” The next two chapters of Elizabeth Costello instead feature the protagonist’s celebrated—and controversial—addresses on “the lives of animals.” Rather than accompanying Costello to those lectures, delivered in the North, we maintain our focus on the oceanic South and take up the invitation to sound its depths with whales. “The Novel in Africa” issues one plumb line for this sounding in its reference to the penguin-oil industry, the precursor to whale-oil extraction in the Southern Ocean. Another line—one offered by the unrepresented lecture “The Lives of Whales” and its promised “sound effects”—is attuned to the loud and lively ocean. Both situate the oceanic South at the conjuncture of global and planetary forces and of human and more-than-human histories. We follow them by turning to two novels produced from the countries between which the Northern Lights cruises: Witi Ihimaera’s The Whale Rider from Aotearoa New Zealand and Zakes Mda’s The Whale Caller from South Africa.

Much has been written about the ways in which these novels stage achieved or failed interspecies relations. Rather than further rehearsing these relations, our interest lies in locating them in a set of intersecting itineraries that map out the oceanic South. What we wish to underline is how the itineraries of humans and whales “interlock” as they journey together “through the southern seas.” This is the term that Ihimaera uses to describe “the knowledge of whalespeaking” that the ancients once had, and with which the Maori ancestor Paikea asked a whale to carry him to the land that lay “far to the south.” The novel shows how the interlocking of “land inhabitants and ocean inhabitants” that articulates the origin story of Aotearoa is sundered when “the whalekilling begins.”

The whale oil extracted from southern waters “lubricated the wheels of industry” and illuminated the lamps of the post-Enlightenment North that are alluded to
in the name of Coetzee’s cruise ship, and that we receive as referring to both the
civilizing discourses of the imperial North and the wedge of reason with which it
cleaved apart the concepts of “nature” and “culture.” In his reading of *Moby-Dick*,
the environmentalist literary scholar Lawrence Buell notes that whaling evolved
into “an extractive industry of global scope” during the nineteenth century. As
the Arctic hunting grounds were exhausted, this industry shifted increasingly
southward. In the early decades of the twentieth century, approximately 2 million
whales were killed in the Southern Hemisphere in “a slaughter... that has few
parallels in the history of wildlife exploitation” and which led to “the near-extinction
of the great baleen whales.” This fin de siècle turn is anticipated in the “Southern
whaling voyage” on which Melville’s *Pequod* embarks: before it is upended by the
white whale, it is bound to round “both stormy Capes” and the orientation of its tra-
jectory is signaled by Ishmael’s declaration, “Cetus is a constellation in the South!”
The violence of the “whalekilling” projected also onto the shores of the Indigenous
South; as Ishmael observes in *Moby-Dick*, Australia “was given to the enlightened
world by the whaleman.”

Formally manifesting the interlocking itineraries rent by the “whalekilling”
that ensued off southern shores, Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider* alternates between
first-person narration by the character Rawini and omniscient narration focalized
by an ancient whale bull and presented in italics. Each traces out their respective
routes at and below sea level. Rawini travels from Aotearoa New Zealand through
urban Australia to a settler plantation in Papua New Guinea. The geography he tra-
verses references histories of Pacific “blackbirding,” land appropriation, habitat
destruction, and persistent settler racisms. During this odyssey, says Rawini, “I
grew into an understanding of myself as a Maori.” Essential to this understanding
is his recognition of his kinship with Papua New Guineans, in what Alice Te Punga
Somerville has identified as the novel’s significant, and often ignored, articulation
of Maori “connection with the Pacific.” This articulation locates the story in what
Rawini describes as the “huge seamless marine continent which we call Te Moana
Nui a Kiwi, the Great Ocean of Kiwa” that extends from Hawai’i in the north to Rapa
Nui (or Easter Island) in the east and Aotearoa New Zealand in the south.

The second narrative moves across Te Moana Nui a Kiwi (or what is variously
called Oceania, the South Seas, and the South Pacific) and the Southern Ocean as it
follows a whale herd in its migrations between “the cetacean crib” in the Valdes Pen-
insula of Patagonia, the Tuamotu Archipelago of the South Pacific, and Antarctica.
The whales’ journey along this ancient circuit is abruptly obstructed by nuclear
testing in the Tuamotu Archipelago. Human history collapses—or rather erupts—
into natural history in the form of a “scald[ingly]” “bright light,” and “giant tidal sound-
waves” tear through the ocean and the creatures that inhabit it. The whales’ focal-
ization sounds the depths of the ensuing devastation, enabling the novel to register
the “hairline fractures indicating serious damage below the crust of the earth.” Appre-
hending the danger of “undersea radiation,” the cetacean protagonists break their
migratory pattern “to seek before time the silent waters of the Antarctic.” The ferocity
of the Southern Ocean is precisely what renders it a haven to the whales: a “calm and
unworldly” realm is maintained beneath the “inhuman, raging storm” that sweeps
across its surface. But the urgency of the whales’ flight has driven them farther south than ever before, and they come up against a solid wall of ice. During their disoriented retreat, they strand themselves on the shores of Whangara.

The ancient bull returns to this shore out of nostalgia for the “oneness” he had experienced with Paikea, the ancestral whale rider who had journeyed with him from the place of the gods to settle these islands a thousand years before. Koro, the aged descendant of Paikea who seeks to translate this legacy into the future, is at the time returning from presenting his claim in a land dispute hearing. Tellingly, the airplane on which he travels is described as “bucking like an albatross” before the storm that has blown in from Antarctica. Human and whale itineraries then converge on the shore as Koro, his son Rawini, and his granddaughter Kahu attempt to save the beached herd. Both narratives conclude redemptively as Kahu fulfills Paikea’s legacy and reactivates the state of “interlock” to steer the herd back to the ocean depths before disengaging to return to land. But the shore remains haunted by the deaths of the “two hundred members of a vanishing species” that beached the previous day at nearby Wainui, foreshadowing the arrival of the mythical herd and underlining the planet-deranging effects of the “giant tidal soundwaves” that the whales’ sounding has exposed.

Mda’s novel The Whale Caller sketches out similarly intersecting itineraries of land and ocean inhabitants from the vantage point of the southern tip of Africa. The Whale Caller had learned the songs of migrating whales during his own peregrinations in which he “spent many years walking westwards along the coast of the Indian Ocean, until he reached the point where the two oceans met, and then proceeded northwards along the Atlantic Ocean coast.” His journey traces out a triangular structure that positions the Cape as the tempestuous portal of the northbound trade that plied between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. To the whales making their annual passage “from the sub-Antarctic to the warmth of South African waters,” in contrast, the Cape offers a safe harbor in the Southern Ocean to which they repair after feeding in the krill-rich waters of the Antarctic Convergence. Their offshore presence inclines the story toward southern and submarine positions.

The narrative centers on the fishing village of Hermanus, which has developed into a popular whale-watching site due to its geophysical situation: the seafloor drops away steeply to provide cetaceans with a deep and sheltered bay for breeding, while the coastal cliffs furnish wildlife tourists with a natural amphitheater. Rather than enabling another manifestation of what The Whale Rider describes as “interlock,” these tourists are depicted as the latest crest in a set of invasive waves to have washed up on the cliffs that the novel declares to have been once the “home” of the Indigenous Khoikhoi and San, who suffered the first wave of genocidal violence during the colonial invasion.

The Whale Caller surmises that—like the Australasians he has read about—the Indigenous inhabitants of these shores had feasted on stranded whales and that their expressions of gratitude for the bounty delivered by the sea included also mourning for the loss of companion species. Once the site of ambivalent celebratory scenes convened around whale carcasses, the southern littoral subsequently...
became an unequivocal theater of death. The Whale Caller can still discern the “two-hundred-year-old stench from the slaughter of the southern rights by French, American and British whalers.” Even though now a protected species, his beloved southern rights continue to hazard various anthropogenic dangers on their migratory route, including “pirates and poachers,” “ships’ propellers,” “fishing gear entanglements and explosives from oil exploration activity.”64 When the sea retaliates against this violation by hurling its “black . . . rage” against the town of Hermanus, the whale Sharisha is unable to “distinguish the blue depths from the green shallows” to which she is lured by the Whale Caller blowing on his homemade kelp horn. His obsession with her has become consuming and he recognizes too late that, while he can summon Sharisha, he lacks the song to save her: unlike in the Aboriginal Dreamtime stories of which he has read, he cannot “sing to make the female whale and her calf escape the shallow waters,” thus ensuring the survival of “future generations that would replenish the seas.”

Following his disastrous failure to appreciate the condition of “interlock” that—as The Whale Rider registers in its conclusion—allows for communion across species without dissolving the difference between creatures of the land and those of the sea, the Whale Caller throws away his horn and commits to living out his days as a penitent. He thus returns us to the figure of the Ancient Mariner—as does The Novel in Africa,” which concludes with Costello observed by an indifferent albatross and her wary chick as if to suggest both the inhuman extent of the Southern Ocean and the imperiling of “future generations” that the human presence therein portends. After Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner shoots an albatross in the Southern Ocean, he finds himself drifting “Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea” in the South Pacific.65 He thus establishes the oceanic South as the setting for the emergent condition that Edward O. Wilson calls—rather than the Anthropocene—“The Age of Loneliness.” The Mariner had earlier claimed that his ship was “the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea.”66 Yet, when Ihimaera’s ancient whale rider and bull traverse southern seas to found Aotearoa, the ocean throbs with welcoming songs. Ihimaera thus redirects the Ancient Mariner’s claim from historical priority in the oceanic South to responsibility for its silence. The violent intrusions of the North, rather than the Anthropos, is held accountable for despoiling the blue planet.67

Retelling an origin story of the Indigenous South and reactivating its legacy for the present, The Whale Rider presents ocean crossings that are world opening rather than world destroying, and soundings that stand in contrast to those of submarine nuclear explosions. This is demonstrated when the new whale rider and the ancient bull dive together into a roisterous world of “dolphin chatter, krill hiss, squid thresh, shark swirl, shrimp click and, ever present, the strong swelling chords of the sea’s constant rise and fall.”68 At the same time, it maintains the inhuman-ness of the ocean: the whale rider must return to shore. Mda’s Whale Caller similarly cannot meet Sharisha on shared ground, even as the welcome that Coleridge’s albatross offers the mariners when they enter the frozen waters of the South is echoed in what he understands as their mutual “yearning” for one another—just as it is in the “yearning” that Ihimaera’s earth and oceans feel for a human presence. The
ethical injunction issued by the materiality of these seas, which—in Costello’s thoughts—are “full of things that seem like us but are not,” is thus to respect alterity in the scene of oceanic hospitality.69

Conclusion
Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff open their inquiry into “theory from the South” by quoting Costello’s question to Egudu in “The Novel in Africa”: “How can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders?”70 The problem that they identify in the global knowledge economy is precisely this relegation of southern positions to the “performance of otherness.”71 Theory from the South intervenes in this economy by arguing for the centrality and prescience of the South in ways that we have found to be highly generative. Reading from the oceanic South, however, offers different perspectives on unfathomed depths and the condition of alterity. As Hester Blum points out, “A critical stance emerging from the perspective of the sea should be mindful of registering the volumes of what its geophysical properties render inaccessible.”72

In approaching the South from the Southern Ocean, we have sought to encounter its oceanic nature in heightened form: the three-dimensional motility and turbulence that are characteristic of seas in general are notably amplified in this ocean, which is defined by its unbounded reaches and relentless circulations. It too has been subject to the invasion and plunder that have produced the global South, but it also enables us, in Spivak’s terms, to “imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities,” and thus to conclude that “alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away.”73

The fiction considered in this article moves us toward resonant apprehensions as it sounds the oceanic South. It registers the persistent presence and legacies of northern resource extraction and settler colonialism in the South while being simultaneously alive to the more-than-human materialities of the sea and its inhabitants. As such, it illuminates ways of thinking between globe and planet, and of interlocking questions of intrahuman and more-than-human justice that are of growing import in a time of anthropogenic climate change.74 The oceanic South suggests, finally, also a model of textuality and modes of reading appropriate to it. Its more-than-human materialities manifest in the agitated surfaces of texts that maintain the condition of alterity in an unsettling planetarity that is realized because of—rather than despite—their admittance of depths that elude and even repulse comprehension.

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Notes
1 The Brandt line measures GDP per capita and meanders along the thirty-degree parallel north before looping up to include Mongolia and China and then swerving around Japan, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand; see Prakash, Poorer Nations.
2 We borrow this formulation from Isabel Hofmeyr’s recent description of the South Atlantic in “Southern by Degrees,” 81.
4 For an exemplary study of transoceanic connectivity as a way of composing the global South, see Hofmeyr, “The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean.”
5 Steinberg, Social Construction, 209.
6 The collaborative formulation of the “oceanic South” draws on our respective ongoing projects of “thinking from the Southern Ocean” (Lavery) and of elaborating “the blue southern hemisphere” and the writing of “southern worlds” in works by J. M. Coetzee and others (Samuelson).
7 Spivak, Death of a Discipline, 72, 77.
8 See Helmreich, Alien Ocean.
9 For an account of the Southern Ocean that is attentive to the material conditions of its history, see Antonello, “Southern Ocean.”
10 Hau‘ofa, New Oceania.
11 See Prakash, Darker Nations; and Cheah, What Is a World?
12 On southern theory as a theory that is “grounded” in the South, see Connell, Southern Theory; on “theory from the South” as a privileged vantage point on global processes, see Comaroff and Comaroff, Theory from the South.
13 Coetzee, Age of Iron, 108.
14 Walcott, “The Sea Is History.”
15 Coetzee, Foe, 155.
16 Coetzee, Age of Iron, 108.
17 Coetzee, Age of Iron, 177.
18 See also Lavery, “Drift.”
19 Steinberg, “Of Other Seas,” 165.
20 Oliver, Earth and World, 103.
21 Oliver, Earth and World, 103.
22 Gilroy, “Offshore Humanism,” 8; for a study that traces this fault line in marine settings, see Samuelson, “Thinking with Sharks.”
24 Coetzee, Doubling the Point, 250.
25 See J. R. Ebbatson’s proposal that the Mariner’s act of shooting an albatross with a crossbow “may be a symbolic rehearsal of the cru of colonial expansion, the enslavement of native peoples; and that the punishments visited upon the Mariner, and the deaths of his shipmates because of their complicity, may represent European racial guilt, and the need to make restitution” (“Coleridge’s Mariner,” 198).
Ebbatson supports his reading by detailing the young Coleridge’s involvement in the abolitionist movement and his readings of travel narratives, including those of James Cook’s southern voyages and, possibly, that of Vasco da Gama, which relates how his predecessor, Bartholomew Dias, shot and killed a native of what is assumed to be Mossel Bay in present-day South Africa with a crossbow (Ebbatson, “Coleridge’s Mariner,” 177, 179; Ravenstein, Journal, 10).
26 Attwell, “An Exclusive Interview with J. M. Coetzee.”
27 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 37–38.
28 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 35.
29 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 15, 29.
30 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 202.
31 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 49, 41.
32 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 47.
33 Leane, Antarctica in Fiction, 50; the “Antarctic Club” of nations was exclusively “white” even though membership was extended to the southern states of Argentina, Chile, Australia, New Zealand, and—even to a significantly
lesser extent—apartheid South Africa (Hofmeyr, "Southern by Degrees," 83).

34 Leane, Antarctica in Fiction, 25.
36 Ihimaera, "Meeting Elizabeth Costello," 93.
37 Ihimaera, "Meeting Elizabeth Costello," 100.
38 Melville, Moby-Dick, 248; Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 49.
39 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 54.
40 Hofmeyr, "Southern by Degrees," 83.
41 The two chapters comprising "The Lives of Animals"—"The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals"—were first presented in Coetzee’s Tanner lectures at Princeton University in 1997; "The Novel in Africa" was first delivered as the Una lecture at the University of California, Berkeley in 1998.

43 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 7.
44 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 7.
45 Roberts, Unnatural History, 87, 95.
46 Buell, Writing for an Endangered World, 205. For a study of the historical continuum between whale-oil culture and petroculture, see Scott, "Whale Oil Culture."

49 Melville, Moby-Dick, 97; Kim Scott’s revisionist account of the so-called friendly frontier of southwestern Australia in That Deadman Dance centers whaling as both the activity through which settler colonialism extended into the region and a symbol of the laying waste of Indigenous and nonhuman worlds alike.

50 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 11.
51 Somerville, Once Were Pacific, 63.
53 Between 1966 and 1996 France performed repeated nuclear tests in the Mururoa Atoll of the Tuamota Archipelago, which remains one of its overseas territories.

54 See Dipesh Chakrabarty’s signal observation that the Anthropocene names a caesura in which “the distinction between human and natural histories—much of which had been preserved even in environmental histories that saw the two entities in interaction—has begun to collapse” ("Climate," 207).
55 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 9.
56 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 9.
58 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 16.
59 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 9; see DeLoughrey, Roots and Routes, 227: the novel "offers a broad and profoundly historical genealogy of Pacific peoples while also illuminating the ways in which all creatures that constitute the Pacific whakapapa are impacted by nuclear pollution.”

60 Mda, Whale Caller, 9.
61 See Samuelson, “Rendering the Cape-as-Port”; Melville’s Ishmael notably compares the Cape to “some noted four corners of a great highway, where you meet more travelers than in any other part” (Melville, Moby-Dick, 218).
62 Mda, Whale Caller, 16.
63 See Haraway, "Companion Species Manifesto."
64 Mda, Whale Caller, 13, 37.
65 Coleridge, Rime, pt. 4.
66 Coleridge, Rime, pt. 2.
67 See Ebbatson’s reading of The Rime, which surmises that the “gigantic historical process” enacted in the shooting of the albatross includes western imperial expansion into native lands, the transoceanic slave trade, and the “massive slaughter of seals and whales” that followed Cook’s reported wildlife sightings in the Antarctic regions (“Coleridge’s Mariner,” 185).

68 Ihimaera, Whale Rider, chap. 19.
69 Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, 54.
70 Coetzee, quoted in Comaro and Comaroff, Theory from the South, 2–3.
71 Comaroff and Comaroff, Theory from the South, 3.
72 Blum, “Melville and Oceanic Studies,” 30.
73 Spivak, Death of a Discipline, 72–73.
74 See Chakrabarty, “Climate,” 213: "The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital."

Works Cited


