A WORLD(-SYSTEM) OF DEBRIS: RUINS, REMAINS, AND SELF-WRITING IN NARRATIVES ACROSS THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Abstract

Addressing critical debates within the scholarship on Indian Ocean studies, African literary studies, and world literature, this article offers a reflection on the idea of ruins, remains (Stoler, 2013, 2016), and self-writing (Mbembe, 2002) as critical and aesthetic concepts through which visual and literary narratives register the past and problematize the future, suggesting new critical possibilities to address and analyze contemporary African literary writing. Addressing the photography project Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu *(Guillaume Bonn, 2015) and the literary works of contemporary authors such as Nuruddin Farah, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and João Paulo Borges Coelho, the article aims to problematize Indian Ocean literatures as a field of study and, therefore, to propose a redefinition of literary and visual narratives within the Indian Ocean as modes of registering the combined and uneven development of the capitalistic world-system. Following the theoretical formulations proposed by the Warwick Research Collective (WreC), the article establishes a counterpoint between the critical debate on world literature and Indian Ocean studies in order to address the Indian Ocean world and its literary forms within a materialist line of thought.*

Keywords: African Literatures, Indian Ocean Studies, World-Literature, Ruins, Debris, Self-Writing

Literary and Visual Storytelling across the Indian Ocean

Addressing critical debates within the scholarship on Indian Ocean studies, African literary studies, and world literature/world-literature, this article offers a reflection on the theme of *ruins, remains*, and *self-writing* as critical and aesthetic concepts through which visual and literary narratives *register* the past and problematize the future, suggesting new critical possibilities to address and analyze African contemporary literary writing[i].

The starting point of my reflection will be the photography project *Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu* (Bonn, 2015) and the literary works of contemporary authors such as Nuruddin Farah (Somalia), Abdulrazak Gurnah (Tanzania), and João Paulo Borges Coelho (Mozambique). The counterpoint between photographic and literary histories points to the possibility to redefine literary and visual forms of narration that, as Ann Laura Stoler proposes, tackle *ruins* and *remains* "not as objects of the post-imperial melancholic gaze but rather as a strategic point of view to rethink imperial formations and their contemporary meanings"

(Stoler, 2013, 2016). Within this critical perspective, the Indian Ocean appears to be a *world of debris*, an aesthetic and conceptual element of "ruination" (Stoler, 2013), re-defining literary writing as an intellectual space for rethinking those "temporalit[ies] that [are] always simultaneously bifurcating toward several different futures, and in so doing [open] the way to the possibility of multiple ancestries" (Mbembe, 2002), or rather, highlighting other histories, subjects, memories, and, therefore, "other modes of self-writing" (Mbembe, 2002). In this way, the geographical and imaginary space of the Indian Ocean is reshaped as both a strategic perspective for the emergence of private histories and, at the same time, as a "worldling paradigm" (Said, 1993, 2004) by which to redefine literary genres, critical concepts, and cartographies for the study of African literatures.

Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu (Bonn, 2015) is a documentary photography project developed by Guillaume Bonn, a prominent contemporary photographer and visual artist born in Madagascar, with a wide international career and numerous photography projects on the African continent.[ii] As the project's title indicates, it has openly been inspired by Paul Theroux's popular work *The Mosquito Coast* (1981), set in Central America, originally published in 1981 and later adapted to cinema: a book that quickly became one of the bestselling publications of one of most renowned contemporary travel writers—according to some critics, the true heir of writers like Conrad and Hemingway. However, I do not intend to focus here on any kind of parallelism between Paul Theroux's book and Bonn's photography project; at the same time, what I find curious is that Bonn uses the phrase "Mosquito Coast" itself, as he explains in the foreword of the photo book, as an "irrational reference" (Bonn, 2015), a guiding motif to unite different and diverse places, cities, and countries within the African continent, and, particularly, on the eastern coast of the African continent. As a matter of fact, according to the text of the photo book, *mosquitoes* and *malaria* would be the link(s) that *came to the mind* of the photographer in connecting Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, and Somalia (Bonn, 2015). However, what the title of Theroux's novel most evidently represents is a clear analogy between Bonn's photographic and visual work and the literary genre of travel literature, where the African continent indisputably stands out as a geographical and aesthetic literary paradigm. In this sense—without attributing any value to the work of the American writer—the work of Paul Theroux is a contemporary paradigmatic case of this literary genre, a long-standing tradition that provides fertile ground for problematizing the relation between *self* and *other*, offering the possibility to analyze the intersection between fiction, documentary, and self-writing.[iii] This further applies to what is widely considered a masterpiece of modern Western literature, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1904) and, at the same time, possibly also to Guillaume Bonn's photography project, which offers a visual narrative encompassing fiction, documentary, and autobiography—showing, as Angolan writer Ruy Duarte de Carvalho states, "on the Road, therefore the narrator" (2005) and masterfully underlining the inevitable link between self-writing and travel literature. This dimension of Bonn's photographic project becomes particularly interesting from a critical point of view if it is seen in contrast to the personal, memorialistic dimension that explicitly underpins the *Mosquito Coast* project. In this regard, as the photographer states in the book's introduction:

> For many years I have been trying to come to terms with the changes that are transforming Africa into a place that is far removed from the familiar, comfortable Africa I knew as a child. Places that seem frozen in time; places that reminded me of the colonial era houses I had once lived in with my parents.
>
> I am the third generation of a family of Frenchmen born in Madagascar. My father and my grandfather spent their formative years on the island. My first memoirs are of Djibouti, an old French colonial outpost stuck between the Danakil Desert and the Indian Ocean. In my childhood in the seventies, it was still part of France […]
>
> In time I became a documentary photographer. I lived in Nairobi and traveled to every corner of the continent, witnessing and recording the continent's changes as they took place. Along the way, my own particular sense of Africa emerged as well, an alchemical mixture made up of the familiar—its fading European colonial heritage, architecture, and enduring lifestyle—together with the continent's devastating wars, its dictatorships, and the epic destruction of its natural environment, including its wild-life. I wished to somehow capture all of this visually. The idea persisted. For a long time, I could not imagine how to embark on such a project. I felt challenged by a number of seemingly unanswerable questions. How could I tell stories of my own memories of a world that no longer existed or, if it did, barely survived? How could I come to terms with my own family's role in the colonial brutality that the continent has experienced for a hundred years? How to avoid falling into the trap of all the romantic clichés of colonial Africa?
>
> I have been trying to come to terms with the changes that are transforming Africa. We are told that progress is a good thing, that mobile phones and the Internet will make all of us happier and our lives better. Along with those things, skyscrapers, highways, parking lots, and all the other accouterments of consumerism have begun to find their way into Africa and to change it, sometimes disastrously. (Bonn, 2015)[iv]

Beside the issues of "progress and transformation" (Bonn 2015), to which I will return in the conclusion of this article, I would like to focus on how Bonn's visual work seems to achieve another layer of meaning by endowing its photographic narrative with an explicitly autobiographical dimension, which the author recognizes as a visual strategy to link a number of different places and cities—a visual device to build a *world* under a photographic gaze that is at once a language of documentation as well as of self-representation. In this respect, I would like to raise the possibility to address *Mosquito Coast* as a work of self-writing, as well as a work on East Africa as a location within the wider perspective of a world-system (Wallerstein, 2004). To this end, it is worth quoting a further passage from Bonn's introduction:

> It is strange and difficult for me to see the continent that I love, and that has made me and defined me, metamorphose so drastically.
>
> […] I decided that I needed to go back where it all began, to the East African coastline, where, over the centuries, newcomers had arrived continuously from distant lands by boat, each bringing new influences with them and together creating the Africa I had grown up with. They came in waves, in trickles, and in different shapes and hues. There were conquerors, explorers, traders, and immigrants, and they

> included Portuguese, Omanis, Indians, British, Italians, Germans, and French. I traveled from Mozambique northward along the Indian Ocean shoreline to Tanzania, Kenya, and Somalia. Subject to the varied forces of their own histories, each was also unique in their modern incarnation. (Bonn, 2015)

Therefore, observing some of the images that appear in the project, in line with the feeling of *painful sadness and nostalgia* that the photographer admits in the text (Bonn, 2015)—echoing what Susan Sontag defines as the intrinsic elegiac dimension of the act of photographing (1977)—ruins and debris take on an emblematic aesthetic and conceptual meaning: a sort of visual chronotope in Bonn's work, pointing, in my view, to Ann Laura Stoler's notion of the *debris of the empires* (Stoler, 2013; 2016), and therefore visually "re-signifying the ruins not as an object of the post-imperial melancholic gaze but as a strategic point of view to rethink imperial formations and their contemporary meanings" (Stoler, 2013; 2016). According to Stoler, thinking the ruin—which in Bonn's case would be visual thought—does not mean regarding the artifacts of the empire as dead material or the remains of a former regime, but is a task that aims at observing how the ruins have been (re)appropriated and therefore assume the strategic and active position of imperial debris in terms of the present (Stoler, 2016). It is exactly from this critical and conceptual perspective that the images of Maputo, Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Merca, Watamu, and Mogadishu, among others, can be observed, addressing the human and maritime presence as visual elements of *ruination*, as strategic conceptual and aesthetic elements capable of *ruining the ruins* (cf. to ruin, ruination; Stoler, 2013), thus underlining the vital contemporary reconfiguration of the inert remains of past empires within the present and how the remains of past times branch into different futures (Stoler, 2016).

Particularly emblematic are two images: the first is a photograph of a woman in a red dress climbing the steps of Mogadishu's old cathedral—obviously a ruin of Italian colonialism (figure 1)—and the second is of the view from a window of the Al-Aruba Hotel in Mogadishu (figures 2 and 3).

On the one hand, the human element—the woman in the red dress—and the seascape of the Indian Ocean, on the other, are the two strategic elements that *ruin* the melancholy that potentially characterizes the gaze of the imperial debris, pointing to its vital (re)signification from a subjective dimension in the present.

Figure 1: Capture from Bonn's photo book (Bonn, 2015). The image and the following ones are also available at the photographer's website (http://www.guillaumebonn.com/mosquito-coast.html).

Figure 2: Capture from Bonn's photo book (Bonn, 2015). Author's caption: "View from the Al-Aruba Hotel, now a military base for the African Union, Mogadishu, 2013" (Bonn, 2015).

Figure 3: *At left.* Capture from Bonn's photo book (Bonn, 2015). Author's caption: "Al-Aruba Hotel, now an African Union military base, Mogadishu, 2013" (Bonn, 2015).

I would like to focus on the first image, which, according to Bonn, refers to a real past experience of the photographer,[v] who reenacts the event through the picture, placing the subject of the woman as the primary visual element, dominating and (re)signifying the debris on two different levels: the debris of Italian colonialism, and the traces of the civil war that the Somali state has endured over the last two decades, particularly the city of Mogadishu.

The second image features the Al-Aruba Hotel in Mogadishu, a building of colonial origin, formerly the base of the al-Shabab militia, and later transformed into the military base for the African Union contingent then leading peacekeeping operations in Somalia. The old building appears in the picture as a sort of frame allowing the viewer to focus on another level of the image. In other words, the building's windows enable a strategic shift from one social topography to another, determined by the focus on the people in the background, focusing an action that happens beyond and despite the debris. In both images, the gaze of the picture indicates a human landscape that defines the ruin not as a trace of the past but as an index of a possible future. Therefore, observing the photographic project as a whole, we see that it is the relationship between the maritime and the human elements that comprises the fabric of a narrative built through different layers of histories and memories, suggesting an explicit and productive counterpoint with literary writing that, through a different language, builds a memory of the self and of the place following a similar conceptual strategy, and therefore pointing to what Achille Mbembe defines as "African forms of self-writing" (Mbembe, 2002). In other words: imaginations and strategies that dismantle an idea of authenticity guided by a

relationship between locality, identity, and history, indicating "an intellectual space to rethink those temporalit[ies] that [are] always simultaneously bifurcating toward several different futures, and in so doing [open] the way to the possibility of multiple ancestries" (Mbembe, 2002). This includes, for example, works like *Paradise* and *By the Sea* (2001), by the Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah; *Links* (2005) and *Knots* (2006), by Somali writer Nuruddin Farah; and *Índicos Indícios* (2005) and *Ponta Gea* (2017), by Mozambican novelist João Paulo Borges Coelho. These are authors whose literary projects are marked by a paradigmatic relationship between *time* and *self-writing*, and where the Indian Ocean points to a subjective and transnational geography through which other times can emerge, (re)presenting stories and memories that reveal different selfs, simultaneously dismantling the idea of an identity that is assumed as a substance (Mbembe, 2002).

"Relics" and "Liquid City" are the respective titles of the first chapters of *By the Sea* (Gurnah, 2001) and *Ponta Gea* (Borges Coelho, 2017), two novels that articulate the conceptual constellation of debris, colonial memory, contemporary transformations, and self-writing as matrix(es) of narratives in which the very relation between subject and time, as well as between the land (the continent and nation-state) and sea (the Indian Ocean and the coastline) makes visible and reframes histories that are simultaneously traces and indexes of a world of temporal, spatial, and human plurality and transformation marked by *combination* and *unevenness* (WReC, 2015). This is also the case of Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect Trilogy*, composed of the three novels *Crossbones* (2011), *Knots* (2006), and *Links* (2001), where self-writing is deeply intertwined with the different historical struggles—from political persecution to piracy—of the Somali nation-state and, from a wider perspective, the entire Horn of Africa. Furthermore, what these literary works seem to put forward is an *idea of the world* that narratives substantiating the definition of an African subjectivity have often neglected or set aside. It is what Achille Mbembe defines as an "Africa disconnected from the world: the crazy dream of a world without others," where *primary fantasies* and the *prose of nativism* lie at the base of the attempt to define an African identity in a clear and simple way and which, over time, has generally failed (Mbembe, 2002):

> In African history, it is thought, there is neither irony nor accident. We are told that African history is essentially governed by forces beyond Africans' control. The diversity and the disorder of the world, as well as the open character of historical possibilities, are reduced to a spasmodic, unchanging cycle, infinitely repeated in accord with a conspiracy always fomented by forces beyond Africa's reach. Existence itself is expressed, almost always, as a stuttering. Ultimately, the African is supposed to be merely a castrated subject, the passive instrument of the Other's enjoyment. Under such conditions, there can be no more radical utopian vision than the one suggesting that Africa disconnect itself from the world—the mad dream of a world without Others. (Mbembe, 2002, p. 251–252)

At the same time, these apparently autobiographical and memorialistic novels can be addressed as literary forms of self-writing that aspire to another conceptualization of the notion of time in its relationship with memory and subjectivity in a postcolonial or rather post-

imperial critical framework. Furthermore, they constitute *forms of registration* of the self outside a conception of *time as space* and as *identity as geography* (Mbembe, 2002), and where the Indian Ocean is configured as a literary or visual and conceptual device able to cope with the density of the African present and, therefore, the element to tackle time as the only possible subjectivity to be written, imagined, and narrated.

On one hand, Abdulrazak Gurnah is usually considered one of the most prominent writers of the Indian Ocean, and the reading of his novels has been frequently defined throughout the corollary of the postcolonial condition but also within the critical lens of world literature,[vi] pointing to a similarity with the critical reception of Nuruddin Farah.[vii] On the other hand, as for the reception of João Paulo Borges Coelho, there have been few attempts to include the work of this author within the critical framework of the Indian Ocean or through the perspective of world-literature.[viii] In general, both the scholarship on Indian Ocean literature and the perspective of world literature/world-literature seem to fall short in promoting critical readings and comparative approaches that deconstruct the hegemony of dominant languages, as well as the market-driven circulation of literature. Furthermore, the proposal to address these literary works in a more materialistic line of thought, tackling these narratives throughout the concepts of *combination* and *unevenness*, would potentially allow for providing a wider definition of the Indian Ocean literary space, as well as a more material sense of the problem of world-literature. On that account, a number of critical paradigms that usually define the scholarship on Indian Ocean studies—transnationalism, circulation, and hybridization, among others—as well as the those that characterize the perspective of world literature/world-literature—core, periphery, modernity—would hopefully be (re)signified, opening new critical possibilities to read literature beyond the limits of hegemonic critical categories and commodity networks.

Self-writing, Indian Ocean Studies, and World-Literature: Toward New Theoretical Departures

A historical study centred on a stretch of water has all the charms but undoubtedly all the dangers of a new departure ~ Fernand Braudel

By operationalizing the relationship between space and history, as Fernand Braudel proposes (1985), scholarship in the field of Indian Ocean history and social sciences have been developing theoretical concepts and methodological approaches that define the Indian Ocean as an "interregional arena" (Bose, 2006, p. 6), and thus as a network of dynamic and structured relationships (Chaudhury, 1990) whose articulation privileges specific links, contacts, and dissonances between "worlds" that are simultaneously separate and yet contiguous. As Sugata Bose points out:

> The Indian Ocean is better characterized as an "interregional arena" rather than as a "system," a term that has more rigid connotations. An interregional arena lies somewhere between the generalities of a "world system" and the specificities of particular regions. (Bose, 2006, p. 6)

The relationship between *regional entity* and *world-system* that the definition of the Indian Ocean as an "arena" proposes to promote is based on the need to problematize spatial constructs that seem to project a certain coloniality of knowledge.

Regional entities known today as the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia which underpin the rubric of Area Studies in the Western academy, are relatively recent constructions that arbitrarily project certain legacies of colonial power onto the domain of knowledge in the post-colonial era. The world of the Indian Ocean, or for that matter, that of the Mediterranean, has a much greater depth of economic and cultural meaning. Tied together by webs of economic and cultural relationships, such arenas nevertheless had flexible internal and external boundaries. These arenas, where port cities formed the nodal points of exchange and interaction, have been so far mostly theorized, described, and analyzed only for the premodern and early modern periods. They have not generally formed the canvas on which scholars have written histories of modern era. (Bose, 2006, pp. 6–7)

In other words, the spatial dimension is a paradigmatic and essential element for the purpose of historical, social, and economic analysis, underlining a number of specificities that characterize the so-called Indian Ocean arena. At the same time, for literary analysis, the Indian Ocean perspective would deeply benefit from a critical approach that allows for observing the Indian Ocean space within a materialist line of thought in order to grasp and analyze the *combined* and *uneven* realities that compose the Indian Ocean world, "if, indeed there is such a thing" (Pearson, 2011, p. 82).

At this point, a further theoretical possibility seems to arise. The *worldling dimension* (Said, 1993; 2004) of time and subjectivity that characterize the literary and visual narratives analyzed in this article offers the possibility to engage with contemporary debates concerning Indian Ocean studies, or rather Indian Ocean literatures, and more recent developments in world-literature according to the theoretical formulations proposed by the Warwick Research Collective in the book *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015). By this, I mean their discussion of the world-literary system, as well as the concept of (semi-)peripheral novel—and (semi-)peripheral realism—proposed by WReC. In order to do this, I would again like to go back to Guillaume Bonn's photographic work and to focus on a single image (figure 4):

Figure 4: Capture from Bonn's photo book (Bonn, 2015). The image is also available at the photographer's website (http://www.guillaumebonn.com/mosquito-coast.html). Author's caption: "An old telephone still in use, Nyali area, Mombasa, 2014" (Bonn, 2015).

The ideas of progress, consumerism, transformation, and metamorphosis that the photographer mentions in the excerpts quoted above are quite evident throughout the entire project; so too are paradigmatic aspects of the literary work usually defined as Indian Ocean writers, particularly in the novels *By the Sea*, by Abdulrazak Gurnah (2001), and *Ponta Gea*, by João Paulo Borges Coelho (2017).[ix] Moreover, observing Bonn's photography project, as well as the novels by Gurnah and Borges Coelho, a compelling conception of the Indian Ocean world seems to arise, offering the possibility to address the discussion of Indian Ocean studies and its narratives within the framework of WReC's debate on the idea of the world in "world(-)literature," and thus, its implications for the fields of literary studies and comparative literature. In lieu of developing a more detailed discussion of the novels—whose density and complexities deserve a more thorough analysis than the length of this article permits—I would like to focus on the disciplinary implications that *the idea of the world* contained in these literary works seem to suggest in order to put forward some methodological and critical reflections that, in my view, are particularly relevant for the argument I am attempting to draw in the conclusions to this text. These conclusions are allegorically illustrated by Bonn's photograph: an old telephone standing out in the open air, still perfectly functioning, and apparently wired to the Indian Ocean. A "dialectical image[s] of combined unevenness requiring not just simple decoding but creative application" (WReC, 2015, p. 17).

First of all, according to the perspective mentioned above, it seems to me that the systemic definition of Indian Ocean literatures (Moorthy & Jamal, 2010)[x] would greatly benefit from confronting WReC's problematization of the world-literary system as the literature that registers the *modern capitalist world-system* (WReC, 2015), and in so doing offers the possibility to recognize specific literary forms that are able to give the account of the *combined*

and uneven developments of modernity as the spatio-temporal sensorium of capitalism (Jameson, 2002; WReC, 2015). Quoting from WReC:

> As we understand it, the literary "registration" of the world-system does not (necessarily) involve criticality or dissent. Our assumption is rather that the effectivity of the world-system will *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world-system exists unforgoably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being.
>
> [...] (semi-)peripheral texts' meditations on the world are necessarily performed in the harsh glare of past and present imperial and colonial dispensations, whatever the specific national, trans-national or regional provenance of these dispensations might be. (WReC, 2015, p. 20)

On that account, the very concept of self-writing—as well as the genres that are conventionally addressed as derivatives of narratives of this type—can be addressed as a paradigmatic literary form of the Indian Ocean and part of a literary world-system. Thus, the Indian Ocean can be defined not as a separate world-system, or rather a system among other systems (Frank, 1998; Frank & Gills, 2000), but as a (semi-)peripheral location and social and cultural space. Within this approach, it would be necessary to focus on the combined and uneven flows of time registered by Indian Ocean literary writing:

> We might then see the "accordionising" or "telescoping" function of combined and uneven development as a form of time travel within the same space, a spatial bridging of unlike times—in Lefebvre's sense, the production of *untimely* space—that leads from the classic forms of nineteenth-century realism to the speculative methodologies of today's global science fiction. (WReC, 2015, p. 17)

Moreover, considering the debate regarding the Indian Ocean and therefore the theorization of Indian Ocean literatures within the framework of world-system analysis, a critical perspective based on the idea of the Indian Ocean as a *World* as well as a *worldling paradigm*[xi]—both being established theoretical perspectives in the scholarship on Indian Ocean studies—will allow us to address the Indian Ocean, and thus Indian Ocean literatures, not as a "level playing field" (WReC, 2015), and therefore to scrutinize a number of hegemonic and Eurocentric features that characterize the debate on comparative literature and that also need to be addressed and problematized within the field of Indian Ocean literary studies. Among many other facets, I would like to focus on a linguistic question that is also related to the idea of the Indian Ocean as a worldling and transnational paradigm (Brugioni, 2017), addressing the rather paradigmatic detail of the marginality of Portuguese-speaking authors and texts within the scholarship on Indian Ocean literature. Reviewing academic publications on Indian Ocean literature from the last decades, it is possible to note that the absence of Portuguese-speaking spaces, subjects, and locations is quite visible, underlining how the few Lusophone authors included are in fact those whose novels have been translated into English, as in the case of Mia Couto.[xii] Recalling the situation that characterizes comparative literature as a field of study, we can easily notice how the field of Indian Ocean

literature needs to engage with its intrinsic multilingual dimension throughout a more progressive and effective idea and practice of writing and translating, avoiding the fetishism of language, and particularly, recognizing the continuum between the practices of writing and translating.

If to read is already to "translate," then the seeds are already sown for the view that, even if translation is by definition a "political" act, something may be gained by it, not merely something lost. We are further enjoined by this insight to grasp reading and translating as themselves social rather than solitary processes, and thereby to attend to the full range of social practices implicated: writing as commodity labour, the making of books, publishing and marketing, the social "fate" of a publication (reviews, criticism, the search for, creation and cultivation of a readership, etc.). (WReC, 2015, p. 28)

In connection with this, I will raise a second point. Taking into account the prominence of the literary genre usually defined as "autobiographical" and "self-writing" in the Indian Ocean world,[xiii] this theoretical perspective will allow us to better qualify *Indian Ocean literary forms* and, particularly, quoting again from the Warwick Research Collective:

> To grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development, we must attend to its modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar—as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies. Any typology of combined and uneven development will offer a catalogue of effects or motifs at the level of narrative form: discrepant encounters, alienation effects, surreal cross-linkages, unidentified freakish objects, unlikely likenesses across barriers of language, period, territory—the equivalent of umbrellas meeting sewing machines on (animated) dissecting tables. These are, in essence, dialectical images of combined unevenness requiring not just simple decoding but creative application. (WReC, 2015, p. 17)

In conclusion, this critical intersection would enable us to reposition Indian Ocean studies, particularly Indian Ocean literary studies, within the vast critical perspective of the world-literary system not as *world literature, bigger*—as Franco Moretti would say (2013)—but as (semi-)peripheral literary forms that register contemporary transformations and changes, and in so doing offer the possibility to rethink the *different levels of historical experiences* and the *unlikely likenesses* of narrations that characterize literary writing in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, this sort of critical and conceptual (re)vision will unquestionably contribute to dismantling a number of hegemonic and essentialist (mis)conceptions that frequently define critical approaches and theoretical formulations in contemporary literary studies devoted to Indian Ocean writers and narratives. Hence, tackling Indian Ocean literatures or, rather, *(visual) narrations and (literary) writing across the Indian Ocean* as forms of registration of the modern capitalist world-system would possibly contribute to a more materialist comprehension of the wide range of *combination(s)* and *unevenness(es)* that characterize the (Indian Ocean) world (literary system).

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Notes

[i] This article draws on the research developed within the project "*Combined and Uneven* Comparisons. Rethinking the fields of African and Postcolonial literary studies within the debate on world-literature" leads by Elena Brugioni at the University of Campinas UNICAMP, grant 2020/07836-0 São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP).

[ii] The project is documented in the photo book *The Mosquito Coast: Travels from Maputo to Mogadishu*, published by Hatje Cantz in 2015. Introduction by Guillaume Bonn; foreword by Jon Lee Anderson.

[iii] On contemporary travel writing, including Paul Theroux, see Ribeiro, 2017.

[iv] All the quotes by Guillaume Bonn are from the photo book's introduction, which has no page numbers.

[v] See the caption of the the image in the photo book in Bonn, 2015.

[vi] Here I mean the definition of "world literature" as literature that circulates beyond national borders, and approaches to reading it, as it has been defined by David Damrosch (2003); on this, it is important to clarify that Damrosch's perspective shows fundamental differences from the definition of 'world-literature" proposed by WReC that I draw on in this article.

[vii] On this, see: Garcia et al. 2010; Garuba, 2008; Hofmeyr, 2007; Hitchcock 2010.

[viii] On this, see: Brugioni 2017a, 2017b, 2014; Leite et al., 2018; Medeiros, 2020; Santos, 2020.

[ix] For a reading of *Ponta Gea* within the critical perspective developed by WReC, see Medeiros 2020.

[x] The systemic dimension was developed by Moorthy and Jamal in the volume *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspective*s (2010), which draws on Andre Gunder Frank's theorization of multiple world-system(s) in order to avoid the supposed dialectic between core/periphery within a single world-system theorized by Immanuel Wallerstein (2004).

[xi] The concepts of *World* and *worldling* were some of the main topics discussed during the international workshop On Worlds and Artworks, hosted by the Research Section Arts and Aesthetics at the University of Bayreuth (February 10–13, 2020), where the paper from which this article originates was originally presented.

[xii] On this, see, for instance, Hofmeyr, 2007; Gupta et al., 2010; and Samuelson, 2017.

[xiii] By this, I mean a number of acclaimed and well-known authors from a diverse range of backgrounds and writing in different languages, as well as authors whose works do not circulate beyond national or regional borders. Two paradigmatic examples can be adduced here: the Nobel laureate Le Clézio and the Swahili poetry of northern Mozambique. In this connection, Clarissa

Vierke's paper at the abovementioned On Worlds and Artworks workshop is particularly important: "World Literature's Other? A Reflection upon a Swahili Poem from Northern Mozambique," where she analyzes the authorships, publications, and themes that characterize Swahili poetry in Mozambique within the critical debate on world(-)literature. On the relation between world literature and what the author defines as "*small* Swahili literature," see Vierke, 2019.