

## **Leah Chase: [00:00:00]**

Welcome and thanks for joining us in another installment of this Center for the Study of the Novel's podcast cafe. In this episode, our host Margaret Cohen is joined by the distinguished scholars Charne Lavery and Isabel Hofmeyr to discuss their new oceanic humanities books focusing on the Indian Ocean. Also joining us is Stanford's Michaela Bronstein, author of *Out of Context*. Charne Lavery is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Pretoria, whose book, *Writing Ocean Worlds*, was published with Palgrave Macmillan in 2021. Isabel Hofmeyr is a professor of African Literature at Wits University and Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. Her most recent book, *Dockside Reading*, was published with Duke University Press

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in 2022. Thank you for listening in on another of our warm and informal exchanges as we scholars have a friendly chat among ourselves.

## **Margaret Cohen:**

So welcome to our podcast and welcome to Stanford. Isabel and Charne, it's really a great pleasure to have you here, and Michaela, thank you for joining us. I wanted to start, Isabel and maybe Charne, by asking how you got to know each other.

## **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

That's an interesting question. We both had an interest in the Indian Ocean, and I think we first met at an Indian Ocean conference and then continued to remain in touch. And then Charne and I set up jointly together this project, *Oceanic Humanities for the Global South*, in South Africa.

## **Charne Lavery:**

I have a slightly more

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garrulous version. I met Isabel when I was a first-year doing my PhD, and I was working on Indian Ocean studies. And a lot of it was quite sort of high-level. And I met Isabel at a conference, and she was telling this amazing story about how these World War prisoners got taken to India, and so there were all these Anglo [?] or now called the African War gravesites in India. So these kind of really random connections that made for a great story. And then also the story about a very slapstick, very popular film in South Africa called Mr. Bones that had also become really popular on the Bollywood circuits. So kind of connections across the Indian Ocean that were not the third world solidarity and other more high-brow things. And then I invited her to be my external examiner, and she said

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at the drinks afterwards, “Come do a postdoc with me.” And so thus began a beautiful friendship.

## **Margaret Cohen:**

That’s so cool. Have you met Michaela Bronstein?

## **Michaela Bronstein:**

Just a minute ago. Hi, I’m Michaela Bronstein.

## **Margaret Cohen:**

So Michaela has serious ocean creds. She swims in the Pacific.

## **Michaela Bronstein:**

It's true. That is true. That may be my most serious ocean cred. But yeah, the Pacific's wonderful. But I've never been to the Indian Ocean, except by your wonderful books.

**Isabel Hofmeyr:**

You'll have to come to visit us.

**Charne Lavery:**

Yeah, you'll have to come.

**Michaela Bronstein:**

I'd love to.

**Margaret Cohen:**

So I have a very broad question, which is how did you all get started working on the ocean? It's a topic or an area or a method that really has not been at the center for all the 20th century, I think, of literary and cultural studies. Going out on a limb here.

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And then in the 21st century, it started to really emerge as a hub of history, culture, literature, anthropology, and I'm wondering how you got involved with it.

**Isabel Hofmeyr:**

[indecipherable]

**Margaret Cohen:**

Yeah.

## **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

I think interestingly, it goes back, in fact, to the political transition in South Africa, so 1994, the legal end of apartheid. And so a lot of scholars then started to think South Africa was – it was both a transition to democracy but also a transition to a very rapidly globalizing world. And most of us had only ever really worked on South Africa. So there was this question of, “If one was going to think about South Africa in the world in this context of this rapidly globalizing, the emergence of the Global South, how would you do that?” So in the wake of 1994, a lot of people became really interested in the Indian Ocean as a way of thinking about

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South links within the ex-third world. And there was a lot of really interesting work that emerged from that. Of course that was all very much a kind of all-stars surface ocean. And in fact, it was really through Charne, who took the lead then to say, “Of course, the surface is extremely important, but we also have to think much, much more in material terms.” So that was my particular reach for coming in.

## **Michaela Bronstein:**

I mean, one of the striking things I found when I was reading these two books alongside each other is the kind of shared object, kind of Indian Ocean culture, but the very different methodologies. And given that you two have worked so closely together, I’m kind of curious to hear the backstory about your more book history -- would that be a fair description? – book history approach versus your what’s inside the books -- that’s a little too glib but let’s go with it – approach and how those

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cross-pollinate within the world of Indian Ocean studies from your perspectives.

## **Charne Lavery:**

Well that sort of feeds in nicely to how I came to the topic. I'm not a natural Pacific Ocean swimmer myself, really sort of not naturally an ocean person. Grew up in the mountains and forests, you know? I came from a philosophy literature background, and then I'd been reading Conrad and being really interested in these moments that he describes throughout a few of the works sinking into the sea as a way of describing existential uncertainty, existential vertigo. So that was my kind of point of interest. And then wanted to bring that into also, you know, I was from South Africa and doing my DPhil at Oxford, so wanting to very much push back against a hegemonic view of the world, of being completely

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Northern. So bringing those two together, this like, "Okay, well, where is Conrad when he's describing these moments?" And that's in an Indian Ocean context, and the existential uncertainty is from the experience of otherness. So then that led into Indian Ocean interest. And then I was quite aware of my own ignorance of the ocean itself. And the headlines around the time - I was doing this research on the PhD and then the book - the headlines were all about how the Indian Ocean was changing, its oceanographic characteristics, etcetera. So I became interested. We did an oceanography course and tried to learn a little bit more about the physical object that we were studying. And then maybe we can talk a bit more - because I came from this close philosophical reading, and that's very much apparent in my approach in this book.

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And Isabel comes to it from books from the outside.

## **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

Books from the outside. Yeah. I think so. I've always found one of the really wonderful things about doing and thinking in those really vast terms about the ocean, or the Indian Ocean, is that it's this huge space of experiment. And that it doesn't really belong to anybody, you know, so it's this huge, huge container in which you can do all of these kinds of explorations. And I was really interested in this Dockside Reading to think about, "Can you put together oceanic studies and the dry area of print culture?" Which has always been dry. And I think it's this very interesting work starting to emerge from all sorts of quarters thinking about this intersection of environmental humanities and print culture. And so the book I think is an attempt to join that particular kind of intersection.

## **Michaela Bronstein:**

I mean, I was thinking about it, and although I'm a

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Conradian scholar, most of my climate change focus research isn't ocean oriented. I work on the Future Library Project. I don't know if any of you have encountered this. It's basically a work of conceptual public art in Norway where an author every year donates a book that will not be read until 2114 when trees planted in 2114 will be cut down to print the books. So the interaction between the materiality of texts and questions about circulation and stopped circulation that you described so wonderfully in the book and questions of environmental humanities are very much on my mind, but I hadn't thought of it in terms of the ocean until this occasion, really. Perhaps because there are ways in which the ocean feels so threatening to material culture.

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And both you and the descriptions of books being tossed into the ocean when they're not allowed in, and all of those more philosophical, existential Conrad passages that you're talking about.

## **Charne Lavery:**

Yeah, I love that books overboard image. There was a point during the research of this book that Isabel – I don't know if we were having a meeting or something – and she called me, and she was like, "What do you think happens to books underwater? How can we find out? You know, like, what's the process?" And I'd been reading about slightly darker versions of various tsunamis, you know, Japan, Indian Ocean, and what happens and differently to human bodies in the sea after long periods of time. So we were kind of thinking of those two things together, but it's a very – you know, you start off with the textual first hook, and then you end up asking these questions about, "Ok, paper and the substance,

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what's its chemistry? How does that interact with seawater? What's its chemistry?" So it's really lovely to involve these materialist, material questions.

## **Michaela Bronstein:**

Did you find an answer to the question, "What happens to books if they're tossed into the-?"

## **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

I spoke to our water engineers who said they thought it would be maybe the currents, that it wouldn't actually be -- I, in fact, left paper in the water to see, and it seemed fine for a long time. They said it would be the sort of knocking the thing about I think would be really interesting. But, Michaela, the project you're talking about sounds so interesting also because it's this real recognition of books as organic objects.

## **Michaela Bronstein:**

I requested that the Stanford Library purchase one of the Future Library certificates which entitles them to a copy in 100 years. And what's fascinating about it is that it's a very ostentatiously handmade paper kind of look. It's not the kind of paper you would print

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a volume on at all because it's very uneven and the edges are all rough. It's sort of designed to draw your attention to materiality that is actually not I would imagine the end goal of what printed books are supposed to look like. And also materiality is consumption energy is the element of that project that I think is fascinating, that kind of making you hold off on the novel that you're interested in because some of these authors are famous authors. You might be sad that this novel by Margaret Atwood that nobody can read. And so that sort of forcing you to refrain from consuming something and making you think about that even the consumption of a book as a form of energy expenditure I find fascinating.

**Margaret Cohen:**

That's really fascinating, yeah. I had a question similar to yours about the cross-pollination of your methods because Charne, you're so powerful in evoking the imagination of the Indian Ocean world

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and the different readers and the different authors that you discuss. And Isabel, I just was blown away by the fact that authors really didn't matter to the censors. You know, that they looked first for who's the publisher. I mean, your lists of all the different things that they looked for, and it just struck me that, you know, there's this interesting cross-pollination including things like words that you take from Goethe[?] like, I don't know how to pronounce gallimaufry. And I just am curious a little bit to just talk a little bit more about that intersection but also difference. It's like you're conjuring up a world, and then the materiality of it starts to take on all these incredibly



interesting and odd features. I mean, I really want to go out to the three-mile limit and just pull up the ocean

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and see what's down there.

**Michaela Bronstein:**

Probably many things that have lasted more than the books have.

**Isabel Hofmeyr:**

Absolutely.

**Charne Lavery:**

I've just been reading about this story by Nadine Gordimer, which I hadn't come across until recently. I'm much more in newer projects, but it's basically the sea recedes at some point and reveals what's on the sea floor. So it's like fantastic, and it's all, you know, this guilty mess of waste and detritus that's on the sea floor, and it's off the coast. It's kind of this revealed history. But the sea recedes as in when a tsunami is coming, and so it eventually comes and covers it back up. Everyone's very relieved. So that sort of drained ocean imaginary is something I'm quite interested in. You do just want to be able to see through from the surface of the sea to the bottom and what's underneath.

**Michaela Bronstein:**

I mean the perhaps less monumental inland version of that is that in several of the drying up lakes of the

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western United States they're finding bodies. And so the kind of literal excavation of the skeletons of the past as the climate changes. Of course, it doesn't seem like the sea is going to recede any time soon. [?] the opposite.

## **Charne Lavery:**

Isabel Hofmeyr: And maybe I can just come in and briefly again on method. Just very briefly, the background to this book was I finished a book called Ghandi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading, which was about the press and the newspaper that Ghandi set up during his South African years. And he was a great opponent

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of copyright, so when I finished the book I was fascinated and thought "Was this position unusual? Well, you know, what was the position with colonial copyright?" And that's how I in fact then ended up with a custom pass. But I think if I had printed this book 10 or 15 years ago, it would have been a much drier book, and I would only have looked at the print culture. But Charne and I both in our teaching and research obviously drew in all this inspiration from Margaret's work about giving us methods and ways to actually – because it's just a huge mental leap to try to imagine under the sea, so your work was really, really fantastic for us. I tried to – I mean, it doesn't really go as much underwater as I would have liked, but it was at least a sense of, "Okay, how can we put together the ocean and paper as closely as possible?"

## **Charne Lavery:**

I mean, the other thing that I was thinking about when you were sort of talking about

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this hundred years in the future has become very much the timescale of imagining post-climate change futures. It was a much longer period, and now it kind of keeps shrinking. We have time horizons that are much sooner than 100 years for kind of major changes in the world. So I mean there's a really interesting question what the paper would look like in 100 years time. Because now all of a sudden it could be a very different future by then, or it could be very similar.

### **Michaela Bronstein:**

Well I think the logic of the project is that the kind of goal is not just to incentivize preserving this one forest but to preserve a world in which you might have books and that you might be able to use the trees to do something as unnecessary as print books, compared to, say, firewood or building shelter or something like that. So I think absolutely the project is meant for it to be possible to fail in a certain way,

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meant for there to be possible for some kind of radical transformation that would make it morally, physically, technologically impossible to succeed because forcing you to think about that possibility is part of the goal.

### **Charne Lavery:**

That's what I think about climate change is forcing Isabel's might have been a drier book, but we were both very much aware when we started working together that the object we were studying was currently changing. It's this kind of consistent space with reliable oceanographic characteristics. You know, this monsoon that goes one way one half of the year and the other way the other half of the year. And that deep structure underpinning a social world and imagined world was changing at the point at which we were looking at it. So, you know, you have to think differently. You know, there's a kind of

forcing to think differently, to think underwater, across oceans which maybe could've been

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considered blank space for some of the 20th century. But that's becoming more of a gap in the long history of imagining the sea as opposed to, you know, central to forms of transport and now central to futures.

**Margaret Cohen:**

And then ocean also is very much related to the land, so the climate would affect inland climates that you would have no sense of actually being connected to in a visual way or in a practical way for seafaring. But yet they're very much affected by drought, for example, in California here for farming. One could go into a very long laundry list.

**Isabel Hofmeyr:**

I found also, in fact, Charne and I went to Antarctica in 2019, and out of that came a short piece "Reading in Antarctica." So again it was this thing about how one really in this age has to become a sort of elemental reader. And that point is very clear when you go to Antarctica because how you read is hugely governed by the

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state of the weather and the ship and whether you're seasick or not. I mean it also obviously impacts a lot on how we thought about reading and discussions of reading.

**Michaela Bronstein:**

I mean one of the things I'm thinking about hearing you talk about this after reading the books, the kind of dichotomy between oceanic experiences, sort of noble material reality – Am I seasick or not? Are

my fingers too cold to turn the pages? etcetera and whatever situation I happen to be in – and ocean as kind of symbolic other to the land, the kind of space uncertainty or the unknown. You see, I think, in your book one of those Conrad lines that I've never written about but always runs through my head, the Pacific being the most discreet of the hot temperate oceans. And one of the things I thought while reading

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your book was that I could see what it meant for an ocean to be less discreet, as it were. An ocean to be a little more knowable, a little less kind of unimaginably vast than the Pacific is looking out across it. And now my own romance with the Pacific is kind of coming out here. But also the way in which that sort of functions both as noble thing, a thing that sort of brings people together, that reflects all sort of material reality in their interactions, versus ocean as kind of this zone of disorientation, which you also talk about, or uncertainty, and how at various points it seems to function in both ways in different cultural contexts and for different purposes.

**Charne Lavery:**

Yeah. One thing we've been really pushing back on in the project as a whole - so the sort of wider network and research project of the Oceanic Humanities for the Global South - has been to try and not only rely on one of those poles.

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So that the ocean is a metaphor for fluidity and uncertainty and unknowability, but that in fact, as many scholars, Margaret, Liz DeLoughrey, several others have been saying for a long time, the ocean is also militarized, territorialized, and materially distinct both across its surface and underneath the surface of the sea. So that it's not just generalized fluidity, which has been one thing we've been finding quite hard to - it requires a certain ocean literacy, actually,

and it almost requires a sort of retraining to see the sea not just as a metaphor or an analog of fluidity and to see it neither as that, nor just as this transport highway, this kind of blank, blue connecting

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like a highway. You know, you don't think about the highway itself. Yeah, those are two things we've been focusing on.

**Margaret Cohen:**

I want to come back to something you said about taking a course together in oceanography and the intersection of science and what we do. It's a super interesting moment for it - I think I mentioned it as we walked in the door - Stanford has started a new school of sustainability, the Doerr School of Sustainability with an oceans department. And I've been talking to some of the people in it. They came after a long conversation that's primarily scientists and policy people to three kind of goals, which is literacy, leadership, and inspiration. I believe those are the three. And we're talking about what role could the humanities play, what role could the blue humanities play and introduce that concept, and they loved that idea. And there is no department of

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blue humanities, as you know. So I'm really curious to know about the ins and outs of your working scientists and taking science classes. And Michaela, I don't know if you've worked with scientists in the contexts of woods or trees.

**Michaela Bronstein:**

No, I haven't. At least, not yet.

**Margaret Cohen:**

But anyways, so then let me just ask the question to Isabel.

## **Charne Lavery:**

I mean, you probably are working with – I mean, we’re all sort of working with engaging with climate science increasingly just as a matter of living in the world. This has been very much our challenge. When we knew that the monsoon was changing and was impacting the currents, that was when we realized we needed to understand how currents work, how they’re related to sea temperature, etcetera. That’s when we took this online oceanography course that was very hard but very good, but also, you know, it became a challenge. But moving actually from this book to my new book project

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to think – you know, literary studies is often done, certainly in this book, figuring out how an ocean is represented in fiction, and so turn to other disciplines. Indian Ocean studies is a very interdisciplinary field, and the other disciplines are typically Indian Ocean histories -- which is now a very vast literature -- Indian Ocean anthropology. So those are kind of the other fields. So the question is, “Is it possible to do a cross-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary project engaging with literary studies and then marine biology and oceanography, maritime archeology?” So these very different disciplines, and it’s sort of led to quite interesting collaborations. One of them is – Isabel is interested in the South Atlantic, and I became interested in the southern part of the Indian Ocean. So we’ve

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both become involved with the national primarily science body working on Antarctic science. And then the other one is this project on the deep Indian Ocean where we’ve followed Margaret under the sea, but in this different context of the Indian Ocean, which is requiring an entirely new literacy in deep sea science, which is something. If we all have a familiarity with climate science, we do not

all have a familiarity with the deep sea, its layers, etcetera. So it's led to some interesting things. The final point is I ended up working on the latest Africa Chapter for the recent IPCC report as the person who works on narratives of oceans and then was helping to narrativize the findings of the IPCC report. So it's interesting that, I guess, learning

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from science in one way leads to these interesting narrative science collaborations.

**Isabel Hofmeyr:**

The one thing just thinking about – because as you said, it is the successes and failures and very often it's just a failure because you're just speaking from such different kind of paradigms and worlds – but the one thing that I found out we've got water engineers who were very fascinated by this idea of what the book calls creolized waters. You know, set in Indigenous understandings around much of Africa, the sea is the realm of the ancestors. And so that became quite a productive site that they felt they could approach that and that was interesting to them. And they felt that was an interesting point in which if they were looking at water, particularly in rural situations, that was useful. And Charne has mentioned, Charne has done more work on this than I, but a real collaboration with marine archaeologists,

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and that's been particularly productive in terms of the kinds of narratives that they generate and the fictional narratives around those shipwrecks.

**Margaret Cohen:**



Are they interested in information that comes from the creative or cultural or imaginative or historical works that you do with scientists?

### **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

I think it depends on the individual scientist, you know. And you just sort of try and – I suppose like anything – you just find out the ones who are a bit interested. Some are absolutely not. And they're sort of really quite anxious if they feel they have to engage with that, but yeah, we'll hopefully find someone.

### **Michaela Bronstein:**

There is this tendency for certain kinds of science-oriented people to think of the arts as a form of communication and not of knowledge production. And I think that that's probably what's you're running into.

### **Charne Lavery:**

Do you have experience

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of working with scientists?

### **Margaret Cohen:**

I have, and I think as Isabel said, it's been quite varied. I think that when I've engaged with marine biologists, some of them have like looked at the first underwater paintings that I write about and they said, "Oh, the lagoon in Tahiti doesn't look like that anymore." You know, so they're interested as a record of coral in a beautiful state, although the work of this painters or printers is quite modernist. So it's not a detailed, loving rendition of coral in the way that a scientific illustrator would give. Others are interested in communication

strategies, primarily. And that's been a surprise to me when I talk to scientists, and they say, "Our work is so dry. We can't get public traction on it. We can't get general audiences interested in it."

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Could you give us some help?" And I always feel like my work is so dry. But I think that we do share the goal of literacy, and that literacy is so hard to convey, and it's so hard to get. And this is not on the scientists. I think recognizing our knowledge, as Michaela says, is really important. But for us on the side of the humanities to recognize that, you know, the description of the secret share or the kind of conditions off the coast of Siam and what that means for the maneuver that a captain is going to do at the end versus a much more allegorical reading of that story about, you know, the narcissistic double or a queer reading

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of the story to understand the reality of these conditions. That's a hard sell still. You know, when I teach a course imagining the ocean, sometimes I pass out a tide [chart]. Like I say, "We're gonna go look at the tide pools. What day would be good?" And then people look at their schedule, teaching and they have all kinds of obligations. And then we settle on a time, and I pass out the tide charts. And they open the tide charts, and we look at the day. And usually it's a high tide or it's not a good tide, and I say, "We have to go at this time," and they're like, "No, we can't." So just to realize that the ocean environment is really – I hate the word granular – but it's just really specific, and it's an element, you know? It's very hard to convey that. I mean, climate change forces it because, you know, you can't just – I was very struck – I'll just go off on one more tangent – but during Hurricane Sandy, I have

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good friends in New York. I come from New York. And downtown Manhattanites, who are very disconnected from the ocean, they're not ocean-lookers. And they were so offended that their power was knocked out for four days because of Hurricane Sandy. It really drove home the fact that they were living very close to the water, but it was hard. They needed that lesson, and I don't know if they kept it.

## **Michaela Bronstein:**

I'm thinking about the west coast of the United States has a bunch of wilderness beach backpacking routes that you can do where you're just sort of hiking along the beach where there's no other access between the start and midpoint for 25 miles usually. But they're dependent on the tides. And lots of people get permits for the beach hikes without realizing that the day that's available is available because

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the only time the tide is low enough to get past a certain point is at like 3 in the morning or something like that, which would be very unwise in other ways. And that sense of sort of what's going on there is sort of the ocean as something that you don't realize you need to know. It's not that there isn't knowledge to be had. This maybe relates to your friends in New York. But you don't realize that you need to take the knowledge that's available into account, which I think gets back to that binary that you were talking about wanting to get away from earlier, that sort of desire to, on the one hand, to see something as sort of just about producing all the knowledge, and we have the knowledge and understanding it, and on the other hand, symbolic realms of the unknowable or unknown. But I think what a lot of what we've been talking about is this kind of sense of knowledge that you don't know you need to access in a particular way,

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and I sort of feel like a lot of things that you're talking about get at that, whether it's the knowability and unknowability of things that have sunk three miles off the coast or the zones of contact that are also zones of separation and isolation in the communities that you're talking about in the novels. But, yeah, I don't, you know.

### **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

On that, I think it's also about the bureaucratization of the ocean, which obviously became clear to me with these customs officials and that somehow you could make the ocean predictable, but you just build an ever bigger and bigger porch to actually remove yourself. Because in the early days, you know these customs houses were very precarious and have been invaded by sand or they've been washed down, and it is this sort of idea that you can actually - it's an imperial fantasy that you can

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bureaucratize everything and stamp your authority on the ocean.

### **Margaret Cohen:**

That's an amazing illustration you have with people of color carrying things onshore like straining under the burden and extremely fit and then the British customs officer - is he British? No, he's a colonial customs officer -

### **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

Yeah, yeah.

### **Margaret Cohen:**

- dressed so beautiful, you know, just standing there with his clipboard.

## Isabel Hofmeyr:

Yeah.

## Charne Lavery:

Well, there's so many forms of semi-forgotten embodied knowledges of the ocean, you know, that just intuitive embodied knowledge, and it's just not a knowledge that has been needed by those in economic and political power for much of the last hundred or so years. And so it feels, it's an area of ignorance and therefore fear. You don't actually want to think about how the ocean might swamp you or take into account

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the tide tables because it just feels like, "Well, I mean, I'll fly over it. I don't need to do that." But there's a lot of people still working in very oceanic ways. There's this fantastic book set in Cape Town. It's a narrative nonfiction about abalone poaching, and it's called Poacher. And it's written by a former poacher and a journalist together, and it's really just seeing how these kind of basically diving equipment abandoned by tourism companies for being old or whatever is now taken over by this community that has had a long history with fishing but now has added scuba diving for abalone as part of their community, and it's this very vivid, adventurous tale of dodging sharks and policemen to get abalone. You know, we forget that

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there are still underwater workers all over the world. There's been a kind of recovery of histories of African aquatics, African diasporic aquatics, and you know, it's not everyone who's ignorant of the sea. And we have the Maldives sinking, and people who live there are very much aware of that. It's not out of sight, out of mind as it certainly was for me.

## **Margaret Cohen:**

Charne Lavery: Yeah, there's increasing

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militarization of the Indian Ocean, which is I think less well known, so submarine territorialization, but also deep sea mining is likely to start next year, and the less is known about ecologies under the sea is the better for companies that might make money out of that. And even though there's invisibility because of, you know, the actually reflective sea surface, this kind of physical invisibility, and then there's possibly more pernicious invisibilization.

## **Margaret Cohen:**

So I want to zoom out with a big question, Charne and Isabel. I mean, you've been working for five years on this really extraordinary project about the Oceanic Humanities for the Global South with the Melon Foundation grant, and I was curious to know maybe any surprises that have emerged for you out of the project.

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## **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

I think for me was our graduate students got very interested in this idea of creolized water, and that produced really fascinating insights. And one thing – it's partly oceanic but it's also sort of linked to other waterways – was the extent to which those waterways would chart home to ancestors and water spirits and all sorts of things really occupied us and unbelievably effective popular sort of archive against the colonial. So they have stored memory in the most interesting and powerful way, and for a long time, it was also hidden because people didn't discuss it or it didn't really register on scholarly radar, so that I think I found

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really fascinating.

## **Charne Lavery:**

Yeah, we had at the start this sense in introducing the project to graduate students who, you know – like to take one example and someone who has now completed her PhD, Dr. Confidence Joseph, and she's now a postdoc, and she was working on, and she was like, "Well, what does the sea have to do with me?" And the kind of link that she found, which then became the basis of her PhD project, was at home, her grandmother had always had seashells in inland Zimbabwe, you know, far from the ocean. Never been to the sea, she'd never been – Conny had never been to the sea. So, you know, these seashells were a big part of her life. The house is lined with them. So, a lot of the students developed things like notions of the sea inland, so bottles of seawater that are brought inland for spiritual purposes,

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the seashells, mythology, mythopoeics about the undersea, but that circulates another aspect of the research became how to link, "What does the sea mean for me?" with how to link it to the hydrological cycle. So that it has to do with rain and drought and land, and it's about how water evaporates from the ocean and then lands up on the interior plateau of the country. So we had – there was, you know, a question that has important was also how to make sure that studying oceanic humanities in the global south doesn't become a kind of greenwashing – or in this case, blue washing. You know, turning away from very important questions of land redistribution to the ocean at a time just, you know, as a kind of slight of hand. And I think the thing that we've been focusing on

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is that whether we like it or not, the sea is important for you, whoever you are, partly because of its future invasive land likelihood.

### **Isabel Hofmeyr:**

I just had one more thing. Also this relates very much to Charne's work. I think if I had to also summarize it, we started off with Oceanic Humanities for the Global South, and we've ended up with the Oceanic South. So, and Charne could maybe speak to that, but so to put those categories much closer together.

### **Charne Lavery:**

This is a formulation I must attribute partly to the wonderful Meg Samuelson, our colleague who – she was working on the kind of – just made the very obvious point which we hadn't thought about, which was that the southern hemisphere is twenty percent more water than the northern hemisphere. It's just much more sea than land in the south. In the way, actually the same way, if you sort of tilt the globe, the Pacific is way bigger than you think. Every time I look at it, the southern ocean is also way bigger than you expect

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and compressed. The northern polar regions and the southern polar regions are not comparable in terms of size. So there is something oceanic about the Global South and the southern hemisphere, both in a physical way and how climate change will impact it. So yeah, that's kind of the jumping off point for us into future research.

### **Margaret Cohen:**

Well, I guess, the jumping off point for future research is a, you know, maybe pat but very apt way to end. So thank you all for this marvelous conversation. It's really a pleasure to have you here, and I'm so looking forward to our Books at the Center later today.



**Isabel Hofmeyr:**

Thank you.

**Charne Lavery:**

Thank you for having us.