



BOOK FORUM

Literary Studies Beyond “The Colonial Book”: A Response to Isabel Hofmeyr’s *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House*

Kate Highman

University of Cape Town, South Africa
Email: kate.highman@uct.ac.za

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In her discussion of censorship in *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House*, Isabel Hofmeyr homes in on a figure of reading invoked by Nadine Gordimer in a letter protesting that the censors treat literature “as a commodity to be boiled down to its components and measured like a bar of soap.”¹ Hofmeyr, recognizing that such reading echoes that of the officials of colonial custom houses, asks what we might learn from those “who tried to read a book as a bar of soap”?²

Hofmeyr’s pairing of the physical book with the bar of soap is resonant given her interest in what she describes as the “epidemiological” reading practiced by the Customs officials—on the lookout both for book-borne pathogens and texts that might incite social dis-ease—and later censors, whose practices she demonstrates were shaped by the Custom House. This “epidemiological” mode of reading partakes of a larger imperial discourse of hygiene in which, as Anne McClintock has shown, soap functioned as a fetish object and agent of empire—as arguably the book did. An advert for Pears soap claims the soap to be “a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization

¹ Nadine Gordimer quoted in Isabel Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 13.

² Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 65.

advances” and casts its task as educative: “teaching the virtues of cleanliness.”³ As is well established, books have figured similarly in the imperial imaginary.⁴ In *Dockside Reading*, Hofmeyr notes how “imperial enthusiasts” argued for copyright legislation to allow the importing of cheap American reprints into the British colonies on the basis of books as educative and “civilizing” instruments.⁵ Both books and soap are figured as “civilizing” agents; both “whiten” and “enlighten.”

In her consideration of imperial representations of soap, McClintock notes a curious detail about adverts for soap and other cleaning agents, namely their frequent use of a seashore setting: “liminal images of oceans, beaches and shorelines recur in cleaning ads of the time.”⁶ Soap and cleaning agents act as “boundary objects”—serving to demarcate the sphere of whiteness—even as they promise/threaten the blurring of boundaries, namely the conversion/transformation or “passing” of the Black subject into white through the embrace of the empire and “civilization.” (Such transformations are pictorially figured in these adverts: with Black subjects magically transforming into white as they clean themselves—or rather are cleaned by white others—with Pears soap⁷). By returning what she describes as “the colonial book”⁸ to the shoreline—the Custom House setting that helped to institute it—Hofmeyr allows us to see the book too as boundary object, in the moment of its formation. For as Hofmeyr notes, the practices of the Custom House officials “produced implicit definitions of what the colonial book should be.”⁹

As a boundary object, “the colonial book” operates as a stand-in for whiteness, and as such becomes a site of contestation given all that whiteness is held to signify in the imperial imaginary, but that does not in fact belong to it: authority, authorship, ownership, property, propriety, originality. *Dockside Reading* is particularly valuable for the lens it provides on how the book—in its colonial guise—came to be raced as white through instruments such as the copyright policed by empire’s Customs officials. Particularly fascinating is Hofmeyr’s account of how texts entering South Africa came to be classed according to their “mark of origin” (“made in England,” “made in Australia,” etc.), with copyright being treated primarily as such a “mark of origin” rather than being “associated with authorship.”¹⁰ Amid the confusion of multiple copyright legislations, Customs officials leaned on the Merchandise Marks Act (1887), reading copyright as “an indirect sign of manufacture” and thus as “a

³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Frontier* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 32.

⁴ See, for instance, Deana Heath’s *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 51–52.

⁶ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 232.

⁷ See the advertisement reproduced on page 213 of McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* and her discussion of it on page 214.

⁸ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 8.

⁹ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 11.

¹⁰ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

poor semiotic cousin to the mark of origin.”¹¹ Hofmeyr describes how “in the case of British copyright, the imprint indicated that the book had been manufactured in Britain and was implicitly ‘white,’ thus operating as a “racial trademark.”¹²

Attending to copyright’s racialization, Hofmeyr provides a brilliant reading of the Xhosa intellectual W. B. Rubusana’s strategic use of British copyright to assert himself as a rights-bearing subject.¹³ Rubusana’s act is a claim not to whiteness per se, not an act of “mimicry,” but to authorship: if copyright is a site where authorship and whiteness are conflated via the logic of “the mark of origin,” Rubusana’s act serves to disentangle them. Hofmeyr makes the important point that Rubusana’s investment in copyright runs counter to “what contemporary debates on intellectual property lead us to believe,” namely that the “so-called developing world ignores intellectual property because of its communal or ‘traditional’ orientations, as opposed to the individualism of Western property law.”¹⁴ This is a narrative that has been used by white writers to justify their appropriation of the stories of people of colour—for instance in the re-ascription of |Xam narratives to their own copyright¹⁵—and Hofmeyr’s corrective is welcome.

Hofmeyr’s identification of the racing of the book via the logic of “the mark of origin” provides a useful analytic for understanding something that has been puzzling me in my own research: the place of the book in the story of English-language South African PEN, at least in the first fifty years of its history in South Africa. International PEN, like the Custom House, is—or was—centered in London but replicated across the globe through local affiliated centers. In South Africa, PEN was founded at the instigation of John Galsworthy, who had travelled by ship to Cape Town for the summer of 1926–1927. There he met Sarah Gertrude Millin, South Africa’s most famously “epidemiological” writer, and persuaded her to start a PEN center.¹⁶ There is an obvious irony here given PEN’s belief in the “diffusion” of literature, traveling across borders of nation and race, and Millin’s infamous horror of “contagion” across racial borders.¹⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the case of South African PEN, “literature” was tightly circumscribed: startlingly white (with only a handful of members of color in its first fifty years in South Africa) and bound to the parameters of the physical

¹¹ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 25.

¹² Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

¹³ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 61–62.

¹⁴ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 61.

¹⁵ Kate Highman, “The Narcissism of Small Differences’: Plagiarism in South African Letters,” *The Global Histories of Books: Methods and Practices*, eds. Elleke Boehmer, Rouven Kunstmann, Priyasha Mukhopadhyay, and Asha Rogers. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹⁶ Bernth Lindfors, “Galsworthy Meets an Insomniac in South Africa,” *English in Africa* 30.2 (2003): 76.

¹⁷ The figure of “diffusion” comes from the first iteration of the PEN Charter, penned by Galsworthy in 1922. The Charter of 1948 first includes the ideas that “literature ... should know no frontiers” and compels PEN members to “dispel race, class and national hatreds.” The iterations of the charter are listed in Megan Doherty’s PhD dissertation, “PEN International and Its Republic of Letters 1921–1970” (New York: Columbia University, 2011), 385.

book. Writers were required (supposedly) to have published two books to be eligible for membership, and in the story of PEN's history in South Africa, the talismanic, boundary-making power of the colonial book emerges in full force. We see this in the outraged response of the almost exclusively white Cape Town-based center of PEN to the formation, in 1978, of a new, Black-led PEN center in Johannesburg (of which, incidentally, Hofmeyr was a founding member).¹⁸ Members of the Cape Town center were furious that the new center admitted "unpublished writers," with the president, Mary Renault, dismissing oral literature as "a contradiction in terms."¹⁹ For Cape Town, the new center threatened what Hofmeyr describes at one point as "Literature with a capital L."²⁰ Cape Town had set themselves up as guardians of the literary: their founding constitution listed as one of its primary objectives, "the attainment of a high literary standard in SA." While Cape Town insisted that they only admitted members who had published two books,²¹ the PEN archives show that many members had not published any books, let alone two. And when they had, the works they produced were not immediately recognizable as "literary" in any elevated sense. David Shrand, the longstanding treasurer of the center, was the author of numerous publications—all on tax: *What Every Dental Surgeon Should Know About Income Tax*, *What Every Farmer Should Know About Income Tax*, *Every Man His Own Tax Consultant*, and so on. Another member title is *So You Want a House: A Guide to House Building in South Africa*. A membership application in the archives shows a writer of newspaper quizzes admitted as a full member.²² Richard Rive, by contrast, was at first granted only "associate membership," without voting rights.²³ In the case of PEN, it is as if the racialized logic of the "mark of origin" has reached its endpoint and doubled back on itself: the whiteness of the writer becomes a "mark of origin" that legitimates their status as "writer"/ "author," and entry into PEN, in lieu of book publication.

Reading Hofmeyr's descriptions of the Custom House "love of pomp and pageantry"²⁴ again put me in mind of the English-speaking, white-led centers of PEN (one in Cape Town and one in Johannesburg), with their formal letterheads, "luncheon" parties (all held at whites-only venues), and excessive concern with the "literary." Hofmeyr's description of "literature with a capital L" emerges in her discussion of how, in his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne, a former employee of the Salem Custom House, positions the Custom House as "Literature's" abject other—"an antiliterary space of cloddish bureaucrats."²⁵ Hawthorne considers the Custom House to be "inimical to

¹⁸ Hofmeyr's name is included on a list of founding members in the PEN archive at the University of Cape Town, collection BC 751, Folder D8.

¹⁹ David Sweetman, *Mary Renault: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 288.

²⁰ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 13.

²¹ BC 751, Folder A2.

²² BC 751, Folder B1.

²³ BC 751, Folder C1. Rive was admitted as an associate member in 1961 (minutes of October 30, 1961) and in 1963 to full membership (minutes of November 18, 1963). In 1961, he had not published a book, but neither had others admitted as full members.

²⁴ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 39.

²⁵ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

literature itself,”²⁶ but as Hofmeyr shows in her book, the Custom House has played a role in “the shaping of colonial literary institutions.”²⁷ Aptly so, for literature does not exist independently of its shaping institutions. Rather, as Derek Attridge writes, literature is itself “an *institution*: it is not given in nature or the brain but brought into being by processes that are social, legal and political, and that can be mapped historically and geographically.”²⁸

My own response to *Dockside Reading* comes as someone situated in a Department of English Literary Studies, and hence—like a Customs official—invested in this thing called “literature.” And like a Customs official, I am employed partially as a professional reader and evaluator of texts (chiefly of student essays, work that entails, like it or not, a fair degree of gatekeeping—deciding what passes the threshold and “lands” or does not—and cloddish bureaucracy). Discomfortingly, there are a number of ways in which the figure of the evocatively named “Custom House” evokes the work done in English departments and the field of “English Literature” as a university discipline more generally. Like colonial Custom Houses, “English Literature” has traditionally worked in the service of securing imperial and national borders and fictions—the borders of the imagined nation, if not actual frontiers of geopolitical states. In this guise, it has served as a keeper of “customs” in the sense of national “traditions” and “heritage” (by a weird coincidence, the author often represented in this vein as the “father of English Literature,” Chaucer, worked for London Customs, and the person generally credited with giving the first lecture series on “English Literature,” Adam Smith, also worked in Customs, although later in his life). And “English Literature,” too, is marked by the logic of the “mark of origin”: classification of texts as such was for a long time how university literature departments organized themselves—into departments of “English,” “French,” and so on. Indeed, as Hofmeyr has noted in earlier work, the discipline of English—and “English Literature” more generally—has performed “a role in creating racial categories,” work that she aptly describes as “boundary-defining.”²⁹ Finally—and perhaps more reassuringly—the discipline of “English,” like the Custom House on the seashore, has always occupied a liminal space, its bounds shifting and unstable, even while performing this “boundary-defining” work. At present in South Africa, the grand edifice of “*English Literature*,” a colonial construction that has often been conflated with “Literature” per se, is increasingly being dismantled into literature (with a lowercase “l”) in English, and Hofmeyr’s book makes a valuable contribution to this dismantling. This is not only through her disentangling of the book from “the colonial book,” raced as white and “calling card of Englishness,”³⁰ but through her self-reflexive attention to reading practices.

²⁶ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

²⁷ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

²⁸ Derek Attridge, *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 22.

²⁹ Isabel Hofmeyr, “How Bunyan Became English: Missionaries, Translation, and the Discipline of English Literature,” *Journal of British Studies* 41.1 (2002): 113. Hofmeyr draws on Franklin Court’s *Institutionalising Literature*.

³⁰ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 15.

As Hofmeyr argues, part of the value of her attention to the reading practices of Customs is in “allowing us to address contemporary debates on reading.”³¹ Her inquiry into “dockside reading” is prompted partly by what might be learned from “the object-oriented reading of the wharfside.”³² Hofmeyr notes that such reading provides examples “that are of considerable interest to a posthumanist, Anthropocene age,”³³ and there is much in her book to interest scholars in the oceanic humanities and related fields. But such “object-oriented reading,” insofar as it allows us a view, from the colonial Custom House, into “colonial object formation,”³⁴ and specifically the formation of the colonial book, is also of interest at a time in which universities and their disciplines are being called to decolonize—a process that entails reflection on their own “object formation.” Universities and disciplines might not be “objects” in the way that books and soaps are, but they are constituted materially, in concert with a range of practices and actors, and might be understood as such in the sense outlined by Leigh Star: “something people (or in computer science, other objects and programs) act toward and with.”³⁵

As noted, what distinguishes the Customs officials’ “reading” of printed matter (if it can be called reading, Hofmeyr uses scare quotes to signal hesitation) is that it is “object-oriented”: “Material was not read so much as treated like other forms of cargo, its outside scanned for metadata markings (title, cover, publisher, place of publication, copyright inscription, language, script), its inside sampled for traces of offensive material.”³⁶ The attention given to items such as “title, cover, publisher, place of publication, copyright” and so on is, as Hofmeyr points out, typical of the “de-texting” methods of reading we associate with book history, and there are moments when the Customs officials appear almost as parodic book historians, diligent attendees to what Jerome McGann describes as bibliographic code.³⁷

Hofmeyr herself is known for her path-breaking book historical work and her studious attention to material detail, which is much in evidence in *Dockside Reading*. But if Hofmeyr brings to the dockside the reading methods commonly described as belonging to book history, it is to *de-fetishise* the “colonial book” rather than to institute and legitimate it. While the dockside reading of the Custom House “produced implicit definitions of what the colonial book should be,”³⁸ Hofmeyr’s work serves to bring these definitions to our attention and thus effect a distinction of the “colonial book” from the book/“bookhood” per se, with all the authority that the “the book” holds in the postcolonial imagination.

³¹ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

³² Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

³³ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

³⁴ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 8.

³⁵ Leigh Star, “This Is Not a Boundary Object: Reflections on the Origin of a Concept,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 35.5 (2010): 603.

³⁶ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 3.

³⁷ Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 56.

³⁸ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 11.

Hofmeyr is deeply aware of the “charismatic”³⁹ potential of books, and their dangers—their “rough magic” (abjured by Prospero, interestingly enough, through their consignment to the sea). Her work serves to blur and unravel what might be described as “hardbound” definitions of “the book.”

Indeed, throughout her career, Hofmeyr’s own “object-oriented reading” has opened the way for demystifying conceptions of “Literature” that center on the colonial book, and as such has allowed for the expansion of the “object” of literary studies—not just beyond the bound book to orature (as with *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That Is Told*) or to periodicals (as with *Gandhi’s Printing Press*), but now to other “vibrant matter,”⁴⁰ particularly coastal waters. The most moving passage of the book concerns what Hofmeyr terms “creolized water,”⁴¹ inviting us to treat the water of the shoreline as a rich site of history, a “sea of stories,” by “reading” water as “informed material.”⁴² There is a welcome bringing together of the book historian’s traditional attention to “textual materiality” with an attention to materiality more generally (as evinced by Hofmeyr’s engagement with object-oriented ontology).

Hofmeyr’s approach is not simply one of “object-oriented” reading but of “docksides reading,” as the title of her book indicates. It is important to disentangle the two different senses in which “docksides reading” functions in *Docksides Reading*: to indicate the readings performed by the Customs officials at the docks and as a figure for the sort of liminally situated, transdisciplinary reading Hofmeyr performs in her book. In many ways her own “docksides reading” performs the *inverse* work of the reading done by the Customs officials. For while Customs officials labored to classify all objects according to the fantastical, ever-proliferating taxonomies of the tariff handbooks, allocating everything to a set place, Hofmeyr’s “docksides reading” lends itself to the unsettling of ostensibly fixed categories and boundaries—including the bounds of “the colonial book.”⁴³ There is palpable and I’d say “infectious” delight in her reading of copyright “alongside the ooze and treacle of organic matter”⁴⁴ and the imaginative possibilities that such *anti*-epidemiological reading offers. “Alongside” is important here: the reading method “emphasizes adjacency,”⁴⁵ an approach Hofmeyr identifies in Jesse Oak Taylor’s “atmospheric thinking,” which “considers the way that bodies of all kinds influence the conditions of possibility in their vicinity.”⁴⁶

A final comment, on what might be described as Hofmeyr’s delightfully *playful* tone at times, even while she attends rigorously to the empirical, so that she manages to bring vividly to life traditionally “dry” subjects—copyright and

³⁹ Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 78 and 88.

⁴⁰ Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 8. Hofmeyr draws on Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴¹ Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 22.

⁴² Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 16. Hofmeyr is citing Sasha Engelmann, “Towards A Poetics of Air: Sequencing and Surfacing Breath,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40.3 (2015).

⁴³ Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 11.

⁴⁴ Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 2.

⁴⁵ Taylor quoted in Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 21.

⁴⁶ Taylor quoted in Hofmeyr, *Docksides Reading*, 21.

ensorship. For the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, the “space” of play is aptly figured by the liminal site of the seashore. Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore’s lines “On the seashores of endless worlds/ children play,” Winnicott was prompted to ask the oddly phrased question “where is play?”⁴⁷ coming to the conclusion that play is “neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality.”⁴⁸ It occupies a liminal, in-between space. The same might be said of reading. As I’ve argued elsewhere, colonial and apartheid literary pedagogy in South Africa tended to foreclose this sort of playful, creative reading, insisting students attend to the “work” as a hermetically closed “object” (the “well-wrought urn” celebrated by the new critics), turning their attention away from what is “adjacent” to the text.⁴⁹ “Dockside reading,” in contrast, ranges beyond traditional disciplinary bounds, while expanding our understanding of literary institutions. Hofmeyr closes her book with the hope that the unusual definitions of bookhood that emerge from her research might persuade others to “venture down to the dockside.”⁵⁰ The invitation—in my interpretation—is not only to join her in the study of the shoreline as distinctively generative site—but to read more playfully and creatively, alert to the world we inhabit.

Author biography. Kate Highman is a lecturer in the Department of English Literary Studies at the University of Cape Town.

⁴⁷ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1971), 130.

⁴⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 129.

⁴⁹ Kate Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom After Apartheid,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 7.3 (2020): 274–85.

⁵⁰ Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*, 84.

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