

Literature sheds light on the history and mystery of the Southern Ocean

October 7 2019, by Charne Lavery and Meg Samuelson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you look at a globe, you'll see that the Southern Hemisphere is bluer than the Northern Hemisphere. A [huge 80%](#) of it is ocean compared to 60% of the North.

The Southern Ocean is the only [ocean](#) in which waves circulate without

encountering intervening landmasses. It's gargantuan in size and ferocity. The roaring, furious, and screaming latitudes are daunting to maritime traffic.

The Antarctic Convergence—where icy currents meet warmer sub-Antarctic waters—supports an abundance of marine life. There's no northern equivalent to this phenomenon. But, like the icebound continent itself, no humans live there.

Because it uniquely flows into the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, the Southern Ocean opens up possibilities for tracking the intersecting currents and itineraries that compose the global South. As do writers and artists, we're calling for the global South to be thought of alongside the Southern Ocean, what we call [the oceanic South](#).

The global South makes you think mostly of an unequal present but the oceanic South brings to the fore pasts of maritime imperialism, as well as what the future might bring. It draws together the dispersed landmasses of the settler South, the decolonised and still colonised countries of the Southern Hemisphere, the "sea of islands" comprising Indigenous Oceania, and the frozen continent of Antarctica.

A [research group](#), that we are a part of, based at the University of the Witwatersrand, Oceanic Humanities for the Global South has turned its attention to cultural representations of the ocean by exploring literature and the arts across different scales of time and place. This includes the Southern Ocean.

Reviewing the literature

Many writers and artists have represented the Southern Ocean in ways that layer possible futures over diverse pasts—illuminating the links between them.

Two examples we discussed in a [recent paper](#) are Witi Ihamaera's *The Whale Rider* from Aotearoa New Zealand and Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* from South Africa.

Both novels register the catastrophic slaughter of whales that took place during roughly the same period as European colonialism. Both explore the interrelationship between genocidal and extractive projects and how humans and whales interlock as they journey together through the southern seas.

This is the term that Ihamaera uses to describe "the knowledge of whalespeaking" that the ancients once had. It was also this knowledge and with which the Maori ancestor Paikea asked a whale to carry him to the land that lay far to the south.

The novel shows how the interlocking of land inhabitants and ocean inhabitants that articulates the origin story of Aotearoa is sundered when the whalekilling begins.

Mda's novel *The Whale Caller* sketches out similarly intersecting itineraries of land and ocean inhabitants from the vantage point of the southern tip of Africa. The Whale Caller had learned the songs of migrating whales during his own peregrinations in which he "spent many years walking westwards along the coast of the Indian Ocean, until he reached the point where the two oceans met, and then proceeded northwards along the Atlantic Ocean coast."

The Whale Caller surmises that—like the Australasians he has read about—the indigenous inhabitants of these African shores had feasted on stranded [whales](#) and that their expressions of gratitude for the bounty delivered by the sea included also mourning for the loss of companion species.

Other literature that's been explored includes poetry by South African-born poet and novelist [Yvette Christiansë](#). She links the Indian and Atlantic Oceans by following "Liberated Africans" from Mozambique to St Helena. This one of the forgotten afterlives of slavery, [centred in the South](#).

The journeys of books

The Oceanic Humanities for the Global South is also taking into account the entire hydrological cycle. This links evaporation from the surrounding oceans to rainfall on the watershed of the Witwatersrand—ridge of white waters in Gauteng. Isabel Hofmeyr, a Professor of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand and New York University, has [proposed the rubric](#) "hydrocolonialism" to link sea and land, empire and environment.

In provisional notes on the topic she discusses hydrocolonial book history and sets out what can be learnt from tracing books on their oceanic journeys.

The Oceanic Humanities for the global South team is involved in a range of other research too. The subjects include undertaking a cultural history of seaweed harvesters, abalone poachers, black whalers and other underwater workers. Members of the team are also exploring representations of water spirits in local literature and culture and tracing links between black aesthetics and the deep ocean.

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