

Coolie, Cane, Kala Pani

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I wish to begin by telling the story of Maharani, an Indian indentured labourer recruited for British Guyana who set sail on the Allanshaw on 24 July 1885, but never completed her journey across the Kala Pani. I quote from Verene Shepherd's 2002 book *Maharani's Misery* here- "Her ordeal started eleven weeks out of India, 200 miles from the Cape of Good Hope, before the ship had undertaken the trans-Atlantic crossing. On the morning of 24 September 1885 she was found lying on the deck suffering from fever and complaining of a pain in her arm...She died on the morning of 27 September 1885." Her case was considered "perplexing" and serious enough to warrant at least four investigations at different points in time, concluding with the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry by the governor of Guyana. Despite testimonials and initial postmortem reports, in the final analysis, Maharani was declared "not raped" since no "convincing physical evidence of forcible sexual intercourse or other signs of violence" were found on her body. Maharani's body was thrown overboard even as the British colonial government continued its investigation in Guyana.

In his book Verne itemizes what remains of Maharani as he sets out to recount her tale- Apart from the fact that she was emigrant number 353 on the Allanshaw, her biographical details are sketchy. The scarcity of information is further exacerbated by the fact that she never landed in Guyana. Maharani was buried at sea. Yet this paper is interested in precisely what Verne considers an impediment toward writing her story. This paper is interested in *Maharani's remains*, and not so much in what remains of Maharani; not the "dry" documentary evidence surrounding her death which pertains to her status as disembodied Coolie harnessed to an extractive system of labour. This paper hopes to dis-locate Maharani from within a deliberately land-locked colonial archive. To release her from disembodiment would open up new epistemological possibilities for a hydrofeminist politics. To re-locate her then, is to identify her "watery" presence as testament to her own (and our) bodily archives (Neimanis). The circumstances of her death must invite an altered imagining of what her burial at sea means both in its material and metaphoric senses.

To then reclaim Maharani's body and her story is to think "hydrologically" as Isabel Hofmeyer suggests. It is to travel underwater and critically engage with the "dry" technologies of empire-building of which the retrospective textual authority of colonial archives is but one instance of land-locked discourses of power (Mentz). When Maharani's body is thrown overboard into the sea it becomes one with the complex hydrosocial cycle of inter-species relationality of which she is always already a part. While the colonial penal order removes traces of her messy corporeality, thinking

hydrocolonially both dis-locates and re-figures Maharani in her aqueous “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo). Although Maharani’s body is constituted by the watery assemblages that shape her place within asymmetrical relations of power, yet it faces the problem of far too many discursive readings. She becomes, as Stacy Alaimo might venture, “curiously abiological” (237). To think of her instead in a “trans-corporeal” sense is to emphasize a critical “contact zone” between biological bodies and their “evolutionary, historical, and ongoing interconnections with the material world” (238). By realizing how Maharani’s story has remained captive to the customs of a racialized penal system oriented towards safeguarding its own discursive image in a post-slavery period, it is possible to imagine justice as something more than a promise of carceral retribution. Here I borrow Astrida Neimanis’ notion of hydrofeminism as a transcorporeal ethics of embodiment wherein we must think of ourselves less as isolated entities and more as “oceanic eddies” - “The space between our selves and others is at once as distant as the primeval sea, yet closer than our own skin- the traces of those same oceanic beginnings still cycling through us, pausing as this bodily thing we call ‘mine’...Water entangles our bodies in relations of gift, debt, theft, complicity, differentiation, relation” (96). Here Neimanis’ configuring of water as a planetary archive of meaning and matter intersects Hofmeyer’s historicization of the sea and the materialities of the marine world. In this, Maharani becomes part of a posthuman hydrocommons that allows for a radically altered perspective on anthropocentric histories of migration and labour engendered by Europe’s early capitalistic adventures.

Maharani’s journey is prefigured by the technologies of empire when she is recruited for the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, yet the process of her hyper-commodification as Coolie, or “super cargo” is activated *at sea*. The sea in turn is altered by the material incursions of empire, by the polluting effects of its trespassing. Maharani’s *Kala Pani* crossing marks a corporeal and epistemological foreclosure in which indenture ship as “mega commodity” attempts to chart its territorial sovereignty across “colonized” waters. The ship carries in its belly seeds of empire-building, the actors and instruments of monocropping and bioprospecting. In Europe’s early modern trading in goods and people, the North Atlantic trading network for example, came to be defined as the “arteries of the imperial body” (Klein & Mackenthun 100). In dominant colonial imaginary, the sea is passive, subtracted from history, bereft of the capacity to hold between its layers the diverse knowledge systems and life-worlds of both humans and more-than-humans.

Yet water remembers, and by remembering it establishes the ubiquity of its presence as connection, conduit, agent, and actor. The inequalities of power that sustain colonial exploitation of land, labour, and resources, have been coursing through waterways “at scales both individual and oceanic” (Neimanis 110). The arterial might of seas and oceans attests to their deep historical knowledge of “tangled materialities” (Alaimo). The sea transforms maritime encounters in both its material and cultural iterations. In a

sense, Maharani's story can only be fully understood when Maharani herself is reconstituted within her multispecies aqueous community proliferating in a context of intense "trouble" (Haraway). Her institutional murder and the desecration of her bodily autonomy needs to be historicized *at sea*. As disposable commodity that has lost its value, she becomes interchangeable with the rotten food grains and expired medicines which would be routinely cast overboard during the indenture ships' long journeys across oceans and seas. To historicize Maharani in the context of British plantation economies in the Caribbean, it is necessary to foreground the fluid nature of power itself and its obsession with stable, rational, and "grounded" narratives; the logic of *terra firma* reiterated in colonial log books, recruitment documents, legal testimonies, and medical reports. The colonial plantation becomes a microcosm of the same monoculture logic which dominates the making of racialized labour groups and the displacement of indigenous plants, critters, and human communities. In a sense, Maharani's death destabilizes the logic of productivity essential to the sustenance of Europe's territorial control. Her violation at sea dramatizes the impossibility of sustaining the myth of order for which an entire "technology of emigration" (Tinker) had been deployed. Her deceased body sparks fear of contamination and necessitates a sea burial. She becomes less-than-human at the moment of her bodily violation. In the context of colonial custom houses Isabel Hofmeyer explains how the ocean would be used as a mode of censorship by throwing undesirable books in them. Thus the ocean bed becomes a giant repository that also expands on the idea of media itself wherein salt, seaweed, cables, ice, books, and bodies, store as well as transmit information. Maharani's story must therefore emanate from the sea, not as a singular narrative, but as part of a tentacular arc attesting to the hydrofeminist possibilities of "remembering" in an ethico-political sense of the term. This is equally vital to the rejection of dominant colony-metropole binaries by situating our postcolonial concerns within a network of empire-building, the other, more aggressive kind of tentacular power dynamic stretching across time and space, leading to irrevocable socio-economic and environmental catastrophes.

To conclude on an interdisciplinary note, we might ask the question then- How does the literary engage with the oceanic? In Indo-Trinidadian writer Ramabai Espinet's 1991 poetry collection *Nuclear Seasons*, a "rusty island sea" becomes the watery metaphor for a posthumanist negotiation with colonial histories of extraction. In her poem "Lost Cargoes" she writes of intergenerational trauma bequeathed through images of "cane-slashed legs, sore hands, cargoes of pain", and yet, memorializes the grandfather who would carry on his back "wrapped in burlap- aloes, bhaigan, tomatoes, rice-cakes". The grandfather gives to his children "a bundle of rags, thin flotsam and jetsam, knotted with seaweed". At the same time, he urges them to "take these ragged sights, bone and weed dipped in the sea's long washing, and make a whole, a life, lighten the water, plant flowers, gather the sea, lace the land". In this invocation of gathering the sea lies the

seeds of an ethics of care crucial for multispecies “worlding” (Haraway). Gathering the sea could be synonymous with the notion of the “hypersea”, described by Dianna and Mark McMenamin, as an evolutionary instance of life folding a watery habitat “back inside itself”. It makes collaborative living essential. It enfolds not only terrestrial flora and fauna, but technological and geophysical bodies of water as well. In a sense, the ability to think with water by developing a critical aqueous episteme rooted in the ethical and the material offers a way to situate Maharani’s story within an expanded, multi-directional, multispecies sea of stories.