

**History, literature and the indices of the Ocean.**  
**Force of signification in Borges Coelho's 'A força do mar de Agosto'**

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*The impact of João Paulo Borges Coelho's 'A força do mar de Agosto' rests largely on its concurrent conceptualization of the Indian Ocean and on its instrumental use of the Indian Ocean as a literary device. In Borges Coelho's short story, the sea is made into something other than a mere background for (neo)colonial – military, economic – endeavours or a simple metaphor at the service of historical and philosophical enterprises. The spatial reframing operated in the short story's arresting premise – that of a sea which does not wet – sets off a process of writing and reading (in and of) the sea which illustrates as well as enacts literature's potential to unsettle both conceptualizations of History and accepted historical records. The political critique of authoritarian practices and neoliberal diktats that unfolds in the text is inseparable from a wider textual and contextual (local and global) examination of sedimented historical, political and philosophical forms that literature may, perhaps should, force open.*

### **Retracing the Ocean**

João Paulo Borges Coelho's two-volume short story collection *Índicos indícios* [*Indic Indices/ Traces of the Indian Ocean*]<sup>1</sup>, published in 2005, addresses the roles and meanings of the often overlooked sea off the Mozambican coast in the imaginary of the inland and of the numerous islands. It does so primarily by offsetting a textualized topography of coastal Mozambique against formulaic cartographies of the nation. The collection as a whole makes evident, on the one hand, the limitations of nationbound frameworks in addressing the traces in and of the sea; on the other, it highlights the ways in which the seas function as surfaces and depths of contact, commerce, and conflict – historically speaking and at present.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to follow Roberto Vecchi's insight that the *topoi-geography* of Borges Coelho's *Índicos indícios* runs counter to the cartography of the colonizer (which traces the rivers, not the sea) and that it allows for the coastal space, 'the decisive variable of the narrative', to go hand in hand with a 'reconfiguration of historical time'.<sup>3</sup> The force of this spatial framing lies in its illustration and enacting of literature's contribution towards a postcolonial questioning and problematizing of accepted historical record. Ultimately, the relevance of the Indian Ocean goes beyond mere geography

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own, unless when stated otherwise. The collection has not been translated into English, so I offer two possible translations that attempt to encapsulate the meanings of the title in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Two examples, among many: the 'migration crisis' in the Mediterranean; the diplomatic and militar tension in the so-called South China Sea.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Vecchi, 'Excepting the exception: A bloodstained cartography of Mozambique in João Paulo Borges Coelho's *Índicos indícios*', in Cristina Demaria and Macdonald Daly, eds, *The Genres of Post-Conflict Testimonies* (Nottingham: CCCP, 2009), 240–241.

as Borges Coelho puts it in the preface to volume I, *Setentrião* [The North]. The Mozambican coastline, plus the numerous islands surrounded by the sea, is extensive but, according to the preface, the area bathed by the sea is:

... muito, muito maior se tivermos em conta as histórias que esse simples facto tem alimentado no imaginário do presente e ao longo do tanto tempo que passou. [...] Por detrás de tantos nomes e tantos cruzamentos, de tanta diversidade, é sempre o mesmo, o mar.<sup>4</sup>

[... much, much more extensive if one bears in mind the histories which that simple fact has fuelled in today's imaginary and throughout the vast period of time since elapsed. [...] Behind so many names and so many crossings, so much diversity, it is always the same, the sea.]

The short stories in *Índicos Índicios* attest to the cultural and ethnic diversity, fluidity and porosity of several Mozambican groups and individuals, shaped by religious and cultural encounters enabled by the commercial circuits of the Indian Ocean and the Mozambican coast and islands. There is certainly, as Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal suggest in their introduction to the volume *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social and Political Perspectives* (2010), a necessity to re-evaluate the ocean, its roles, functions and respective critical perspectives. Whether the answer is to have the ocean 'anthropomorphized', as if 'it could not exist or possess a meaning were it not a mirror of humankind', is another matter entirely.<sup>5</sup> The sea demands an approach that is able to counter what John Mack has denounced as the traditional historiographical representation of the seas 'either as the backdrop to the stage on which the real action is seen to take place – that is, the land' or 'as the means of connection between activities taking place at coasts and in their interiors'. This leads Mack to conclude: 'The characteristics of the sea itself, the nature of man's interactions with it, the alliances and liaisons which takes place on it and because of it, the contacts effected, cemented or cast asunder, are all largely absent from this historiography.'<sup>6</sup>

What follows reads Borges Coelho's short story 'A força do mar de Agosto' [The Force of the August Sea], featured in volume II (*Meridião* [The South]) of the *Índicos Índicios* collection, with an interest both in the conceptualization of the Indian Ocean (Indian Ocean as a method, to quote Isabel Hofmeyr<sup>7</sup>) and in the instrumental use of the Indian Ocean as a literary device. 'A força do mar de Agosto' supplements a historiography that has either addressed the sea or, under that pretence,

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<sup>4</sup> João Paulo Borges Coelho, *Índicos índicios I: setentrião* (Lisboa: Caminho, 2005), 9–10.

<sup>5</sup> Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, 'Introduction: New Conjectures in Maritime Imaginaries', in *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives* (London / New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>6</sup> John Mack, *The Sea: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 19–20.

<sup>7</sup> Isabel Hofmeyr, 'The complicating sea: The Indian Ocean as method', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32/3 (2012), 584–590.

has often used the seas as a metaphor for a meta-reflexive approach to the historian's task. Its use of marine metaphors may also provide a critical comment on how certain philosophers (of history, among others) have forged and projected a given image of the sea. The narrator of this particular short story, penned by a fictionalist who is an established academic historian, will make full use of the performative powers of literary fiction with a view to addressing the histories and the stories brought about with the force of sea, too often overlooked on account of the aforementioned representational bias toward the land.

'A força do mar de Agosto' adopts a singular paradoxical approach to the rescuing of the role and function of the sea: its premise is that of a sea which 'não molha' [does not wet].<sup>8</sup> Although this situation will prove to be temporary and, by the end of the short story (it is, in fact, the ending of the short story), the sea will recover its true force as unexpectedly as it had been lost in the first place, this will be enough to break the 'grande coluna do tempo' [large column of time] and invite questions regarding the legitimacy of the supposedly natural order of things once the calm sea renders historical incidents, accidents, and events (the vast majority of which had not been recorded by history) visible in a 'desarrumação sem hierarquia' [untidiness without hierarchy].<sup>9</sup> The ending of the short story, with a return to 'normality' which unmasks the miscalculation of all plans and endeavours that had interpreted the apparent solidification of the sea as a *carte blanche* for its appropriation, emphasises a political reading which is particularly rich if one takes into account Jacques Rancière's attempt to circumscribe a 'politics of literature'. Rancière's definition of politics, in this context, is as follows:

[...] a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.<sup>10</sup>

One can therefore discuss 'politics of literature' when 'literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world.' 'A força do mar de Agosto' raises critical, discursive and historical questions about what is and/or is not seen, heard, done by whom (not) and to whom, and it engages polemically in a discussion that is both local and universal, historical and imaginary. All of the above does not preclude the fact that 'A força do mar de Agosto' engages with area studies, history, critical theory, political discourse, etc., via the forms and the force of a literary text. It thus confirms the

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<sup>8</sup> João Paulo Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridião* (Lisboa: Caminho, 2005), 126.

<sup>9</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridião*, 134.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The politics of literature', in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London / New York: Continuum, 2010), 152.

validity of Rancière's definition of the syntagm 'politics of literature' as meaning that 'literature "does" politics as literature'.<sup>11</sup>

### Reminders and reminders

The narrative of 'A força do mar de Agosto' begins with the reporting of a strange occurrence: there is no sea in the bay of Maputo, not at least in the traditional understanding of sea. A stone thrown by a child does not skip along the water, a fisherman's boat, a *xitatarru* does not glide and the fisherman finds himself dragging it through a surface which had seemingly become a very particular sort of desert. Water was seemingly solid, marble-like, no one and nothing was wet.

For those with an interest in historiography, this description of the sea may evoke Jules Michelet reference in *La Mer* (1861) to the seawater's 'gelatinous effect' (as it 'is whitish and rather viscous'), which causes the sea's 'plants and creatures' to 'gleam through it [seawater] as through a diaphanous garment'.<sup>12</sup> In 'A força do mar de Agosto', the sea will ultimately acquire a degree of transparency when in its apparent solid state (most notably, with the help of technology), thus ironically christallizing Michelet's vision on the 'transparent seas of the Indies', and the way in which 'the phantasmagoria which the depths afford' strikes those who encounter it.<sup>13</sup> The revelation that Borges Coelho's short story produces is as unreal as the natural phenomena to which Michelet referred, but the phantasmagoria that is now visible – albeit still, to an extent, submerged or buried under water – is historical through and through; indeed, in the preface to volume II of *Índicos Índicios* Borges Coelho mentions the concomitant traits of heaviness and transparency that the sea bears when referring to this very same short story.<sup>14</sup> The seeming solidification of the sea exposes historical (Indic) indices which call out to the present: a small airplane which had been thought to have crashed on land, and two skeletons; a group of Austrian soldiers under the orders of William Bolts, shipwrecked in September 1779 and their cargo of textiles and silver spoons that they hoped to exchange with 'os locais que viemos a ser nós' ['the locals that came to be us']; a much more recent young sailor, still in colonial times, in his sport boat Vauriant; a tow ship from the harbour; a catamaran tragically shipwrecked – all of its occupants deceased, except for a woman who was saved by a dolphin; women and children who picked shellfish by hand; last, and least, as one will come to see, an unexpected cemetery: a number of fishermen enclosed in their characteristic *xitatarrus*.

The 'solidification' of the sea acts as a device that breaks the vertical arrangement of time (the column of time, in the text) and lays bare a temporal line of traces which is not ordered or classified, it is untidy and irregular and illogical, in the previously mentioned 'desarrumação sem hierarquia':

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<sup>11</sup> Rancière, 'The politics of literature', 152.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Roland Barthes, *Michelet* (Berkeley / Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Barthes, *Michelet*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos índicios II: meridiano*, 10.

traces that cannot be recovered, that point in multiple temporal directions and that cannot be traced back to an origin or fit into a format. The '[p]equenos e desencontrados vestígios' [small and conflicting vestiges] – chief among them the unexpected cemetery of 'pequenos pescadores imóveis, como se dormissem'<sup>15</sup> [small still fishermen, as if they were asleep] – are a reminder of colonial (and postcolonial) encounters in and through the sea, a fitting illustration of postcoloniality as a 'concatenation of multiple temporalities'.<sup>16</sup>

The focus on the varied and diverse 'desencontrados vestígios' rather than on documented encounters accounts for what Achille Mbembe has described as '*time as lived*, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences'.<sup>17</sup> The spatialized timespace, rearranged according to no dominant (epistemological, disciplinary, political, ideological) hierarchy, fits in with Mbembe's view that 'the notion of the "postcolony" refers to a timescape which is simultaneously in the process of being formed and of being dissolved through a movement that brings both the "being formed" and the "being dissolved" into collision'.<sup>18</sup> The pseudo-solidification of the sea creates a device through which the habitual formations and dissolutions (in and through the waves, movements, and forces of the sea) come to a temporary still and can therefore be glimpsed. In the short story, the authorities will nevertheless wilfully ignore any findings that could come from a change in and of perception.

In Rancière's reading of the 'poetics of knowledge' in history texts, Rancière pursues history's seemingly contradictory reliance upon literary traits as it purports to purge itself of literariness in its quest for a scientific history. Rancière praises Jules Michelet's Republican paradigm, often criticized for its Romanticized approach and the use of literary artifices, precisely because it reveals an understanding of the relevance of 'literature' in addressing the past. It stands in contrast to the *Annales* school's well-documented use of literary works as 'historical' documents (even if Fernand Braudel's study on the Mediterranean was a watershed publication on the historiography of the seas). Given Hayden White's interest in the interface between history and literary tropes, it is hardly surprising that he took upon the task of writing the foreword to the English-language translation of Rancière's *Les noms de l'histoire: Éssai de poétique du savoir* [The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge].<sup>19</sup> In the foreword, White summarizes Rancière's take on Michelet:

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<sup>15</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridião*, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'Africa in motion: an interview with the post-colonialism theoretician Achille Mbembe', interviewed by Christian Höller, *Springerin magazine*, 3 (2002). <<https://www.springerin.at/en/2002/3/afrika-in-bewegung/>> accessed 20 February 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Mbembe, 'Africa in motion: an interview with the post-colonialism theoretician Achille Mbembe'.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

Michelet goes into the archives not in order to *read* the documents as the dead indices of events now past, but in order to immerse himself in those documents *as* fragments of the past still living in the present. [...] Instead of interpreting the documents, Michelet lets them *speak* for themselves by showing them to us. The difference between the *dead written* word, which, like a corpse, can only be *viewed*, and the live spoken word, which can only *be heard*, is effaced.<sup>20</sup>

As suggested by Dmitri Nikulin, Rancière's positing that 'a historian should *lend* his or her voice to those who have been missed in and by history' draws heavily not just from Michelet, but from Roland Barthes's reading of Michelet's life and work.<sup>21</sup> Let us recall that, in Barthes' view, Michelet innovates by reorganizing history:

... not on the level of ideas, of forces, of causes or systems, but on the level of each carnal death. The historian's duties are not established in terms of the general concept of historical truth, but only confronting each dead man of history; his function is not of an intellectual order, it is at once of a social and a sacred order. The historian is in fact a civil magistrate in charge of administering the estate of the dead (a formula Michelet derives from Camões in the Indies).<sup>22</sup>

In the context of a reading of *Índicos Índicios*, the quasi-anecdotal reference to Luís de Camões's administrative post (when Camões is better known as, among other things, the epic poet of Portuguese maritime expansion) is a helpful reminder of a colonial administering of life and/or death. Incidentally, Camões lived off the Mozambican coast during his prolonged and interrupted return to Portugal after being discharged from the office with the title that proved inspirational to Michelet.

In the remapping of the coast promoted by the arrest of the come and go of the waves, which makes visible the graveyard whose remains are – unlike other remains – beyond recovery, identification and mourning, the *xitatarrus* do not mark the spot; yet they are a visible remainder, and a reminder. According to White, this is the lesson that Rancière takes from Michelet: Michelet succeeded in 'making them [the poor] speak as silent people', 'the historian keeps them silent by making them visible'.<sup>23</sup> The now visible, small, disseminated corpses of the the poor fishermen in

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<sup>20</sup> Hayden White, 'Foreword: Rancière's revisionism', in Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Dmitri Nikulin, 'The names in history: Rancière's new historical poetics', in Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross, eds, *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality* (London / New York: Continuum, 2012), 75.

<sup>22</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, 82.

<sup>23</sup> White, 'Foreword: Rancière's revisionism', xvi.

the ‘unexpected cemetery’ offer a platform – however tenuous – for addressing, in Borges Coelho’s own words, Africa’s unresolved relationship with the sea.<sup>24</sup> The corpses present both a historical imperative and an alternative to colonial histories without relinquishing an engagement with colonial capitalism. The corpses, buried in their boats and their nets, victims of the dangers to which their precarious living conditions exposed them, emerge only to be ignored and marginalized by the present government who will take control and appropriate the (now) ‘land’ in which they are buried. As was in the past, during colonial administration, so is – as a result – in today’s ‘devenir autoritaire’ [becoming authoritarian], embodied in the short story’s fierce neoliberal and neocolonial forces, foreign or national: there are no obstacles to what Mbembe calls ‘economic appropriation’.<sup>25</sup>

### **Appropriations: blank sheet, spattered desert**

After the sea apparently becomes solid, the authorities decide to investigate only when the smell of rotten fish on the surface can no longer be ignored. The ‘Policia Municipal’ [Municipal Police] tries to blame the locals, the fishermen and the fishwives. Seen as this is ultimately unconvincing, the ‘Brigada dos Técnicos’ [Brigade of Technicians] is brought up from the rear and comes to the front: the military lexicon foreshadows what will take place next. The Brigade is equipped with rulers and compasses, GPS and transmitters, mobile phones, so that they are able to compare what they see before them to the topographical and hidrographical charts. As they prepare to lay the groundwork for an unbridled attempt at appropriation, the best they can do in order to come to terms with the newly found landscape is, quite farsically, to install a toilet as a model for illustrating how the water could have been flushed out of the bay – if the rivers cannot be traced, the sewer pipes can. The South Africans, given their expertise in photographing the Mozambican land – to set up bases during the war, to install gaspipes (and the narrator is quick to point out how gas pipes and sewer pipes are not dissimilar) – were now called upon as friendly neighbours (narrator *dixit*), or perhaps not so friendly:

Vieram com os seus técnicos e aviões, quadricularam a baía e fotografaram, um a um, os quadrados que a partir do ar imaginavam cá em baixo.

Num deles estaria o ralo, ou ao menos a explicação.<sup>26</sup>

[They came with their technicians and planes, squared the bay and photographed, one by one, the squares that from the air they imagined here below.

In one of them would be the drain, or at least the explanation]

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<sup>24</sup> João Paulo Borges Coelho, ‘Entrevista com João Paulo Borges Coelho’, interviewed by Rita Chaves, *Via Atlântica* 16 (2009), 155.

<sup>25</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2013), 80.

<sup>26</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 132.

Attempts to scrutinize, survey, charter will persistently try to fit the sea into the representations and the possibilities that they presuppose and impose top down ('a partir do ar imaginavam cá em baixo'); ironically, the narrator compares the product of the US and South African's mapping techniques to abstractionist and cubist painting styles.<sup>27</sup> Maps, photographs, satellites will ultimately fail in their search for a no less imagined (from high above, from the air, in opposition to the 'here below') origin, or explanation – they are no match for untidiness without hierarchy. Although the skeletons in the now-closeted space of Maputo Bay are now exposed, the Government, rather unsurprisingly and unlike the historian writer, remains oblivious to the 'estate of the dead'. Western technology and ideology (in the North American and South African apparatuses) are ultimately ineffective and the Government adds insult to injury by ignoring the visible 'disposition' of the past as a multiple, multidirectional space. The Government would rather wilfully imagine and project (now from the land as, before, the South Africans from the air) this space as a blank slate.

The impossibility of thinking beyond the paradigm of the appropriation of virgin land, 'vasto espaço branco por preencher' [vast blank space to be filled in], lays bare the motivations of the 'Governo de todo nós' [Government of all of us] that closes off any possibility for other scientific efforts and endeavours by going all in on 'soluções mais tangíveis, as ditas nossas soluções' [more tangible solutions, the so-called our solutions].<sup>28</sup> The appeal to rely on 'as nossas próprias forças' [our own strengths] translates into a 'Plano Director' [master plan], drawn 'numa grande folha branca' [on a big white page]<sup>29</sup>, with a view to urbanizing as much of the area as possible. Through the Government's configuration of the sea as a blank space for neocolonial filling in, the crisis in the sea has patently become – as the neoliberal mantra holds – an opportunity, predictably, for the expansion of capital. The Government will repeat in the sea, now as farce, a tragic history of colonization of the land: it will build nothing except for a road and gas stations so that, in light of modern neoliberal conceptions, enterprising citizens may have free reign to buy generators, to dig wells, to build high walls and hire private security with dogs and batons to guarantee the success of this exclusive development.<sup>30</sup>

The white page of paper on which the plan is drawn is symptomatic of the Government's position and, to an extent, of its wishful thinking. Although the sea in its apparent solid state is described as a desert, it is instantly clear that it is far from being a blank canvas on which plans and desires can be effortlessly carried out; the attribution of an adjective to the desert makes this obvious: 'Um deserto salpicado de pequenos pontos prateados, brancos e negros ou até de outras cores' [A

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<sup>27</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 135.

<sup>29</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 135.

<sup>30</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 135-36.

desert spattered with small dots in silver, white and black or even in other colours].<sup>31</sup> The dots that authorities and technocrats will come to map, identify and wilfully ignore are not a form that can easily be apprehended. The description of the dots as spatters metonymically transposes to these remnants the fluidity that is attributable to the sea and that is exceptionally suspended in the beginning of the short story. The same word, *salpicos*, is applied specifically to the thousands of *xitatarrus* that will be found ‘Salpicando vários quadrados’ [Spattering several squares].<sup>32</sup> The spatters were always there – foreshadowing the fact that, as one will come to address, the sea was always already there even if its force (quietly undermining all potential forms of survey, planning, development and appropriation) went unnoticed.

### **After all there was sea**

The fishermen in the bay have no documents that can entitle them to any say, let alone to prove possession of the (liquid) sea, and hence their claims for possession of some of the new emerging land goes unheard, in the same way that the now visible corpses of the dead fishermen from the past (presumably their ancestors) are overlooked. The inhabitants of the island of Inhaca are equally powerless. They can only murmur concerns *vis-à-vis* the inevitable incorporation and/or blotting out, whose growlings their own murmurings anticipate:

E agora, murmurava-se de boca em boca, ela (Maputo) aproximar-se-ia ruidosa num som rouco de bulldozers, como um voraz bicho já arrotando antes de comê-los. Lançaria as suas avenidas como um grande polvo lançando os tentáculos, exalaria os seus fumos negros e espessos de cidade como esse polvo lança a sua tinta. Metáfora marinha, mas nem por isso menos ameaçadora e real.<sup>33</sup>

[And now, it was murmured by word of mouth, she (Maputo) would noisily edge closer in a husky sound of bulldozers, as a voracious animal belching already before eating them. It would throw its avenues as a large octopus throws its tentacles, it would exhale its thick and dark city smoke as such an octopus throws its ink. A marine metaphor, but as threatening and real nonetheless.]

The black ink and smoke are expected to fill in the vast blank space and blot out any dots that spatter the desert. The irony of having a marine metaphor describe the voracious expansion and development

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<sup>31</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 137.

of land is not lost on the reader when the dimensions of Leviathan and Behemoth are fused precisely at the moment when islanders get stuck between a hard place (the ‘mar imenso’ [immense sea]) and the Maputo Bay sea which has now been appropriated as land. As they are about to throw themselves into the unknown open sea, they are rescued in extremis from the roaring bulldozers by the restoration of the flow in the bay of Maputo, as are the seashore inhabitants, and the fishermen. The precarious community (for a lack of a better word) of islanders is spared from total exclusion, seemingly paradoxically, via the separation that the sea in the bay insures once its liquid state is restored. The fishermen are saved from being evicted from the sea which had provided them with a means of livelihood and was the cemetery of their ancestors.

What ultimately interrupts the incorporation and annihilation the islanders, fishermen, or the seashore inhabitants was always already there: ‘afinal havia mar, só que tão quieto e transparente, tão leve e tão etéreo que passara despercebido!’ [after all there was sea, only it was so quiet and transparent, so light and so ethereal that it had gone unnoticed’].<sup>34</sup> The sea’s ethereal transparency may invoke further the already mentioned Michelet’s description of seawater as a diaphanous garment and the ensuing phantasmagory which the historian intuited. However, more than a site of historical difference, the sea is a producer of differences, it interrupts an infinite projection and expansion of the *ipse* via the difference(s) already there, even if unnoticed at first sight or upon ever closer inspection (South Africa, the USA, the Government of all of us).

The story of these ‘communities’, who live off and by the sea, who resist annihilation by an Authority and a Plan which is not able to listen to them or to recognize them as stakeholders only because the sea is – contrary to what different agents, institutions and forces, national and international had perceived – liquid, its waves come and go, points to the sea as more than simply an ‘other’ to the land, which can dialectically be sublated; if anything, its coming and going interrupts sublation. This touches upon the role that the sea has played in philosophy of history or political philosophy as it goes against Hegelian formulation of the sea as the merely dialectical ‘origin of “commingling”, “heterogeneity”, and “extraneousness”’. Roberto Esposito refers to Friedrich Hegel’s notorious framing of Africa as outside the westward unfolding of the *Geist* while highlighting also the sea’s merely dialectical role in the Hegel’s vision of the expansion of Europe: the sea is ‘the place of the improper’, only to be subsumed in and by the proper.<sup>35</sup> In Esposito’s view, who carries out, in *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, a critique of Martin Heidegger’s seminal reading of the sea in Hölderlin, it also undercuts Heidegger’s reiteration of Hegel’s formulation. In Esposito’s counter-reading, the movement of the sea prefigures Esposito’s own definition of

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<sup>34</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 138.

<sup>35</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 107.

community<sup>36</sup>: the sea may very well be the ‘site of the improper’<sup>37</sup>, but – to paraphrase Jacques Derrida – there is no *dehors mer*. In Hölderlin, ‘[t]he sea withdraws, and in this withdrawal it is actualized not in two distinct passages but within one movement: it withdraws giving itself – as a gift to others, and it gives itself as a gift as it withdraws. The sea’s withdrawal leaves the land to be’.<sup>38</sup> Esposito’s dismantling of Heidegger’s ontological investment in Hölderlin’s sea continues:

Hölderlin's verses constitute the exact reversal of that heroic epic of the sea that Hegel philosophically ‘sang’ under the mark of the infinite expansion of Europe. Contrary to this vision, Hölderlin's sea reminds us of our shared inability to be appropriated; pure crossing [*traversata*] without ‘forward’ or ‘back’, as Hölderlin makes clear in the third version of the lyric. An absolute present withdrawn as much from the sirens of Utopia as from the calls of nostalgia – Theodor Adorno will also remark upon this in his polemic with Heidegger. The present is the time of the loss of the origin. [...] That it [the sea] doesn't have an end, nor a direction, nor a logic means that the origin itself has been cast so deeply into the abyss that it cannot be shown except in the movement with which it withdraws. This is the sea: the eternal coming and going of waves: withdrawing as a countermovement of the stroke; the undertow that leaves something on the earth, and vice versa, because the sea in question isn't to be understood in opposition to land but rather as its secret meaning; the oscillating, precarious, and troubling dimension that constitutes the hidden undercurrent of land, that which land is incapable of seeing by itself, its blind spot.<sup>39</sup>

The coincidence of the flow of the sea being restored just as the inhabitants of the islands prepare to flee into the unknown reinforces the importance of the come and go of the sea. The sea, as a literary device, presents no escapist route, either through nostalgia or utopian projection (a ‘new dawn’ in unknown Perth, a ‘sol novinho em folha’ [brand new sun])<sup>40</sup> across and beyond the sea. The force of the sea lies rather in its bringing together as, and because, it separates – hence the clear danger of anthropomorphizing the oceans, in imagining its subjects and the ocean as a subject. There is no ‘us’ in the short story except in the rhetoric of the authoritarian becoming (to use Mbembe’s term) of the ‘Governo de todo nós’ [Government of all of us] when it pushes its ‘ditas nossas soluções’ [the so-

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<sup>36</sup> Roberto Esposito defines ‘community’ as not ‘the *inter* of the *esse*, but the *esse* as *inter*’, ‘being itself as a relationship’. That leads to a discussion of the superimposition of being and nothing: ‘... being of community is the gap, the spacing that relates us to others in a common non-belonging, a loss of what is one’s own which never manages to be added up into a common good. Only lack is common, not possession, property and appropriation’; see Roberto Esposito, ‘Community and nihilism’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 1 (2009), 27.

<sup>37</sup> Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, 107.

<sup>38</sup> Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, 108-09.

<sup>39</sup> Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, 109-10.

<sup>40</sup> Borges Coelho, *Índicos indícios II: meridiano*, 137.

called our solutions] and appeals to ‘as nossas próprias forças’ [our own strengths] as a smokescreen to push on its programme of disenfranchisement, exclusion, and economic appropriation. The force of the sea ultimately interrupts the ipseistic projection of the becoming authoritarian selfsame. The come and go of the sea (and of ‘community’ and its non-subject) calls for a reading that goes beyond projected forms. The force of sea – both hiding and revealing, coming and going – ultimately interrupts the extension and/or the mirroring of the selfsame (i.e. the Authority of the land, ordered into a Master Plan projected onto blank sheets). But neither does it provide the land(ed) authorities with an opposite; it rather confronts them with their blindspots and limits to the otherness (*what* or *who*) the selfsame can appropriate.

The force of the sea stresses the otherness within, and a within which is without defined borders or propriety. The remnants (vessels, corpses) are traces, an absence rendered noticeable: indices (Indian Ocean’s or otherwise) point only to a presence insofar as that same presence is beyond recuperation – it is a sign of absence as much as it is of presence. This irrecoverability is not, for fiction, an admission of defeat; it is a condition of possibility. The suspension of the column of time brought about by the spatIALIZATION of the sea (sea as a temporary space for investment and development with a view to colonization) brings to the forefront the ways in which it is not time and space that define the relation between self and (its) other, but rather what Derrida has termed *spacing*:

*Spacing* designates *nothing*, nothing that is, no presence at a distance; it is the index of an irreducible exterior, and at the same time of a *movement*, a displacement that indicates an irreducible alterity.<sup>41</sup>

Ultimately, the ‘force’ of the sea interrupts the sublimation, the projected erasure (devouring or blotting out, as was the threat of the marine metaphor) which a ‘solidified’ sea promised; the marks of the corpses, the corpses as marks indicated already (in the desert splattered with small dots) a *spacing*, a movement and an alterity, which could not be – dialectically or otherwise – be erased, filled in, blotted out. What these ‘communities’ have in common is the negative force of the sea which separates them as much as brings them into play.

### **Always the same, always different.**

The risk of overlooking, or approaching acritically, the ways in which Indian Ocean is constructed, represented and articulated in and through literature is, first and foremost, to miss out on varied and diverse connections that make studying the Indian Ocean relevant in the first place. Literature

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Positions: interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta’, in *Positions* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), 81.

provides a way of questioning, of placing in question, and as the question, the relation between the local and the global precisely because it is one of the privileged instances of where the local (the spacetime of Mozambican coast, the North [*Setentrião*] and the South [*Meridião*]; the Indic indices) is necessarily in tension with the global (concepts, writings).

As Borges Coelho has not failed to mention in interviews, the short stories in *Índicos Índicios* are grounded on the local geography and history of Mozambique<sup>42</sup> but the porosity of African literary writing (including his own), the way in which it is inexorably embedded as well as in dialogue with a wider, ‘global/universal’ context cannot be denied; indeed African literature should strive to become ‘literatura universal’ so as to counter ethnicist or exoticist prejudices, often in tandem with marketing ploys. The move to ‘desafricanizar essa literatura face ao olhar do Outro’<sup>43</sup> [de-Africanize that literature in relation to the gaze of the Other] ends up mirroring other acts in different areas which share a similar performative trait: in history, with authors such as Michael Pearson proposing the notion of Afrasian sea to counter the erasure and invisibility of the East African coast agents and ports in the studies on the Indian Ocean trade<sup>44</sup>; in philosophy, the countering of the Hegelian submission of Africa (and, consequently, of African thinkers) to the realm of the obscure, of the unthought with V. Y. Mudimbe’s ‘ambivalent rhetorical move’ in his rewriting of Michel Foucault (‘L’Ordre du discours? / ‘The Order of Discourse’) in *L’odeur du père* (chapter ‘Quel ordre du discours africain?’)<sup>45</sup>, or Achille Mbembe’s insistence that it is insufficient, when ‘dealing with African societies’ “‘historicity’”, to address merely what happens ‘on the continent itself at the interface between the working of internal forces and the working of international actors’. According to Mbembe, it is crucial to undertake a ‘critical delving into Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it’.<sup>46</sup> In ‘A força do mar de Agosto’, the *xitatarrus* (past, underwater; or present) stand as a necessary reminder of the tension between local and global, as their temporal ubiquity keeps them in dialogue and tension with the several vessels (colonial or post-independence ships, such as the ones owned by the islanders; airplanes, Mozambican and South African; American satellites) without ever hinting at nostalgic or utopian projects. Even if unbeknown to the islanders, fishermen, or residents of the shore, their story is interwoven with foreign agents and interests and/or the unrecognized ‘olhar do Outro’ of South Africans, USA, or Australia as much as it is with the equally distant but nevertheless intrusive Government, or every Indic index that the supposedly solid sea ultimately rendered visible.

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<sup>42</sup> See João Paulo Borges Coelho, ‘A literatura e o léxico da pós-colonialidade: uma conversa com João Paulo Borges Coelho’, interviewed by Elena Brugioni, *Diacrítica* 3/24 (2010), 443.

<sup>43</sup> See Borges Coelho, ‘Entrevista com João Paulo Borges Coelho’, 158–159.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Michael Pearson, ‘The Swahili coast in the Afrasian Sea’, in *Port Cities and Intruders. The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 36–62. On the overlooking of East African commerce, see Chandra Richard De Silva, ‘Indian Ocean but not African Sea: the erasure of East African commerce from History’, *Journal of Black Studies* 29/5 (1999), 684–694.

<sup>45</sup> See Michael Syrotinski, *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 83–84.

<sup>46</sup> Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 14.

‘A força do mar de Agosto’ functions as a marine allegory in which the exceptional, brief metamorphosis of the sea reveals the underlying groundlessness of the authoritarian political and economic power structures which grip the (home)land. In fact, the pseudo-solidification of the sea made visible what was and is always there, merely unnoticed: the untidiness without hierarchy, the conflicting vestiges. The ‘mar de Agosto’, by ultimately resisting appropriation and – more significantly still – sublimation, thwarts the laws and logics of the land (i.e., explore and map out; conquer and occupy; invest the capital and reap the dividends) and in the process exposes the ways in which the logics and the laws of the land are themselves ultimately groundless. The sea in ‘A força do mar de Agosto’ acts as a force which questions the forms (historical, cultural, economic, inevitably political) and it is as such – force rather than forms – that it must be addressed. Seeking for the easy way out (‘ralo’ [drain]) or an ‘explanation’, rather than attending to the tensions and dissemination of the come and go, will therefore inevitably fail to scratch the surface, irrespectively of how transparent the sea is (or was, briefly, when, to all appearances, it was solidified). As previously addressed, the search for an explanation is merely a thinly disguised excuse to carry on with business as usual by imposing a ‘Plano Director’ which plays into and in tune with the interests of (neocolonial, neoliberal) enterprise. As abovementioned, the South African and US agents will be asked to apply to the sea the expertise – on gas pipes and on satellites – they had picked up on somewhat dubious past dealings and and/or under false pretence.

In addressing the small, and the smallness of, remains (or indices) and the force of the sea, ‘A força do mar de Agosto’ exposes the intricate relation between the sea’s history, stories and imaginary. The force of the sea lies in its deployment as a device that can address the traces in the Indian Ocean contribute towards assuaging Borges Coelho’s concerns, expressed in interviews, regarding the neoliberal drive (globally speaking, and in Mozambique) towards erasing and manipulating memory, on the one hand and, on the other, towards shutting down the capacity to ‘imaginar o futuro’ [imagine the future].<sup>47</sup> It can be said that Borges Coelho’s conception of the role of literature partially coincides with Barthes’s and Rancière’s vision of what Michelet’s history, underlined and underwritten by its literary traits, had the potential to offer. However, Rancière’s ‘scientific and political project’ which complements the history of the victors with the ‘the story of the vanquished, the abject, and the downcast of history’<sup>48</sup> and provides the excluded (the poor) with a ‘voice’<sup>49</sup> cannot be equated with Borges Coelho’s concern for those who suffer and cannot speak out because they lack the ‘capacidade, força, voz, para se fazer ouvir’ [capacity, strength, voice, to make themselves heard].<sup>50</sup> There are

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<sup>47</sup> João Paulo Borges Coelho, ‘Entrevista a João Paulo Borges Coelho’, interviewed by Ana Patrício Vicente Peixinho Santos, *Navegações* 4/1 (2011), 109.

<sup>48</sup> White, ‘Foreword: Rancière’s revisionism’, ix.

<sup>49</sup> Nikulin, ‘The names in history: Rancière’s new historical poetics’, 76.

<sup>50</sup> Borges Coelho, ‘A literatura e o léxico da pós-colonialidade: uma conversa com João Paulo Borges Coelho’, 443.

meaningful overlaps, and the short story's allegiance to those missed by and in history can be traced in the language of the text as it offsets the 'pequeno' (small vestiges, dots, fishermen) against the 'grande' (large octopus, large white sheet, large column of time).

Borges Coelho's efforts, however, might be read as an exploration of how literature works in disjunction in relation to history. Vecchi's compelling case for including Borges Coelho's short stories in the tradition of *estória* (tale, story), which can be traced back to Brazil and earned a significant following in literature in Portuguese from African countries, is an apt reminder of a productive tension at work.<sup>51</sup> One can find in João Guimarães Rosa's insistence on the differences between the pair *história* [history; story] and the less common and not entirely consensual *estória* [story; tale] a step towards Borges Coelho's own take that literature's distinctive contribution is *not* towards filling in the gaps, providing coordinates, but rather working by contrast. According to Borges Coelho, it is up to the novel (mutatis mutandis, the short story), with its characteristically freer and less responsible exercise of the imagination, to go beyond the dead indices of history and to make visible who (as well as what) has been hidden, buried or overlooked: 'A historiografia interpreta enquanto o romance, aberto, dispõe' [Historiography interprets whereas the novel, open, exposes].<sup>52</sup>

The homophony between *estória* and *história* helps inscribe and highlight the difference between history and story, a difference – furthermore – which draws attention to itself through and in writing. To Jacques Derrida's question on whether 'politics or the political' is not also 'this engagement with powerlessness?'<sup>53</sup>, Borges Coelho's *histórias/estórias* provide an answer in writing, through literature's role both as 'instituted fiction' and 'fictive institution which in principle allows one to say everything'<sup>54</sup>, the role of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives and directions in the face of a neoliberal shutdown of meaningful ties between past, present, and future. The politics of 'A força do mar de Agosto', with its rendering visible (the índices in the sea) and sayable (murmured by islanders and coastal inhabitants) may lie in the aforementioned Rancièrian involvement 'in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world' as much as in a Derridan engagement with powerlessness.

The untidiness without hierarchy, which in the short story acts as a reminder of the sea's force and to its toing and froing even when its force is only seemingly suspended for a period, acts as a reminder of the condition of writing and reading as operating in contrast to finding 'the drain, or at

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<sup>51</sup> Vecchi, 'Excepting the exception: A bloodstained cartography of Mozambique in João Paulo Borges Coelho's *Índicos indícios*', 242–243.

<sup>52</sup> See Borges Coelho, 'Entrevista com João Paulo Borges Coelho', 153–154.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Politics and friendship', in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 193.

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, and Derek Attridge, "'This strange institution called literature": an interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 36.

least an explanation'; reading – in literature as well as in history – cannot be reduced to a search for a solution, an interpretation, or an exercise in filling in the gaps. In *Glas*, Derrida (as Michelet, Barthes, Heidegger before him, and Rancière afterwards<sup>55</sup>; without forgetting, of course, Borges Coelho) also deploys a marine metaphor. Derrida evokes the operation of the sea dredging machine as an illustration of the exercise of reading, of an inexhaustible and constantly shifting attempt to get to the bottom, to grasp a meaning that is constantly reconstituted (though not as the same) by the toing and froing of the sea. Derrida's enactment in *Glas*, while meditating on the reading of Jean Genet's text in interplay with Hegel and disrupting the omnivorous appetite of the Hegelian system, acts as a warning of how it is only too easy to guarantee a reading by setting up or settling for a heading, subsuming other discourses into the logic of a selfsame. Derrida exemplifies with the defamiliarizing (*la mère* [the mother]; *la mer* [the sea]) 'matrix or grammar' of the 'dredging machine' being manipulated by some levers:

And I scrape (*racle*) the bottom, hook onto stones and algae there that I lift in order to set them down on the ground while the water quickly falls back from the mouth.

And I begin again to scrape (*racler*), to scratch, to dredge the bottom of the sea, the mother (*mer*).

I barely hear the noise of the water from the little room.

The toothed matrix (*matrice dentée*) only withdraws what it can, some algae, some stones. Some bits (*morceaux*), since it bites (*mord*). Detached. But the remain(s) passes between its teeth, between its lips. You do not catch the sea. She always reforms herself.<sup>56</sup>

The 'toothed matrix' dredging the bottom of the sea destabilizes without appropriating, performing against and because of the constant re-enactment (the performative and the to-comeness) of the sea, the unpredictable and the remains. In this way, it performs as a critique of the teleological Hegelian omnivorousness played out also, as Esposito's critique makes clear, in his positing of Europe's sea-borne infinite expansion. This machine exemplifies a different praxis to that of the other apparatuses in the short story; the airplane and satellites used by the South African and US teams in the text project a framework upon the sea, from above, searching for and interpreting clues for an origin or an explanation to the text and the indices with which they are confronted. In Derrida's image, as is the case in the short story, the sea is in no way alien – quite the contrary – to the production of meaning.

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<sup>55</sup> For Nikulin, the sea in Rancière 'is a metaphor that is more than a metaphor'; see Nikulin, 'The names in history: Rancière's new historical poetics', 72.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 204–205.

Furthermore, as in the short story once again, it cannot simply be posited as the other to a (pre-existing) selfsame (as such), to be appropriated. This image stands perhaps as one of the best illustrations of the point made by Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, in a critique of structuralism's overreliance on the concept and meaning of 'form', of the necessary force (the movement, the violence) to the reading of any text.<sup>57</sup> The short story's precipitate ending ('afinal havia mar') lays bare that beyond and underneath the forms (the squares into which the new space is mapped out and which became the crux of the dispute between fishermen and the authorities), simultaneously underwriting them and ultimately undermining them, the force of the sea was always in play, already undermining the verticality of the large column of time.

The sea, even if and when solidified, would still prove to be too much of a challenge to the technology and ideology of the Government's Brigades. If there is to be, as Borges Coelho hopes, a chance to imagine the future, this would entail being open to what is other and cannot be determined in advance. It would also mean accepting that Indic indices must be consistently reread, always with a difference. The sea, always the same, ever differently. You do not catch the sea, it always reforms itself. That is the force of the sea of August.

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<sup>57</sup> See Jacques Derrida, 'Force and signification' in *Writing and Difference* (London / New York: Routledge, 2001), 1–35.

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