

Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean: Cultural and Literary Perspectives. Edited by MARKUS ARNOLD, CORINNE DUBOIN and JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK. Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée 2020. 334 pp. eBook £9.49. ISBN: 978-2-36781-357-8.

This bilingual and multidisciplinary volume extends the ecological concept of the ecotone to diverse regions of the Indian Ocean: its southwestern islands, the South African Cape, and the deltaic and coastal regions of the Indian subcontinent. Although the guiding thread of the ‘ecotone’ sometimes gets lost, the main strength of *Borders and Ecotones* is its ambitious spatiotemporal and disciplinary scope, which weaves one of the richest tapestries of the Indian Ocean seen in contemporary scholarship. The volume is thus of interest to both students and experts on the Indian Ocean, as well as to any readers interested in exploring new conceptualizations of the border.

As explained in the introduction to the volume, the botanical term ‘ecotone’ refers to the ‘transitional zones’ between distinct ecosystems, where species mix and diversity is multiplied (p. 12). Ecotones can coincide with human frontiers: ‘[F]ollowing the path of rivers or mountaintops, traversing deserts or crossing seas, borders are more often than not ecological ecotones as well as sites of experimentation and cultural innovations’ (p. 10). Additionally, as Florence Krall has established, the ecotonal concept productively engages with humanistic and social science disciplines (p. 13).⁷⁴ But how, specifically, does the ecotone—be it ecological, cultural, or both—relate to the Indian Ocean world? This capacious volume explores the question through a wide-ranging collection of contributions in English (ten) and French (five).

Until recently, the vast waters of the Indian Ocean were fragmented by invisible disciplinary borders: Francophone scholars working on the Mascarenes were siloed off from Anglophone scholars focused on the coastal regions of Africa and India. This volume joins growing efforts, spearheaded by literary scholar Ananya Kabir and writer Ari Gautier, to put them in direct conversation. Temporally, the volume’s contributions stretch from seventeenth-century colonialism to contemporary migratory tensions. Geographically, the essays span the islands of the

⁷⁴ Florence R. Krall, *Ecotone: Wayfaring on the Margins* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

southwestern Indian Ocean (Mauritius, Rodrigues, the Comoros, Mayotte, Madagascar, and Reunion), and reach out to the South African Cape and Robben Island. They touch upon a small island off the coast of Bombay (Mumbai) and weave through West Bengal, exploring Calcutta (Kolkata), the Sundarbans and the temporary islands called ‘chars’ that emerge at the confluence of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers. Comparative analyses reach out toward the Caribbean and French Polynesia. Essays are drawn primarily from literary studies, as well as from creative writing, sociology, anthropology, and history.

Conceptually, the ‘ecotone’ can be illuminating as it fosters richer and more expansive notions of the borderland. For example, in her essay ‘Is “The Unity [...] submarine” ? Hommes et femmes à la mer dans quelques textes des îles du sud-ouest de l’océan Indien’, Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo’s framing of an ecotonal submarine realm full of ‘corps-déchets [trash-bodies]’ and ‘créatures amphibies’ (p. 81) challenges us to rethink the precarious migrant condition. For its part, Annu Jalais’ essay ‘The Human and the Nonhuman: “socio-environmental” Ecotones and Deep Contradictions in the Bengali Heartland’ explores the overlapping valences of the concept in the Sundarbans region, which she argues is ‘an ecotone both geographically as it is between land and water as well as socio-culturally as it is a borderland between Bangladesh and West Bengal, between Hindu and Muslim, between land-based and forest-based and river-based occupations’ (p. 128).

Certain essays, such as Cécile Do Huu’s article ‘Une archéologie des îles des Mascareignes et de Polynésie française’ on archipelagic archeology, and Pallavi Chakravarty’s piece ‘Ecotones of Resistance: The Contested Narrative of the “Refugee” in post-Partition Bengal (1947–71)’ on the need for a distinct category of ‘partition refugee,’ are fascinating in and of themselves. However, their linkage to the ‘ecotone’ does not seem to be a conceptual necessity. In the context of those contributions, it is a challenge to understand the unique theoretical merit of the ‘ecotone,’ especially as opposed to that of other key concepts already entrenched in the field of border studies (and evoked in the volume itself), such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderland or Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the contact zone.

The curation of such a wide-ranging collection is no minor feat, and the editors rise to the challenge by structuring the volume into four thematic sections. The first ‘Between Land and Water: Motion, Flux and Displacement,’ revolves around mobility. The second, ‘Individuals and Communities: The Human and the Nonhuman Ecotone,’ explores the inter-human and inter-species valences of the ecotone. The third section, ‘Here, There and Across: The Macro and the Micro Ecotone,’ toggles between granular and broader geographical perspectives. Finally, ‘Beyond Borders’ is an interview of the Mauritian author Shenaz Patel, whose self-identification as an ‘exploratrice’ (p. 293) frames her prolific and diverse literary production. The organisation of contributions is perhaps not intuitive, but it is definitely productive: readers are pushed to grapple, for example, with the conceptual (dis)continuities between the ‘foreign’ status and assimilation efforts of Comoran migrants in Mayotte, as well as those of Muslim citizens and migrants in India. Ultimately, it is precisely this commitment to weaving new links between hitherto academically-, geographically and linguistically compartmentalized regions that constitutes the greatest contribution of *Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean*, and that will make it a lasting scholarly reference.

NIKHITA OBEEGADOO
HARVARD UNIVERSITY