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# FROM LITTORAL TO OZONE: ON MIKE PEARSON'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIAN OCEAN HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

In this chapter I examine two of Michael Pearson's most important contributions to our understanding of Indian Ocean history: the concept of the littoral, which he first articulated in his seminal article on "Littoral society: the case for the coast" in *The Great Circle* 7, no. 1 (1985): 1-8, and his comment in *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 9) that "I want it to have a whiff of ozone." Accordingly, I review Pearson's publications to see how he has written about these two notions and how they have influenced historical scholarship about the Indian Ocean.

For the past four decades Mike Pearson has enriched our historical understanding of the Portuguese colonial empire in Asia, early modern India, maritime history, and the Indian Ocean. Whatever the specific topic, his scholarship is always imaginative and well documented. With regard to the last of these broad areas of knowledge, however, for me it is the publication of his seminal article on littoral society that first marked his presence as a major voice in Indian Ocean studies.<sup>1</sup> Over the three decades since the appearance of that article, Mike Pearson has expanded the frontiers of how we think and write about the history of the Indian Ocean. One of the noteworthy features of his scholarship has been his readiness to re-think his positions and to question the continued stability of his previous interpretations. At the same time, he has proved to be as accessible and provocative a writer as he is a careful historian. In this short contribution I propose to examine two of Pearson's most important contributions to our understanding of Indian Ocean history: the concept of the littoral, and his commitment to writing Indian Ocean history that has

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1. Michael Pearson, "Littoral Society: The Case for the Coast," *The Great Circle* 7, no. 1 (1985), 1-8, reprinted in Michael Pearson, *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate/Variorum, 2005), Chapter VI. Many thanks to Cal Margulis for research assistance in preparing this paper and to the anonymous reader for suggestions to improve the first draft.

“a whiff of the ozone.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, I will review Pearson's publications over these three decades to see how he has written about these two notions and how they have influenced historical scholarship about the Indian Ocean.

Without question Pearson's concept of the littoral as an organizing principle for coming to grips with the essential character and unity of the Indian Ocean world is the more substantive and widely influential of these two ideas. Intellectually, it reflects Pearson's engagement with the important group of maritime historians in Western Australia that included Peter Reeves, Ken McPherson, and Frank Broeze—all now sadly deceased—who made Perth the center for Indian Ocean studies in the late twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> To my way of thinking it also qualifies as an example of “geographies of knowing.”<sup>4</sup> The emphasis of the Perth group's scholarship was on port cities and the colonial period and, accordingly, overemphasized “European activities in Asia.” What Pearson sought was a way to address the entire Indian Ocean world, both geographically and chronologically. He suggested, “A study of littoral society is much more holistic than that of port cities, and forces one to concentrate much more on the sea, thus avoiding the temptation to which many port city studies have succumbed, that is, the tendency to stray inland to distant markets and influences, and ignore the sea altogether.” Historians must recognize that port cities “need to be seen as part of coastal or littoral society at least as much as entrepôts [sic] servicing an inland hinterland,” if we are to understand the larger context in which port cities are located.<sup>5</sup>

Pearson goes on to advocate that it is important in maritime history to appreciate that “by definition it includes both land and sea...and so avoid the tendency to see people at sea as *sui generis*.” He further argues against the idea that colonial history, beginning with Gama's entry into the Indian Ocean in 1498 and continuing into the mid-eighteenth century, represents a watershed in Indian Ocean history. Emphasizing the dramatic change in the number and character of sources for regional history after 1500, “the history of coastal western India does not” exhibit such a transformation. This changed perspective opens up the possibility in which “littoral history will make a large contribution.” Indeed, he concludes his introduction to this paper by suggesting that “if one focuses on the sea, and the littoral, then on-going themes and trends become clear and one can escape the shackles of a largely European-derived documentation.”<sup>6</sup>

For Pearson, the attraction of the concept of the littoral was that, as a porous frontier, “there is a continuum between land and sea activities, with the strip of the littoral in the

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2. It is somewhat ironic that the characteristic smell of the sea to which Pearson alludes is not ozone, but a gas released by bacteria. See Sanjida O'Connell, “The science behind that fresh seaside smell,” *The Telegraph*, 18 August 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/6044238/The-science-behind-that-fresh-seaside-smell.htm>, accessed 26 January 2017.

3. See Ghulam A. Nadri, “Sympathetic ‘Farangi’: An Interview with Michael N. Pearson,” *Itinerario*, 28, no. 3 (2004), 13.

4. Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20 (2002): 647-668.

5. Nadri, “Sympathetic ‘Farangi,’” 13.

6. Pearson, “Littoral Society,” 1-2.

middle, acting as a hinge or mediator. There is no dichotomy, the two are not discrete. Rather they merge and blend in the littoral.”<sup>7</sup> Drawing upon his reading of Fernand Braudel’s monumental history of the Mediterranean, he next probes the possibility that there may be a littoral society consisting of people who inhabit the seashore and who can “be seen as constituting a different society from people living inland.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time he cautions against automatically including “all people near the sea,” noting that “even coastal residents may have very different perceptions and attitudes.”<sup>9</sup> Keeping his focus on the coast of western India, the area on which his original research concentrated, he emphasizes “the influence of geography on littoral. This dictates that maritime influences, or perhaps the area we can call the littoral, are of varying depth inland....The land-sea frontier is flexible, variable: pace Braudel, a thousand frontiers indeed!”<sup>10</sup> Moving towards his concluding thought, Pearson argues:

A final answer must then stress the sea, but not separate it from the land. Our definition of the history of littoral societies is simply that it is a history focusing on people whose lives were connected with the sea, and who travelled over salt water or were influenced by what occurred on it. The history of such people is not restricted to the sea. Influences on littoral society of which we must take note can come from far inland. It is always a matter of interaction between the affairs of land and sea. This interaction will never cease at sea, for no one lives totally on the water and completely uninfluenced by the land. The land frontier is porous, elastic: all we can say is that when a land activity is in no way influenced by the sea, then we are not interested. This then is the land frontier, the end of the littoral.<sup>11</sup>

Having thus laid out in some specificity his definition of littoral society, and while cautioning that the business of definition is not a solution to writing what he calls “good” history, Pearson writes: “I am strongly convinced that this effort is well worth making. We need more precision, but there is no doubt that there is such a thing as littoral society.”<sup>12</sup> A few lines later he suggests more modestly that “the concept of littoral society has, I am sure, a ‘tin-opener’ utility at the least. It can open for us a new and better series of categories, and help us to avoid the problems associated with maritime, port city and imperial history.”<sup>13</sup> More specifically, he suggests what he considers to be

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7. Ibid., 4.

8. Ibid. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1972).

9. Pearson, “Littoral Society”, 5.

10. Ibid., 6.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 7, emphasis in original.

13. Ibid., 8.

several characteristic elements of littoral society, such as its pluralism resulting from the presence of different groups of foreign merchants in littoral ports; greater consumption of fish than among inland people; the particular impact of the monsoon on littoral areas, where sea travel is impeded at certain times of the year; and “certain cultural and religious differences” that are a consequence of sea travel and maritime activities. Understanding these possibilities will require “empirical research to flesh out these distinctive elements.” Indeed, he concludes: “Empirical research is the essence, but should take place not in a vacuum, but as a means to test existing theory.”<sup>14</sup>

In the years following the publication of this highly original contribution, Pearson worked ceaselessly to define and refine the fundamental challenges involved in writing a history of the Indian Ocean and, more generally, to further the domain of maritime history. A fascinating example of the myriad ways in which he was seeking both to tackle these definitional issues and to develop an empirical base for testing his ideas may be seen in his informal remarks delivered at the panel on “The Writing of Indian Ocean History” at the 1986 meeting of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. On that occasion he asked: “How do we define, categorise, abstract and isolate this entity (if indeed it is one) of an Indian Ocean?”<sup>15</sup> One typical Pearson response was “to counterattack” by pointing out that all analytical categories are artificial. Another might be to embrace maritime history as a way to deliver a final blow to Eurocentrism. But, he then contends, “The basic question is to delineate elements of unity, thus showing there is indeed an Indian Ocean world.”<sup>16</sup> He first indicates trade as one way to do this. “A more hazardous enterprise,” he proposes in language that indicates the tentative nature of his formulation, “is to try to delineate all around the edge of the ocean a coastal, or littoral, society which has elements of commonality.”<sup>17</sup> He alludes to the role of brokers, whose multiple contacts as intermediaries in servicing both maritime and inland trade are not ineluctably littoral. Thus, he reiterates his mantra that “we need lots more empirical research if we are to demonstrate there was such a thing as littoral society.”<sup>18</sup> In the rest of this short essay he discusses his then current research on the hajj as a way to open up several questions of maritime history and ends with a consideration of Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of the modern world-systems “as useful in suggesting new questions, in forcing us to be comparative and analytical.”<sup>19</sup>

Pearson integrates his littoral perspective and Wallerstein’s world-systems notion in his ambitious set of lectures on the early modern history of the Swahili coast in the context of Indian Ocean and world history. He states plainly that his “concern is with

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14. *Ibid.*, 6-7.

15. Pearson, “Maritime History Theory and Empirical Testing,” *Review: Asian Studies Association of Australia*, 11, no. 1 (1987/1988), 23.

16. *Ibid.*, 24.

17. *Ibid.*, 25.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 31.

the validity and utility of maritime history, and of the concept of a distinctive littoral or coastal society. Can we see the seas and shores of the Indian Ocean as being a discrete unit that can be investigated like a state, or a city, or a ruler?"<sup>20</sup> He subsequently asks, "what exactly is a maritime or littoral economy or society, and is it necessarily different from a landlocked one? Is it only coastal? A moment's reflection will show first that littoral society is very similar to some land-bounded societies, and second, that the littoral is not restricted to the shores of the ocean."<sup>21</sup>

These are, of course, questions whose origins reached back more than a decade for Pearson. Two years later Pearson argued that in order to understand the history of Islam in eastern Africa "the key concept here is littoral society. The subject is far from fully studied yet, but the general notion is that there is a certain commonality about all societies located on the shores of the Indian Ocean."<sup>22</sup>

When Pearson finally published his Indian Ocean magnum opus in 2003, it was no surprise that littoral society occupied a prominent place in his presentation of central issues in conceptualizing Indian Ocean history and that questions of permeability, transitionality, and commonality remained front and center.<sup>23</sup>

The question is whether we can see people who live on the littoral as making up a distinctive society, one that can be separated from those further inland. And if so, can we find any commonality in littoral society all around the far flung shores of the Indian Ocean? Does location on the shore transcend differing influences from an inland which is very diverse, both in geographic and cultural terms, so that the shorefolk have more in common with other shorefolk thousands of kilometres away on some other shore of the ocean, than they do with those in their immediate hinterland?<sup>24</sup>

Pearson's book inevitably ranges over many more topics than the littoral and he does not draw any conclusions about the utility of the littoral in this format, which concludes with a fairly depressing sense of the future fate of the seas. In the context of this discussion, however, it is noteworthy that the many reviews of Pearson's book did not take up littoral

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20. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 8. For my own review of this book, see Edward A. Alpers, *The Historian*, 62, no. 3 (2000), 678.

21. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*, 38.

22. Michael Pearson, "The Indian Ocean and the Red Sea," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, eds. Nehemia Levtzion & Randall L. Pouwels, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 42; for restatements of this idea, see also Michael Pearson, "Consolidating the Faith: Muslim Travellers in the Indian Ocean World," *The UTS Review*, 6, no. 2 (2000): 12 and Michael Pearson, "Afterward," in *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean*, eds. Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (London: Hurst, 2007), 367.

23. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 37-41.

24. *Ibid.*, 38.

society as a talking point, whether for praise or criticism. Featured in an exceptional Roundtable set of reviews in the *International Journal of Maritime History*, each of the invited scholars was apparently asked to examine some particular aspect of the book in which he or she had special expertise.<sup>25</sup> As Pearson remarked in his interview by Ghulam Nadri, “It is disappointing that most of the reviews have not really addressed my discussions of maritime history as a field, but rather have commented on gaps related to their own specialities.”<sup>26</sup>

In 2005 Pearson revisited the littoral in a short essay published in an issue of *History in Focus* that asked contributors to consider “lives shaped by the sea: how has the sea determined, influenced or changed peoples and communities on land?” Sounding by now familiar themes, he wrote, “If we look at people who live on the coast, that is the littoral of the ocean, we can make the case that they do demonstrate a certain social and economic unity all around the shores of the Indian Ocean.”<sup>27</sup> He continues by listing various “commonalities” shared by littoral inhabitants, including location, a diet heavy with fish, salt production, coral reefs as a source of building material, mangrove and palm trees, a shared lexicon of words deriving from Arabic, and folk religion, which focused on “customs to ensure safe voyages or a large catch, or a favourable monsoon so that fishing could recommence.... In all this we find strong commonalities all around the shores of the Indian Ocean, commonalities which are not shared with the very various folk inland.”<sup>28</sup> Although this short summary of views that he had first expressed in embryo in 1985 and developed over the following twenty years may seem to indicate that Pearson regarded these characteristics as definitively established, nothing could be further from the truth, as his major reconsideration of littoral society that appeared the following year makes clear.<sup>29</sup>

In this thoughtful reconsideration of littoral society Pearson reiterates his strong belief that “an attempt to specify the nature of littoral societies is central as we try to advance our exploration of seas and oceans.” He notes, further, that his thinking “will be consciously tentative and problem oriented,” but also that the article “makes the case that there is such a thing as littoral society.”<sup>30</sup> He states that three criteria are basic to his analysis: “location on or near the shore,” which is obvious, as well as the “more difficult” criteria of occupation and culture because they involve parsing out the intensity or absence of links between land and sea. “It is this mixture of maritime and terrestrial influences that makes

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25. “ROUNDTABLE: Reviews of Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, with a Response by Michael Pearson,” *International Journal of Maritime History*, 16, no. 1 (2004), 153-197. The reviewers were Thabit A.J. Abdullah (153-157), R.J. Barendse (157-164), H.V. Brown (164-168), Femme S. Gaastra (169-172), Kenneth McPherson (172-178), H.P. Ray (178-184), Patricia Risso (184-187), and Lodewijk J. Wagenaar (187-194), plus Michael Pearson (194-197).

26. Nadri, “Sympathetic ‘Farangi,’” 15.

27. Pearson, “Coastal communities and maritime history,” *History in Focus*, 9 (2005), 1/3, <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Sea/articles/pearson.html>, accessed 25 January 2017.

28. *Ibid.*, 1-2/3.

29. Pearson, “Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems,” *Journal of World History*, 17, no. 4 (2006), 353-373.

30. *Ibid.*, 353.

a study of littoral society a paradigm for maritime history in general.”<sup>31</sup> After a short discussion of location, Pearson devotes most of his time to the more vexing problems posed by littoral occupation and culture. Much of his discussion is familiar, so I will not repeat it here; but in addition to incorporating more recent scholarship that bears upon these questions, he introduces some ideas that further complicate matters. One of these is the place of islands, which he suggests “are perhaps where we are most likely to find littoral societies.” Some islands—the Seychelles, the Andaman, and Nicobar Islands—he states, “are purely littoral.” He also considers the possibility that “islands in the rivers [that connect interiors to the Indian Ocean] can be seen as making up little littoral societies all their own, even far ‘inland.’” Islands, he argues, exemplify “the complexity and ambiguity that must be the dominant note in any discussion of littoral society.”<sup>32</sup>

Using a metaphor that he had not previously emphasized, Pearson continues that “if the littoral is permeable, then our description must be amphibious, moving easily between land and sea.” One way to think about this changing relationship, he opines, is the notion of *ressac*, “the threefold violent movement of the waves, turning back on themselves as they crash against the shore,” as articulated by Jean-Claude Penrad in his discussion of Swahili society.<sup>33</sup> He also introduces the distinction between littoral folk, like fishing communities, and truly aquatic people like the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq as a way to further complicate matters. As he proceeds he raises the ways in which globalization, tourism, and pollution threaten littoral societies. “This is not to say that we can write of the end of littoral society.”<sup>34</sup> Rather, he concludes, “The complex symbiosis between land and sea that we found to characterize littoral society for most of history is fast being transformed.”<sup>35</sup>

In light of the growing interest in world history, including maritime history and the history of the Indian Ocean, it should come as no surprise that Pearson’s re-thinking of the concept of littoral society has attracted considerable attention.<sup>36</sup> An important application of his ideas was made by Charles Wheeler, who focuses on littoral society in an extensive approach to the place of the sea in Vietnamese history “that establishes the littoral as a distinct space, by describing a place in time wherein littoral societies acted as the first point of local contact between mariners and merchants; transacted commercially with them; and in doing so, developed interdependently with them.” Accordingly, he draws attention to

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31. *Ibid.*, 354.

32. *Ibid.*, 358. For a recent exploration of Indian Ocean islands, see Burkhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers (eds.), *Connectivity in Motion: Island Hubs in the Indian Ocean World*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

33. Pearson, “Littoral Society”, 359. Jean-Claude Penrad, “Societies of the *Ressac*: The Mainland Meets the Ocean,” in *Continuity and Autonomy in Swahili Communities: Inland Influences and Strategies of Self-Determination*, ed. David Parkin (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994), 41-48.

34. Pearson, “Littoral Society: Concept and Problems”, 370.

35. *Ibid.*, 372.

36. The 2006 article receives a CiteWeb score of 54. DOI: 10.1353/jhw.2006.0059. An interesting citation that reveals an audience beyond the “narrow” confines of the Indian Ocean is Stefan Feuser, “A Stroll along the Sea: The Processional Way in Ephesus and the Littoral,” *CHS Research Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (2014), 2§, n.4, which cites both the 1985 and 2006 articles: [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hlnc.essay:FeuserS.A\\_Stroll\\_along\\_the\\_Sea.2014](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hlnc.essay:FeuserS.A_Stroll_along_the_Sea.2014), accessed 30 January 2017.

“a littoral group of people” who played a fundamental role in facilitating the expansion of the Vietnamese state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>37</sup> Building his argument beyond what it was possible for Pearson to do in his model-building exercises, Wheeler concludes that the activities of these folk “exemplify an amphibious orientation common to all Việt Nam’s littoral inhabitants, one that fused together earthbound and sea-drift worlds.” They also “served as the essential integrative link between downriver ports and their big-ship merchant-mariners.”<sup>38</sup> In building his argument from a wealth of empirical detail, Wheeler acknowledges that “Michael Pearson provides the best conceptualization for social and economic historians, arguing that three characteristics [see above, n.31] distinguish the littoral from terrestrial or maritime zones of social organization.”<sup>39</sup> More recently, Craig Lockard briefly mentions littoral societies in his analysis of early modern Southeast Asia.<sup>40</sup>

Historians of the Indian Ocean have, to varying degrees, also been inspired by Pearson’s ideas about littoral society. For my own part, in an essay written (though not published) before his re-thinking article appeared in 2006, I very specifically test his ideas as they apply to the Mozambique Channel and conclude by quoting his call for more empirical research.<sup>41</sup> Drawing upon both Pearson’s 1985 article and its imaginative application by Eric Tagliocozzo to the Indian Ocean, Kerry Ward, whose work on the Dutch colonial empire spans the Indian Ocean from Cape Town to Batavia, considers littoral societies as one way to conceptualize the entire region, while noting certain limitations for her discussion of Cape Town.<sup>42</sup> In his wide-ranging history of the western Indian Ocean before about 1500, Abdul Sheriff adopts and applies Pearson’s definition of littoral society in both his introduction and a chapter on “The Sea,” while his text clearly

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37. Charles Wheeler, “Re-thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quang, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37, no. 1 (2006), 123-153, quoted at 125. Since Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 10, acknowledges “that my book fails to pay the amount of attention to the Malay maritime world than a southeast Asian specialist would expect,” I find this an especially significant application of his theory.

38. Wheeler, “Re-thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History,” 133.

39. *Ibid.*: 133, n.35.

40. Craig A. Lockard, “The Sea Common to All: Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1400-1750,” *Journal of World History*, 21, no. 2 (2010), 221-222. A secondhand reference to littoral societies that cites Lockard as the source of this idea is Hong Seok-Joon, “The social formation and cultural identity of Southeast Asian frontier society: Focused on the concept of maritime Zomia as frontier in connection with the ocean and the inland,” *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, 5 (2016), 31.

41. Edward A. Alpers, “Littoral Society in the Mozambique Channel,” in *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World* eds. Himanshu Prabha Ray & Edward A. Alpers (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123-141, reprinted in Edward Alpers, *East Africa and the Indian Ocean* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2009), 167-180, 230-234.

42. Kerry Ward, “‘Tavern of the Seas’? The Cape of Good Hope as an Oceanic Crossroads during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges*, eds. Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 146 and Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 171; See Eric Tagliocozzo, “Trade, Production and Incorporation: The Indian Ocean in Flux, 1600-1900,” *Itinerario*, 28, no 1 (2002), 75-106, although Pearson, “Littoral Society: Concept and Problems,” 354, n.2, observes about Tagliocozzo’s usage that “it is a courageous attempt at a broad overview along political economy line, but the three ‘littorals’ he identifies are really better described as ‘regions.’”

shows his commitment to such a model.<sup>43</sup> Finally, a recent chapter by Pearson integrates his long-standing interest in brokers with the littoral.<sup>44</sup>

Pearson's littoral society and associated ideas have also been drawn upon by both cultural studies and literary scholars with whom he has collaborated in Australia and South Africa. Stephen Muecke asks: "Why should we acquire knowledge about Indian Ocean popular culture? Because it will tell us how people are connected via what they share, and today this extends with new media beyond the geography of the ocean. The flows are different now. Michael Pearson sets up a problem to do with the Indian Ocean, a familiar and important one about littoral cultures: 'Surat and Mombasa have more in common with each other than they do with inland cities such as Nairobi or Ahmadabad.'"<sup>45</sup> In her analysis of two of Amitav Ghosh's Indian Ocean novels, literary scholar Meg Samuelson similarly finds Pearson's ideas about littoral society to be a significant way to think about these two works.<sup>46</sup>

Most recently, an issue of *The Asian Review of World Histories* is devoted to the body of Pearson's work. In her introduction, Radhika Seshan comments of the five contributions, "All these essays have taken Pearson's work as their starting point and gone on to question or extend his arguments."<sup>47</sup> Two of these, by Kenneth Hall and Ilicia Sprey, take off from Pearson's ideas about the littoral and his call for more empirical research to examine different implications for Southeast Asia.<sup>48</sup> Most directly addressing and probing into Pearson's notion of littoral society, however, is the essay by Rila Mukherjee, who in a previous overview of Indian Ocean historiography published in the same journal acknowledged: "One of the most influential contributions in the new century was the concept of similar littoral societies dotting the shorelines across the Indian Ocean by Pearson."<sup>49</sup> In her more recent essay, however, Mukherjee "rethinks the 2006 model, applying the following periodizations: the pre-Anthropocene; the Anthropocene from the 1700s; and globalization from the 1990s. It consists of: an examination of Pearson's ideas; their critique; and an assessment of the littoral." She contends, moreover, that

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43. Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 5-6, 25.

44. Michael Pearson, "Connecting the Littorals: Cultural Brokers in the Early Modern Indian Ocean," *Eyes cross the Water. Navigating the Indian Ocean* in eds. Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr & Michael Pearson (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010), 32-47.

45. Stephen Muecke, "Cultural Studies' Networking Strategies in the South," *Australian Humanities Review*, 44 (2008), citing Pearson, "Littoral Society: Concept and Problems," 345: <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2008/muecke.html>, accessed 30 January 2017.

46. Meg Samuelson, "Crossing the Indian Ocean and wading through the littoral: Cosmopolitan visions in Amitav Ghosh's 'antique land' and 'tide country,'" *Cultural Dynamics*, 24, no. 2-3 (2012), 189-205, citing Pearson at 190 and 195.

47. Radhika Seshan, "Ports and Littoral Societies: A Tribute to Michael Naylor Pearson," *The Asian Review of World Histories*, 5, no. 1 (2017), 4.

48. Kenneth R. Hall, "Maritime Trade and Societal Transitions in the Western Indonesian Archipelago: Samudra-Pasai at the Dawn of the European Age," *The Asian Review of World Histories*, 5, no. 1 (2017), 31-68; Ilicia Sprey, "The Vietnam Central Coastline and the Emergent Nguyễn State, c. 1500-1700: Port, Coastline, Hinterland Interrelations," *The Asian Review of World Histories*, 5, no. 1 (2017), 69-112.

49. Rila Mukherjee, "The Indian Ocean: Historians Writing History," *The Asian Review of World Histories*, 1, no. 2 (2013), 302.

“Pearson’s model [is] an inconsistent notion of place and a [sic] ahistorical function of time and memory.”<sup>50</sup> Mukherjee adopts a critical stance towards the basic premises of Pearson’s model, questioning the limits of its universality, being based on his deep knowledge of coastal western India, and suggesting that “Pearson can be accused of environmental determinism.”<sup>51</sup> As she presses more aggressively in her critique of Pearson’s model, Mukherjee questions, “How does Pearson manage time, change and history on the littoral?”<sup>52</sup> Her elaborate dissection of Pearson’s ideas continues in this vein and leads her to ask, “Ten years hence, how do we regard Pearson’s littoral?”<sup>53</sup> While I can appreciate Mukherjee’s desire to stimulate Indian Ocean scholars to think critically about Pearson’s littoral society schema, I do not consider that his approach reflects “environmental determinism,” nor that it is in any way ahistorical. Indeed, a counterpoint to such assertions may be found in Pearson’s more recent chapter on Indian Ocean ports, which demonstrates both a sensitivity to change over time and incorporates the littoral as a dynamic component of his overview.<sup>54</sup>

In the final sections of Mukherjee’s stimulating paper, she notes the damaging impact of environmental change, globalization, and mass tourism on littoral societies, as has Pearson. Nevertheless, she states her belief that “the littoral has mutated but is still alive fighting back and even regaining some of its energy....something Pearson did not anticipate.”<sup>55</sup> These are serious challenges to Pearson’s model, to be sure, but even if he does not entirely agree with Mukherjee’s hopeful statement that he “will appreciate my arguments,” her intervention is clearly a sign of respect for the influence of his ideas. Furthermore, her intervention is a welcome challenge to Indian Ocean scholars to think creatively about this vast world region.

I want to end with some words about Pearson’s commitment to inserting “a whiff of the ozone” into writing about the Indian Ocean. As it happens, Pearson also introduced this second theme in the same 1985 Great Circle article that launched his notion of littoral society by commenting critically: “What is often ignored is a more maritime dimension. There is no whiff of the ozone in this work.”<sup>56</sup> This same phrase is featured in the introduction to his history of the Indian Ocean, where he indicates that “I want it to have a whiff of ozone.”<sup>57</sup> In the almost two decades that separate these two expressions of intent, Pearson was busily at work on a number of projects that would eventually contribute

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50. Mukherjee, “Revisiting Michael Pearson’s Indian Ocean Littoral,” *The Asian Review of World Histories*, 5, no. 1 (2017), 9-30, quoted at 10.

51. *Ibid.*, 14.

52. *Ibid.*, 18, 19.

53. *Ibid.*, 24.

54. Pearson, “Ports in the Indian Ocean,” in *The Ports of Oman*, eds. Abdulrahman al Salimi and Eric Staples (eds.), (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: George Olms, 2017), 17-29.

55. Mukherjee, “Revisiting Michael Pearson’s Indian Ocean Littoral,” 29, 30.

56. Pearson, “Littoral Society”, 1. For my own critique of maritime history, see Edward Alpers, “Maritime History, World History, Global History: Some Thoughts on Past, Present, and Future,” in *Oman, A Maritime History*, eds. Abdulrahman al Salimi and Eric Staples (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: George Olms, 2017), 17-28.

57. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 9.

to his major history. As he confessed to Ghulam Nadri a year after its publication, his first book—important in its own right—largely overlooked “what was happening at the sea.”<sup>58</sup> Subsequently, his collaboration with Ashin Das Gupta, as well as the influence of several other historians of India, opened up the Indian Ocean more explicitly for him as a field of study. Yet, he told Nadri, he was disappointed with the book he co-edited with Das Gupta because “I don’t think the book had any sense of the sea in it....In a way, I subsequently have tried to rectify these omissions.”<sup>59</sup> In preparation for writing his Indian Ocean history, he recalled, “I also read masses of first hand travel accounts....I quoted these travelers extensively in the book, partly to make it more readable, but more because that way I hoped to get a bit of ozone into my work, to give some sense of what it was like to travel by sea at different times.”<sup>60</sup>

Readers of *The Indian Ocean* will surely be in no doubt that he more than achieved this goal. In the words of reviewer Ulrike Freitag: “One gets a sense of the ocean, its fish and waves, the missionaries, merchants and slaves crossing it, as well as those who worked the ships, docks and fisheries. The lengthy quotations from archives and travel reports enhance the readability of this work.”<sup>61</sup> Amusingly, Pearson admits in a short review of Indian Ocean historiography in which he first complains that “there is no sense of the sea here, no discussion of the people who travelled over it,” that in his book “I went to some lengths, maybe too many lengths, to give some sense of the ocean, to provide, as I said, a whiff of ozone, as opposed to the prevailing tendency to write only of Indian Ocean trade.” I concur that Pearson succeeds in conveying a meaningful sense of the ocean, but it is worth noting here that the combination of so many lengthy quotes with the way in which Pearson presents his history makes it very difficult to use as a text for undergraduate students, as many of us have attempted. Pearson continues, “We should try to convey a sense of the sea, of storms, calms, anchorages, passengers, monsoons to provide a sense of the maritime experience.”<sup>62</sup> In the introduction to a volume co-edited with South African colleagues, Pearson opens his comments by citing the novels of Joseph Conrad and Patrick O’Brian as exemplars of the kind of voices for which he is searching in work by historians.<sup>63</sup> A few pages later he remarks “that on the vast ships ploughing the

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58. Nadri, “Sympathetic ‘Farangi,’” 10. Pearson addressed this bias in his first book in “Early Relations between the Portuguese and Gujarat. A New Overview,” *Indica*, 35, no. 2 (1998), 85.

59. *Ibid.*, 11. See Ashin Das Gupta and Michael Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1987).

60. Nadri, “Sympathetic ‘Farangi,’” 14.

61. Ulrike Freitag, review of Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 67, no. 3 (2004), 442.

62. Michael Pearson, “Brief Comments on Recent Work on the Indian Ocean,” *Itinerario*, 28, no. 2 (2004), 187, 188.

63. Michael Pearson, “The Idea of the Ocean,” in *Eyes cross the Water*, 7. For novels in the exceptional Patrick O’Brian Aubrey-Maturin series that feature Indian Ocean locations, see *H.M.S. Surprise* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1991 [1973]), *The Mauritius Command* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1991 [1977]), *The Fortune of War* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1991 [1979]), *The Thirteen Gun Salute* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1992 [1989]), and *The Nutmeg of Consolation* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1991 [1991]).

seas today there is little ozone, little sense of the sea.”<sup>64</sup> To his very great credit, Pearson continues to pursue his quest for conveying a greater sense of the sea in his more recent writing as is most evident in his pair of chapters for the multi-volume, multi-part *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*.<sup>65</sup> In particular, his chapter on “Life at Sea,” which builds on and extends material from his book, establishes from the very beginning what Pearson seeks to achieve: “This chapter tries to give an impression of what it was like to be on a ship in the Indian Ocean in the early modern period.”<sup>66</sup> In this he admirably succeeds.

In this instance, as in all of his work on the early modern period, Pearson is careful to emphasize both the limitations and strengths of the available, overwhelmingly European, sources. He avers, “I have long been convinced that if used with care, they can tell us much about the activities of Asians, as well as Europeans.”<sup>67</sup> This is very much my own position with respect to European sources for both Indian Ocean and African history, and as I am almost as fond as he of long quotations, I can only applaud his commitment to this writing strategy. The details of this enlightening chapter provide invaluable insights into the broad issues involved in life at sea in the Indian Ocean. In sections on “Danger at Sea,” “Boredom and Pleasure,” “Crews and Passengers,” “Cargoes,” “Cabins,” “Food,” “Health and Mortality,” “Hierarchy,” “Consultation,” “Disorder on European Ships,” “Punishment,” and “Asian ships” Pearson covers a vast range of topics that affected or characterized life at sea. In order to achieve his stated goal to provide “a whiff of ozone” he sometimes must have recourse to works outside the chronological limitations of the early modern period, but wherever possible he inserts contemporary primary source material designed to illustrate what it felt like to sail upon the Indian Ocean in these centuries. Furthermore, his own narrative analysis provides a meaningful context for this material. Similarly, while his following chapter on “Religion and the Sea” would seem to be rather more restrictive, sections on “Attitudes to the Sea,” “Blessing Ships,” “Setting Out,” “In Times of Danger,” “Conversions,” “Pilgrimage,” and “Rectification” allow for the inclusion of numerous quotations that both advance his points and illustrate his methodological strategy.<sup>68</sup>

Let me conclude this part of my contribution to our collective tribute to Michael Pearson by noting that in his very generous review of my own effort at writing a history of the Indian Ocean Pearson issued one qualification: “There is one disappointment. Alpers is aware that to give voice to the host of actors who were humble pedlars chaffering

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64. Pearson, “The Idea of an Ocean.”

65. General Editor of this vast project is D.P. Chattopadhyaya; for details see <http://csc-india.in/publication.html>, accessed 9 February 2017.

66. Pearson, “Life at Sea,” in *The Trading World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, Volume III, Part 7 of the *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, ed. Om Prakash (Delhi/Chennai/Chandigarh: Pearson, 2012), 633-658, quoted at 633.

67. Ibid.

68. Pearson, “Religion and the Sea,” in Ibid., 659-677, which includes a bibliography for both chapters.

their way around the ocean, and to the ordinary seamen on dhows and steam ships, is a difficult task. Certainly this is true, yet it is regrettable that we get very little sense of what it was like on a ship or dhow, no real sense of the sea and the experience of maritime life.”<sup>69</sup> Point taken; in writing the history of any significant body of water it remains one of the greatest challenges to convey what it was like to experience that life, whether it involved coasting, open sea sailing (both pre-modern and modern), or riverine travel and work. Here is where great literature is often our fallback position in the absence of direct historical sources. But it is characteristic of Mike Pearson’s historical imagination and his wide-ranging scholarship that he leaves us with such daunting and stimulating concepts to test and standards to achieve.

Future Indian Ocean historians will surely continue to read Pearson’s work profitably for ideas with which to organize their own research and to challenge his concomitantly. To do so effectively will require scholars to use the widest possible range of methodologies and sources—both emic and etic; to be willing to look from the littoral outward across the ocean to its opposing shores, as well as inland to the hinterland; to account for change over time; and to think comparatively around the Indian Ocean littoral. For to make sense of the vast world region of the Indian Ocean requires imagination, perseverance, and the continued application of sound scholarship. Mike Pearson exhibited all of these characteristics, and building upon his work in the future will require no less rigor.

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69. Michael Pearson, review of Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), *The International Journal of Maritime History*, 26, no. 4 (2014), 833.