



Meena Alexander,  
photo by Marion Ettlinger.

# Indian Ocean Flows:

May Joseph speaks with  
Meena Alexander

2010, NEW YORK CITY



Meena Alexander's new book *Poetics of Dislocation* (University of Michigan Press, Poets on Poetry Series, 2009) offers a "shattered" reading of the New American poet's journey through liquid cartographies. Liquidity surfaces as a network of marine geographies, oceanic topographies and river estuaries in Alexander's mnemonic landscape. The Indian Ocean becomes a fluid space of encounter where the west coast of India and the east coast of Africa fuse with the currents of the Hudson River. Between water and land, between the Hudson River and the island of Manhattan, Alexander grafts ancient languages onto the volcanic schist of the New American poetry.

Alexander's searing interrogation of the spaces between childhood and what she identifies as an "oceanic becoming" transpires in mid-passage by boat between India and Africa, in *Poetics of Dislocation*. The Indian Ocean undulates as the place of arrival, between continents and languages. Alexander meditates on "Black Water" — a place both mythical, and locatable in the treacherous undertows of the Benguela and Agulhas currents, deep in the Indian Ocean. This preoccupation with the Indian Ocean allows for penetrating analyses into the tectonic shifts of migrancy between land masses and bodies of water, between childhood and the Indian Ocean. I sat with her one day and talked to her about these deep currents in her work.

**MJ:** Meena, could you talk about the idea of flow and how flow works in your writing?

**MA:** May, this is a very big question. Flow — there are so many ways to think about it. My father was a meteorologist. He was fascinated by the flow of currents of air and the way that clouds moved in the skies. It was his work and he taught me this. I kept looking up at the clouds and learned their names. Appa was very involved through his work in the flow of monsoon air and certain wind patterns that related to the flow of water in the Indian Ocean.

So I grew up in a household where things were flowing...I mean, that was my father's job, right? In oceanography and with monsoons you have air currents and the currents of the water that come together. I grew up in a household where the flow of natural storms, often very unpredictable, was something that my father tried to predict, to pattern. This became very important to me. So, I think in many ways a crucial piece of my imaginative world is that I had a father who exposed me, when I was very young, to the flow of air currents and the flow of currents in water.

**MJ:** I would like to return to the idea of the flow of water, the currents of water. Could you speak to how the Indian Ocean impacts your work?

**MA:** "The Sea has many sleeves" — that's a line of a poem I wrote in Durban looking out on the Indian Ocean. I went with my mother from Bombay to join my father who was in Sudan and we went up the Indian Ocean, up the Red Sea, to port Sudan. And I turned five on the steamer.

I think that first theatre, for me, was the ocean and it was a very scary thing because it didn't have any landmarks. It didn't have the house; it didn't have the streets; it didn't have the garden; it didn't have any of the roads and the patterns that I knew up to the age of five, living in India.

I was just in this ship, I was plunged in it and water was all around. This was also the time of the Suez trouble or... well, it hadn't quite started because it was February and I think that broke out in October '56. But I knew that there was something dangerous there. When I looked out on the water of the Indian Ocean...the sea was never flat...there were so many waves, some almost as large as mountains and then flying fish — and fish that would land on deck and I'd go and try to pick them up. They lay on deck, squirming.

You see, for me the flow of the water and the flow of air have always been bound together. What I saw in the Indian Ocean was this extraordinary expanse where the boat was very, very small, and the ocean was very, very large. And one could in an instant be plunged to one's death. I knew that boats had caught fire, etc. And later I learned more about the Kerala coast, and found out that when the Europeans came in the 16th century, one of the things that they (the Portuguese) did was to set a boat afire with everyone on it to show the Indian princes their power.





They also carried out an Inquisition on the Syrian Christians whom they thought of as heretics. My family of origin, as you know, is part of this ancient community. Before this, stretching back for 2000 years, there were centuries of peaceful trade between the coast of Kerala and the coasts of Persia, Rome, Africa, China.

Last summer we went to see Muziris — the Roman word from the time of Pliny — for an ancient seaport. It's called Kodangaloor in Malayalam. This is where the Romans came in search of pepper and spices. It is also where St. Thomas came, it is said, in the first century. Later I thought to myself, I come from a part of the world where for centuries, there have been voyages back and forth across the Indian Ocean.

It's not just something that I sought out because I needed it for what I write; it is actually what/where I come from. And even my travel to Africa is part of that 'coming from' as it were. It seems organic. Not just autobiography but also history.



The Indian Ocean is really important to me — a first space. I think if there were several lands and territories and nations between India and Sudan, it would have been a totally different experience crossing borders. Here we have the ocean, the root of all life. The Indian Ocean is chaos. It is plentitude. It is also what we cannot ever fathom. It is always beyond us, I think, as human beings who live on dry land.

Gandhi's travels back and forth across the Indian Ocean were very important to me. I've been thinking about them. If you look at his autobiography, it seems to indicate that many of the very important thoughts he had came to him when he was at sea. There was this liminal space between India and South Africa, for Gandhi. You might be able to think out things that are difficult in one place differently once you cross the margins, just across the borders.

It's possible that a large body of water allows one a space of freedom from the constraints of the land. You can, in fact, think outside of the box. So in that sense the ocean is very important. The Indian Ocean isn't just savage, uncharted water. It has been a site of voyages for centuries.

In the past few years I have been traveling to Venice.

One of the things I did when I was in Venice this last time was to see this extraordinary map of the world, the *mappa mundi* made by Fra Mauro in the 15th century. It was based, in part, on the work of Arab cartographers... a huge planisphere. Painted parchment set in a circular frame, preserved on the wall of the Biblioteca Marciana. They just show it to you for an instant because the sunlight could damage it. In his conception of the world as we know it, the southern hemisphere is up at the top, including India. A great river flows out of Africa into the Red Sea.

I suppose, if you wish, what I'm doing is a kind of mapping in my head that allows for the world as I live it — in my life, and my personal history. And after all, what else do I have as a poet except my personal history? I'm very bad at learning history from books and so on. The ocean allows a measure of freedom that dry land doesn't, if you're interested in mapping and making maps. I mean, that poem called "Rumors for an Immigrant" in my book *Raw Silk* in a way is its own kind of mapping.

New York is very important, it's where I am. It's an island. If I were living in Minneapolis, I'd be landlocked. But I'm living in Manhattan, which is completely surrounded by water, even if one may not be aware of it all the time. So we're in an island city, a place where people and ideas and histories often cross — sometimes with violence, sometimes not.

**MJ:** I want to stay with the idea of mapping and the Indian Ocean and ask you to talk more about this idea of the "black water." I'm thinking of the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, black water. There's a lot of indigo in your writing.

**MA:** The black water's not indigo; it's two different things. Black water is taken literally from *Kala Pani*, the old notion that if you cross the black water that's around India you lose caste; you lose who you are if you cross the black waters. It becomes a trope for diasporic people going away. My grandfather went off in 1913 from India to study theology at Trinity College in Hartford. He told me of traveling to the South, and seeing racism first hand, they all thought he was African American, it was only when he wore Indian clothes that they took him to be a foreigner. When he returned to India via England he was lucky to survive. It was a time when boats were torpedoed out of the Atlantic. It was World War I. Right from when I was very young, this idea of losing — losing who you are, losing what you have in the water — was very powerful for me. That you might amass something and then suddenly lose it in the black water, in *Kala Pani*. And of course you could lose your identity.

The title poem of my 2008 book *Quickly Changing River* is about names, losing your name in a transit lounge. It's a dream poem if you wish.

**MJ:** You have a line, "Map of Indigo," in the poem "Map" in *Illiterate Heart*. That line particularly caught my attention.



**MA:** Now indigo is a different story. I mean the British forced peasants in certain parts of India to cultivate the cash crop indigo. This caused terrible starvation — famine even. There was unrest among the peasants because they didn't have the food to eat, and they had to grow this cash crop which resulted in a peasant uprising against the British. So in the colonial era, indigo stood for something that caused very great hardship. But then of course the color indigo is prized and I love the color, it's very beautiful. That poem that you're referring to was evoked by seeing some silk screens by the Japanese artist Hiroyuki Shindo in the Museum of Modern Art, where he uses indigo to great effect in his art work.

**MJ:** Could you talk a little bit about how the relationship between Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia influences your writings? In *Raw Silk* for instance, we encounter Ghalib, Allan Ginsberg, Mahatma Gandhi, Frantz Fanon, Lorca, and Enheduanna of Ur — from Mesopotamia. You also quote from the South African poet Keorapetse Willie Kgositsile. We go through quite a range of traditions, confluences of poetic traditions in just that one text, that one collection. There are these large maps that jump at the reader.

**MA:** Do you find that distracting?

**MJ:** No. I think you're drawing on a variety of different poetic and aesthetic traditions.

**MA:** Well first of all, Enheduanna of Ur was the very first poet we have in recorded history. She's from Mesopotamia and I wrote that poem Triptych in a Time of War evoking her. Where she lived, bombs were falling as I made the poem. It was composed in 2003 in a time of war. I have an essay called 'Fragile Places' in the new book *Poetics of Dislocation* about composing poetry in a time of violence. To return to the poem, as I was writing it, the new Iraq war started. And there's a whole way in which the world is compressed in our twenty-first century experience. I mean, the world as we live it is very thick and dense. It's not like this thin thing with only one meaning; there are always multiple meanings in everything that we encounter. And history's like that. It's this terrible compression of history that I wanted to try and evoke in the poem.

So in the first part I speak of Forugh Farrokhzad who is this extraordinary Iranian, feminist poet who died at the age of thirty-two in a car crash. Then in the middle section I deal with Enheduanna. And in the last section of the poem, "The Dove of Tanna", is inspired by a powerful piece that hangs in the cafeteria of 365 Fifth Avenue where I teach. I imagine the dove flying over the scene of war. It begins with a poet sitting in front of the internet. In some ways it is an epic poem. That poem is not very long, but for me it has the epic scope because it covers enormous tracks. It's a surreal poem, if you wish, but I think our existences are surreal. I wanted to get to that violence, that catastrophe through the figure of two women poets and this work by a male artist, Frank Stella.

Then the cycle of poems 'Listening to Lorca' was composed as a homework exercise, if you wish, given to us by the Royal Festival Hall in London and it is an invocation of Garcia Lorca. Ten poets from different parts of the world were asked to use Lorca's *Poet in New York* as a jumping off point for their own world. Lorca had come to New York in 1929 to study English — he failed dismally — but he wrote this extraordinary book. So I kept reading it, but I don't know Spanish, I have an Italian friend who speaks very good Spanish so I got him to read it to me in the original. In writing my poems, I heard Lorca's words in my head. The poems are a response to him. He is speaking to me in the aftermath of 9/11. So this is our world.

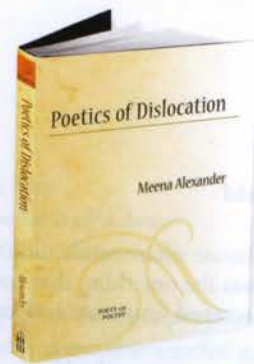
**MJ:** Well, you know, it's interesting... it is the world you inhabit, but it is also the case, in terms of literary and artistic traditions, that there is the disposition to give national narratives.

**MA:** You're absolutely right.

**MJ:** I think your work shows the crossings, the traversals of tradition.

**MA:** It's very hard for me to deal simply with national narratives because I don't fit into any of them. I draw on all of them at once just because of my life. It's not so strange these days to have somebody who moves. A lot of people are like that now. This migrancy thing...





**MJ:** Can we talk more about movement and the location of writing through movement? I know you've talked about writing in subways and while being in passage.

**MA:** Actually, with most of my books, I start to compose them in New York, then I take the pages to India, work there and bring the text back again. I have a very personal tradition of taking my work from here to there and back again. I make these crossings, literally, with the material page, or the stuff on the computer. So I do like to travel with my writing. I write a lot when I'm moving. I write in cafes, but sometimes I also write at home. I'm very comfortable writing in airport lounges and transport lounges — the margin between places. Actually in transit lounges, the laws of the land do not hold. I didn't know this, but in fact it's the case that in international transit lounges, you're not under American law — or British law or Indian law, whatsoever. So this idea of being outside the law in a fashion is also very powerful for me in terms of my own writing. You know, writing as a woman, writing as someone who doesn't quite fit into a particular place, I have to invent a world. And the world that I write is the world that I need to come into existence. Toni Morrison says somewhere that we write the books we need to read. I think that's true for me certainly. I write what I feel I need to live with. I feel very lucky if someone else like yourself reads it and finds something there that seems relevant to them, even if for a very brief time.

**MJ:** You write about a nervous knowledge. I'm very interested in your idea of a nervous knowledge, in this excavation you talk about, this nomadic memory.

**MA:** Well, the nervous knowledge, I think it's from that poem 'Translated Lives', if I'm not mistaken. I think because it is a bodily knowledge, right? It is knowledge that you have through the nervous system, lodged in the body, which is — well, it's not in the body, it's the soul of knowledge, which traverses, which moves, which is kinesthetic. For me, this nervous knowledge is always a performative knowledge; it's not static in the way that an old fashioned map is, something that you presumably fix in time and that holds true for more than one person. For me this nervous knowledge is something that has to be rekindled time and again. It has to do with the very particular routes the body travels. For me, it has to do with the sort of pathways that the body has and makes in daily life, the quotidian where we encounter the world and how we go through it.

There is a way in which the world as we know it, particularly in the extremes of violence, has become carnival-esque. The mappings that we have, however precarious, are very, very valuable to us because they allow us to hold on for a brief while to the kinds of roots that exist for us already in our memory. After all, what is the future except what we can make out of memory in the present? So in a way *Poetics of Dislocation* is about this. I have a little piece that first came out in the net journal *artbrain.org* edited by Warren Neidich. As part of the forum that was set up by a neuroscientist, who is also a poet, responded. My own piece was called 'Nomadic Memory' and dealt with losing place. The question of place is fascinating to me. I can suddenly turn a corner in New York, see the play of light against a roof and be sure I am in another city, an 'elsewhere' I was once in. So already in the mind there's this elaborate archive of places and possibilities, which then of course flows into art.

Flows, that was what we started with, yes?

**MJ:** And poetry! ■