

**Bridging the Indian Ocean: in conversation with Lindsey Collen, writer from Mauritius**

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**Abstract**

Oceans have occupied our imagination since time immemorial, both in symbolic and practical ways. The Indian Ocean, as an example, is a region characterized both by complex economical, historical, cultural and social connections; and imaginative entanglements. Memories of recent and distant pasts plumb oceanic depths, needing to be carefully recollected and sieved to make sense of the present, and imagine possibilities for the future. Storytelling is one device through which personal and collective memories can re-surface and be contested, through which connecting bridges can be built, as can be observed in the work of South African-born Mauritian writer and activist Lindsey Collen.

Internationally acclaimed Collen, who won among other accolades the Commonwealth Writers' Prize twice, writes in English and Kreol. Her work blends a localized Mauritian story with a global transnational discourse, challenging the official discourse inherent to power relations and language dynamics in Mauritian society and culture. While Mauritius is often hailed as a multicultural paradise in popular discourse, social tensions are rife. Relegating the exoticization of islands to the colonial past, Collen lucidly denounces the profound inequalities inherent to Mauritian society, revisiting slavery, indentured labor, and colonial pasts to better understand present-day social relations and tensions. By exploring the multiple metaphors of the island and surrounding ocean, Collen discusses the cross-cultural relations and identities at play in the Indian Ocean region. Her literary voice is underpinned by a profound awareness of the economic and social complexities inherent in the Indian Ocean region's inter-connectedness. Collen's work creatively builds bridges within the region – between islands, continental shores, and an inhabited ocean space. This paper, drawing from Indian Ocean scholarship, personal correspondence and interviews with Collen, seeks to understand Collen's outlook on the Indian Ocean region as a important geo-political force.