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## OCEANIC HISTORIES

### From the Terrestrial to the Maritime

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The oceans press on our consciousness and lives these days. Theologically, it may be the fire next time, but the city of Jakarta is sinking, and Indonesia contemplates a new capital. The South African artist Gideon Mendel's series of photographs titled *Drowning World* (2007) has cameos of people standing up to their necks in water in cities across the world, defying political categories like the First and Third World. *Floodlines* portrays the impact of water on the lived space of the interior landscape and *Water Marks* on the indecipherable traces of water on the intimate records of personal photographs. Water, water, everywhere, nor do we stop to think. Even more apocalyptic is Marie Velardi's installation *Atlas des Isles Perdues, Edition 2107* (The Atlas of Lost Islands) of 2007, which has a series of ink drawings of sinking islands, as the waters of the ocean rise on account of global warming; the islands stretch across the oceans named and differentiated by humans in customary acts of hubris. By 2107, all of the depicted islands will be under water, so many Atlantises. Global warming has reminded us of the porosity of the boundaries between ocean and land, belying the hard distinctions that we have been prone to make at least since Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum* in 1609. Ironically, Grotius's argument for a free, open ocean simultaneously laid political claims on the freedom to trade and travel of nations. The fundamental question before us, as humans, in addition to being academics, is how we stop fragmenting the ocean along national claims and ideas of "territorial waters." The divisions into oceans – Atlantic, Pacific, Indian – and seas – Red, the Mediterranean – while heuristically satisfying, sometimes forget the underlying fact of one body of water with its tides and seasonal winds, within which human beings negotiate and make claims.

Looking at the ocean as one body allows us to recognize the importation of the territorially incarcerative ideas of area studies into a space not

amenable to such dictation. We are forced to think beyond the idea of the discrete spaces of Asia, Africa, and Europe to be more connected as much as interstitial histories. We have to learn to think athwart and betwixt the geographies of recent origin generated by a worship of the golden calf of the nation state. Temporally, too, we need to think beyond the limited chronologies of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity towards a notion of time dictated by movements across the ocean, as Braudel foundationally did, and historians like Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Engseng Ho have done more recently (Braudel, 1972; Ho, 2006; Subrahmanyam, 2012). We have been prone, as social scientists, to think about a terrestrial imagination, with the ocean on the margins of our thought. A maritime vision would require us to engage with the persistent movement of people, goods, and ideas across the ocean which has always exceeded the remit of states and empires. If we think more ambitiously, as Rozwadowski has suggested recently, with the vast movement of people across millennia that populated the world, human life may well have moved inwards from the littoral, unsettling our received trajectories of civilization which are rooted in agriculture and states (Rozwadowski, 2019). If we think about territory as created by the movement of people across space, then Amitav Ghosh in his recent novel, *Gun Island*, has reminded us how intimate the connections can be between the Sundarbans and Venice, and the Bay of Bengal and the Mediterranean (Ghosh, 2019).

All of this takes us to a recent kerfuffle in the *American Historical Review*, in which the historian Nile Green took issue with the literary scholar, Isabel Hofmeyr, over the idea of an oceanic cosmopolitanism (Green, 2018). Underlying this at one level was the understanding of disciplines as having hermetically sealed spaces with distinct protocols. Green, while lauding Amitav Ghosh's adventurous geographies which do not recognize the concreteness of borders and land's ends, wrote, "historical novelists, however gifted, should not set the agenda for an empirical discipline any more than potentially anachronous latter day ideologies" (Green, 2018: 847). The second target of his spleen was of course Hofmeyr's idea of "Bandung at sea" (Green, 2018: 847): the idea that the Bandung Conference of 1955 generated an imagination that transcended the boundaries of the newly decolonized nations of Asia and Africa and was premised on affinities generated by fluvial connections of trade and religion as much as politics. This reified opposition between imagination and "fact" occludes the fact that there has been a historical dialectic between the movement of people and the imagination of the world that they create. Arguably, Bandung was made possible by the prior peregrinations of people and represented the condensation of these experiences rather than the inauguration of an absolutely new vision of the world. In this sense, the short-lived hopes of Afro-Asian affinity created by Bandung are understandable as the *end* of a historical process, rather than the absolute *beginning* of a new one. It is built upon an empirical and concrete set of "archipelagic connections" – the relation

between non-contiguous spaces built on historical connectedness – in the age of nations (Lee, 2010; Eslava *et al.*, 2017; Menon, 2018). Bandung, in that sense, was the return of the repressed. We need a more supple engagement with history, more than a mere fetishizing of the archives generated by states and imperial formations, to rethink the ocean in history. The lived cosmopolitanism generated through the movement of people is a parallel trajectory to the narratives of empire and nation.

Green also creates a false dichotomy between cosmopolitanism and the idea of difference. He equates cosmopolitanism with an idea of sameness and a bland universalism opposing it to the “challenging engagement with difference” (Green, 2018: 849) that he espouses. Needless to say, an idea of cosmopolitanism which does not work with existing differences and a recognition of them is merely an imperial universalism. The straw man of an unreflective aspiration as against, presumably, the hardness and friction of history, afflicts Antoinette Burton’s evaluation of the oceanic histories that underlie Bandung. The history of Bandung precedes Bandung, as I have been arguing. When Burton states that “Bandung needs to be re-imagined less as an emancipatory lesson than as a cautionary tale about the racial logics embedded in postcolonial states from the moment of their inception” (Burton, 2016: 6–7), it raises again the spectre of the paranoia of the Cold War and the fear of an Afro-Asian unity, this time neutering it as an impossibility. Reports on the death of Bandung appear to be highly exaggerated when we look at it through the lens of the palimpsest of oceanic histories.

### The Tense Present

What troubles one most about the concept of globalization is the suggestion of a process without end: the eternal sunshine of the present continuous tense. It seems to imply both something transcendent (like the World Spirit) and something unstoppable (like a runaway train). This combination of the mystical and the empirical should make us sceptical regardless of whether we are historians or only anthropologists. Historians do not work with an idea of an ineffable flow of time without end unless they are at the service of varieties of religious fundamentalism that believe in eternity. In the current historical juncture, where we are seeing the pervasiveness of ideologies that seek to address the contingencies of the present by recourse to eternal laws and conditions (the superiority of X race or idea), it is necessary to think about both time and context. This is not to suggest that we should fall back upon an unreconstructed historicism with its unmitigated belief in origins, genealogy, and teleology. If we are to contend with the idea of globalization in its manifestation as present continuous and engage critically as we did with an earlier avatar of it – that is, modernization – we need an analytical understanding that engages the ideas of past, present, and future with due attention to the integrity of each. An anthropological focus on context and

local texture needs to be supplemented by a method that moves beyond hermetic lifeworlds and takes seriously contingent connections. We need to work with the understanding that the world is not a continuous space and that what we know as history is the emergence and disappearance of connections across time and space. A striking example of historical contingency would be the Chinese eunuch admiral Zheng He's voyages between 1405 and 1433 from Southeast Asia to East Africa, after which the Chinese as a nation never went to see again. Or, more recently, the Soviet Union's creation of a space of affinity, from Dagestan to Delhi and from Ljubljana to Lagos, till the centre did not hold. Everything seemed forever till it was no more (Yurchak, 2005). The present continuous tense represents the myopia of humanity.

It could be argued that globalization can be understood in the present perfect tense. It describes something that happened in the past, but perhaps the exact time it happened is not important. What is important is the relationship with the present. Such an idea would be anathema to a conventional historian, since the profession lays much emphasis on origins and causality. Again, the idea of a completion – or, as journalistic wisdom has it, the achievement of a flat earth – carries with it a degree of triumphalism. It is an idea of a world without contingency or indeed without “friction” (Tsing, 2011). Living as we do in the age of borders and camps, with the world divided into narrow fragments, it is clear that the very idea of globalization lives now amid the backlash against it. The Polish plumber in Britain became the metaphor for Britain's exit into an autarkic realm of nostalgia for empire and the presumed comforts of a class order. And, of course, the Muslim at the gates of Europe has led to a fiercely ingrown imagination that has sparked the growth of chauvinist political parties. Globalization had happened. Or at least the understanding that it had happened led to the fierce digging in of heels against the possibility of a future continuous tense. Even as there are calls for a new philosophy for Europe (Esposito, 2018), such intellection is located in a sense of immediacy, a misrecognition of a history that had already violently involved Europe in the lives of distant others. What we see now is the return swing of the boomerang of history, in Césaire's words, implicating past, present, and future. The call to history comes from this need to address amnesia, an anxiety born more out of a present and imminent sense of danger and less from a solipsistic desire for vindication, or of *déjà vu*. In contrast to our insistence on contingency in response to the present continuous (“everything was forever till it was no more”), one can say here that “nothing is over until it is really over.” The earth is not as flat as a naive account may make it.

Finally, there is the no-nonsense, practical approach that does away with any notion of tense. The world has always been thus, always already connected. If one thinks about the process of populating the world once the first anatomically modern humans started their peregrinations out of Africa

about 40,000 years ago, then the time span of one's argument achieves new dimensions. It raises the fundamental question of how far back we have to go in order to write a history of the present. There were two routes out of Africa. A northern route would have taken our ancestors from eastern sub-Saharan Africa across the Sahara Desert, then through Sinai and into the Levant. An alternative southern route may have charted a path from Djibouti or Eritrea across the Bab el-Mandeb strait and into Yemen around the Arabian Peninsula. The Bab el-Mandeb, one of the world's busiest shipping channels, would have been a narrow channel about 15,000 years ago. The southern migration ran across from northern Africa to Southeast Asia and Australia and by the Pacific coastal route to South America. The implications of this early globalization are profound for our understanding of both the idea of a common stock of humanity and a genetic dispersion that does not allow for any bounded and unmiscegenated idea of racial identity. In fact, this account may even upset the traditional historical accounts of the origins of civilization, focused as they are on rivers, land, agriculture, and states. It has been suggested that perhaps the movements of humans across the vast expanses of the oceans, hugging the coastline, may have been the way that civilizations originated and spread, from the littoral inward (Rozwadowski, 2019). To cautious academics following Voltaire's suggestion of cultivating one's own garden, or indeed discipline, all of this might seem a trifle enthusiastic. We might prefer more recent themes, for example, the age of ocean voyages by Europeans, or colonialism, or capitalism. Then one could locate the idea of globalization within bite-size portions of time, rather than adopt a gourmand's appetite for time and space. However, in either case there are historical arguments to be made that are less the product of anxiety and more about precisely defining the extent of one's garden against that of others.

### **Art at the End of the World**

The most immediate sense of globalization that we have is that of global warming and the rise of the ocean levels due to the melting of the polar ice caps. Regardless of where one is located on the globe, the rising waters press on our consciousness, and we are becoming more aware that the Biblical prophecy of the fire next time may be a red herring. This sense of an interconnected history brings together for the first time the intertwined fates of humans, animals, and other beings on the planet, sentient or otherwise. Whether we locate this history in the distant historical past with the origins of agriculture and the destruction of the environment with war, clearing of forests, and the origins of states, or the more proximate and accelerated destruction arising from industrialization, history attends on our reflections (Steffen *et al.*, 2011). The idea of the Anthropocene has shifted us away from the benign temporality of the Holocene (from the Greek *holos*, "whole")

reminding us precisely of the lack of wholeness of the epoch that we occupy. However, there is a considerable continuity of the narcissism that puts the human at the centre of the universe, whether as the rightful owner/depredator of the world (as in the book of Genesis) or as the agent who has wreaked destruction. It reminds one of Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's painting of the Angel of History, being blown backwards into the future, surveying the ceaseless piling up of the debris of history in his wake (Benjamin, [1940] 2003). We may be returning to more theological ideas of the Great Chain of Being or indeed the idea of the equal culpability of all creatures for their actions, as with the early modern church and its understanding of the actions of insects and animals on the environment and the actions of humans as equally moral or otherwise (Ferry, 1995). The renewed interest in human–animal interaction arises as much from an understanding of the hubris of an anthropocentric view as from the fact of a common fate. That the ongoing degradation of life and the environment has a history of human occlusion of the non-human in history has made historical rethinking necessary about processes described hitherto in the abstract jargon of successive ages of progress. Decentring the human becomes possible only as a result of catastrophic thinking, the imagining of what comes after the apocalypse. As Samuel Johnson observed, “When a man knows he is to be hanged . . . it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

The art biennale in the southern Indian coastal city of Kochi summons up the many histories of humans and non-humans and their interactions with nature. Kochi itself emerged as a port in 1342 CE when a flood in the Periyar River silted up the historic port of Kodungallur (Cranganore or Muziris in the Roman records). Its coming into existence was a result of the human impact on the environment as much as the inexorable rhythms of water and the monsoons. The founding myth of the state of Kerala – indeed, of many regions along the western coast of India – has the legendary figure Parasuram reclaiming land from the ocean by throwing the axe with which he had slain 21 generations of warriors into the waters. The ocean recoils in horror at being asked to accept this bloody offering, opening up a narrow strip of land for inhabitation. The idea that what belonged to the ocean is a gift easily recalled is reflected in historical events like the flooding of the Periyar as much as the clear and present possibility of the city of Mumbai being swallowed by rising ocean waters by 2050. Not an alarmist scenario if one considers that the city of Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, is no longer habitable because it is sinking at the rate of ten inches a year. In this case, however, it is a direct result of human action – both domestic and industrial consumption – in draining the aquifers.

It is alarming when floodwaters enter homes, raising visions of the universal deluge, but what about that which is happening on the periphery of our visions and understanding? The Swiss artist Marie Velardi (2007) raises this issue in her installation *Atlas des Isles Perdues 2107* (Atlas of Lost Islands

2107) at the Kochi Biennale. In a room where the walls are painted a cerulean blue hang a series of framed sketches – contour maps of islands across the globe – spanning the oceans. On a table in the centre is a leather-bound volume with the title mentioned earlier. What viewers realize as they walk through the room is that some of these islands from the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans – some familiar, some not; some inhabited, some not – have already disappeared under the waters, others will disappear soon, but by 2107 all of them will be submerged. It is a visual conflation of tenses, past, present, and future: an entire history of the earth in one fell swoop. This is a history that moves beyond the limited imaginings of modernity, the colonial and postcolonial eras, and so on and addresses the time of the present through an ongoing past and an imminent future. As with Mendel, the questions of territory and time are both complicated as we move beyond the idea of nations and regions and think genuinely with the globe through a conjuncture. It is a conjuncture that raises the question again of how far back or how wide we have to go to write a history of the present. This concatenation of geographies is occasioned less by human agency and more by myriad actions over time by nonconnected actors in non-contiguous spaces which will have an impact on these spaces. The idea of a globalized common fate is common to both Mendel and Velardi, but the latter gives us a sense of finality that is on the horizon – a tense present continuous.

In her video installation *Contin(g)ent* (2008), the Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander traces a map of the world in honey and lets loose an army of ants on it. As the ants consume the honey, the continents shift shape and slowly disappear. This disappearance of “the world” by virtue of the disorganized, frenetic feeding of the ants is captured via time-lapse video over 10 minutes and 30 seconds. At one level, the video is about greed and the desire to consume without limits, which leads eventually to the loss of that which one desires, an exhausting desire that leads to the exhaustion of desire. However, there is also the hubris of cartography and the connectedness of the world made through travel, discovery, and exploitation – the world written through the actions of humans. The time-lapse video also evokes the accelerated pace of globalization, which effaces boundaries and identities at the cost of the erasure of the earth. All of these artworks question the verities of the social sciences with their silo-oriented work of disciplines, spaces, and time. They take us beyond the idea of disciplinary crises or, indeed, the solipsistic anxieties of academics and ask us to consider the histories that led to the present, providing a “fuller narrative . . . a more total account,” as Appadurai asks of us. One’s battle may not be with the idea of history; rather, it should be with myopic anthropocentric accounts of history that dwell still with an idea of the national rather than the global. That we are in the space of a “contingency without an identifiable archive,” as Appadurai puts it, means that it is the creative artist in the crucible of their imagination who is forging

the weapons for contending against human amnesia and hubris. However, knowing that “globalization has a *longue durée*” provides us with less comfort than Appadurai assumes. The work of history provides no consolation, no space for nostalgia, to go back to the image of the Angel of History. When these artists invoke a long history that stretches both backwards and forwards but collides with the present, they speak of the *jetztzeit* – now time – that Benjamin invoked. The proper work of history, outside the conventions and pieties of the discipline, is this *jetztzeit* when one reaches back to the past in a time of urgency to see the exigencies of the present clearly.

### Walking on Water

The history of human civilization has been the struggle between trying to put people in their place and the resistance to such rooting. States have tried to settle, classify, and imprison people within boundaries, labour regimes, and social arrangements. Each of these processes has generated dissenters who resist this civilizational aspiration of elites by rebelling or by voting with their feet. The invention of the nation has been the most recent and the most successful attempt to bind people together through coercion as much as the ideology of belonging. The citizen is pitted against the stranger, the migrant, the refugee, and the person out of place. In fact, this is the flip side of globalization, which creates more and more placeless people on the move from geographies devastated by the wars between nations. If war is the global symptom of our times (Grove, 2019), so is the relentless movement of people laughing to scorn physical barriers, documentary regimes, and the sustained brutalities of military power. This dialectic of national belonging pitted against the unwelcome stranger is the motor for globalization. Sri Lankans in Capri, Sikhs in Toronto, Syrians in Berlin, Rohingyas in Oman, and Bangladeshis in Venice: this is a concatenation of geographies, histories, and identities that fuels the political economy of capital, the racial economy of nations, and the fluid economies of labour simultaneously. The scale here is both global and local at the same time. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it confounds these binaries, and we are forced to think about the space of uncanny and proliferating continuities. Migration produces its own scales and territories and a crosshatching of spaces. The very idea of people out of place – which was the bedrock of considerations about nations, citizens, and refugees – is in a crisis, not least because the very idea of citizenship itself has been rendered parlous in the age of new regimes committed to generating a paradigm of precarity for consolidation of authoritarian power.

The entities that come to mind when one looks at the new globalization of movement are that of the Syrians – some physically fit, others disabled and in wheelchairs – crossing the Mediterranean Sea in numbers in their



flight to Europe. Amid the heartrending images of those who did not make it are the many who, in a contemporary miracle, walked on water to safety. The oceans, with their tumultuous waves and their recalcitrance, seemed to have held no terrors for these modern-day Jesuses. Indeed, one can draw an alternative genealogy of those who have taken to the ocean in search of better lives, from Cambodians to Sri Lankan Tamils to the Rohingyas, to set alongside our conventional accounts of sea voyages that stretch from the Vikings through the Portuguese to Thor Heyerdahl. It is on the uncertain borders with the oceans – Lesbos or Lampedusa – that we are seeing the effects of globalization as those with nothing to lose exercise a temerity that transcends borders and national identities. These examples of human intransigence in the face of the pressures of history demand narratives that move beyond the coast and dip their feet in the water and retrace the steps of those distant ancestors who walked on water to cross over from Africa to populate the world. The emergence of spaces that are rents in the ambitions of nations to police their borders is an indication of a globalization that creates connections between non-contiguous spaces. There are multiple archipelagoes of affinity, and it is the movement of people that creates this archipelagic space. Amitav Ghosh, in his recent novel *Gun Island* (2019), creates such an archipelago of connections between the Sundarbans mangrove swamps in the Bay of Bengal and the sinking city of Venice. Bangladeshi migrants move across the waters to labour in the city: a city of fable for litterateurs and sentimental visitors, a familiar swampy site of labour for the Bangladeshi. Ghosh brings together history, unexpected connections, and the supernatural in a narrative climax that pits a xenophobic state against the “foreigners” in their midst. What Ghosh seems to be suggesting is that Venice is merely an island in an archipelago connected by the movements of labour; the city sits at the lip of a very *longue durée* of globalization. These conjunctural contexts are important. Some are born globalized, some achieve globalization, and some have globalization thrust on them, a matter of history, after all. Another novel, *The Dragonfly Sea*, by the Kenyan writer Yvonne Odhiambo Awuor (2019), looks to an archipelago of connections created by the voyages of the Chinese admiral Zheng He to the East African coast in the fifteenth century. On the island of Lamu live the Chinese African descendants of this encounter, and the novel takes up the story of one tempestuous young woman and her journey to China as a “descendant” under the aegis of the present government of China. We tend to look at globalization too often through the abstract forces of financial capital or the etiolated theorization of cosmopolitan intellectuals, forgetting the real, unceasing movement of people that has always laughed national borders to scorn.

The question of origins bothers us. Either we want to find a particular conjuncture, or we imagine, as stated earlier, that the question of origins is a misplaced one. This is an anxiety that cuts both ways and has a very distinct

notion of time. An earlier version of anthropology believed in the idea of an encounter with the West that opened up spaces to civilization or to a violent encounter with a different world of values, depending on the politics of the writing. Globalization in the period of imperial expansion and consolidation was never about a flat earth but about a very peaky, hierarchical one. There were those who had reached fulfilment and others who had to strive upward, however Sisyphean the task, condemned never to occupy the same time as those who sought to better them. What was called the “denial of coevalness” (Fabian, 1983) was also about those who could enter history and those who merely lived in it, like buffaloes in a swamp. The very idea of the globe was one ordered rationally into directions, time, and cartographic accuracy: datelines, latitudes, and longitudes. It was horizontal, reflecting the spread of the stain of empire, pink on the map, bloody on the ground. However, it was also vertical in that spaces were incorporated in a hierarchy that placed many at the bottom and some at the top. It had the nature of a sacral ordering, a new great chain of human beings. Globalization was about an awakening to history and a sense of one’s place (Buck-Morss, 1991: 36). The metaphor of the Sleeping Beauty is a potent one: spaces waiting for the kiss of the prince to waken to a sense of purpose and action. However, there were other versions of the globe and understandings of the cosmos that sat alongside these imperial visions. Globalization, in this sense, at least, is a flow in which many visions of the world collide, and it is this collision rather than the triumph of any one version that constitutes the historical process. Writing against the idea of beginnings and endings is itself the beginning of a more textured history. A powerful work by Thongchai Winichakul (1997) takes up the question of the relation between cosmology and geography in Siam: the relation between a vertical geography that connects humans to the heavens and a horizontal geography that connects humans to other humans. If one were to move away from the teleological impetus of history that seeks the constant transition from X to Y state, one can see in this argument the presence of many globes that complicates the question of globalization. The Thais acquire another version of the globe to set alongside their local understanding, and the metaphor of awakening to a “reality” makes way for an understanding of crosshatching realities. As Ghosh shows, the world of Sundarbans and its finely balanced cosmologies of tigers and female deities segues into other sacred and secular spaces across the ocean, into a Catholic Venice and its more secular dangers.

### **Continuous Oceans**

Alongside these recreations of an archipelagic imagination, we need to think seriously across oceans and move away from an imagination driven by terrestrial hubris. Under the terms of the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, Pope Alexander VI divided the world on either side of Cape Verde, the lands to

the east belonging to Portugal, and those to the west, to Castile. A similar procedure is followed by historians who divide the indivisible ocean into segments depending on their national affiliations: Asian historians study the Pacific and Indian oceans, and the Atlantic is the preserve of Euro-American history. Renisa Mawani's recent book *Across the Oceans of Law* asks how we can get "the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian oceans into much-needed conversation" allowing us to imagine a paradigm of "oceans as method" (Mawani, 2018: 6, 17). As she puts it, "the maritime voyages of Indian travelers joined the eastern and western Indian oceans to the Pacific, and in some cases, the Atlantic" (Mawani, 2018: 10). Thinking the ocean through the histories of migration begins to reckon with contiguous as much as continuous oceans rather than divided continents. The ocean is a global entity within which multiple connections happen as opposed to the continents truncated and divided by the idea of nations and borders.

Mawani takes up the story of the *SS Komagata Maru* that sets sail from Hong Kong in April 1914 to Vancouver with 376 Punjabis on board, travelling eastwards rather than westwards across the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic. Given the tightening restrictions on immigration and the drawing of the colour line by the imperial white powers that looked at brown migration with suspicion, the voyage was seeking to sidestep regulations. But Baba Gurdit Singh was also summoning up another older idea of oceans beyond the control of nations and empires. In February 1914, the native of Punjab and a putative rubber planter in Malaysia had issued a proclamation to all Indians. The Sri Guru Nanak Steamship Company with a fleet of four ships would eventually travel the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, from Bombay to Brazil, and from Calcutta to Canada. Apart from the rhetorical alliteration, the idea of continuous water was central to this imagination. We can contrast this to two kinds of academic discourse, one that sections off water as a heuristic act, as in the case of MN Pearson's idea of an Indian Ocean space carved out by monsoon winds. This seeming meteorological determinism is less restricting than the kind of occlusion present in KN Chaudhuri's work. Africa is written out of his Indian Ocean world for cultural reasons, so the sequestering of the Indian Ocean is achieved through occluding an entire continent. He observes, "In spite of its close connection with the Islamic world the indigenous African communities appear to have been structured by a historical logic separate and independent of the Indian Ocean" (Chaudhuri, 1990: 36).

In the era before steamships, the first ever travelogue in an Indian language was written in Malayalam, the language of Kerala on the southwestern coast of India. The *Varthamanapustakam* (1790) details the account of a journey from Malabar to Rome via Lisbon to settle a dispute within the local Catholic community over the question of succession. In November 1778, Malpan Mar Joseph Cariattil and Cathanar Thomman Paremakal set sail for Europe, anchored in Angola in February 1779, and then via

Bahia in Brazil, for that was the route of the ship that they travelled on. They were extremely glad to get to Bahia, “the bosom of all saints” (Podipara, 1971: 485). The account has one of the earliest examples of xenology (observations of foreigners by Indians) and the account shares disturbing similarities with a later colonial anthropology. The people are described as “very idle and ignorant. They cultivate only what is necessary for their food and spend their daily wages without putting aside anything for the future. Hence there are neither rich nor poor people among them. They possess nothing except their food and live in the huts made with their own hands” (Podipara, 1971: 486). Cariattil had spent time in Rome earlier, so he was able to communicate with the local Italian Capuchins in their language and they settled down for a comfortable conversation on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas. The ship then sailed to Genoa – *en route* they were attacked by English pirates – a voyage that took them 33 days. They stopped for a month in Genoa and finally reached Rome in 1780. Cariattil was clear that he “[had] not come to see the glories of the city of Rome” but rather to try to settle the dispute back home. In fact, there is little description of the Vatican or accounts of theological discussions. Cariattil observed laconically, “The body of the Pope was tall and stout, his face bright, his hair well-combed and their ends arranged into little curls, like rings” (Podipara, 1971: 515–24). In July 1782, Joseph Cariattil achieved what he had set out to do and was nominated the Archbishop of Cranganore.

Meanwhile, he found time to reply to testy letters from the Bishop of Cochin who was irritated at his absence over so long a period and not entirely convinced why Cariattil and Paramekkal had to go to such great lengths to strengthen a claim to local authority. Cariattil was very clear, “it is known as a law of nature that the honour, the prestige and unity of a community can be kept intact only if that community is governed by those of that community” (Podipara, 1971: 590). And if this necessitated crossing the oceans, so be it. Of course, one must not engage in intemperate travel for the sake of religion. He asks the Bishop acerbically, “if you are ready to suffer for Jesus Christ, why don’t you go to China or to some similar country? You don’t go there since you know very well that there you will be slapped in the face” (Podipara, 1971: 592).

What is interesting in this account is that we move away from the narratives of seeming habitués of the ocean as it were. Cariattil and Paramekkal take to the high seas because there is a job to be accomplished; a practical, pragmatic relation to travel that moves us away from hard distinctions between land and sea travel. Moreover, for them, the ocean was a body of water that had to be travelled on and the route of the ship from south India to Bahia and back again to Genoa does not merit much comment as a deviation or a longer route. They take the sea for granted and in their stride, as it were. On their way back they encounter a storm near Bahia in June 1785,

“the steersman and the sailors trembled; some in the ship appeared as dead and bloodless.” However, the archbishop “sat at the back of the roof of the ship looking into the sea, prayed incessantly to god and made the sign of the cross on the sea” (Podipara, 1971: 611).

## The Space of Relation

How are we to rethink the spatial imaginary of the ocean away from the paradigm of area studies and distinct maritime spaces? Our present imaginations are equally the residue of colonialism and nationalism; the partition of the world during the Cold War; and the pedagogical structures at universities and academic production that has largely worked within this curtailment of the conceptualizations of space. What Lewis and Wigen have called the “architecture of continents,” the idea that continents are “large, continuous, discrete masses of land, ideally separated by expanses of water” (Lewis and Wigen, 1997: 21), structures our understanding. However, hidden in this assumption is another deeper misrecognition; the bodies of water themselves are separated and distinct. These putative oceanic subsystems, ecological and meteorological zones, and cultural enclaves recreate the division of the world into nations and regions. This is not to deny the coherence that may exist within such zones but rather to assert that the boundaries are fluid and porous, as on land, but without the hermetic seals between nations. As used to be asked of the Roman Empire, how did one know when one had left it? This is the fluid and conjunctural question that we need to think about. Glissant asks for archipelagic thinking across non-contiguous but connected spaces; connections that are born of travel, migration, and affinities imagined through these intersecting histories. In his evocative words, “the Caribbean is . . . a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts . . . the reality of archipelagos . . . a natural illustration of the thought of Relation” (Glissant, 1997: 33). The sea explodes and scatters land and connects it at the same time, in fact, it becomes that which connects lands. Laleh Khalili’s work on new ports and shipping infrastructures argues that maritime transportation is central to the very fabric of global capitalism and brings together military bases, cargo ports, hydrocarbon economies, free trade zones, and the international migration of labour to serve this global network (Khalili, 2020). If Glissant addresses the question of culture, imagination, and affinity, Khalili’s work not only forces us to get our feet wet but also gets us to think about the hard undergirding of the world through the oceans, where we see a network of ports rather than the classic urban centres, capital cities of the world, that we are accustomed to think about.

Adrian Paci, an Albanian artist based in Milan, reflects on this very fact in his video installation, *The Column* (2013). The video is shot on board a ship, somewhere in the middle of the ocean between Asia and Europe. On

deck, a group of Chinese stone carvers using mechanized grinders and cutters forge Grecian columns from huge marble blocks. These Grecian columns “Made in China” will be installed in Europe as emblematic of a mythical and uncontaminated European lineage that connects Greece to contemporary Europe. Yet, without the mediation of Chinese labourers and their own mythic voyage, Europe becomes impossible. The video speaks to the simultaneity of absence/presence (Greek civilization, present yet past) and immateriality (the effacement of labour). The question of relation that Glissant raises is addressed here through the uncanny networks across oceans and of time as also the connections of contemporary Chinese capital and labour with Europe’s nostalgia regarding the idea of civilization. As Glissant might have said, the sea explodes these imaginations into a wide arc of relationalities. “Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity” (Glissant, 1997: 1). Here is a primary call to overstep, stepping into water, but also stepping over the distinctions of oceans named by humans in their own image.

While the ancient Chinese character for city was the same as that for wall, when we think about port cities from Melaka to Kochi to the Arabian Peninsula and the Swahili coast, we can see these cities as doors or portals. They reflect layers of historical maritime interaction sometimes going back over millennia. Of course, it is possible to make too much of their cosmopolitanism, and here one would perhaps agree with Nile Green on exercising caution. These multiracial, multi-ethnic, polyglot sites, whether Zanzibar or Kochi, would reflect coexistence as much as conflict, and it is important to not make metaphors of them. Prejudices and everyday tensions get worn away as much as exacerbated in the business of living together (Glassman, 2011; Nandy, 2000; Lewis, 2016). As Su Lin Lewis has observed, port city cosmopolitanism always entailed a “double consciousness” of global processes and local pluralism, each playing off the other (Lewis, 2016: 11). This *longue durée* engagement with the ocean could lead a Kerala intellectual like Balakrishna Pillai to commence his history of the region in Babylon and reflect on the trade in pepper from Roman times, the pepper with which Carthage paid tribute to Rome. Pillai mused “Is Kerala a chapter in the history of Rome or is Rome a chapter in the history of Kerala?” (Menon, 2010). Such postcolonial “provincialization” *avant les lettres* arose less from a political stance under empire and more from a sense of a present that extended backwards across oceans beyond colonialism. Ports have always been spaces of liminality sitting as they do on the edge of the ocean and open to the world and possessing fluid geographies. Tomé Pires, the sixteenth-century Portuguese apothecary, observed in Melaka that one can hear 84 languages spoken, where even the parrots were multilingual. If colonialism was to bring in a “linguistic intransigence,” to use Glissant’s words and the imperative of monolingualism, in the port cities a polyglot universe survived

alongside larger imaginations of space and longer temporalities of reckoning history. Thinking with port towns, their miscegenated spaces, and their betwixt and between histories, requires us to live as Socrates said, not like ants and frogs around a pond, but to think about the ocean less as land's end and more as a shaper of the history of land (Horden and Purcell, 2002: 7).

A recent slew of works has worked with this premise of thinking what I would like to call the "paracolonial" to move beyond the triad of pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial that abbreviates historical time to the conjuncture of the colonial. Instead of reading backwards from the myopia of nations and area studies, Engseng Ho studies the space between the Hadramawt in Yemen and South East Asia through the movement of religious specialists, traders, and political actors. It is a history that precedes, sits alongside, and exceeds colonial and national narratives and geographies. The initial migration is of Alawi Sayyid descendants across the ocean tracing a sacred geography of graves and worship this gets overlaid with the movement of kin, mercenaries, and goods. Alongside this are the creation, dispersion, and recreation of an ecumenical Islam along a wide swathe catering to a creole population whose mothers were Indian, Buginese, Chinese, and so on. While the twentieth century does bring a kind of closure to an incessant movement which commenced in the twelfth century CE, the movement of people and ideas across the oceans continue, and strategic geopolitics continues to deal with the long historical traces and its spillover into other waters: as in the history of Osama Bin Laden in the Atlantic Ocean. As Ho observes, "peoples native to old diasporas have geographical sensibilities as large as whole empires; possessed of folklore, ritual and literature, their cultural memories reach back even further. It is an expansive intelligence of this sort, I believe, which has now taken up arms against its geographical equal, the American empire" (Ho, 2004: 241).

Other works like that of Sunil Amrith on the Bay of Bengal, though carefully demarcating an ecosystem on the north-eastern coast of India, also extend the notion of territory to map it with the movement of people, religion, and commodities. It is at the same time, a well-defined as much as porous space which allows for a fluid imagination of land, sea, and coast that is not confined to the idea of a nation and its "territorial waters." Amrith manages to bring together tides, winds, and territorial geography to create a sense of layered pasts teeming with jostling ethnicities, religions, and nationalities. This emphasis on leaving the shores and looking at lives made in migration and commodities in transit also involves a more supple relation with the idea of law. What appears fixed and intractable within the structures and protocols of courts acquires new dimensions at sea. While the law literally is all at sea while dealing with issues of human trafficking, piracy and the trade in arms, the movement of legal professionals across the ocean creates its own "empire of the law." Legal precedents are carried across the ocean from the Indian subcontinent and find a new life in

litigation within African courts. And it is not only these travels within the carapace of empire and its institutions, but also the deep memory of custom, trust, and contract within the mercantile communities scattered along the ocean in port cities from Gujarat to the Swahili coast and the Middle East. The mercantile diaspora creates its own geography of commerce as much as kinship and it is this dispersed sense of belonging that allows for survival across political regimes. The most significant instance of this is the expulsion of Asians from Uganda which then generates a diaspora that spills across oceans (Mamdani, 2011; Amrith, 2013; Machado, 2014; Mathew, 2016; Bishara, 2018).

These geographies of affinity generated through migration, marriage, and commerce as also parallel networks of religion and religious practices exceed the affiliations to contemporary nation states as much as colonial cartographies. Space is created by the movement and imaginations of people and material; space is not a static entity within which people move. We have to reckon with a different temporality than merely that of our etiolated sense of a time of modernity. We need to think athwart maps, with a sense of transversality as Lionnet and Shih have suggested with their idea of “minor transnationalism” to engage with these uncanny and proliferating geographies. As they put it, “we forget to look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent” (Lionnet and Shih, 2005: 1). We need to move towards an “archipelagic thinking” across non-contiguous yet connected spaces and rebel against the comfort of assuming that things near each other are more related to each other, or that people think with the space created for them by the nation states of which they are, or hope to be, citizens. Nisha Mathew, in her dissertation on Dubai, works with the idea of a concatenation of geographies addressing the seemingly eccentric question of where Dubai actually is. Over the course of time, Dubai intersects with and inhabits several geographies: Japan in the early twentieth century through the pearl trade and later oil extraction in the Persian Gulf; Antwerp, Surat, and Kozhikode in the twentieth century through gold; London and New York again in the twentieth century and beyond through finance capital and real estate; South and South East Asia, as also eastern Europe through labour migration; and, for a brief moment, to the lands of the former Soviet Union following 1989 and the spike in consumer demand for electronic goods (Mathew, 2014).

### **Different Relations**

When we think about connections across the oceans, for example, between the southwest coast of India and the Swahili coast, or between the southeast coast and Malaysia, Singapore, and beyond to China, while we may be thinking expansively, we are still imprisoned in an inherited geography. We enclose water between parentheses of land: Africa and India bracketing



the Indian Ocean. Ptolemy in the first century of the Christian Era saw the Indian Ocean as the Mediterranean – an inland sea – where the eastern coast of Africa turned eastwards to join up with the coast of Asia in the Far East. What would doing history in an interstitial way involve, looking at the connections that cross hatch the oceans? Continuing with the idea of a paracolonia, or indeed paranational history, that is, one that sits beside, precedes, and exceeds these political temporalities, we shall look at three themes: slavery, capitalism, and state formation, for reasons of proper gravity.

The history of labour in the Indian Ocean is seen as constituted by the experience of indenture, following on from the histories of the Middle Passage and the trade in African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean. Arguably, there has been a longer experience of slavery in the Indian Ocean, involving domestic and royal household slavery of a very different kind. As work from Patricia Crone onwards has shown, Islamic slavery had many manifestations which included the possibility of meritorious service in the military allowing for the ultimate possibility of kingship as in the case of the “slave dynasty” that ruled Delhi in the early first millennium CE (Crone, 1980; Eaton and Chatterjee, 2006; Kumar, 2007). Military slaves, particularly from Abyssinia, played a role in state formation in South Asia from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, thereafter, leaving behind the detritus of the extinction of indigenous states in the community known as Sidis who have a marginal existence along the southwestern coast (Eaton, 2008). If we go even further back, the *Periplus* mentions the trade in slaves from the Somali coast to the Roman Empire, and the Abbasid Caliphate used slaves from East Africa to desalinate the marshlands of southern Iraq in the ninth century CE (Gordon, 1989: 118). This circulation of slaves in the Indian Ocean continued into the seventeenth century with the Dutch bringing in slaves from their territories in South and South East Asia to Cape Town, unmarked as yet by racial boundaries and characterized by miscegenation (Schoeman, 2012). With the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade, this bounded trade acquired a new geography through the Mozambique connection. The nexus between Gujarati merchants, African demand for Indian cottons, and slave trade with the Portuguese, French, and Brazilian slavers meant an extension of the commerce in human bondage to slave markets across the Atlantic to Bahia. Brazilian capital from Bahia and Rio de Janeiro became increasingly involved in the procurement of Indian textiles for slave trading from Luanda and Benguela in Angola (Machado, 2014: 158). The parentheses enclosing the Indian Ocean were porous, and we need we think with another map in which Africa and India are not bookends but open up to larger geographies at different times. We must not read back the idea of the Indian Ocean as a “British lake” in the phrase coined by the Indian diplomat and historian K.M. Panikkar (Panikkar, 1945: 72).

If we look at historical capitalism from the period eleventh to the eighteenth-century CE, there is a history of the flow of silver from South

America to Song China, given the demand for Chinese goods, that spanned the oceans (Yazdani and Menon, 2020). As Machado shows, silver and the trade in slaves created a skein of connections between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean: “the place of Africa as a notable source of silver has been largely overlooked because scholars have concentrated on imports from the Levant, Europe or the middle East, or focused on the Chinese silver market” (Machado, 2014: 210). The Vaniya merchants were deeply embedded in the slave trade, and evidence for the period 1600–1800 shows that around 28,000 tonnes of silver (representing 20% of the world’s production) entered the Indian subcontinent from the west. To the east, through the Manila to India trade, silver flowed in from the Pacific (Machado, 2014: 246). From Brazil to Bombay across the Atlantic and the Pacific, silver crossed the continuous ocean creating a space beyond continental formations. Jeremy Prestholdt’s work on East African consumer demand connects early industrial capitalism in the United States as much as India, through production in Salem, Massachusetts, and Bombay. The first industrial textile mill in India was founded by French manufacturers to produce cloth for Senegalese demand. And the demand for Indian textiles shaped Lusophone trade in Africa and Asia. As Prestholdt shows, the first textile mills in Bombay were founded entirely by Indian capital based on burgeoning trade with Africa. Between 1866 and 1870, the export of cloth from Bombay to Zanzibar went up by 400%. Between 1877 and 1888, a decade of growth, locally made cloth exports to Zanzibar went up from 2.8 million yards to 15 million yards annually. He quotes a trader Joseph Thomson who filled out a caravan for Lake Tanganyika in the 1870s who wrote that “fashion was as dominant among Central Africa tribes as among the belles of Paris or London” (Prestholdt, 2008: 63). In 1869, Juma bin Salim in Oman writes a contract to deliver 10,500 pounds of ivory to Zanzibar. He was popularly known as Juma “Amerikani” for importing American cotton sheeting which he exchanged for elephant tusks from Congo. The capital financing his trade came from Bombay, the cotton sheeting from Massachusetts, and the ivory from Congo (McDow, 2018). Here again, we see the ocean encircling the globe making possible connections between commodities and consumer demand and driving the growth of early industrialization in the United States and India.

Ravi Palat has written about the interstate system of the Indian Ocean from North Africa to East Asia with overlapping sovereignties and autonomous communities in a mercantile world. The world of customary law and trust sat alongside the development of state systems, international banking, and illicit economic activity on the ocean. While Palat argues for an ecological form of development in this interconnected region based on rice cultivation – regimes built on control of labour and negotiation with mercantile capital – he does not conceive of it as a closed system (Palat, 2015). In fact, the work of Machado, Bishara et al. as much as the earlier work

of KN Chaudhuri can be read productively alongside this conception of a state system. The centrality of merchant capital along the coasts meant a polyglot, cosmopolitan network of Jews, Armenians, Arabs, Gujaratis, Chinese, and so on each with radiating connections across oceanic space with diasporas from South East Asia to the United States. Ibn Batuta had travelled in the fourteenth century CE as a jurist within an Islamic cosmopolis with its own conventions and customary law. It was a world of overlapping law, mercantile trust, and the newer overlay of states. Bishara talks about a similar phenomenon 500 years later under the British Empire where the carapace of British law allowed “empires advocates” as he calls them to carry Anglo-Indian precedent from the courts of India to the colonies in Africa. We must resist narratives of closure or of telos when we speak about the empire of law; overlay, negotiation, and parallel networks might be closer to the truth. Even in the age of British Empire, as Bayly has shown, the Second Empire that followed the loss of the first with American independence meant that personnel, ideas, and institutional forms circulated from the Atlantic world to the Indian Oceanic world. Cornwallis, as we know, redeemed himself in Lord Jim fashion for his defeat at Yorktown by proving his mettle as Governor-General in India (Bayly, 1989). Continuity, persistence, and circulation are the frames that we need to think about to avoid the pitfalls of thinking with autarkic ocean worlds.

## Conclusion

We began by speaking of connected ocean and postcolonial visions of the unity of colonized peoples reflected in the Bandung Conference of 1955, which brought together political leaders and radicals from not only the Indian Ocean world but also someone like Richard Wright, from across the Atlantic (Roberts and Foulcher, 2016). This coming together reflected not only present hopes and future aspirations but also a past history of slavery, trade, colonialism, and indenture that had brought the “coloured peoples” of the world together to labour on plantations – sugar and cotton – and within regimes of exploitation and punishment. As early as 1803, a Secret Memorandum had been issued from the British Colonial Office to the Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company in the wake of the Revolution in Haiti. John Sullivan wrote asking for the introduction of Chinese labour in Trinidad, connecting two oceans through forced labour, to counteract “the spirit of insurrection being excited among the Negroes in our colonies” (Lowe, 2007a: 124). He felt that a “free race of cultivators,” by being kept distinct from the “Negroes,” would also be attached to their European proprietors. The manipulative cynicism of such manoeuvres was not lost on African American intellectuals both during slavery and much after. Frederick Douglas was clear that the “rights of the coolie in California, in Peru, in Jamaica,

in Trinidad and on board the vessels . . . are scarcely more guarded than were those of Negro slaves” (Lowe, 2007b: 212). Du Bois too summoned up the unity of coloured people across the oceans, resisting the imperial attempt to divide and rule. He spoke of the “dark and vast sea of human labour in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa, in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States” (Lowe, 2007b: 212).

Lisa Lowe has spoken of these intimacies and perceptions of affinity between Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americans through literature, political reflection, and dwelling upon violence and coerced labour in the making of the modern world. Reflections on servitude and freedom were premised precisely on the systems of oppression that underlay racial capitalism and colonial rule that spanned the oceans while sequestering the oceans as spheres of control. In the islands of the Caribbean, this sense of a shared history led to invocations of identity that were premised on fluidity, movement, and affinities that addressed an archipelagic imagination. When Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé famously proclaimed the idea of *creolité* in the 1980s stating “neither European, nor African, nor Asian, we proclaim ourselves Creoles” (Carter and Torabully, 2002: 9), they were addressing histories of circulation, migration, and miscegenation that dwelled on the borderless world of the ocean through which their ancestors were carried. It is in this spirit that we must think again about the vast expanses of the continuous oceans.

This chapter has tried to engage with the historian’s insistence on historicizing the phenomenon of globalization that arises from a disciplinary anxiety to both explain away the phenomenon (“nothing special”) and absorb it within existing paradigms (“we have seen this before”). What we need to treat with a proper degree of scepticism is whether we are witnessing “spatial encompassment on unprecedented levels” – or is this just a matter of perspective? Historically and into the present, there has been a concatenation of spaces through the movement of peoples, ideas, and material, and if one resists the Hegelian temptation (of the achievement of one time, one space, and one idea, as Marxists tend to think), the world has always been an archipelagic entity with multiple intersecting visions of the globe. We certainly need to move beyond “the local, sovereign, and archival” to look at a more dispersed sense of space. Even the “local” is merely a site within which multiple visions of the world intersect. This requires us to move beyond the hubris of nationalism and states, as also the cages of regional and area studies created by a merely strategic Cold War vision, to think about the multiplicity of connections across non-contiguous spaces. What would it mean to study the world along the oceanic fault lines of movement from Melaka to South India, Aden, and Europe, which projects Tamilian refugees to Capri and Canada? Or indeed the historical memory of the Crusades, which leads Syrians to walk across the waters to Europe? How do Lesbos and Lampedusa become the nodes of a globalization that speaks of the restless and

relentless movement of humans across unconnected landscapes? This would be a truly “comparative study of connectivities” that explodes the ocean into the land, as Glissant memorably suggested. We need to start walking on water if we are to truly understand the time and space of globalization.

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