

# Introduction

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When Vasco da Gama finally arrived in Calicut, India, on May 21, 1498, after a journey of some eight months, he took the precaution of first sending to shore one of the convict-exiles brought as guinea pigs of sorts to be left in newly discovered places. The anonymous *Roteiro*, a rutter or pilot's guide providing a firsthand account of the voyage, reports that the convict-exile, perhaps someone named João Nunes, was taken to "two Moors from Tunis, who knew how to speak Castilian and Genoese" (Ames 2009, 71) ("dois mouros de *Tunes*, que sabiam falar castelhano e genovês") (Velho 1960, 40), with whom he had the following exchange:

The first greeting they gave him, was this that follows:  
"The Devil take thee! What brought you hither?"  
They asked him what he sought so far from home and he answered them:  
"We come in search of Christians and spices." (Ames 2009, 71)

E a primeira salva que lhe deram foi esta, que se ao diante segue:  
—Ao diablo que te dou; quem te trouxe cá?  
E preguntaram-lhe o que vinhamos buscar tão longe. E êle respondeu:  
—Vimos buscar cristãos e especiaria. (Velho 1960, 40)

Despite the apparent Muslim-Christian conflict of what has been seen as the first modern European encounter with India, the episode in fact reveals how, with well-established routes and networks, the Indian Ocean was already a transculturated sphere when Europeans arrived. Rather than discovering absolute difference, the Portuguese found surprising similitude in India, as Nunes was taken

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This issue honors the memory of the talented Mughal historian Kumkum Chatterjee (1958–2012), with whom I planned this special issue in its early stages, but who sadly passed at far too young an age. Not only a brilliant scholar, she was a delightful person with infectious enthusiasm for all things Indian Ocean. This is a small token of respect to memorialize a great loss.

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to join those from his linguistic community of Romance speakers. In his biography of da Gama, Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997, 129) underlines how the episode affirms “the curious unity of western Mediterranean culture . . . , where Tunisian Muslims spoke Arabic, Castilian and Genoese, and where the Portuguese could actually have a sense of relief at seeing such ‘familiar’ faces.” The episode suggests that categories of selfhood and belonging can shift depending on context. Although Muslims had been recently ejected from the Iberian Peninsula during the Reconquista, in India Iberians and Muslim North Africans came to be perceived as inhabiting the same category. Instead of a babble of incomprehensible noise, the Portuguese heard in India familiar sounds of home. In this signal moment of the beginnings of western European interaction with Indian Ocean societies, the experience unbalances any stable categories of East and West, self and Other.

Despite the lengths to which Europeans traveled to reach India, they did not begin the global integration of trade and culture. While traditionally the early modern period was said to be the European “age of exploration,” scholars have called into question the idea of European exceptionalism to tell a very different story of the history of Europe’s relation to Asia. In her seminal *Before European Hegemony* (1989), Janet L. Abu-Lughod revises Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1974) theory of the emergence of a European world economy from western Europe’s transition from a feudal economy to a capitalist one between 1450 and 1670. She argues instead that from 1250 to 1350 global economic and cultural centers were in the Middle East and Asia, with Europe only peripherally connected to this dynamic Asian system. Before the rise of the West, there was a fall of Asia because of decimated populations from the bubonic plague and the instability of the Mongol empire after Genghis Khan’s death ended the *pax mongolica* that secured the overland trade routes. However, other scholars, especially those of early modern China, extend Abu-Lughod’s analysis to dispute even the narrative of a rise of the West in the sixteenth century. Rejecting Eurocentric norms, Bin Wong (1997) and Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) find Eastern economic dominance continuing later into the eighteenth century. Disputing the argument that Europe had any advantage before 1750, Pomeranz, for instance, finds many parallels in such economic indicators as life expectancy, consumption, and production between Europe and East Asia and argues that their later divergence owes much to European access to coal and the resources of the Americas. Andre Gunder Frank (1998) too argues that before the late eighteenth century there was a pro-

nounced disparity between European and Asian demand for each other's goods: while Asian goods like silk, tea, porcelain, and spices were highly sought after in Europe, Europeans had little to offer Asians and only entered intra-Asian trade by importing silver from the New World that they exchanged for Asian luxury items. Historians of the Indian Ocean, such as J. C. van Leur (1995) and Niels Steensgaard (1974), have long found Europeans to be irrelevant in early modern Asian trade, while K. N. Chaudhuri (1978) describes a vibrant economy in the region with Indian merchant princes to rival the Medicis and the Fuggers.

When Europeans entered the Indian Ocean, they did so as relative newcomers. The early modern Indian Ocean economy, comprising the linked economic spheres of the Arab world, India, China, Southeast Asia, and East Africa, was a world economy in which trade was conducted over considerable distances long before the arrival of Europeans. The Indian Ocean is perhaps the "oldest" ocean in terms of human activity, having been traversed for millennia. As Sugata Bose (2009, 6) notes, the Indian Ocean was an "interregional arena" that was "tied together by webs of economic and cultural relationships" but with "flexible internal and external boundaries." It is, as Chaudhuri (1985, 1990) argues, a unified sphere, like Fernand Braudel's (1972) Mediterranean, having a common history and a cohesive identity. The unity of this interregional arena is forged through transnational networks of trade and exchange of a long-standing duration. Long-distance commercial voyages from Persia to China had existed at least since the Umayyad and 'Abbasid caliphates (Hourani [1951] 1995, 46–50, 61–79). Foreign merchants in Tang-era China included "Manichaeans, Uighur Turks from Central Asia, Mazdeans and Nestorian Christians from Persia, Hindus and Buddhists from both South and Southeast Asia, and the Japanese and Koreans" and "merchants from Siraf and Omani ports trading on the coasts of China during the early Abbasid period" (Risso 1995, 24–25). In the later medieval period and beyond, Arab and Chinese traders met halfway in the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia. Tomé Pires (1944, 2:268) listed in his sixteenth-century history of Melaka more than sixty peoples who had traded there, coming from India, China, and the Middle East, including "Moors from Cairo, Mecca, Aden, Abyssinians, men of Kilwa, Malindi, Ormuz, Parsees, *Rumes*, Turks, Turkomans, Christian Armenians."

Global trade that brought different peoples together played a significant role in processes of transculturalism and the hybridization of culture in the early modern period. In the transnational networks created by global trade, not only mate-

rial goods were exchanged but also far more. Along those routes traveled people who brought with them ideas, cultures, languages, texts, and religions. Skilled gunners, artisans, musicians, and religious teachers could all be adopted to foreign courts to enhance the prestige of the monarch, even as foreign merchants peopled the trading ports of the Indian Ocean. Thus Islam spread across East Africa, India, and Southeast Asia through merchant networks (Risso 1995). And thus da Gama and his men sailed all the way around the Cape of Good Hope to encounter in India their Tunisian neighbors, who, according to the *Roteiro*, congratulated them on their achievement.

Viewing Europeans as only one among a number of interacting groups in the globalized sphere of the Indian Ocean enacts an important shift in our scholarly framing of the relations between the West and the Rest. This shift is one, in Dipesh Chakravarty's (2000) resonant phrase, of "provincializing Europe" to decenter it and write a history of radical heterogeneity. But this project is not simply one of recovering non-European historical actors and literary texts. Changing the frame also leads to the recognition of how European literature and history have functioned as asymmetrical master narratives, what Chakravarty calls the "hyperreal Europe" (45) and what might also be termed a spectral Europe whose ghostly presence haunts and distorts our reading of the past. Changing the frame calls attention to fissures and gaps in the European archive itself that demand new interpretations and a reexamination of assumptions of European dominance. Even a work of Eurocentric nationalist mythmaking like Luís Vaz de Camões's *Lusiads* (1973, 1997), when reexamined, can show a rather different picture of Europeans in India. An epic poem celebrating da Gama's voyage, Camões's *Lusiads* is at once an imperialist celebration and a deeply anxious text revealing the transculturation and hybridization of its protagonists in interaction with Africans and Asians. In *The Lusiads* not only do the Portuguese discover Castilian-speaking North Africans—"a Mohammedan born in Barbary" who speaks "fluent Castilian" (*língua hispana*) (Camões 1973, 1997, canto 7.24–25)—but they themselves are linguistically malleable: they converse in Arabic with the natives of Mozambique (canto 1.50) and with East Africans (canto 5.77). The encounter with the Swahili-speaking East Africans offers a glimpse of Arabic at work as a trading lingua franca: the East Africans are described as knowing a "little Arabic," which they speak poorly ("*arábica língua, que mal falam*") but "which Fernão Martins spoke fluently" (*E que Fernão Martins mui bem entende*) (canto 5.77.1–2). Aware of their need to be able to navigate this heterogeneous sphere,

the historical da Gama voyage prepared by bringing two interpreters, Fernão Martins and Martin Afonso, who, having lived in the Congo, spoke several Bantu dialects (Ames 2009, 16); the manuscript of the *Roteiro* includes a vocabulary list of what purports to be Malay (Velho 1960, 95–99). While the poem’s colonialist mythmaking turns the Tunisian into a Christian convert, a careful reading of Camões shows the Portuguese themselves having trouble maintaining a wholly European identity. In Mozambique they are mistaken for

uncultured Turks,  
Who, from their home by the Caspian Sea,  
Had set out to conquer all Asia,  
And by fate’s decree had even overcome  
The imperial city of Byzantium.

(gentes inumanas,  
Que os apouentos cáspios habitando,  
A conquistar as terras asianas  
Vieram, e, por ordem do destino,  
O império tomaram a Constantino.)  
(Camões 1973, 1997, canto 1.60.4–8).

This mistake confuses two new arrivals in the Indian Ocean, as the Ottomans were also attempting to expand their influence there, starting their own age of exploration (Casale 2010; Özbaran 2009).

More than a simple misrecognition, the episode hints at the imperial desires of the Portuguese as they strive to emulate the conquerors of Constantinople. To portray the dislocation of the Portuguese, the text even enacts a transposition of identities. In the Portuguese encounter with the people of Malindi, narrated in several stanzas, the Portuguese were enthusiastically welcomed even as they celebrated their hosts “as if both sides were emulating / The other party in their celebrating” (E assi festeja / Um ao outro, a maneira de peleja) (Camões 1973, 1997, canto 2.91.7–8). In this emulous rivalry and combative celebration, the descriptions of the two sides mirror each other. The text oscillates between difference and similitude to unsettle and unmoor European identity. Although not as radically heteroglossic as that trickster Fernão Mendes Pinto’s *Peregrinação* (*Travels*), Camões’s work too could be said to foreground, in his dialogue with Asia, “another’s speech in another’s language” (Wojciehowski 2009, 170). By attending to European interactions with non-Europeans without making Europe the center, we can start to listen for the voice of the Other.

This special issue listens for heteroglossia in the interactions of Europeans with the peoples of the Indian Ocean and their entangled histories. These transnational networks gave rise to complex relations that sometimes took unexpected

turns. European travelers, merchants, or diplomats found themselves in relations that were sometimes dependent and often intimate in the highly mobile and cosmopolitan societies of the Indian Ocean. In these foreign worlds, Europeans were transformed into transcultural and transnational figures with shifting, fluid, and malleable identities.

By taking the Indian Ocean as a unit, or at least as an interarticulating conglomeration, this special issue participates in the recent turn to oceanic studies that extend the work of Braudel and Chaudhuri. This oceanic turn disrupts the land-based focus of nationalist histories and literatures to call attention to diasporas, migration, and the crossing of cultural and linguistic boundaries. Tracing the localizations of Hadrami Arabs from their Yemeni homeland across the Indian Ocean in India and Southeast Asia, Engseong Ho (2006) shows how far-flung a transnational network could be, how variegated its local manifestations even as the diaspora maintains deep connections to the homeland and other nodes in the network. Sebouh Aslanian (2011) has demonstrated a similar process for the Armenian mercantile diaspora stretching from Iran to London, on the one side, and to Manila in the Philippines, on the other side. These histories remind us of extraterritorial formations operating below the nation-state. They also point to the crucial role of itinerant merchants. In attending to European interactions with Indian Ocean societies, then, we focus on a particular type of Europeans: those venturing far from home. They do so primarily as merchants and sailors, who also function as diplomats and interpreters. Emphasizing the role of the sailor, Hester Blum (2010, 671) argues, “Freedom from national belonging can make possible other ways of understanding affiliation, citizenship, mobility, rights, and sovereignty.” This issue expands on her argument to take as synecdoche of oceanic culture the mobile merchant-sailor, unmoored from an original homeland and entering other sovereign domains to acquire new affiliations and cultural identities—so evocatively depicted by Camões as both the Arabic-speaking Portuguese and the Castilian-speaking North African convert—who was the primary go-between in the encounters between Europe and the Indian Ocean.

To get a sense of this vast interregional arena encompassing so many cultures, regimes, and languages, this special issue brings together literary scholars and historians studying different parts of the Indian Ocean, opening different windows to parts of a diverse whole. The essays range geographically from India to Yemen, from Southeast Asia to South Africa, essentially circling the Indian Ocean. To understand European interaction with Asian and African societies

from a non-Eurocentric paradigm, the contributors take different strategies. Some turn to lesser-known archival sources, providing new glimpses of transcultural interaction. Others include non-European sources to add another dimension to the analysis. Paying attention to the nuances of transnational interactions, they reveal the complexities, tensions, and surprising heterogeneity of early modern encounters.

Before Europeans, the Indian Ocean had its own intellectual and cultural history. Sometimes that history shows striking parallels to Europe, though influence in either direction may not be possible to demonstrate. Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski's essay examines the resurgence of materialist or atomist philosophy in Mughal India at the end of the sixteenth century, coincident with a similar interest in the European Renaissance. Rereading the debates at the Mughal emperor Akbar's court at Fatehpur Sikri, Wojciehowski recovers the role of the shadowy Cārvāka materialists, similar to atheists, and considers how Jesuit reports transmitted information about Mughal skeptical inquiry back to Europe. But though information from the East slowly wended its way to Europe, there were nonetheless gaps in the transfer of knowledge, even within the structure of a corporation like the English East India Company. The asymmetry of information between London and factories in the East revealed in archival materials is unfolded by Richmond Barbour, who examines the foundational factory established in Bantam (Banten) in western Java in Southeast Asia. While the published account in Samuel Purchas's great compendium *Hakluytus Posthumus* (1625) was edited to minimize appearances of conflict, Barbour's analysis of the unpublished material shows the company's internal disarray. The corporation was internally riven by conflicts, rivalries, and factions; company control through the technology of writing was undermined by death and disease or problems of translation. In one fascinating episode, the English even had to seek information from the Javanese to determine which English group owned a contested warehouse, that is to say, the English needed Javanese help in writing their own (corporate) history.

Transnational networks were crucial to the functioning of the English East India Company. Amrita Sen explores the understudied female networks that were part of social, political, and economic transactions at the Mughal court by focusing on the friendship of three key women: an Armenian Christian named Miriam Begum, who married the English captain William Hawkins, and two English women, Francis Webbe and Mrs. Hudson. Unlike the men, the women had access to the women's quarters of the Mughal court and thus had alternative avenues to

secure trading and other privileges. Focusing on the western Indian Ocean, Timothy Davies examines the epistolary network that supported British private trade of the eighteenth century also to show the importance of intra-Asian relations and networks. British merchants were dependent on Asian (and Armenian) partners and intermediaries and the access they provided to Asian networks. Voyages of Asian merchants were important even for the unity of the English company as they helped link British traders scattered in various parts of India. The relationship between Asian and British traders was reciprocal and substantial. This reciprocity could become a bone of contention in East India Company politics in the metropolis. Taking a different perspective, Robert Markley considers Alexander Hamilton's anti-imperialist critique of the English East India Company, including his account of the English defeat in the Mughal War (1686–89). Challenging the self-justifications and stereotyping tropes of Mughal despotism of such company directors as Josiah Child and John Ovington, Hamilton presents the Mughal court as a model of civil government whose just emperor embodies Christian morality. He thus bridges British and Mughal cultures with a semiotics of civility transcending culture. In doing so, Hamilton himself became transculturated, speaking several Asian languages and identifying as he did with the Mughals.

Nancy Um's study of medical diplomacy in eighteenth-century Yemen highlights the ship doctor's unexpected role as an ambassador. Weaving together a montage of sources from European—including Dutch, English, and French—and Arabic accounts, she shows how the Qasimi ruler Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad bin al-Mahdi Ahmad actively sought cures from foreign doctors who accompanied various European and Safavid embassies to Yemen, revealing the internationalization of medicine. The exchanges were characterized by interest and curiosity rather than fear and suspicion. My own essay also focuses on the figure of the ambassador but at another Islamic court, Aceh on the island of Sumatra in South-east Asia. Also using a montage of sources, in Dutch, English, and Malay, I consider the making of a Malay language handbook by a Dutch prisoner, Frederick de Houtman, who went to Aceh on a trading voyage. The sultan of Aceh's interest in foreign knowledge, including medicine, led him to attempt a religious conversion of Houtman, who had become fluent in Malay, to make him an interpreter and emissary. Early modern transnational communication meant that Europeans were learning to speak non-Western languages, including Arabic, Malay, and others, to negotiate the Indian Ocean trading networks. Finally, Susanah Romney contextualizes Dutch widespread use of the term *wilden*, or savages, in North America



by focusing on their application of it to the Khoekhoe of southern Africa. When contrasted with the detailed, even admiring cultural descriptions the Dutch produced of other Africans, including those of Mozambique, this term, also applied to Native Americans, reveals less about the Khoekhoe than about the Dutch, who had difficulty comprehending social structures very different from their own. Use of the term *wilden* is a measure of Dutch frustration with their failure to establish commerce in the area. Their application of the term to the Khoekhoe provides a context and an ancestry for their later use of it in the American New Netherlands.

Engaging new awareness of the Indian Ocean as a sphere of contact, the essays take a variety of approaches, but they all eschew binary categories to attend to the complexities of European interactions with local communities, interactions that can be cooperative or turn antagonistic depending on political and social circumstances. Increasingly, the intertwined fields of history and literature are defined not by national boundaries but by circuits of human interaction. In the early modern era, those networks and circuits were predominantly sea routes, even if the encounters occurred on land. The language handbook of Houtman (1605), which my essay discusses, pairs together two languages, Malay and Malagasy, that appear unrelated but are in fact linked by oceanic circuits. Even though Malagasy, spoken on the large island of Madagascar off the coast of East Africa, seems geographically far removed from Malay, spoken in island Southeast Asia—the two separated by four thousand miles of ocean—both languages belong to the Austronesian language family. A mix of the Bornean Maanyan language and East African Bantu, Malagasy is its westernmost member. Linguistic, archaeological, and now genetic evidence shows that Madagascar's indigenous peoples have mixed African and Indonesian ancestry, itself a story of an earlier history of transcultural networks in the Indian Ocean, for it was settled about fifteen hundred to two thousand years ago through migration from Indonesia (Adelaar 1995; Vérin and Wright 1999; Hurles et al. 2005). Might Houtman in fact have noticed linguistic similarities between these two languages of the Indian Ocean? Embedded within early modern documentary evidence of transculturation is another layer of earlier pre-European transcultural exchanges. The languages of Houtman's handbook show unity in the diversity of the Indian Ocean.

Rather than experiencing a so-called clash of civilizations, Europeans instead were entering and integrating into preexisting networks, whether at courts or in merchant circles, in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. A rereading of these transactions shows Indian Ocean peoples as active agents in transcultural exchanges.

And if the Indian Ocean presented a sometimes bewilderingly variegated world, Europeans themselves were neither homogeneous nor united. No longer interpreting encounters between Europeans and non-Westerners as moments of racial or religious conflict, transnational perspectives in historiography and in literary studies mark a shift to seeing them as negotiations, engagements, and dialogues.

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