



Perspectives from Other Boats: On Amitav Ghosh's Indian Ocean "Worlds"

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In reflecting on Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, set in the waters of the Indian Ocean, this essay highlights the role a historical imaginary can play in undergirding the claims to explanatory truth made by historians in their interpretations of the past. While historians work within the conventions and strictures of professionalized practice and are uneasy about utilizing historical fiction to animate their work, the essay suggests, through a consideration of the books of Ghosh, that bringing these two modes of inquiry into relation with one another can produce a mutually beneficial dialogue about the nature of sources, archives, and the methodologies we use in producing accounts of the past. This is especially so for those stories involving individuals at the "margins" of history whose voices it is challenging to recover. The essay draws attention in this regard, though, to some of the problems in Ghosh's attempts to reinscribe into the history of the ocean the idea of an Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism that is seen to have been eroded over time. It challenges, further, the trilogy's reinforcing of a teleology of the ocean as a British lake whose dynamics were defined by the logics of empire and driven by the force of capital, by pointing to the continued significance of South Asian vernacular mercantile networks in maintaining commercial interests through institutional arrangements and mechanisms that East India Company capitalists could not penetrate or define.

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At a recent African studies workshop at Harvard University, John Thornton, the eminent historian of West-Central and Atlantic Africa, presented a paper recounting his involvement as a historical consultant for the remake by the media company A&E Networks of Alex Haley's *Roots* for its History Channel. Eschewing the controversies surrounding the book and its author, the paper detailed Thornton's interpretation of key elements of the history of its main protagonist, Kunta Kinte, and his life in the Gambia in the late eighteenth century to determine whether such a figure could indeed have existed much as Haley claimed that he had. In her commentary on the paper, Caroline Elkins, the equally distinguished and Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard historian of British colonial violence in Kenya, drew attention to the issue of a positivist versus a subjective approach to historical materials and their relation to the representation of the past. "At what point," she asks, "are we certain as historians that we are actually factually correct in that kind of positivist way based upon our evidence versus a kind of certainty with our subjective interpretation?" Elkins was making a point about the dividing line between the positivism of "fact" sought by a televised production seeking to establish authenticity for its visual representation of the past versus the subjectivity of historians' interpretations of that past in which the data and materials they collect are open to alternative interpretations and are replete with gray areas or only the lightest human imprints, and absences and silences. In thinking about these questions, Elkins urged Thornton and the audience members to consider critically how we can understand the intersection between fiction, creative license, and historical interpretation. In turn, Thornton's rejoinder—while allowing for the possibility that Haley "had made the whole thing up"—stressed that if we

regard *Roots* as historical fiction, then the matter at hand becomes one of historical verisimilitude. In other words, the historian's task in this instance is to establish whether such a figure as Kunta Kinte *could* have existed in the historical context provided for him by the author of *Roots*. Ultimately, Thornton emphasized, "I want to make a story that could have happened."

If perhaps not central to the intellectual enterprise of most academic historians, questions of verisimilitude and authenticity nonetheless lurk in the shadows of the truth claims that underlie professionalized interpretations of the past. For no matter the nature of the evidence on which historians base these claims, inherent in the process of assembling their materials into a cohesive narrative, they draw on a (subjective) historical imaginary to provide their stories with coherence and structure. There comes a moment, at times perhaps even several moments, when amidst the mass of evidence and the complexities of detail collected in archives of various sorts, a larger picture of patterns, processes, and causality appears to emerge, allowing historians to establish the veracity of their claims to explanatory truth. For those writing histories "from below," especially, this often involves a great deal of creativity—at least in the most compelling accounts—and affords historians an opportunity to envisage the world or worlds they have created from disparate fragments and fleeting moments as constitutive of a certain recovered historical wholeness.

This process of recovery, of unsilencing the multivalent voices of the past, occurs, though, for academic historians within the conventions and strictures of professionalized practice that disallow or close off an engagement with an intellectual mode that can influence the contours and textures of the scholarly imaginary, namely historical fiction. Despite the misgivings and uneasiness that many academic historians have about utilizing this genre to illuminate or animate their work—Antoinette Burton recounts an eminent scholar's firm position on the matter with the words "history is history and fiction is fiction"—there is great potential nonetheless for recognizing that bringing these two modes of inquiry into relation with one another can produce a rich and mutually beneficial dialogue about the nature of sources and the archives we use, and the methodologies that are brought to bear on producing the past.

Amitav Ghosh occupies what in many ways is a unique position as a writer of historical fiction, for as many have noted, he has formal academic training as a social anthropologist and completed doctoral work that required him to develop challenging linguistic competencies, ethnographic specialization, and orthographic skills to read source materials from the extensive twelfth-century Cairo Geniza documents. From his earliest days as a writer, Ghosh has demonstrated an affinity for and appreciation of historical research. Most of his work, including books such as *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and more recently the deeply researched and engrossing *The Glass Palace* (2000), has involved serious and sustained research in documentary sources located in archival repositories and private collections scattered across many countries. While certainly there are other writers of historical fiction who undertake deep research for their work (one has only to think of Hilary Mantel, for instance), Ghosh occupies a particularly well-forged space at the intersection of academic historical production and thought and fiction-writing. Indeed, few are the writers who are called upon to share a stage with Natalie Zemon Davis, as he did in 2012 at the University of Cambridge, or who regularly attend academic conferences as both speaker and participant. And for those historians who adopt an oceanic framework to study the past, *In an Antique Land* (1993)—is described in a recent critical assessment of Ghosh's work as "at once a travelogue, a detective story, a romance with a lost world, and an anthropologist's attempt to write a dialogic ethnography"—has established itself as a seminal, and perhaps even foundational, text for scholars' conceptualizations of the enmeshments of the "worlds" of the Indian Ocean. Its appearance at a time of political reorientations and geographic and spatial reimagining following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the urgent realities of an emergent "hyper"-globalizing world helped spur interest in the Indian Ocean as a fertile historical space for rethinking conventional spatial scales of historical analysis, such as area studies models or the category of the nation-state.

If *In an Antique Land* guaranteed for Ghosh a place as an important "Indian Oceanist," the Ibis Trilogy has cemented his reputation within this expanding subfield of historical inquiry. Perhaps most importantly, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015) provide readers and historians alike with carefully and microscopically crafted reconstructions of particular social, political, and commercial interactions across the Indian Ocean of the 1830s. These involve a range of individuals, from

East India Company officials and private European merchants to indentured laborers, lascars (sailors), and Parsi opium traders.

In amassing a large cast of characters, Ghosh is most adept at giving voice to those who often are silenced or whose voices can be only partially recovered from the historical record. It is in overcoming the limitations of archives, they're at times deafening silences and gaps, that Ghosh's work can recover productively the intimacies of human lives dispersed widely across the ocean. The "subaltern" Indian Ocean that Ghosh constructs and captures is characterized, in *Sea of Poppies* in particular, by the sinews of constant movement and the logics of coerced labor extraction in the form of indenture. The author traces the sea tracks of the ocean into the Indian interior, where the experience of indenture began, through inland journeys from the agrarian lands of North India for *girmityas* (indentured laborers) to the coast, and ultimately to voyage across the Bay of Bengal and the southwest Indian Ocean to the island of Mareech (Mauritius).

Importantly, Ghosh opens a window into the polyglot world of the onboard life of sailors and the hierarchies of vessels' command structures, often overlooked in the more recent scholarship on the ocean, to give us a sense of the dynamics of maritime labor. Moreover, the book's rendering of the languages of sail serves as a reminder not only of their richness but also of the critical importance of a mutually understandable lexicon for managing the dangerous daily maneuvers that were necessary for successful long-distance sailing in the nineteenth century. By exposing the linguistic polyphony of these maritime lives, Ghosh underscores the ways in which non-elite Asians and others (such as Zachary Reid, the American sailor of slave descent) created spaces of social and cultural interaction that were not necessarily controlled by ship owners, European merchants, or the increasingly intrusive British imperial state. The importance of language is, of course, not confined to the sailors on the *Ibis*, but is also a central feature in Canton among the opium merchants of Fanqui-town, who communicate through a mix of Hindustani, English, and Portuguese; for other merchants, such as the Parsi Bahram Modi, their speech was "a rushing stream ... silted with the sediment of many tongues—Gujarati, Hindusthani, English, pidgin, Cantonese" (*River of Smoke*, 208). The Indian Ocean was an ocean of portable words and languages that Ghosh re-creates in intricately crafted detail to capture its extraordinary linguistic entanglements involving sailors, merchants, businessmen, and imperial officials alike.

Ghosh has stated repeatedly, both in print and in public appearances, that history provides the "backdrop" for the stories he narrates through his characters. While he aims to "stay within certain boundaries of plausibility" created by his research, what remains key for the writer is the predicaments in which these characters find themselves. Some of these are caused by the imperial extractive violence of human labor and penalty produced through the structures of indenture and convictism that moved Indian bodies around the Indian Ocean. But it is opium—its production, trade, and consumption—that provides the metanarrative and framing structure for the unfolding of the particular predicaments of characters as diverse as Deeti, Paulette Lambert, Zadig Bey, Neel Rattan Halder, and Bahram Modi. Their lives are in a variety of ways deeply entwined in the drug's multilocal exchanges, which stretch from mainland India to Chinese ports and territories. While enriching some and providing the East India Company with a valuable source of revenue through its monopoly, opium exposes the ravages, exploitations, tensions, and avarice of empire. As embodied through the lived experiences of these individuals' various attachments to the commerce in opium, Ghosh allows us to glimpse the intricate human dimensions of a vast transregional trade, the valences of which are largely hidden from perspective for historians, either because of the limitations of the sources or because they are lost sight of through the conventions of academic practice, which seek to identify broader processes and patterns of historical change.

The worlds conjured by Ghosh in the *Ibis* Trilogy, then, help bring the Indian Ocean to life in meaningful ways for historians and expose some of the webs of connection created by regimes of imperial and private venality that implicated different actors and produced mass displacement and loss. Even Zachary Reid, the American seaman of slave descent to whom we are introduced in *Sea of Poppies*, is lured into direct participation in the trade by the prospect of financial gain (*Flood of Fire*), ultimately espousing perspectives similar to those of the loathsome free trader Benjamin Burnham.

This process of tracing and uncovering the movements of subaltern encounter and expression reflects also, in a certain sense, an attempt to reinscribe an Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism into the history of the ocean that is seen to have been eroded over time under European—particularly British—imperial rule from

the later nineteenth century and through the politics of postcolonial states. In “Confessions of a Xenophile,” in particular, Ghosh articulates an ideological framework shaped by Third-Worldism/non-alignment that, as suggested recently by Isabel Hofmeyr, cast his novels as “a kind of Bandung-at-sea or an alignment of Third-Worldist subalterns at sea.” But in having both indentured laborers and penal transportees aboard the same ship, Ghosh betrays an infelicity in historical representation. For despite recent scholarship showing that officials and migrants perspective indenture through their understandings of convict experience in penal settlements, the two groups were not actually shipped together across the Indian Ocean. Rather, their presence on board the same vessel creates for Ghosh a “useful alliance of subalterns” reflecting a forgotten Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism.

Ghosh’s historical imaginary is guilty further of reinforcing, perhaps unintentionally, an enduring teleology of the Indian Ocean as a British “lake” whose dynamics were ultimately and definitively shaped by the logics of empire and driven by the force of capital. While Ghosh sheds light on the strategies and motivations of actors whose lives are often at the margins of or absent from mainstream historical accounts—thereby helping us understand how those caught up in the webs of empire may have negotiated its strictures and encroachments—they act very much within an oceanic world defined by deepening British involvement or become dependent on its possibilities. A merchant such as Bahram Modi, one of the few Bombay Seths to resist the East India Company’s monopoly on opium, thus commits large financial investments to the export of opium from India to China and is faced with major losses when the vessel carrying his cargo, the *Anahita*, is decimated by a storm in *River of Smoke*. While there certainly were South Asian merchants who took advantage of new or expanding commercial opportunities that arose with the growing British presence, many more merchants operated at the time within the entrails of an oceanic commerce in which the Company and private traders were in most respects another competing group alongside others. Vernacular capitalists did not, as new work is increasingly demonstrating, become dependent on or subservient to the large-scale financial commitments of British (or Euro-American) capital in oceanic trade, but rather operated through indigenous commercial structures, institutional arrangements, and exchange mechanisms that not only were beyond the reach of empire but allowed South Asian merchant networks to maintain positions and modes of business well into the twentieth century, thus belying understandings of them as “intermediary” capitalists fulfilling niche roles or as structuring a parallel “bazaar” economy alongside a market economy. These networks did not simply adapt to changing commercial landscapes but shaped them in fundamental ways.

Equally, independent South Asian shipping—too often assumed to have been relegated to the sea lanes of coastal trafficking by the increase in private British shipping or by the monopolies of the Company—retained its importance particularly in the western reaches of the ocean and allowed important networks such as Gujarati Vāniyā and Kachchhi Bhātiyā merchants to transport impressive cargoes over large distances between ports in East and Southeast Africa and their adjacent islands, the Arabian Peninsula, and India. These medium-sized ships, constructed at shipyards in Daman and elsewhere along the west coast of India, enabled the movement and mobility of goods and people that gave the Indian Ocean a vitality that intersected with, but was not subsumed or displaced by, British or European interests. This active and well-financed seafaring contributed, further, to an expansion of local and interregional circuits of robust commercialized and widespread exchange undergirded by sophisticated consumer cultures that bound the economies of Kathiawar in coastal and inland Gujarat to African, Red Sea, and West Asian markets.

Some of these connections, albeit in much earlier centuries, were of course the subject of Ghosh’s *in an Antique Land*. If the mobilities that underlay them were increasingly challenged by the anxieties of postcolonial states to maintain the integrity of sovereign borders, as noted by Ghosh, their continued vitality and significance to exchange across the ocean into the period covered by the Ibis Trilogy should remind us of their critical role in structuring the commercial and economic contours of the ocean and in delimiting the possibilities even for metropolitan and colonial capital later in the nineteenth century. The signal achievement of Ghosh’s work in creating complex social worlds in painstaking detail over more than a thousand pages of text is in expanding a historical imaginary of how the struggles and challenges experienced by a variety of individuals in his intricately crafted Indian Ocean tableau were felt and lived. These are indeed stories “that could have happened,” and we see in them the potential for new ways of understanding the myriad cross-currents of the ocean.

As will be clear to those familiar with the historiography of the Indian Ocean, my title owes a debt to, even if it strays from, Engseng Ho's "Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A Perspective from the Other Boat," *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 46, no. 2 (2004): 210–246.

Worksite

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "History and Anthropology," in Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 1, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York, 1963), 9.
2. Antoinette Burton, "Amitav Ghosh's World Histories from Below," *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 2, no. 1 (2012): 71–77, here 73.
3. The event, "Storytelling and the Global Past," was hosted by the university's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities on March 2, 2012.
4. Ghosh recently participated in the international conference "Cosmopolitan Currents in the Indian Ocean: New Conceptual Models for Studying Cultural Integration and Change," New York University Abu Dhabi, March 15–17, 2015.
5. Quotes from Mahmood Kooria, "Between the Walls of Archives and Horizons of Imagination: An Interperspective with Amitav Ghosh," *Itinerario* 36, no. 3 (2012): 7–18, here 9; and Damien Stankiewicz, "Anthropology and Fiction: An Interperspective with Amitav Ghosh," *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (2012): 535–541, here 539.

