

## Beyond the Cape: Amitav Ghosh, Frederick Douglass and the Limits of the Black Atlantic

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The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream....Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld: it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, 'the Black Water.'

—*Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that gray vault. The sea. The sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History.  
— "The Sea is History," Derek Walcott

### I.

The first epigraph above is the opening paragraph of Indian-Bengali author Amitav Ghosh's 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies*, the first book in a projected trilogy set on the trade routes of the Indian Ocean on the eve of the Opium Wars. The ship of Deeti's vision is later revealed to be the *Ibis*, a former "blackbirder" or slave ship that arrived at that moment in Calcutta from Baltimore. Its intention is to take on indentured laborers and transport them to plantations on Mauritius as a replacement for the slave labor recently abolished by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. Ghosh's novel revolves around the trials of Deeti, who escapes from her native village after the death of her opium-addicted husband and enlists aboard the *Ibis* as a "coolie" laborer. Through Deeti's narrative of survival as an indentured laborer, Ghosh attempts to recreate through the genre of historical fiction the lost personal accounts of the first wave of South Asian coolie labor after the formal end of British slavery. In doing so, he attempts to fill a conspicuous void in the modern history of labor migration and displacement. In contrast to the Atlantic tradition, which boasts a number of writers like Olaudah Equiano and Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, so few first-hand accounts from the nineteenth century written by South Asian laborers survive that Isabel Hofmeyr claims that the Indian Ocean is the "home to failed diaspora [and migrants] who move but do not embark on projects of cultural memory and constructing homelands" (18).

This article will look at how Ghosh attempts to recover the Indian diaspora from this alleged failure by forging narrative and theoretical continuities with the texts of African-American slavery, specifically through the figure of Frederick Douglass, and the legacy of the Atlantic Middle Passage that constitute the black Atlantic memory of the novel.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the slave ship of Deeti's mystical vision, which sets in motion Ghosh's epic of the Indian Ocean diaspora, is the exact image that Paul Gilroy selects as the primary chronotope for his study of the African diaspora, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. To focus on the transatlantic nature of black cultural forms, Gilroy professes a vision remarkably similar to Deeti's:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship [represents] a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion.... Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for the redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activities, as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts. (4)

Although it may not be entirely necessary to rehearse the details of Gilroy's text, it is worth noting the way in which his transatlantic model has influenced the discourse of African diaspora since its publication. Gilroy's stated aim in the *Black Atlantic* is to "break the dogmatic focus on discrete *national* dynamics" and to "reevaluate the significance of the modern nation state as political, economic, and cultural unit" that has privileged "racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses" (1, 6-7). His solution to the language of monolithic, exclusionary ethnocentricity is to adopt an intercultural perspective that "take[s] the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in... discussions of the modern world" through an engagement with the transatlantic exchanges between the vernacular cultures of African-American, Caribbean and European musicians and writers (15). Within this alternate or "counter" construction of modernity, the territorializing logic of the nation-state is turned inside-out by a hybrid, oceanic culture fueled by the endless cross-fertilization of Atlantic trade routes. As the vehicles of diaspora and as polyphonic "microsystems of linguistic and political hybridity," the ships within Gilroy's model are invested with both the traumatic and the liberatory schemes of transatlantic exchange that constitute, according to his argument, a counterculture of modernity contesting racialized modes of oppression (Gilroy 13).

Since the publication of *The Black Atlantic* in 1993, Gilroy's oceanic paradigm has been greatly expanded by a number of theorists, perhaps most notably by Joseph Roach in his study *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996). Expanding upon Gilroy's transatlantic methodology, Roach proposes a shift to the conceptualization of a circum-Atlantic world that "insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of

the culture of modernity” (4). It is within this world defined by the traumatic history of the triangular trade that processes of “surrogation” produce the “three-sided relationship of memory, performance and substitution” resistant to the amnesia of the (state) archive (2). Through performance and text, Roach traces the mnemonic reserves that constitute “counter-memories”—performances that dramatize “the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences” (26). Most salient for this article is Roach’s theory of surrogation and the repetition and revision of living memory retained in images and words that establish the oceanic space as the stage for countless intersecting “performance genealogies” (26). Throughout this essay I will refer to the way in which Ghosh reads and revises traditionally Atlantic texts—the mnemonic materials of an oceanic interculture—as acts of performance and extends these genealogies beyond the black Atlantic.

By beginning his narrative with the arrival of the *Ibis*, Ghosh locates his novel within a burgeoning transnational Atlanticist discourse, much of it rooted in the vanguard texts of Gilroy and Roach. As a part of the much heralded “transnational turn” in literary studies, this discourse takes the sea as “fundamentally a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified lines and images—in short, a field of strategic possibilities in which the Oceanic order holds all together in a common but highly fluid space” (Boelhower 92-3). As evidenced by the *PMLA*’s May 2010 special forum, “Oceanic Studies,” in the wake of black Atlantic studies, scholarship focused on maritime modernity is gaining both scholarly momentum and institutional support. With the shift from the national to the transnational as the ordering principle of this model’s critical apparatus, the deterritorialized theories and texts of diaspora and their emphasis on hybridity have become central to alternative oceanic canon formation. It may be inevitable, however, that the rise and consolidation of any new paradigm will occasion new boundaries and new acts of enclosure. The oceanic, counter to the nation-space, “leaves no traces, and has no place names, towns or dwelling places; it cannot be possessed” (Boelhower 92). Yet, despite the expansiveness of this paradigm, surprisingly few practitioners have ventured to extend these narratives beyond the charted boundaries of a traditionally Atlantic and Western space. Critics over the last decade have noted that the formulations of Gilroy, Roach and others have tended to locate themselves within and between the cities of Europe and North America, privileging a North Atlantic discourse.<sup>1</sup> In practice, the increasing institutional momentum of transatlantic and circumatlantic studies of diaspora have often served to reinforce the disciplinary delinking of East and West, literally at the water’s edge. Jed Esty asks of William Boelhower’s concept of a new Atlanticism: “If an oceanic logic is displacing a territorial logic as part of the ‘archeological turn in the humanities,’ is that project any longer anchored in a recognizable geography (or hydrography) that warrants the name Atlantic?” (107).

As I will argue, Ghosh's historical novel contests the boundaries of the black Atlantic through a comparative project that produces new forms of hybridity and new theorizations of diaspora formation in the Kala-Pani, the Black Water. It must be acknowledged, however, that any study that attempts to link subcontinent literature with the black Atlantic faces the constellation of issues surrounding the potential conflict between the oceanic model and what has traditionally been the focus of postcolonial studies. While both disciplinary paradigms attempt to produce a counter-discourse to the dominant formation of western modernity, certainly these two discourses offer conflicting accounts and emphases in regard to national territory and the nation-state. William Boelhower, a critic on the forefront of the New Atlanticist paradigm, articulates this distinction: "[while] postcolonial scholars ... [turn] their history inside out and often fix on reading the new nation-building process in their native countries in terms of allegoresis, Atlanticists must necessarily enlarge the contact zones and embrace a greater range of complexity (both linguistic and cultural) beyond the structures of the nation-state" (86). Against what might be seen as a fundamental methodological difference, a number of critics in the last decade have sought to bridge these discourses.<sup>2</sup> A common feature of many of these studies is the work of Homi Bhabha, whose emphasis on the figure of the hybrid and the locality of culture offers the greatest potential for common ground (so to speak). The oceanic and the chronotope of the ship at sea offer yet another model through which we can "locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*" (Bhabha 1).

Ghosh's previous works have already explored the ways in which Western and Eastern schemes of mobility and trade produce corresponding diasporic histories. Inderpal Grewal has written that *In an Antique Land* (1992), which traces the movements of a medieval Indian slave between Cairo and the subcontinent, maps the Indian Ocean through methodologies parallel to those employed by Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (184). *Sea of Poppies*, however, goes further in its formulation of theoretical and narrative continuities. As South African poet Gabea Baderoon puts it, the Atlantic and the Indian are both "oceans of middle passage... of cosmology, memory, and desire, tracked in the movement, language and culture of enslaved and dominated people" (91). It is these models and genealogies of Atlantic memory that Ghosh's historical fiction expands and reconfigures beyond their heuristic limits in its attempt to reproduce the lost voices of the nineteenth-century Indian diaspora by dislocating the slave ship within an unfamiliar hydroscape located far off the Atlanticist map. Through repeated encounters with Atlantic texts and the mnemonic reserves of American slavery, Ghosh reopens the radical potential for oceanic intercultural performance and brings into question the discursive (and often institutional) boundaries between theorizations of black/African and Asian diaspora. This dialogue, I will argue, creates a hybrid space in the novel that in turn challenges the established binaries of black/white and colonizer/colonized.

## II.

Part and parcel with the rise of a transnational Atlanticist paradigm is the emphasis on the sailor as the cosmopolitan figure *par excellence*. Ghosh's novel is filled with vivid depictions of the era's motley crews. One seaman in particular, Zachary Reid, acts as the surrogate throughout the novel for black Atlantic memory. Zachary is the son of a "Maryland freedwoman" and her former master; his light skin is described, in accordance with the tropes of American slave narratives, as "the color of old ivory" (10). While *Sea of Poppies* begins as the *Ibis* arrives in Calcutta, the Atlantic genealogies of both the former slave ship and the African American first mate Zachary Reid are reconstructed from fragments of the mate's memories throughout the first third of the book; reversing the variegated temporality of colonialism, the Atlantic world exists in the novel only *as memory*. The reader learns that Reid had worked as a carpenter in the Baltimore shipyards before joining the crew of the *Ibis*. His change of career is prompted by his witnessing a specific act of racial violence:

Zachary closed his eyes and, for the first time in many months, his vision turned inwards, travelling back across oceans to his last day at Gardiner's shipyard in Baltimore. He saw again a face with a burst eyeball, the scalp torn open where a handspike had landed, the dark skin slick with blood. He remembered, as if it were happening again, the encirclement of Freddy Douglass, set upon by four white carpenters. (47)

Ghosh links Reid with perhaps the most recognizable figure of the black Atlantic, yet what is most immediately striking about the reference to Frederick Douglass is its anachronism. Ghosh, reading and reproducing Douglass from the former slave's autobiographies, is correct in many of the details; the wound caused by the handspike, the burst eyeball, and the howls of the surrounding carpenters are directly out of Douglass's own texts. However, Freddy's surname was not Douglass at the time of the incident at Gardiner's shipyard, but Bailey, the name of his former master. Frederick Bailey did not rename himself Douglass until after he had escaped slavery in September of 1838. The *Ibis*'s arrival in Calcutta is recorded in the novel as March of 1838. Not only is there not yet a Frederick Douglass at the time that Zachary is remembering him, but Frederick Bailey is still enslaved in Baltimore.

Given the number of details Ghosh extracts from Frederick Douglass's autobiography, it would seem unlikely that the anachronism of the name could be simple sloppiness on the author's part. I would suggest that by reading this rather strange moment in the text through Homi Bhabha's work, the appearance of an anachronistic Douglass establishes a continuity between black Atlantic and postcolonial discourses. In other words, as a point of contact, Douglass serves as both a historical figure in the Atlantic world and an anachronistic metonym for the conceptual foundation on which Ghosh develops his project of postcolonial recovery and revision. This encounter with the paradigmatic black Atlantic text

establishes the radical potential for a revision of a oft-repeated colonialist trope that Homi Bhabha claims “*inaugurates* a literature of empire” after the early nineteenth century: the “sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book” (102). Bhabha’s reading of this trope in *The Location of Culture* through Conrad and Naipaul asserts that the repetition of the English book within the colonial/postcolonial narrative is ultimately emblematic of the split within the colonial presence “between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (107). This split produces new forms of hybridity that “[display] the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (112). Of course, there is an obvious difference between the colonial subject’s encounter with the English text and Ghosh’s reading of the most celebrated and canonized North American slave narrative. Rather than the encounter between colonizer and colonized, Ghosh stages the revelatory moment of contact between two subalternate discourses that effectively “provincializes” Eurocentric modes of thinking modernity (Chakrabarty 4). Encountering Douglass, Ghosh claims for his novel alternate forms of textual authority based upon the force of traumatic memory rather than on cultural/military hegemony. Yet, what is crucial in this encounter is that Ghosh’s reading of the text produces within the narrative a third hybrid space of instability through its anachronism, which becomes ultimately the space of his historical fiction. Bhabha writes that “the discovery of the book is, at once, a moment of originality and authority. It is, as well, a process of displacement that paradoxically makes the presence of the book wondrous to the extent to which it is repeated, translated, misread and displaced” (102). Ghosh’s encounter and subsequent alteration of Douglass’s slave narrative performs within that Atlanticist genealogy the critical intersection between black Atlantic and postcolonial concepts of hybridity as the global Zachary Reid becomes the surrogate for the Atlantic Douglass in the novel.

The appearance of an anachronistic Frederick Douglass opens the novel up to a broad collection of black Atlantic associations. For Gilroy, Douglass serves as a “shining example” of the possibilities of a deterritorialized identity formation closely linked with the chronotope of the ship. While still enslaved, Douglass contrasted his own condition as “confined in bands of iron,” to the ships on the Chesapeake—“freedom’s swift-winged angels” (1994 573). Frederick Douglass’s escape from slavery, as described in his last autobiography *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, represents for Gilroy a paradigmatic scene of Atlantic mobility set against the racist mechanisms of the state. Douglass describes his use of the “sailor’s protection”<sup>3</sup> to avoid capture by slave-catchers on the train to the North:

I had one friend—a sailor—who owned a sailor's protection, which answered somewhat the purpose of free papers--describing his person and certifying to the fact that he was a free American sailor.... One element in my favor was the kind feeling

which prevailed in Baltimore and other seaports at the time, towards “those who go down to the sea in ships.” “Free trade and sailors’ rights” expressed the sentiment of the country just then. In my clothing I was rigged out in sailor style. I had on a red shirt and a tarpaulin hat and black cravat, tied in sailor fashion, carelessly and loosely about my neck. My knowledge of ships and sailor’s talk came much to my assistance, for I knew a ship from stem to stern, and from keelson to cross-trees, and could talk sailor like an “old salt.” (1994 644-645)

When confronted by a suspicious conductor who asks for his free papers, Douglass (or, more accurately, Bailey) answers: “I never carry my free papers to sea with me. . . . I have a paper with the American eagle on it, that will carry me round the world” (248). Although, as Jeffrey Bolster points out, Douglass would have been familiar with the hardships and the violence of seafaring life from his work on Baltimore’s waterfront, as an activist he continued to explore the liberatory possibilities (if not the realities) of an Atlantic space, perhaps most notably in his first and only foray into fiction with his novella *The Heroic Slave*. *The Heroic Slave* is a fictionalized retelling of the uprising on the slave ship *Creole* led by the ship’s enslaved cook, Madison Washington. Washington’s final words in the narrative, after the successful slave revolt and a storm that threatens to sink the *Creole* before it can reach the port of Nassau, claim: “you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free” (Douglass 1990 68).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to Douglass’s explorations of the Atlantic as a space of potentially liberatory revision and performance, his activism extended far beyond the immediate sphere of the North American abolitionist movement. In the last ten years, scholarship on Douglass has increasingly been focused on his transatlantic and transnational activism, particularly his role in English anti-slavery activities, his advocacy for Irish labor and his travels in the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> In at least one case, during an 1871 trip to Jamaica, Douglass saw first-hand the conditions of indentured South Asian laborers. In an article printed in the *New National Era* that year, entitled “The Coolie Trade,” Douglass describes in detail the victims of this new bondage: “This Coolie Trade—this cheap labor trade, as now called and carried on—is marked by all the horrible and infernal characteristics of the slave trade. There is nothing in the details of the African slave trade . . . more revolting and shocking to the sense of decency, justice, and humanity than are seen in this foul, harrowing, sickening, and deadening Coolie trade” (1955 263). In Douglass we see not only the paradigmatic black Atlantic figure, but also the potential for the expansion of Gilroy’s web of associations beyond its heuristic focus on the Middle Passage and its African victims.

Ghosh’s novel goes further than simply invoking a historical Frederick Douglass to the point of reproducing a voice in excess of the archive. Zachary’s memory of the fight at the shipyard adds a new scene not included in Douglass’s own account of the event: “[Zachary] remembered, too, Freddy’s voice afterwards, not reproaching them for their failure to come to his defense, but urging them to leave, scatter: ‘It’s

about jobs; the whites won't work with you, freeman or slave: keeping you out is their way of saving their bread" (47-8). Ghosh himself reproduces Douglass's voice delivering the commandment to "scatter," the utterance that underlies the diasporic subjectivity of his character Zachary Reid. This addition to the text exemplifies a kind of repetition with revision that Roach places at the center of oceanic intercultural exchange. Ultimately, it is the reader who is led to encounter a familiar Douglass as *new* within the context of the alternate discursive field of the novel.

Forming the prehistory of Ghosh's Indian Ocean epic, the voyage of the *Ibis* from Baltimore to Calcutta, as remembered by Zachary early in the novel, maps the boundaries and binaries of an Atlanticist discourse in order to stage a movement beyond those limits. While Douglass and his fictional Madison Washington *act* as sailors in order to gain their freedom, Zachary actually becomes one, and contrary to the liberatory potential of the sea as voiced in Douglass's writings, the Atlantic space becomes for Zachary yet another space of confinement and racialized violence. Zachary's voyage begins when he is formally inscribed within the racial epistemology of the Atlantic world: "Mr. Burnham was in such a hurry to get his schooner to India that she has sailed short-handed from Baltimore, shipping a crew of nineteen, of whom nine were listed as 'Black,' including Zachary" (11). From this initial act of inscription into the archive, the utopic potential of ship-borne hybridity is soon undermined. Zachary discovers that the hold of the *Ibis*, "was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans," causing leaks that ruin the cargo (12). Weather forces the ship to change course, and it is caught in the doldrums, where it begins to run out of provisions. Zachary notes: "before the wind picked up again, three men were dead and two of the black crewmen were in chains, refusing to eat the food before them" (12). Crossing the Atlantic, the possibilities for liberation collapse into an endless restaging of the traumatic history of the Middle Passage—an endless circumnavigation of repetition without revision.

### III.

The turning-point of the *Ibis*'s voyage comes at the very boundary of the Atlantic. On its course around Africa, the *Ibis* stops in Cape Town for provisions, and is almost entirely abandoned by its crew. Zachary remembers: "the crew melted away overnight, to spread the word of hell-afloat with pinch-gut pay" (12). A passing detail in the book, the melting of the crew nevertheless makes manifest the dissolution of identity at the limits of Atlantic discourse. Only Zachary resists re-circulating within a closed circumatlantic system of exchange. Cape Town, the historical intersection of a number of European colonial, Asian indentured and intra-African diasporas, lies on the conceptual boundary between the Atlantic as "the site for the emergence of capitalist modernity as a transnational



system” and “the Indian Ocean as the site par excellence of ‘alternative modernities’” (Hofmeyr 13). It is Zachary’s ability to cross this arbitrary line-in-the-water that reaffirms a homology between Western and Eastern counter-narratives of modernity. Only beyond the borders of Gilroy’s and Roach’s black Atlantic system, within an alternative oceanic ecology that Deeti’s vision identifies as the Kala-Pani or Black Water, do the monolithic discursive structures of race in modernity start to break down. Historically, for Indian laborers to cross the Kala-Pani constituted an irreversible break in one’s connection to the homeland and to their religious belief: “According to Hindu belief, the traversing of large expanses of water was associated with contamination and cultural defilement as the crossings led to loss of tradition, caste, class and a generally ‘purified’ ideal of Hinduness” (Mehta 1). Within *Sea of Poppies*, the force of the Kala-Pani taboo to deconstruct territorialized forms of identity is extended beyond the South Asian characters of the novel as both the traumatic “third” space of diaspora and as a stage by which newness enters the world via global oceanic ecologies.

Beyond the cape, the slave ship becomes a vehicle for the articulation of polyphonic diasporic associations across cultures that overcome but do not entirely erase territorialized forms of identity. At Cape Town, the *Ibis*’s black and white crew is replaced with a multiethnic group of lascars. Zachary “had originally thought that lascars were a tribe or nation, like the Cherokee or Sioux: he now discovered that they came from places that were far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese” (13). The lascars, resistant to the taxonomic language that Zachary attempts to impose upon them, represent more than most of Gilroy’s own examples the potential for alternative identity formation. In the Black Water the performance of diaspora escapes the Eurocentric or Anglophonic models into what Paul Zeleza calls diaspora as “a navigation of multiple belongings” that transcend any stable archive of national or geographical referents (41).

It is not long after this transition that the texts of the Atlantic world are turned on their head. Due to the wholesale replacement of the ship’s crew, Zachary is promoted to second-in-command of the *Ibis*. The captain soon falls ill, and when the ship arrives at Mauritius, Zachary must visit a local plantation in order to deliver a letter. Dressed as a gentleman, Zachary tropes the ritual Frederick Douglass describes when the slaves visit the master’s Great House Farm (501-502). Zachary himself expects to see “a mansion, like those in the plantations of Delaware and Maryland,” but is ultimately disappointed by the “one-storeyed wood-framed bungalow” (19). Wined and dined by the plantation owner, who knows Zachary only from his gentleman’s clothes, this episode in Mauritius introduces a host of new possibilities of performance. Zachary Reid passes as white, but without the denial that is central to the literature of passing. Rather, his newfound mobility is a symptom of an indeterminacy of identity beyond the Atlantic and evident throughout the

novel in the proliferation of hybrid vernaculars and new scenes of reading. The Black Water then becomes a stage for the extension of, in Joseph Roach's terms, the repetitions *with* revision that constitute the performance genealogies of Atlantic interculturalism.

Leaving the black Atlantic, Zachary's "black" identity as inscribed within the text of the logbook is recast as a multiplicity of overlapping associations of displacement, each giving rise to a distinct vernacular that performs a living counter-history to the discrete taxonomies of the archive. Zachary as mate circulates within the colonial Anglo-American diaspora, which speaks a nearly incomprehensible creolized English that Ghosh painstakingly recreates as a living language from *Hobson-Jobson*, a glossary of Anglo-Indian terms first published in 1886. The Lascars, who consider Zachary to be one of them, speak an international language dubbed "ship-pijin" or Lascari, which the mate learns over the course of the voyage. His love interest throughout the novel is Paulette, a remnant of the French presence on the subcontinent whose first language is Bengali and who disguises herself in order to sail as an indentured laborer. When a fellow laborer marvels at her ability to impersonate an Indian woman, Paulette responds: "There is nothing untrue about the person who stands here. Is it forbidden for a human being to manifest themselves in many different aspects?" (455). Over the course of the voyage, these groups, including the Indian laborers themselves with whom Zachary can find common cause in his own semi-voluntary exile, come to be considered by Deeti as jahaz-bhai and jahaz-bahen—"children of the ship"—the apotheosis of Gilroy's concept of a hybridized interculturalism and the nucleus of what Deeti envisions as future dynasties in the diaspora.

On the Black Water, Zachary Reid, whose surname itself suggests the imperative for the repeated reinterpretation of signs, is subject to radical re-reading. His name is translated by his new lascar shipmates as "Zikri," which Paulette later informs him means "one who remembers" (238). In a scene of productive "misreading" parallel to that of the Ghosh's own reproduction of Frederick Douglass, Nob Kissin Pander, a native accountant for the East India Company and trickster figure of the novel, finds Zachary's name in the logbook: "When at last he saw the notation beside Zachary's name—'Black'—he uttered no wild cry of joy—it was rather with a sigh of silent jubilation that he rested his eyes on the scribbled word that revealed the hand of the Dark Lord" (153). Pander reads the inscription in the logbook not as proof that Zachary is a light-skinned black passing as a white authority figure, but rather that the black sailor is, in fact, a messenger from the Dark Lord Krishna. He enacts Bhabha's paradigmatic encounter with the colonial text and the production of subversive alternative readings, here related directly with the formation of diasporic identity. Pander's reading (or misreading) of Zachary performs the work of diaspora through the proliferation of an alternate space that defies the absolutist archives of race and nation—locating and (dis)locating a performance of diasporic identity that crosses and recrosses

the discursive borders between Frederick Douglass and Hindu scripture—bridging the black Atlantic and the Kala-Pani.

The readings of both Ghosh and Nob Kissin Pander performed on black Atlantic texts posit a globalized and globalizing hermeneutic; these scenes of reading produce from the archive multiple substitutions that defy supposedly stable ethnic and racial categories. These substitutions in turn reconfigure the mnemonic materials circulating throughout the novel that are resistant to forgetting the history of trauma at the root of American slavery and the colonial system. It is only in the last pages of the novel that Zachary's race as recorded in the logbook re-emerges to threaten his status on the *Ibis*. The climax of the story comes as the entry recorded in Baltimore is discovered by first mate Jack Crowle, whose name, like Reid's, offers a double reading in its echo of Jim Crow. Not only does Jim Crow refer, as another chronological break, to future segregationist laws in the United States, but also to the performances of T. D. Rice and the popularization of black-face minstrelsy in the 1830s, the period in which the novel is set (Strausbaugh 58-61). It is precisely the role of black-face minstrelsy—a cultural form that “ensnared” African-Americans “in a constant awareness and estimation of the effect of the color line”—that Crowle was reproducing with the logbook (Sundquist 275). Crowle effectively catches Reid, according to the dominant racial ideology, performing in white-face.

The echo of Jim Crow in Jack Crowle's name raises again the problems of performance, identity and transgression that underlie much of the text. Yet, another reading of this climactic moment in the text returns the figure of Frederick Douglass into the novel. Crowle's name recalls too the famous confrontation between the young Bailey and Edward Covey, the “negro-breaker,” which Gilroy marks as central to the black Atlantic construction of a counterculture of modernity. Gilroy's reading suggests that Douglass's encounter with and defiance of Covey can be understood as a systematic reworking of Hegel's allegory of the master and the bondsman (Gilroy 60). As Douglass writes, “I was a changed being after the fight. I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a FREEMAN” (1994 286). For Ghosh's Zachary, the confrontation with Crowle carries with it a different set of signs rooted in colonial racial taxonomies. Wielding the coercive power of the archive, Crowle attempts to blackmail Zachary into agreeing to mutiny by cornering him in his cabin. Contemplating the logbook page, Zachary faces the essential madness behind the authority of the sign:

His eyes sought out the piece of paper that he was holding between his fingers, and he was amazed to think that something so slight, so innocuous, could be invested with so much authority: that it should be able to melt away the fear, the apparent invulnerability that he, Zachary, had possessed in his guise as a ‘gentleman’... that the essence of this transformation should inhere in a single word—all of this spoke more to the delirium of the world than to the perversity of those who had to make their way in it. (465)

It is at this moment in the narrative that the complex web of associations building around Zachary threatens to be reduced once more to a racial binary.

Unlike Douglass's battle with Covey, the confrontation between Crowle and Zachary is cut short. As Crowle threatens Reid, a third figure suddenly appears, the "half-Chinese convict" Ah Fatt (466). Fatt, the son of a South Asian trader and a Chinese mother, represents throughout the novel an alternate scheme of hybridity independent of the West and the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Angered by an earlier, horrific encounter with the first mate, Fatt murders Crowle with a handspike, and then briefly locks Reid in the cabin with the body by placing the handspike across the door handles. A common nautical tool, the murder weapon here is highly symbolic, as the handspike appears only one other time in the narrative: Zachary's recollection of the attack on Freddy Douglass in Baltimore. As mnemonic material in opposition to the logbook, the handspike is reinvested with potential for both liberation and confinement. While this sudden burst of violence is undoubtedly problematic, when read allegorically, the return of the handspike signals a revision of the lord and bondsman binary. The re-performance of Douglass's (and Hegel's) text is disrupted by the intervention of the Eastern character. On the last page of the novel, Zachary takes the page of the ship's log from Crowle's body and manages to escape the cabin by dislodging the handspike.

As the first book in a projected trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* leaves unresolved the fate of Zachary and the coolie laborers in the *Ibis*'s hold.<sup>6</sup> However, the revision of Hegel's allegory promises that at the root of the formation of a South Asian diaspora will be a radical extension and revision of the black Atlantic model and its relationship with Western modernity, revitalizing that discourse through the addition of alternate ways of being and performing identity. What Zachary's reclaiming of the archive and the abrupt end of the novel suggest is that the redemptive potentiality of the movement away from exclusionary racial/colonial dynamics and the articulation of diasporic hybridity may only be possible for the African-American as well as the South Asian subject by stepping beyond the narrow genealogies of the black Atlantic and towards a broader articulation of the Black Water, a concept that further obscures the liminal narratives of race and locality. The intervention of the "East" into a paradigm otherwise closed to such expansion opens new possibilities for the reclamation of the archive beyond the mastery of racially and geographically limited narratives.

As I have suggested, a key question that surrounds the rise of oceanic studies as a truly transnational paradigm is whether or not that model can move beyond the heuristic limits of the black Atlantic space. Within Ghosh's narrative, when Zachary overcomes the cartographic boundaries that separate West from East institutionally and theoretically, established binaries are overthrown. However, it may be that within critical practice,

territorial logic is inescapable even within the highly fluid discourse of oceanic studies. Boundaries and borders may be remapped, but they remain integral to the way critical modes become institutionalized. At a poignant moment in *Sea of Poppies*, when the *Ibis* is leaving Calcutta and setting out to sea, Deeti marvels at the immensity of the ocean. Her first instinct is to search for new borders: “it was impossible to think of the water at all—for water surely needed a boundary, a rim, a shore, to give it shape and hold it in place?” (363). Where these borders lie will perhaps determine the future shape of oceanic studies beyond the black Atlantic.

## Notes

1. Since its publication, a number of critics have criticized *The Black Atlantic* for the limits of its model, which Gilroy himself acknowledges to be incomplete. As Louis Chude-Sokei notes, despite the open borders of Gilroy’s project, we are ultimately presented with “a discourse located somewhere in between London and New York.” He asks: “because [Gilroy’s] examples are almost all drawn from that New York/London nexus, one wonders about the ‘real’ Africa and its response to the issues and concerns that Gilroy suggests are trans-Atlantic” (“The Black Atlantic Paradigm: Paul Gilroy and the Fractured Landscape of ‘Race,’” 743-4). Similarly Paul Tiyambe Zeleza raises concerns that Gilroy universalizes the “racialized minority experience” of African Americans, despite the African descended majorities in most of the Caribbean islands (37). Zeleza also suggests that Gilroy’s “polyphonic” Atlantic construction forecloses relationships beyond the Anglophone world, largely disregarding the Portuguese speaking Afro-Brazilians, who constitute by far the largest African diaspora population in the world. Along with these geographic and linguistic exclusions, the title of the study itself points to a potential contradiction in Gilroy’s constructions. Zeleza notes that despite his “postmodern phobia against essentialism,” Gilroy “at times desperately seek[s] a ‘black,’ not a ‘white,’ or ‘multicultural’ Atlantic” (“Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic,” 37). See also Charles Piot, “Atlantic Aporias.” Ironically, the language of the “black Atlantic,” deployed in opposition to the discourse of monolithic nation states, threatens to reproduce that same arbitrary and exclusionary pairing of racial identity with geography.

2. One early work to discuss the tensions between the black Atlantic and the postcolonial is Ian Baucom’s article “Charting the ‘Black Atlantic.’” See also Malina Johar Schueller, “Articulations of African-Americanism in South Asian Postcolonial Theory”; Bed Prasad Giri, “Diasporic Postcolonialism and Its Antinomies,” 215-235; Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio eds., *Beyond the Black Atlantic: Relocating Modernization and Technology*; John Gruesser, *Confluences*:

*Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic*, esp. pp. 1-22.

3. The “Sailor’s Protection” was a document issued by the federal government beginning in 1796 to both black and white American sailors as protection against impressment. For more on the protections afforded to African-American sailors in the antebellum period, see Jeffrey W. Bolster, “‘To Feel like a Man’: Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800-1860” and *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*.

4. For more on the connections between the character of Madison Washington and Douglass’s own self-fashioning, see Sundquist, 117-123.

5. For studies of Douglass’s activism in Britain and Ireland, see Paul Giles, “Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture” and “Douglass’s Black Atlantic: Britain, Europe, Egypt.” For studies of Douglass’s work in the Caribbean, see Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas*.

6. The second book in the Ibis Trilogy, *River of Smoke*, was published in 2011.

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