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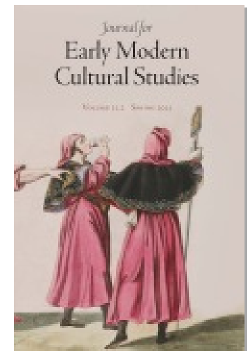

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Introduction
Local Oceans:

New Perspectives on Colonial Geographies

JANE HWANG DEGENHARDT
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Addressing an audience at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo in 1993, the Oceanic anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa delivered a blistering rebuke of the "belittling" view of states and territories, one he contended was held not only by the West, but also by the Pacific's own national and regional governments.[1] Such a view, resulting in a posture of economic dependence rather than self-sufficiency, is "traceable to the early years of interactions with Europeans" and emerged intrinsically from globally oriented "macroeconomic" and "macropolitical" perspectives that perceived the islands to be small, distant, and fragmented—predisposed to incorporation into colonial geographies (148–49). Hau'ofa suggested that in order to revise this perspective it was better to conceive of the region not as "islands in a far sea," but rather as "a sea of islands" (152–53). Whereas "islands in a far sea" evoked "tiny, isolated dots," Hau'ofa called for "a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships" (153). The Oceanic sea of islands had never been far, nor small, nor fragmented; they were not tiny islands to be carved up and colonized, but imbued with locality as with culture.

Such a holistic view of oceanic regions runs contrary to the objectives of early modern European venturers, and it may seem strange today to those committed to bounded political and economic spaces. But perhaps "bounds" are not a good way to think about oceans. Neither is it accurate to think in this way about the globe-spanning commercial companies of the seventeenth century,

nor about the oceanic geopolitics of the twenty-first, which have continued to exert startling force in complex relations such as Tonga's Chinese debt or the US response to Puerto Rico's devastation during Hurricane Maria.[2] Yet early modernists are still too comfortable thinking in these terms—of centers and peripheries; of "distant" ventures across alien seas; of London, Amsterdam, and Lisbon as metropoles with world-spanning empires. We need another framework that gives "elsewhere" pride of place, one closer to Hau'ofa's view—or better, many frameworks, each attentive to geographical particularities and cultural differences. This is our goal: to respect that what seemed like "far seas" to the directors of the English and Dutch East India Companies were, critically and operably, *local oceans* to the Indo-Portuguese, the Formosans, the Tamil, the Syrians, and even the Britons who sailed, lived, and died on them.

Local oceans are communities. They are seascapes strung through with social, political, and economic networks within which conflict and cooperation imprint themselves upon local cultures. Oceanic ecocriticism has begun to address the sea and its representations in environmental terms; and oceanic studies—an interdisciplinary field of sociopolitical and humanist inquiry—builds on these conceptions, affording us an opportunity to re-examine the "global ocean" in cultural terms.[3] While these are important conversations, it has been a goal of this special issue from the earliest stages to tear up, or at least forcefully wrinkle, the Eurocentric map of the early modern World-Ocean, and to mark the interrelation between ecological and cultural geographies in ways that are attentive to the interdependence of local and networked perspectives. This posed a difficult task, particularly for the two of us as editors writing from American departments of English literature and so unable in numerous ways to speak on behalf of other shores and peoples. Thus, while the communities and their cultures in this issue vary widely, they do not stretch as far as they could. They are constrained, linguistically and historically, in that they are all drawn at least in part from English accounts bearing on or emerging from colonial relationships in multicultural and diasporic coastal regions. Still, what a rich variety of ways there are to make an ocean local: tapestries, maps, plays, personal accounts real and imagined. All of these bring to light absent, suppressed, or unconventional narratives, histories of cultural forms and oceanic relations emerging together.

The historical scope of the issue ranges from the late sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century, capturing a period of what has come to be understood as transformational English economic expansion characterized by the early history of the East India Company, the growth of trade in the eastern Mediterranean, and colonial ventures stretching from the Americas and to East Asia. Scholarship of the period has emphasized the emergence of a vast commercial empire associated with London—within which English trading companies were the vehicles, if not the engine. By resisting the reflexive ways in which local places were made into distant "elsewheres," this issue offers new histories to supplement what have become conventional narratives of English commercial expansion. In order to address the process whereby local oceanic communities compel us to reconsider our narratives of globalization, we take up part of the task proposed by Jyotsna Singh in a previous special topic issue of *JEMCS* when she encouraged "an approach that takes into account both the complex itineraries of shifting English commercial, global practices . . . as well as their local negotiations and perceptions within a larger contextual knowledge" (125). The impact of global systems and forces cannot be understood, Singh suggests, without attending to local histories. Importantly, she uncovers valuable local perspectives even in the writings of English travelers such as Thomas Coryate, whose personal interactions in the Mughal empire provide an "important and necessary corollary" to historical understandings of the East India Company as "an economic entity of emergent global capitalism" (125). This issue embraces Singh's concern for how global analyses should incorporate local perspectives, as well as her implicit invitation to fully acknowledge both the colonial imperatives that motivated English overseas enterprises and the proto-capitalist structures through which they were pursued. In doing so, we attempt to acknowledge the multiplicity of perspectives and scales that are invoked even within "colonialist" narratives, revealing how the model of a binary relationship between colonizer and colonized cannot fully account for the diverse and complex cultural geographies of early modern European colonialism.

Furthermore, whereas colonialism tends to be understood as a land-based phenomenon that produces certain kinds of communities, economies, cultures, and periodization (as in the terrestrial, even "landed" conception of the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism), we advocate for the reconceptualization of early modern colonialism as a water-based enterprise. Specifically, we consider how foregrounding local oceans, their communities, and their histories calls for a new set of paradigms for understanding early modern

colonial relationships—showing how they are shaped by the fluid, unbounded, and interconnected quality of oceanic spaces. Accordingly, this issue considers how new cultural forms are produced when local places and communities are redetermined by—and resist—the oceanic, imperial networks into which they are organized. While focused on diverse local regions, all of the contributors to this issue remain attentive to the central and multifaceted ways in which the ocean reconfigures relationships, requiring an understanding of imperial expansion and colonialism that is oriented around mobility rather than settlement. As Hauʻofa's charge to bring a more "holistic perspective" to the Pacific "sea of islands" suggests, the cultural geographies of early modern European colonialism were constituted by water as much as they were by land. They were expansive networks rather than small, bounded wholes. And they were culturally shaped by the unique relationships produced by oceanic mobility and the interplay between land and sea—relationships influenced by tides and currents, by ecological and environmental factors, and by the rich sedimentation of Indigenous histories that preceded colonial settlement. Rather than enforce relationships based around conquest and hierarchy, oceanic flows foster dynamics of interrelationality, interconnection, and entanglement.

In her study of post-World War II transpacific literatures from a comparative Indigenous and Asian Americanist critical lens, Erin Suzuki employs an "analytic of *relation*" to observe "the shifting and relative positionalities of different communities and cultures," and embraces Hauʻofa's vision of a connected Oceania as a replacement for divided-up Pacific Islands (Suzuki 5). As she puts it, "Oceania is a term that emphasizes the importance of communities and cultures in relation, as opposed to in *aggregation*"; it also represents a "conceptual shift from thinking through the Pacific as an abstract geopolitical concept to a more multiply-sited, relational space" (12). Under this conceptual shift, the specificity of the "Pacific" ocean as critically and exclusively the "Pacific" loses its significance, exposing how the division and naming of oceanic space is as arbitrary and unnatural as the conception of global space in terms of nations and continents. Spanning numerous oceans, the articles in this volume share a commitment to a fluid and multiply-sited oceanic perspective as a means to recovering the relational nature of colonial spaces that precedes and exceeds the hegemonic bounds of empire.

By foregrounding local oceans and the dynamic communities they foster, this issue rejects the models of geographical space that have been typical of Eurocentric accounts of colonialism and imperial expansion in the early modern

period. Although they take up European materials primarily in English, the articles decenter London and eschew the undifferentiated "global" in favor of the communities developing in non-English spaces: the British archipelago, multi-cultural Madras, the island of Formosa (Taiwan), the Coromandel coast of India, and the refugee shorelines of Syria and Turkey. This array of colonial geographies is deliberately varied, including representative investigations within the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea. In producing such an oceanic variety, our goal is not to exhaust or flatten the cultural forms emerging in each place, but rather the opposite: to raise into sharp relief the differences between them, and to emphasize the benefit of approaches chosen to suit particular seas rather than totalizing oceanic concerns. As critics such as Hester Blum and Elizabeth DeLoughrey have pointed out, while ocean-centered paradigms have helped to bring cultural and historical dynamics into view that transcend national borders, they can run the risk of abstracting and dematerializing the ocean and its effects on communities (both Indigenous and colonial).[4] And, as Suzuki notes, while ecocritical scholarship has effectively resisted these distortions of ocean space by foregrounding the ocean's agency and materiality, it runs a different risk in "viewing the ocean as a 'perspective- and self-dissolving' medium where national and cultural particularities are subordinated to the tides of a 'universalizing sea'" (6).[5]

Learning from both the contributions and the potential occlusions of oceanic studies and ecocriticism, we seek in this volume to take a localized view of oceans and their histories to offer a more nuanced and nimble account of the impact of colonial relationships and their diverse manifestations. Importantly, if a "local" view offers a valuable alternative to "the global," it is simultaneously constituted in relation to a larger global system and set of connected relationships. Moreover, the "local" does not in and of itself signify a transparent or self-evident point of view but rather encompasses a multitude of perspectives and positions. Viewing the local requires not merely zooming in, but also allowing for the possibility of various, shifting angles. The articles in this volume share an interest in restoring just such an awareness of depth, scale, and position to local-colonial-oceanic networks and relationships—demonstrating how the diverse histories of these geographies possess their own particularities.

Even as they are joined in historicist bent and political aim, these articles are as paradigmatically distant from one another as the oceans within which their subjects operated, employing a range of perspectives and methodologies:

archipelagic studies, inter-imperialism, postcolonial theory, performance studies, visual arts, and art history. When they do take up overlapping or mutually inclusive physical locations, as is the case of Srirangam and Madras, both along India's Coromandel Coast, their cultural geographies are rendered very differently: in "Views from the Deck of a Ship," Shweta Kidambi Raghu opposes "saltwater" and "freshwater" perspectives within visual representations and textile production throughout Tamil Nadu; while Carmen Nocentelli's approach in "Of Corn and Tares" is documentary, managerial, and concerned with the development of a distinct religio-ethnic community at Fort St. George, in modern-day Chennai.

Each set of articles is organized according to oceanic *perspective*, a concept through which all of them frame distinct colonial paradigms for early modern maritime spaces and cultures: regarding them by turns visually, institutionally, dramatically, and narratively. They move from the cartographic perspectives of archipelagos and waterways (Caro Pirri, Shweta Kidambi Raghu) to the interrelational perspectives of diasporas and empires (Carmen Nocentelli, Alexander Paulsson Lash) and to the urgently embodied perspective of refugee performance (Robin Kello). However, if each piece emphasizes a particular mode of viewing, they also demonstrate an awareness that no perspective is singular, static, or universal in nature, and that each depends on the viewer's position—on who is doing the looking and for what purpose. Ultimately, we hope these discussions show that if there is much to learn from local oceanic perspectives, it is critical to acknowledge that their production depends on the distinct sociopolitical and economic particularities of the observer or writer, venturer or inhabitant.

A multi-perspectival understanding of culture underpins our first two articles, albeit on vastly different seas and waterways. In "Repeating Englands," Caro Pirri examines how English writers responded to divergent incentives to represent their nation as both rhetorically insular *and* as geographically expansive by embracing an archipelagic model that reconciles insularity with expansionism. Pirri draws usefully on the theoretical work of archipelagic studies scholars Michelle Ann Stephens and Brian Russell Roberts, who have demonstrated how the notion of the archipelago is "as culturally contingent as the geographical form of the continent," even though it seems to denote a chain of islands that is a naturally coherent entity (6).[6] For Stephens and Roberts, the archipelago functions as a "prime metaphor within the structuring grammar of colonial modernity," in effect serving to naturalize colonial relationships (33).

By conceiving of their Atlantic colonies as repetitions of an initial island, Pirri shows, English writers found a way to "represent western movement as a kind of expansion of Britain itself rather than as a movement away from it"—a form of oceanic migration that nevertheless suggested they were static. Pirri demonstrates how this archipelagic model of colonial expansion fostered a certain bodily "disposition toward place" and an "insular perspective" that "would remain stable, regardless of place." In a strikingly original reading of early modern dramatic performance, she describes how London entertainments incorporated the insular and archipelagic thinking of colonial writers into their spatial dynamics, and concludes with a discussion of *Cymbeline*'s (1611) metaphor of Britain as a floating "swan's nest"—a movable Britain, stable, yet unbound—that enables oceanic perspectives invested in colonial insularity and reproducibility.

Addressing the variability of perspective in a different way, Shweta Kidambi Raghu's article, "Views from the Deck of a Ship," demonstrates how methods for viewing and depicting the Coromandel Coast of India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflect divergent colonial and Indigenous relationships to waterways. Taking up a rich archive of European maps and images of the region—from Johan Nieuhof's *Zee en Lant-Reize de verscheide Gewesten van Oostindien* (1682) to Alexander Dalrymple's *Map of the East India Company's Lands on the Coast of Coromandel* (1778)—Raghu shows how European traders imagined the coast and its peoples from a distanciated "saltwater perspective,: as viewed from "the deck of a ship." Turning subsequently to Indigenous architecture and religious practices, the article identifies the cultivation of a contrasting "freshwater view" represented in Tamil textiles and tapestries. Attentive to the ecology of the interior riverscape and its botanical features, this view emphasized stewardship and sustainability, rather than the extraction of resources. A set of textiles created by local artists for East India Company patrons reveals a compelling "interweaving" of "saltwater" and "freshwater" perspectives, ultimately producing a "conglomerate visual perspective" that Raghu identifies as a "brackish view." Raghu's forcefully de-colonial history of perspectives and textiles culminates in an analysis of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Hanging Depicting a European Conflict in South Asia* (pre-1763) in which she demonstrates how colonial land-theft was juxtaposed with the kind of Indigenous riverscapes more typically associated within sacred architecture. This tapestry materializes what she calls a "multisensory model of stewardship," one attuned to the conflict between colonizing, mercantile approaches to the

coastline and the Indigenous understanding of the fluvial waterways that flow inland from the coast. This brackish mode, Raghu contends, underlay the production of textiles along the Coromandel Coast and shaped artistic and colonial negotiations in early colonial India.

In "Of Corn and Tares: Making Madras English, 1639–1696," Carmen Nocentelli examines very different materials at the northern edge of the same region, the Coromandel Coast, and initiates an investment in diasporic and inter-imperial relations that also animates the article by Alexander Paulsson Lash that follows. Examining the policies and documentary history of the English East India Company (EIC) factory at Fort St. George, Nocentelli uncovers a fascinating local history of the evolving Indo-Portuguese settlement at Madras—an "entrepôt" of overlapping economic, ethnic, and cultural communities. In doing so, Nocentelli argues that the key to English commercial expansion along the Coromandel Coast of the Indian Ocean was the ability of Company merchants to capitalize on previous oceanic diasporas and to integrate themselves into local networks of commerce and culture. As the readiest point of entry into these local networks, Nocentelli argues, the settlement at Madras was instrumental in producing a racially and culturally diverse community of Indo-European residents, which included the offspring of mixed unions as well as Indian converts to Christianity. However, the EIC's attempts to assert control over intermarriage and kinship relationships—provocatively articulated through an appropriation of the biblical parable of corn and tares (Matthew 13:24–43)—met strong resistance from English merchants living in Madras. Through careful engagement with marriage records and archival manuscripts from the India Office Records, Nocentelli demonstrates that the Company's goal was not so much to pry the English and Indo-Portuguese apart as to adopt a strategic approach to assimilation and intermixing that prioritized English national interest over the interests of the Madras settlement as a multinational, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional community. By mapping the tug of war between EIC authorities and Madras agents, the article highlights "the paradoxical nature of early modern oceanic mobility"—and its fostering of a heterogeneous diaspora—both as a global instrument of empire and as a local force that worked against it, forging instead multi-lateral contests and alliances.

Alexander Paulsson Lash's "Oceanic Inter-Imperialism in Psalmanazar's Formosa" is similarly concerned with the convergences and conflicts created by multiple imperial actors operating in the same region. Drawing on Laura Doyle's

theoretical formulation of "inter-imperiality," Lash foregrounds the imperial contest over the island of Taiwan and its surrounding trade routes, characterized by a succession of early modern conquests by Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese colonizers.[7] Taiwan's local ocean and its commercial significance rendered the region "a staging ground for a variety of maritime empires" and a "strategic inter-imperial zone," rather than "a peripheral territory." Lash brings to light a unique perspective on Taiwan's inter-imperial history by examining George Psalmanazar's *Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* (1704), an ethnography written by a French impostor who successfully tricked a large number of Londoners into believing he was an Indigenous Formosan. While scholarship on Psalmanazar's narrative has tended to focus on what his imposture can teach us about changing standards of evidence and about questions of religious and racial identity, Lash situates Psalmanazar as a shrewd observer of Taiwan's inter-imperial history who appropriated an aboriginal perspective so as to appeal in particular ways to the English colonial imagination. Specifically, the *Historical and Geographical Description* used strident criticism of Formosa's previous conquerors to invite English readers to project themselves as future "benevolent" colonialists and "heroic supporters of the Formosan populace." Lash concludes by considering Taiwan's modern history of subjugation under Japan and China, as well as its struggles around identity and self-determination—developments that grew out of Taiwan's earlier history and that have subsequently laid the groundwork for its heightened significance today as a major point of contention in the rapidly developing inter-imperial rivalry between China and the United States.

The issue's final article turns even more deliberately to modern-day concerns by considering Shakespeare and Wilkin's *Pericles* (1608) in terms of contested oceanic mobility in the present, considering recent adaptations to gauge the affordances of performance in oceanic activism related to forced and climate migration. In "Seas of Displacement, Acts of Hope: *Pericles*' Twenty-First-Century Adaptations," Robin Kello considers an outpouring of recent productions that adapt *Pericles*' thematic of "hope" in order to address modern experiences of oceanic migration, displacement, and diaspora in the Mediterranean and Black Atlantic worlds. These productions capture the embodied and subjective experience of oceanic mobility that is emphasized in *Pericles*, working to capture the feeling of precarity and bodily vulnerability associated with oceanic refugeeism. In doing so, they extend the political impact of

Shakespeare and Wilkins' play to demonstrate its radical anti-colonial potential. Through a contemporary theater studies perspective, Kello proposes an activist theater of encounter and response. He examines Adrian Jackson's 2003 production, which includes refugee testimonials; Theatrum Botanicum's 2005 *Children of the Sea*, first performed in Matara, Sri Lanka; Kent Gash's staged BIPOC reading for the Red Bull Theater's "Exploring Pericles in 2021" series; and the exhibition, in the final week of October 2021, of Little Amal, a 3.5-meter-tall puppet representing a Syrian refugee child, exhibited at Shakespeare's Globe in London. Kello insightfully juxtaposes Little Amal's journey and Gash's Black Atlantic re-visioning of *Pericles*, emphasizing the patterns of family displacement and the healing of collective trauma that both the local and migrant performances make possible.

Collectively, the work in this special issue of *JEMCS* seeks to take new account of enduring postcolonial questions in the wake of our past decade's forced migrations, challenges to oceanic justice, and pressing geopolitics, insisting on the enduring political relevance of these little-known histories and the cultural forms through which they take shape. In short, it extends the historical and political implications of the early modern ocean in several new directions: by pushing theoretical boundaries, venturing into new geographies, expanding our archive, and ultimately by taking new stock of the relationship between local oceanic communities, and colonial histories.

NOTES

1. See Hau'ofa 149.

2. For a news article about China's loans to Tonga, see Taina Kami Enoka in Nuku'alofa.

3. See Sivasundaram, Bashford, and Armitage, especially the Introduction 1–27. For three agenda-setting articles or forums on oceanic and cultural studies, see "Oceanic Studies: Theories and Methodologies" in *PMLA*; the articles in *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, especially Blum and Steinberg; and the special issue on "Shakespeare's Waters" in *Studies in English Literature*. Other influential eco-critical approaches include Dobrin; Goul and Usher; The Black Mediterranean Collective; and Stephens and Martínez-San Miguel.

4. See Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies"; and DeLoughrey.

5. Suzuki quotes here from Blum, "Introduction: Oceanic Studies" 153.

6. See Roberts and Stephens, Introduction 6. Pirri also draws upon Antonio Benítez-Rojo's notion of "repeating islands" to identify the figure of the English colony as a "repeating England"—a conceptual, rather than a geographic archipelagic formation.

7. See Doyle.

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