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The Porous and the Pure

An Artifactual History of Ties between Asia, Europe, and Latin America

Ajay Gandhi

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The Porous and the Pure: An Artifactual History of Ties Between Asia, Europe, and Latin America

Ajay Gandhi

Abstract

This essay uses three kinds of artifacts to frame connections between Asia, Europe, and Latin America, between the 1500s and the present. These items – simultaneously tangible things and symbolic projections – plot a method and chronology of entanglement. The first are precious-metal decorations made in Goa, on India's western coast, for Portuguese patrons. A second is a 17th-century painting of a young slave from India taken to the Netherlands. The third artifact is the spider's web, and the Caribbean folk figure of the Anansi spider. Such artifacts can be read through purity and silence, as well as porosity and convergence. In this itinerary of artifacts, we begin with a social imaginary that is determined and untainted, and move to conditions that are fluid and open-ended.

Keywords: convivial counter-politics | slavery | indenture | traces

About the author

Ajay Gandhi (Mecila Senior Fellow, 2021) is an Assistant Professor at Leiden University in the Netherlands. His interests are in urban, political, and economic anthropology, with a focus on South Asia. He was earlier a Research Fellow and Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany, and received his PhD in Anthropology from Yale University. He has published on transactional and material forms, postcolonial jurisdiction, political and urban violence, and social aesthetics and concepts.

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1. Introduction

This essay considers three artifacts that illustrate contact-points between Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The historical arc is from the 1500s till the present. My conceptual aim is to illuminate transcontinental proximities and colonialism's cascading fallout. This essay's premise is that an artifact offers both a naturalized narrative and prospective horizon. As we represent the world – something that seems pregiven – we also create and modify it.

The three artifacts which anchor this essay are first, 16th-century precious-metal prestige objects, made by Goan artisans for Portuguese patrons; second, a 17th century Dutch painting of a slave from India; and finally, the figuration of the spider's web, as conjured in Caribbean folk tales.

The Goan objects made for Portuguese colonizers offer, for today's museums, an apolitical celebration of cultural hybridity. I suggest, in contrast, that they underwrite the imperial politics of purity. The Dutch painting from the late 1600s seems to affirm colonial expansion and the confidence of racial hierarchy. I propose that it also expresses a complex vision of living with difference. The spider's web, and the myth of the Anansi spider, moves between Africa, Latin America, and Asia. I argue that through the embodied experience of créole mixing, the spider's mesh offers a convivial counter-politics, mirroring the incompleteness, the distribution, and the work of mending in social life.

2. The Politics of Purity

The Lisbon quay juts into water veined with silver cloud-light. Here, on the Ribeira das Naus, the river Tagus expands and churns, then disgorges into the Atlantic. It is June 2022, and I stand outside a 1940s dried salt-cod warehouse. Now the Museu do Oriente, it marks Portugal's presence, after the 1500s, in Goa, Japan, Macau, and Timor.

The bright shock of riverside sun gives way to dark galleries inside. In climate-controlled vitrines is a bronze Virgin Mary from Mughal India. A cedar wood sculpture from Goa of Saint Francis Xavier. A Nanban painting from Edo Japan of Portuguese merchants. They mostly date from the 1600s, before Portugal's eclipse in Asia by the Dutch, French, and British.

A glancing mention in a display panel catches my eye. Of a Goan goldsmith brought to Lisbon five centuries ago. In 1518, Raulu Chatim – called Rauluchantim in the museum

– disembarked at the river Tagus.[1] Yet Raulu Chatim is an absent presence. He is said to have made jewellery for King Manuel. But nothing of him remains: no objects are left and no biography exists. Once, imperial desire co-opted his skill; here, the museum's narrative takes over his life.

This story seems a little brittle; it needs its own vitrine. I read a terse text panel on the wall. It dismisses the idea that "Europe exerted cultural hegemony over Asia… There was, instead, a process of convergence and transculturality".

The tortoiseshell combs and ivory pendants around me are, in this view, mere emblems of the hybrid and heterogeneous. Raulu Chatim's presence in Lisbon and Asian creations made for imperial patrons come out of Europe's genius at fostering fusion. I wonder, though. Can we separate the product from the person? What we appreciate and what we annihilate? Can we extricate Raulu Chatim from the museum's story of obliging mixture and see his life differently?

*

On this June afternoon, the air is clotted with moisture. I walk along the Ribeira das Naus to Lisbon's centre. It is here that Raulu Chatim arrives in 1518 with Portuguese *armadas*.

His fleet depends upon trade winds. Ships sail in galleons and carracks from Lisbon in spring and early summer. Pilots time their journey to bend around southern Africa's Cape. All to catch the southwest winds going from East Africa to Asia and arrive in India by fall. Raulu Chatim catches the return journey. This begins in early winter, with the northwest monsoon winds. Leaving India in January, *armadas* return to Iberia in summer. This circuit is the *carreira da Índia* or "India Run" (Boxer 1969; Gschwend and Lowe 2015).

Portuguese envoy Vasco da Gama, just twenty years earlier in 1498, lands in Kerala. Da Gama marks Europe's modern rise in the scramble for eastern products. Cutting out Venetian and Mamluk brokers for Asian goods, da Gama's landing in India revolutionizes Portugal. By 1505, a Portuguese *feitoria* or factory is in Cochin, trading Indian spices and luxuries scarce in Europe. Five years later, the Portuguese trounce Goa's ruler, Yusuf Adel Shah, of the Bijapur Sultanate, and establish a colony there. Pepper, the most lucrative commodity-spice, floods Lisbon.

When Raulu Chatim comes ashore in 1518, crown revenues from this traffic reach 97 million *réis* (Ferreira 2015: 66). That same decade, wealth from overseas extraction

1 On a rare academic mention of this goldsmith, see Silva 1996. In other accounts, he is named Roulu Shet (Russell-Wood 1998: 105).

outstrips Portugal's domestic revenues. Portugal's King Dom Manuel I knows how his bread is buttered; he moves his Lisbon court from hilltop castle to river. A royal residence, the Paço da Ribeira, is flanked by the headquarters of *Estado da Índia*: Portugal's eastern empire.

Manuel has his royal apartments built atop the centralized entity siphoning India's wealth into his treasury. Indeed, Portugal's empire is within Manuel's strolling grounds along the Tagus.[2] At the Casa da Índia, crown personnel fix prices, log deliveries, weigh cargoes, audit merchants, manage convoys, and collect duties.

Adjacent along the quay is the *Armazém da Índia*. There, ships return from India to moor and replenish their arsenals. Adjacent to it is the *Casa dos Escravos*, or Slave House, where human cargo is divided into lots (Saunders 1982: 15). A price tag tied with parchment and string hangs off slave necks, so that contractors can appraise their worth (Lowe 2012: 23).[3]

Raulu Chatim arrives here in boom times. Portuguese carracks from the east disgorge camphor, cloves, nutmeg, saffron, pearls, incense, silk, and myrrh. Pepper, bought for two *cruzados* in Kerala, can be sold in Lisbon for 30 *cruzados* (Hatton 2018: 53). The profusion of Indian textiles, spices, and luxury goods at Manuel's residence leads contemporaries to give it the nickname *Paço da Índia* – Palace of India (Gschwend and Lowe 2015: 32).

Renaissance chronicler Damião de Góis observes the hectic activity at *Casa da Índia*. Its treasurers and inspectors are inundated by the sheer volume of Asian goods. Waiting merchants proffering silver and gold are dismissed – "come back another day" – as the *Casa da Índia*'s clerks "didn't have time to count it all" (Hatton 2018: 53).

*

Raulu Chatim arrives in an Iberia of tarnished types and elevated nobility. In his fleet, the returning cargo include persons turned into products: roughly ten percent of Lisbon's population in the 1500s are slaves (Lowe 2012).

2 Evident to contemporaries was the proximity of imperial authority and material fruits of the "India Run". Between 1500-1521, Manuel sent 271 ships to India: "the unloading of goods and animals could be seen from the royal palace windows, even as Rua Nova merchants snapped up the new merchandise." (Gschwend and Lowe 2015: 29).

3 A diligent accounting – lists, receipts, duties – surrounded Lisbon's slave culture. Such formalities were interwoven with rituals of humiliation: at the *Casa dos Escravos*, the "slaves were stark naked during the evaluation, exposing their bodies to the appraisal not only of the official evaluators but of prospective buyers as well. These buyers inspected the slaves' mouths, made the slaves extend and retract their arms, bend down, run and jump and perform all the other movements and gestures indicative of good health and a sturdy constitution" (Saunders 1982: 15).

Many come from West Africa – Cape Verde, São Tomé, and Ghana – where Portugal establishes colonial stations through the 1400s. As *Estado da Índia*'s global footprint expands throughout the 1500s, women and children from East Asia are sold in Portugal; some are coerced into sexual slavery (Sousa 2019: 466–473; Yoon 2021: 32).

As Raulu Chatim's ship docks on the Tagus, Moorish *arraíses* or boat swains work the river ferries. Black *regateiras* or street vendors stroll the waterfront with pots of rice pudding, couscous, and chickpeas (Saunders 1982: 71; 77). As Raulu Chatim settles into Lisbon, and interacts with patrons to make their ornaments, he may see Tupí from Brazil serving in palace ceremonies (Jordan 2005).

To get fresh water from Lisbon's fountains, the goldsmith will need the services of Black women, *negras do pote*, who carry water pots (Saunders 1982: 77). To dispose of excrement and refuse, he will rely upon African women – *negras de canastra* – who lug wicker baskets (Saunders 1982: 75,77). When he requires precious metals or stones from the *Casa da Índia*, slaves are the ones who shift the bales.

Raulu Chatim, a skilled craftsman, joins other Asian experts in Lisbon who are now in demand. These include Indian cabinet makers (Saunders 1982), and needlewomen from Goa who work for Portugal's queen (Russell-Wood 1998: 105). Japanese, Bengalis, and Javanese are among those in Lisbon's Asian community of slaves and ex-slaves (Sousa 2019).[4]

Before 1518, Raulu Chatim works for Afonso de Albuquerque. This is the Portuguese admiral who strengthens da Gama's foothold and is Goa's first viceroy. Then the goldsmith from Goa catches King Manuel's attention. At this time, overseas wealth inflates social status in Manuel's court. New titles need creating, and the class of *fidalgos* or nobility enlarges.

They need ornaments to bolster fictions of distinction. Like the lacquered cabinets and engraved family crests now at the *Museu do Oriente*. Such decoration broadcasts prominence and helps the aspiring to advance. Raulu Chatim works away, making products that enhance the person. He cannot be unaware that visible symbols are social armour.[5] Manuel's cortège through Lisbon, for instance, entails an elaborate

4 Slaves in Lisbon in the 16th century were generally from Africa, while others were from Arab North Africa, China, Malabar in India, and the Tupí community in Brazil (Lowe 2015).

5 A profusion of items from India are available in Portugal in the 1500s. These come from a variety of places on the subcontinent, including Goa, the Malabar coast, Bengal, and the Deccan, and include: embroidered *mantilhas* or cloaks, printed cottons, musk, tortoiseshell decorations, rock-crystal pendants, gilded silver rosaries, gold reliquaries, mother of pearl objects, carved gunpowder horns, and rosewood cabinets (Crespo 2015).

animal menagerie.[6] The king collects elephants and other animals as tribute from Indian rulers, then imitates their ceremonial rituals.

On Lisbon's streets, trumpets and drums prod a procession of elephants in gold brocade, a rhino, an Arabian horse, and jaguar. Manuel is not content to walk behind with his court (Hatton 2018: 58). He broadcasts the fortunes of *Estado da Índia* across Europe, dispatching a white Indian elephant in 1514 to the pope, and displaying a Cambay rhino in 1515, the first seen in Europe since antiquity.

How does Raulu Chatim experience Europe 500 years ago? What does it feel like to find your talent endorsed as your world is usurped? We cannot know. His experience is lost, his impressions an enigma. All we know is that Raulu Chatim transmutes his talent into what others desire.

*

Exactly when Raulu Chatim works in Lisbon, Hernán Cortés heads a Spanish expedition to Mexico. He will kidnap Montezuma and besiege the Aztec capital. Yet this is not just a story of plunder.

In Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* (1984), he dwells on Cortés' appreciation of Aztec products. True, the conquistadors will systematically destroy that civilization. Yet Cortés does not disparage the Aztecs as primitive or simple-minded; he sees that they are sophisticated and capable of intelligent design.

Cortés writes to the Spanish court.[7] On Aztec architecture: "their city was indeed the most beautiful thing in the world". Fabrics and jewellery are of "high quality", of "such varied and natural colours", "so well constructed", "so realistic in gold and silver that no smith in the world could have made better".

Why do you appreciate the other, then destroy them? For Todorov, the key is when humans are abstracted from objects. Colonialism severs the link between person and product. When you detach creator from creation, everything is permitted. Todorov writes of the Spaniard "understanding-that-kills": they turn Aztecs to the "status of object" (Todorov 1984: 127–130).

The Portuguese battle the Spaniards for territorial supremacy in the 1500s. They seem in perpetual disagreement. Yet their vision is similar. A journal kept by Vasco da Gama's crewmember of his 1498 arrival in Kerala echoes Cortés. Their counterparts in India

6 "Acquiring, owning, and showcasing exotic animals, flowers and herbs, in outdoor menageries and gardens of royal residences, became a priority, forming an essential part of the pageantry and spectacle at the Portuguese court" (Gschwend 2015: 155).

7 Cortés' letters are quoted in Todorov 1984: 128–129).

wear “fine linen and cotton”, their dress is of “rich and elaborate workmanship”, they are surrounded by “precious stones, pearls, and spices” (Ames 2009: 50–51).

The disparity between Europeans and their interlocutors is stark: the Portuguese give a “rather paltry gift of cloth, hats, coral and agricultural products” to Calicut’s ruler, which fail to “create a favorable impression” (Subrahmanyam 1998: 63). Álvaro Velho, writing that exhibition’s logbook, notes how da Gama is told that this “was nothing to give a King, and that the poorest merchant who came from Mecca… would give him more than that” (Subrahmanyam 1998: 65).

Da Gama is more proprietary on his second visit to Kerala in 1502. Jewish scribe Gaspar Corrêa, travelling alongside, describes da Gama’s actions.[8] The Portuguese have entered an aquatic emporium in the Indian Ocean where Arab Muslims are key brokers. These merchants impede King Manuel’s demand for a trade monopoly to Europe. Already, many Portuguese disdain Muslims, after decades invading North Africa, and centuries of Moorish rule in Iberia.[9] Off of Kerala, they become da Gama’s enemy and obsession. Da Gama bombards Calicut, intercepts merchants, and executes hostages.

Then the Portuguese kidnap a fleet of Muslims. Corrêa hears da Gama’s orders: “cut off the hands and ears and noses of all the crews,” break “their teeth with staves,” set their ships “on fire”. The charred, bloody hostages drift to shore. A crowd douses the flames, extracting survivors, Corrêa observes, with “great lamentations”.[10]

On the same journey, da Gama has a Hindu emissary of Calicut’s Zamorin ruler burnt with embers. His lips are cut off. Corrêa notes that the Brahmin’s appendages are “strung around his neck”; he is dumped on a boat and sent on shore. Da Gama lades his package with sarcasm for the Zamorin: with the body parts “have a curry made to eat”.

8 The quotes that follow are from Corrêa 2010 [1869]: 331–332.

9 Already evident in Vasco da Gama’s first two voyages was an adversarial attitude towards “Moors”, especially *mouros de Meca* (“Moors from Mecca”), those who were the existing brokers of Indian Ocean trade to Europe via the Venetians (Subrahmanyam 1998: 60). As Portugal’s presence in Asia expands in the 1500s, “Eastern ventures were ideologically construed as an extension of the centuries-long crusade known as the Iberian Reconquest”, including the policy of *política dos casamentos* (intermarriage), whereby local women in Asia, including Muslims, were subject to “conquest marriages” with Portuguese settlers (Nocentelli 2013: 50).

10 This image is mirrored by an anecdote recorded a century and half later by Dutch surgeon Wouter Schouten. At that time, in the Bay of Bengal, Portuguese pilots led slaving raids into the Ganges Delta, for slaves to be procured by the Dutch in trading posts like Pipeli. From there, slaves from India went to fledgling Dutch settlements in Batavia, the Banda islands, and the Cape colony in southern Africa. Schouten describes a scene in January 1662 where narrow rowing boats arrive in Pipeli with bound women and children: “what a miserable groaning, weeping and heartbreaking whimpering these unfortunates utter… robbed of everything, tied up and beaten, taken, poor and naked, into slavery” (Holtrop 2021: 149).

A shared outlook dismembers others and extols their creations. It is as if da Gama replays Cortés' treacherous affection. Admiration, then eradication.

*

Purification is intrinsic to the goldsmith's craft. Raulu Chatim will know that base alloys dilute gold's sheen, and how fire extrudes impurities.[11] Purity also shapes colonialism; refining loyalty and eliminating contaminants are central to its political craft. Purity is thus where Raulu Chatim's art and origins entwine.

Raulu Chatim is said to return to Goa in 1520. He has done what he must: make products that amplify patrons. On his return journey to Goa, the *armadas* to India are staffed by a decreed class of *degredado* – degraded or impure ones. Abject exiles are needed to man Portugal's maritime machine.[12] *Degredados*, who include criminals and religious fugitives, conduct dangerous labour on ships, and interface with hostiles.

In Goa, if Raulu Chatim lives long enough, he will see Portugal, at its global apex, succumb to official antipathy and suspicion. By the mid-1500s, the confluence of difference in the Portuguese empire has become too much. Until the end of the 1400s, Portugal's political elite contain the influence of the clergy. Legislation against Jews and official antisemitism – when compared with Castile and Aragon – is less evident. The Portuguese political class relies heavily on Jewish astronomers who incorporate Islamic learning (Seed 1995: 134–135).

But by the end of the 15th century, Spain's Catholic kings insist that Portuguese Jews be expelled, as a precondition of Iberian marital and political pacts. By 1496-97, Jews are converting to Christianity; Dom Manuel's expulsion decrees open space for pogroms in Lisbon in 1506. New Christians or *conversos* like mathematicians Pedro Nunes and Master João, who aided Portugal becoming a naval power, start fleeing (Seed 1995: 136). King João III initiates Portugal's Inquisition in 1536, and by 1543, people are being burned at the stake. Portugal's scientific and technological advantage

11 It is worth underlining here that skilled knowledge, and not merely labouring energy, was central to colonialism's political economy. In European empires, the accreted, specialized knowledge of non-western societies was harnessed and coercively claimed. For example, an analogous figure to Raulu Chatim in the Dutch empire is Januarij van Bengalen, an Indian slave and silversmith in Batavia in the 18th century (Holtrop 2021: 161–162).

12 See Nocentelli 2013: 34) for how *degredados* were an element of a wider "forced expatriation of convicts" hardwired into Portugal's colonial expansion from the 1400s onwards.

irrevocably erodes. The knowledge of astrolabes and latitude hitherto hoarded by the Portuguese diffuses to other European nations.[13]

Dom Manuel's children, weaving clerical biases into political decisions, shape imperial matters. By the 1540s, as the Catholic church is institutionalized in Portuguese India, other faiths are outlawed, and Hindu temples destroyed.[14] The Inquisition gathers steam. The codification of Catholic supremacy in the tropics dovetails with sexual and racial anxieties, namely the "dangers of contamination" to the Portuguese from local habits and rituals (Cruz 1998: 30).

Afonso de Albuquerque's earlier project, in Goa, for infusing with Catholic blood "the vine stock of bad blood" by Muslims in India founders; Portuguese settlers in the empire are considered "the lowliest plants of the kingdom" (Nocentelli 2013: 62). Moral laxity and sexual corruption among Portuguese settlers becomes an anxious trope in the 1500s (Županov 2000: 210). Albuquerque's intermarriage policy – *política dos casamentos* – gives way to worries about moral purity, erotic restraint, and racial degeneration (Nocentelli 2013: 78). The ascendance of religious figures in Portuguese politics and empire, is evident, by the mid-16th century, in the rhetoric of Jesuits in India like Francis Xavier (Nocentelli 2013: 75).

The inquisition becomes a theatre of purity and power throughout the *Estado da Índia*. In 1560, the Holy Office of the Inquisition is established in Goa. The Inquisition has the *auto-da-fé*: a ritual of penance. Public performances in Portugal root out Muslim and Jewish converts to Catholicism. "Crypto-Jews" and "crypto-Muslims" are said to covertly practice outlawed faiths. After forced confession and show trials, some of the accused burn at the stake.

Muslim and Jewish converts are considered New Christians in Portugal, and some flee to Goa. But they cannot escape the Inquisition, and are ensnared, after 1560, by the *auto-da-fé* on India's western coast. Local Hindus and Muslims are also targeted; Brahmin interpreters flee to Vijayanagara (Županov 2000). Amidst coconut palms and banana fields, the Portuguese burn Sanskrit books. Ban the speaking of Konkani. Outlaw offerings to local gods. During Goa's Inquisition, at least 16,000 trials are conducted.

13 Emblematic of this shift is the publication of Dutchman Jan Huygen van Linschoten's *Itinerario* at the end of the 1500s, an account of his time clerking in the *Estado da Índia* in Goa. Filled with navigational and ethnographic information on the East Indies, and rapidly translated into other European languages, Linschoten's text helps displace Portugal's informational hegemony and trading primacy in Asia, and contributes to a wider discourse on Portuguese *decadência* or decline. See Steenbrink 1993: 25) and Nocentelli 2013: 66–89).

14 With the onset of Portugal's Inquisition, Lisbon's diverse groups encounter segregation based on race and religion. An index of this trajectory in the city are the demarcated water spouts at municipal fountains: separate spouts earmarked for Moorish, mixed-ancestry and Indian slaves and freedmen (Lowe 2015: 66).

The Inquisition is both performance art and political machine. Portuguese soldiers and Jesuit priests enact *auto-da-fé* processions in Old Goa. In this, they mime King Manuel's mannered cortège in Lisbon. The auxiliaries of *Estado da Índia* dress in finery to incinerate the traitorous.

In Old Goa, the Sé Cathedral's bells toll to mark the spectacle's start. The accused are dragged up from dungeons in the Palace of the Inquisition opposite. The ash of heretics litters public squares, impure residues burned off the body politic. People shorn of their affiliations and ambiguities become only product. Not of what they make but what they think. The *degredado* is no longer an isolate: anyone – Jew, Muslim, Hindu – can be degraded.

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Walking along the Tagus, I am close to where Manuel's palace stood. Along with the *Casa da Índia*, it was flattened in Lisbon's 1755 earthquake. I envisage the city Raulu Chatim was in, as plural and divided as today.

But my mind drifts back to Goa, where Raulu Chatim likely ended his days. Years ago, I visited Old Goa, where gilt reliquaries – decorative containers for the remains of Catholic saints – abound. The most famous is Saint Francis Xavier's tomb in Old Goa's Basilica of Bom Jesus. It was completed in 1637 by Goan craftsmen, in silver filigree with crystal panels.

A century earlier, Xavier was an energetic exponent of the Inquisition. He exhorted the Portuguese crown to enforce Catholic dominion on India's western coast.[15] Raulu Chatim enters the historical record and vanishes. He leaves no trace. Maybe his fame grew. Perhaps he saw the Inquisition pyres in Goa. Possibly he became a *degredado*. Maybe, perhaps, possibly: the speculative grammar of an unmarked life.

In contrast, Xavier enters history's archive and remains. His traces are venerated in a procession and feast each decade. In an ironic reversal, Xavier's body is now a fetish object, his life turned into souvenirs: the person has become the product.

Craftsmen from Goa like Raulu Chatim made the reliquaries for *Estado da Índia*. These items are agreeably innocent at Lisbon's *Museu do Oriente*, shaping its story of convivial comingling. Following this lead, scholars interpret such reliquaries for melding Asian and European styles, for their pastiche of motifs. Yet each ornament also speaks

15 Xavier's renown grew through his purported miracles in Portuguese coastal fortresses and trading posts in Asia in the 16th century. His exorcisms were directed at the custom of Portuguese *casados* cohabiting with Asian women, households which relied on local methods of curation. The threat of soluble European selves, permeated by native "paganism", enabled Xavier "to intervene in order to reassert Christian control and his personal authority over these disruptive experiences coming from intercultural and inter-racial mixing" (Županov 1998: 150–151).

to colonial cleansing; they express not just an aesthetic but a politics. Erasing earlier histories, expelling unwanted contaminants, these artifacts inform a modern counter-story: of pain inflicted in the service of purity.

3. Fact and Truth

Till now, we appraised possible readings of 16th century artifacts, to shed light on Europe's past and present. These items plotted Europe's longstanding admixture in tension with the politics of purity. Here, I continue this train of thought, shifting from the Portuguese to the Dutch colonial world, while continuing to probe what artifacts do. In line with the previous section, this second part of the essay moves from cultural representation to political analysis, while tracking movement and mixture between continents.

In Spring 2021, a museum visit made me question the stories we ascribe to our journeys. I had come to Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum: the guardian of Dutch culture, and a central repository of European art. Entire floors and wings, replete with Greco-Roman statues, Renaissance landscapes, Flemish still-lifes. In such a place, I decode a history that is recognizable but not wholly my own.

It was early summer, and I was with my children. We entered a gallery and my son faced an oil painting. I glanced blankly at a familiar 17th-century scene: people of wealth, with powdered wigs and lace sleeves, feasting on delicacies. My boy, Roshan, black hair and eyes, in a T-rex shirt and Teva sandals, lingered. So I looked closer and saw, startlingly, another brown boy, with black hair and eyes, in the painting.

Figure 1. Gerard Wigmana, *Dinner with Julius Schelto van Aitzema, Sara van den Broek, Guests and Servants* (1697).

Source: Reproduced by permission of Gemeente Noardeast-Fryslân, Netherlands

That boy is Filander van Bengalen. In grey livery and buckled, shiny shoes, he holds a tray obligingly. Filander is said, in the exhibition catalogue, to be 10 years old, as is my son when we visit. The figures in this painting from 1697 are in Dokkum, close to the North Sea. How did Filander come to serve in this remote place? And what does his journey tell us about our contemporary parsing of difference?

The painting is shown, in the context of our visit, during Rijkmuseum's "Slavery" exhibition. The exhibit plainly details kidnapping, confinement, mutilation, and erasure. We see a branding iron that seared possession onto skin. A brass collar that encircled a person's neck. A foot stock of heavy timber in which one sat stuck.

These materials propped up Dutch global supremacy in the 1600s, their navigational acumen built on earlier Portuguese forays in Asia and the Americas. Slaves – from West Africa, the Malay Archipelago, and the Indian subcontinent – stitched together this Dutch world. "Maritime prowess" and "capitalist speculation", in this sense, are heroic abstractions. What this world rested upon was intimate terror. Beheading, burning, flaying, and drowning: slaves' actual present and frequent future (Gilroy 1993; Trouillot 2015 [1995]).

At their Amsterdam school, my children learn another history: that of the *Gouden Eeuw* or Golden Age. It is a parable of intrinsic unfolding, of cultural genius. Innovations in science and technology, and art and aesthetics, become native inventions. This pedagogical industry insists that the contemporary – democracy, modernity, capitalism – was birthed in Europe.[16]

The Rijksmuseum reckons with the suffering that constituted the Golden Age's underside. But making such violence explicit seems to preserve narrative privilege. Europeans are the historical actors, non-Europeans the mute victims. Cue the telling response of pity and guilt.

The Rijksmuseum exhibit can, however, invite a counter-reading of the past. Arguably, it was the sugar-producing and spice-picking Dutch slaves and indentured workers in Brazil, the Banda islands, the Cape Colony, and Suriname who, in their productivity, politics, and pleasures, embodied the emergent and dynamic. Slaves – picking nutmeg, drying mace, stirring molasses – generated the cash-flow to support the likes of Rembrandt (Nicolaas 2021).[17]

Slaves also were novel in political organization. In the exhibit is a silk map with Maroon settlements. Maroons comprised Africans of disparate traditions and tongues, brought to the Caribbean (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Streva 2021). Remarkably, they forged autonomous communities outside of plantation hierarchies. Fleeing into the interior, they organized and nurtured a new kind of society, despite relentless Dutch manhunts.

And it was slaves who innovated in aesthetic forms. The exhibit shows a painting of rare plantation festivity: slaves singing and dancing, and in that, affirming existence. Elsewhere in the Rijksmuseum's collection is an image of plantation *Du* dances, where slaves could express dissent in vital form. These were moments of joy and critique. Such dance channelled African musical and linguistic inheritances (like the Anansi spider myth, discussed later) and generated new forms.

16 On the intellectual production shoring up this self-congratulatory, hermetic view of the western world's genesis, see Dussel 2000; Graeber 2007; Buck-Morss 2000.

17 The coercive political economy of commodity production and the creative political economy of artistic production are intimately linked. In the Rijksmuseum is Rembrandt's full-sized double portrait, from 1634, of a wealthy Amsterdam couple, Oopjen Coppit and Marten Soolmans. The Soolmans family became rich owning an Amsterdam refinery which processed raw sugar harvested by enslaved Africans in Brazil (Nicolaas 2021). The flaunted and visible – the extravagant lace and rosettes in Rembrandt's painting of the couple – obscures the offstage suffering which underwrote such portraiture.

All of this brings us to the painting with Filander. He belonged to a swath of people from North India and the Bay of Bengal, abducted, branded, and sold from the early 1600s.[18] They remind us that the history of slavery is not confined to the Atlantic or those taken from Africa. Like other Dutch slaves, those extracted from India were severed from their relations and self-understandings. These pasts deleted, their last names became uniform toponyms like “van Bengalen”.[19]

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dutch East India Company (or VOC) supercharged human trafficking in Asia. They intensified the quantity of human cargo and stretched their geographical distribution. Yoked to farms and households across Dutch possessions, they picked nutmeg in the Banda islands, built fortifications and worked as domestics in Batavia, and picked grapes in southern Africa’s Cape Colony (Holtrop 2021).[20]

And some of them, like Baron van Bengalen and his son, Filander, accompanied their Dutch masters home. Despite prohibitions on bringing overseas slaves to the Netherlands, VOC functionaries could successfully petition for some to accompany them home, while enslaved “servants” would journey to Europe unreported (Holtrop 2021: 171).

Filander arrived in the Netherlands in 1689. Eventually, he and his mother, Rosette – from Sumbawa, in the Sunda islands in Southeast Asia – became servants in Friesland province. If the larger Rijksmuseum exhibit qualifies a nativist reading of the past, this painting of unexpected proximity unsettles narratives of today. Let us consider three ways we might read the portrait.

We first have the white supremacist story of the “The Great Replacement”. It suggests that shadowy elites are facilitating demographic transfer in the West. This is a theory of how the European present became muddled, its purity and traditions lost. And yet here is Filander and his mother, 320 years ago, in about as Aryan and Christian a place as Europe can be. The white nationalist refrain – of a pristine European population getting impinged upon – is implausible looking at this painting. European heterogeneity is

18 More than 26,000 slaves from the Indian subcontinent were transported by the Dutch VOC just from Arakan between 1624 and 1665. A separate traffic in slaves from Bengal, conducted via private traffickers through VOC circuits, from the middle of the 17th century and throughout the entire 18th century, comprised hundreds of thousands of people (Holtrop 2021: 156). See also Subrahmanyam (2005: 240–242).

19 New European first names foisted upon slaves were taken from “the Bible, the classics of antiquity or the months of the year” (Holtrop 2021: 149). Slaves from India with the toponym “van Bengalen” found in Dutch archives include those called Augustus, Abraham, Susanna, and Angela. Slaves could not only change hands but, as part of their status as transferable objects, change names during their lifetime.

20 See Ghosh (2021) on Dutch mass killings and slavery in the Banda islands in the 1600s, conducted to monopolize and bolster nutmeg production.

hardly a novelty; the trade of the VOC and other multinational corporations accelerated mixing on the continent.

Second, there is, from a different political direction, the “empire strikes back” story. This, too, is a tidy narrative, yet one that strains. Remember that Filander is moving through a time and space of legal and moral disagreement on subjugated status. Moving between slave and servant, child and adult, Asia and Europe, he falls into the impasses of human worth.

And third, there is the integration story: a tranquil and tranquilising one of distinct others blending in. In real life, after his tray-hoisting days were over, Filander van Bengalen became chief of police in Dokkum. He married a Frisian woman and had several children. We might, however, hesitate to share pride in his trajectory. It is too hagiographic and orderly, as are all stories of assimilation.

I wish, at the Rijksmuseum with Roshan, looking at the painting with Filander, I knew what to say. For the stories of white people’s replacement, of south-north migration, of dutiful integration, flatten and domesticate. All buckle against the silences, the contingencies, of how we get to where we are, of what such movements mean.

Here Toni Morrison’s distinction between fact and truth can instruct us (Morrison 1995). For a novelist like her, the truth of how a slave thinks and feels entails going beyond fact. For slavery, as a system, relentlessly obstructed the capacity to represent inner life. The ability to write, the means to record: with few exceptions, these were, by European slaveholders, denied (Hartman 1997).

Filander’s provenance, his self-knowledge, was excised, so that we, as much as him, have shreds where something whole existed. In the painting, he is visible but not audible; evident as supporting actor, but silent as consciousness.[21] The picture of Filander allows us the tantalizing possibility of a different story. Yet his story remains unintelligible insofar as we move among scraps of biographical fact. Or rely on familiar, sometimes comforting, but often deficient readings. For my boy Roshan – Netherlands-born yet prone to be asked “where are you from?” – the truth of our pathways, past and present, is yet to be written.

4. Webbing the World

In previous sections, I examined the tensions of hybridity and imperatives of purity, and drew on a Dutch painting of an Indian slave to probe the distinction between a

21 Non-western slaves usually emerge in the archives of the early modern period through administrative records: estate inventories of Europeans where slaves are listed among the transferrable merchandise, as well as records of punishment and notarial deeds of transfer (Holtrop 2021).

determinate “fact” and an open-ended “truth”. To conclude our journey and point to generative possibilities, I want, in this third section, to think about how metaphors enable a different reading of movement and encounter, and thus open up a different practice of politics.

It is evident to many that we conjure our societies as static, terrestrial roots.[22] Being sons of the soil, of the fatherland or motherland, are reigning metaphors.[23] They underlie ideas first broached in the nineteenth-century heyday of social science (which was when the nation-state also emerged). These include notions of race, community, culture, and nation.[24] As modern beings, we have become invested in fixed origins.

I find this idea to be exhausted and misleading. If language frames what is natural, and images establish what is possible, our metaphors need an update. This section advances an alternate figuration, that of the spider’s web. A spider’s web gives a more apt image of how, as social beings, we converge and unfold. To illustrate, let us look at the story of the Anansi spider.

In 1928, American anthropologists Melville and Frances Herskovits arrived in Suriname, a Dutch colony on the rim of the Caribbean (Herskovits and Herskovits 1936). The Herskovits, studying popular folklore, gravitated to capital Paramaribo’s *dyari* – “yards” or open-air compounds. Yards were proletarian zones outside of European scrutiny. They were one version of a general type; barrack-like quarters for the racial underclass dispersed through the Caribbean. One could see them in Port of Spain in Trinidad and Georgetown in British Guiana.

At Paramaribo’s interstices, yards comprised an agglomeration of cabins with multiple families, and open communal space, or clearings, for daily activities such as cooking.

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22 On the yoking of social and terrestrial images in modern polities, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]). They build off the figurative contrast between arboreal, or tree-like formations – centralized and hierarchical – and rhizomatic, or more diffuse, modes. For Deleuze and Guattari, the unified or “molar” tree, and the nomadic unboundedness of the “molecular” rhizome, stand in for inter-dependent but distinctive ways of being.

23 Benedict Anderson succinctly captures how passionate patriotism or “political love can be deciphered from the ways in which languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, *Vaterland*, *patria*) or that of home… Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied… nation-ness is assimilated to skin color, gender, parentage and birth-era – all those things one can not help” (Anderson 1991: 143). George Mosse elaborates how the *Vaterland* relies upon cultivating embodied affects, and circumscribing affinities: “the supremacy of the fatherland over the individual subordinated personal desires to the collective consciousness – the Volk, the ‘people’” (Mosse 1985: 72).

24 The suturing together of an ethnic and religious public and its putative territorial roots is not confined to the west. It is also central to postcolonial nationalisms. For a discussion of the centrality of *Bharat Mata* (India Mother) in contemporary Hindu nationalism – a feminized polity anchored in a fixed land, or *bhoomi*, that must be aggressively defended against foreign, especially Muslim depredations – see Chatterjee (1993: 113–114) and Hansen (1999: 82-83, 109-112).

Yards were primarily inhabited by Afro-Surinamese, mainly descended from West African slaves. But other sections of the colonial underclass – Javanese, Chinese, and Hindostani – were also found there.

Figure 2: Migrants in a yard in Paramaribo, Suriname.

Source: Leiden University / KITLV Shelf Mark / Image Code 8859.

For Dutch officials, Paramaribo's yards were rowdy and unsanitary: a moral and health hazard.[25] This official unease coincided with the knotting, across imperial formations, of scientific racism and biomedical authority in the late nineteenth century (Stoler 2010). Burgeoning state administrations, new technologies, and twinned notions of racial purity and bodily health, led to intervention in the lives of the colonized.[26] Yet despite this official unease around the yards, the Herskovits' saw a creative ferment in them. At night in the yards, they noted, the "gossip is liveliest"; neighbours competed for acclaim in singing and story-telling and Winti priestesses led dances to the gods (Herskovits and Herskovits 1936: 15).

The Hindostani, or indentured Indians, arrived in Suriname after 1873, and slavery's abolition. Docile labour was necessary, to keep Caribbean sugar plantations, central to

25 In Dutch colonial newspapers, and in governmental reports from the late nineteenth century, yards were "pig sheds" that were "filthy and dirty" and full of "constant discord" (Fokken 2018: 272–275). These apparent hotbeds of strife were read through the liberal discourse of improvement: yards were communal spaces precluding individual responsibility.

26 In the colonial archive of this period, "intimacy between contracted emigrants, indigenous people, slaves, and slave-descendent peoples are referenced by negative means, in cautionary rhetoric and statements of prohibition with respect to possible contacts between colonized groups, all implying the fear and anxiety of racial proximity in a context of mixture and unstable boundaries" (Lowe 2015: 34).

European wealth from the 1600s, profitable.[27] Indians fulfilling this function in Suriname were of a larger wave of subcontinental migration to the region from the 1800s to early 1900s (Tinker 1974). The largest portion – of roughly half a million migrants from all of Asia in the 19th century – went to the British West Indies, including British Guiana, Trinidad and Tobago (Lowe 2015: 36-37). Smaller numbers ended up in Suriname, and nearby French Guadalupe and Martinique, as well as British Jamaica, St. Lucia, Nevis, St. Vincent and Grenada.

The Hindostani under Dutch jurisdiction in Suriname were to reside near plantations they worked on. But soon they were present in Paramaribo's yards. The Herskovits saw them there, alongside African, indigenous, and Asian people. Yards hosted an expressive amalgam of diviners, healers, and ceremonial dance, part of a wider "countercultural" Caribbean religiosity (Fokken 2018: 273–275). Disparate groups, in settings such as markets, adopted linguistic patois, healing ideas, and ritual practices.[28]

This interlacing of gossip, song, and ritual included Anansi storytelling. The Anansi spider, in West Africa, has long figured in oral tales (Marshall 2010). Through slavery, and the journey between the Gold Coast and New World, this crawler became part of Caribbean folklore. The Anansi is seen as cunning and a bit of a trickster. In one version, the spider, through subterfuge, gets the sky god to part with his stories. The Anansi then shares them with everyone, democratizing what was private property. In other renderings, on both Atlantic coasts, the spider outwits larger beings, dissembling to achieve its goal.

On Caribbean plantations, the school of life was in stories. Strategic indirection vis-à-vis colonial masters was needed to survive. Work slow-downs, staged confusion, and food theft preserved strength and autonomy.[29]

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The web motif informs literature scholar Hazel Carby's memoir, *Imperial Intimacies*, on her Jamaican and British family (Carby 2019). It suggests movement and narrative

27 On how the Caribbean sugar trade figured into European wealth, and how racialized plantations figured, if elliptically and implicitly, in Western art and political thought, see Buck-Morss 2000; Mintz 1985; Trouillot 2015 [1995].

28 Festivity's incorporative aspect – the way that it invites disparate forms of participation – troubled colonial authorities in the Caribbean. Madhavi Kale describes the celebration of Hosay (Muharram) by Hindus, Muslims, and Afro-Trinidadians in colonial Trinidad. It was seen as suspect because it dissolved so-called "traditional forms of Indian cultural expression" (Kale 1994: 85). In turn, this rebuke to cultural continuity and segmentation was a political threat. The boisterous confidence of such festivity was dangerous to colonial authorities, a sign that Indian labour was "unpredictable, possibly ungovernable" (Kale 1994: 86).

29 For a broader discussion of such modes of resistance prevalent amongst workers in the Caribbean, including Asian indentured laborers, see Kale 1994 and Marshall 2010. On a general discussion of quotidian or everyday forms of resistance among subaltern peoples, see Scott 1990.

as kinds of connective tissue. The migration of bodies and stories we tell are woven strands:

> The architecture of this tale has the tensile strength of a spider's web spun across the Atlantic: spinnerets draw threads from archives, histories and memories, joining the movement of men from Britain during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars to the flood of volunteers that left the Caribbean to travel to Britain during the Second World War; the radial fibres that hold rural England and rural Jamaica in tension link the Atlantic port cities of Bristol and Kingston. Orphan threads have been left broken because I do not know how they should connect. Though I am unable to make these repairs the web weathers and holds. (Carby 2019: 3–4).

A spider's labyrinth, in this way, resembles our world: one that is partial and fraying, that requires constant mending, and yet has, out of this incompletion and fragility, an overall architecture.

Here, the web ensnares our fiction of society as a pure pedigree. The Anansi arachnid, for post-slavery communities, signals convergence in movement, but also, crucially, what is undone and divided: the severing of African ties via the Middle Passage; the demand to clear and harvest unfamiliar land. In the Caribbean, the conceit of primordial wholeness and categorical purity was impossible.[30]

What makes the Anansi relevant to our discussion is that it permeated beyond Afro-Caribbean groups to adjacent others.[31] Crucial here, in the West Indies, were spaces of meshing, like yards and steamships. Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*, for instance, tracks indentured workers who moved back and forth between Guiana or Trinidad and India (Bahadur 2013). Their journeys were suffused by physical danger, familial stress, and money woes. On these difficult, lengthy oceanic passages, Indians told "nansi stories, tall tales from West Africa about the spider Anansi" (Bahadur 2013: 168).

30 It is useful here to distinguish rhetorical enmity between social groups, and the prosaic mixture that belies claims of separation. Aisha Khan notes, for example, that a social discourse that posits Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian enmity cannot explain the offspring produced in sexual encounters between disparate groups Khan (2003: 9). Khan's observation, of Indo-Caribbean anxiety at sexual mixing with other racial groups, is also evident in the documentary *Jahaji Music* (Sharma 2007). In it, "chutney-soca", a hybrid musical genre deriving from soca and calypso and using Indian instruments, is marked by sexual innuendo and suggestive dancing, drawing the participation of Indo-Trinidadians as well as their ire.

31 The prevalence of the Anansi motif within Indo-Caribbean groups can be seen at different levels, from the naming of people in the community as "Nancy", to Anansi-like motifs of tricksters transgressing hierarchies in literary texts by descendants of indentured Indian migrants (Sidnell 2000).

Nansi tales were picked up through Brown and Black proximity: on plantations, in créole towns, in Paramaribo's yards.[32] From such places, the Anansi trafficked between the Caribbean and South Asia, when Indians returned home. Moving athwart, spider-like, the Anansi story took a roundabout route from Africa to Asia via the West Indies.

This non-linear movement shows how culture, a latticework, is diffuse and leaky. Some things stick and others pass through.[33] The Anansi's travel through disparate societies embodies mutable mesh itself.[34]

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Thus to a second illumination afforded by the Anansi motif. The spider's web is incomplete; its constituent parts have an uneven integrity. Parts get broken by insects, damaged by rain, and weakened by wind. Its geometric components never achieve wholeness, as in imagined unity. The filaments that comprise its netting remain provisional, though still supple and supportive.

As Carby notes, webs can be broken or disconnected, yet still weather and hold. No form – be it a spider's web or person's body or social network – is finished. Our go-to metaphor of roots implies primary ancestry. It invites us to extrude difference, in the service of future completion. Yet the web's layout, and our social arrangements, are not determined a priori. Many shapes are possible.

One term for this is incipience. For Adrienne Rich, in a poem of that title, the spider manifests what, at every moment, is possible:

> to know the composing of the thread
> inside the spider's body
> first atoms of the web
> that will hang visible tomorrow (Rich 2013: 7).

Like spider snares or star constellations, we exist in unsettled adjacency. Humans are akin to webs or galaxies: matter coexisting in irresolution. Our stories are yet to be told from connections not yet made.

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32 Nayan Shah draws our attention to the forms of "migrant sociability" and "stranger intimacy" in "zones of transit" such as the port colony (Shah 2011: 55).

33 Plurality is, despite rote liberal applause, usually a fraught social reality. Tejaswini Niranjana has written of the historical censure by Indian nationalists of women who underwent indenture in Trinidad from the second half of the 19th century, and the contemporary anxiety at blurred song-dance genres like "chutney-soca" (Niranjana 2006). Women's participation in the ludic and erotic genres spawned by the encounter with Afro-Caribbeans competes with the patriarchal refrain of decency and domesticity. For a further take on the ways in which "chutney" music among Indo-Caribbeans in Trinidad figures into notions of propriety and hybridity, see Mohammed 2002: 178–179.

34 A parallel analysis of mesh as metaphor for sociality is Tim Ingold's notion of "meshwork" as "entangled lines of life, growth and movement" through which action emerges (Ingold 2011: 63).

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This brings us to the third part of this story, around the labour of connective care. The metaphor of roots invites a native-alien distinction. In India, America, and Europe, others are conceived of as infestations: as menaces to uproot. The spider image illustrates the limits of this thinking. Webs are always, somewhere in their physical structure, fraying or damaged. A spider's tracery may be full of holes yet still serve as a place to rest, feed, and thrive.

The banal but necessary work of life – nourishing, upholding, repairing, patching – is the spider's lot. And it is also that of many people who comprise an unseen infrastructure of support. Across many societies, it is migrants who clean, cook, and care. As was seen during the covid pandemic, the state can be secondary to our well-being. What matters beyond official infrastructures are grids of kin, friends, and strangers. We exist in the criss-crossing of migrants and (often female) dependencies. Authorities tear and tangle – yet depend upon – these webs. They harass foreigners and underpay women, without whom society would collapse.

Our stories – our relations, too – are passing forms in a larger design. A web will split and dissolve. A person gets ill and vanishes. Our societies fragment and disperse. Yet we still respond and recuperate to stitch something new. The spider constantly moves around and mends the form which supports it. For us, mending is both the manual activity of weaving fibres, and the aspect of interpersonal care. Maintenance becomes a practical and moral capacity: a means to live, and to tell the story of how we ought to live.

The Anansi figure and spider web thus draw us to our present. It not only tells us how we, across time and space, came to be. It offers a vision of what we might be. Connected through sticky links, not tethered to roots. In process and undefined, not pre-set as fixed types.

5. Conclusion: Methods and Movements

As we move towards this essay's end, I wish to describe how my described aesthetic and material artifacts have underwritten this essay's method and movements: its mode of elicitation and its chronological structure. We departed with Portugal inaugurating Europe's entry into Asia and the Americas in the 1500s. This opened up into the Dutch extension of this European ascendance through global slavery in the 1600s. Finally, we came to the period from the 1800s till the present, and the comingling of four continents in the Caribbean.

The first and second sections reckoned with themes of purity and silence, which I suggested marked Europe's presence overseas. The precious-metal prestige objects made by Asian artisans for Portuguese elites effaced non-European and non-Christian traces. The second artifact, a painting of a young slave from India serving Dutch masters, is more ambiguous, allowing a non-western presence that is clearly subordinated into the frame.

These sections express compartments of culture and politics, bequeathed by imperial formations, and the epistemologies of European modernity. The third image complicated this. Here, we see the unpredictable and generative results of movement and mixture. A social order which seeks to segment is undermined by mobility and exchange.

This chronological and conceptual trajectory was bolstered by scholarly literature on the history and anthropology of colonization, slavery, cultural forms, and migration. Throughout this text, we tracked mutations of affinity, translation, and demarcation evident between European, Indian, and Afro-Caribbean people. Moving between the 1500s and the present day, and tacking between Latin America, India, and Europe, I considered topics such as memory, power, and used first-hand experiences alongside analytical framings.

In rounding off, I wish to say something of this essay's movements and methods of elicitation. We might say they were akin to the underwater pearl diver. Hannah Arendt uses pearl diving to metaphorically describe Walter Benjamin's mode of analysis (Arendt 1968). Standard history relies on layered deposits of sediment: stacks neatly on top of one another. This is the realm of tradition, the seafloor of linearity and causality.

The pearl diver, in contrast, does not authoritatively map or neatly segment. The seafloor – official history – is already a fragmented abyss. As modern beings, there can be no authoritative, unaffected domain, only the recurrence of rupture, and murky depths scraped and churned. The pearl diver employs a nimble discretion to locate and extract items of value in the present. What grabs one's attention is pried loose from its context and put into adjacency with something else, as Benjamin did by coalescing disparate impressions. As Arendt puts it, the pearl diver seeks not to "excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface… the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization" (Arendt 1968: 50–51).

So it is that, in this essay, we strove to collect and reassemble, to disembed and recombine, what has drifted away and may be seen anew. The stories we encountered – of an Goan goldsmith working in early 1500s Lisbon, of an Indian child-slave brought to the Netherlands in the late 1600s, and of the confluences, from the late 1800s in the Caribbean, of people from Asian, Africa, and the Americas – belong to the past but

have sometimes escaped notice. They teeter in the void, obscured in the trenches of our consciousness, where many stories dissolve.

Yet this was not a reclamation or extraction project. Our task, akin to the pearl diver, was to think with these images as something we can use. Pearls, after all, are crystallizations of deposited sediment. Such grains are foreign irritants to the oyster or mussel, as this essay's human figures can also seem: matter out of place.[35]

Though awkward entrants to new contexts, we find them of value now, in the present. Moving athwart, in an errant manner, is more useful to us than keeping pearls lodged in place, in their proper milieu. This essay wasn't honouring the abode of fragments but placing them in proximity to disparate things, to reveal what they churn up. With this, we begin threading these pearls, to see what new shapes they make.

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35 The term "matter out of place" is derived from the anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas 2001 [1966]). In her classic analysis of purity and pollution, Douglas identifies things and people belonging to demarcated symbolic categories as a threat when they transgress established boundaries.

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Contact

Coordination Office
Maria Sybilla Merian Centre
Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America

Rua Morgado de Mateus, 615
São Paulo – SP
CEP 04015-051
Brazil

mecila@cebrap.org.br

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