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# Africans and Asians: Historiography and the Long View of Global Interaction

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The dispersion of Africans is a phenomenon of the modern world.

—Kilson and Rotberg<sup>1</sup>

The historian who looks eastward, confronting the vast movement of men and women across Asia will be taken for granted.<sup>2</sup>

—George Shepperson

The black man is lord of the people of the East.<sup>3</sup>

—Al-Baladhuri

## RACE, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Westerners have a tendency to view interaction among the world's various peoples as a marker of the modern age. This implies that interaction across the globe is a modern phenomenon given primarily to Westerners. Inherent in this tendency is the inability of non-West-

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Kilson and Robert Rotberg, eds., "Preface," in *The African Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> George Shepperson, "Introduction," in *The African Diaspora*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Baladhuri (ed. Muhammad Hamidullah), I: 505. Cited in Bernard Lewis, "The African Diaspora and the Civilization of Islam," in *The African Diaspora*, p. 44.

erners and those also deemed *un*-modern to participate in this interaction.

Even when this interaction occurs within modern time and space, most of us have little critical regard for what we view. For instance, what are the levels of African and Asian interaction in the "New World"? How is this interaction interpreted? What are its nuances and implications? What should we make of an eighteenth-century Mexican slave from "Bengal" who sues for his freedom and that of his wife, "*una creola negra*"? Or how is Alberto Fujimori understood in a Peru once mined by African slaves?

The exigencies of modern racial construction have erected paradigms that are accepted globally and that militate against critical examination of African and Asian interaction. In that regard, modern racialized hierarchies preclude Africans and Asians, as well as other interested parties, from making such inquiries. If this is true of modern analysis and the histories that it spawns, the issue of the histories that precede the modern era written by those of us who consider ourselves "Western" or modern—even postmodern—appear to be more problematic.

This is particularly true in the examination of Africans and people of African descent. The vision imposed on Africans is temporally and geographically fixed: movement to the western hemisphere in the wake of the Columbian voyages. The vehicle, and therefore, the sociopolitical economic icon of this experience is the slave ship. It is here that the histories of Africa, Africans, and peoples of African descent are "known."

So, a series of questions is initiated here. For me, the most pressing is positing the existence of African-Asian interaction in the periods that precede the Columbian age. This includes considerations of how such interactions might be characterized and the temporal, geopolitical, economic, and cultural dimensions of those interactions. Here, these questions are engaged in three ways. First is an examination of sources from the European classical and the biblical ages through those surrounding the voyages of Columbus for what they might reveal of African-Asian interactions. The crux of the analysis involves rereading and reinterpretation. This means not simply the recognition of definitional anachronisms, but the ways in which definitions blend, meld, and shift over time—blending, melding, and shifting to meet the political and economic exigencies of time. In fact, the "empirical idea" of what might or might not be African and Asian is bound up in these fluctuations. Such an empiricism is a construct of the modern age, and its histories reflect it.

Second, in this regard, is a discussion of how Africa and the African and Asia and the Asian have been conceptualized and then conceptually collapsed over time and in various discussions. The most prevalent example here has been the various characterizations of the “Orient” and its diminishing constituent parts.

Finally, this discussion includes the geopolitical economic dynamics over which African-Asian interactions are played out.

Here we also need to speculate on terminology as well. For instance, how should we interpret the notions of the “Orient” or Orientalism? Of course, Edward Said offers some guidance here, as does Martin Bernal. Their notions were explicated in an old Western civilization textbook that argued that pre-Mycenaean Greece was more “Oriental” than Western.<sup>4</sup> Of course, this idea already had been championed by scholars of African descent, writing a century or more before them.<sup>5</sup> It was also witnessed in the inauguration of institutional structures such as the London School of Oriental Studies, which once contented itself with the notion that all that need be known of Africa rested within the purview of the “Orientalist.” Africa was an afterthought in its construction, an afterthought that liberated Egypt from the African continent and African peoples. Egypt was articulated as a “crossroads” of the world right through the modern age; yet it was a road that no African ever crossed—at least no “black” African of historical substance.

This observation leads to two points of speculation here. The first relates to Kilson and Rotberg’s declaration that the African diaspora is “a phenomenon of the modern world.” The second revolves around the ways in which the “Orient” and the “Semite” (Arab and Jew) weigh on considerations of who and what Africans are in relation to these two conceptualizations. What role does race play in these conceptualizations and the related epistemologies, historiographies, and histories?

There is a sense of “Africanness”—“Africinity”—displayed in the

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<sup>4</sup> T. Walter Wallbank, Alistair M. Taylor, and Nels M. Bailkey, eds., *Civilization Past & Present*, Vol. I (Glencview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1976), p. 96. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, Vol. I (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Maghan Keita, “Deconstructing the Classical Age: Africa and the Unity of the Mediterranean World,” *Journal of Negro History* 74.2 (Spring 1994): 149, 159. Maghan Keita, *Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx* (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 15–26, 41–151. Maghan Keita, “Race, the Writing of History, and Culture Wars,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33.2 (November 2002).

earliest of writings that dominate Western historiography. The Bible, the Talmud, and classical authors including Herodotus, Diodorus, Aeschylus, Vergil, Pliny the Elder, and Quintus of Smyrna have written on this. The interactions of Africans with Europeans and the people of Asia Minor have been analyzed and debated as the crux of Western and then world historiography. One key to understanding this is the debate over the geographic and cultural placement of Egypt: its position as either Asian or African, or as the crossroads for more than the two.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the pending emergence of the modern academy and notions of racial empiricism, the most familiar strains of the debate took form. Here the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt initiated the modern racialized histories with which we are most familiar. This dominant discourse, in the conceptualization of Edward Said, "Orientalized" significant parts of Africa, in effect, rendering them "Asian," or at least non-African. The Napoleonic expedition through the voices of luminaries such as Denon, Gregoire, and Volney was central to a new racial historiography. Here was the incantation and recantation of Africa in a temporal frame that was mind-boggling. In less than a generation Africa would be denied. Napoleon's scientists declared the greatness of Egypt to be "Negro" and African, only to later to reverse themselves. Constantine de Volney would note: "[A] people now forgotten, discovered, while others were yet barbarians, the elements of the arts and sciences. A race of men now rejected from society for their sable skin and frizzled hair, founded on the study of laws of nature, those civil and religious systems which still govern the universe. . . . we reflect that to the race of negroes, at present our slaves . . . we owe our arts and sciences."<sup>6</sup> Volney made this statement only to bow to the political economy of racialized slavery. As Du Bois put it, "The Frenchman Volney called the civilization of the Nile valley Negro after his visit. But such a barrage of denial from later men met him that he withdrew his earlier conclusion, not because of further investigation, but because of scientific opinion in the nineteenth century."<sup>7</sup> Du Bois pointedly identified the coercive political economy that signaled acquiescence

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<sup>6</sup> C. F. Volney, *The Ruins: Or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires: And the Law of Nature* (1802; reprint, New York: Peter Eckler, 1926), quoted in Dickson Bruce Jr., "Ancient Africa and Early Black American Historians, 1883–1915," *American Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1984): 689.

<sup>7</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (1946; rev. and enl. ed., New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 118.

to and then the rise of our most conventional and current historiography concerning Africa and its diaspora. "One must remember that Egyptology, starting in 1821, grew up during the African slave trade, the Sugar Empire and the Cotton Kingdom. Few scholars dared to associate the Negro race with humanity, much less civilization."<sup>8</sup>

These statements rested on the firm foundation of European travel narratives such as those of Edward Long and Janet Schaw. The result in an emerging American landscape, where the early nineteenth-century stakes were quite high, was the conceptual construction of the American school of anthropology. Faced with scholarship from Herodotus, Diodorus, et al. through the French scholars at the close of the eighteenth century, Morton, Glidden, and Nott clearly articulated their intention "to take Egypt out of the hands of the Greeks and tourists."<sup>9</sup>

By the 1830s, what was to become the modern American academy and its professional disciplines—in this case, history and anthropology in particular—were firmly mired in racialized conceptualization that would shape over two hundred years of debate. On one side of this debate were the new American school of anthropology and its heirs and allies—an intellectual collection bent on protecting and justifying racialized slavery and constructing the myth of African inferiority and incapability. Arrayed against them from the late eighteenth century onward were voices from Africa and its diaspora—the Wheatleys, Equianos, Bannekers, Walkers, and Douglasses of the age. Their efforts would give rise to a group of black professional historians. The culmination of those efforts was seen at the close of the nineteenth century and the opening to the twentieth in the works of scholars such as Joseph T. Wilson, William T. Alexander, and of course, George Washington Williams.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk Then and Now: An Essay in the History and the Sociology of the Negro Race* (1939; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1970), p. 25. It should also be noted that Du Bois was quite intent on tracing an African presence in and interaction with Asia.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Long, *History of Jamaica* (London: T. Lowndes, 1774; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1970). Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal in the Years 1774 to 1776*, Evangeline Walker Andrews, ed., in collaboration with Charles McLean Andrews (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934). Samuel Morton, *Crania Americana* (1839). George B. Glidden, *Types of Mankind* (1840). J. C. Nott was responsible for adapting and translating Arthur de Gobineau's work for American consumption. Also see Gloria Horsley-Meacham, "Bull of the Nile: Symbol, History, and Racial Myth in 'Benito Cereno,'" *New England Quarterly* 64.2 (1991): 236–237. Michael D. Biddiss, "Gobineau and the Origins of European Racism," *Race* 7.3 (January 1966): 264.

<sup>10</sup> David Walker, "Appeal," in *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*, ed. Sterling Stuckey (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro

The heirs of this African diasporic intellectualism were the Woodsons, Du Boises, and Houstons. They were followed by Hansberry and Snowden. Up through the mid twentieth century, the debate, as they enjoined it, was marked by both implicit and explicit reference that underlined the historical interaction between Africa and Asia, and of course, the agency of peoples of African descent.

In the competing historiographic debates, these intellectuals and their scholarship become the background upon which the flash points created by the works of Cheikh Anta Diop, his putative disciples the Afrocentrists, and of course Martin Bernal might be understood. Here, as well, are the works of Jacques Maquet on *Africanité*, Alain Bourgeois, and Valentine Y. Mudimbe.<sup>11</sup> They stand against the most recent set of arguments that finds them ahistorical and dangerous. Among the most prominent voices here are Mary Lefkowitz, Molly Meyerowitz Levine, and pundits such as George Will. These are also minds that have not considered African and Asian interactions. In effect many of them have difficulty in gauging African historicity or that of any peoples of African descent.

In regard to African and Asian interactions there is an exclusionary device that has worked its way from the somewhat conventionally accepted works of scholars such as Hodgson and McNeill to more radical thinkers such as Abu-Lughod, Wallerstein, and Frank. Even Edward Said found it difficult to make such a connection.<sup>12</sup>

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Ethnologically Considered," in *Negro Social and Political Thought, 1850–1920*, ed. Howard Brotz (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 227–235. Edward Wilmot Blyden, Tayler Lewis, Theodore Dwight, et al., *The People of Africa* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Co., 1871). George Washington Williams, *The History of the Negro Race in America* (1883). There was also the significant body of work that emanated from the hierarchy to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Also see Keita, *Race and the Writing of History*, pp. 27–50, 75.

<sup>11</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* [Antériorité des civilisations nègres. English. Selections] (New York: L. Hill, 1974). *Precolonial Black Africa: A Comparative Study of the Political and Social Systems of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the Formation of Modern States* [Afrique noire pré-coloniale. English] (Westport, Conn.: L. Hill, ca. 1987). Alain Bourgeois, *La Grèce antique devant la négritude* (Paris: Présence Africaine). Jacques Maquet, *Africanity, the Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Also see Ali Mazrui, *Africanity Redefined* (2000); Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*; V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: James Currey, 1988). V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: J. Currey, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (1989). Immanuel Wallerstein, "World System versus World-Systems," in *The World System*, ed. Frank and Gills (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 292–296. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa and the Modern World* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1986). Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, "Rejoinder and Conclusions," in *The World System*, pp. 297–307. Andre Gunder

Diop “reintroduced” the notion of the “Asiatic black,” which had currency in Black Nationalist literature in the late 1920s and 1930s; its most prevalent reincarnation is seen in the doctrines of the Nation of Islam under the leadership of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. This was, of course, a doctrine of African-Asian interaction to be dismissed within the mainstream academy. In that regard, however, to be fair to Kilson and Rotberg, the epigram I have lifted from their preface is somewhat ameliorated by the inclusion of chapters by Frank Snowden and Bernard Lewis that account for temporal analyses that are to a large degree “premodern,” and that might give pause to speculation on African-Asian interaction over a *longue durée*. Adele Simmons provides a slightly broader geographic plane of analysis in her treatment of colonial Mauritius.<sup>13</sup>

Snowden’s essay in the volume, “Ethiopians and the Graeco-Roman World,” works by implication in addressing the questions of African movement and diaspora in the ancient world. And while the work centers on what might be regarded as the foundations of the Western world, the “Oriental,” “Eastern,” and “Asian” implications of Snowden’s analysis are not lost on the reader. In fact, they are themes that are played out in Snowden’s other works, works that link Africa, “Ethiopia,” and Egypt to a much broader configuration of the world—the Eastern world, at that. In fact, the analyses of both Snowden and William Leo Hansberry offer a much broader interpretation of terms such as “Afro-Eurasian” or “Afro-Asian” used by scholars such as Marshall Hodgson and William McNeill. In fact, the Snowden-Hansberry interpretations force a conscious analysis of where Africa and peoples of African descent are not within the works of celebrated world historians such as Hodgson and McNeill.<sup>14</sup>

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Frank, *ReORIENT* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Frank’s subtitle is “Global Economy in the Asian Age.” In light of Frank’s most recent work, *ReORIENT*, and his criticism of Philip Curtin in 1991, all of this becomes that much more interesting. Remarking on Curtin’s *Cross-Cultural Trade*, Frank stated: “Curtin . . . has not sought to pursue the African connection in Afro-Asia as far back in history as it may deserve.” Andre Gunder Frank, “A Plea for World System History,” *Journal of World History* 2.1 (Spring 1991): 8. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Frank M. Snowden, “Ethiopians and the Graeco-Roman World,” in *The African Diaspora*, ed. Martin Kilson and Robert Rotberg (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976). Lewis, “The African Diaspora.” Adele Simmons, “Class or Communalism? A Study of the Politics of Creoles in Mauritius,” in *The African Diaspora*.

<sup>14</sup> Frank M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970). Frank M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983). William Leo Hansberry, “Ancient



In large part, the modernist preoccupations are the same ones that propel the analyses of scholars devoted to questions of Islamic, Arab, and "Asiatic" agency and "civilization." Here, the characterizations of the pre-Islamic Arab need to be addressed—addressed in a fashion that speaks to a cultural rather than racial or biological construction. In that regard, we might ask who and what is the "Arab"? Is she/he "Asiatic"? This is certainly the implication of notions that explore contexts such as "Afro-Asian" and "Afro-Eurasian." It is inherent in the construction of "Orientalism" as Said enunciates it. Yet within all this, the prefix "Afro-" is hardly explored. However, it is quite clear that those who are termed "Asiatic"-cum-Arab have a presence and an interaction with the African that precedes "modern" constructions of the "Arab," the "Jew," the "Muslim," and the "Oriental."

Consider the biblical and classical sources. Take the contention over Martin Bernal's subtitle, "The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization." Bernal's assertions (and those who contend with him) argue within the context of a pre-Arab Egypt. They argue within the substance of how Egyptians themselves might be characterized and even biologically and socially constructed. In the common denominator of the debate is the proposition that ancient Egypt was a crossroads, even a "melting pot" for various "racial" and cultural groups assimilated to the grander model of classical Egypt. Within this time and space, those who would become "Arab"—the "Asiatic" and the "Oriental"—are engaged in social and political-economic intercourse with those we now call African.

Even if the most conservative and conventional notions of this interaction are entertained, even if the epistemology that separates Egypt from Africa is accepted, there is no getting around fact that Africa and Asia are in interaction here. Look at the ways in which Kush/Nubia/Ethiopia interacts with Egypt proper, and then beyond that. What should we make of confrontations and emissaries with and among Assyrians, Hittites, Syrians, Persians, and others? These are

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Kush, Old Aethiopia, and the Balad [sic] es Sudan," *Journal of Human Relations* 8 (1960). *Pillars in Ethiopian History: The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook*, Vol. I, ed. Joseph Harris (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974). *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writers: The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook*, Vol. II, ed. Joseph Harris (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981). Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). William H. McNeill, "The Rise of the West after Twenty-Five Years," *The Journal of World History* 1.1 (1990). Keita, "Deconstructing the Classical Age."

peoples and cultures that occupy Hodgson's "Afro-Eurasian *ecumene*." It is a world in which Africa exists, if only as a hazy geographical projection for modern historians. It is also a world in which the Kushite/Nubian/Ethiopian presence receives great recognition. They are characterized as both threat and liberator; salvation to both Egyptian and Jew; integral elements in shaping the history of the biblical and classical periods.<sup>15</sup>

#### AFRICA, ASIA, AND "CLASSICAL" INTERACTION

Within the classical sources, the African and Asian elements are played out as well. Here, they offer a parallel to the biblical accounts. Herodotus, Diodorus, and Pliny are among the authors of the period who provide insight into the interplay of Africans and Asians in the Middle East. Of course the observations of classical scholars speak to an "Ethiopianized" Egypt. They also argue the Ethiopian origins of Egypt itself: "colonists from Ethiopia," the possibility of "black" Canaanites, and of course, commerce and diplomacy (the marriages and strategic alliances that cemented political economic power in the region; again this is Josephus Flavius's characterization of Moses's marriage to the Ethiopian princess Tharbis, and the Bible's allusion to Moses's marriage to the Midian woman after his exile).<sup>16</sup>

Particular attention should be given to the African presence that is attributed to the most renowned of classical sources and the images they provide in the construction of the classical world.<sup>17</sup> Within this

<sup>15</sup> Herbert G. May and Bruce Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Josephus Flavius, "The Antiquities of the Jews," in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987). Henry T. Aubin, *The Rescue of Jerusalem: The Alliance between Hebrews and Africans in 701 B.C.* (New York: Soho Press, 2002). Keita, "Deconstructing the Classical Age."

<sup>16</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Exodus 2:16–22, 18:1–12; Numbers 12:1–16. Josephus Flavius, "The Antiquities of the Jews," pp. 69–70, 69 n. a. Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 146, 149–150, 167. Diodorus Siculus, *Antiquities of Egypt*, trans. Edwin Murphy (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1989). Also see Diodorus quoted in Basil Davidson, *African Civilization Revisited* (Trenton: African World Press, 1991), pp. 61–62. Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 2: 321; 22: 295. Edith Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origins and Functions in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History* 10.5 (1969): 525. Snowden, *Blacks*, pp. 105, 109.

<sup>17</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Meyers (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 13. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Mentor, 1970), p. 11. Quintus Smyrnaeus, *The Fall of Troy*, trans. Arthur S. Way (London: Heinemann; New York: Macmillan, 1913), p. 77. Vergil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Patric Dickin-

context, while we have ample evidence that relates to the Greco-Roman world, and even to a fair degree the Persian world, there is still a tendency to overlook another melding of "Afroasiatic" construction: Carthage.<sup>18</sup> Even here, we might regard the point as well made. However, the earlier historical period seems to be only reiterated and expanded in light of critical analysis.

Herodotus serves this particular issue quite well. And his insights are repeated by a host of classical writers. Here, three points initiate the intimacies between Africans and Asians. First is Herodotus' reference to the "two sorts of Ethiopians" in his illustration of the composition of the *Persian* army. "The eastern Ethiopians . . . served *with* the Indians. These were just like the southern Ethiopians, except for their language and their hair: their hair is straight, while that of the Ethiopians in Libya is the crispest and curliest in the world. The equipment of the Ethiopians from Asia was in most respects like the Indian. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Herodotus' text does several things for us. He situates a distinct group of Africans—this is his allusion, terming them "Ethiopians"—in Asia. He then applies certain cultural affinities that give them semblances that might be recognized among "Indians." He then complicates the "African" and "Asian," writ large, by placing them all within the Persian army alongside of Egyptians, of course. It might be argued that this is the replication and expansion of the historical model mentioned above within the context of the Egyptian empire.

Snowden argues that one historical reference to the size and strength of Ethiopians under arms is related to the prowess of the

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son (New York: New American Library, 1961). Pliny, *Natural History*. These are listed by way of illustration. See Snowden for a much more extensive and comprehensive compilation.

<sup>18</sup> R. Bosworth Smith, *Carthage and the Carthaginians* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. 19. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (1915; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk: Then and Now* (1939; reprint, Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1993), pp. 6, 39. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (1946; reprint, New York: International Publishers, 1969), pp. 136, 141–142. B. H. Warmington, *Carthage* (Robert Hale Limited, 1960), pp. 16, 32. Gilbert Charles Picard and Colette Picard, *Daily Life in Carthage*, trans. by A. E. Foster (New York: McMillan Company, 1961). Gilbert Charles Picard and Colette Picard, *Life and Death in Carthage*, trans. Dominique Collon (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1969). Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization*, trans. Mercer Cook (New York: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974), pp. 70, 118–119, 122. Alain Bourgeois, *La Grece Antique devant la Négritude* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1971), pp. 14–19. Snowden, *Blacks*, pp. 2, 124–125. Valentine Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988). V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994). Keita, "Deconstructing the Classical Age," pp. 153–156.

<sup>19</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, p. 486. Emphasis added.

Nubian pharaoh of Egypt, Taharqa. He then allows Aeschylus to impress us with the import of one Ethiopian contingent in the army of Xerxes: “the thirty thousand ‘Black Horse’ . . . a reference to men, not the type of horse mounted.”<sup>20</sup>

Herodotus’ second tantalizing sliver is the injunction of the Persian city Susa. Clearly, lodged in Herodotus’ thinking was the consciousness of his audience and their acquaintance with Susa, not simply as a great Persian center, but also as one of the origins of a great hero of Troy: Memnon, prince of Ethiopia. Again, Snowden writes that “though associated with the east and Asia . . . Memnon was eventually localized unmistakably in Egypt and Ethiopia.” He leads a troop of twenty thousand to Troy, “one half Ethiopian and the other half from Susa.”<sup>21</sup> This was the “swarthy Memnon” that Vergil celebrated through Aeneas, Memnon of whom Quintus Smyrnaeus wrote in *The Fall of Troy*:

Till our new champion come, the stormy heart  
Of Memnon. Lo, he cometh, leading on  
Hosts numberless, Aethiopia’s swarthy sons.<sup>22</sup>

For Herodotus and the rest of the ancient world, there was a clear association of mythic and historical events that placed Africans in every quadrant of their world, not only as servitor, but as brother, sister, cousin, husband, wife, lady, and lord.

Brother, sister, cousin, husband, wife—Aeneas, Dido—Vergil, Carthage, and the Roman state: in the classical world there are complex, almost overwhelming, series of relationships that characterize both mythological and historical structure and construction. In acknowledging them, McNeill’s *Mythistory*<sup>23</sup> is evoked. Here, in the early juxtaposition and collusion of the African and the Asian, we need to entertain the “casual,” not quite “mundane,” yet almost “pedestrian” ways in which the characters of these “dramas”—historical and otherwise—not only pass, but also embrace each other in the construction of this world: Dido of Tyre, Asian/African—sister/cousin to Memnon; Aethiopia’s Memnon, “cousin” to Trojan Aeneas, Dido’s lover, Rome’s putative founder and conferrer of Classical/Hellenic pedigree; cousin to Hector and Paris, combatants of the Libyan/Egyptian and Ethio-

<sup>20</sup> Snowden, *Blacks*, pp. 123–124.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151–153.

<sup>22</sup> Quintus Smyrnaeus, *The Fall of Troy*, p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago and London: University of London Press, 1986), pp. 1–22.

pian "Danaans," whose scions, both Homer and Herodotus assure us, are the heirs of the royal house of Sparta. The preceding is not a complete sentence. If this passage is difficult and tedious, it is intentional. It is illustrative of the nature of the inquiry, even when we begin with what is most familiar. And even here, it conjures up the desire of all authors: to be read more than once.

Almost from its inception, the mythistory of the "Western" classical world evokes the interactions of Africa and Asia. Those interactions occur in personalities who become representative of cultures, bodies of people, and masses of land. Go back to Bernal's evocation of the "Afroasiatic roots of Classical Civilization." The mythic proportions of the historical paradigm—even the points of contention—on one side or the other are not whether this Afroasiatic interaction occurred, but the degree to which it was played out. The "children" of Africa that are central to Homer's epic, the Danaans, are related to the "children" of Asia who populate Ilium and those who constitute its allies. The reiteration of these relations and interactions—their Africanness and Asianness can be seen in this one mythological genealogy: Belus, king of Tyre, father to Dido of Tyre (later queen of Carthage); father to Cepheus, king of Ethiopia; father to Aegyptos, king of Egypt; and father to Danaus, king of Libya. This is the Afroasiatic line out which come the mythic hero-kings of the Peloponnesus, beginning with Perseus and the royal house of Sparta. This is also the line that will also give rise to Carthage and then, according to Vergil, Rome. And these too are the instances in which we miss African and Asian interactions if we are not diligent in our analysis, and if we are not intent in searching myth for history.

Carthage: Phoenicians in African space, possibly the only "true" Punic empire, and only within the context of Africa—and possibly the most shadowy and overlooked of classical times and space. The leading experts on Carthage resist African relationships for the state. It is "Asian," one of the earliest of the "Oriental" states—it is the place and time, according to them, where Phoenicia is retained, incorruptible. There are, conceivably, no "Africans" in this African space.<sup>24</sup> Forget the marriages to the princesses of this space. Forget the peasants who till its soil, who rise in revolt over imperial policy. Forget the class of "Libyphoenicians" who provide notions of ethnic *mélange* here. Forget the men at arms and their great beasts who spark both the imag-

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<sup>24</sup> Picard, *Daily Life in Carthage and Life and Death in Carthage*. Keita, "Deconstructing the Classical Age," pp. 153–156.

ination and terror of their adversaries from contention with the Greeks over Syracuse to the Roman declaration of “*Carthago delenda est.*” In convention, Carthage is, simply, the “Orient” in Africa—African time and space “Asianized,” and therefore contested.

In this is a certain irony. The terminology that Sanders takes to task as dubious racialized epistemology and historiography—“semitic” and “hamitic”—achieve exactly the opposite of their authors’ intent in this case. First, the terms and the inability to exorcise their conceptual interaction and the physical and social interactions of those they intend to describe underscore the intimate and immediate activities between those of Africa and its nearest Asian counterparts—its “Near Eastern” counterparts. Second, in the parsing of the ethnographical and historical language on this time and space, in the intentional slighting of Africa—whether the construction is “Eurasian” or “Afro-Eurasian”—the received metaphor of the “Orient” was one that through the late nineteenth century also described and catalogued significant segments of Africa and Africans as part of that singular world, a world unified by the diffusion and reiteration of cultures and then by the waves of religion that came to characterize the West.<sup>25</sup>

So this “Afro-Asian”—or to satisfy the older contingent of post-seventh-century C.E. world history, this “Afro-Eurasian”—world posited Asia in Africa and then suggested that an act of such epistemological and historiographic magnitude not be questioned, and that its ramifications—in all their manifestations—not be analyzed. Yet, the conceptual categories that organized these bodies of knowledge accepted an a priori notion of African-Asian interaction, even if it assumed that Africa was consistently the inferior in such relations.

#### EARLY CHRISTIAN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL INTERACTION

And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of Candace the Queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her treasure had come to Jerusalem to worship. (Acts 8: 27)

This is another Biblical inscription separating these two temporal spaces yet linking geographic, religious, and cultural space. Again, the

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<sup>25</sup> Sanders, “Hamitic Hypothesis,” p. 525. Jesse Benjamin, “Of Nubians and Nabateans: Implications of Research on Neglected Dimensions of Ancient World History,” in *Conceptualizing/Re-Conceptualizing Africa: The Construction of African Historical Identity*, ed. Maghan Keita (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 31–52.

space is contemporaneous and contiguous. It does not take us as far afield as we might go to illustrate the issues surrounding African and Asian interaction in the “premodern” era. However, pursuing the questions in this manner provides a grounding that undergirds not only the plausibilities of these arguments, but their logic as well.

Return to Stephen’s epigram. Unpack its epistemological and historiographic baggage. The New Testament identifies the African in a way that is consistent with ancient categorizations. The language is transcendent of the new space we have just entered. The language and the context of the vignette also speak to the nature of interaction. Neither Stephen nor his audience—the earliest of Christians, or those of the high medieval era and even the early Reformation—are unnerved or taken aback by the presence of a high Ethiopian official in Jerusalem to worship during the highest of the holy days. They remember what, as Bloom<sup>26</sup> has contended, so many who study the period have forgotten: the African state of Ethiopia/Kush/Nubia, which was to become Axum/Abbyssinia, by this time had legitimated its authority in the region by crafting an imperial lineage that linked Jerusalem and Axum. The “Ethiopia” to which Stephen refers occupies an almost seamless transition in *his* African myth-historiography that acknowledges its evolution from the state that supercedes the pharaohs of Egypt to the relation between Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, and Judah’s King Solomon, to the hazy and ephemeral political economy of the *candaces* who occupied the historical landscape from Alexander through the Augustine empire. The point is that Stephen’s Christian, Jewish, and later Muslim audiences have this knowledge. It is the backdrop from which they make sense of “black” Jews who become the first among Christians. This is the reiteration of cultures and religions that seemed to astound the modern, Western world in the 1980s when Ethiopians claimed to be Jews—Falashas.

The geography of the Ethiopians’ epiphany and conversion leads us deeper into Africa and to its east coast. It leads us to an Africa facing the Indian Ocean. In this there is a certain caution that Benjamin<sup>27</sup> underlines, in that there is the tendency to think of the “ocean-view” as the motive force for what marks this African space; that the Indian Ocean and its westward traffic are the sources of the “cultures,” “civilizations,” “languages,” social structures, and even physical pro-

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<sup>26</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, “Of Nubians and Nabateans,” pp. 31–32, 47–48.

portions that are found here. There is rarely a discussion of the reciprocities that must have occurred in this multidirectional traffic over so long a period of time. In any event, the questions of that traffic are evident in the faces of people from Africa's Indian Ocean and Red Sea coasts to those of the Pacific and South China Seas.

By the fourth century of the Common Era, the "King of Kings"—the Negast—Ezana, had consolidated and collapsed the conceptual notions of an Axum/Aithiopia/Abbyssinia. In the first century c.e. the author of *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* described the sea lanes and port cities of the African side of this Afro-Asian interaction from Egypt to the Axumite port of Adulis as "a port established by law." The activities from ports as far north as Egypt, Mogadishu, and Adulis, linked with those farther south, criss-crossed the Red Sea and dropped into the Indian Ocean, connecting the first two legs of regularized Afro-Asian voyages. The result was the consolidation of commercial and cultural activities between East Africa and the Saudi peninsula, particularly what would become the modern states of Aden, Oman, and Yemen.

By the sixth century, the commercial and cultural exchanges of the ancient age were clearly witnessed. At the direction of the "Axumite governor of Adulis," the Egyptian monk Cosmas Indicopleustes provided an important set of documentation that became part of his work *The Christian Topography*. In this work, Cosmas, boarding an Indian vessel at Adulis, reiterated the obvious bonds, and then swung his readers into the Indian Ocean and brought them to "Ceylon": "The island being as it is, in a central position, is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and *Ethiopia*, and it likewise sends out many of its own."<sup>28</sup> Here were arrayed ships from all the nations of the world, including those of "Ethiopia." The irony of Cosmas's *Christian*

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<sup>28</sup> Emphasis added. Cosmas enunciates the themes of the Classical Era that were made most familiar by Herodotus and implied in mythic literature by authors such as Homer, Vergil, and Quintus, and then links them in a Judeo-Christian motif: the Afro-Asian interaction that characterized their time and space.

The river Phison separates all the countries of India [lying along its course] from the country of the Huns. In scripture the Indian region is call Euliat (Havilah). For it is thus written in Genesis: *Now the river goeth Out from Eden to water Paradise. From there it was parted and became four heads. The name of the first is Phison (Pishon); that is which compasseth the whole land of Euliat, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; there is the carbuncle and the jasper stone; [Genesis 2:10–12] where the writer clearly calls the country Euliat. The Euliat, moreover, is of the race of Ham. For thus it is written: The sons of Ham, Cush and Misraim, Phut and*



*Topography* was that a monk of—by some accounts—the African Church, claimed, as Stephen and his Ethiopian official might, the world of the Indian Ocean for Christianity.

Again, Cosmas places his world in high relief against the backdrop of the classical world. From Herodotus on, Africa and India are joined. Indians are “Hamitic.” They share the same biblical and classical origin as Ethiopians, Egyptians, Puntites, and Canaanites. Cosmas’s ethnography aside, it seems that he may have been much better able to judge the exchange of various commodities, their origins, and the crews that transported them from space to space. Just as he reported Ethiopian ships anchored off Ceylon, he also wrote of African crews and merchants in India.<sup>29</sup>

The historical trajectory of Cosmas’s voyage and work—his commission from the Axumite governor of Adulis—also suggests this about the geopolitical economic space he covered: what we now conventionally term the Swahili Coast clearly had a historical longevity that predated Christianity, and, of course Islam. Ironically, in what many have considered the “radical” theses on the subsequent eras, this factor and its repercussions are overlooked.<sup>30</sup> The interaction of “Semitic” peoples with Africans, and the construction of a multicultural political economy that would later be called “Swahili,” had its roots in a pre-Christian era. Again, the cultural and political-economic constructs would replicate themselves across Africa—particularly its northern littoral—all the way to its western edge, and then turn north into Europe and ensconce themselves for almost a millennium as “Moorish” culture; another Afro-Arabic, Afro-Asian form. If nothing else, it is certainly another manifestation of the ubiquitous “Orient.”

What does become clear is this: Cosmas’s voyage seems a faint echo

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*Canaan the sons of Cush, Saba and Euliat; that is the Homerites and the Indians, for Saba is situated in the Homerite country, and Euliat is in India.*

Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography*, trans. J. W. McCrindle (ca. 525 C.E.; New York: Burt Franklin, 1897), pp. 365, 372–373. Stanley Burstein, ed., *Ancient African Civilizations: Kush and Axum* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998), pp. 83–86. Philip Snow, *Star Raft: China's Encounter with Africa* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography*, pp. 368–370, 371–372.

<sup>30</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 36. Andre Gunder Frank, *Re-ORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Also see Maghan Keita, “Africa and the Construction of a Grand Narrative in World History,” in *Across Cultural Borders: Historiography in Global Perspective*, ed. Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedikt Stuchtey (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 289–293.

of interactions that were occurring several centuries before our Egyptian monk set out to become the “Indian Ocean voyager.” What he witnessed in Ceylon as part of the great ocean commerce—the “Ethiopian ships” docked there—was only one sign of a reciprocity that drew Indians, Persians, Indonesians, and Chinese to African waters as well.<sup>31</sup>

This is Du Bois’s mystical, almost mythical allusion to “Asia in Africa” in *The World and Africa*. And while the title may sound somewhat old-fashioned—even Victorian—Du Bois’s chapter describes several levels of reciprocity that suggest not only a long history of “Asia in Africa,” but of Africa in Asia as well. This chapter of *The World and Africa* complements the works of Du Bois’s contemporary, J. A. Rogers, and more recent compendia under the auspices of Ivan Van Sertima.<sup>32</sup> Of course these works, along with Du Bois’s own, point to epistemological and historiographic concerns posed by a number of scholars concerned with the ways in which the modern conceptualizations of race have shaped historical and intellectual discourse in general.<sup>33</sup>

So Du Bois’s opening in this chapter, which posits “Negrillos,” “pre-Dravidians, Negroes with some mixture of Mongoloid and later Caucasoid stocks,” “Krishna, ‘the Black,’” and the “Black Buddha of India . . . imaged in the Negroid type . . . Sut-Nahsi,” is fundamentally overlooked, in spite of his documentation.<sup>34</sup> And while Du Bois’s placement of the African in Asia in the ancient world is not and was not pilloried in the way in which scholars who make such claims at the close of the twentieth century are (and we suppose will continue to be through the twenty-first), it was, as most of these works were, silently dismissed—deemed too far-fetched to be of real intellectual merit.

Du Bois underscores Cosmas—Cosmas becomes an essential corroborator, not only of what was but what might have been. Historical

<sup>31</sup> Neville Chittick, “The Coast before the Arrival of the Portuguese,” in *Zamani: A Survey of East African History*, ed. B. A. Ogot and J. A. Kieran (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), pp. 103–110. B. G. McIntosh, “The Eastern Bantu Peoples,” in *Zamani*, pp. 199–200. Snow, *Star Raft*, pp. xiv, 2–19. Samuel M. Wilson, *The Emperor’s Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultural Contact* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), p. 124.

<sup>32</sup> Du Bois, *The World and Africa*, pp. 176–200. J. A. Rogers, *Sex and Race* (1952; reprint, St. Petersburg, Fla.: Helga Rogers, 1968). Jan Van Sertima, ed., *African Presence in Early Asia* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publications, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Earl E. Thorpe, *Black Historians: A Critique* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1971). August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). Paul A. Cimbala and Robert F. Himmelberg, eds., *Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). Keita, *Race and the Writing of History*. Keita, “Race, the Writing of History, and Culture Wars.” Keita, “Grand Narrative.”

<sup>34</sup> Du Bois, *World and Africa*, pp. 176–181.

time and space are filled with African and Asian interaction in broad relief. The task is to sharpen them.

### A MEDIEVAL AGE: CUSPING MODERNITY

A century after Cosmas, Muhammad burst upon the scene, and Islam radically altered the ways in which the world was organized and might be known. The Christian and European response to this is what Said defines as "Orientalism." Within this Orientalist sway, before a European reckoning, Africa was already the "Orient," and Africans were "Orientals" in it.

If we accept the logic of the closest "edge" of African and Asian contact articulated in the ancient period, and then rearticulated during the early Christian era, the clear, yet racially, ethnologically, and culturally fuzzy patterns—the shared patterns of this space—are evident. Cosmas is the most prominent chronicler of the African-Asian encounter from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and through the Pacific Ocean for this period. In the centuries that follow his work, the entry of Africans into central Asia and beyond; and the reciprocal—though nowhere as demographically dense—movement of Asians from the "beyond" and closer, into Africa, march from the medieval to the modern age.

Jerry Bentley has written *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (1993). Building on Abu-Lughod's thesis (1989), Bentley constructs a world "before European hegemony" that uses the "Ancient Silk Roads" as one illustration of the premodern experience and its complexity and sophistication. In his construction however, as with Abu-Lughod, Africa seems peripheral. It has little place in *Old World Encounters*. The analysis that Bentley presented in 1993—and has since modified—implied what Abu-Lughod did in her construction of a thirteenth century in which both the trans-Saharan and the Zanj/Swahili coast cultural and commercial nexuses were treated as peripheral or nonexistent in a world "before European hegemony."<sup>35</sup>

In personal conversation and correspondence, Bentley has acknowl-

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<sup>35</sup> Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts in Pre-Modern Times* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*.

edged his oversight.<sup>36</sup> Travelers such as Marco Polo chronicled much of what now has become evident to Bentley. Polo, according to Mike Edwards, was particularly interested in “taking notice of black-skinned Muslims” as he moved through Persia.<sup>37</sup> Al-Baladhuri’s observation returns here: “The black man is lord of the . . . East.” Without referring to Polo’s text at this moment, we need to employ what Bogumil Jewsiewicki calls a “speculative philosophy of history.”<sup>38</sup>

Were the “black-skinned Muslims” Polo encountered descendants of Persia’s ninth-century Zanj population? Or were they as commonplace to Polo as the blacks of fifteenth-century Venice that peopled Carpaccio’s paintings and Shakespeare’s sixteenth-century plays? Did Polo evoke the image of black magi to confer some understanding of African types at the court in Baghdad? Did Basra still echo as a center of learning? Was the work of al-Jahiz still potent? Would his missives and epistles still have credence? Would Polo have witnessed a debate that summoned up al-Jahiz’s notions of the “superiority of the blacks to the whites?” “[T]he desert is full of Negroes married to Arab wives, and they have been princes and kings and have safeguarded your rights and sheltered you against your enemies.”<sup>39</sup>

Whatever Polo might have thought, four centuries before his travels, one of the most important events in the history of the Persian

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<sup>36</sup> Jerry Bentley, personal correspondence with the author, 3 February 1999. Bentley writes, “There were definitely some African connections that I missed when writing *Old World Encounters*. Some things I have become aware of in the meantime and have tried to incorporate into more recent works.”

<sup>37</sup> Mike Edwards, “The Adventures of Marco Polo, Part I,” *National Geographic* 201 (May 2001): 19. Interestingly enough, in 1991 *National Geographic* examined the itinerary of a contemporary of Marco Polo whose travels revealed much the same information concerning the relations between Africa and Asia during the Middle Ages and the approaching Renaissance. “Ibn Battuta, Prince of Travelers,” by Thomas J. Abercrombie, like the Marco Polo piece, is accompanied by visual images that must be, in the least, arresting because of what they suggest and the historical legacy they report. At the very least they suggest, that on this issue—the *longue durée* of African and Asian interaction—these two texts, read together, provide a sound place from which to begin such an inquiry for the medieval and Renaissance periods. *National Geographic* 191 (December 1991): 2–49.

<sup>38</sup> Jewsiewicki’s comments on a “speculative philosophy of history” were made in relation to his analysis of the work of Cheikh Anta Diop. What becomes as interesting here, in relation to the remarks of both al-Baladhuri and al-Jahiz, is Diop’s argument in much of his work of the African presence in “Asian” space, e.g., Mesopotamia. This, of course has been a peripheral argument of the Nile Valley school, of which Theophile Obenga, Van Sertima, and Jacob Carruthers are prime advocates. See Bernal, *Black Athena*; Keita, *Race and the Writing of History*.

<sup>39</sup> Jahiz, “Superiority of Blacks to Whites,” in *The Life and Works of Jahiz*, ed. Charles Pella (Berkeley, Calif.: 1969), p. 196.

Empire of the Abbasids illustrated the propositions propounded by al-Baladhuri for the seventh century, and later by al-Jahiz in the ninth. In the construction of his argument on the Silk Roads and their role in "cross-cultural contacts and exchanges," Bentley speaks to the role of Islam and the "even more important [rise] of the Abbasid, that organized and pacified the Middle East," in order to secure those routes. Polo would, of course, note that organization in cities such as Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, and in his observations on flourishing "trade and industry," where "[t]hey make cloth of gold and silk of every sort."<sup>40</sup> These were the preeminent signs of Abbasid power and the gateway to the Silk Roads themselves. For these reasons, Alexandre Popovic relates that the Abbasids' "chief interest was the Asian part of the Empire" into which they had imported by the ninth century "from an indeterminate date . . . Negroes from the east coast of Africa . . . as slaves." This particular observation was accorded to the Abbasid court scholar, al-Jahiz, who many scholars believe was of African descent himself.<sup>41</sup>

One of the ways to illustrate the African and Asian dynamics inherent in the "revolt of the Zanj" is to revisit its historical depictions. A wonderful illustration of this, literally and graphically, is the cover piece of Popovic's 1999 paperback edition. Here, the depiction—the "representation" that many cultural critics find so important—is lodged in the characterizations of what appears to be a Mughal piece produced about the sixteenth century. The depiction is representative of what William H. McNeill and Marilyn Robinson Waldman term "the refined and effete atmosphere of the Persian-Turkish-Mongol court life out of which this literary-artistic tradition had grown" and which, in itself, represents a certain historical legacy. While their particular reference is to the descriptive literature of the court of Akbar (1556–1605), they also note, "Akbar was a generous and discriminating patron of art and letters, as were his predecessors and successors."<sup>42</sup> If this piece is indeed from the period, it poses serious epistemological and historiographic implications concerning how the African—in this case, the Zanj—might be known, on one hand, and why this issue might be celebrated in a distant court, at a distant time, on the other.

<sup>40</sup> *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (London: Folio Society, 1958), p. 35. Cited in Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p. 165.

<sup>41</sup> Alexandre Popovic, *The Revolt of the African Slaves in the 3rd/9th Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Press, 1999), pp. 9, 14.

<sup>42</sup> William H. McNeill and Marilyn Robinson Waldman, eds., *The Islamic World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 353.

Conventional yet hardly mundane explanations revolve around the notions of Mughal legitimacy that were tied to their putative descent from Persian, Turkish, and Mongol dynasties. This must be tied to their Islamic inheritance and the propaganda of the Zanj wars in which the leading Abbasid court chroniclers characterized the revolt and its leaders as apostates.

The Abbasid forces have characteristics that are recognizably, and stereotypically, “Asianized.” The historiographic intent of the piece—more than likely commissioned by the Mughal court to illustrate the challenges facing the caliphate, and its power to subdue them—placed the Abbasid state in Asia. In such a placement, the Asian state is clearly besieged by Africans. But as al-Jahiz, al-Tabari, and the modern scholars who have analyzed both their works and the event reveal, the Zanj were so long-lived in this Asian space that they might be considered culturally ubiquitous. And, as *National Geographic* has shown, that physical and cultural presence still lives.

The universality and longevity of the Zanj in southern Iraq is seen in the flexibility and expansiveness of their cultural and political economic identity. While the term “Zanj” clearly refers to Africa, Africans, and “blacks,” the sociopolitical economic construction that they came to represent included, fundamentally, a huge proportion, if not all, of the subject laboring populations of southern Iraq. Here is the phenomenon noted by many scholars of ethnic construction in Africa. Ethnicity and racial condition can be conferred by occupation and status.<sup>43</sup>

What Marco Polo actually may have seen in the thirteenth century is clearly open to debate; contemporary and modern analysts have attested to this. In my own limited perusal of two separate editions of his text and two analytical critiques, Africa is represented only by implication.<sup>44</sup> However, those implications are large and overwhelming when taken and analyzed within the context in which Polo lived and wrote.

For Polo, much of Africa *was* Asia: “Middle India.” Clearly by the

<sup>43</sup> E. Ann McDougal, “The View from Awdaghust: War, Trade and Social Change from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 26 (1985): 8–13, 26. Lamont D. King, “State and Ethnicity in Precolonial Nigeria,” in *Conceptualizing/Re-Conceptualizing Africa*. Benjamin, “Nubians and Nabateans.”

<sup>44</sup> Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, ed. and trans. Manuel Komroff (New York: Modern Library, 2001). Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, ed. and trans. Manuel Komroff (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., 1935). John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999). John Critchley, *Marco Polo's Book* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK and Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1992).

beginning of the modern age, for voyagers such as da Gama (1497–1498) and Barbosa (ca. 1500–1517), the entire East African coast was connected to Asia by religious, cultural, and commercial extension. Their point of geographic discrimination—and then distinctions not entirely applicable to either side of the Indian Ocean—was between “black” and “white” Moors. The former were Africans; the latter were the not-quite-so-white dark peoples of South Asia.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the two or so centuries that separate their observations from Polo’s are informed by a rich conceptual context that structures the very nature of medieval European life and its visions of the “Orient,” and that compel the quests of the mariners of the age of European exploration.

As John Larner reveals, the linkages are fairly straightforward for the enterprising student of medieval literature, history, and culture—provided such a student is willing to take the leap of speculative faith that Jewsiewicki suggests. The play here is with the oxymorons that connect these ages (the medieval and Renaissance periods and the age of [European] discovery), and the modern analyses that fail to evaluate them. Wolfram von Eschenbach’s twelfth-century *Parzival* is a primary illustration of the historical cultural context that shaped the world of the Polos, their predecessors, and those who succeeded them.<sup>46</sup>

*Parzival* relates the duties of a young noble in the quest for manhood and knighthood. The main character’s ordeals are contextualized (and almost cast as asides) in relation to the travels of his father and the prowess of his half-brother. The implications are layered and accretive. They build on one another with such power that I am at a loss to determine why they have not been explored in this way outside of the work of Jacqueline de Weever.<sup>47</sup> In short, the linkage of “black/blackness,” with “Moor,” “Saracen,” Islam, and the East—Baghdad—are astonishing. The text introduces Parzival’s brother, Feirefis, whose power is rivaled only by the “Baruc” (sultan) of Baghdad, himself. Feirefis is Muslim and a retainer of the sultan. Here, von Eschenbach’s text enjoins “Asia,” and then proclaims the sovereign of “Middle India” (indeed of all “India” in Polo’s text) as the son of Feirefis—heir to Asia, Africa, and Europe—the Prester John.

The linkage is propelled by these relations: the mother of Feirefis

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<sup>45</sup> Basil Davidson, *African Civilization Revisited* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1991), pp. 148–162.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Andre Lefevere (New York: Continuum, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba’s Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

is Queen Belakane of Zazamanc—a Moorish queen of a Moorish state. “Feirefis” is eponymous: the literal translation is “the checkered one,” both black and white. The linkages go further. Feirefis marries Repanse, the Grail-Maiden, and from their union comes Prester John, mythically, the most powerful man in all of Christendom—emperor of Marco Polo’s “Indias,” including the “Middle India” that designates Africa/Abyssinia.

Polo’s implied Africa is witnessed in “Middle India” and the struggles between the khan and Prester John for control of the entire world. This can clearly be read as the struggle between Islam (in the most putative sense) and Christianity. The irony is that Christianity, in the cultural context of Polo’s time, is represented by an Asianized Africa. Here, within *The Travels of Marco Polo*, “Asian lore” becomes intractably linked to the mythologies of Africa.

In these linkages posed by medieval literature it becomes useful to engage in some etymological exploration. Polo’s word of choice for Muslims throughout the East, including China, is “Saracen.” Conventionally, the term is hardly related to the word “Moor,” hence the two tend to stand alone. Yet the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the terms are interchangeable, and in the end the two may be distilled as one word: “African.”<sup>48</sup> The interchangeable nature of the terms and their extrapolation exist right into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, if not beyond. In the work of Sir Walter Scott, in particular *Ivanhoe*, the “black,” “Negro” mercenary retainers of Brian de Bois-Guilbert are also characterized as “Oriental,” “Eastern,” and “Saracen”—wearers of “silk and embroidery.”<sup>49</sup>

Can we get further East than this—India, even if it is the India of Marco Polo? What possibilities might place Africans in China, or Chinese in Africa? Again, Larner provides some focus here. He writes of the work of medieval “Arab” scholars and their knowledge of Asia. Upon reflection, for the Africanist, their number is almost legion. Larner draws on two in particular, and they serve to make the case here. He selects first the twelfth-century work of al-Idrisi and his famous *Kitab al-Rojer* (*Amusement for him who desires to travel round the world*; 1153–1154). Al-Idrisi provides knowledge on India and South-east Asia. Larner then introduces Abulfeda, a late thirteenth- to early

<sup>48</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary, Concise Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 1846, 2639. Hans Debrunner is also helpful here in stipulating Moor and Saracen as synonymous cultural concepts in which some of the members are indeed black. *Power and Prestige: Africans in Europe* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 1979), pp. 18–19, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1832), pp. 39–41.



fourteenth-century scholar. Abulfeda comments on the "Karimi merchants of Cairo . . . and their extensive trade with . . . India and the Spice Islands." Lerner concludes his reading of Abulfeda by adding, "[a]nd of China, where Egyptian merchants were to be found, though not in great numbers."<sup>50</sup>

Lerner also mentions the renowned Jewish scholar and physician of al-Andalus, Benjamin of Tudela, who made his way across Africa to the court of the sultan in Baghdad. Benjamin of Tudela sparks the narrative related by Amitav Ghosh in *In An Antique Land*.<sup>51</sup> Ghosh is moved by the story of Abraham Ben Yihu—by all descriptions, an "African" Jew—who moves from his Maghrebian home to Cairo, and then from Cairo to India, where he resided for more than a decade, married, had children, and "amassed great wealth," all with the aid of his "Indian 'slave and business agent'"—more so, a trusted member of his family. Ghosh's reliance on S. D. Goitein's manuscript collection of the Geniza documents, and in particular "MS H.6," sets the stage for the reappearance of the African, Asian, and Semitic speculation that opened this piece. Polo tells us that Jews were present in the China of his visit. We know later, at the very beginning to the modern age—the culmination of the *Reconquista*—"Moorish" Jews again made an eastward migration into the Ottoman Empire.

Yet, again, in accordance with the observations of Abulfeda, how many Jews of China might have had African origins? The question is impossible to answer, but once more, we can turn to Jewsiewicki, and then to John O. Hunwick's translation, *Shari'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghili to the Questions of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad*.<sup>52</sup> These turn-of-the-modern-age entreaties located Jews deep within the confines of the African empire of Songhay, spoke of Persian Muslim merchant-proselytizers there, and linked that empire through religion and trade to the "vast trading network whose tentacles reached into the heart of Europe, into Central Asia and into India." All this was the culmination of seven centuries of an Islamic Africa. The possibilities of Afri-

<sup>50</sup> Lerner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, pp. 12–13. Also see al-Idrisi, "Nuzhat al-mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al-afaq," in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, ed. N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 104–131.

<sup>51</sup> Lerner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, p. 13. See also Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*, ed. and trans. A. Asher (London: 1840) in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, pp. 135–136. Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> John Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghili to the Questions of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad* (New York: British Academy, Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 3–28.

cans—from Songhay or elsewhere—expanding their geographic and economic horizons seem altogether plausible.<sup>53</sup>

This is speculation, yet, according to the Chinese, there are/were “Africans” in China. They may be registered in three ways: African artifice and goods, the African and Africa imagined, and Africans as the people they were and are. Again, Snow’s *Star Raft* becomes particularly useful. Snow begins his work with the 1415 gift of a giraffe to the Ming emperor from the court of Malindi. While, as Snow puts it, “the giraffe bore witness that two unlikely peoples had converged,” the Malindi giraffe was not the first instance in which China and Africa had met.<sup>54</sup> The Han (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) had been in contact with Africa. The archaeology of Kush revealed the material exchanges of that contact; the tortoise shells, rhinoceros horn, ivory, and other African products were clearly key to Roman trade with China. Cosmas had clearly implied the possibilities that might exist for Africans.

Snow speaks of the Chinese geographers and cartography, and of the travails of Du Huan, the Tang military officer who lost twelve years within the Abbasid domain and the lands of “Molin . . . inhabited by black people.” “In 1974 Chinese archaeologists recovered an ocean-going junk abandoned apparently in the 1270s as it was about to discharge its cargo.” On board was a small but significant quantity of African goods. Clearly, the “vast trading network” of Islam of which Hunwick wrote was in action here. And according to Snow it helped to distribute more than just the goods of Africa in China. Africans themselves were evident as early as 977 C.E. Their physical presence and stature allowed them to fill a mythic-historical niche that had existed in China since the fifth century.<sup>55</sup>

Arab merchants to the Song court were accompanied by black servants the Chinese called “Kunlun slaves.” Yet the Kunlun presence seemed to predate this recorded Arab excursion. Snow relates that between the eighth and tenth centuries, the Indonesian kingdoms of Sri Vijaya and Java had supplied African slaves to the Chinese courts. This has plausibility when one explores the long-standing oceangoing relations between Indonesia and the island of Madagascar.<sup>56</sup> What

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<sup>53</sup> For this period, the “cusp” of the modern age, Songhay represents the forward edge of the African states and their continued interaction with the East—“Asia,” as it were. Of course, one of the crucial elements that sparked the European age of discovery was the fabled pilgrimage—the *hajj*—of Musa, the Mansa, or emperor of Mali, in the early fourteenth century C.E., the stuff of legend and history.

<sup>54</sup> Snow, *Star Raft*, p. 1. Wilson, *The Emperor’s Giraffe*, pp. 121–126.

<sup>55</sup> Snow, *Star Raft*, pp. 3–13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16–19, 40.

reasons do we have to assume that Africans, including merchants, slaves, wives, and, military retainers, under any and all circumstances, did not also make the voyage in the opposite direction? Again, Cosmas's account seems quite useful here.

In any event, the physical presence of Africans in Chinese space lent itself to the reinforcement and expansion of various Chinese conceptualizations concerning these Africans. In the Tang era, Snow reports, a distinct literary tradition emerges in which the black, Chinese Kunlun are central: "they speak Chinese, behave like Chinese and are treated by their Chinese owners with every sign of respect. The Kunlun are no common servants. They are unfailingly heroic and resourceful."

By Song times, the African as Kunlun, or otherwise, had a certain familiarity among the Chinese. They had become objects of awe, respect, and prosperity. Yet with the growing Arab trade and the increase in their numbers, like all commodities the values that had informed the Kunlun—the African, the black, the slave—shifted as well. They came to be characterized in the same manner that masters regarded most subject populations: servile and, many times, subhuman.<sup>57</sup> However, the fact still remains: the African is present in China, present and affecting social, political-economic, literary, and cultural notions that characterize China during this period.

Snow goes on. While the African presence through the twelfth century is witnessed primarily among slave and laboring populations in the port city of Guangzhou, the Chinese were also capable of differentiating between Africans who might be defined as "servile" and those of an entirely different class altogether. On two separate occasions in 1071 and 1081–1083, "emissaries . . . from a country beyond Oman . . . called Zengdan, a name meaning Land of the Blacks" arrived at the Chinese court and "were treated with honour."<sup>58</sup>

I hope that my fervent reliance on Philip Snow can be forgiven. However, he provides one of the most concise and plausible entrees to placing Africans in Chinese space, and then to speculating on the issues of reciprocity, not just between Africans and Chinese, but between Africans and various other peoples of Asia as well. Snow also gives this particular reminder: he references Ibn Battuta, and in doing so, leads us full circle to one of the concerns that opened this work.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 19–21.

Can we consider Ibn Battuta “African”? And if so, what should we make of his voyage to China at the “cusp” of the modern age? Better yet, what should we make of the other “African types” that Ibn Battuta records as having been in China as well? “I arrived at the town of Sijilmasa. It is a lovely city. . . . I stayed there with the *faqih* Abu Muhammad al Bushri—he whose brother I met in the town of Qanjanfu [Kuang-chou near Canton?] in the land of China.”<sup>59</sup> While this encounter takes place in West Africa, Snow recounts what appears to be a totally separate incident in which in 1342 Ibn Battuta encounters “a man from Mogadishu who had been to China. His name was Said . . . [H]e was a devout Moslem and an Islamic doctor of law.” Apparently, Snow implies, he had taken the Koran at face value: “Seek knowledge, even as far as China, if need be.”<sup>60</sup>

In being taken with the possibilities that Snow presents I am not alone. Samuel M. Wilson has found Snow’s account so compelling that he has used it to frame an entire chapter, and based the title of his book on it. In *The Emperor’s Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact*, he calls Snow’s work “wonderful” and uses it as a segue to an exploration of contact between China and Africa in the early modern period.

Wilson is fascinated by the contacts that occurred in the first third of the fourteenth century and are represented in the “treasure ships” of the huge fleet of his excellency, the admiral and “Grand Eunuch of the Three Treasures,” Zheng He. In the Chinese expansion into the western Indian Ocean, the fifth through the seventh of the admiral’s voyages were specifically focused on increasing commercial relations between China and Africa. And here enters the famed Malindi giraffe and its Malindian diplomatic escort, and their appearance at the Ming court in October 1415. The Chinese record these events as well. There are African flora and fauna in their presence; they are excited by the image and imaging of Africa and the African; the African is accorded both the mundane and the prestigious welcome. And all well before the advent of Columbus.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, trans. and ed. Said Hamdun and Noel King (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1994), pp. 29–30.

<sup>60</sup> Snow, *Star Raft*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>61</sup> Wilson, *The Emperor’s Giraffe*, pp. 121–126. Snow, *Star Raft*, pp. 23–24. Snow complicates the history by introducing a third party to the exchange of the “Malindi giraffe”: the “king of Bengal.” So here, an African state is the reciprocal partner with two Asian states, each intent on maximizing access to the other, in this case, by way of the goods of Africa.

## CONCLUSIONS: BIOLOGY, BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE, AND HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTS

Dark, abiding, signing, Africanist presence . . . .<sup>62</sup>

I began this piece with some musings on race, epistemology, and historiography. Such an opening might lead the reader to the notion that I have fairly little use for historical “fact” or “truth.” The truth of this particular matter is, in fact, that I find myself drawn much more fervently to the issues that frame the writing of histories and the constructions of the bodies of knowledge out of which those histories emerge. It is the “why” and “how” of the interpretation of fact, and the “why” we should suppose that that interpretation represents truth—any truth—that gains my attention. Far from speculations on “fact,” “truth,” or even “proof,” I find myself drawn to what Martin Bernal posited as plausibility.

The issues that compel my inquiries concerning Africans and Asians in “premodern” time and space focus on the oxymorons of modern epistemologies and historiographies. These are epistemologies and historiographies that impose limitations on the basis of a modern conceptualization: race as a biological imperative, a “scientific” notion. This biologically motivated concept of race is responsible for all kinds of things, including the ways in which modern historians impose their own notions and values on the historical periods, events, and actors they analyze and record. We are all guilty here.

In an age obsessed with racial purity, modern historians have ignored the oxymorons of the ages they explore before their era. In an era where the rise of the nation-state and empire are racially determined and even equated with race, the former two are artificially demarcated in relation to the latter. They are, in fact, geographically manufactured artifices over which no racial impurity may spill, and in which the same is hierarchically contained.

Modern conceptualization, in the face of historical contradiction, simply maintains that the “physics” of these matters, the inherent and visible oxymorons of the historical record, are at best exceptions, and at worst nonexistent. In the case of Africans anywhere outside of Africa—and certainly outside of the ubiquitous “sub-Saharan” Africa—physical movement was an impossibility before the Columbian era.

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<sup>62</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books), pp. 5, 6–10, 89–90.

So Africans in Asia were simply overlooked and ignored. Their possibilities were impossible.

In that light, the Cheikh Anta Diops of the world were crazy, or worse, “radical” for even suggesting such a possibility; for suggesting that “an understanding of the Mesopotamian Semitic world, Judaic or Arabic, requires constant reference to the underlying Black reality”; for suggesting the possibility of “black-skinned people in western Asia.”<sup>63</sup> They represented a discourse—an “un-intellectual discourse”—that in conventional circles was as “crazy” as it was politically dangerous in its historical generation of the “Asiatic black man.” African types along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates were impossibilities; figments of weak and overwrought imaginations. These were the inventions of historians, if they might be called such, who had an “agenda,” and who were without pedigree. The conventional, racialized historiographies and epistemologies of our era could overlook the alternative bodies of knowledge—the different ways of knowing—out which these histories were constructed. Yet, the world is quite comfortable with “white” Africans.

The historiographies of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African America loom large here in their direct and implicit notions of Africans in Asia. From George Washington Williams (1883) through W. E. B. Du Bois (1915, 1939, 1946), the possibilities of Africans in Asia and the rest of the world were the stuff of historicization. They are a large part of the legacy upon which the history of the “Black World” has been constructed.

Now, in an age of “new historiographies,” we are disposed to reconfigure Africa as part of the world—the entire world. We are compelled to come to grips with the contradictions inherent in “old” modern histories, historiographies, and epistemologies. We are compelled to try to make sense of their oxymorons, and the oxymoronic interpretations they have imposed as history.

We can look to Antar, and the “Black Crows of Arabia” (Lewis); we can chart the ebb and flow of the tactics and strategies of the Zanj and wonder at their popularity and the longevity and legacy of their struggle (al-Jahiz, al-Tabari, Popovic); we can sight (and cite) and read of the Kunlun as they “ooze magic” (Snow). They and their images take us to the brink of modernity and across: How do da Gama, Barbosa, de Alencova, and the rest find their way East?

Their pilots came from the Swahili coast—the Zanj coast. And

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<sup>63</sup> Diop, *African Origins*, p. xv.

when Cook and others would enter the South Pacific two centuries or so later, how would they name the peoples and places they encountered? What sense should we make of “New” Guinea? Where was “old” Guinea and how was it characterized? How could we understand their designation of the “melan” in Melanesia? They were certainly referencing something of a historical past and its renderings that made them quite comfortable in what they saw.<sup>64</sup> And what they saw supposed at least centuries of presence and movement by peoples of African descent in the construction of these societies.

“Stops” in Persia, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, and China become all the more plausible. Here, as Morrison has written for American literature and cultural production in the modern age, and as others attempt the same for Europe in both modern and premodern times, it would seem that Asia’s time to unfold is upon us as we witness and admit to its “dark, abiding, signing, Africanist presence” in the longest view of global interaction.

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<sup>64</sup> Du Bois, *World and Africa*, pp. 176–180, 196–198.