JUMPING SHIP – SKIRTING EMPIRE:
Indians, Aborigines and Australians across the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

Relationships between South Asians and Australians during the colonial period have been little investigated. Closer attention to the dramatically expanded sea trade after 1850 and the relatively uncontrolled movement of people, ideas and goods which occurred on them, despite claims of imperial regulation, suggests that significant numbers of Indians among others entered Australia outside the immigration restrictions of empire or settlers. Given that many of them entered or remained in Australia without official sanction, their histories will not be found in the official immigration records, but rather in the memories and momentos of the communities into which they might have moved. Exploring the histories of Aboriginal communities and of maritime working class networks does allow a previously unwritten history to emerge: not only of Indian individuals with complex personal and working histories, but often as activists in the campaigns against racial discrimination and in support of decolonization. Yet their heritage has been obscured. The polarizing conflict between settlers and Aboriginal Australians has invariably meant that Aboriginal people of mixed background had to 'choose sides' to be counted simplistically as either 'black' or 'white'. The need to defend the community's rights has meant that Aboriginal people had to be unequivocal in their identification and this simplification has had to take precedence over the assertion of a diverse heritage. In working class histories, the mobilization of selective ethnic stereotyping has meant that the history of Indians as workers, as unionists and as activists has been distorted and ignored.

I. Behind the back of Empire

Although invariably opening with an account of British maritime exploration, the major histories of colonialism in Australia rapidly move on to focus on land-based exploration within the continent and on the landed societies of the metropole and its other colonies.

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The precarious nature of sea transport across distances has played an important role in the chronologies of settler movement and unquestionably in settler identity, but it has seldom been examined in itself. Rather it has been a means to an end, with the focus remaining on the departure and destination points on land at either end but with less consideration of the complexities of sea life itself or the interactions of pre-colonial seafaring routes with those of imperial shipping. Nationalist histories have had a strong tradition of considering Australian settler labour organization aimed at excluding any competing non-European labour, so there has been even less investigation of the international seafaring vessels which came into Australian waters as the sites of residence for many thousands of colonial maritime workers, the ordinary seamen from a range of different nationalities who moved the ships of empire from the 1850s to decolonization.[2]

Thomas Metcalf has recently characterized the way in which settler histories have long portrayed their physical as well as their cultural position:

'… each colony is assumed to exist only in its relationship to the imperial center. These studies in effect conceived of the British Empire as a set of strings – or better yet, as lines of telegraph wire though which information flows up and policy directives flow down – running from each colony to the metropole in London.'[3]

The enormity of that distance from London to Sydney and the duration of travel between them have been of great importance in shaping the way the Australian colonies developed. More recently however, historians have shifted their attention to the links between settler colonies. The movements of ideology, policy, popular culture and people between the settler colonial societies of America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and sometimes those of South America have increasingly claimed attention.[4] These analyses have often been intensely critical of settler society and its

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[2] Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982).

[3] Thomas Metcalf: *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860 – 1920*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2007, p6

[4] Ian Tyrrell, "Beyond the View from Euro-America : Environment, Settler Societies, and the Internationalization of American History.," in *Rethinking American History*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

impact. An example is geographer Derek Gregory's analysis of *The Colonial Presen*t which invokes Fanon's analysis of the role of settlers themselves in the deep conflicts of colonialism.[5] Nevertheless, although such analysts might be critical, their attention has remained focused on settler ideologies and on settler-to-settler connections. An important example of the complex tensions involved can be seen in the interplay between the chapters in the edited volume *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*[6] Only three of the chapters deal with non-European settlers, two of them in relation to South Asia, but their focus is limited to middle class or professional travelers in nations dominated by Europeans or European settlers. Patrick Wolfe has identified the problems in his essay on Islam and Indian Nationalism in Europe when he argues that despite the fact that 'transnational history …. has no necessary confinement to settler societies in the west', such a narrow set of limits has nevertheless continued.[7]

The histories of colonised maritime workers have been investigated however, in a series of important studies of labour in colonized societies, building on work such as that by Janet Ewald on East Africa, the Indian Ocean industrial histories of Frank Broeze and the Indian maritime cultural histories of G. Balachandran. Most recently, Ravi Ahuja has discussed the dualism of the large British colonial recruitment of South Asian labourers into the seafaring industries in his 2006 article 'Mobility and Containment'. He points out that while British colonialism demanded unprecedented mobility of Indian indentured labourers, military personnel and maritime workers, it simultaneously built up a web of constraining regulations and conventions, which made it far harder for South Asians than it was for any other seamen to leave ships in ports other than in India and to stay in the metropolitan port cities or the settler colonies. It was largely these almost impenetrable constraints, with their severe penalties in fines and, even more

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[5] Ann Curthoys (2003) "Constructing National Histories," in *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, ed. Bain Attwood and Stephen Foster (Canberra: National Museum of Australia), Derek Gregory (2004) *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), Lorenzo Veracini (2003) "The Evolution of Historical Redescription in Australia and Israel and the Question of Founding Violence," *Australian Historical Studies* 122.

[6] Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds.) (2005) *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU ePress).

[7] Patrick Wolfe (2005) "Islam, Europe and Indian Nationalism: Towards a Postcolonial Transnationalism," in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds.) *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Pespective*, (Canberra: ANU ePress).

threatening, a 'bad discharge' and charges of 'desertion', which led to the stereotype of Indian seamen as 'docile' and 'compliant'.[8]

From within Australia, the powerful ideology of Imperial control led to a view that the containment of non-European workers, that is, their exclusion from metropolitan and setter societies, was fully successful. This was consistent with Australian settler self-congratulation over their success in campaigns against transportation of British convicts and the admission of other unfree labour, including that of Indian indentured labourers (1830s-40s), then later Chinese gold miners (1850s-60s) and then again with Indian/Afghan camel handlers and traders (1890s). Yet to some extent, the historian's argument – and indeed the public conviction – of the success of containment has arisen from using Empire-authored sources for such studies: the documentary and visual archive, whether formal or informal, official or popular. The official records, the catalogues and the schedules which European imperial powers were so well able to produce are actually the archives of mechanisms for control rather than proof that the controls worked. They show us the various ways in which metropolitan powers saw themselves as imposing order onto 'chaos' by directing the deployment of people and things around their newly acquired territories from one land base to another. By their very existence, these records imply that such control was effective, whatever the realities of their effect might have been. Even when we have turned to look at the records of popular culture like novels and images which were passed between self-consciously defined 'settler' communities, we are looking at claims of achievement of the 'settler' goal, in which such documents are reflective of hopes, desires or fantasies rather than accomplished facts.

Alternatives emerge, however, from looking from outside a European empire land-based perspective. We can learn, for example, from Melanesian and Pacific Islanders around Australasia, who understand the sea not as an empty place, but instead as a peopled and storied place, "a sea of islands"[9] that connects rather than separates seafaring people.[10] We could then see the lines of communication across the seas

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[8] Ravi Ahuja (2006) 'Mobility and Containment: the voyages of South Asian seamen, c.1900 – 1960', *International Review of Social History* 51, Supplement, pp. 111–141

[9] Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) ' "Our Sea of Islands" ' *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1.

between colonies as flexible highways with infinitely variable branches rather than as being sealed tubes of controlled passage.

Ahuja admits that containment could never be complete.[11] The regulatory barriers were in fact permeable, and there is now considerable work emerging from research with the seafarer-derived South Asian communities in the United Kingdom. Rozina Visram (1986), Laura Tabili (1994) and others have contributed important studies of how these communities had mobilized protective strategies to hide the seamen who had jumped ship and support networks to assist them to find work, even if in exploitative conditions.[12] The detailed histories of these communities have been developed, not from official records of immigration to the UK or even from the shipping company employers' archives of those who had 'jumped ship'. Instead, they have emerged largely from the life histories collected among surviving seafarers like those recorded in the 1980s by Caroline Adams in the East End of London.[13] Yet while not denying their significance for later immigrants, Ahuja has pointed out that the real increase in these important British-South Asian communities began only after 1950, by which time decolonization and Partition had reshaped both the subcontinent and the regulatory web which had previously made it so hard to move into the metropole.[14]

In Australia the mythology of complete Empire containment to prevent any South Asian entry could be believed because there were no self-identifying South Asian communities in the country derived from seafarers. There were South Asians. They were the Afghanis and peoples from the North Western Frontier Provinces who came to manage the essential camel transport in Australia's arid inland from the 1850s. Along with some Indian merchants and traders, their presence had been well publicized and initially welcomed. There appeared however to be no port communities whose

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[10] Kate Barclay (2008, forthcoming) "Ocean, Empire and Nation: Japanese Fisheries Politics," in Devleena Ghosh and Heather Goodall (eds.) *Fresh and Salt: Water, Borders and Sovereignty*, (London: Routledge), Paul D'Arcy (2006) *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press).

[11] Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment' pp 113-114.

[12] Rozina Visram (1994) *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700 – 1947*, Pluto, London, 1986; Laura Tabili, *'We Ask for British Justice': Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain*, Cornell, NY.

[13] Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment', p135, referring to Caroline Adams (ed) (1994) *Across the Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: live stories of pioneer Sylhetti settlers in Britain*, London.

[14] Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment', p 114.

membership had arisen from irregular and often illicit entry by South Asian seafarers who had somehow managed to stay.

Yet if we look laterally and creatively at the source material, the lists, the classifications and the catalogues, we can perhaps begin to see past the claims of Imperial control to recognize the vernacular technologies and philosophies as well as the people who circulated via these pathways from colony to colony. To begin this process, this paper looks in section II at what we know about the Indian population who did penetrate the Australian population in accordance with the framework of the official system. It then charts the symbols and representation of sea travel which, along with the regulatory web, made up the apparatus of Imperial control seem so impervious.

In section III, however, the paper shifts its focus away from the official archives of control to look at the memories and popular culture of the Aboriginal population into which seafarers moved if they did enter Australia without official sanction, that is, behind the back of Empire. It then asks what pressures might have been operating to obscure this South Asian heritage. In Section IV, the paper considers more briefly the Australian maritime working class population, another population with which South Asian seafarers came into contact. Here we find also memories not only of interactions with Indian seamen, in contradiction to an impression of sealed ethnic segmentation, but memories of activism and collective campaigning for improved working conditions and in opposition to colonialism. Finally, in section V, the paper considers one of the rare sources of archival material, the records of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia, which contains documents actually authored by Indian seafarers themselves, in and about Australia.

II. Cultures of Control

There is already a sound basis to understand regulated and legal nineteenth century movement between South Asia and Australia in the work of Suzanne Rickard[15] and Margaret Allen.[16] Rickard's 'Lifelines from Calcutta' is a detailed account from the

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[15] James Broadbent, Suzanne Rickard, and Margaret Steven (2003) *India, China and Australia: Trade and Society 1788 - 1850* (Historic Houses Trust).

[16] Margaret Allen (2005) "'Innocents Abroad' and 'Prohibited Immigrants': Australians in India and Indians in Australia 1890 - 1910," in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds.) *Connected Worlds.*

archives of the entry and migration into Australia of the many South Asians who arrived in the early days of the British colony. Indians and Sri Lankans arrived in Australia as servants, perhaps as cooks, perhaps as ayahs or nursemaids, attending British staff and settlers who frequently come directly from Indian residence. Many of them had learnt their official functions as well as experiencing a new form of cultural interaction in India. Another group of South Asians whom Rickard has documented had arrived in Australia as convicts: they had been imprisoned and convicted by the British in India and then been transported out to Australia in the early days. There was an inverse flow of British convicts who escaped, many disappearing into India and other British domains via legal and illegal means. There are also groups of Indian entrepreneurs, some of them Sikhs, who arrived as small traders and travel within the Australian colonies. Allen's work is oriented towards a later time period than Rickard's, making the comparison of individual travelers' experiences in India and Australia and seeking out those Indian-authored accounts to give an insight into the increasing difference between such journeys as the hostility within Australia to 'non-white' entry increased around Federation. By definition, Allen's subjects are middle class and articulate subjects, who may comment on traders or workers but whose experiences are those of relatively privileged and solitary travelers.

There were as well two groups of Indians who arrived as labourers. Indentured workers came to Australia in relatively small groups in the 1830s and the 1840s as agricultural or pastoral labourers, recruited by graziers alarmed at the approaching end to controllable convict transportation to NSW in 1848. These Indians were sent into the Hunter River region and from there up the river valley into the pastoral north west of the state. The other major group were those from what were then known as the North West Frontier Provinces of India, from areas like Punjab and Afghanistan, some of whom were Sikhs while many others were Muslims.[17] They came to manage camels which were introduced to be the major transport mechanism in the intensely arid areas of central Australia. Many of these people moved in an easterly direction into pastoral areas, traveling from central Australian areas towards Broken Hill and then to Wilcannia and along the Darling River as hawkers, stock workers and later storekeepers to settle throughout north western New South Wales. Few of these Indians who entered

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[17] Pamela Rajkowski (1987) *In the Tracks of the Camelmen* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson). Christine Stevens (1989) *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: A history of Afghan camel drivers in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Australia within the imperial and colonial regulatory framework remained in readily identifiable cultural or racial communities. One group who came to form a concentrated community were the Sikhs, in locations like Woolgoolga on the NSW coast though in earlier periods they were much more dispersed within the Australian colonies. So the ways in which we learn about these people are largely through the British and settler technologies of controls such as the archives, registers, lists and records of their entry and residence in Australia. Our attention to these records arises from our land-based understanding of colonialism and imperial structure. We assume that people's presence on the land implies an earlier, unproblematic transit and that they have then established formal residence and a stable occupation in the places where they are recorded to have settled.

This movement of people as workers, servants or convicts has been seen as if it were taking place along a seamless set of transit channels which did not allow leakage along the way. The assumption has been that this imperial network fully contained the people who traveled along it and only discharged them onto the land at the end of all of the routes. But if we take up the Melanesian and Polynesian islanders' approach, discussed earlier, which offers a view of the ocean as a network of highways, we can open up the possibility that in fact the sealed quality of the imperial transport mechanisms was less than perfect. A close study of other systems of English Imperial management demonstrates that claims to have perfected not only innovation but also control, like the British irrigation canals in northern India, or even the sewage system developed by the British in Delhi, were flawed. Such major works were only ever partially successful in their goals and their failures were ignored or quietly hidden away.[18] These situations suggest that mastery and control were more illusion than reality.

The ways in which sea voyages have been written about in travel narratives have contributed to the reasons why similar questions are seldom pursued: Australian diaries and novels of sea travel rarely mention the crew. Yet the ships travelling between Britain and its colonies did so with many people on board, not only the British and European captains and their passengers. The large numbers of seamen who crewed

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[18] Rohan D'Souza (2006) *Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Michael Mann (2006) "Delhi's Belly: The Management of Water in a Changing Urban Environment, 1803-1912" (paper presented at the History of Waters, Jadavpur University).

these vessels were largely either African or South Asian and by mid 19th century were widely known in Australia as *sidis,* in the case of North Africans, in a corruption of the names Said or Sayed and *lascars*, in the case of the South Asians, in a derivation from the Persian word for military camp follow which shifted from being land based to refer particularly to seamen.[19] The term 'lascar' was used to define seafarers from the Portuguese ports of East Africa and West India working on Portuguese ships and later with British and French merchant shipping lines which plied their trade around the empires. For Europeans in the metropoles and in the colonies, the term *lascars* shifted from that of being a job description to being a generic racialised description, meaning coloured seamen and certainly this is how the word was used by trade unionists and historians in settler colonies like Australia.[20] Attitudes to *lascars* in both the settler colonies and in the imperial centres began to shift through the 19th century as imperial controls over expanding territories were tightened. As racial anxieties began to increase the movement of people also became more regulated. Rozina Visram has demonstrated these shifts by gathering and comparing changing visual representations of lascars in English ports from the mid 19th century. Some paintings depict exoticised but respectful images of *lascars* on the London docks. Increasingly, however, such images become caricatures of 'orientals' which, while usefully indicating the contemporary ethnic and racial diversity of non-British seamen then on the docks, were nevertheless viciously denigratory towards these seamen.[21]

Jane Ewald's work 'Crossers of the Sea', based on research in East Africa, traces the shift in Indian Ocean trade from sail to steam in the 19th century.[22] Ewald demonstrates the simultaneous economies in East Africa and West India, and the developing capitalist colonial networks through merchant trading. She shows that not only were seafarers from a range of different locations involved, including East Africans and West Indians as well as South Asians, but that people of different status were drawn into the trade:

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[19] Oxford English Dictionary; Hobson Jobson. Janet Ewald (2000) "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, C. 1750 - 1914," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 1-42.

[20] Gopalan Balachandran (2008, forthcoming) "Coolies, Class, and Nation: 19th Century Oceanic Maritime Labour and the Structures of Modern Capitalism" in (eds.) Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke.*Cultures of Trade: Indian Ocean Networks,* Transforming Cultures eJournal, Vol. 3 (2).

[21] Rozina Visram (1986) *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947*, London: Pluto Press, plates between p148-149.

[22] Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, C. 1750 - 1914."

lascars on the boats included some people who were still enslaved, some people who had been freed from slavery and free born sailors as well. The sailing ship structure allowed a much more fluid and flexible role for these seafarers, who could be both entrepreneurs in their own right at each port, as well as being much more flexibly allocated on the sailing ship itself. With the development of steam transport from the 1850s onwards, the distinction between engine room staff in the much more dangerous conditions deep below decks and of deckhands or ordinary seamen as they were called became increasingly differentiated. By the later 19th century, Ewald argues that the racial divisions had been cemented on the western routes whereby the East Africans, known as Seedies in a corruption of Said or Sayeed, were relegated to the difficult and dangerous conditions below decks. Other engine room crews were Indians, often Punjabis, while the ordinary seamen or deckhands were predominantly South Asians. The officers and stewards who tended to the increasing tourist trade were more likely to be European, but many South Asian men became part of the group of stewards known as the 'saloon' department.[23]Ravi Ahuja outlines a shifting pattern, just as racially ethnically segmented, in which South Asians increasingly appropriating the engine room and deck departments on British shipping from African and Chinese crews.[24]

Ewald identifies three critical changes of colonial and corporate control in the shift from sail to steam. Firstly tight control over time discipline became increasingly possible as the steam engines detached the schedule of the merchant ships from the regimes of wind and climate, which meant that the mail routes could increasingly operate to the tight schedule that was demanded at either end of the run.[25] Secondly, job specialization was intensified as the steam engine room, which demanded special skills and special control, was also segregated because of the appalling conditions of noise, heat and danger there. And finally the racialised segmentation of the job order had been intensified so that by the turn of the 20th century, the separation of working groups by ethnicity was more strongly entrenched than it had ever been in the days of sail.[26]

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[23] Note that our recent research into the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia membership archive suggests a differing stratification on the eastern routes and in Dutch shipping lines, in which the engine crews were largely South Asian while Indonesians might be more often present among the deckhands.

[24] Ravi Ahuja (2006) 'Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900–1960' *International Review of Social History*, 51 Supplement, pp 111-114.

[25] Jim Masselos (1992) "Changing Definitions of Bombay: City State to Capital City," in *Ports and Their Hinterlands, 1700-1950*, ed. Indu Banga (New Delhi: Manohar Publications.

[26] Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, C. 1750 - 1914."

The major merchant shipping lines like P&O advertised themselves in their proliferating tourist literature and posters in ways which made explicit the racial order on the large steam ships. Posters for early 20th century cruises on P&O, for example, show that while the tourist passengers were European, the staff who were lined up waiting on them were of mixed racial categories. We can see that while the visible, 'saloon' and 'deck' staff didn't include Africans, they certainly included South Asians. The poster showed a hierarchy of privilege and power depicted in the visual flow from the fore-grounded reclining tourists through to the insignia of rank on the uniforms of the European crew and on to the humble stewards and deck cleaners standing at the end of the line. An 1886 tourist on one of the P & O lines traveling between England and India, [significantly 'The Parramatta' which indicates its overall route to have included Australia] observed this shipping order to be one in which "that glorious British Empire of which we are here a small moving isolated fragment could be seen displayed".[27]

We see images of the technological power of the Imperial order in another poster from the P & O line which portrayed two of their enormous new steamers in the early 20th century as 'The White Sisters' which dwarfed not only their small tug boats, but the seemingly fragile Arabic sailing craft which was depicted veering off ahead of their towering prows as they steamed across the foreground of the poster. The choice of the colour white to badge the P&O liners in the later nineteenth century, a colour then reintroduced in the 1930s, was no accident, seeking as it did to stress the racialised order of exotic travel, in which Europeans were pampered tourists while colonized and 'coloured' people either served them or looked on as amazed spectators.[28] This visual representation of massive European power and technological mastery which was passively observed by exotic, primitive and appreciative natives was reproduced precisely in the posters of the Dutch steam shipping line, which also plied Australian

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[27] Ibid., p 24. Ewald is citing Edwin Arnold, on board the *Parramatta*, 1886, quoted in Peter Padfield (1981) *Beneath the House Flag of the P & O*, p. 70.

[28] TravelOnLine, *P&O Cruise History* (nd [cited 2006]); available from <http://www.travelonline.co.nz/cruises/po-history.html>. There are numerous websites on maritime shipping company history, from P&O to British India. One is that compiled by the de Fonseka family of Sri Lanka, documenting the Mackinnon Mackenzie Co of Ceylon, most of which contain images of shipping posters, eg. <http://www.defonseka.com/hist_mack01.htm>

waters with both cargo and passengers, the *Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij* line, known universally as KPM.[29]

Yet these images of imperial order and power obscured the fact that all the established merchant shipping lines by the turn of the 20th century carried major populations of colonized people, moving afloat around these empire networks as the workforce of the steamers. As the colonial transport system began to gather pace in the late 18th century, the British government had became concerned about the presence of large numbers of transient Asian and African seamen in the ports and they legislated for the insertion of what became known as the Asiatic Articles in to the mercantile shipping acts.[30] These acts influenced [although they did not determine] the later Australian shipping legislation which limited the wages and conditions available to Asian and African seamen and controlled the movement of seamen in the ports of Britain and other settler colonies.[31] Nevertheless, with the expansion of imperial trade in the 19th century, the growth of new ports and the opening of new routes for new products, there was a major rise by all accounts in the numbers of these seamen.[32] The figures are from diverse sources and can give no more than an indication of the scale of this rise. As an indication, however, lascars already made up a significant proportion of the crews of British sailing ships in 1821, when they were reported to account for 84% of those crews on the Eastern routes, including the Indian and Australian routes. By 1855, all British merchant shipping companies were employing 12,000 *lascars*, 60% of them from the sub-continent of India. By 1900, one company, P & O, was employing 12,000:

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[29] Another site for the display of shipping posters, but this time for the Dutch lines, is the Hague Museum, and there is a parallel construction of colonized people as both 'exotic' and 'amazed' by European technology shown in this KPM poster at <http://www.posterpage.ch/exhib/ex108roy/ex108roy.htm>.

[30] Gopalan Balachandran (1996) "Searching for the Sardar: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market, Calcutta, 1880-1935," in Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.) *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, C. 1750 - 1914.", Laura Tabili (1994) *"We Ask for British Justice": Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain,* New York: Cornell.

[31] Frank Broeze (1998) *Island Nation: A History of Australians and the Sea,* Sydney: Allen and Unwin, Brian Fitzpatrick and Rowan J. Cahill (1981) *The Seamen's Union of Australia: 1872-1972. A History.* Sydney: The Seamen's Union of Australia, Michael Quinlan (1996) "Industrial Relations before Unions: New South Wales Seamen 1810 - 1852," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 38, no. 2.

[32] The following figures are drawn from Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947,* .and from Jones, J.P. 1931: 'Lascars in the Port of London', *P.L.A. Monthly February 1931*; Report P&O Board of Directors 2 June 1900: Report on employment of Indian Seamen, both archived at <http://www.lascars.co.uk>. An important discussion of the numbers of Indian seamen over the whole period is in Gopalan Balachandran (2003) "Circulation through Seafaring: Indian Seamen 1890 - 1945," in *Society and Circulation: Mobile Peoples and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950*, ed. Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, New Delhi: Permanent Black, .pp 97-99.

59% were *lascars*, but they were defined in very clearly identified segments of the ships workforce; 28% of the stewards were *lascars*, but 81.5% of the firemen were *lascars*, with some *seedies*, while 95% of the deckhands and ordinary seamen were *lascars*. By 1928 52,500 *lascars* were employed on all of the British trading vessels, and this accounted for 30% of all seamen.

Over this century and a half these African and Indian seamen were represented variously as threats or as victims in Britain and Australia. In the 1790s the British government constructed *lascars* as a threat when they instituted the Asiatic Articles with its goal of limiting the seamen's access and permanent settlement in England. By the 1830s however, British philanthropists and others were constructing *lascars* as helpless, abandoned and pitiful victims of exploitation, who needed shelter and assistance to return home. The answer for these philanthropists was better contracts which provided better welfare for coloured seamen but also ensured their effective removal from Britain's shores.[33] In Australia, there was a series of major strikes during the 1890's against the new coalitions of grazier employers and also shipping owners and shipping lines. A major issue in these strikes was the control and eventual replacement of coloured labour by Australian and New Zealand settler labour. This was actually more of an attempt to control local shipping rather than to remove or exclude coloured labour on international shipping, but the predominance of *lascar* seamen on P&O and other steam lines continued to be used as a major example of the threat posed by 'coloured' outsiders to local labour. Unions in both Australia and the United Kingdom continued to represent *lascars* as a threat when they challenged P&O in the courts over their employment of coloured seamen instead of Europeans in particular shipping lines in the early years of the century. The agitation escalated in Britain in the 1930s as the depression affected the job opportunities of the British, although the Australian Seamen's Union adopted different strategies, refusing to recruit 'coloured' seamen into their own union but nevertheless supporting them to establish their own unions to improve conditions while in Australian waters.[34] Thus, British and settler seamen

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[33] Gopalan Balachandran (2008) "Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890-1939", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review,* 39:1 (2002): 96-99.

[34] Balachandran, "Coolies, Class and Nation: 19th Century Oceanic Maritime Labour and the Structures of Modern Capitalism", Fitzpatrick and Cahill, *The Seamen's Union of Australia: 1872-1972. A History.*

endorsed their governments' attempts to stop *lascars* legally coming ashore and taking up permanent residence, whether they constructed *lascars* as threats or victims.

III. Indian seafarers in Aboriginal memory and forgetting

Yet in fact neither official surveillance nor union opposition stopped people from jumping ship.[35] Motives for such decisions may have been mixed. Whatever their own feelings about the Australian colonies, settlers assumed that their colony was an irresistible attraction, but there were few good reasons for an Indian seafarer to consider abandoning not only the wages due at the end of the voyage but his family and village at home in India in order to stay in Australia.[36] Even so, circumstances might change at home, with deaths and family differences, which might at times make a return more difficult. Not uncommonly, the financial collapse of small ship owners left many cargoes and seamen abandoned in various ports, whatever the Articles which seamen had signed on under in their home port said about repatriation. Such short term stays might become extended indefinitely as relationships developed or opportunities arose. For example, some long established Indian families in Australia trace their descent to seafarers who jumped ship in the 1860s and to circus performers who visited with a troupe in the 1890s and stayed on when the tour was over.[37] But this is an invitation for the historian to think laterally, seeking beyond the archives or the official records of the lists of employees, or short term entry permits or even those allowed eventual migratory or permanent residency status. Beyond such formal records, our strategy is to look to the resources of memory and family history within those communities into which Indian seafarers may have been drawn, which is particularly to Aboriginal communities. We have also begun to look at the histories of the working people with whom Indians interacted on the wharfs and in the slums and red light districts of the port cities to understand these interactions and the possible outcomes which may have flowed. In this way we can put faces to the statistics.

Yet it is worthwhile first to consider how Aboriginal people dealt with having a mixed heritage in their family when there was no question of illegality. There are some

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[35] Tabili, *"We Ask for British Justice": Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain.*

[36] G. Balachandran 2007, personal communication, Heather Goodall.

[37] Reg Persaud, 2006, personal communication, Devleena Ghosh.

Aboriginal people who DO trace their ancestry to LEGAL Indian immigrants. The most famous example and also one which demonstrates the empowering possibilities of an outsider's perspective in the conflicts Aborigines faced with white Australian authorities, is that of Thomas Peersahib (1859 - 1946), an immigrant from the diasporic Indian community on Mauritius, who arrived between 1876 and 1881 as a young but already well educated man. He became an active Methodist, adopted the surname of James and married Ada Cooper, a Yorta Yorta woman from a high profile political family at the Cumergunja Aboriginal community on the Murray River. They raised their family on this Aboriginal settlement which had already shown the beginnings of what became a long and proud history of assertive demands for land and justice. Thomas James made a significant contribution to this emerging tradition, taking up a role as a school teacher on Cumeragunja which allowed him to equip with literacy and then broader learning a number of key people who went on to become effective and responsible community leaders. Some were close to his age, like Ada and her brother William Cooper. He was then the teacher for their sons and nephews, like Jack and George Patten, Doug Nichols and Eric and William Onus.

During the late 1910s, the NSW Aborigines Protection Board attempted to break up the strong Cummergunja community to further its goal of 'assimiliation'. The community was located on reserved government land, so the Board resumed the independent farm blocks Aboriginal people had believed were their own and tried to remove their community leaders by withdrawing their permits to live on the reserve. When the whole community protested furiously, the Board began to pressure the Education Department to transfer Thomas James to another school, arguing that his presence "would continue the friction and strife which had been prevalent".[38] In August 1921, after rising conflict with Aboriginal community members, the Board finally succeeded in ending the employment of James as teacher, on the grounds that it was "not in the best interests of the Aborigines" for him to stay. James' services were terminated although the Board was faced with further anger from the Aboriginal community as they threatened to remove their children from the school in protest. In August, the Board tried to expel James and Ada's oldest son, Shadrach, but he continued the Cumeragunja tradition and refused to comply with the order, seeking legal advice in an unprecedented challenge to

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[38] Government of NSW, *Aborigines Protection Board Minutes,* 14/5/1919, 25/6/1919, discussed in Heather Goodall (1996) *Invasion to Embassy: Land in NSW Aboriginal Politics, 1770 to 1972*, Allen and Unwin, pp 126-134.

the Board's authority. It was forced in turn to ask the Crown Solicitor's advice and had to rewrite the expulsion order in different terms to protect itself from court proceedings. The political nature of the expulsion is evident from the Board's insistence throughout that "the presence of [Shadrach] James on the Station is a menace to the good government thereof"." Shadrach still refused to leave the station and the Board finally prosecuted him for trespass.[39]

Shadrach (1890 – 1956), forced off the community, then took up an active role as a unionist and finally local government councilor, but he was continually being challenged by the State authorities who insisted he had no right to speak for Aborigines as he 'was not an Aboriginal' because 'his father is an Indian and his mother is a half-caste Aboriginal'. His sustained response, which was to try to force the Government to accept him AS Aboriginal, is an indication of the political pressures placed on Aboriginal people of mixed heritage who were repeatedly called on prove their Aboriginality by repudiating their other heritage. This has been effective up to a point in that what is remembered about both Shadrach and his father is their involvement with the Cumeragunja Yorta Yorta community, and indeed Shadrach is remembered AS a member of that community. As a result, the details of Thomas's early life are fragmentary at best, and there is no hint of what Shadrach thought about the rich heritage from his father's past which he was forced to ignore.[40]

Another example of similar pressures were those exerted on Fred Maynard, the leader of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in the 1920s and an outspoken advocate for land rights and the protection of Aboriginal children. His grandmother was a Worimi woman, Mary, from Dungog, but in 1846 she married a Mauritian, Jean Phillipe, (1813-1876).[41] Maynard's family believed he had an African background, but the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius had a population in the 1840s which was largely Creole, a community formed with a mixture of French, Indian and African origins.[42]

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[39] *ibid*: 17/8/1921, 19/8/1921, 21/10/1921, 7/12/1921.

[40] George E. Nelson, entry on Thomas James in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 14, Melbourne University Press, p596. His sources include Nancy Cato: *Mister Maloga* (Brisbane 1976) and the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Identity*, 3, Jan 1979.

[41] John Maynard: 2007: *Fight for Liberty and Freedom*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, pp. 9 – 12.

[42] Michelle Antoinette: Situating Creole Subjectivity in the Indian Ocean and beyond', paper delivered at *Ocean of Stories: Intercoloniality, networks and cultural exchange around the Indian Ocean*, UWA, Feb 2008.

When Maynard wrote to the NSW Premier, the Aborigines Protection Board tried repeatedly to discredit him by claiming that he was not Aboriginal at all, but instead an 'American negro' or 'South African black'.[43] The sustained use of accusations of non-Indigenous background in an attempt to sever relations between activists and their communities has left a strong legacy of reluctance to acknowledge mixed heritage.

Yet far more common than this legal heritage are the Aboriginal families who have been shaped by an Indian or South Asian father, grandfather or uncle whose entry or later residence was transitory, extended without authorization or outright illegal. Many have been associated with seafaring and with unregulated entry through ports.

One such story is that of Anthony Martin Fernando, whose extraordinary life is discussed in more detail in this volume by Fiona Paisley. Anthony Martin becomes visible in the histories of Aboriginal activism during the 1930s when newspaper accounts from the London press begin to give glimpses of an elderly man who has taken his courageous challenge against the British Empire right to London. He was described in a series of press reports as marching the streets of London, an elderly Aboriginal Australian hawking toys for a living.[44] His mixed ancestry as an Aboriginal man and an Indian was hinted at only by his name, which continues to be very common among Indians of Portuguese ancestry, Konkani-speakers from Goa and Sinhalese from Celyon and in 1945 was common name among Indian seamen on British and Dutch shipping passing through Sydney.[45]

In the 1930s, bundled against the cold, Anthony Martin Fernando had covered his greatcoat with the tiny skeletons he sold, in graphic symbolism of the deaths of his countrymen at the hands of the British. These occasional reports of his defiance in the face of racial abuse and his articulate defence in the courts were eagerly gathered up by Aboriginal activist Pearl Gibbs in Sydney in late 1930s. She pasted carefully them into her scrap books and took them around between rural communities and to public

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[43] Heather Goodall: 1996: *Invasion to Embassy*, Allen and Unwin, pp 149-170; A.C. Pettit for APB to NSW Premier, 3 Nov 1927; E.B. Harkness, Ed Dept to NSW Premier, 11 Nov 1927, PDCF A27/915.

[44] Max Brown, "Fernando, the Story of an Aboriginal Prophet," *Aborigine Welfare Bulletin,* 4, no. 1, Heather Goodall (1989) "Angry Ambassador: Anthony Fernando in Italy and England, 1887 to 1939," *Land Rights News* February.

[45] Indian Seamen's Union in Australia, "Union Membership Card Index 1945 - 1949," in *Noel Butlin Archive of Business & Labour* (Canberra: 1945 - 1949).

meetings, evidence of a rich and continuing Aboriginal tradition of assertion and resistance in the face of colonial oppression.[46]

The tragedy of Anthony Martin Fernando was that he didn't know of any of the excitement and respect that his work generated among Aboriginal people back in his homeland. He had been born near Sydney of an Aboriginal mother, from whom he had been separated at a very young age. His father had most likely been a South Asian seafarer named Fernando [or Fernandez] who had been living with Anthony Martin's Aboriginal mother in an area just to the north west of Sydney in the 1860s.[47] Anthony Martin Fernando believed his father had abandoned his mother and consequently he had grown up resenting the man who had left him a name but apparently no other legacy. Anthony Martin Fernando travelled widely as a young man, spending time in Western Australia where he met the campaigning feminist and human rights advocate, Mary Bennett. Wherever Anthony Martin Fernando went, he found himself speaking out increasingly assertively about the injustices being done by the settlers to his fellow Aboriginal people. Eventually by his own account he decided in 1887 that he would leave Australia, disgusted at the refusal of settlers to let him testify against the settler murderers of an Aboriginal man because he, himself, was Aboriginal.

In his departure, Anthony Martin Fernando evoked a resonance with his father, however unintentional it may have been. For he too became a *lascar*, working his passage on a steamer to Europe, where he led an eventful life moving from employment in Italy to refugee camps in the displacements after WW1 and then again into Italy, from whence he was deported to the United Kingdom in 1922 by Mussolini, then an ally of Britain, for insulting the British with his anti-colonial campaign. Anthony Martin Fernando played a diverse and important role in Europe, not only as an angry ambassador bringing the voice of colonized Australia back to challenge British Empire, but in a range of interventions in the early forums of the international movement, as Fiona Paisely demonstrates so effectively. His role as a member like his father of that large body of colonized people afloat, the lascars, is less well known. In reversing the directions his father took, however, he assumed a very new role: that of a working, colonised man who turned the apparently seamless conduits of Empire to his own

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[46] Goodall, "Angry Ambassador: Anthony Fernando in Italy and England, 1887 to 1939", Heather Goodall (1983) "Pearl Gibbs: Some Memories," *Aboriginal History* 7, no. 1 (1983).

[47] Jim Kohen, Earth Sciences, Macquarie University, personal communication. Heather Goodall.

advantage, traveling on them to bring his message, 'behind Empire's back', right into the heart of Europe itself.

Another history which emerges from research and activism within the Aboriginal community is also closely associated with the dimensions of the seafaring trade that worked outside official control. This is the story of the family of Kevin Tory, an Aboriginal unionist and activist who traced his family's descent from Tory (perhaps originally Tiwari) Devo, an Indian from Rae Baraeli district near Lucknow, who arrived in Australia from Fiji in 1887. Tory Devo may have left India as a *lascar*, although he may also have arrived originally in Fiji as an indentured labourer. While in Fiji, however, during the early 1880s he accumulated enough money to buy himself a small schooner and began trading goods around the islands. When he came across to Australia he settled in Bandjalang country on the north coast of New South Wales and later married Agnes Phillips, herself an Indian of Anglo-Indian descent who had met Tory in Fiji where Agnes' father was an interpreter for the British. The newly married couple took up a farming block at Lawrence on the Clarence River where they brought up their 15 children and where they lived until their deaths. A number of Tory and Agnes' children married Aboriginal people from the area and, with close contacts between two and then three generations, they retained a family history which celebrated Aboriginal histories but also retained fragments of the complex Indian histories of both Tory and Agnes's families. As Kevin said of his Indian forebears, "the only people who would talk to them were the Aborigines".[48] This was enough for Kevin to be able to trace the family back to Lucknow when he travelled to India during the 1990s to explore his family history.[49] Tony Birch also has an account of his great grandmother who married an Indian Muslim, went back to live with him in India for many years and when he died, married his brother and brought him out to Australia.[50]

While the Tory family is one in which Aboriginal people have conserved an Indian history, the family of George Fernando has a different but much more common story. George jumped ship in the 1890s and crossed over the Great Dividing Range into the pastoral north western floodplain of the Darling River. He married Ada Woods, a

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[48] Kevin Tory, personal communication, 1990, Devleena Ghosh

[49] Kevin Tory, interview with Heather Goodall, 10.2.2007; Kevin's aunt, Rene Clare Norhede's family history, manuscript, nd.

[50] Tony Birch, personal communication, 2003, Devleena Ghosh.

Yuwalaraay woman with whom he lived on her country around Angledool. The younger generations of the Fernando family have only a fragmentary memory of George's South Asian culture: George is known to have been Singhalese and is known to have jumped ship, but beyond that his grandchildren and great grandchildren know little of his cultural background, with little awareness for example that he probably had Portuguese ancestry as well as South Asian. He was regarded as and referred to exclusively as 'Indian'. They do remember, however, that he made great curries. Yet his very presence as a South Asian father was a major factor shaping all their lives. George worked as a shearers' cook and in similar work in the sheep industry but he and Ada were forced to move from the grazing properties where he was working to the newly established Angledool Protection Board 'mission' station in 1912 and bring their 10 children with them, because they were classified AS Aboriginal. All Aboriginal children, of whatever parentage, were vulnerable to removal by the Protection Board unless they attended the second class Board school on the Mission. But George, because he *wasn't* Aboriginal, was forbidden entry and so his children remembered him camping outside the fence and being able to visit them only occasionally. The need to continue to earn a living forced him to travel between the grazing property work sheds and Angledool, still more limitation on his time with his family. His absence and his background added a further level of insecurity to the family and made them even more exposed to the Protection Board's policy of the systematic removal of children. As a result each of the Fernando children, starting with the older girls, was taken away to be kept in the Board's Cootamundra 'training home' for girls and eventually 'apprenticed out' into lonely indentured domestic service in distant locations. Neither George nor Ada abandoned their children: George travelled the long distances to visit the girls in Cootamundra, against the Protection Board's severe disapproval, and sat patiently until his turn to see them. He and Ada were waiting for them when finally, one by one, they all made it home.[51]

This presence of a South Asian parent complicated the process of identity formation which the removal of children had made difficult enough for those Aboriginal people who were taken away. In many ways the testimonies of people removed and their

[51] Heather Goodall (1996) *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW 1770-1972,* Sydney: Allen & Unwin with Black Books, Heather Goodall (2006) "Karoo: Mates. Communities Reclaim Their Images," *Exchanging Histories: Aboriginal History* 30, Heather Goodall (1990) "'Saving the Children': Gender and the Colonization of Aboriginal Children in NSW, 1788 to 1990," *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* 2, no. 44.

collective designation as the 'stolen generation' has consolidated a narrative of Aboriginal people as victims. This is exemplified in the circulation of the stories about Aboriginal people as the victims of massacres and then as the victims of the systematic removal of children from 1912 to 1940 and onwards. It's important not to ignore the enormous damage done to many Aboriginal children who were removed in this way. But it is important to recognize also - and the Fernando family exemplifies this - that despite the damage done to some children, there was also an enormous resilience and a determination to survive the experience. Most of George Fernando's children returned to Angledool or Walgett or to the nearby townships. Many of them, and certainly their children after them, became activists campaigning for an end to discrimination and for the attainment of justice in relation to social, educational and legal rights. Good examples are George Fernando's grandsons George Rose and Tombo Winters who were both prominent in the establishment of the Aboriginal legal service and medical services across the north western region in the 1970s and 80s.[52] Their South Asian heritage had made the Fernando children even more vulnerable to removal, but there were other Aboriginal families across the country with mixed ancestries and fair complexions who found it was safer to 'pass' as non-Aboriginal. One of the ways to do this was by claiming to be Indian rather than Aboriginal.[53] The very pride (perhaps the stubborn refusal to be defeated) which had allowed George Fernando's children to return home and take up an active campaigning role against injustice, was just as likely to have led them to embrace assertively the Aboriginal side of their identity rather than appearing to wish to avoid it by acknowledging their South Asian heritage.

Furthermore, the tough histories of Aboriginal colonial experiences continued to shape the lives of George Fernando's children. Although they did return from their 'apprenticeships', his daughters found that they were faced another displacement when the Protection Board decided in the interests of cost saving and efficiency to uproot the Angledool community and force the residents to move at gunpoint more than 200 km to Brewarrina in 1936. Photographic recording of field work by anthropologist Norman Tindale in 1938 coincidentally opened up a window onto the sequence of enforced movements which dumped people from four different Aboriginal communities into the

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[52] Goodall, "'Saving the Children': Gender and the Colonization of Aboriginal Children in NSW, 1788 to 1990", Heather Goodall (2002) "Too Early yet or Not Soon Enough? Reflections on "Sharing" Histories as Process Not Collection," *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 118.

[53] See for example Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988).

Station at Brewarrina. In these archives we catch a glimpse of some of George's children: Mona and Sylvia. We see their suspicion as they cautiously face their photographers, suggesting the deep distrust of Protection Board authority and of both official and academic power which by this stage had penetrated the whole community.[54] These histories of displacement and removal along with the sustained tension and resistance they generated mean there has been a polarization in identity formation in Australia which is compounded by the settler colonial politics. There has been a continued political pressure to identify as either black or white, the Manichean dichotomy that Franz Fanon speaks about as symptomatic of settler colonial cultural and political structures. This very identification into either/or category then serves to relegate indigenous people to an uncomplicated museum of the past in which the rich stories of intercultural exchange that are so much a part of the histories of the Australian continent before European settlement vanish. It has been this pressure which has added to the other factors which have limited the degree to which George Fernando's South Asian history was passed down through his daughters to his grandchildren, like Joey Flick[55] for example, along with other members of the Winters, Rose, Walford and Flick families who are the grandchildren and great grandchildren of this Singhalese seaman. Although only across the relatively short period of 3 or 4 generations, these have been intense pressures to forsake identities which are alternatives to either the dominant Anglo settler identity or the oppositional Aboriginal identity with its strong sense of traditional affiliation. So the legacies of culturally diverse parents and grandparents like George Fernando have been set aside and eventually lost in many families. Only in some, like that of Kevin Tory, has that legacy have been conserved and indeed is being newly explored as people like Kevin attempt to relocate and reconnect with their Indian pasts.

IV. Indian Seafarers in Working Class memory and forgetting

While Aboriginal histories and memory are an important source for understanding the ways in which people from India came to Australia and the impact they had, it was not only those people who jumped ship like George Fernando or Anthony Martin's father or even those who formalized their residence like Tory Devo, who have shaped the past in

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[54] Goodall, "Karoo: Mates. Communities Reclaim Their Images."

[55] Joey Flick, personal communication 2006 and 2007, Heather Goodall

Australia. Through industrial union histories and the memories of working class activists and workers on the wharves, which were the sites of interaction, we can see the impact of those who continued to work the ships. The interactions of shared work and shared struggle on the wharves opened up lines of personal communications between Indians and Australians. Although most Australian unions characterized 'coloured' labour both on the ships and on land as a threat to working conditions and wages and indeed the dignity of 'white' labour, there was one notable group of unionists who refused to endorse Australian labour racism. They were the Wobblies, the members of the International Workers of the World [IWW] who challenged such racial divisiveness not only in theory but also in practical strategies and in the personnel who were involved in the union. This was a syndicalist movement which arose from the anarchist bodies of thought in Europe and which drew particular energy from the labour struggles in Chicago in the United States. Their goal was to set up 'One Big Union' which would cover all working people, men and women, of all colour and creed. Many Wobblies were seamen and this meant that the character of the seamen's union in Australia was more strongly international than many others. The work of Verity Bergman documents and demonstrates the high IWW presence among seamen, who interacted on their ships with ethnically and racially diverse shipmates whom they also found in the ports along with the waterside workers of many nations.[56]

As a result, the IWW was one of the few unions which supported Singhalese seamen in 1915 when they attempted to establish a local chapter of the One Big Union in Darwin. At a time when the mainstream unions, including the Australian Seamen's Union, were opposing 'coloured' labour, the IWW was supporting any group of seamen who wanted to unionize in order to establish a unity of purpose against the divide-and-rule strategies of the shipping owners.[57] The International Workers of the World was destroyed by the conflicts around World War I, but the personal networks of relationships across ethnic lines on the wharves and on the boats themselves continued, according to the memories of seamen and wharfies who continued to regard themselves as Wobblies and are a major source of information about the interactions on the docks.[58] The impact of the Depression and then World War II, while heightening fears of racial competition among

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[56] Verity Burgmann (1995) *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia,* Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Robert Haworth, personal communication, 2007, Heather Goodall.

maritime workers, also challenged those fears by forcing new alliances in the shifting struggles against Fascism and for decolonization and national independence.[59] Some of the working class activists who were closest to the maritime unions, like the Australian Communist Party [CPA] in the later 1930s, began to make increasing contacts with Indonesian nationalists exiled in Australia and also with the transient Chinese and Indian seafarers who tried to use the fluid situation in wartime to challenge the racially discriminatory conditions of the international shipping trade as well as to support nationalist movements in the immediate region. These Australian activists, often but not always members of the CPA, are another rich source of personal memories. Sylvia Mullins and her brother Jack are two activists born in the 1920s who have vivid memories of a number of Indian seafarers who took active organizing roles in the 1940s.[60] Another Australian CPA activist, Phyllis Johnson has been interviewed for other projects over the last decade, and even while she focussed on other themes, still demonstrated the close working relationship which she and her late husband Johnno had had with Indian seafarers on a number of political campaigns.[61] During her recent interview for our project, Phyllis expanded on her close personal involvement, offering warm memories about the camaraderie which developed across the lines of ethnicity and religion, but also giving valuable insights into the strategies adopted by the seafarers in their interactions both with allies and with the shipping companies with whom they were in dispute.[62]

V. Indian Seafarers speaking for themselves

Finally, just occasionally, we have a few opportunities to learn about how Indians themselves saw these interactions on the waterfront. This occurred notably with the documentation created around the birth and early years of the Indian Seamen's Union in

[59] Gopalan Balachandran, "Coolie, Class, and Nation" (paper presented at the Culture and Commerce in the Indian Ocean, Leiden, 2006), Balachandran, "Coolies, Class, and Nation: 19th Century Oceanic Maritime Labour", Balachandran, "Searching for the Sardar: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market, Calcutta, 1880-1935.", Rupert Lockwood (1982) *Black Armada: Australia and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence 1942-49,* Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982.

[60] Sylvia Mullins Cross, interviewed 13 March 2007; Jack Mullins, interviewed 2 March 2007, Heather Goodall.

[61] Phyllis and Johnno Johnson, interviewed by Jan Lingard, at Padstow, in 1997.

[62] Phyllis Johnson interviewed at Padstow, 1 May and 10 May 2007, by Heather Goodall.

Australia from its formation in 1945 to 1948.[63] The union was formed when Indian seamen refused to man Dutch ships which were attempting to take arms back to the former Dutch East Indies to fight against Indonesian nationalists who had just declared independence. While Australian maritime unions focused initially on Dutch military shipping and troop movements, the Indian crews of merchant shipping identified deadly cargoes of guns and bullets leaving ports disguised as commercial goods. Despite facing threats of internment from an ambivalent Australian Federal Labor government and hounded by Dutch security men, hundreds of Indian seamen walked off the ships and refused to either load or sail the ships towards Indonesia. They worked in concert with Australian maritime unions and they received support from left-wing activists, including the CPA and the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council as they formed their own union, demanded backpay and decent conditions and challenged the imperial shipping lines of the Dutch and the British with deputations and the Gandhian tactics of peaceful but tenacious sit-ins.[64] In January 1946, these Indians seamen hosted a banquet for the Australians who had supported them. For once we have a glimpse of the ways in which the Indians themselves regarded their roles in the struggle and their relationship to the Australians with whom they were in daily contact. Mohamed T. Hussain, the striking Indian crewman who opened the banquet, began his speech in this way:

> *"On behalf of my brother Indians and myself I extend to you all a warm welcome…We are Indian seamen without a ship and we have not been able to do all we would of liked for you…But what is missing we hope we will make up for with the warmth of our welcome…*
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> *Those who have controlled our country for so many years, so that because we are Indians we must be slaves…There can be no new world while there are any people who are slaves of others…The winning of freedom in Indonesia will surely be followed by the freedom of India. For that reason we must do everything possible to see that the Dutch are driven out of Indonesia".*[65]

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[63] Indian Seamen's Union in Australia Archive Deposit number: E177, 1945 – 1949 (Noel Butlin Archive of Business & Labour [NBBL] in Archives Library of the Australian National University)

[64] Heather Goodall (2008, forthcoming) "Port Politics, Race and Change: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945 -1947," *Labour History*.

[65] 13 Jan 1946, notes for speech by Hussain, E 177/5 Indian Seamen's Union in Australia Archive.

We have two ways then to learn about the *lascars* in Australia. The understanding we gain from Aboriginal memory and from the memory of Australian seamen, wharfies and activists are important insights into how personal interactions developed and left lasting impacts. They don't however give us the words or the perceptions of the Indians themselves. Just sometimes, in the scattered records in union archives, we are able to listen to the voices of those Indian seafarers speaking for themselves. In all of these sources, we see glimpses of people who are neither threats nor victims, but instead an interacting, assertive and complex body of people who were beyond the control of the imperial supervision and regulation which had supposedly been established and policed so effectively.

VI. Conclusion: jumping ship, challenging empire

This overview into the interaction between Indians and Australians suggests a number of questions that we can ask in terms of the study of contemporary diasporas. Those who jumped ship in the past tended to be dispersed and isolated geographically and socially from other Indians. Their potential for collective cultural, social or political assertiveness was thus greatly reduced and in many cases they left little legacy or memory about their lives in India or about their relationships once they reached Australia.

But we can ask how those who jumped ship constructed and expressed their identities. Was it as George Fernando did: through the symbolism and hospitality of food? Although George Fernando's cooking is remembered only dimly by his grandchildren, nevertheless it is their key memory. Was this a way in which he was offering them more about his own background while he simultaneously supported his family to assert their Aboriginal identity? For other people, did this manifest through politics? Were there others like the seamen glimpsed on the Sydney wharves in 1945, who either jumped ship or just interacted on the wharves? As they disappeared into the wider Australian and often Aboriginal population, were they able to exercise a sense of political independence or assertiveness which arose from their Indian backgrounds and which engaged *with* Aboriginal people's strategies and tactics in trying to defend families against the Protection board and, later, the Welfare Board?

Finally, those who ***didn't*** jump ship were just as much a part of active exchanges with Australians as those who did jump ship. There were long established traditions of stereotyping and depersonalising Indian seafarers as either threats or victims, particularly on the waterfront. Yet those activists who interacted with Indian seamen in the course of shared political work or social interactions have strikingly different memories. More broadly, were there dimensions of life on and off ships which allowed Indians to sustain a sense of collective identity? Were they drawing on shared village or kinship backgrounds, built into collective recruitment processes, as was commonly believed? Or was this just another of the myths and stereotypes about Indian seafarers, whose varied living places and growing unionization suggest either different or rapidly changing origins and orientations over the century in which they were in most active contact with Australians.[66] Were there other or additional processes in the pressure cooker environments of shipboard life, vulnerable to the power of ship captains and masters and with increasing racialised job differentiation between *seedies* and *lascars* for example?

These questions arise about not only the construction of an 'afloat' identity which was disassembled each time people went home, to Bombay for example and then further to the farming communities around Bombay or Aden where they lived. Did relational identities develop in ports so that bonds were established between working class groups which sustained an internationalism, rare ***within*** settler colonies, which contributed to a developing sense of globalization among workers persisting into the 21st century.

These are the questions which might find some answers in the work with Australians, both Aboriginal and maritime working class [and often both], and in the archival traces around them. Ultimately, the partial answers found in Australia will offer a contribution to a deeper understanding that may be found by further research in South Asia, tracing the lives of these Indian seafarers at home as well as away.

This discussion has been part of a wider project suggesting that the 18th and 19th century empires set up conduits along which people, technologies, ideas, plants and animals all

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[66] G. Balachandran has undertaken continuing and important analysis of this question across his body of work, see particularly Balachandran, "Circulation through Seafaring: Indian Seamen 1890 - 1945.", Balachandran, "Cultures of Protest in Transnational Contexts: Indian Seamen Abroad, 1885-1945.", Balachandran, "Searching for the Sardar: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market, Calcutta, 1880-1935."

moved. They flowed in all directions without necessarily either the knowledge of or the control by imperial regimes. In some cases they seeped out of the conduits in direct contravention of obstacles placed in their way. *Lascars* were increasingly regulated, documented, classified and recorded as part of the attempt to control their employment and their ability to move from the ports into the metropole or the colonies. However, despite these controls, they flowed in and out of those locations and generated a diaspora which was beyond the vision and the reach of empire, as well as influencing the culture and politics of settler colonies, especially in and around the docks.

Looking beyond the land-based structures of empire and colonies, and acknowledging the flows along their sea routes, allows us to ask very different questions about empire. Building on even earlier routes of trade and culture, these European empires greatly extended such conduits to encompass the globe. But they could not hope to control what then flowed along them. In fact the sea routes opened up active, unruly and ungovernable channels across which people, ideas, 'nature' and things all circulated and changed. This is an early example of the globalization we identify as such a defining generative process in the 21st century diasporic cultures of South Asia.

Acknowledgments

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Interviews

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