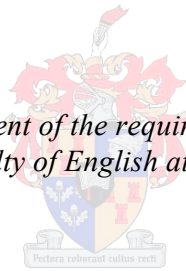


**Narrating Alternative Histories:
An Exploration of Jamal Mahjoub's *The Carrier* and Amitav
Ghosh's *In an Antique Land***

by
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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the relationship between the past and the present, as represented in Jamal Mahjoub's *The Carrier* (1998) and Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992). These texts re-imagine history in order to think a different future. They narrate alternative histories and in the process critique Western historiography and its representation of the East and South. This thesis will draw on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as a way of conceptualising dominant Western attitudes towards the East, as well as the South, represented by Africa, as the liminal characters in Mahjoub and Ghosh's texts move across the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds. Mahjoub and Ghosh both fracture their narratives into a historical and a contemporary thread, interweaving these fragments in order to comment on the dynamic relationship between the past and the present. This relationship will be conceptualised drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of a constellation connecting points in time. The mapping of connection is enabled by the authors' exploration of a history of connection between diverse people in these regions. The alternative histories proposed reveal precolonial Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trading networks built on exchange, resulting in cosmopolitan societies emphasising connection rather than geopolitical binaries. Conversations across differences — of culture, religion, and schools of thought — drive these connections in the historical plotlines. By juxtaposing this past world with a more hostile twentieth century world, Mahjoub and Ghosh seek to question whether reconceptualising the past enables the re-imagining of the present and future, in terms of how people are able to connect across boundaries of difference.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die verhouding tussen die verlede en die hede soos uitgebeeld in Jamal Mahjoub se *The Carrier* (1998) en Amitav Ghosh se *In an Antique Land* (1992). Hierdie tekste herverbeel die geskiedenis met die doel om 'n ander toekoms te dink. Hulle vertel alternatiewe geskiedenis en lewer sodoende kritiek op die Westerse historiografie en die uitbeelding van die Ooste en die Suide daarin. Hierdie tesis sal uit Edward Said se *Orientalism* (1978) put as 'n manier om die dominante Westerse houdings teenoor die Ooste sowel as die Suide, verteenwoordig deur Afrika, te konseptualiseer soos die liminale karakters in Mahjoub en Ghosh se tekste oor die Indiese Oseaan- en Mediterreense wêreld beweeg. Beide Mahjoub en Ghosh versplinter hulle verhale in 'n historiese en 'n kontemporêre draad, en verweef hierdie fragmente om sodoende kommentaar te lewer op die dinamiese verhouding tussen die verlede en die hede. Hierdie verhouding sal gekonseptualiseer word deur te put uit Walter Benjamin se konsep van 'n konstellasie verbindingspunte in tyd. Die kartering van verbindings word moontlik gemaak deur die skrywer se verkenning van 'n geskiedenis van verbindings tussen diverse mense in hierdie gebiede. Die alternatiewe geskiedenis wat hier voorgestel word, onthul pre-koloniale Mediterreense en Indiese Oseaan-handelsnetwerke gebou op uitruiling, wat gelei het tot kosmopolitiese samelewings waarin die klem op verbindings eerder as geopolitiese binêre geval het. Gesprekke tussen verskillende kulture, gelowe en denkskole dryf hierdie verbindings in die historiese verhaallyne. Deur hierdie vergange wêreld en 'n meer vyandige twintigste-eeuse wêreld naas mekaar te stel, wil Mahjoub en Ghosh bevraagteken of die herkonseptualisering van die verlede die herverbeelding van die hede en toekoms moontlik maak, in terme van hoe mense in staat is om oor verskilgrense heen met mekaar te verbind.

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Chapter One: Mapping Migration through Time and Space

What was the point of looking backwards? By the time we got to secondary school all the humanities had been dropped including geography. So we had no real idea, not only of how we got here, but where we were to begin with.

Jamal Mahjoub
(*Travelling with Djinn*s 64)

A multitude of maps ‘write’ contemporary society. Between physical maps, ranging from the world atlas, to detailed local area maps, to GPS and Google maps, star charts and geologic maps, society maps itself. This stems from a desire to know where we are. Maps both locate us, and offer the space for dislocation, by showing alternative spaces and routes. Despite offering the possibility of travel and freedom, maps also delimit spaces, at once showing boundaries and what is beyond them. Yet, as Mahjoub points out in the above quotation, without looking backwards, there is no real sense of where ‘here’ is. Therefore, the project of mapping goes hand-in-hand with historiography. This thesis is concerned with a mapping of time, represented by Walter Benjamin’s notion of a constellation connecting stars, or historical events, through time; and a terrestrial mapping, focusing on boundaries and the conversations that occur across them. In this thesis, I will be exploring Jamal Mahjoub’s *The Carrier* (1998) and Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* (1992) and the ways in which these authors narrate alternative histories in order to question the relationship between the past and the present, and to explore the ways in which people converse across borders. Both Ghosh and Mahjoub’s projects are inherently political, as they critique Western historiography by presenting an alternative historical archive that writes Eastern and Southern voices back into history,¹ reinserting an Eastern and Southern presence on the European continent and in so-called Western science. Moving outside of the West, they also reveal a history of connection across the South and East, external to a Western framework. Mahjoub and Ghosh both fracture time in their narratives, interweaving and juxtaposing the present with an alternative past. This undertaking of narrating an alternative past is thus intrinsically linked to a project of re-imagining the present and the future.

¹ This thesis will draw on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as a way of conceptualising Western attitudes towards the East, as well as the South.

The Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds that are represented in *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land* reveal long histories of movement. There is a tendency in Western historiography to focus on early movement across the planet as a predominantly Western phenomenon, as Western empires expanded into the rest of the world, thus ‘discovering’ the world map. Challenging this conception is part of Mahjoub and Ghosh’s project as they trace a long history of movement. Coinciding with the movement of people is the movement of knowledge, two things central to the art of cartography. Maps are thus a useful way of measuring the knowledge held of the world at a particular point in time. A pertinent illustration of this, and of the history of movement and knowledge outside of Western discourse, is in the work of Arab cartographer al-Idrisi. His map of the world, the *Tabula Rogeriana*, created over a span of fifteen years in the 1100s, was, and is, widely regarded as the most accurate and extensive map of the Middle Ages, outstripping its Western counterparts in accuracy and detail. The accuracy of this map is due to al-Idrisi’s understanding of the world as spherical and his attempts to map the world according to this shape, rather than simply as a flat surface. As for the content of the map, he used a combination of the works of contemporary geographers, and the knowledge of Muslim merchants and pre-Islamic scholars (Amodeo). This example illustrates the existence of a world in flux, prior to the West’s interventions and technologies of later centuries. In addition, it shows that considerable knowledge existed outside of European knowledge centres, and that knowledge, like people, was able to travel freely across perceived East-West boundaries. The *Tabula Rogeriana* thus represents the knowledge held about the world in the 1100s in the East. I want to liken Mahjoub and Ghosh’s texts to al-Idrisi’s *Tabula Rogeriana* in the way that these authors too map historical twelfth- and seventeenth-century worlds, respectively, in order to throw light on their locations in the present.

I have chosen these particular texts by Mahjoub and Ghosh for the similar way in which they structurally deal with the relationship between past and present. Both *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land* split their narratives into interweaving strands that “[destabilise] the division between past and present” (Steiner, “Of translators” 43). They are thus complementary in structure and in their mutual interrogation of the relationship between the present and the past, and in their project of narrating alternative histories. Moreover, each author brings to his writing a wealth of personal experience of migration and occupying the position of the Other. While these authors deal with this subject in many of their other works, what attracts me to

these two particular texts is the way they both centre on the sea and ocean as a way of linking diverse worlds and time periods through migration across these zones. Both texts are explicitly focused on border crossing in the most literal sense of transgressing various national and regional boundaries, as well as more figurative cultural and temporal border crossings. By examining the movement across time, the focus in both texts turns to the notion of history. Both Mahjoub and Ghosh are decidedly political in their views of history, and this comes to the fore in their bodies of work, both literary and non-fiction. They thus have a common project of re-imagining the past in order to comment on the present, and to re-imagine the future.

Jamal Mahjoub is no stranger to migration and dislocation. Born in England in 1960 of Anglo-Sudanese parentage, and raised in Sudan, he subsequently studied in England before moving to Denmark, and later to Spain. He has published a number of novels, starting with his Sudan-based trilogy of *Navigation of Rainmaker* (1989), *Wings of Dust* (1994), and *In the Hour of Signs* (1996). Mahjoub's next two novels, *The Carrier* (1998) and *Travelling with Djinns* (2003), explore the position of the outsider in Europe. He later published *The Drift Latitudes* (2006) and *Nubian Indigo* (2006). He has since turned his attention to crime fiction, writing under the pseudonym Parker Bilal. His fiction has a strong focus on exploring the past and how it is represented in history, as he ranges from centring on Sudanese history, to representing the silencing of Nubian history, as well as narrating personal struggles of identity through dislocation arising from migration, as seen acutely in *Travelling with Djinns* and *The Drift Latitudes*. What draws me particularly to Mahjoub as an author is the way in which his academic background as a geologist profoundly influences his work in the way he excavates layers of history and location. Having studied geology himself, a comparison can be drawn with his character in *The Carrier*, the historian and archaeologist Hassan who is sent to the Jutland peninsula in Denmark to decipher the writing on a brass case found next to a skeleton on an archaeological dig. It is through Hassan's excavation work that the second narrative thread is woven, as the mystery behind this discovery is revealed in the seventeenth-century narrative of Rashid al-Kenzy, the son of a slave, scholar, and prisoner, who journeys to Denmark on his quest to find the newly-invented Dutch telescope. Through Hassan's lens, and through Mahjoub's lens, the language of archaeology is employed to add a particularly layered response to the exploration of history.

While drawing on the scientific discourse of geology, Mahjoub is just as interested in the more social aspect of archaeology. He uses both his fiction and non-fiction to examine the new subdivisions in society, particularly in Europe, driven presumably by his location there, between rich and poor and between different cultures. He sees the particular importance of transcultural literature in examining the disjunctions between people. This type of literature, he explains, relies

on the thin crack of light which lies between the spheres of reader and writer, [...] and something is always lost in reaching for that light, but something is also gained: Gradually that crack grows wider and where there was once only monochrome light, now there is a spectrum of colours. (“Writer and Globalism” 4-5)

Thus, while a gap exists between the reader and the writer, and by extension between people divided by other barriers, specifically by culture in light of the argument of this thesis, the gap is not an empty chasm signalling disconnection. Instead, the gap allows for light, and furthermore, light in a variety of colours, indicating the various ways people are able to bridge the gap through connection and understanding. Literature is one way of crossing the gap, through its reflections, linking “diverse cultures which are now, for better or worse, stuck with one another, and whose encounter now defines the world we live in” (“Writer and Globalism” 6). Mahjoub thus sees literature as holding an important place in society in enabling people to think through difference, and to find a means to communicate across the gap. The power of literature lies not in its ability to reflect the social issues of the world “to get at the ‘truth’”, but rather to “[take] us into another person’s life, not as objective viewers, amateur anthropologists, but as human beings. When we read a novel we allow ourselves to become someone else” (“Fiction, reality and the fear of flying” 9). Fiction thus enables a person to occupy the position of somebody else, allowing the gap between the reader and the Other to be bridged in a way that is, according to Mahjoub, not possible by any other means.

In the same way that fiction bridges the gap between people, across the various boundaries dividing people, it also bridges gaps in time. Mahjoub notes that “stories draw threads across time and space” (“Fiction” 9). His interest in narrating alternative histories is driven by what he terms “dark spots on the global map of fiction” (“Fiction” 9). These dark spots refer to the inadequate and sparse representation of fiction from the Middle East in the West, which fuels Western ignorance of the East. The solution to this vast gap in literature is, according to

Mahjoub, the proliferation of stories from the East, as well as translating existing Eastern literature for a Western audience (“Fiction” 10). Mahjoub is thus pursuing a project of writing stories from the East back into mainstream narratives, with a particular focus on historical representations. He is, however, not interested in simply writing historical novels for the sake of “creating a kind of nostalgia for the past” (Tervenon). What he is interested in is the relationship between the past and the present. He uses the form of his work to play with this interrogation, as can be seen in the split narrative of *The Carrier*, where the contemporary plotline serves “as a reminder of where we are today” (Tervenon). Moreover, he uses factual references in this novel, such as existing newspaper headlines, in order to set up a meaningful and politically charged discussion between very real pasts and presents. Mahjoub’s fiction is thus inherently political, addressing current European debates about immigration and multiculturalism by questioning Europe’s incomplete and non-inclusive narrative of its own past. In another of his novels, *Travelling with Djinns*, he narrates an alternative history of Europe that is counter to popular discourse of purity and homogeneity:

The face of this continent is scarred by the passage of people. From east to west, north to south. From the earliest Neolithic wanderers to the Mongol hordes, from the Huguenots to the Calvinists, pilgrims, refugees, gypsies. It is a history of railway tracks and roads. A history of transgression of frontiers and border lines being crossed and recrossed. The Romans, the Visigoths, the Jews, Bosnians, Albanians, Kosovans, the blind, the sick, the old, the crippled. These are the people upon whose sacrifice the history of Europe is written, and our collective destiny is written in the course of those migrations. (173)

Mahjoub sees the history of Europe as one of movement and border transgressions. Located in Europe himself, his focus on the migration across Europe by both Europeans and non-Europeans holds a personal interest to him. This comes to the fore in *The Carrier* as a large portion of the novel is set in Denmark, with the supposed purity of this space invaded by foreign bodies and foreign knowledge. Mahjoub is thus interested in writing an alternative history that represents migrations of people and knowledge to the West.

Despite the relevance of Mahjoub’s work to current debates about migration in Europe and elsewhere, little critical attention has been paid to his work, specifically *The Carrier*. I feel there is a great need to insert his work into this conversation. I will draw on the work done by Jopi Nyman on the relationship between Europe and its Others as portrayed in the novel.

Critics such as Brenda Cooper and Tina Steiner have focused more on the existence of a collaborative history of science and knowledge transmission. Building on the work of these scholars, I will shift the conversation to an exploration of the impact of reimagining this history of science and its implications on relationships across the Mediterranean and within Europe has on reconfiguring present and future relations.

In contrast to Mahjoub, the body of scholarship on Ghosh's oeuvre has been much more prolific. Critics have focused on numerous aspects of *In an Antique Land*, with a particular emphasis on the anthropological study within it², the limits of Ghosh as ethnographer and historian, and the cultural translation that occurs. Other critics³ have looked specifically at the role of history and the act of casting one's eye backwards to bring to light the story of Ben Yiju and the Slave of MS H.6. Ghosh has been cast as nostalgic by critics such as Gauri Viswanathan and Robert Dixon for painting a picture of syncretism and utopian humanism. I wish to move away from such arguments. My particular argument in this thesis will rely on the language of discourse as a way of discussing Ghosh's conception of time as a continuous conversation. I will thus be focusing particularly on Ghosh's non-linear view of history and the possibility this creates for re-imagining relationships across time and place.

Like Mahjoub, Amitav Ghosh is intimately acquainted with migration. Born in Calcutta, India, in 1956, his childhood was characterised by travel, living in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as well as Iran. His education reflects his global upbringing, as he studied first in Delhi, then in England, where he obtained his doctorate degree in social anthropology. Turning away from anthropology, Ghosh has become a prolific novelist, publishing *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), and *River of Smoke* (2011), the latter two of which are the first instalments of the *Ibis* trilogy. In addition to his works of fiction, Ghosh has also written a number of essays, published in the collections *Dancing in Cambodia* (1998), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), and *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006). The overarching theme across the majority of Ghosh's work is border crossing, specifically across the Indian Ocean region. The common thread is a movement between India, North Africa, and the West, ranging from London, in the case of *The Shadow Lines*, to New York,

² Critics here include James Clifford, Neelam Srivastava, Javed Majeed and Claire Chambers.

³ I will be drawing here on critics such as Binayak Roy, Eric Smith, Anshuman Mondal, Tapan Ghosh, Christi Ann Merrill, and others.

in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. His interest in the movement of people and the dialogue that occurs across these differences is best captured in the *Ibis* trilogy, which focuses on voyages across the Indian Ocean. His other core focus, like with Mahjoub, is that of representing the past. Narrating alternative histories is key to Ghosh's writing, as well as to his own political stance, as illustrated by his close connection to the Subaltern Studies scholars, a collective of Indian scholars whose aim is the rewriting of India's history from below (Chakrabarty, "Subaltern Studies" 9). This project of narrating the past differently is carried out in *In an Antique Land*, a text born out of his actual experiences of undertaking fieldwork in Egypt for his doctorate degree. Drawing on his observations of the relations in two Egyptian villages, Ghosh knits this narrative together with the history of Jewish merchant Ben Yiju and his slave, the Slave of MS H.6, thus creating a narrative that is partly an ethnographer's journal entry, a memoir, an historical account and a migrant tale. Through his research into the Slave of MS H.6, he reveals a cosmopolitan medieval Indian Ocean world, with relative peace, understanding and cooperation across the South.

What is clear from *In an Antique Land* and the greater body of Ghosh's work is his interest in the histories of interaction between people across various physical and cultural boundaries. This focus flows naturally from his field of social anthropology. For this reason, I would like to explore his reasons for turning from anthropology to writing, and the impact that this has had on his writing, particularly in relation to a text like *In an Antique Land*, which draws on his academic studies. In an interview with Alessandro Vescovi, Ghosh describes how he realised anthropology was not what he wanted to do despite the interest it held for him; he states:

Anthropology, at least the anthropology of that time, was full of generalizations, and my mind doesn't work like that. I can't think about very abstract generalizations. I like to think about people, that's what interests me, people, characters. The plight in which individuals can find themselves. (131)

Ghosh is thus interested in moving from the more general field of social anthropology that examines the way societies function, to a closer exploration of people and their internal world in fictional representation. The difference between anthropology and fiction can be seen in the disparity between *In an Antique Land* and Ghosh's anthropological field notes as published in *The Imam and the Indian* (2002). The change of form, from supposedly neutral

observation to the much more sympathetic portrayal of conversations and the relationships formed between Ghosh and his subjects, reveals Ghosh's interest in human connection beyond a purely ethnographic study. In conversation with Lila Azam Zanganeh, he talks about the influence that anthropology has on his fiction, thanks to the methods involved in anthropological research: "You just go and talk to people, then at the end of the day you write down what you see. So what it really does is trains you to observe, and it trains you to listen to the ways that people speak" (Zanganeh). Ghosh is thus a keen observer of people and events, and this manifests itself in his writing. Freeing himself from academic and supposedly objective observations, Ghosh's fictional writing instead focuses on the connections between people, locating them in a history of interaction and dialogue.

Ghosh is similarly interested in location in a physical sense, as he explores border crossings. His diverse body of published work is multi-faceted in terms of genre as well as location and subject. Claire Chambers notes that in Ghosh's varied fictional settings, ranging from India, to Egypt, the Middle East, Britain, Burma, America and Malaysia, "he frequently emphasizes that travel is not a recent by-product of globalization but something that societies have always undertaken for economic, religious, political or personal reason" ("Absolute Essentialness" 27). Thus, like Mahjoub, he is interested in bringing to light a history of the East and the South that is significantly under-represented in Western historical narratives. He also has the same interest in the concept of time, as can be seen in the similarities between the temporal structures of the two texts studied in this thesis. As he notes, "[time is] the central element in narrative. All narratives are really the unfolding of events in time" (Aldama 90). He has a particular interest in time, and the various ways it can be represented and constructed in fiction. Within *In an Antique Land* specifically, he uses the same kind of fragmentation of time as Mahjoub, describing it as a "double helix" with two separate moments in time "pulled together solely by a single narrative that has no interactions" (Aldama 90). Yet these separate strands speak to each other in a conversation that is reminiscent of Mahjoub's gap that allows for light to filter through in a variety of colours. In the same way that Ghosh sees endless possibilities to represent time in novel, he also attributes much potential to its form. He collapses the difference between fiction and non-fiction in terms of the techniques present in both. As he notes, "[i]n the end it's about people's lives; it's about people's history; it's about people's destinies. When I write nonfiction, I'm writing about characters and people, and when I'm writing fiction, I'm doing the same thing" (Aldama 86). The ultimate interest for Ghosh, in all his writing and with all

his experimentation with time and form in his work, is to write personal narratives, an interest sparked by his study of anthropology.

Ghosh thus crosses boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, as well as between moments in time, as he interweaves the past and the present. This border crossing is also present in the way in which he deals with location, and the idea of identity as being rooted in place. Ghosh sees his own particular relationship to migration as that of travel, rather than of belonging to the diaspora. His own understanding of the diaspora as a space to be studied stems from his realisation that “India is not in one place” and how this “is in some very important way the pattern of the future. What we see today is that nation-state is fading to be replaced by these enormous diasporic civilizations” (Zanganeh). Inherent in this observation is a critique of the notion of identity as being fixed to the nation-state. This emerges in his work through the various transnational journeys his fictional characters undertake, and the history of transnational dialogue that he portrays. Ghosh thus seeks a more fluid notion of the relationship between identity and place. He captures this in his prose piece, “The March of the Novel through History,” discussing the paradox of the novel: “those of us who love novels often read because of the eloquence with which they communicate a ‘sense of place.’ Yet the truth is that it is the very loss of a lived sense of place that makes their fictional representation possible” (23-24). What this quotation elucidates is that dislocation — and not necessarily enforced dislocation, but perhaps a voluntary displacement through travel — is what allows one to talk about place with any meaning. In addition to this is the role of the novel in articulating the experience of both rootedness and dislocation.

Discussions of place and migration are thus present in both Mahjoub and Ghosh’s writings. While migration itself is not the core focus of the argument of this thesis, it is implicit in any discussion of history and the patterns of connection across vastly differing places and people. The link between migration and questions of time is captured by Daniela Merolla and Sandra Ponzanesi, who see migration as “a literal and metaphorical transition in space but also a translation in time. It refers to a past and a present whose territorial boundaries do not overlap anymore” (3). The link between space and time is integral to the migrant experience. This is a result of the lived experience in a place as part of the past, most often a nostalgic past, and the present experience of a different place. Thus moving through space requires moving through time, resulting in a two-fold displacement.

The history of migration has long been colonised by the West's representation of it. Tabish Khair connects this European monopoly of "agential human movement" to a European tendency to "deny rational agency to colonized people" (72). This claim to rationality and modernity was solidified in the eighteenth century with the practice of Orientalism as an academic inquiry, which led to "rational and scientific Europe being juxtaposed with the irrational and intuitive Orient: The Middle East or Central Asia" (Atabaki 4-5). Thanks to this ownership of agency and history, it was "[n]o wonder Europeans and their descendants appeared to have 'traveled,' 'discovered,' and 'settled' – and, thus, made possible the modern world" (Khair 72). What this effectively does is position the West, and particularly Europe for the purpose of this case study, as modern, and by implication the rest of the world as "premodern" and thus excluded from claims to modernity (Chakrabarty, "Modernity" 666). This view denies rationality and progress, tenets of modernity, to precolonial and colonial states, suggesting that access is gained to modernity only through the adoption of Western values. What this essentialist approach to history also does is to "perceive modernity as a homemade product of European rationality, universalized by modernization theorists" (Atabaki 10). The non-West is consequently denied any claim to modernity except in its late-to-the-party attempts to mimic Western modernity. "The 'belatedness' of the post-colony to the 'developed' or 'First' world is," according to Gaurav Majumdar, "a myth constructed by uneven dynamics of power" (154). Recognising the myths driving historical representation of the East and the South, and the power dynamics that generate them, creates a space for new texts, both fictional and non-fictional, to narrate alternative histories. This allows for the "grand historical narratives of former European metropolitan centers [to be] interrupted and de-centred by people shifting among multiple locations whose diasporic sensibilities refashion traditional definitions of literary canons, identities, and genres" (Merolla & Ponzanesi 1). This is precisely what these texts by Mahjoub and Ghosh do by moving between various locations, in the process destabilising the divisions imposed on the world order. In order to unsettle the centre, it is first necessary to dissect the ways in which the centre has been defined, and conversely, how the rest of the world has been demarcated in relation to this centre.

The world system has for a long time been described in terms of binaries: that of East and West, and North and South, indicating not just a geographical separation, but also a division of culture, ideology and identity. The division of the world into the West versus the East dominated global discourse for a long time, with the Occidental West Othering itself against

the Oriental East, a topic that will be explored more thoroughly in chapter two with reference to Said's foundational intervention *Orientalism*. As the notion of development, and the subsequent division between first and third world, and later, developed and developing world became more prominent, the division between North and South became more entrenched. The term 'global south' eventually became the preferred, and less obviously ideologically charged, means of referring to the 'third world' (Braveboy-Wagner 1). Accordingly, the term encompasses Africa, Asia and Latin America, united in their so-called underdevelopment and through their colonial history. This way of dividing the world is connected to the East-West binary, with East and South holding similar positions in relation to the more powerful West and North. A further attempt to move away from the ideologically charged terminology of East and West resulted in the formation of an economic-based theory to demarcate the world, namely Immanuel Wallerstein's World-System Theory. In this theory, the world is divided into core and periphery, with a later added semi-periphery. World-system theory is based on the idea that "an identifiable social system exists that extends beyond the boundaries of individual societies or nation" (Shannon 20). While the East-West binary was driven by a cultural approach, the core-periphery division is determined by predominantly economic factors. This view posits that the core consists of the most developed nations, in terms of sophisticated technology, military power and high production and thus capital income (Shannon 24). By extension, the peripheral states are weak and underdeveloped, while the semi-periphery was created to accommodate those nations which are more powerful and productive than the peripheral states, but not on the same level of power and wealth as the core states. While this model is not arranged by geographical differentiation in the explicit manner of the North-South, East-West divisions, the cluster of countries associated with each division remains strikingly similar. What underscores each of these binary divisions is the clear-cut groupings, suggesting the ease with which the world can be divided along cultural and economic lines. It is this categorical partitioning that Mahjoub and Ghosh problematise in their work.

The core problem with binary divisions, such as that of North-South, East-West and core-periphery, is that they are extremely reductionist. As Edward Said notes, divisive tags like the Orient and Occident "[herd] beneath very wide labels every possible variety of human plurality, reducing it in the process to one or two terminal, collective abstractions" (155). The result of this broad lumping of diverse people under the label of Oriental is a form of reductionism, specifically "the reduction of all other identities such as class, ethnicity,

gender, religion and political allegiances to one inclusive identity” (Atabaki 13). Thus to speak of Oriental people, or Africans, or Muslims in a broad way is to deny the variety of identities within this category and the distinct regional differences between them. These binary divisions are accordingly wholly inadequate. This is particularly true when dealing with the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds, where great parts of the regions do not fit easily into geographic categories of South and East, because they can be classified as both. The Mediterranean in particular has been a melting pot of both Northern and Southern cultures, and the influence in the region has changed hands many times, shifting the power base between East and West. North Africa, and specifically Egypt, is especially difficult to situate within these categories. These binary divisions are also inadequate due to the way they suggest regions interact across the binaries. The Indian Ocean world, for example, is a trading network that interacted wholly across the South for a long part of its history, and thus existed outside of the influence of the North or core. It is therefore imperative to move away from a North-South focus, and instead to recognise South-South relations. In addition, by continuing to use these classifications, the discussion remains inevitably trapped within Eurocentric discourses of power. My use of these terms throughout this thesis is to further the broader arguments in Mahjoub and Ghosh’s texts of narrating alternative histories in reaction to dominant Western historical discourse.

The narrative discourse in the texts by Mahjoub and Ghosh destabilise the clear-cut binary divisions between the West and the rest by showing the patterns of movement contrary to, or rather not represented in, European historical accounts. Increased migration has created a paradoxical opening up and simultaneous closing down of the world. Caren Kaplan notes how the organisation of the world, socially, politically and economically, has arisen out of “movement of transnational capital [which] deconstructs traditional modern borders and cultures and reconstructs new ones, both eroding and consolidating versions of the nation-state” (8). As national boundaries become easier to cross with the progress of transport, nations have become increasingly border obsessed. The apparent growth in the number of refugees and immigrants worldwide has given rise to a commonplace rhetoric of immigration, with the proliferation of terms such as “cultural clash,” the “refugee problem,” and “multiculturalism” in contemporary discourse indicating a perception that Europe is only now suddenly being “inundated with non-Europeans” (Khair 75). This indicates a fear that the West is being invaded. Khair makes a noteworthy observation in this regard:

If the previous invisibility of non-European movements tended to justify European control of spaces in the name of greater ‘knowledge’ or ‘entrepreneurship,’ the current visibility of non-European movements serves to hide the fact that human beings are far less mobile than capital today – perhaps more so, keeping in mind the growing ease and reduced costs of travel, than in the nineteenth century – and that human movements today are both permitted and controlled by capital. (Khair 75)

Thus despite the ease with which movement across the planet is enabled through technology, it has simultaneously become much more controlled, through the maintenance of borders, and the processes of visas and immigration procedures, and of course monetary constraints. What inevitably happens is that “non-European bodies [...] are obscured or even made to disappear in the verbiage of words thrown up by the current rhetoric of non-European ‘diaspora’ and ‘immigration’” (Khair 75). What enables this is the historical erasure of the non-European presence on European soil, both historically and at present, as well as a refusal to acknowledge the world as always having been in a state of flux. Both Mahjoub and Ghosh are concerned with excavating these non-European bodies, and highlighting a history of motion across the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds.

Any history of motion needs to examine boundaries as well. Joel Migdal’s conception of borders is useful here. He notes that borders have always been dependent on a number of shifting historical conditions, thus are not as rigid as modern conceptions would perceive them. Instead, “[b]orders shift; they leak” (5). Migdal views boundaries as conveying more than borders, defining boundaries as “lines dividing spaces as represented on maps; boundaries signify the point at which something becomes something else, at which the way things are done changes, at which ‘we’ end and ‘they’ begin” (5). The term boundary, by this definition, forecloses the possibility of hybridity, where borders are straddled. The notion of a fixed boundary is a social construct that includes “symbolic and social dimensions associated with the border divisions that appear on maps” (Migdal 5). Also important in Migdal’s conception of boundaries is what he calls checkpoints and mental maps (6). These are what are used to separate spaces, as “actual and virtual checkpoints [are used] to divide one space from another” while checkpoints are “sites and practices that groups use to differentiate members from others and to enforce separation” (6). While there is a perception that boundaries are rigid because of the checkpoints and mental maps used to enforce them, Migdal is careful to point out that these boundaries are not in fact static, but are under threat

from “contradictory demands on them” by various differing social groups (11). These demands and the inadequacies of rigid boundaries result in border crossing. These border crossings in turn “serve as sites of practices undermining the state image and neutralizing its boundaries” (Migdal 20). What this suggests is that boundaries are a purely social construct, and they remain shadow lines, sites for transgression. The act of border crossing emerges in both Mahjoub and Ghosh’s texts, as the authors explore conversations across boundaries, in the form of the language of science, in *The Carrier*, or through straightforward dialogue between people and cultures, in *In an Antique Land*.

The rigid imposition of physical boundaries that demarcate nation states is a particularly modern phenomenon. This urge to fix space emerges from the inherent idea in geographical progress of “terrestrial unity” (Vidal qtd in Berman 284). The need for this unity is seen as a particularly “modernist geography” (Berman 288). This attaches terrestrial groupings to political states in a much more fixed way, in contrast to earlier ages where the borders of empires were more fluid, constantly expanding and contracting as battles were fought for territory and power was lost and gained. The language of boundaries has shifted considerably to modern notions of what constitutes nations. “To historicise boundaries,” say Simpson and Kresse, is “to show how these things have changed over time” (12). Yet they also recognise that showing “that boundaries and spaces have histories in which they have changed shape is one thing, dealing with the significance of the contemporary form seems quite another” (12). Thus historicising boundaries is crucial in understanding them as a fairly modern construct, with regards to rigidity and scale of boundaries, but also to understand how even in modern times, boundaries are never as fixed as they appear to be. By juxtaposing a historical world where boundaries were less fixed, alongside a modern world demarcated by rigid national boundaries, Mahjoub and Ghosh illustrate the shifting attitudes towards boundaries and the effect that has on conversations across them.

Mahjoub and Ghosh both map a past that conceptualises boundaries as much more fluid and porous than their present counterparts. This fluidity resulted in cosmopolitan societies across the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean networks, as not just physical boundaries were transgressed, but cultural and identity ones as well. The type of cosmopolitanism proposed in *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land* needs close examination. The term cosmopolitanism, dating back to the fourth century BC, meant “citizen of the cosmos” and thus denoted a rejection of the view that people belonged to a specific community (Appiah xii). Kwame

Anthony Appiah warns that cosmopolitanism should not be read as some kind of “exalted attainment,” but rather that in human community “we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association” (xvii). Important in his approach is not that we turn to some kind of universalism linking all people, or a search for objective values common to us all, or a kind of syncretism in which difference is collapsed. Appiah instead puts forward a model of conversation (xix). This way of thinking about cosmopolitanism as a conversation echoes Ghosh’s use of conversation as a way to cross borders, as well as Mahjoub’s idea of the gap of multicultural light. What this means for cosmopolitanism is that a cross-cultural conversation is entered into by a desire, or curiosity, to find points of similarity across differences. These shared points between people do not need to be universal, “all they need to be is what these particular people have in common” (Appiah 97). The crucial point here is that connection can be found “not *through* identity but *despite* difference” (Appiah 135, emphasis in original). Appiah makes this point by demonstrating our ability to respond to art that “is not ours” (135). One does not need to be Chinese to appreciate the Great Wall of China. “The connection,” therefore, “through a local identity is as imaginary as the connection through humanity” (Appiah 135). Accordingly, a South African’s link to the Great Wall of China is the same as a Chinese person’s link to it, in that both are made in the imagination, and yet those connections that are forged are authentic in terms of the meaning ascribed to them. This view of cosmopolitanism is supported by Simpson and Kresse, who view it as “[enveloping] a consciousness of human diversity” (3). Cosmopolitanism is, for them, both a “normative goal: to live in peace with one another,” as well as a “factual challenge: how to create or envisage wider unity when faced with social diversity” (Simpson and Kresse 3). Again, this view of cosmopolitanism does not collapse difference into an overarching universalism. The challenge, then, is to communicate across and between these differences, instead of ignoring them or widening the chasm between them. Both Mahjoub and Ghosh’s texts dwell on this challenge by representing cosmopolitan worlds and the difficulties of partaking in conversations across cultural divides.

As physical boundaries are transgressed, and notions of national and cultural identity become less fixed through cosmopolitanism, globalisation increases the number of encounters across these boundaries. As the global population increases and technology seemingly shrinks the world, “conversations across boundaries [are] inevitable” (Appiah xix). These conversations are not necessarily easy, conflict-free ones. Arjun Appadurai has diagnosed the central problem of global relations as being “the tension between cultural homogenization and

cultural heterogenization” (5). Just as there is a contradictory pull towards tightening borders as it becomes easier to cross them, there is a simultaneous tendency to retreat into cultural segregation and arguments of purity and homogenisation, even as the entanglements of people and history have encouraged cultural heterogeneity. This creates a global system, or “global cultural economy [that] has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those which might account for multiple centers and peripheries)” (Appadurai 5). This complexity arises precisely out of the disjunctures between people, culture, economy and politics (Appadurai 6). Globalisation brings the differences into play more frequently and on a greater scale than ever before, implying that the need to have these conversations in a meaningful way is vital. Thus uncovering a past in which conversations were taking place may facilitate a space in the future where those conversations can be resumed. This is why Mahjoub and Ghosh’s projects have so much to offer in that by narrating a past in which conversations did take place — although the two authors see these conversations in different ways — an alternative present and future is mapped out.

Fiction becomes a particularly useful lens through which to examine the complexities underlying human interaction. According to Shameen Black, fiction, through its multivocality is uniquely able to express these nuances, “because fiction conventionally calls attention to the texture of experiential life through emplotted action, the novel almost always participates in one form of another of social border crossing” (8). The particular aesthetic choices employed in *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land* use fragmentation to explore this border crossing. The grammar of exile repeatedly makes use of discourses of fracture, rupture, cracks and interstitial spaces. Turning to one of the most quoted authors on the subject of exile, Salman Rushdie speaks of fracture when discussing human perception and the experience of exile. In speaking about the fragmentary way in which the past is viewed, using the analogy of a broken mirror, he says, “human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions” (12). While exile is a more extreme form of migration, and not fully applicable to the texts I will be studying, the fragmentation inherent to dislocation is something, I want to argue, that manifests itself in the very form of migrant literature. Both *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land* do not follow linear paths, but rather fracture time, shedding light on both the past and present, demonstrating how they leak into one another despite gaps of a few centuries. Clingman adds to this idea of a particular grammar informing border-crossing fiction. He

notes that “form becomes content – a way of being and seeing” (11). What accentuates this type of fiction is the “grammar of identity and location” (Clingman 11). This indicates that the experience of crossing borders, in terms of a literal transnational crossing, as well as on the level of the “transitive self” that must navigate identity (Clingman 11), necessarily determines the form of the narrative. Notions of identity, of location, of history and of the sense of the present thus all become tangled together, manifesting themselves in an interweaving narrative of migration.

To speak of history, is to speak of migration, and to speak of identity. To speak of the present is also to speak of the past. There is always a dual movement in characterising either the present or the past, as they are intrinsically connected, as illustrated by Benjamin’s metaphor of the constellation. This idea is present in the grammar of the texts under consideration as their interweaving narratives demonstrate this connection. To simply accept the predominant Western narratives of so-called third world history is to severely limit the understanding of present day movement of people and ideas. It is necessary to re-present history in order to illuminate both the realities of the present and the possibilities of the future. Chakrabarty recognises that “how we periodize our present is [...] connected to the question of how we imagine the political. The reverse must be true as well: that every imagination of the political entails a certain figure of the now” (“Where is the now?” 459). I would argue the same is true for the past. How we periodise the present is connected to how we understand the past, and our configuration of the past is linked to our understanding of the present. Inherent in this is our imagining of the political. No representation of history is free from a political agenda, as acutely demonstrated by the historical amnesia of European historiography. Both Mahjoub and Ghosh are highly aware of the politics behind history, and this comes to the fore in both *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land*.

What I will be proposing in the course of this thesis is a way of thinking about the relationship between the past and the present as a lateral one, rather than a linear one. Just as the interstitial space is productive for migrants, space created by a lateral temporal movement is also fruitful for rethinking time. What the notion of a sideways movement suggests is a more fluid conception of the relationship between the past and present, and, of course, the future. This is in opposition to the more rigid, teleological notions of time, and particularly of the past, which limit the ways of talking about the present. Thus an exploration of time, with a dominant focus on the past, is necessary. Chapter two will examine history and how it has

been conceptualised, and the shortcomings of the predominant historiography, suggesting alternative ways of narrating history. This chapter will also turn its gaze to the specific histories of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds, the two regions which form the backdrops of the texts in question. History will be examined with a specific focus on these areas and their relationships with Western and Northern Europe. This will lay the groundwork for an in-depth exploration of Mahjoub's *The Carrier* in chapter three and Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* in chapter four. Both texts narrate alternative histories which counter dominant modes of European historiography. Despite a similar political project, and a similar narrative form, the two texts have entirely different focal points. *The Carrier*, set largely between the Mediterranean and Denmark, looks at entanglement by presenting a history of science and the flow of knowledge as a means of connecting people. *In an Antique Land*, on the other hand, is much more concerned with connections between people, and examines a history of conversations across difference, and the possibility of resuming these conversations once more.

To return full circle to the idea of the map as a representation of history, and as a useful framework in which to consider conversations across borders, I turn to Margaret O'Doherty's study of Fra Mauro's world map, the *Mappa Mundi*, created between 1448 and 1459. Focusing particularly on the Indian Ocean world, the map is a fascinating study in its representation not just of space, but its "[intervention] in and [manipulation of] its political and socio-spatial world" (30). The map is political in that it mines both the past and the present in order to "serve a desired future" (O'Doherty 33) – in this case, to navigate between the Indian and Atlantic Ocean. The map embodies a

transitional object, a kind of spatial and temporal junction and crossing-point, facilitating and indeed embodying connections between Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, between oral tradition and written cosmography, between medieval and modern, between periods of Arab and European dominance in the Indian Ocean world. The map may be all of these things, but above all, it is an agent, not a neutral witness. It mediates between places, knowledge systems, world and representation, past and present, to shape not just the graphic space of the map but the real space of the world, at the same time as it foregrounds and aggrandises its cartographer's mediatory role. (O'Doherty 36)

This echoes al-Idrisi's map, which represented broader ideas than a mere mapping of physical space through its implications of Islamic knowledge and trading networks in the East. The map is an inherently political object that mediates between the past and present, and through its specific representation dictates a desired future. In the same way, *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land*, as non-neutral texts that narrate alternative histories, map out a certain relationship between the past and the present that has the potential to intervene in the future. Their authors, like mapmakers, become mediators in the quest to reshape the world as we know it.

Chapter Two: Alternative Histories: Exploring Historiography

*The roulette wheel spins and the outcome is unpredictable, but human hands
spin the wheel.*

David Abulafia
(*The Great Sea* xxi)

Crucial to my interrogation of Mahjoub's *The Carrier* and Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* is the question of history. The concept of history and the practice of historiography need to be unpacked in order to reveal the political projects of Mahjoub and Ghosh in their subversion of Eurocentric versions of historical representation. Both authors' texts recognise that history is something that is constructed and that the dominant worldview of history has been constructed from a specifically Eurocentric position. These texts contain historical strands that present alternative histories that question the relationship between the past and the present, and the potential impact this relationship has on the future. There is an implication here that the manner in which history is viewed has a profound influence on the present and the future. Thus, there is an underlying political project that seeks to re-present the past in order to reimagine the future. Essential to this reimagining is how the relationship between the past and present is conceived. I am particularly interested in a fluid, lateral movement between time, rather than a linear trajectory backwards to the past, or a teleological progression forward. Consequently, it is necessary to unpack the tradition of historiography in order to introduce this notion of lateral movement as a destabilising concept that questions teleological understandings of history. This project questions the typical pattern of movement found in Eurocentric histories, not just in its representation of time but also in terms of literal movement, by showing the movement of people and knowledge from the South and East, upward to the North and West. There is also a focus on a South-South movement across the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds, which existed outside of a European framework. This exploration of historiography will encompass both the form which Eurocentric historical narratives take, as well as the content it posits as truth. The alternative histories that Mahjoub and Ghosh, and indeed many critics, put forward challenge this view of history on the levels of both content and form by offering a different kind of narrative altogether.

The first question is, naturally, what is history? History is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “[a] written narrative constituting a continuous chronological record of important or public events (esp. in a particular place) or of a particular trend, institution, or person’s life.” What is immediately significant in this definition is the inclusion of the term narrative. Hayden White divides historical representation into three types: the annals, the chronicle, and what he terms “history proper” (*The Content of Form* 4). For a representation of the past to become proper history, White posits that there needs to be a chronological and accurate portrayal of events, but more than that, there needs to be a narrative that weaves these facts together: “The events must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence,” says White, “but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning that they do not possess as mere sequence” (*The Content of Form* 5). History proper uses a narrative to elevate itself from the annals, which represent events without attempting to weave any story around or between them, while the chronicle takes the form of “unfinished stories” (*The Content of Form* 5). The preferred use of narrative when it comes to historical representation is linked to the very notion of what is real, according to White, who says that “the very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which ‘the true’ is identified with ‘the real’ only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity” (*The Content of Form* 6). Both the OED and White’s insistence on the presence of a narrative implies that humans need narrative in order to make sense of the world and the past. Meaning is therefore intrinsically linked to narrative. Without a narrative connecting the events of the past, these events do not hold significance to the present and the future.

This view is supported by other critics as well. Paul Ricoeur sees the ongoing relationship between history and narrative as a result of the fact that all historical discourse is concerned with the progression of time as it affects humans, and it is “[b]y means of this indirect derivation [that] narrative form gains explanatory value and takes its place within argumentative logic, which continues the *disposition* of traditional rhetoric” (15, emphasis in original). The idea here is that humans use narrative and emplotment to understand their own lives and changes within it, hence the popularity, and even necessity, of the narrative form in making sense of the past. What this also implies is an inherent similarity between history and fiction. Yet historians and critics of historiography are quick to point out the fundamental differences between history and fiction. Alan Munslow notes that history cannot be conflated

with fiction since “history is a narrative representation that pays its dues to the agreed facts of the past” (6). Munslow here draws on White’s fascination with the link between history and fiction, after recognising that history is in fact a construction. “Historiography,” says White, “is an especially good ground on which to consider the nature of narration and narrativity because it is here that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual” (*The Content of Form* 4). Nevertheless, the distinction remains clear between history and fiction. A novelist can build his narrative on imaginary events, whereas a historian cannot, and must instead “‘find’ or ‘discover’ them” since “historical events have already been ‘invented’ (in the sense of ‘created’) by past human agents who, by their actions, produced lives worthy of having stories told about them” (*The Content of Form* 173). Thus, history is careful to map real events insofar as it can, by echoing the chronology of events, rather than imagining them. The parallel between history and fiction is brought about by the nature of people to form lives that “have the coherency of emplotted stories” (White, *The Content of Form* 173), which is something that both history and fiction try to echo in their narratives. Furthermore, both history and fiction are “writerly” in the sense that they are “imaginatively organised” and “authored” (Munslow 6). The inclusion of the term “important” in the OED definition of history also points to the subjective decision of the historian to judge what events are deemed important and which events do not merit inclusion. In this manner, many groups of people are effectively written out of history as their stories and events are not deemed important, while other stories and events are elevated to a position that grants them power. While historical discourse emerges out of real events, it is also selective and framed, and thus inextricably linked to a project of representation.

Understanding that history is constructed from or based on the past, as opposed to being an exact mimicry of it, necessitates a clear distinction between ‘the past’ and ‘history.’ Munslow defines the past as something that “once was, is no more and has gone for good,” whereas history “is a corpus of narrative discourses *about* the once reality of the past produced and fashioned by historians” (9, emphasis in original). Furthermore, “the past is a category of *content* (real events)” and “history is a category of *expression* (varieties of narrative representation)” (9, emphasis in original). History, therefore, is a representation of past events. White also examines this distinction by pointing out that while the term history includes the past, it has meaning beyond simply a representation of the past. For him, history is constructed. From the period of late modernity, “a specifically historical past is created by

professional or in some way socially authorized investigators of what is only a virtual past as long as it has not been established as having really happened on the basis of evidence of a specific kind and authority” (“Historical Event” 10). This view transfers the power of representation to the individuals who have been authorised to select from the full range of human events, those particular ones that “can be fitted into diachronically organized accounts of a group’s self-constitution over time” (“Historical Event” 10). What this underscores is the power of human agents to demarcate certain events as important or public, in order to weave a specific narrative to further a particular point of view. This notion is further supported by Linda Hutcheon, who sees historiography and fiction as “complementary activities” since they share “the same act of refiguration, of reshaping of our experiences of time through plot configurations” (100). More than that, both historiography and fiction are “notorious[ly] porous genres” (106), given the constructed nature of history, and fiction’s propensity to base itself on history.

Consequently, fiction becomes a useful space in which to examine historical discourse. Beyond simply aiding in explaining the emplotment of historiography through an application of narrative analysis to historiography, exploring the representation of history in fiction itself can render something beyond what historiography is able to offer. Isabel Hofmeyr looks at the contradiction in historical discourse as the “desire to remember” when it meets the “urgent imperative to forget” (“Africa Fault Line” 104). She then draws on Dan Ojwang’s work to show that “the language of fiction is particularly well suited to this task of navigating contradiction. Since fiction is a form of simultaneous knowledge, it can explore contradictions in a way that expository prose cannot. Fiction hence has a way of being one step ahead of historiography” (“Africa Fault Line” 104). Fiction allows for greater scope in terms of the language it can use, as opposed to historiography that limits itself to the traditions of historiographical discourse in order to present itself as factual and credible. Fiction has the scope to dwell on the subtleties, complexities and contradictions of the past without worrying about the conventions of historiography. It therefore has potentially greater power to subvert dominant modes of historical discourse and question problematic representations.

Fictional interrogations of historiography are of course grounded in the real-world practice of historiographical discourse. Understanding the terms surrounding history will help clarify between the teleological mode of history employed by the West, and its erasure of many

stories of the East or South, and the alternative histories invoked by authors such as Mahjoub and Ghosh. Tejaswini Niranjana usefully distinguishes between historicism, which she defines as the “genetic (searching for an origin) and teleological (positing a certain end) nature of historiography” (10); and historicity, a concept which invokes the notion of change, and means “effective history” or “that part of the past that is still operative in the present” (37). This indicates a move away from the fixed notion of history as being encased in the past, as something finished, and instead envisions history as a continuous dialogue between the past and the present. Niranjana’s definition of historicism highlights a particularly Western tradition of History, with a capital ‘H’ to invoke the particular dominant mode. This mode of historical discourse is rooted in the practice of Orientalism. Orientalism, according to Said, “is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2). Orientalism is thus the characterising of all aspects of the Orient, by the Occident. This representation is by no means an innocent one, as the practice of Orientalism is in essence “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). Central to this is the power relationship, with the West holding the power leading to an unequal relationship between the Occident and Orient, which allows for Western domination over aspects of the Orient, such as their history. This position of power is solidified by the West’s hold over authorship, reducing the Orient to a passive position of being written about (Said 308). Niranjana see this “process of ‘othering’ [as involving] a teleological notion of history, which view[s] the knowledge and ways of life in the colony as distorted or immature versions of what can be found in ‘normal’ or Western society” (11). Therefore, the West constructs a particular version of history, denying agency to the East, by the Othered Oriental, and more broadly all colonial subjects, as merely “representations, or objects without history” (Niranjana 3). More than that, the historical practice of Orientalism informed dominant Western historicism, through the practice of colonial translation. The way non-Western texts were translated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries put forward particular representations that were grounded in “Hegelian theory of world history” (25). In other words, Western theory and historicism developed out of the West’s relationship with the East, and in relation to it.

This entanglement of Western teleological history with the history of the East can be seen in Georg Hegel’s philosophy of history. The founding feature of Hegel’s work on history, and indeed all his philosophy, is that of reason, as he states that “Reason is the Sovereign of the

World” and that “the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process” (9). This “rational process” presents itself as a clear unfolding progression of history. He divides the world historically into three phases, or eras, starting with The Oriental World, then the Greek World, and finally the German World, as a way to explain the shift in dominance from the East to the West. “The History of the World,” states Hegel, “travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning” (103). He goes so far as to call this process natural, mimicking the movement of the sun rising in the East and setting in the West. Apart from further emphasising the pervasive attitude of Orientalist thinking in Western thought, this also shows Hegel’s belief in teleological progression in history that closes off any possibility of further contribution from the East to world history. Hegel’s view of a progressing history is in line with Niranjana’s historicism, and the kind of historiography that critics like her, and authors such as Mahjoub and Ghosh, are writing against. This also underscores the West’s self-definition against the Other, as the Hegelian conception of historical progress emerged out of the view that there is a clear line of progress, with the East holding the position of least development, and the West being the pinnacle of progression.

Western history, and particularly Eurocentric history for the purposes of this study, has been incredibly invasive in terms of its dominance, as a result of the West’s cultural, economic, political and military power. Eurocentric methods of historiography operate on the level of both content and form. In terms of form, Western historiography, as mentioned before, is teleological. Its basic assumption, according to Jack Goody, is that “the arrow of time overlaps with an equivalent increase in value and desirability in the organization of human societies, that is, progress” (24). This of course relates to the content of history as well, as a narrative of progress, in terms of technology, science, economic growth and human rights (Goody 24), is imposed onto world history. This implies that a universal idea of progress can be applied, with Western notions of what constitutes progress being applicable to the whole world. White picks up on the tendency of Western historiography to “rank events in terms of their world-historical significance” and counters that this ranking is “less world historical than simply Western European, representing a tendency of modern historians to rank events in the record hierarchically from within a perspective that is culture-specific, not universal at all” (*The Content of Form* 9-10). This dominance has arisen from Western historians’ power not only to prescribe their own stories, thereby elevating Western history, but also in their silencing of the history of the vanquished. This silencing takes place in two moves, with the un-writing of the history of the vanquished as “fiction, i.e., as legend or myth, and therefore

as less than ‘history’ in Western eyes,” and secondly, by rewriting this history “as subsidiary to the history of the victor with the latter henceforth providing the telos of the former” (D’haen, “History” 213). In this way, the history of the East is not just silenced but relegated to the realm of fiction. This is reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak’s claim that “the subaltern cannot speak” (104), referring to the difficulty of creating a speaking position for non-Western subjects given the systems of power present in the epistemological order of things. The alternative histories that are emerging out of the non-Western world are thus writing back to the “gender and cultural bias [that] has existed in male, white, metropolitan, bourgeois history from the seventeenth through to most of the twentieth century” (Munslow 114). These alternative histories presuppose the “un-writing of ‘history’ as Western discourse of truth, particularly in its habitual guise as self-legitimizing record of progressive history as embodied by the nation state under modernity” (D’haen, “History” 213). Therefore, it is not enough for these alternative histories to simply insert previously silenced voices into history, but to question the entire framework of Western historiography in order to legitimate their position in history.

The writing that is emerging counter to Western historiography moves specifically away from the teleological approach and its concern with origin, fixity and ending. These alternative models for historiography attempt to construct “memory as a form of counter-history that subverts false generalisation by an exclusionary ‘History’” (Woods 13). Inherent in this is a search for a more balanced representation of the past, as well as a more fluid notion of the past as fundamentally connected to the present. Central to this view is the idea of lateral movement between the past and present. What this lateral movement suggests is that the past is not a closed off entity, but rather one that is continually in conversation with the present. Hutcheon coined the term historiographic metafiction to refer specifically to postmodern texts that try to re-conceptualise history. This type of fiction “suggests that to re-write or to re-present that past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (110). More than that, historiographic metafiction “suggests that there is no direct access to that real [past] which would be unmediated by the structures of our various discourses about it” (Hutcheon 146). This suggests that history is inherently political in terms of what is included in the historical archive and how events and people are represented. According to Tim Woods:

Memory and history form part of a literary politics of identity which plays dynamically upon a palimpsestual tension. It uses the future imaginary to negate, renegotiate or playfully compromise present authority. In turn it can also reaffirm authority, or its possibility by counteracting the traces of colonial and precolonial sociality within the postcolonial. (13)

A layered understanding of history is thus central to building identity in the present. The past, the present and the future imaginary are in continual dialogue with one another in order to affirm or negate the present state. In other words, what is central to these emerging fictions concerned with historical representation is the possibility of the future as the impetus to look back at the past and reconfigure the present.

Benjamin's perception of the relationship between the past and the present is crucial to the notion of history put forward in Ghosh and Mahjoub's fiction. It is worth quoting in full his thoughts on this connection:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical post-humously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (263)

Benjamin thus recognises that the past is not, and cannot be, cut off from the present. The events of the past have tangible consequences for the present and the future. His metaphor of the events of the past and present forming a constellation is evocative in its illustration of how the dots connect across space and time, essentially mapping the connections between them. This link between present and past is further elaborated on in Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's notion of contemporaneity, which he reveals to be "an essential multitemporality: as remnants or relics of various stages and formations of the past and as rudiments of stages in the more or less distant future" (28). This echoes the idea of a constellation, with various points, or events, scattered over a distance that connect over time, not as a linear progression, but as a multitemporal and lateral space.

While this indicates a proposed flexibility in the way time is understood, history inevitably involves looking back at the past. The motion of looking back always risks the potential trap of nostalgia, a sentiment that is largely seen as debilitating for the present or future state. However, recent critics have started to salvage the notion of nostalgia as something potentially positive. Dennis Walder points out in his study of postcolonial nostalgias that “the rosy, sentimental glow most commonly associated with nostalgia is only part of the story,” and a more nuanced look at it “reveals its potential as a source of understanding and creativity” (3). Walder sees nostalgia as an inherent part of people’s understanding of their own history, both on an individual and cultural level. More than this, “[e]xploring nostalgia can and should open up a negotiation between the present and the past, leading to a fuller understanding of the past and how it has shaped the present” (Walder 9). Nostalgia, in essence, is the looking back into the past from the position of the present, usually because there is some desire to return to the past, or to recreate feelings or circumstances. It thus offers what Walder terms a “double perspective” because it moves “towards the past in its relation to the present, through the memories of the self as both actor and spectator” (9). While Walder recognises that this looking back is often tinted with sentimentality, glossing over the negative aspects of the past, he is also aware of the potential that nostalgia has for self-reflexivity, allowing “the past into the present in a fragmentary, nuanced, and elusive way” (16). This notion of nostalgia thus echoes Benjamin’s notion of history as a constellation that connects the past and present.

The idea of a productive nostalgia that looks forward to the present is what Svetlana Boym terms reflective nostalgia. In her study on nostalgia, aptly named *The Future of Nostalgia*, she demarcates nostalgia into two distinct categories: restorative and reflective nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia emphasises the “*nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home,” reflective nostalgia “dwells in the *algia*, longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). Restorative nostalgia is closely linked with nationalist revivals. Invoking a nostalgia of this kind is to see the past in an absolute way and to call for a return to particular versions of the past. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, is “more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrecoverability of the past and human finitude. *Re-reflection* suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis” (Boym 49, emphasis in original). The focus is shifted from recovering “absolute truth” to a much more fluid “meditation on history and passage of time” (Boym 49). As with Walder, Boym’s conception of nostalgia, specifically her use of reflective nostalgia, is concerned as much with the future

as with the past. She captures this relationship by recognising that “[f]antasies of the past determined by the needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (Boym xvi). Nostalgia thus does not merely long for home, or for a particular local space, but seeks to understand the non-linear movement of time and space, moving between conceptions of the local and the universal. This movement between past and present takes the form of a dialogue, in which the movement is sideways rather than backwards, echoing Boym’s statement that “nostalgia is never literal, but lateral” (354). This idea of lateral movement is central not just to nostalgia but also to the conception of history as a continuing presence in the present and future. It allows for a middle ground between looking back to the past with a longing for something that is lost, and looking at the past as a relic, just a plotted point on the linear progression of time towards some kind of teleological end. This lateral movement indicates the mobility between these spaces, allowing for the possibility of an on-going and fluid relationship between past and present.

Boym also notes that “[n]ostalgic reconstructions are based on mimicry; the past is remade in the image of the present or a desired future” (354). This idea speaks to Walder’s claim that the “dynamic of memory is that its existence is always in the present, even as it struggles to reclaim the past” (139). This notion salvages the two particular texts I am studying, as well as many other postcolonial narratives that reimagine the past outside of Eurocentric understandings of history. Rather than simply casting a glow on an alternative past, this view of the past is rooted in the present in order to show the constant dialogue between the two. This view also offers redemption to those places and spaces with traumatic histories. Judith Butler counters the notion that the future must follow the past in a linear fashion: “the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past; loss must be marked and it cannot be represented; loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression” (467). The past is an inherently paradoxical space as a result of its relationship to the future and its representation of loss. Butler does caution, however, that while loss has the potential to be a productive space, “it cannot constitute a rewriting of the past or a redemption that would successfully reconstitute its meaning from and as the present” (468). What this means is that a nostalgic past cannot be rebuilt purely from the imagination. It needs to follow from the actual events of the past as well as the present. It is not fiction, after all.

Walder notes that nostalgia in postcolonial fiction is evoked most often in order to conjure up nationalist feelings in the wake of colonisation and decolonisation (16). The distinction between traditional imperialist nostalgia, or Western nostalgia and anti-imperialist nostalgia emerging out of the postcolonies, is the specific configuration of the relationship between the past and the present. According to Jennifer Wenzel, “anti-imperialist nostalgia is a desire not for a past moment in and for itself but rather for the past’s promise of an alternative present: the past’s future” (17). What is of course noticeable about the kind of nostalgia present in both Mahjoub and Ghosh’s texts is that it is not anti-imperialist in an overt way, as the texts are critical of narrow national identities, thus rejecting a restorative nostalgia. Both texts employ a much more subtle reflective nostalgia, in their concern with transnational connection and a reflexive examination of the relationship between the past and historical discourse. Both authors defy borders, as Ghosh portrays an Indian Ocean world where patterns of connection (and difference) transcend national boundaries, invoking a universal humanism. Mahjoub, on the other hand, looks to the power of science and knowledge to transcend these borders. The kind of history Mahjoub and Ghosh invoke thus echoes their acknowledgement of the power of the present to reflect a changing conception of the past, and the subtle power that this then gives the imagining of both past and future. The past is used not to look back with longing, but to actively reimagine a different future.

The Chronotope of the Sea

Narrowing the focus from the wider lens of historiography, I will be looking at the specific historiographies of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean regions, as these oceanic worlds form the setting of *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land*, respectively. The ocean has long been a feature in literature, as a popular trope in travel narratives, both for fiction and non-fiction. The ocean as a field of study is crucial in a global, cosmopolitan world, in that it is a space that transcends fixed boundaries of place and identity. Paul Gilroy has arguably been one of the most influential thinkers in this regard, in his analysis of the Black Atlantic. His work is critical of national and ethnic approaches, and looks instead at the Atlantic “as one single, complex unit of analysis” in order to produce “an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (Gilroy 15). In doing so, he not only challenges “English historiography and literary history” but also “the ways in which black American cultural and political histories have so far been conceived” (Gilroy 15). While my study is not focused on the Atlantic, Gilroy’s use of the ocean as a way of understanding identity and culture beyond

the nation state is not only key to many later historians' work, but also to the focus of this thesis. Gilroy's analysis of the Atlantic as a complex system looks at the

fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation that we try and specify through manifestly inadequate theoretical terms like creolisation and syncretism [which] indicate how both ethnicities and political cultures have been made anew in ways that are significant not simply for the peoples of the Caribbean but for Europe, for Africa, especially Liberia and Sierra Leone, and of course, for black America. (15)

This characterisation is useful to the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean as well, as it recognises the complexity of an oceanic system and the reach of impact across all shores linked to the ocean. It also suggests, through these lateral connections, a certain coevalness of histories.

Gilroy's other important assertion in his study of the Black Atlantic is the notion of the ship as a chronotope. Using Bakhtin's concept of a chronotope as a spatial-temporal frame, Gilroy settles "on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol of this enterprise" (4). The ship, as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" is important in that it focuses "attention on the middle passage, and on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs" (4). While the ship itself is not a figure of central importance to this particular thesis, the broader concept of the sea is a more useful chronotope for the type of history I wish to examine, similar to Bakhtin's use of the road as a chronotope. The sea is a particularly useful metaphor for the kind of alternative history that these texts are trying to narrate, as they move away from notions of rigidity and fixed boundaries and identity. Robert Foulke points to the complex notion of time at sea:

The seafarer's sense of time is equally complex. It is both linear and cyclical: Time is linear in the sense that voyages have beginnings and endings, departures and landfalls, starting and stopping points in the unfolding of chronological time; yet time is also cyclical, just as the rhythm of waves is cyclical, because the pattern of a ship's daily routine, watch on and watch off, highlights endless recurrence. Space and time have always merged more obviously at sea than they do in much of human experience. The simple act of laying out a ship's track on a chart by using positions determined on successive days connects time and space visibly. (9)

There is an echo here with the kinds of historical modes that are being suggested by Mahjoub and Ghosh. This view conceives of history as recognising the chronology and coherency of events, but at the same time is cognisant of the ever-changing nature of history as something that is porous, flexible and fragmented, not simply progressing in a linear line, but moving incessantly between past and present. The sea becomes an incredibly apt metaphor for this kind of history. Margaret Cohen has looked at the popularity of the sea trope in fiction, pointing out that “[s]ea fiction’s simultaneous stability and flexibility are evident in the form’s narrative poetics, as well as in its defining cultural values” (169). Sea fiction is thus suited to a narrative form that echoes the patterns of the sea, which in turn is reflective of the type of historical narrative that the authors are weaving.

The focus on the sea as a unit of study is linked to increasing questions around the nature and history of globalisation and cosmopolitanism. Drawing on Benjamin’s observation that “historiography is a constellation that the present makes with the past,” Cohen points to the importance of the maritime frontier as “an example of such a constellation between an earlier era of intensive globalization and our own today” (14). The sea does not just link the various terrestrial regions connected to it, but also forms a temporal link, helping to shed light on present day patterns of globalisation. This relationship between the study of the sea and the study of history has become increasingly popular, resulting in Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s need to coin a new term to describe it:

The systematic comparison of ... seas can suggest a new configuration of history, and one that might attain a global scale. So promising, indeed, does the notion of a sea or an ocean appear for this task that the term the new ‘thalassology’ [from the ancient Greek *thalassa*, ‘sea’] has seemed an appropriate coinage to denote it. (qtd in Vink 41)

While this term was created in the context of a forum focusing on the history of the oceans that did not include the Indian Ocean, Markus Vink links this new term of thalassology to the Indian Ocean and its rich history. The purpose of highlighting this word is to show the long tradition of scholarship about the ocean and thus its importance in understanding land-based and regional history as well. Just as the sea is a moving space, subject to constant change, the coasts too are spaces exposed to ever-present movement. As Pearson notes, “[t]he coasts are seen as fungible, so that one can write an amphibious history which moves easily between

land and sea” (“History” 80). It should be noted that the study of the sea can never be fully separate from the land and that the coastal zones are a particularly important aspect of the study of the ocean. Even studies that look at the social space of the ship need to note “the extent to which this reflects or modifies terrestrial society and social science models” (Pearson, “History” 80). Therefore, while the sea is a fruitful avenue of study, it cannot be separated from the land that it connects to, even though, as Pearson notes, the ocean offers up new angles of analysis. It is worthwhile noting that “maritime history is not simply the story of landed society gone to sea,” but “the world’s seas and ocean [are] real places [as opposed to] voids between the real spaces, which are inevitably lands or nations” (Rediker qtd in Pearson, “Idea of the Ocean” 9). The ocean is a truly transnational space, in that it transcends contemporary notions of fixed boundaries, yet remains a highly concrete link between these spaces. It is inseparable from its landed limits, yet is not bound by their rigidity.

The recognition of a long history of the sea that existed outside of Western control and outside of Western history lends weight to the critical scholarship surrounding South-South relations. This is in defiance of a tradition of North-South transnationalism that, according to Hofmeyr, uses a seemingly neutral terminology, much like globalisation, “to imply transnational processes emanating from the west and then radiating outward” (“Black Atlantic” 3). In other words, transnationalism has always been understood in relation to the West. By highlighting a history of the sea focusing on South-South transnationalism, where relations took place without reference to Europe, traditional North-South and East-West binaries are destabilised as adequate frameworks to understand the world. To historicise the ocean, then, is to attempt to understand a long history of connections that do not fit neatly into modern frameworks of territories and rigid borders. Vink examines this newfound interest in historicising the ocean:

On the one hand, the ‘aquacentric’ perspective of maritime-based studies has strong potential to dissolve artificial distinctions among supposedly coherent and ostensibly distinct regions (e.g. Europe, Africa, Asia, etc.) by drawing attention to systematic and long-term interactions conducted across bodies of water such as the Indian Ocean or its ‘sub-Mediterranean’ components. ‘Historicizing the ocean’ is a welcome development because it helps bring focus to large-scale historical processes of commercial, biological, and cultural exchange that other geographical constructs often obscure. On the other hand, maritime regions sometimes change dramatically with shifting relationships between bodies of water and masses of land –

as evinced by the various starting points (and concomitant degrees of ‘seaborne connectivity’) in Indian Ocean history and arguably its terminus in the nineteenth century through the forces of globalization with a change from a history *of* the Indian Ocean to a history *in* the Indian Ocean. (58-59, emphasis in original)

The importance of this statement is twofold. Firstly, there is the recognition of a long history of exchange, specifically with reference to the Indian Ocean world, but equally applicable to the Mediterranean world. This allows for a conception of human history that does not fall into the categorisation of all people into distinct and static groups. Secondly, the quote acknowledges the ever-changing nature of an oceanic space, especially with the turn of the nineteenth-century, and how changing notions of globalisation led to entirely new ideas about this region. The major shift in thinking between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a result of the decline of the age of empires and the rise of nation-states. This new way of ruling territories was much more rigid than the ever-shifting tides of empires, leading to a feeling “that a particular inclusiveness of culture and economy had been irretrievably lost to a more intolerant age” (Bayly and Fawaz 2). C.A. Bayly and Leila Fawaz caution against casting too nostalgic a glow on this seemingly inclusive pre-nation-state past. They point out “even precolonial and pre-modern social systems were fragmented by significant linguistic, cultural and political barriers” (7). They put forward the argument that “[t]o have meaning, comparative history must also be a history of connections; history, to distinguish itself from other disciplines, needs to account for change” (16). This accounting for change is what the next section will focus on, as I turn to the specific histories of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean, respectively.

A “Global Mediterranean”

The Mediterranean is a space that has always been difficult to delineate. Fernand Braudel, arguably the foremost scholar on the Mediterranean because of the scope of his study to include geography, sociology, economics and religion, has been integral not just to present day conceptions of the Mediterranean, but to the field of historiography itself. His study is testament to his feeling that the sea “is the greatest document of its past existence” (17). Braudel fully recognises the complexity of the space he is studying. The Mediterranean does not easily fit into fixed categories, of either time or space. In order to study its history, Braudel divided the Mediterranean into different planes, namely “geographical time, social

time, and individual time” (21). This shows the very different histories that can be presented depending on the particular focus. Braudel’s imagining of the Mediterranean as a complex space is furthered by the fact that it is not even a single sea, but rather “a complex of seas” (17), whose limits are not easily fixed, as the boundaries shift according to whether they are set by climate, by geography, or by social or political factors (168). This is further complicated by the far-reaching influence of the region, leading to a claim of a “*global* Mediterranean,” reaching as far as “the Azores and the New World, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Baltic and the loop of the Niger” (168, emphasis in original). The scope of the Mediterranean was and is vast in terms of its commercial and social reach. Braudel aptly captures this reach by comparing it to a magnetic field, with a radiant centre expanding outwards “without one’s being able to define the exact boundary between light and shade,” with the Mediterranean then needing to be “accepted as a wide zone, extending well beyond the shores of the sea in all direction” (168). Therefore, while there is a core region of the Mediterranean, one whose existence climatologists, geographers and historians would agree on, its outer regions become murkier the further out this reach is expanded.

Despite the shifting tides and boundaries of the Mediterranean, and its diversity of people, culture, geography and climate, it still managed to function in some sense as a unified space. Braudel sees this unity as something “created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply, and the routes they follow” (276). People have thus forged a unity born out of a need to trade and communicate. This unity “is the combination over an area of route networks and urban centres, lines of force and nodal points. Cities and their communications, communications and their cities have imposed a unified human construction on geographical space” (Braudel 277). David Abulafia cautions against reading this unity as a homogenous Mediterranean identity moulded by the region, as argued by Braudel. Instead, Abulafia favours diversity over unity, as he notes that “[a]t the human level, this ethnic, linguistic, religious and political diversity was constantly subject to external influences from across the sea, and therefore in a constant state of flux” (641). The Mediterranean was, and is, an area of great multiplicity. Much like the sea’s continuously shifting tides, the Mediterranean world was subject to persistent change, as people were brought into contact with different ideas and cultures.

As significant as the sea is as the vehicle for movement and diversity, the coastal zones and its relation to the interior are just as important. Abulafia sees the coastal zones around the sea

as “meeting-points for peoples of the most varied backgrounds who have exploited its resources and learned, in some cases, to make a living from transferring its products from better-endowed to ill-endowed regions” (641). This trade-driven contact gave rise to various conflicts, such as the pirating of merchant ship. Conflict on a grander and more formal scale emerged “when the great land empires reached the shores of the Mediterranean and began to interfere with movement across its surface: the Persians in antiquity, the Ottoman Turks from the late fourteenth century onwards, and [...] the Russians in the eighteenth century” (642). Of course, Great Britain exerted the greatest control over the region as it expanded its empire, despite its relative distance from the sea. While there was undoubtedly a constant, although varying, presence of conflict in the region prior to colonial expansion, Abulafia does not deny a sense of unity as well. He finds this unity in the Mediterranean’s “swirling changeability, in the diasporas of merchants and exiles, in the people hurrying to cross its surface as quickly as possible” (648). He notes that the types of people embarking on these crossings were often not typical of their home societies, being outsiders as “traders, slaves or pilgrims” (648). Yet they created a unity across the region by having a “transforming effect on these different societies, introducing something of the culture of one continent into the outer edges, at least of another” (Abulafia 648). Through this transformation, the sea and its surroundings became a dynamic site of interaction between vast groups of people, to the point that the Mediterranean “has played a role in the history of human civilization that has far surpassed any other expanse of sea” (Abulafia 648). This long history of interference shows that the Mediterranean has had a “history of conflict as well as contact” (Abulafia 642). This view is supported by Jacques Rancière’s assertion of the Mediterranean as a space comprising of great multiplicity, “which puts its separate parts into relation with one another,” with the unifying element being that of exchange (79). The unity in the Mediterranean was thus not that of homogeneity, but rather that of connection across, and in spite of, vast differences.

The idea of conceptualising the Mediterranean along the lines of exchange and flow of people, products and ideas is echoed in Iain Chambers’ study of this sea. He recognises the importance of the “multiple and diverse currents and components” making up the region, drawing on “Said’s noted theme of overlapping territories and intertwined histories” in order to suggest “a less rigid, more open comprehension of the making of a multiple Mediterranean” (3). Even more pertinent for this particular study is Chambers’ recognition of the entanglement of histories in this multiplicity. He sees the contemporary Mediterranean as a space “where the Occident and the Orient, the North and the South, are evidently entangled

in a cultural and historical net cast over centuries, even millennia” (3). The sea subverts barriers, on both the level of geography and culture, rendering any argument for cultural or historical purity incomplete and insufficient (I. Chambers 147). Across this vast multiplicity, Chambers, like Braudel and Abulafia, looks for a unifying feature of the Mediterranean:

If there is a unity in the Mediterranean, it is perhaps a hidden, critical “unity” where the sea itself, as the site of dispersion and drift, exposes the fragility of inherited configurations. Here distinctions do not lie in the false constitution of civilizations clashing along the shorelines but are sedimented in the daily concentration of the structural and racialized division between the rich and the poor, pinpointed in an overloaded boat of “illegal” immigrants reduced to a blip on a European radar screen. Stripped of ideological alternatives, there only remains the South. (149-150)

What this leaves us with is an image of a precolonial Mediterranean world that, despite vast differences between the people and cultures of its inhabitants, managed to find many points of contact driven by exchange. The challenge for contemporary and future times, then, is to reconfigure this region outside of Western historiography, and indeed Western ideology, to reclaim connections across the South.

The “Hundred Horizons” of the Indian Ocean

The study of the Indian Ocean flows naturally from that of the Mediterranean, and contains many parallels. The historiography of the Indian Ocean is very much indebted to Mediterranean thinking and particularly the work of Braudel (Vink 43). Vink’s conception of the Indian Ocean and ‘the new thalassology’ follows on “Braudel’s image of the Mediterranean as ‘pulsing’, the ‘Greater Indian Ocean’ as expanding and contracting to embrace or exclude adjacent zones as part of both long-term and short-term economic fluctuations” (53). The Indian Ocean world is one that is just as hard to define and limit as the Mediterranean, as it too is a network that is in constant flux. The very existence of such a fluid space questions notions of the fixity of geographical space and the relationship between various terrestrial spaces. Sugata Bose moves the Indian Ocean world beyond the idea of a region, characterising it instead as an “interregional arena” transcending the fixed regional entities comprising it, such as South Asia, the Middle East and East Africa (6). This ‘interregional arena’ was “tied together by webs of economic and cultural relationships”

while comprising of “flexible internal and external boundaries” (Bose 6). The limits or boundaries of the Indian Ocean have always been in constant flux. Bose captures this in the title of her book, *A Hundred Horizons*, indicating the scope of, to use her term, the arena. Gwyn Campbell, focusing specifically on Indian Ocean Africa (IOA), notes that this is “not a fixed geographical unit in the sense that the degree of interconnection with the IOA fluctuates over time and according to region; at times it might involve only limited littoral regions, at others extended to West Africa” (173). Linking with the fluid nature of the geographical limits of the Indian Ocean world is the kaleidoscopic patterns of people and social boundaries, as the region was characterised by “shifting patterns of social division and of ethnic and religious rivalries” (Simpson and Kresse 2). This implies that notions of who constituted an insider and an outsider in the area was constantly changing, and with this, “versions and visions of past and present and the ways in which their relationships were conceptualised have been many and fluctuating” (Simpson and Kresse 4). This makes it difficult to talk with any definitive clarity about the Indian Ocean world, since its underlying characteristic is that of change.

The Indian Ocean, like the Mediterranean, has both a history of connection and unity, as well as one of conflict and contrast. K.N. Chaudhury views certain elements in the Indian Ocean as cohesive, such as “means of travel, movement of peoples, economic exchange, climate, and historical forces,” whereas “[r]eligion, social systems, and cultural traditions, on the other hand, provided contrasts” (qtd in Vink 44). Vink draws on John Elliott to point out that the Indian Ocean is at the same time unifying and divisive, ripe with paradoxes (59). This allows for a complex understanding of the dynamics in a region which spans continents and great distances. Hofmeyr’s comparison of the Indian Ocean to the Black Atlantic questions what universalisms are able to tie the South together in the Indian Ocean world. She identifies a number of universalisms that have been lifted out by scholars of this region, such as “trade, capital and labour; religion (often linked to trade); pilgrimage; travel; war, colonial rule and anti-colonial movements; and port towns,” as well as groupings such as “Muslims, the Portuguese, British rule and so on” (“Black Atlantic” 8). What is created is a history of human connection across differences, notably not erasing the differences but simply creating dialogue across them. “Rather than viewing patterns of movement and trade as forces which inevitably reduce social diversity,” suggest Simpson and Kresse, “this history has created societies in which differences are recognised and individuals are, to a greater or lesser extent, equipped with the skill to navigate through such differences” (15). Bose recognises that the

people of the Indian Ocean were always involved in cultivating a culture of connection in opposition to European practices of division: “The peoples of the Indian Ocean made their own history, albeit not without having to contend with economic exploitation and political oppression, and the oceanic space supplied a key venue for articulating different universalisms from the one to which Europe claimed monopoly” (Bose 273). This is underscored by Pearson’s claim that “the Indian Ocean, the people on it and the littoral societies strung along its shores have enough commonalities to be as valid an object of study as is a state or a city or any other landed unity” (“Idea of the Ocean” 10). These commonalities span across the imposing borders of nationality, religion, culture and ethnicity demarcating the modern world.

The factor driving what Simpson and Kresse term “human connectivity” in the Indian Ocean world, is exchange (13). Importantly, this trading system, of both goods and people, “existed before Western supremacy” (Desai, “Oceans” 716). Ethnographers have indeed found that the exchanges of people, goods and ideas “are reflected in the contemporary social, architectural and religious fabric of the regions” (Simpson and Kresse 13). There are arguments, however, that the majority of this exchange was for commercial practices, with the flow of goods taking precedence over human connections, thus indicating that the kind of cosmopolitanism present was one more of material goods than of people (Simpson and Kresse 13). Yet this idea is not so out of place with contemporary cosmopolitan societies, which are to a large extent still being driven by economic forces and a need for global trade. Felicitas Becker notes that the “trans-oceanic connections” of the Indian Ocean world were shaped “by networks and their nodes rather than by large territorial-cum-political units” (261). Therefore, this world was driven by exchange, and the very real divisions that existed between people and cultures in this vast network were not disregarded but allowed to play second fiddle to the greater purpose of trade. Yet the face of trade in the Indian Ocean world has changed drastically over time. “Old connections,” says Becker, “have withered with the marginalisation of the dhow trade; young nations competed for loyalty with the less territorial networks” (261). New global patterns of trade and commerce, driven specifically by Western capitalism, have altered the way in which the people of the Indian Ocean world interact with each other, despite a history of finding connection in spite of differences.

What this conception of a shifting notion of boundaries brings about is a new way of looking at globalisation, “by focusing on the historical space that intermediates between the levels of

nation and globe” (Bose 3). What is important here is Bose’s use of “intermediates.” The Indian Ocean operates on neither the scale of the nation nor the globe, but constantly moves between them. This speaks to Hofmeyr’s claim that the “Indian Ocean complicated binaries, moving us away from the simplicities of the resistant local and the dominating global and toward a historically deep archive of competing universalism” (“Universalizing” 722). The future of the Indian Ocean world has much potential to reconceive itself again along lines of an area of networks, rather than an area made up of rigid and competing territories and nation states. As Becker points out, “one of the strengths of the notion of networks [is] to allow for the possibility of parallel, yet hardly connected social groupings in one territorial and even in one social setting” (261). The challenge now, after reclaiming a history of networking across diverse groups of people for the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds, is to reimagine a future based on these more fluid exchanges.

Connecting the Constellation

All of this brings me to why it matters to study narratives of the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and indeed any oceanic world – and I lift out oceanic worlds particularly here because of their reflection of a kind of fluid history as posited earlier in this chapter. Gaurav Desai sums it up neatly when he says that “[t]o read the diversity of these lives through available narratives and to anticipate narratives yet to come are to call attention to the multiple legacies, histories and identities that have long circulated in the world of the Indian Ocean” (“Oceans” 718). What remains is to bring to light a multitude of narratives about the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean World that demonstrate these multiple legacies, thus destabilising rigid and teleological historical accounts of these “interregional arenas” dictated by the West. What these new conceptions of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds convey is a focus on connections between people and nations, moving beyond fixed notions of space and identity. This is reminiscent of Gilroy’s argument against ethnic absolutisms in that the

affirmation of the intercultural and transnational is more than enough to move discussion of black political culture beyond the binary opposition between national and diaspora perspectives. The suggestive way that it locates the black Atlantic world in a webbed network between the local and the global, challenges the coherence of all narrow nationalist

perspectives and points to the spurious invocation of ethnic particularity to enforce them and to ensure the tidy flow of cultural output into neat, symmetrical units. (29)

This is equally applicable to the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds. Simply acknowledging a history of transnational and intercultural exchange destabilises binary oppositions between nations and between East and West, North and South. A fluid movement between people, places and cultures, crossing over boundaries, and more than that, a much less rigid conception of boundaries, is reflective of the lateral movement of time between past and present. Thus, the kind of fluid history that is being put forward in opposition to Western historiography is mirrored by a history of movement and change within these oceanic worlds.

Narrating these alternative histories that question traditional frameworks is a political project, with much at stake for those in the non-Western world. By re-presenting the past, these narratives attempt not just to fill in the gaps in the historical archive, but also question the very framework of historical discourse. These narratives then become essential in countering dominant Western historiography and its enforcement of power hierarchies:

For this is not simply to propose the heroic space of the counter-narrative that offers the promised homecoming of an alternative history, identity, and autonomous sense. Here the divisions between the colonizer and the colonized, the hegemonic and the subaltern, the victors and the victims decline into a more disquieting critical complexity that frustrates all unilateral desires to complete the picture. Encountering voices, bodies, and lives that exist beyond the official accounts supplied by both colonial and postcolonial power, we are drawn into dissonant narratives. Here the continuum of history fragments under the pressure of the unassimilated, and the resulting remains are worked over in a poetics that punctuates and exceeds the narrow logic of an inherited political view. The tale is perpetually interrupted or broken, and through the resulting gaps the silenced and the marginalized intercede in the telling of the world. (I. Chambers 59)

The “ordered archive” cannot maintain its order or its clear linearity as the alternative histories start to surface (I. Chambers 58). The project thus moves beyond reinserting silenced voices back into history, recognising that a complete, unbroken picture is impossible. Instead, as the framework of Western historiography is questioned, the discourse surrounding it cracks, allowing gaps for the silenced to emerge. It is for this reason that narrating alternative histories on their own is not enough. This is why time was taken to

examine the practice of historiography itself in the quest to identify alternative modes of writing history, where a new way of understanding the relationship between the past and present was put forward. As Chambers notes, “[h]istory does not arrive bleeding facts, dripping truths, flooding of the past. It is elaborated, articulated, represented in language, organized in discourse, disciplined in institutions, relayed by authorities” (25-26). There is always a discourse of power behind historiography. Representations of history should also be interrogated by asking who is writing that history, and who is being written about.

Finally, looking to the specific histories of the ocean worlds is productive in reconfiguring our notions of history. Not only does the fluid and cyclical nature of the sea reflect the much more inclusive and fluid method of history proposed, but the system of networks operating across these worlds has much to offer in terms of refiguring a future that is not based on rigid borders and divisions between places and people. As Bose notes, there is a need to find universalisms across our differences:

as for the relations of that oceanic realm with the world beyond its outer boundaries, modern history suggests that there may be scope for postcolonial conversations. If the globe at the dawn of the twenty-first century is indeed witnessing a new, ferocious round in the clash of civilizations, the prognosis will be one of deepening conflict and unending war. But if the history of the modern world can be interpreted to a significant degree as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms, room can be created for understanding through intelligible translation. (282)

The project of narrating alternative histories is vital in that it sheds light on this history taking place in the oceanic worlds where people *did* recognise that there were universalisms connecting them beyond their differences. Rethinking the past thus has potentially deep implications for reimagining both the past and the present. As Said has noted, “we all move within the boundaries of imaginary geographies in which what is available is not the truth as an absolute, a-historical measure of the world, but a constructed series of representation” (qtd in I. Chambers 10). Recognising that representations of people and their networks of exchange are constructed, allows the possibility to actively challenge these constructions and represent an alternative pattern of relations, in the past, the present and the future. The two texts that will be examined do precisely that: by fragmenting their narratives and bringing to the fore previously silenced voices, both Mahjoub and Ghosh, in *The Carrier* and *In an*

Antique Land, illustrate in very different ways how connection has been, and can be, forged across diverse and conflicting worlds. They question not only the content of Western historiography, but its form as well, in their defiance of linear and teleological progressions of history.

Chapter Three:

Shared Science, Entangled Histories: Jamal Mahjoub's *The Carrier*

History is about power. One history displaces another.

Jamal Mahjoub

(*Travelling with Djinn* 252)

Jamal Mahjoub's novel, *The Carrier*, explores the flow of knowledge and the history of science, and how this history is represented. The novel is split into two plotlines; the first is set in the seventeenth century and traces the journey of Syrian-born scholar, Rashid-al Kenzy, who finds himself imprisoned in Tunisia, where his skills as a man of knowledge and science are utilised by the Dey who sends him on a quest to find a Dutch telescope, a new invention, perceived to be of great advantage to those who possess it in the Mediterranean world. This expedition takes him across the Mediterranean into Europe, where he finds himself shipwrecked in Denmark. This plotline is interwoven with a second narrative thread set in the twentieth century, wherein Hassan, an archaeologist, is sent to the Jutland peninsula in Denmark to decipher an Arabic inscription on a brass case which was found alongside the remains of a skeleton in an archaeological dig. By fragmenting and interweaving two vastly different time periods, Mahjoub is able to excavate the relationship between the past and present, in order to comment on how the past has an impact on present day society and notions of history and identity. Twentieth-century Europe is presented as a space that is hostile to the Other and views its own history as homogenous and free from, as well as superior to, a non-European history. Mahjoub utilises a ruptured narrative as an aesthetic tool that uncovers the links between threads of history, showing the various connections and disconnections between past and present. What is revealed is a dynamic history of knowledge production from the Southern and Eastern regions of the Mediterranean, challenging a Eurocentric view of knowledge production. The fractured narrative also uncovers a continued pattern of reactionary intolerance towards science and the pursuit of knowledge, as well as an intolerance of multiculturalism.

There is a clear link between the narrative threads, as Hassan's assignment in Denmark, deciphering the meaning of the Arabic inscribed on the mystery box, is also a quest to discover the perceived anomaly of Rashid's presence as far north as Jutland, a space

supposedly untouched by Said's Other. The mystery is unravelled in the seventeenth-century thread, as it traces the journey of Rashid al-Kenzy as he moves from Algiers to Cadiz to Denmark on a quest to find and bring back the telescope. As Hassan tries to piece together this fragment of history surrounding Rashid's life, he is confronted with a hostile environment that rejects his presence. This sentiment is echoed in the other narrative strand as Rashid too is rejected, not just by the European continent, but also by his other environments (Aleppo – Syria, Samarkand – Uzbekistan, Cyprus, Alexandria, Cairo, Tripoli and then Algiers) as well. Rashid exists in an anomalous state: he is the bastard son of his Nubian slave mother and her silk merchant master, Sayed Abdelrahman al Jabri. His complex position in the liminal spaces of society is entrenched when he is granted an education by his father, which leads him eventually to the Valley of Dreamers, an enclave of scholars and learners tucked away from outside influence. It is Rashid's conflicting status, as both highly educated and the son of a slave, that leads him into trouble. In Algiers, he is accused of sorcery and unfairly imprisoned for murder. His position in society, as a scholar but also as a slave, is utilised by the qadi in Algiers to send him on the mission to find the rumoured Dutch telescope. It is from this unique position as an exile, rejected from so many environments, that Rashid is able to transcend the kind of national, religious, and cultural boundaries that limit most people, as he searches for a higher truth in knowledge, and through this finds connections across these boundaries.

The texture of the novel is rooted in the language of geology and archaeology. The overlap between the twentieth-century project of archaeological discovery in the text, Hassan's profession and Mahjoub's own scholarly background is obvious. To revert to Mahjoub's own language of archaeology, his is a project of excavation. He unveils what Rancière terms a "scholarly *geology* of the social times" (85, emphasis in original), as he digs through the layers of the twentieth-century landscape to understand how the current topography was formed and shaped over time. By excavating the past, he uncovers just how rooted the present still is in history. As Jopi Nyman points out, "by embedding personal narratives in the web of intercultural exchange, [Mahjoub's] fictions reveal the interdependence of Europe and its Others and show how their histories and identities are intertwined" ("Europe" 15). *The Carrier* specifically uses the history of science and attitudes towards knowledge as a means of reminding Europe of its own buried history and exposing a shared history of zealous behaviour, inhibiting progress and tolerance. Most importantly, the text exposes an entangled history of knowledge. Mahjoub unearths an early flow of science between the politically

polarised East and the West, as they drew on each other's scientific discoveries, as knowledge criss-crossed in both directions. The implication of this is that knowledge systems have always inevitably been knit together, as other differences have been laid aside by scholars interested solely in intellectual pursuits. European science is thus as much indebted to Islamic science as vice versa, and neither progression of knowledge developed without the other. Mahjoub is explicitly interested in this entangled history of knowledge. In an interview with Taina Tervonen, he says:

I wanted to stress the shift in the world. How the great leap of learning which took place in the 16th-17th century in Europe could not have happened without contact with the East, in this case the Arab world. The novel is very much addressed at the myth that the knowledge and learning upon which people base their cultural identity is somehow inherent to a particular race or nation. History shows the interdependence of cultures and learning. Progress comes not from isolation, but from the breaking of boundaries. For Rashid, it is a voyage into the unknown, the darkness of the world beyond the limits of the Islamic world, beyond his own geography. ("Exploring the past")

Western and Eastern, specifically European and Islamic, science and knowledge systems are thus braided together and effectively cannot be untangled. Despite great hostility between the East and West, as well as intolerance within each society towards the progression of science and reason in opposition to religion and authority, science and knowledge has remained a way of maintaining a connection between the two societies. It occupies a position similar to that of Rashid himself, as someone who moves between hostile spaces, seeking resistant cracks open to connection.

Mahjoub as an author is interested in the connection between history and the present, and what the implications of this are on identity. Nyman notes that Mahjoub's novels "are involved in an ethico-political project of historicizing cultural encounters. They show that the contemporary is deeply rooted in past histories, and that the desired self-image promoted in today's West is based on an exclusion of its Others and a suppression of unwelcome pasts" ("Europe" 15). Inherent in his work is thus also the interrogation of the relationship between the West and the rest. By excavating these buried histories, he attempts to problematise Western narratives of stability and purity, insisting instead on a notion of identity that "is changing and drifting, both synchronically and diachronically" (Nyman, "Europe" 15).

Mahjoub inserts outsiders into European spaces in order to interrogate this relationship, as well as to problematise the way in which European national identities are formed. In this way, the binary of centre-periphery is challenged. An interconnected knowledge system that flowed in both directions between East and West is uncovered, exposing the flaw in established understandings of the centre-to-periphery directed flow of knowledge. In addition to focusing on the multidirectional flow of knowledge, Mahjoub, as a man who is no stranger to migration, also shows the flow of people that defied a strictly centre-to-periphery direction. He is thus writing back to a European “monopoly on accounts of travel, mapping and discovery” in spite of the fact that early Renaissance accounts “indicate[d] both awareness of and blindness to the movements of non-European/semi-European peoples” (Khair 68). *The Carrier* becomes a way of challenging Eurocentric narratives that bury any traces of non-European presence, be it of physical footsteps of outsiders on their soil, or indebtedness to knowledge systems outside of Europe’s borders.

Just as there is a double narrative in Mahjoub’s *The Carrier*, between the Hassan and Rashid’s respective story lines, there is another type of double narrative in the novel: that of fiction, and of history. What the inclusion of the historical narrative does is “test the capacity of a culture’s fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of ‘imaginary’ events” (White, *The Content of Form* 45). Mahjoub weaves facts in with his fiction in order to comment directly on the skewed representation of non-Western people and thought in history. He includes real newspaper clippings and events in the twentieth-century narrative thread in order to bring the reality of the novel’s present to the reality of the actual present. In the seventeenth-century thread, Mahjoub draws attention to a rich body of Islamic science, spending time listing Islamic scholars to indicate the weight and reach of this rich scientific and philosophical history. He then draws the connections between what is regarded as Western knowledge and Islamic knowledge to show the ways in which these thinkers have influenced each other, and the interconnectedness of knowledge. By grounding the novel in actual history, as problematic as that phrase is given the subjectivity of history, Mahjoub comments on how mainstream historiography has chosen which facts to represent and which ones to silence. This focus on history has a goal beyond simply criticising Western historiography. To recall Hutcheon, “to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (110). By

narrating an alternative history, Mahjoub is thus offering a way of re-imagining the present and the future.

Movement and Multiplicity in the Mediterranean

Mahjoub situates a large portion of the seventeenth-century narrative in the Southern and Eastern littoral of the Mediterranean. This space represents a melting pot of culture, trade and information, and its character has been described by Braudel as “complex, awkward, and unique” (17). Defying any fixed definition thanks to its varying geography, climate, people and politics, it is a sea whose “history can no more be separated from that of the lands surrounding it than the clay can be separated from the hands of the potter who shapes it” (Braudel 17). The sea as an abstract concept, and this sea in particular, rejects borders, rigid boundaries, homogeneity and singular histories. As Chambers remarks, the Mediterranean “is a world of interruptions and intervals [...]. Here one’s time is constantly constellated by other times: It becomes multiple and multilateral, and it belongs to no one” (I. Chambers 140). This multiplicity is perhaps the most defining aspect of the Mediterranean, despite numerous attempts to find its unifying features. Its history of movement and entanglement corresponds with Achille Mbembe’s conception of Afropolitanism in Africa. Afropolitanism is predicated on the idea of Africa as a continent that has always been in continual flux, as people and cultures moved in from outside the continent, and people crisscrossed within the continent. This history of movement has been around since pre-colonial Africa, with Mbembe referring to a “history of people in perpetual movement” (27). Any conception of African culture needs to take into account the impossibility of a discourse of purity or homogeneity. Moreover, “[t]he cultural history of the continent can hardly be understood outside the paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement” (Mbembe 27). African history is one of “colliding cultures, caught in the maelstrom of war, invasion, migration, intermarriage, a history of various religions we make our own, of techniques we exchange, and of goods we trade” (Mbembe 27). Likewise, the Mediterranean is also a space of continuous movement, albeit with the sea as a focal point for exchange and movement. What unifies the space is the exchange (Rancière 79).

This imagining of the Mediterranean as a space of fluid multiplicity is reflected in Mahjoub’s descriptions of the various ports and cities that Rashid passes through. The flow of people, culture, information, and technology is highlighted from the North African and Middle

Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, to Southern Europe. A rich history of trade and knowledge is emphasised. The image of an entangled history is invoked from the outset of the novel in the description of Algiers as a legend: “Its strange and tenacious roots tangle in the imagination. It is like a mysterious, unexplored body to be unraveled layer after layer by the hands of an experienced lover” (*The Carrier* 1). The language of archaeology is invoked to describe this process of excavating the layers that make up the topography of any space. Mahjoub continues to describe the harbour teeming with global connections, “packed with vessels arriving from every conceivable point on the globe, rings to the tune of unfamiliar tongues in the breathless, incessant chatter of humanity and the turn of the tide” (*The Carrier* 1). Algiers is thus the embodiment of a space that rejects narratives of isolation, of cultural purity and of an uncivilised dark continent. This coastal city is positioned to benefit not just from the movement within Africa, but also from the sea-borne movement across the Mediterranean. As such, it is a space that is teeming with potential for valuable contributions to world knowledge. Algiers’ position as a port of call within a vast network of trade allowed news of the Dutch optical device to reach North African ears, sparking the international quest to find it. While the age of empires and kings had passed by this stage, this period of Mediterranean history was the “time of petty tyrants, greedy middlemen and pompous stamp wielders” (*The Carrier* 2). While the Dey of Algiers, “paid lip service to Istanbul”, he was not politically bound to the Ottoman Empire in any real sense (*The Carrier* 2). The telescope was thus a coveted device that could provide a significant military advantage to the Dey’s coastline. Free from the power of the Empire, or the later colonial powers, the Mediterranean cities were driven to acquire and trade in technology and knowledge in order to remain competitive in terms of trade and wealth.

This flow of information and ideas, and with it technology, was a driving force for further movement in the Mediterranean region and beyond. This is illustrated in the novel by the quest for the Dutch telescope. Rashid, the liminal man, is charged with the task of tracking down the mysterious telescope, journeying across the Mediterranean and eventually further north. His travels extend this image of a smorgasbord of networks, or perhaps more accurately, one intricately connected network spanning the Mediterranean and its surrounds. On board the ship with Captain Quraishy, en route from Algiers to Cadiz, Rashid observes an incessant current of trade at every stop they make: “[they] have arquebus matches from Breton and Cretan wine; they have copper wire and nails, and alum and Italian biscuits and salt” (*The Carrier* 61). As they journey on, it becomes apparent that this was a coastline with

numerous points of contact with most corners of the world. Rashid observes this web of transnational interactions as they round Gibraltar into the Bay of Cadiz: “Swollen with new wealth, it was awash with vessels of every description; carracks moored bow to stern in elegant crescents. Caiques, cogs, roundships, urcas from the Netherlands and Antwerp rocked gently at anchor” (*The Carrier* 73). Docking in Cadiz, Rashid finds “a world preoccupied with itself, with matters further afield, aware that it was the hub of some much larger wheel” (*The Carrier* 74). As he makes his way off the ship and into the coastal city, he sees the full extent of the stamp of multiculturalism present there:

The trees on the Calle de San Miguel stirred languidly to the thick scented odour of mangrove swamps and papayas rotting slowly in the humid foliage an ocean away. The silver of South America rattled in the pockets of the dark-brimmed eyes of hatted merchants who hurried down the Alameda Viega, their hands thrust into their pockets, their wealth in the hollow tarry hulls of those ships which slipped across the moonlit sand bars and the twinkling reefs of the West Indies as they glided off, singing their way west. The city was at the centre of a complex web of handshakes and agreements by which the fate of the distant corners of the world became commodities. (*The Carrier* 78)

This description of Cadiz echoes Chambers’ analysis of Naples as a quintessential Mediterranean city. To him, the city moves beyond its physical reality and “slips through conventional schema to propose a floating semantics, drifting through a hundred interpretations, a thousand stories” (I. Chambers 79). The city of Cadiz, like Naples, is not bound by its location in Spain, but rather becomes a space representative of many other places. The city space, in its architecture, its foliage, its inhabitants and the wares that pass through it, represents a trade network stretching to the West Indies and South America, as well as the closer Mediterranean ports. This coastal region is a hub of world trade. Implicit within these descriptions is an acceptance of multiculturalism. There is a common “*lingua franca* of the sea” that facilitates communication between widely varied population groups and languages (*The Carrier* 75). The differences between people and cultures are secondary here to the primary goal of trade, with greater variety of connections allowing greater commercial potential. This way of representing the precolonial Mediterranean world speaks to Rancièrè’s claim that exchange is what unifies a space. In this case, the trade routes were a driving force for interaction, and for an acceptance of the multiplicity of peoples and cultures that coincided with transnational networks of exchange.

Within this current of exchange and intermingling is the flow that I am most interested in: the movement of knowledge, and with it, technology. Mahjoub presents a history of the Mediterranean that is not widely acknowledged by the Western world: a history of vast and influential intellectual thought and science. To place the seventeenth-century Mediterranean world into context, it is necessary to go back further in time, to the peak of the Islamic world's dominance in the Mediterranean region. As John Freely points out in his exploration of Islamic science, "[w]hen Europe was shrouded in the relative darkness of the Middle Ages following the end of Graeco-Roman civilisation, Arabic astronomers were observing the heavens from observatories in Samarkand, Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Marrakech and Cordoba" and extending and preserving their knowledge passed down "principally from the ancient Greeks" (ix-x). In the golden age of Islamic science, from the ninth to the twelfth century, the Islamic world, holding its power base in the Mediterranean, was far ahead of its European counterparts. Islamic science and philosophy was heavily influenced by Aristotle, and it was only around the year 1000 that Aristotle's work started reaching Western Europe (O'Shea 149). In fact, "Islamic culture, through Toledo, Palermo, and a half-dozen minor centers of translation, had brought the west an incomparable gift: self-knowledge" (O'Shea 149). This middle link between ancient Greek thought and "contemporary" Western knowledge has been effectively erased from Western history books. As Freely points out, "by the seventeenth century Europe had forgotten its debt to Islam, for although Newton [...] gives credit to earlier European and ancient Greek thinkers, he makes no mention of the medieval Arabic scholars from whom Europe had first learned about science" (x). Just as Mahjoub traces the presence of people and cultures from the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean intruding on the northern shores, specifically along the Spanish coast, he maps a consequent migration of science, as he shows the influence of Arabic scholarly work and Islamic science on Western thinking.

Mahjoub achieves this through his seventeenth-century scholar Rashid, who is exposed to the rich body of scholarly tradition in the Arabic world. Born to a slave who captured the fond attention of her master, Sayed Abdelrahman, Rashid is given access to education typically beyond his caste as his aptitude and appetite for learning is discovered, in contrast to the laziness and ineptitude of his father's legitimate son, Ismail. Forced to flee after the untimely death of his father's legitimate son, the opportunity arises for Rashid to continue his studies in the Valley of Dreamers. The principle of this sacred place of learning is best described in

the inscription on the stone arches at its entrance: “*The ink of scholars is worth more than the blood of the martyrs*” (*The Carrier* 58). Before Rashid is taken there, one of his school masters, Nuraddin, explains to him that the concept was born out of the previously widely held belief that “all knowledge was one and thus equal [... and] that we should recognize every form of knowledge, no matter where it might come from, even foreign sources” (*The Carrier* 34). Up until the twelfth century, this belief was indeed widely held across the Muslim civilisation. Not only was it “a period in which the Muslims developed a great thirst for learning – a craving, the like of which history had never known before” (Qadir 104); but it was also believed that knowledge production was a fundamental tenet of Islamic belief. Unlike modern Western science, however, Islamic belief held that this task of knowledge production was only possible through religion, “since the source of knowledge is the Sacred, the aim and the object of knowledge is no other than the realisation of the Sacred” (Qadir 5). This belief is entrenched in the Quran itself, which C.A. Qadir quotes as claiming “every human being, irrespective of caste, creed, sex or age, has the inalienable and indisputable right to acquire knowledge” (19). Rashid’s desire for knowledge echoes these early Islamic ideals, as he tells his Sufi teacher that “[he wishes] to devote [himself] to studying the universe in all the wonder in which God created it” (*The Carrier* 36). It is this thirst that secures him a place in the Valley of Dreamers, amongst like-minded scholars. This attitude towards knowledge that is open to many sources reflects the same tolerant attitude of a Mediterranean zone arranged to facilitate more trade. There is a higher goal in both these cases, namely increased knowledge and increased trade, that transcends the numerous smaller differences between sources of knowledge and the various cultures involved in trade.

Rashid remembers his time at the Valley of Dreamers while on board the ship set on course to locate the telescope. He thinks back to the model of the universe in the Valley of Dreamers, and he remembers that the “observatory and the academy, with its schools of medicine and philosophy, mathematics and geography, was really a retreat for a small group of devotees, men who feared for their lives” (*The Carrier* 69). He also remembers how his time there and his learning expanded his world exponentially:

Time brought the yearning for freedom; the tiny invisible strands which bound him to his saviours began to part one by one. The world grew bigger, more colourful, more filled with noise and light than he had ever known in that great house where he was born to serve. He unlocked the cage of mathematics, turned the key of al-Jabr’s mystical language which took

his name – algebra. He climbed steadily towards the sublime array of the celestial bodies. There was no sign of randomness, this was not the reckless hand of coincidence; each and every distance between the fixed stars was measured. Measured in fingers and handspans and lances. Their brightness was arranged on a scale. They fell into houses, families, constellations of such magnificence that he was moved to tears when their delight was revealed, blinking innocently in the inky oceanic night. Their message was written there by the Creator for man to study, to awaken his senses and make him learn. The motion of the orbs could be measured in angles and distances, while the course of his life eluded all such method and order. (*The Carrier* 70)

This passage describing the pursuit of knowledge indicates the power and beauty that Mahjoub accords it. Within this is the recognition of the influence Islamic science has had on contemporary science, particularly in the fields of mathematics and astronomy. The most famous of these mathematicians was Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizimi, who wrote *Hisab al-Jabr waal-Muqabalah* (The Calculation of Integration and Equation), which was widely used in European universities up until the sixteenth century as the primary textbook on algebra (Qadir 115). Closely linked to advancement in the field of mathematics, was progress in astronomy. The interest in astronomy by Muslim thinkers was reflected in the number of observatories constructed across the Islamic world (Freely; Qadir). The influence of the work done by these astronomers is still felt today, in terms of their contribution to charting the stars, their influence on the calendar and more. According to Paul Lunde, “the very appellations of the constellations still bear the names given them by Muslim astronomers – Acrob (from aqrab, ‘scorpion’), Altair (from al-tair, the ‘flyer’), Deneb (from dhanb, ‘tail’), Pherkard (from farqad, calf) – and words such as zenith, nadir, and azimuth, all still in use today, recalls the works of the Muslim scholars of Al-Andalus” (qtd in Qadir 116-117). Another noted Muslim astronomer, Ibn al-Haytham, is said to have influenced thinkers such as Galileo, Descartes and Kepler (Freely 90). Mahjoub uses Rashid’s scholarly knowledge, particularly of astronomy, to highlight the history of scientific and intellectual progress in the Islamic world.

Further emphasising the access to and influence over knowledge production along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, is the quest to find and control a new piece of technology: the telescope. News of such a device had reached the northern shores of Africa, sparking a pursuit for such an instrument whose uses would be invaluable in a sea-

trading region rife with competition. As Rashid struggles with the ship journey, he wonders whether such an instrument could possibly be worth the effort to recover it. Rashid recalls an anecdote from his past, regarding the virtue of outside knowledge. This anecdote demonstrates the extent to which knowledge has always flowed from one place to another, casting its influence on thinking far and wide:

It is said that the seventh caliph of the Abbassid dynasty, al Mamun, was visited one night in his sleep by Aristotle the Greek. It must have been an awful dream for he awoke in the morning with a haunted look upon his face and claws of sheer terror clutching at his bowels. [...] Without delay he summoned all the crusty advisors and ancient wise men of Baghdad to him and ordered them immediately to begin translating every scrap of knowledge they could get their hands on, whatever language it was written in: Greek, Persian, Soghidian, Sanskrit, Chinese; anything and everything, but especially, he wagged a finger, that of the Greeks. And that is how learning came to the language of the Prophet. Before that, the Arabs had little but legend and religion. The revealed knowledge, the Awaal sciences, were virtually unknown. ‘Seek knowledge wherever it may be found, even in China!’ it is written in the Book of Books. The works of Aristotle and Plato and Socrates and Ptolemy subsequently appeared and their light was passed on and enhanced by the diligence and application of dedicated men. And thus the great thinkers of the Golden Age are known to us. (*The Carrier* 96-97)

Rooting his novel in the concrete history of the Islamic world, Mahjoub brings to light a tradition of entangled knowledge. This passage highlights the enormous influence that Greek thought had on Islamic science, as well as the reach of early knowledge, again emphasising a world that has long been in movement. Ptolemy, for example, was the base for Al-Battani’s theoretical astronomy (Freely 61). It was through these so-called Eastern thinkers that the knowledge of the early Greek scholars made its way back to Europe. In bringing this history back to light, reinforced by what Brenda Cooper calls “the weight of names” (72), in other words, through the continual listing and referencing of Islamic scholars scattered through *The Carrier*, Mahjoub demonstrates how entangled knowledge systems are. Knowledge essentially has become a braid, made up of the contributions of various groups and cultures; something Tina Steiner terms a “collaborative history of science” (“Of translators” 41). This braid cannot be clearly separated out into distinct strands and singular histories. Mahjoub’s novel shows this in the interlacing references to scholars, demonstrating how “North African, Arabic, Greek and Asian traditions draw on each other and literally crisscross the Seas” (Steiner, “Of translators” 41). The political point that Mahjoub is making, which will be

brought out more clearly in the twentieth-century strand of his narrative, is the disavowal by the West of this collaboration. This history has been “buried under the hegemony of Western traditions” aided by “the arrogance of these Western assumptions about its own monopoly on knowledge production” (Cooper 72). What enables this burial of history is power.

While Mahjoub references this early period of great enlightenment and vast knowledge production in Islamic science and philosophy, the novel’s historical thread plays out after this golden age of Islamic knowledge. During these golden years, the recognition that knowledge was collaborative proved to be a catalyst for great advancement of thought. However, this acceptance of foreign knowledge sources would later be used in the antithetical sense by Islamic authorities to reject the knowledge production emerging from the Islamic world. Mahjoub highlights a time where there was a swing back towards strictly controlled religious knowledge and conservatism, a theme that resonates in the novel’s present. The impending threat to independent knowledge is indicated by the very existence of the Valley of Dreamers as a place tucked away from outside influence, thus trying to escape the authorities’ attention. The changing tides with regard to Islamic authorities’ attitude to the freedom of knowledge acquisition is reflected in Rashid’s contemplation: “Is it not written that the lowliest of men is equal to the noblest, that each man’s faith is between him and his Creator? But such arguments are frail protection against the swords and spears of the zealots when they come, and they do come, as they did, finally to the Valley of Dreamers” (*The Carrier* 72). What is evident is that there is tenuous relationship between science, used here in its broadest sense to accommodate knowledge emerging out of rational thinking, and authority, in both a religious and political sense. The example of the Valley of Dreamers is a cautionary tale, and is just the start of many more instances highlighting this tense relationship.

Focusing particularly on this moment in the novel as representative of attitudes in the Islamic world at the time, there were historically a multitude of factors that led not only to this shift in attitude against science, but also to the decline of the Islamic control of the Mediterranean region. While the peak of Islamic power in the Mediterranean was in the twelfth century, by the eighteenth century, “the Muslims had neither their lands, nor their sciences, nor their philosophy. What they had were superstitions, outmoded beliefs and ideas, literalism, conformism, clinging to the past, wrangling over words, hostile to whatever was new and deviated from the set path” (Qadir 122). Qadir attributes this fall to an array of factors, including the ransacking of Baghdad, shifting attitudes towards the Greek influence on

knowledge, the creation of Fiqh schools, Ijtihad and its difficulties, and the rise of ascetic mysticism (123-131). There was a shift in emphasis from studying worldly phenomena to “other-worldliness and the denial of the world we live in” which lead to the “stoppage of all scientific activity among Muslims” (Qadir 134). Underscoring these elements was an additional factor identified by the chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, Munir Ahmad Khan:

rulers in the past [...] feared that the spread of education and knowledge in the masses might erode their absolute authority. The emergence of learned and skilled people leads to the loosening of the grip of feudal and religious elite groups. Science and technology has urbanised societies which leads to the reordering of the existing social structure and redistribution of power and changes, which are resented by the established ruling classes. By opening new opportunities for a large number of people and offering an entirely new mode of acquiring influence through knowledge instead of inheritance, the spread of science and technology strikes at the root of the powerbase of the privileged group. (qtd in Qadir 134)

This fear that increased access to science and technology would ultimately threaten the ruling classes is one that will be echoed later in the novel by the authorities in Denmark. In a historical sense, this decline in Islamic knowledge production, as well as political, financial and military power in the region, was mirrored by the rise of Western European power across all these fronts. Osmon Bakar compares how, at the height of Islamic power, the Muslim world was able to integrate knowledge from other civilisations in a positive and progressive manner. However, in its decline, “due to its internal weaknesses as well as the highly superior material power of the West, it proves itself impotent to stem the speedy flow of Western culture into its territory” (Bakar 203). As the West spearheaded its position at the forefront of the fields of science and technology, Islamic science’s contribution faded out of mainstream discourse, and weakened both internally and externally. What this demonstrates is the link between power and knowledge. Cooper finds that “the novel exposes the ways in which science, far from being objective, is implicated in the power politics relating to issues of wealth, trade and colonialism” (66). For Islamic science, this power relationship was exerted both internally by Islamic authorities fearful of loss of control, and externally by Western dominance over ownership of knowledge and history.

Mahjoub holds up a mirror between West and East in terms of this power relationship, in order to show a similar move towards conservatism and religious control over knowledge production across the waters in Denmark. Of course, this seventeenth-century example is symptomatic of a long history of this type of religious control in the West, best illustrated by institutional enforcement by bodies such as the Spanish Inquisition. As in the changing Islamic world, Northern Europe too had pockets of resistance to the restrictions placed on scientific progress. Heinesen has the same thirst for knowledge and exploration that was once so widespread in the Islamic Mediterranean. He illustrates this desire to know more, specifically relating to astronomy, when he tries to explain his plans to build an observatory to Anderson. He tells him “the age we live in, Anderson, is the most exciting in history. In the next one hundred years we will learn more about ourselves and the universe in which we live than in all the centuries that have passed since the dawn of time” (*The Carrier* 155). When he explains his plans to build an observatory, he is met with derision. Holst, described as the “King’s Prefect,” tells him that “[he] cannot be blind to the implications, the repercussions of such a ... ludicrous venture. This is a matter for universities and kings, not some second-rate horse trader in the provinces” (*The Carrier* 195; 198). He goes on to call Heinesen’s work “unholy manifestations” (*The Carrier* 200). The extent of Holst’s disdain is shown when he calls Heinesen’s work with the King’s astrologer “superstitious stuff” and “nonsense,” adding that “the stars are out of our reach and God intended for them to remain so. [...] Your ideas mean nothing to the ordinary people of this world. They know nothing but the kingdom of God. To them your indulgent imaginings are not only incomprehensible, they are also a threat” (*The Carrier* 200-201). Ultimately, Heinesen’s unfinished observatory gets torched, just as the Valley of Dreamers was burned to the ground. Munir Ahmad Khan’s statement about the fear of the ruling elite holds true for seventeenth-century Danish authorities as well. The violent backlash against science and independent knowledge is thus a phenomenon that ranges across time and space, rather than being specific to a region, religion or culture. There is a shared history of power relations exerting themselves against science. To echo Cooper, Mahjoub’s critique is levelled at this relationship of power that denigrates science and knowledge.

Despite the concerted efforts in both the East and the West to banish independent pursuits of knowledge, pockets of resistance remain. Mahjoub brings forth his belief in the collaborative production of knowledge by uniting Rashid repeatedly with others who share his thirst for knowledge. Rashid’s love affair with science is not torched with the Valley of Dreamers. He

soon finds himself in Cyprus, working for Sidi Hamed Hazin, a wealthy timber merchant. He is given the unusual task of utilising Hazin's vast library as a source through which to bring happiness to his wife. After succumbing to her, and through this act of inadvertently providing Hazin with an heir, he leaves, eventually finding himself in Algiers. There he gains a reputation when he uses his applied rationality and common sense to save a girl's life in front of a crowd. He is soon sought out to help with all manner of problems, and "the answers which he was able to provide, often based on pure common sense, were often the most appropriate, but usually were a matter of deciding what people wanted to hear" (*The Carrier* 20). He is represented as a beacon of rationality in a sea of people who rely on superstition, traditional beliefs and blind religion. His rationality eventually backfires, as the common people, no longer part of a tradition of the inalienable right of everyone to knowledge acquisition, start accusing him of sorcery as a way of explaining his superior knowledge. When he finds himself stranded in Denmark, once more he is brought together with a like-minded fellow, Heinesen, where together they pursue knowledge of the stars whilst those around them call such a pursuit heresy.

The Northern Fortress

The journey north to find the Dutch telescope takes an unexpected turn when a storm moves the ship off course, eventually shipwrecking off the Danish coast. This migration signals a movement in time and space. Physically, Rashid's untimely arrival in Scandinavia / Northern Europe traces a history of migration into this region, a presence that is largely denied in historical discourse and contemporary national narratives. By locating Rashid in such a remote space, far removed from his Mediterranean world of experience, Mahjoub is making the point that "no space is without external influence" (Nyman, "Europe" 9). He is challenging the view of Europe as what Nyman calls a fortress ("Europe" 2). This conception of Europe posits it as a space that is closed, "in the need of defending itself against hordes of foreign invaders" ("Europe" 3). This reflects a long history of imagining Europe always in relation to the Other; "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 2). This viewpoint has persisted in contemporary times, where there is still great evidence of hostility towards immigrants seen as invading singular European spaces. This continuing tradition of hostility is demonstrated in Mahjoub's novel by the Danish antagonism both Rashid and Hassan experience, indicating a disjuncture between the events of the past and established historical discourse. As Nyman remarks of the

twentieth-century Danish villagers, it is their “insufficient awareness of history [that] forces them to adhere to ideas of fixed home and stable identity” (“Exile” 428). Unaware of their own past of “silenced histories of migration” (Nyman, “Exile” 427), the Danes are doomed to repeat a pattern of rejection as they continue to buy into a vision of a superior, untouched Europe, characterised by singularity and purity. Nyman uses Hassan’s observation, when looking at the landscape in Jutland for the first time, that “[p]eople look at a landscape and think it must have been like that for all eternity. The idea that the ground under one’s feet is reliable” (*The Carrier* 37), to illustrate the tendency Europeans have to imagine their own history as stable. Mahjoub narrates an alternative history to the accepted Western one, which reveals that any notion of a stable home, history and identity is “a historical illusion” (429), even for such a remote area of Denmark. The novel challenges a Eurocentric space by showing how the “minority deterritorializes the majority and leaves its mark in history” (Nyman, “Exile” 435). This is done both by showing the physical presence of the Other on European soil, as well as the intellectual influence the Orient, and in the case of the novel, specifically Islamic science, has had on Western intellectual thought and scientific advancement.

Rashid is not the only invading Other in the novel, as Hassan fills this position in the twentieth-century narrative, facing similar hostility despite the fact that he has lived in Denmark for a number of years. Hassan occupies a position as a bridge between the past and the present, as well as between two separate worlds and perceived knowledge systems. His arrival in Jutland is unexpected, as local archaeologist, Okking, is expecting Jensen and is unsettled by the arrival of Hassan, a man clearly not of Danish descent. The resistance towards Hassan as an outsider is reflected in the descriptions of the exterior spaces and the weather upon Hassan’s arrival in Denmark. When Hassan arrives for the first time, it is raining in violent bursts, and the weather is described as “disturbed” (*The Carrier* 5). The first building he encounters is a derelict garage. There is no sense of welcoming. This is then echoed by his reception in town, where he is greeted with mistrust and often outright rejection. His first encounter with a local is the girl in the garage shop, who stops smiling when she sees him, and begins “to shuffle newspapers and magazines on the counter” (*The Carrier* 6). This sentiment is not isolated, as he arrives at his accommodation and Mrs Ernst, his landlady in Jutland, is unhappy that he is not what she was anticipating and is taken aback upon seeing that he owns a car (*The Carrier* 7). Okking has a similar first reaction by simply staring at him in silence for a full minute before eventually saying, “I was expecting Jensen”

(*The Carrier* 38). There is a sense of deep mistrust of Hassan, as a foreigner, and worse, of presumably Arab descent. This mistrust is stressed when Hassan finds himself the object of scrutiny in the store once more. As he is being watched by a farmer, clearly keeping a keen eye on him, Hassan notes the headline of daily newspaper:

‘Goodbye and Good Riddance!’ Beside him the farmer was now fiddling with matches and puffing at the stem of his pipe. The boy was staying at the cash register and adding up the items. The picture on the front of the paper was of a Gambian man, arrested for drug pushing in Copenhagen and now ordered to leave the country. Hassan was familiar with the story. One would have to have been deaf, dumb and blind not to have heard about it. A ruling that would once have been greeted with dismay and opposition was now being publicly applauded; the journalists would, no doubt, say that they were only reflecting the general mood in the country, and perhaps they were right. (*The Carrier* 107)

The hostility towards Hassan is neither a personal attack nor a unique incident, but instead reflects a societal obsession with increasing invasion of the Other. Okking’s wife reiterates this in a slightly more polite way when she remarks on Hassan’s good command of Danish. Upon explaining that he has lived in Denmark for a long time, she responds with, “I didn’t mean to pry, but you know how it is. We are all curious to know where people come from” (*The Carrier* 254). It is the addition of the word “but” that bothers Hassan, with the afterword signalling Danish intolerance towards perceived outsiders. Martin, the boy working at the garage shop who befriends Hassan, tries to explain the town’s animosity towards him: “You don’t know what’s like. I mean nothing happens here. You have a life, a job, a family. I mean, maybe they wonder why you have those things and they don’t” (*The Carrier* 222). Despite Hassan’s obvious expertise, and the trust placed in him by those who sent him to Jutland to help the locals uncover the mystery of the buried body, the locals cannot bring themselves to see beyond his surface-level Otherness.

The locals’ resentment of Hassan runs deeper than merely a reaction to his appearance, and the invasion of his Otherness. What draws a further line of separation between Hassan and the locals is his knowledge, and subsequent success, in contrast to the rural and fairly ignorant lives that they lead. Hassan is needed in Denmark to decipher what Okking calls “that gobbledygook” inscribed on a brass case found next to a skeleton at the archaeological site (*The Carrier* 42). This “gobbledygook” is Arabic, rendering Hassan’s knowledge crucial

to solving the mystery of the box and the skeleton. His expertise is necessary to bridge the gap of knowledge of the Danish archaeologists, as well as to attempt to bridge the gap between what happened in this place in the past, and what knowledge they have of it in the future. Hassan defies traditional Oriental-Occidental roles, by being the carrier of knowledge and the crucial link to uncovering the story behind the archaeological findings, as well as being the figure of prosperity in a rural space. In a sense, he represents the divide between rural village life and cosmopolitan city life.

The intolerant and hostile attitude demonstrated by the Jutland inhabitants is an echo of the same type of animosity experienced by Rashid centuries prior to Hassan's arrival. Rashid's sudden appearance stirs up ample hysteria in the town, when they find him amongst the wreckage of the ship, ravaged and brought to ground by a great storm that claimed the rest of the shipmates' lives. The first introduction the reader is given of the locals' reaction to Rashid is from Klinker's explanation to Heinesen: "Nobody knows what it is, really. You know what people are like, sir. Some are calling it a sea-monkey, a monster from the deep; others call it the messenger of the devil himself" (*The Carrier* 125). The sub-human manner in which he is described proliferates, as the language dehumanises him, alternating between describing him as an animal and as some kind of demon. He is further described as being "black as burned wood" with eyes "like the fires of damnation" (*The Carrier* 126); "the creature" (*The Carrier* 126); "beastly apparition" (*The Carrier* 126); "a sea creature;" and "an ape of some kind" (*The Carrier* 130). These descriptions give over to inhumane behaviour, as the townspeople chain him up in a stable and treat him as if he was an animal. The crowd outside Rashid's stable turn into a mob seeking vigilante justice as they call to have him burned on the pyre. The townspeople's attitude towards him culminates in the examination by the surgeon, Mason. An immensely disturbing scene is subsequently described, as the surgeon prods and pokes Rashid, weighing and measuring everything he can, sticking rods and pipes into his body. When it ends and the surgeon leaves, "the devil slumped naked and retching on the cold floor. Even the guard who had witnessed the examination seemed to take pity, for he returned briefly to drop a rough linen blanket over the shivering creature" (*The Carrier* 149). Beyond the fear of the ignorant masses with their hunger for mob justice, Rashid poses an even more ominous threat to the slightly more rational provost. When Heinesen guesses that the language marking the wooden trunk with which Rashid was shipwrecked is that "of those who worship Mahomet," the provost is horrified, and exclaims: "Do not say that, Heinesen. I implore you, not even in jest" (*The*

Carrier 135). To the townspeople, Rashid is sub-human, on the level of an ape, or worse, a creature of the devil. To the provost, he is another kind of threat entirely: a Muslim. This fear of the Arabic world intruding into a supposedly homogenous Christian and European space mirrors Okking's dismissal of the Arabic on the same wooden chest as "gobbledygook" (*The Carrier* 42). This European space is not just hostile to Rashid, and later Hassan, as individuals, but to the world that they represent. This rejection in turn reiterates the erasure of Islamic influence in the history of European scholarship.

Rashid's inhumane treatment exposes a tension in the novel between the "civilised" and the "uncivilised." Counter to popular narratives of the West as civilised, enacting the civilising mission on the rest of the world, the novel reverses this relationship by revealing an uncivilised Europe. Mahjoub inverts the typical Orientalist division by having Rashid question the uncivilised behaviour of those around him. His wariness of the Christian West is first revealed while he is still in Cadiz, when he realises he has no desire to visit the North, as "[h]e had heard about the climate and the dirt and the ways of the Christians who, if word was to be believed, were even more primitive than the ones who washed up in Algiers on every ebb tide" (*The Carrier* 78). He talks later of "the ignorant ways of the Christians" (*The Carrier* 101), an idea that is confirmed by the behaviour he encounters in Jutland. In addition to their inhumane treatment of him, the townspeople also partake in a number of superstitious rites. One example is that of cleansing flagellation sessions, performed several times a day by a group of women in front of the stable where Rashid is initially detained (*The Carrier* 145). What this serves as is a counter to the image of Europe as the civilised and rational continent, especially in contrast to the multicultural and relatively tolerant Mediterranean world from whence Rashid travels. Christianity is branded here "as narrowly puritan in matters religious and racial," and while the Islamic world does not escape criticism, the appearance of Islamic "religious zealotry [...] is incidental, whereas under seventeenth-century Christianity it is official policy" (D'haen, "Stranger" 128). Therefore, while not trying to claim that the Islamic world is without incidents similar to this one – and Rashid faces his fair share of rejection and intolerance across the entire Southern and Eastern Mediterranean world – Mahjoub is questioning European notions of itself as the civilised continent, when in fact it has a long history of institutionalised zealotry. What underscores this intolerance is an ignorance born out of either religious or state-driven limitations on knowledge production and dissemination.

Amidst this widespread ignorance, pockets of rational thinkers and scientific minds thrive in spite of limitations of the pursuit of science. In the case of the seventeenth-century narrative thread, Rashid finds a kindred spirit in Heinesen. Heinesen approaches the matter of Rashid with a rational attitude from the outset. There is a striking moment which truly captures the heart of what Mahjoub is doing in terms of questioning the history of the relations between the North and South, when Heinesen says to the provost: “Curious, don’t you think, that they are aware of our existence, they even have our towns plotted on their instruments and yet we know nothing of them?” (*The Carrier* 141). Just as Fra Mauro’s map described in the introductory chapter of this thesis showed, the West certainly did not have a monopoly over world knowledge and the subsequent mapping of the known world. Important to this profession was shared knowledge, as mapmakers drew on previous maps and favoured travellers’ and traders’ accounts. This points to the importance of collective information. A similar relationship of cooperation is formed between Heinesen and Rashid. Heinesen recognises Rashid as simply another human from a different place and seeks common ground between them. Rashid speaks the *lingua franca* of the southern trading ports, which is close enough to Spanish for Heinesen and Rashid to converse with some degree of understanding. Heinesen agrees to the provost’s request to take him in and have him work as a builder on Heinesen’s property, where he is building an observatory. Heinesen and Rashid later find another mutual language: that of science, and, more specifically, astronomy, which allows them to communicate as equals.

This shared appreciation for, and understanding of, astronomy is discovered after the accidental death of a boy working alongside Rashid on Heinesen’s observatory. News of the death reaches town, and two men come up to the house to question exactly what Heinesen is building. Upon seeing Rashid walking outside the house, the two men are struck by outrage and fear, exclaiming “[o]ut there. It walks ... on two legs,” and “Good God above, are they here ... amongst us?” (*The Carrier* 201). What follows is Heinesen’s attempt to sway the men by pointing out that the Spanish rely on such men’s work to create their wealth. When neither that, nor Heinesen’s dismissals of their claims of bad omens as pure superstition, does anything to allay the men’s fears, he summons Rashid to write something for the men to prove his intelligence. What appears to be a meaningless scribble turns out to be the catalyst for Heinesen and Rashid’s scholarly partnership, as he recognises their common preoccupation with the stars: “Heinesen lifted the sheet of paper and stared for a moment at the markings there. Something oddly familiar about them, but it was not until he laid the

paper down on the table which afforded him a view of them from another angle and tilt that it hit him: the constellation of Pleiades” (*The Carrier* 205). It is here that the pinnacle of Mahjoub’s project is reached, which is to show the flow of science across both worlds, intersecting all other beliefs. Rashid’s knowledge of the constellations comes from his time spent in the Valley of Dreamers, learning from the great Muslim philosophers. Heinesen, meanwhile, comes to his knowledge from a Western perspective, having studied under Tycho Brahe. Mahjoub includes this historical figure in order to demonstrate the interconnection between East and West in the field of astronomy. Brahe was a Danish astronomer in the sixteenth century, who referred in his own work to the renowned Islamic astronomer al-Battani. The more commonly recognised name in connection with astronomy in the Western world today, Copernicus, was also influenced by al-Battani (Freely 61). Yet Rashid and Sigrid, Heinesen’s sister, when talking about the constellations and model of the universe, only demonstrate a knowledge of the astronomers within their own cultural systems, without being aware of the influence of the other. Sigrid talks of Copernicus, but has not heard of Nasr al-din al-Tusi, a key figure in Islam astronomy not just for his own contributions as a mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, but also for the role he played in preserving the history of Muslim philosophy and science by compiling books on Islamic philosophy, helping to preserve this history (Qadir 139-140). Rashid, upon seeing Copernicus’ work, is convinced that he must have known of the work of Muslim astronomers. Mahjoub is making the point that whether or not people are aware of the entanglement between Eastern and Western thought, knowledge, and particularly astronomy in this case, is comprised intrinsically of an interwoven web of scholarly traditions, leading to the impossibility of speaking of either Western or Eastern thought as separate entities.

The purpose of bringing together Rashid and Sigrid, two scholars representing two different worlds, is thus to show the connection between Western and Eastern knowledge. Scientific progress emerges out of pooled knowledge and scholarly collaboration. Steiner argues that the novel does not simply re-trace the line between North and South, Europe and Africa, but rather “expands the trajectory by drawing the readers’ attention to the collaborative history of science” (“Of translators” 41-42). Mahjoub is not merely inserting an African or Middle Eastern viewpoint into a European one, or reversing the flow of knowledge along the same linear path, but he is instead insisting on the idea of collaboration. This is demonstrated by the partnership of Rashid and Sigrid as scholars who, representing East and West, realise through their conversations the benefits of collaborative knowledge (D’haen, “Stranger”

129). The flow of knowledge has crossed over the Mediterranean and beyond, for centuries. To claim any superiority of intellectual thought would be to ignore the wide influence of thought that has impacted all modern notions of science and knowledge.

Despite a clear history of scientific collaboration, this entanglement is largely erased by historical narratives. The reason for this lack of awareness of the knowledge transferral between the two world systems goes back to the decline of Islamic power and the simultaneous rise of European power. Europe used scholarship to privilege its own systems of knowledge and rewrite the East's history of knowledge. This was used as a means of legitimising Europe's position of dominance. Theo D'haen looks at Said's comments on the West's legitimising process and Europe's recasting of the Oriental and Islamic worlds "as devoid of – or as lagging behind in – the features of modernity, and therefore as inferior to the West. In the process, Western scholarship disqualified all non-Western forms of knowledge, reducing them to superstition, myth, legend and the like" ("Stranger" 124). Part of the West's success in becoming the only legitimate source of knowledge production, was to effectively erase the East's history, discrediting their contributions. By bringing Rashid's first-hand knowledge of the contributions of Islamic science into contact with a European system that, while having been influenced by Islamic scholarly work, has denied this connection, Mahjoub is able to interrogate the relationship between East and West, and highlight the collaboration that has taken place as a result of a history of movement and connection.

As Hassan brings his knowledge of Arabic to Denmark, and Rashid brings his knowledge of astronomy from Islamic science to meet with Heinesen and Sigrid's extensive library and knowledge, a common ground is forged between these characters and their worlds through science and the pursuit of knowledge. As Rashid takes his place in Heinesen's extensive library, he finds considerable connection to his early experience of learning:

Altitudes and azimuths, the tables, the charts of stars, all familiar to him despite the awkwardness of the language and the method used. He recognized the patterns of his ancestors, the great men whom he had grown to admire and love as though they were his family – his true family, as he thought of them. For a long time, a lifetime, he had lived with these men in his head, until they had become a part of him and he of them. How he had dreamed of joining their ranks; mathematician, astronomer, geographer. Such aspirations now

seemed far away and all the more ridiculous for that. The books which filled the shelves of that great library had once suffocated and stimulated his imagination. He wanted to swallow them all whole. He wanted to dig his way through page by page, line by line until all the knowledge hidden there in signs and ciphers was his. He would drink the ink, eat the paper. These books contained the arcs of the heavens, the holy, unfathomable mystery which enclosed him, like a cocoon. (*The Carrier* 219-220)

Rashid here is experiencing feelings akin to homecoming, when confronted with ideas and thinkers he is familiar with, who he feels are his “true family” (219). At this moment he is in a sense “transcending [...] cultural barriers to knowledge” (Kearney 135). He is bound neither by Islamic nor European limits of knowledge acquisition in this moment, nor by historical prejudices; but instead revels simply within the ideas themselves for this instant in time. In addition, Rashid expresses an incredible hunger for knowledge that would be praised in Western scientific communities today. This hunger, however, was out of sorts in the seventeenth century, where neither the Islamic nor Western worlds truly valued intellectual pursuits that ventured outside of the narrow confines to which those in power prescribed. As Steiner remarks, “all the hopeful glimpses of encounter and collaboration, of pockets of resistance, are only temporary respites from the intervention of power in the guise of individuals and institutions steeped in discourses of control and exclusion” (“Navigating Multilingually” 57). The Islamic world had moved back at that time towards a closed religious reading of the world, while the Western world similarly was afraid of any sources of knowledge from foreign places. The Mediterranean coastal region saw the pursuit of science and technology as worthwhile, but placed its value in trade and military advantages, rather than pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Rashid thus moves as a figure in the margins, an outlier, and one of the few individuals across all three of these regions who defies society’s imposed limits on science and the pursuit of knowledge.

Mahjoub’s focus is just as much on the limitations imposed on knowledge as it is on knowledge as enabling connection across boundaries. Cooper, drawing on Bruno Latour, sees this as a relationship of power; that “science cannot be divorced from history and that knowledge is implicated in power and power is buttressed by scholarship” (68). The decline in Islamic scholarship is a dual result of the power of Islamic authorities over scientific progress in a return to conservatism, and the meteoric rise of Western power, politically, economically and culturally, which sought to elevate its own systems of thought and disavow

all others. This influence of power led to the near-erasure of Islamic scientific contributions in Western conceptions of its own history of knowledge and intellectual progress. Knowledge is used by those in power to gain advantages, such as the Dey of Algiers trying to appropriate the telescope in order to gain military and trade advantages in the Mediterranean. By restraining knowledge production, the powers-that-be in both Rashid's Mediterranean world, and Heinesen's Danish one, try to maintain their own position of privilege. Therefore, the pursuit of knowledge will always be bound up in power struggles, and the kind of history that is written will likewise be inextricably bound to power. Mahjoub's characters are caught between the power-hungry authorities and the ignorant masses who see their knowledge as a form of sorcery. Within this bind, they are unable to pursue knowledge, and "the only harmonious community that Mahjoub can envisage, and that only sometimes, is an elite one, between communities of scholars" (Cooper 85). The implication of this is that objective and true knowledge production can only be achieved outside of official institutions run by those that hold power. Mahjoub thus offers a somewhat bleak outlook on both the history and future of knowledge, which belies the idealised view that knowledge and science is, and can be, truly objective.

This melancholic outlook is compounded by the scarcity of these scholars and the liminal positions they occupy. Rashid finds kindred spirits in Heinesen and Sigrid, two characters also existing in the margins of society. Echoing Cooper's idea that elite communities come together to pursue knowledge outside of the influence of power, Steiner theorises about a safe space for these liminal characters. She refers to knowledge itself as being a "safe space, which affords the characters with relationships across boundaries" ("Of translators" 48). Of course, this position is constantly under threat, as illustrated by the novel's ending, with Heinesen never recovering from the ordeal he was put through by the mob of townspeople, leading to his eventual death, and Sigrid burns to death in the house. Rashid's fate is less certain, as he stumbles into the cold and darkness, clutching the manuscripts and charts he had been able to grab, as well as the telescope in the brass case. The safe space that knowledge affords these characters in their existence in the liminal cracks of society is only temporary. Ultimately the force of European conservatism at the time catches up to them. Both the authorities, dreading a challenge to their world paradigm, and the mob, fearful of knowledge they do not understand, violently shut down the small space of intellectual freedom that Rashid and Heinesen had managed to create for themselves.

The danger in presenting only a few liminal characters who have access to the kind of knowledge they do, and the clear separation between those of rational thought and the rural ignorant, is that of advocating elitism in scholarly pursuits. Mahjoub presents a hostile world where very few are privy to these ideal “transnational and translational collaborative spaces” (Steiner, “Navigating Multilingually” 52). Access to knowledge is an elite activity. The hope that connections can be forged across differences of culture, religion and nationality is somewhat negated by how few people are seemingly able to form these connections using the transcultural language of science. By way of the examples of people who are privy to this language in Mahjoub’s novels, this space of connection is open mainly to those who occupy positions in the cracks of society, and are happy to exist in a state of unbelonging. In addition, there seems to be a gender divide, where only men form the scholarly elite, which, as Cooper points out, is strangely out of sync with the novel’s “political sensitivities” (80). The carriers of knowledge are men, Rashid, Heinesen and Hassan. Only two female figures feature in any significant way: Hazin’s wife and Sigrid. Hazin’s wife is never given a name, and her eventual happiness stems less from the intellectual connection established by Rashid’s reading to her, but rather from the physical connection when she seduces him. Nameless, she loses significance, becoming a mere channel for Rashid’s own desires. Sigrid, on the other hand, possesses great knowledge and scientific thought, and there is an intellectual equality between her and Rashid. Yet she still seems to exist purely as a tool of Rashid’s realisation of collaborative thought in the field of astronomy, as well as an object of desire. Cooper notes the moment where Sigrid burns in the house, and “Rashid experiences the joy of the light coming off her. This is to re-enact symbolic male stories and mythical imaginings, which give them power over women, at the very moment that Mahjoub is rejecting the racist and vicious revenge on the enslaved stranger and the eccentric scholar” (Cooper 80). As much as Mahjoub subverts Western control exerted over Islamic scholars, and people in general, he appears to fall into a trap of inadvertently repeating a similar relationship of power over women in the novel.

Viewing the Past and the Future through the Telescope

Mahjoub’s *The Carrier* represents a history of movement in the world of knowledge and science. Knowledge, rather than consisting of separate strands of independent knowledge systems, is a web which requires the criss-crossing of information, and cannot be untangled. Mahjoub narrates a wildly under-represented history of Islamic science and philosophy that

has both drawn from and influenced Western knowledge, resulting in one entangled knowledge system. Through Rashid's vast knowledge of science, and particularly of astronomy, Mahjoub shows the interconnection between the Islamic and Western worlds in terms of scientific progress and understanding of the physical world. His travels to the remote Jutland peninsula in Denmark, and his eventual partnership with another keen astronomer, Heinesen, brings light to this entangled history, for both Rashid and for the reader. Mahjoub avoids depicting an Islamic world steeped in idealistic nostalgia, despite highlighting its rich history of science and philosophy. The East and South have been just as affected as the West in terms of limitations to independent knowledge production, showing that questions of power are universal. This connection is woven through the mirrored storylines of the torching of the Valley of Dreamers and the burning of Heinesen's unfinished observatory. Intolerance abounds on both sides of the Mediterranean, for both multicultural contact, predominantly in the North, as well as for science and progress, found throughout the region. Yet, despite the obstacles thrown in the way, knowledge still progresses, as scholars find ways to connect with each other across their differences, searching for a higher truth found in science. The very fact that Hassan stands in twentieth-century Denmark, excavating the ruins of Heinesen's burnt observatory, and deciphering the writing on the wooden chest that has endured three centuries, shows that the pursuit of knowledge has continued to defy those who try and limit it.

The novel ends ambiguously for Rashid, just as his position has been ambiguous in society from the start of his life. The last few pages reveal that the body found by Okking and his team of archaeologists is that of Heinesen, not Rashid. Rashid is seen stumbling into the cold night, clutching the telescope and as many manuscripts and charts as he can carry. He looks through the telescope, gazing into the distance of both the past and the future:

The instrument in question is deceptively simple: a brass casing open at either end into which hard droplets of glass are squeezed. The light enters through the glass, bending as it does so – air and glass being so related – and passes, thus transformed, into the long brass tube of time. The rays are collected like so many threads and sewn together again, much like in the telling of a tale. What seems at first far thus becomes near. Time is hurled out at the void and the distant extinguished stars. The past reaches out and for a brief, fleeting moment the present is faintly illuminated. (*The Carrier* 276)

The suggestion here is that in the same way that a telescope brings what is far, closer, so it is that through the past, the present can be illuminated. In Steiner's words, "*The Carrier* translates between the past and present" ("Of translators" 42). The use of the telescope, and the specific focus on astronomy, warrants a repetition of Benjamin's statement that the past forms a constellation with the present (263). Just as the East and West are connected by a combined knowledge system, so too are the past and present connected. The past is illuminated through the gaze of the present, just as the present is illuminated through the narration of the past. What is revealed is a historical pattern of intolerance towards independent knowledge, and a refusal by authorities to recognise the entanglement of East and West in terms of scientific thought. By revealing the cracks where the past leaks into the present, there is a sense that by narrating an alternative past, there is potential for a re-imagined future.

This relationship between past, present and future is brought to the fore through the language of science. The telescope provides a way of bringing the past into clear view, while the notion of history is mediated in this text through the discourse of scientific history. This discourse extends to the use of the language of archaeology, used by both Hassan and Mahjoub himself. Archaeology is particularly useful in that it involves a careful excavation of layers, much like historical analysis involves the careful uncovering of layers of the past. Most significantly, there is a lateral movement in the novel. By fragmenting and interweaving separate narrative strands, the novel moves laterally through time, illuminating a dynamic relationship between past and present, which cracks open new possibilities for the future. Even though the text is largely melancholic, it leaves a possibility of hope, suggesting that change is possible if the past is reimagined. The notion of lateral movement is also applicable to the way in which Mahjoub explores binaries. He problematises traditional binaries of past and present, centre and periphery, as well as home and away, in order "to present a hybrid form of identity" (Nyman, "Exile" 425). By questioning these binaries, Mahjoub instead portrays a world where boundaries are no longer clear, as past and present crisscross, home and away are blurred by a more fluid notion of borderlines and the portrayal of characters who move along the cracks, belonging nowhere and everywhere, and where centre and periphery are undone by entangled histories. By acknowledging that the binary divisions between West and East, North and South, have been defied for centuries by science and scholars, the novel offers the hope that these binaries will continue to be crossed in the future. Facilitating these crossings is the language of science, as communities of scholars and

thinkers seek ways of understanding the world that are universal, and not bound to narrow definitions of cultural and national identity.

Chapter Four:

Conversations with the Past: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*

...the greatest danger to public memory is official history. Even the dead, as Walter Benjamin declared, are not safe from the victors, who consider public memory part of the spoils and do not hesitate to rewrite history. Or reimage it.

Geoffrey Hartman
("Public Memory" 77)

Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* structurally and aesthetically echoes the fragmented form of Mahjoub's *The Carrier*. Both texts are constructed with bifurcated plotlines in order to explore the relationship between the past and the present. However, unlike Mahjoub's novel, Ghosh's text evades any simple classification as a novel or even as a work of fiction. Instead, *In an Antique Land* combines "a traveler's tale, an (auto)ethnography, an alternative history, a polemic against modernization, the personal record of an anthropologist's research and [...] a novel" (Smith 447). Ghosh's tale knits together his own experiences as an ethnographer living in two small Egyptian villages with the wider narrative of his detective work tracking down the Slave of MS H.6 in history. The modern thread of the text begins in 1978 when, as a Ph.D. student at Oxford University, Ghosh encounters Professor S. D. Goitein's collection of translations titled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, referencing the Jewish trader Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave. Later, Ghosh finds himself in Egypt in 1980 completing ethnographic research in the villages of Lataîfa and Nashâwy for his dissertation. This section of the book originates from Ghosh's genuine notes from his research. As the text narrates Ghosh's personal experiences in Egypt, placing himself as narrator, he investigates the Slave of MS H.6, whom he calls Bomma, creating a twelfth-century narrative strand that tracks Bomma's movements through history and across the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds. What is brought to life in this narrative thread is the seemingly unusual relationship between Bomma and his master, Ben Yiju; a relationship that, in its relative equality across class and cultural differences, complicates historical understanding of relations in the Indian Ocean world. A world in motion is uncovered, one in which the cultures and people of North and East Africa, the Middle East and India have interacted for centuries. By presenting this world, and that of late twentieth-century Egypt, as well as India, alongside each other, Ghosh

finds the points of connection temporally, between the past and the present, as well as spatially, between India and Egypt.

Ghosh's vision rests on the version of history that he presents. The world that Ben Yiju and Bomma inhabit illustrates a long pre-colonial history of interconnection and cultural intermingling reminiscent of Mahjoub's seventeenth-century Mediterranean. The twelfth-century representation reveals an enmeshed history between specifically Egypt and India resulting from the Indian Ocean trade network. This region is depicted as largely harmonious and cosmopolitan, focused more on cooperation through trade and connections, rather than the many cultural and ideological divisions. This vision of the Indian Ocean world reflects the scholarly turn to thalassology, pinpointing the sea as a focus area to study history. The relationship between India and Egypt was mediated through the sea as the Indian Ocean region was structured along trade routes, leading to increased interactions between the people of the Indian Ocean world. These connections were transnational, creating a "historical space that intermediates between the levels of nation and globe," providing the possibility of "[a] radically new perspective on the history of globalisation" (Bose 3). This transnational space was aided by a fluid understanding of boundaries, allowing the flow of people and ideas (Bayly and Fawaz 7). By narrating a history of transnational movement within the South, echoing the idea of Mbembe's Afropolitanism that was also used to discuss the Mediterranean, a version of globalisation is created that is inherently part of the history of the Indian Ocean, rather than a modern Western construct. As Desai points out, "African globalization must be thought of in the context of a long history" ("Oceans" 715). Therefore, the purpose of narrating a twelfth-century plotline that writes a history of connection across the South is to reposition the pre-colonial Indian Ocean world outside of Western reference, as well as to show how a less rigid application of borders increases transnational and intercultural connections.

Just as Ghosh highlights a fluid and entangled history of conversation across the Indian Ocean world, he also traces the imposition of more rigid boundaries, and the subsequent effect that had on transnational connection. According to Ghosh's depiction, this international cooperation changes abruptly with the arrival of the Portuguese and the resulting influence of Western powers. The West thus enters the narrative as an interrupting force between South-South relations. While little of the book takes place spatially in the West, as in Mahjoub's novel, the West remains an ever-present entity in the twentieth-century narrative. Ghosh

highlights the dominance of the West, not only militarily and culturally, in changing the nature of relations in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean trading worlds, but also the West's epistemological dominance. This epistemological dominance accounts for the effective erasure of historical accounts of this region as a network based on connection and collaboration rather than divided by differences and the hierarchical structuring of the region. This dominance translates into power over history books and thus the power of representation. Not only did the West prescribe a set of relations across the region, through notions of fixed boundaries and territorial sovereignty, but also prescribed the kind of historical discourse projected. Just as the Danes in Mahjoub's novel were unaware of their own history, so too are the Egyptian locals in Ghosh's text unaware of a long history of connection, as opposed to division, between India and Egypt. Therefore, by challenging the dominant Western historiography and narrating a history of cooperation between India and Egypt, as well as more generally of the people of the South, Ghosh is suggesting the possibility of re-imagining both present and future ways of relating to each other across boundaries.

It is in the metanarrative, or what Tapan Ghosh has termed the parallel "third story" of the text (152), that Ghosh reveals how the present tries to wilfully ignore the past, despite faint echoes of a forgotten universalism still making itself heard in the twentieth century. By casting a light on these faint traces, Ghosh is not only trying to present an alternative history in order to further understanding of the present, but also to ultimately question future relationships. *In an Antique Land* is essentially a text of conversations. As Ghosh himself has noted in an interview, "that's how the whole book is constructed, it's just a series of conversations" (C. Chambers, "Absolute Essentialness" 28). Ghosh takes his original notes from his anthropological dissertation and subverts the historical European anthropological tradition of speaking for these Egyptian villages by presenting the raw data in the form of conversations. This allows the villagers not only to literally speak for themselves in the text, but also to question Ghosh himself, as the ethnographer, thus destabilising the conventional hierarchies of this relationship. The historical plotline too is presented as a conversation, given that the research is sparked by the uncovering of a correspondence between Ben Yiju and a merchant by the name of Khalaf ibn Ishaq, in which Bomma is mentioned. The type of connection Ghosh is suggesting is thus the ability to establish conversations across boundaries, which manifests itself both literally and metaphorically in *In an Antique Land*.

This connection echoes Benjamin's idea of a constellation as mapping and connecting points across time, and in this case, space.

Ultimately Ghosh's text interrogates the notion of fixed boundaries, by referring back to a time where conversation flowed freely across those boundaries, indicating a much more fluid notion of transnational connections. Ghosh examines a number of binaries such as the temporal one between the past and the present, boundaries between nations, religions and identities, and that of the relationship of the centre to the periphery. Ghosh's works, according to Claire Chambers, do not only "transgress generic boundaries, but they also effortlessly cross national frontiers" ("Absolute Essentialness" 27). This idea is evidenced in his novel, *The Shadow Lines* (2005), which employs the concept of shadow lines to talk about the lines that divide people, and how they are essentially imaginary. The use of the Indian Ocean as a setting for discussing these boundaries comes back to the notion of the ocean as a fluid entity that cannot be contained, and defies attempts to impose rigid divisions. As Chambers points out, "[t]he Ocean provides a forum for erasing the divisive 'shadow lines' he problematises in many of his novels" ("Indian Ocean" 87). Ghosh's text thus uses the Indian Ocean trading world as an example of how shifting notions of boundaries, from a fluid conception to a rigid imposition, has interrupted the conversations that once occurred easily across these divisions. By narrating an alternative past that facilitated these conversations, Ghosh interrogates the difficulty of dialogue in present times.

Travelling in the Past: the Indian Ocean World

Ghosh's particular form of interaction with history is suggested already in the title of the text. *In an Antique Land* situates the text in a space that is specifically not a nation or country, but rather a more general "land". Furthermore, the use of antique, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "belonging to former times, ancient, olden" with additional connotations of being old-fashioned, signals the intrusion of the past. Within this title, then, is the suggestion that he is travelling in the past, and in a place that is representative of a far-reaching history. The subtitle, "History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale," is descriptive of his travels back into the history of this antique land. Christi Ann Merrill notes that ethnographies, histories and European travel accounts conventionally are situated from the vantage point of Europe (specifically England), as the place *from* which to view other nations, cultures and people, rendering Ghosh's subtitle ironic (107). This is because England, and the West, are not

explicitly visible in the text in terms of the position from which Ghosh is looking. Yet, on closer inspection, the West is a continual presence in the text, as it is through a Western university that Ghosh is studying and to whom he is presenting his findings; his gaze contains inflections of this dominance. Of course, Ghosh's actual position is more destabilising, since despite the traditional dominance of the observant ethnographer, his own position is complicated by his identity as an Indian, rendering his relationship with the Egyptian villagers more equal than, say, an English scholar in Egypt. There is thus a point of connection between him and the villagers because of an entangled history of South-South relations. In addition, the form that the novel takes is not an ethnographic representation, although it is based on Ghosh's actual field notes from the time. His representation of the villagers avoids conventional ethnographic representation by portraying the actual conversations of, rather than making categorical statements for and about, the villagers. His role in the village also departs from conventional ethnographic practices in that the participant-observer relationship is often reversed. James Clifford has been especially critical of the traditional participant-observer relationship present in ethnography (18-21). As he notes, "the ethnographic encounter is always already enmeshed" (23). By inserting his own voice into the narrative, Ghosh very clearly indicates his own participation in this relationship. Tapan Ghosh remarks that the "'I' is not simply a narrator or chronicler but a witness and a participant as well; the all-pervasive presence of the 'I' has tied together all the facts and events in the book" (153). Ghosh attempts to avoid traditional hierarchies of dominance and writing for the Other, since he himself is in the complicated position of being both an Other, as well as a representative of a Western institution. The West thus intrudes into the text despite Ghosh's spatial location in Egypt and India, indicating its epistemological and cultural dominance.

In order to understand Ghosh's position as the non-traditional ethnographer travelling in Egypt in the 1980s more clearly, it is first necessary to examine the kind of history that Ghosh presents in the twelfth-century narrative thread. His vision of this time is mediated by the discovery of the Slave of MS H.6, who "first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942" (*Antique Land* 13), making a brief appearance before disappearing again. He is referenced first in an article in the Hebrew journal, *Zion*, which contained transcriptions of medieval documents, including the letter written by a merchant from Aden to Ben Yiju. This letter makes mention of Ben Yiju's slave, termed the Slave of MS H.6 after the catalogue number of the letter. This is noteworthy because of the remarkability of a slave being worthy

of not just a mention, but a greeting from a wealthy merchant. As Ghosh notes, this inclusion of a note to the slave comes “from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly individual, existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests” (*Antique Land* 17). Bomma’s unusual mention, which elevates him to this position of an individual rather than merely a slave, thus sparks Ghosh’s interest as he begins the quest to track down the limited traces of the slave’s lingering voice in historical documents. This feat is made more difficult by the uncertainty of his name. In fact, Ghosh only reveals the slave’s name, and the mystery behind it, more than halfway through the narrative. The translation of the letter names the Slave of MS H.6 Bama. As Ghosh finds further traces of the slave in other documents, he finds that the name was in fact always written as B-M-H. To uncover the mystery, Ghosh travels to Tululand in Mangalore to trace the slave’s origins, where, drawing on the local dialect, he finally settles on Bomma as the slave’s name, catapulting the Slave of MS H.6 at last to the position of “protagonist in his own story” (*Antique Land* 254). By placing Bomma in the spotlight, Ghosh lifts out a voice that would otherwise have been lost to history. In addition, this narrative thread serves another purpose, which is to illuminate the medieval Indian Ocean trading world. By examining the much more tangible traces of Ben Yiju in order to learn more about Bomma, Ghosh uncovers a cosmopolitan world, rife with conversations across great differences, at a time when there was a much more fluid understanding of these constructs of difference, be it national, religious or cultural. As he challenges European visions of this region, Ghosh moves between personal experiences of migrancy at this time and the broader discussion of historical and cultural interaction across the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean region.

The backdrop for both a large part of the history that Ghosh interrogates as well as his own anthropological research is Egypt, an antique land both in its own right, given its long and complicated history, as well as the quintessential Orientalist exotic location. Egypt has long been a prime target of the Orientalist imagination, and still today occupies a major space in Western discourse of antique history, with its tales of Pharaohs and ancient Pyramids. However, while the Golden Age of the Pharaohs is preserved, albeit in various museums around the world, the more recent history of Medieval Egypt has faced greater problems in terms of preservation in the historical archive. The power exerted over Egypt by the West is demonstrated in the naming of Cairo. Ghosh sees Cairo as a metaphor for the country, since locally in Egypt, country and capital are referred to by the same name: Masr. The root of this

word means “to civilise” or “to settle” (*Antique Land* 32). This name has deep historical roots, extending further back than the origins of Islam. Yet Europe, in its Orientalist project, has “insisted on knowing the country not on its own terms, but as a dark mirror for itself,” drawing this name from a Greek term signifying the Copts, thus rooting the name in the Christian population (*Antique Land* 32). Therefore, in the very naming of the city, the West has already sought to enforce a specific reading of history onto the country and, indeed, the region. Egypt’s own name, Masr, does quite the opposite in rendering “the city indistinguishable from the country; a usage that brims with pleasing and unexpected symmetries” (*Antique Land* 33). This symmetry is reflected in the geographical layout, as the settlements sprawl on both sides of the Nile, with Cairo specifically lying in the fork where it splits, “straddling the imaginary line that since the beginning of human history has divided the country into two parts, each distinct and at the same time complementary” (*Antique Land* 33). Cairo not only forms a geographical centre in Egypt, it is also representative of the wider role Egypt played as a key location for linking the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trading worlds. As this link between places, it has a history of both internal and external migration, and a rich cosmopolitan demographic.

Much like the Mediterranean world Mahjoub presents in *The Carrier*, Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* also seeks to show a precolonial trading world built on connections, rather than divided by national and cultural divisions. C.A. Bayly and Leila Fawaz, in their study of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean region, found that this zone “was, in fact, a unity constructed by a myriad of long-range connections of migrant communities, trade links, and religious doctrines” (7). They go on to state that it was “[t]he absence of rigid boundaries among the great multinational empires [that] aided the movement of people and ideas” (7). This region was not only rife with trade, but Egypt, and Fustat, which was the capital under Muslim rule and is now a part of Old Cairo, was an important link in joining these trade routes, playing a “pivotal role in the global economy as the entrepôt that linked the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean” (*Antique Land* 37). Beyond simply its strategic importance for trade, Fustat, and the broader Masr, were representative of the connections between the region in its position as a “heterogeneous space” (Gabriel 47), and was the connecting point between two diverse trading regions: the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. This world was distinctly multicultural and thrived on the relatively smooth relations between the diverse groups of people moving around and trading in the region. By highlighting a history of cosmopolitanism present in the region prior to the arrival of

European colonial powers, Ghosh “demolishes the cliché that cosmopolitanism is the exclusive fruit of European expansionism” (B. Roy 66). He thus not only reclaims Egypt and the region from Western history, uncovering a history of cosmopolitanism denied to historical imaginings of the region; but Ghosh also shows how cosmopolitanism took root in the South and the East, thus preventing the West from claiming sole ownership of the concept.

The world of the Indian Ocean trading routes was, according to Ghosh, an open one, where people from all over had the freedom to move around with relative ease. The implication of this image is that the lack of rigid national borders, something that was to arrive with the Europeans, encouraged conversations between people. While differences no doubt abounded, and conflicts did arise – this was, of course, the age of empires in the Mediterranean region, a period marked by shifting centres of dominance in the area – these conflicts were not configured in the same way as those erupting in the period of colonisation, and later, decolonisation. This is because identity was not formed along strict national lines, of Said’s Orientalist ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The Indian Ocean transcontinental trade and the heterogeneous culture that supported it was to be altered with the arrival of the naval might of Europe, bringing an end to the “shared enterprise” of trade relations (*Antique Land* 80-81). Egypt’s prime position, and proficiency, for trade within this region caught the attention of the rapidly expanding so-called ‘First World.’ This geographical location made Egypt “the object of the Great Powers’ attentions, as a potential bridge to their territories in the Indian Ocean” (*Antique Land* 81). This interest in Egypt extended beyond a strategic geographical interest to include scholarly and artistic interests as well, as “Egyptomania” swept across the West (*Antique Land* 81). This newfound interest in Egyptian history would have profound effects on the region, and its ownership of its own history.

This effect is best illustrated by the example in *In an Antique Land* of the sacking of the Geniza housed within the Synagogue of Ben Ezra. A Geniza was a chamber set aside in Jewish synagogues for the purpose of housing religious documents. The very term “Geniza” is thought to come from the word ganj, which translates to “storehouse” (*Antique Land* 57). According to Desai, “[m]edieval Jews believed that it was sacrilegious to destroy any piece of paper that might have the name of God inscribed upon it” (“Old World” 126), hence the storing of all such documents in a Geniza. The practice of saving religious documents was soon extended to include all documents written in Hebrew, since Hebrew was seen to be

synonymous with religion at the time (Desai, “Old World” 126). The idea was that these documents would be given a proper “religiously sanctioned” burial at a later date (Desai, “Old World” 126). In the case of the Geniza in the Synagogue of Ben Ezra, the documents were never buried, but simply stored. The build-up of these documents created an extensive archive of a large portion of medieval Egyptian history. The significance of this archive was the survival of an extensive documentation of ordinary life, having never been subject to a historian’s judgment as to which stories were important and which were not. Rather than a carefully put together historical narrative, these documents represented a wide overview of everyday life. In addition, these documents were testament to a history of migration across the region, and the intermingling of diverse groups of people. The Synagogue of Ben Ezra, built in the fortress of Babylon, was a congregation consisting of Jewish migrants. Amongst them was Ben Yiju, himself an immigrant from Ifrîqiya, what is known today as Tunisia. These largely North African Jews were hardworking members of the community, whose “travels and breadth of experience and education seem astonishing even today” (*Antique Land* 55). The collection of documents housed in the Geniza thus recorded not only Egyptian life and the experiences of a small group of Jews in Egypt, but also held testament to the cosmopolitan trading world of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean region. Abulafia has noted the importance of these traders for the documentation of life during this period in the region, as well as the key role they played in actually spreading and preserving knowledge across the Indian Ocean region in medieval times. The preservation of this history is a result of their meticulous recordings of their transactions:

To speak of the Jews is to speak of traders who had an unusual ability to cross the boundaries between cultures, whether in the early days of Islam, during the period of ascendancy of the Genizah Jews from Cairo, with their trans- and ultra-Mediterranean connections, or in the period of Catalan commercial expansion, when they could exploit their family and business ties to their co-religionists and penetrate deep into the Sahara in search of gold, ostrich feathers and other African products that were beyond the reach of their Christian compatriots still stuck within their trading compounds. The prominence and mobility of a minority group is intriguing. These Jewish merchants were able to bring back information about the world beyond the Mediterranean ports that was recorded and disseminated across Mediterranean Europe and further afield in the remarkable portolan charts and world maps produced in late medieval Majorca. As merchants moved around, so did information about the physical world. (Abulafia 646)

It is in such records of these Jewish merchants that the twelfth-century narrative thread of the novel originates. Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant, and his reference to his slave, come to life for Ghosh first in the pages of a Hebrew Journal, *Zion*, and then in S.D. Goitein's collection, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*. The series of letters between Ben Yiju and Khalaf ibn Ishaq describe the transactions occurring across the region. The region's cosmopolitanism is illustrated by Ben Yiju's life. Born in Tunisia, he moved to Egypt and then later to India, before returning to Egypt. He settled in the Roman fortress of Babylon in Cairo, along the banks of the Nile, at a time when this port was one of the busiest in the region. He and his fellow Jewish congregation at the Synagogue of Ben Ezra were representative of a world in a movement: "Carried along by movements of that cycle of trade many of them travelled regularly between three continents – men whose surnames read like the chapter headings of an epic, linked them to sleepy oases and dusty Saharan market towns, places like El Faiyum and Tlemcen" (*Antique Land* 55). Ben Yiju's own history of transnational movement along trade routes was not isolated, but represented a tradition of migration, signalling in turn a long tradition of globalisation. The remaining historical documents recording the lives of people like Ben Yiju illuminate a world of vast networks of movement of people, trade and knowledge, countering the notion that the planet is "newly-shrunken," but instead showing that this drive to travel and move is merely a continuation of a long history of transnational flows (*Antique Land* 55).

Ghosh translates the impact of this cosmopolitan world by recuperating a voice that would ordinarily be silenced in Western historiography. In this way, he allows the subaltern to speak, to use Spivak's phrasing once again. The slave appears first in 1942, making "a brief debut" in which he was "scarcely out of the wings before he was gone again" (*Antique Land* 13). The slave is first mentioned in a letter written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq to Abraham Ben Yiju in 1148 AD. The year he first makes his appearance in modern print is also the year that the Middle East saw an influx of foreigners due to World War II, with soldiers drawn from the far corners of the world, adding to the cosmopolitan melting pot that was once commonplace. As the crowds of armies gathered that year, "Alexandria was witness to the last, most spectacular, burst of cosmopolitan gaiety for which the city was once famous" (*Antique Land* 15). The summer of 1148 AD, the year the letter in question was written, was equally bustling with foreign armies as a huge Crusader army camped outside of Damascus. Against this backdrop of "grand designs and historical destinies," the letter to Ben Yiju, with its mention of the Slave of MS H.6, shows a glimpse of the ordinary day-to-day lives continuing

to operate uninterrupted (*Antique Land* 15). The purpose of recuperating this voice is to write the ordinary experiences of individuals into wider historical narratives. A voice such as that of Bomma, an Indian slave working for a Jewish merchant, is precisely the kind of voice that is never given the stage, in a historiography that focuses on presenting events and patterns, rather than individual experiences. I am drawing here on the image Said uses in *Orientalism*, of the Orient as a stage on which “figures [will appear] whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate” (63). In Ghosh’s writing, the figures of Ben Yiju and his slave subvert the typical Oriental narrative appearing on the stage in place of more important figures, portraying an alternative history and a different set of relations.

The unique accumulation of documents housed within the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra was not to remain undisturbed forever. This archive was first discovered by the mid-eighteenth-century Jewish traveller, Simon Van Geldern. The discovery was largely disregarded, as the “Egypt of the ancients” was more fashionable for European study and held the Orientalist imagination with much more intensity and interest than the more recent medieval history of Egypt did (*Antique Land* 82). Over a century later, the Geniza was visited once again, this time during the period of British control of Egypt. Slowly the Geniza entered the scholarly world, “and then, soon enough, events began to unfold quietly around it in a sly allegory on the intercourse between power and the writing of history” (*Antique Land* 82). What followed was the steady emptying of the Geniza’s documents. The documents were siphoned off and changed hands, with substantial collections housed in Russia, Palestine, Europe and the United States of America. This was managed quite easily under the all-too-familiar justification that the custodians of these documents did not know the value of them. Before the building was torn down years later, officials sold off the last of the documents on the international market, “to libraries in Paris, Frankfurt, London, Vienna and Budapest” (*Antique Land* 87). The Geniza was fully emptied of its historical artefacts by the end of the First World War. It is here that the allegory that Ghosh mentions in his meta-commentary is so succinctly illustrated, as the “Islamic high culture of Masr had never really noticed [this dispersal], never found a place for the parallel history the Geniza represented, and its removal only confirmed a particular vision of the past” (*Antique Land* 95). The West used its power to remove the vast record of a cosmopolitan history in the region, while Masr was largely unaware at the time. Possessing such a sizable archive documenting life in this period gave the West the power to narrate, unchallenged, its own version of this history. The documents

of the Geniza proceeded to travel to the far corners of the world, just as the writers of those documents once did.

This incident, slipping unnoticed past the Egyptian citizens, signals an important and disturbing tradition in Western historiography. Ghosh highlights the significance of this event in the following observation: “It was as though the borders that were to divide Palestine several decades later had already been drawn, through time rather than territory, to allocate a choice of Histories” (*Antique Land* 95). Inherent in this observation is the “politics of knowledge” that grants the West the power to choose the history that is narrated, and the same politics underlies the ransacking and appropriation of the Geniza documents (Desai, “Old World” 126). Using firstly their political and military weight, the West gained access to Cairo and these documents, and using their epistemological dominance were able to not only remove these documents of local history but then rewrite the very lines within which the region was to be understood. By silencing the history of migration and entanglement across this region, the West cut off the region’s understanding of itself, interrupting the conversations that flourished in a cosmopolitan network across the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds, but also imposing an amnesia that prevented the resumption of this conversation post-decolonisation. This power that the West imposes over the Orient’s history is most notably seen in the Epilogue of *In an Antique Land*. Ghosh tracks down the final resting place of the documents, providing the stage for Ben Yiju and Bomma’s appearances. Housed in the Annenberg Research Institute in Philadelphia, USA, are the Geniza documents, with their final reference to Bomma, indicating the sum of money owed to him by Ben Yiju. Ghosh captures the odd juxtaposition of this final resting place: “In Philadelphia then, cared for by the spin-offs of ‘Dallas’ and ‘Dynasty’ and protected by the awful might of the American police, lies entombed the last testament to the life of Bomma, the toddy-loving fisherman from Tululand” (*Antique Land* 349). This particular story of a Jewish trader and his Indian slave and the cosmopolitan lives they led, finds its resting place in the vaults of a nation representative of the Western tradition of rewriting other peoples’ history. Robert Dixon explores the irony of this moment as well, noting that “[t]he archive is a synecdoche of postmodernism and postmodern theoretical practice, with its globalizing tendency, and its complicity with the most imperialistic aspects of the modern American State. In Philadelphia, Amitav Ghosh might be travelling *in* the West, but his sly civility ensure that he is not travelling *with* the West” (22, emphasis in original). The very presence of Bomma in these records subverts this theoretical tradition by revealing how previously silenced voices emerge

out of the cracks of historiography, indicating the insufficiencies of the archive. Bomma's history, while enclosed in the historical archive of the West, is no longer hidden from view. Instead, Ghosh has breathed life back into it, using Bomma's voice to counter Western narratives, hence Dixon's observation that even though Ghosh may spatially be in the West, he is not conforming to Western narrative modes of history.

This process of historical recovery is ultimately a political one. Ghosh's research into the records taken from the Geniza by the West gives life to a history that has otherwise been silenced by the West, both in that its record has physically been removed from its origin, and silenced in its exclusion from the historical narrative that the West has woven for this region. Anshuman Mondal refers to this as Ghosh's "attempt to recover 'lost' and parallel' histories from the silences of a totalizing European history" (20). This reconstruction of a "lost" history "[counteracts] the crippling effects of that loss, although that loss is itself at once the origin and creation of the historical imagination" (Majeed 47). The loss is what inspires a reimagining of history, in order to narrate the silenced or lost histories. The narrative of Ben Yiju and his slave does not simply reveal a silenced history, "conjuring up figures from pieces of paper" (Majeed 49), but also challenges dominant Western discourse by revealing a network of connection and cooperation in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean trading world. By offering an alternative history, Ghosh problematises the "'givenness' of History" (Mondal 20). He does this not by dwelling on the loss of the region's ownership of their history, but by focusing instead on the "intimation of presence, in this case a pre-colonial world of 'accommodation and compromise'" (Chew 199). Ghosh writes the presence of precolonial cosmopolitanism back into history, suggesting that a dynamic history of connection and conversation existed before national boundaries were enforced upon the region. He is thus "suggesting possibilities of an alternative discourse of dialogue, rather than domination" (Gupta 201). This reconstruction of history does not take place on a grand scale, but rather by tracing a particular personal story that is representative of a wider silencing of histories. This essentially creates "world history from below" (Burton 75), as history is re-imagined from the bottom up, with a focus on ordinary people and events rather than those grand events traditionally deemed important by historians.

The medieval Indian Ocean world that Ghosh presents is peaceful and cohesive, with much less hostility than Mahjoub's Mediterranean world. Eric Smith notes the repetition of words such as "'hub,' 'cycle,' 'juncture,' 'nucleus,' and 'archipelago' in Ghosh's depiction of the

medieval Middle East [which] suggests a concentric cohesiveness binding together the heterogeneous peoples and cultures of a stable past” (547). This idealistic precolonial world was based on a version of a free-market system, where commerce was the principal driving force of connection across the region, rather than national divisions, regulated international relations and systems of dominance. It was the arrival of the Portuguese in the region that changed the face of this cosmopolitan world and altered the way in which the locals interacted with each other. The major shift in power in the region occurred in 1509 AD, where South-South relations gave way to a hierarchical power relationship enforced by the West. As Europe realised that it could not compete commercially with the Indian Ocean region on equal footing, thanks to the established connections and culture of collaboration across the South, they turned to force instead, embarking on a naval offensive:

The battle proved decisive; the Indian and Egyptian ships were put to flight and the Portuguese never again had to face a serious naval challenge in the Indian Ocean until the arrival of the Dutch. Soon, the remains of the civilization that had brought Ben Yiju to Mangalore were devoured by that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has raged ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. (*Antique Land* 288)

It was at this point that the nature of the region was forever altered. The history of the people and their interactions of the time, well documented in the Geniza, lay forgotten, before eventually dispersing to all corners of the world. However, many critics have claimed that Ghosh is painting a nostalgic image of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean world, which was not necessarily as peaceful as the text suggests. Desai in particular has critiqued his position that “intrusion by force of arms arrived only with Europeans,” as this is “somewhat questionable given the little that we do know about the Indian Ocean trade” (“Old World” 135). While it is indeed true that to read the region as harmonious and peaceful prior to European history is to ignore the many conflicts that did abound, however, Ghosh’s focus rests on the connections rather than the disconnections. His political project is to demonstrate the history of dialogue across differences, which by no means collapses the existence of a great deal of difference in the region. He does, in fact, allude to conflict in the region. One example of this is in Khalaf’s letter that refers to “another eventful year in the Middle East,” going on to describe how “the Levant is riven by wars between Muslim principalities” (*Antique Land* 17). There are also references to piracy problems that interrupted the flow of

trade. However, Ghosh's ultimate focus is the way in which the region managed to operate despite these inevitable conflicts, with an overall focus on the connections binding the diverse people of the region. Due to the more fluid nature of boundaries, both of nation and identity, in medieval times, these conversations and connections occurred with much more ease than they did after the arrival of Western powers, with their imposition of fixed boundaries and the subsequent development of rigid national identities.

While Ghosh certainly does not disavow the presence of conflict and disconnections within the region prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, he can however be accused of a nostalgic representation of this world. He brushes quickly over incidents of conflict prior to this point. Critics have called Ghosh out for his nostalgic portrayal of syncretism. While his depiction tries "to surmount problems of racial, religious, and cultural division by invoking a syncretic approach to cultural conflicts," he remains trapped by an "inability to confront difference at the level of immediate intersubjective encounters" (Viswanathan). Gauri Viswanathan thus charges Ghosh with brushing over the real differences between people on a personal level, by painting a broad nostalgic picture of syncretism across cultures. Like both Christi Ann Merrill and Neelam Srivastava, I feel that to simply dismiss this portrayal as nostalgic, when defined in negative terms as a sentimental reading of the past taking place through rose-tinted glasses, would be to ignore that broader narrative that Ghosh is weaving in *In an Antique Land*. Merrill recognises the potential inherent in Ghosh's use of nostalgia, suggesting that it can be used as a "purposeful effect"; and that "a simple-minded linear landscape might be complicated by temporal triangulations set into dynamic motion by our engagement with the narrative" (111). She thus disavows a reading that sees time in the novel as a simple linear line, in which progress (in a humanistic sense, rather than a technological or developmental one) has moved in a negative direction. Reading the text as a continual conversation between the past and the present allows a more dynamic reading which questions how the past interacts with the present, rather than viewing the past as simply the lost ideal world that we can only yearn after. Srivastava also counters Viswanathan's reading of Ghosh as simplifying the "intractable political problem" that is cultural and religious difference (Viswanathan). Srivastava salvages *In an Antique Land* from Viswanathan's negative view by focusing on the ethical preoccupations of the text:

I believe the ethical preoccupations of *In An Antique Land* are ultimately linked to a strategic humanism, which is not necessarily grounded in a Eurocentric essentialist discourse. Ghosh is

not proposing an easy and relativistic acceptance and smoothing-over of differences as an alternative to fundamentalism. His espousal of syncretism is neither nostalgic nor blandly ‘multi-culturalist’ – yet another homogenizing fiction of the nation-state – as Viswanathan seems to suggest. It is the search for an alternative history to the segregationist narratives that aim to elide this common past in order to promote the cause of religious separatism. (62)

What Srivastava is emphasising is Ghosh’s search for an alternative way of relating to each other beyond national or religious separatism. He does this by countering the contemporary relations in Nashawy, where the villagers cannot conceive how anyone can follow Hindu beliefs, asking him questions such as “[w]hat is this ‘Hinduki’ thing?” (*Antique Land* 47), and the repeated question, “is it true that you worship cows?” (*Antique Land* 125). Their incomprehension of his beliefs signals an inability to move beyond cultural boundaries and imagine the lives of others, with a world where dialogue flowed across and in spite of these differences. Ghosh is neither naïvely suggesting that it is possible to return to how things were in the past, nor is he merely mourning the loss of more tolerant interregional human relations; what he is doing is looking for possible ways of reconceiving the “segregationist narratives” that have defined contemporary times, in an attempt to imagine a more hopeful future. This future is not rooted in homogenisation, but rather in recognising that differences do exist, and will always exist, but that conversations are possible across these differences.

A point of divergence among critics seems to be whether Ghosh’s portrayal of the medieval Indian Ocean trading world is syncretic or not. Viswanathan’s reading of the text is that Ghosh as narrator attempts to deny the presence of difference, insisting on a “timeless syncretism” (Viswanathan). Syncretism is an attempted unification of differences, and thus implies a collapse of difference rather than the less rigid notion of universalism, which looks for underlying similarities that unite all people. Universalism is also steeped in nostalgia, since it tends towards either denying the differences, or setting them aside to focus on common humanity. What is at stake here is whether representing an Indian Ocean world with such a focus on the peace and connections is overly nostalgic. Nostalgia needs to be rescued from its negative connotations. While I do believe that Ghosh’s view of the Indian Ocean world that Ben Yiju and Bomma occupied is nostalgic, this kind of nostalgia can in fact be productive and adds to the conversation between the past and the present in *In an Antique Land*. Returning to the theory of nostalgia, as explored in chapter two, Walder’s view bears stressing again, that nostalgia has the potential for self-reflexivity, allowing “past into the

present in a fragmentary, nuanced, and elusive way” (16). It is here where Ghosh’s nostalgia is thus salvaged as a productive device in the text. By focusing on a harmonious representation of the Indian Ocean world, Ghosh is able to show how aspects of this particular past continue to leak into present-day relations in the region. To do so, he provides a glimpse of a world that was more tolerant and open to movement and exchange, and finds examples in contemporary times, which indicate that remnants of this world and its viewpoint still exist. Ultimately this creates a space in which to rethink future relations. Ghosh’s use of nostalgia thus does not remain trapped in the romantic past, but rather opens up a dialogue between the past, present and the future.

Recalling Boym’s thoughts on nostalgia discussed in chapter two, the productive nostalgia invoked by Ghosh mirrors what Boym termed reflective nostalgia. This reflective nostalgia is concerned with “the meditation on history and passage of time” (Boym 49). The idea of lateral movement is again important, as conceptions of time move from a linear to a lateral movement, echoing both the fluid and cyclical nature of the sea, as well as the fluidity of boundaries and identities as posited by Ghosh’s portrayal of the medieval Indian Ocean world. There is also an echo here with Benjamin’s idea of the constellation, linking points across time in one system. Boym specifically looks at the figure of the nostalgic, as one who is always a “displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal” (12). Ghosh occupies the position of the nostalgic in *In an Antique Land*. He is in the position to view the past from a local and a universal perspective. He is at once dislocated, an Indian man who has lived in England and now in Egypt, while at the same time sharing an affinity with the villagers in Egypt, as a result of a shared regional history, as well as also belonging to the demarcated ‘Developing World’. From this position, he uses the narrative of Ben Yiju and Bomma to question linear notions of history and progress imposed by Western knowledge systems. By recovering a past that runs contrary to the dominant archive, and revealing the ways in which elements of this past have survived despite a new set of interregional and international relations, Ghosh subverts Western notions of time and history. By continually setting up a dialogue between the past and present, he moves sideways rather than backwards, echoing Boym’s conception that “nostalgia is never literal, but lateral” (354). This notion of a fluid temporal movement speaks also to Walder’s claim that the “dynamic of memory is that its existence is always in the present, even as it struggles to reclaim the past” (139). These notions have deep implications for this text as they salvage it from the criticism that Ghosh is yearning for an ideal past; instead, he is working from the present to explain

why anomalies exist in the way people interact across the Indian Ocean world, and ultimately, is trying to expose a future that encompasses conversations across differences once more. The view of the past is very much rooted in the present, as much as the present is rooted in the past.

Walder notes that nostalgia in postcolonial fiction is evoked most often in order to conjure up nationalist feelings in the wake of colonisation and decolonisation (16). However, Ghosh uses nostalgia to induce precisely the opposite: feelings of universal connection across different spaces and cultures in defiance of national boundaries. He is also not in any sense yearning for home, or his own immediate past. Most discussions of postcolonial nostalgia are intricately linked to the notion of the homeland (Walder 51). Walder refers to a range of nostalgic formations in fiction such as “struggle for identity, a yearning for the homeland, an idealisation of the future, a witnessing of trauma, a rewriting of bitter histories of civil conflict and mass killing, or a historicising of the present” (163). Yet the only mention of Ghosh’s own childhood and home occurs after yet another confrontation with the villagers turning the traditional participant-observer roles of ethnography around to question him on his beliefs. The narrator flashes back to 1947 in Dhaka after the partition, when great violence broke out between Hindus and Muslims. This memory, however, is not invoked for nostalgic reasons, but to draw attention to the relative peacefulness of Nashawy. Ghosh concludes that “[despite] the occasional storms and turbulence their country had seen, despite even the wars that some of them had fought in, theirs was a world that was far gentler, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine” (*Antique Land* 210). Rather than longing for, or sentimentalising, his own childhood or nation, Ghosh instead uses this memory to draw attention to Egypt’s relatively more peaceful past. This highlights the fact that Ghosh is not interested in a restorative nostalgia. He is critical of imposed and rigid boundaries, as exemplified in this memory. The imposition of these boundaries not only enforces and exaggerates difference, but also often actively constructs these differences and conflicts. Anjali Roy notes that the “alternative history of syncretism may be juxtaposed against the segregationist narratives that aim to deny this common past in order to promote the cause of religious separatism” (44). While I would read Ghosh’s medieval portrayal as a history of conversations, rather than a syncretic world, I do agree he exaggerates the peacefulness of this world. However, this serves a purpose in the text to create a clear contrast between that time and the twentieth-century world of fixed boundaries and

disconnections. He thus uses reflective nostalgia to initiate a conversation about the artificiality of these boundaries and their contribution to conflict between people and nations.

The nostalgia woven by Ghosh is focused on specific interpersonal connections. Belliappa postulates that the Ghosh, aware of the violence and conflict present in Medieval times,⁴ implies instead “that the extortion and rapacity of Colonialism put an end to the possibility of the kind of relationship that existed between individuals as different as Ben Yiju and Bomma” (62). Bomma’s mention in the letters between his master and Khalaf ibn Ishaq indicates a relationship between him and Ben Yiju that exists outside of dominant narratives of the position of a slave in society. In a second letter from Khalaf ibn Ishaq, Bomma is once again sent “plentiful greetings” and earns himself a footnote (*Antique Land* 18). In this footnote he is described as “slave and business agent, a respected member of his household” (*Antique Land* 18). The trust between Ben Yiju and Bomma is also evident. When Ben Yiju moved to Malabar from Aden, he sent his slave to Aden to “transact his business there” on his behalf (*Antique Land* 159). Ghosh suggests that the relationship between the two men emerged out of a different conception of slavery than that of contemporary understandings of the term. His suggestion is that “their arrangement was probably more that of a patron and client than master and slave” (*Antique Land* 259). Moreover, “servitude was a part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and it often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations would suggest” (*Antique Land* 260). The relationship between Ben Yiju and Bomma, through its relative equality, confronts modern expectations of the relationship between a master and slave, despite differences of caste, culture and nationality.

“Travelling in the West”: Conversations with Contemporary Egypt

This contrast between an earlier time of connection and collaboration and a later period of disconnection and binary thinking is created by interweaving the twentieth-century narrative thread with that of the historical uncovering of Ben Yiju and Bomma’s stories. This allows Ghosh to explore the “ways in which the medieval survives into the present” (Majeed 47). Shortly after uncovering the reference to the Slave of MS H.6, Ghosh finds himself in Tunisia

⁴ This observation is particularly pertinent in light of the recent violence in the region, especially with Egypt’s Arab Spring and the on-going turmoil, illustrating a continuing thread of conflict throughout history. One could postulate that this contemporary violence stems from the interruption of conversations across borders of differences.

and then Egypt, doing research for his social anthropology doctorate. His temporary home in Egypt allows him to follow up on leads linking to Bomma, but also creates a connection between his world and the one that Bomma and Ben Yiju occupied. Ghosh says of his initial connection to Bomma: “I knew nothing then about the Slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement” (*Antique Land* 19). The historical thread links to the twentieth-century one, as Egypt’s history of welcoming outsiders allows Ghosh to feel a sense of entitlement to be in Egypt, as an Indian outsider, like Bomma. This connection across time is also reflected in the type of narrative Ghosh constructs. Both threads follow the lives of ordinary people against the backdrop of a larger history. Majeed sees this as a shared history, as “*In an Antique Land* reflects a self-conscious shifting away from grand historical figures and narratives to humbler figures and stories that illuminate larger themes” (5). This is seen in the sections set in Lataifa and Nashawy, as the stories and conversations of locals are presented in their raw form, inserting these ordinary figures into larger historical narratives. Bomma’s story represents an alternative set of relationships present in the medieval Indian Ocean region, while the tales of the villagers and their interactions with Ghosh, as ethnographer and Indian, reveal how the region’s attitudes towards cosmopolitanism have changed. In this way, the relationship between the past and the present is interrogated, as cracks are discovered in the present, through which the past shines.

While obvious similarities exist between Bomma and Ghosh, as Indians working in Egypt, the relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju, unusual by modern conceptions of a slave-master relationship, allows for an interrogation of Ghosh’s relationship with the villagers of Lataifa and Nashawy. By juxtaposing these relationships, Ghosh maps the change in relations and conversations across people of the Indian Ocean world between Bomma’s time and his own, particularly focusing on the increased disconnection between Egypt and India. Ghosh starts investigating the story of Bomma seriously after inadvertently crossing the path traced in history by Bomma and Ben Yiju, many times, “until it became clear that [he] could no longer resist the logic of those coincidences” (*Antique Land* 99). Ghosh’s time spent in Egypt turns out to be incredibly useful to this inquiry, when Ghosh discovers that the “usages of the dialect of Lataifa were startlingly close to those of the North African Arabic spoken by Ben Yiju; that far from being useless the dialect of Lataifa and Nashawy had given [him] an invaluable skill” (*Antique Land* 104). His conversations in Egypt literally help him to initiate a conversation with the past. This shows how the two narratives are inherently connected to each other, and they allow him a two-way movement, with his knowledge of one world

advancing the knowledge of the other. Besides having a somewhat utilitarian usage, his knowledge of both worlds also provides him with insight into the societal relations and beliefs in the small villages in Egypt, in which he lives temporarily. This allows for the comparison between the twelfth and twentieth century in terms of how relations across the boundaries of the Indian Ocean world have shifted.

Ghosh's time in Egypt, moving first from Lataifa and then to Nashawy, highlights both how the past continues to influence the present, as well as how the violent rewriting of the past by Western powers has broken down transnational communication to an extent. Ghosh is reminded by Ustaz Sabry that "the people of Egypt and India have been like brothers for centuries" (*Antique Land* 186). The connection that Bomma and Ben Yiju had was thus not unique in what it represented for transnational relations. The history of travel has not been forgotten either:

The area around Nashawy had never been a rooted kind of place; at times it seemed to be possessed of all the busy restlessness of an airport's transit lounge. Indeed, a long history of travel was recorded in the very names of the area's 'families': they spoke of links with distant parts of the Arab world – cities in the Levant, the Sudan and Maghreb. That legacy of transience had not ended with their ancestors either: in Zaghoul's own generation dozens of men had been 'outside', working in the shaikhdoms of the Gulf, or Libya, while many others had been to Saudi Arabia on the Hajj, or to the Yemen, as soldiers – some men had passports so thick they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas. (*Antique Land* 173-174)

This extract reveals Ghosh's rejection of a narrative of rootedness. Even the most rural villages in Egypt recognise their legacy of migrancy and are no strangers to movement within the region. During both Ghosh's first trip to Egypt and his return in 1988, he encounters numerous families who have brothers and fathers working outside the country, particularly in the Gulf States. This ties into the historical narrative that also depicts a world on the move. Clifford picks up on this, claiming that the text subverts the usual narrative of the worldly ethnographer visiting the rooted natives, opting rather to show a field site that "opens onto complex histories of dwelling and traveling" where "[e]veryone's on the move, and has been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel" (2). The image of the men as passengers in a transit lounge exemplifies the mobility of this world. There was, and is, a need to trade across the region, allowing people transnational work opportunities, whether in the spice trade of medieval

times, or the oil trade of the late twentieth century. This underscores the image of the Indian Ocean world as a hub of movement and trade networks, both in the twelfth and twentieth centuries.

Yet for all the recognition of a history of migrancy, there is also a great amount of discord between the cultural relations of Ben Yiju's time and those of contemporary society. Ghosh's interactions with the villagers highlight this in an often amusing way, as they struggle to understand his culture and religion. A particular aspect of his culture that they keep returning to with much horror is the tradition of burning one's dead instead of burying them. It should be noted here that Ghosh is not particularly religious, despite his Hindu roots. He is reprimanded at one point: "You should try to civilize your people. You should tell them to stop praying to cows and burning their dead" (*Antique Land* 126). This cultural ignorance extends in both directions. Early in his visit, Ghosh realises that he does not recognise any of the women in Shaikh Musa's house, even though he must have seen them on many occasions. He realises that this is his own fault, "for neither they nor anyone else in Lataifa wore veils (nor indeed did anyone in the region), but at that time, early in my stay, I was so cowed by everything I had read about Arab traditions of shame and modesty that I barely glanced at them, for fear of giving offence" (*Antique Land* 41). He has thus bought into popular portrayals, rather than approaching Lataifa with an open mind, illustrating the great potential for ethnographers to skew their representations through their previously-held beliefs about a people. As humorous as these moments are, they indicate a far more sinister problem of people being unable to communicate across their differences, despite a history of conversation. Clifford is helpful in explaining the disconnect between these cultures defiant of a history of movement in the region: "Cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things" (3). Thus the sense of transnational identity fostered by interconnectedness in the region through trade and movement was eroded as borders were reconceived as fixed, and identities became more polarised.

These exchanges reveal the ignorance of both Indians and Egyptians of each other's cultures. Moreover, there is a clear hierarchy, as they designate themselves below Western culture, using the criteria of economic, technological and military development. Ghosh first starts realising this when he gets dragged over to Mabrouk's family home, where his approval is needed of their new "Indian machine" – the water pump. He wonders where he would have

stood in their ranking if he had “the privilege of floating through it protected by the delegated power of technology, of looking untroubled through a sheet of clear glass” (*Antique Land* 74). At this stage, this observation is merely anecdotal, as this is the first time he is granted status because of the highly-regarded technology that his own country produces. When he tries to explain the similarities in poverty and agriculture to the villagers, they show a great amount of disbelief, which he attributes to the “ladder of ‘Development’ in their minds” (*Antique Land* 200). They cannot imagine a life below theirs on this scale of development. The water pump is also indicative of another aspect of the history of the region: the period of decolonisation. Ghosh credits the spirit of decolonisation, and the formation of the Non-Aligned movement, for facilitating not only the presence of water pumps and Indian films in Egypt, but also for presenting “an attempt to restore and recommence the exchanges and conversation that had been interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance (“Confessions” 37). The water pump simultaneously represents a point of connection between the two nations, as well as a point of departure, as they measure themselves against each other according to a Western notion of developmental progress.

This hierarchy is also present in Ghosh’s purpose for being in Egypt in the first place: ethnographic research and the representation of these villagers, who the West regard as the Other. Following from the previous examples, it is clear that Ghosh is all too aware of the disconnect and ignorance existing between his world and that of Nashawy. Claire Chambers examines this problem of representing the Other:

[Ghosh] rejects any single historical or anthropological account’s claim to provide an authentic and complete version of the Other. His discussion of anthropology suggests that its fieldwork methodology is based on concealed relations of dominance. The Other’s specificity tends to be elided in ethnographic research, as generalizations about the community are made at the expense of discussion about gender, class, age, and historical circumstances. In place of the epistemically coercive discourses of history and anthropology, Ghosh offers a deliberately partial and dialogic narrative. He suggests that to provide a non-coercive translation of alterity, the text should be multi-faceted, imaginative, and open-ended. (“Anthropology” 16-17)

This view of the text as a “deliberately partial and dialogic narrative” accounts for its conversational aesthetic. Ghosh is intentionally trying to avoid a totalising and rigid view of

life in Lataifa and Nashawy. He counters the villagers' ignorance with his own ignorance, and includes their questioning of him alongside his own interrogation of their lives. The text is thus a deliberate attempt to avoid falling into Western patterns of representation. Yet the presence of the West remains in the foreground of the text. Besides its relationship with anthropology and the project of representation, the West is present as a scale by which Ghosh and the villagers measure each other, highlighting the pervasive reach of Western standards of progress and success.

The background presence of the West in 'developing' Egypt is brought to the fore when Ghosh has a public spat with the Imam. The tension between local traditions and the influence of Western thought is exposed in the Imam's attitude towards traditional medicine. Ghosh seeks out the Imam to discuss the use of traditional herbs and natural remedies, something the Imam was once renowned for. The Imam is angry when Ghosh tries to bring up the topic of traditional medicine, telling Ghosh to "[f]orget about all that; I'm trying to forget about it myself" (*Antique Land* 192). Instead, he brings out his box filled with Western medicine, and attempts to inject Ghosh, to his protest, in order to demonstrate his knowledge. The Imam thus rejects traditional methods of healing in favour of Western methods, clearly expressing his belief in Western superiority. Later they meet again in public, after Ghosh approaches him on behalf of Khamees, who wants the Imam's help in treating his ill wife with traditional remedies. This sparks a confrontation, as the Imam vehemently wants no association with traditional medicine. Tensions rise when the topic turns once again to the subject of burning the dead. Ghosh tries telling him that the dead are also burnt in Europe, attempting to salvage his own culture from the barbaric labels being placed on it by the villagers. The Imam becomes angry and they end up involved in an 'our guns are bigger than yours' argument. Ghosh realises at this point that both he and the Imam are "travelling in the West" (*Antique Land* 236), unable to relate purely on a South-South level because of the pervasiveness of the presence and language of the West. More so, the West meant only one thing for the majority of people in this region: "science and tanks and guns and bombs" (*Antique Land* 236). It becomes a terrible moment for Ghosh as he realises the extent to which transnational communication has broken down since the time of Ben Yiju and Bomma:

I was crushed, as I walked away; it seemed to me that the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which

people once discussed their differences. We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yiju or his Slave, or any of the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done: of things that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been absurd for either of us to use those words, for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development. Instead, to make ourselves understood, we had both resorted, I, a student of the ‘humane’ sciences, and he, an old-fashioned village Imam, to the very terms that world leaders and statesmen use at great, global conferences, the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning; he had said to me, in effect: ‘You ought not to do what you do, because otherwise you will not have guns and tanks and bombs.’ It was the only language we had been able to discover in common. (*Antique Land* 237)

This moment illustrates the extent to which relations in the South are now mediated by the West. This section, and ultimately the whole book, seeks to demonstrate how relations across the Indian Ocean world have been redefined in Western terms, with an erasure of the common history and bond between the nations and cultures living in this region. The only way they now know how to communicate is through the language of the West, and by using Western standards of development to weigh each other up. Clifford notes that this moment is contrasted with his earlier summation of the village as a transit lounge, with this episode instead demonstrating that “the long-established displacements and localizations occur within an increasingly powerful force field: ‘the West’” (4). Their understanding of each other is now mediated by the language of the West, rather than by the language of their common history.

This incident suggests the only commonality that exists between India and Egypt is the West, despite the many historical connections between the two. The previous South-South movement has been converted into a triangular movement, with the West at the top of the triangle, dictating the flow between nations of the South. Nilanjana Gupta views this as a superimposition of the West and its ideologies onto “the histories of the two ‘antique lands’,” with this intervention to blame for destroying “the process of dialogue, exchange, assimilation and syncretism of the peoples of the two nations” (195). This moment is especially violent and crushing for Ghosh, who is trying to illustrate that India and Egypt do have a common reference point that is *not* the West. Yet, this scene ends with a glimmer of hope. Ghosh walks home with Khamees and ‘Eid after this incident, and Khamees tries to

cheer him up by promising to visit Ghosh in India one day, despite his lack of desire to travel. This shows a connection forged across the South, between India and Egypt, without Western mediation. Clifford poses a question that is applicable to this scene: “As old patterns of connection across the Indian Ocean, Africa, and West Asia are realigned along binary poles of Western modernization, are there still possibilities of discrepant movement?” (5). Khamees’ attempt to cheer Ghosh up does not itself counter the Imam’s attitude, but it saves the text from foreclosing any possibility of connection outside of a Western reference point. New possibilities of resuming South-South movements, outside of a Western framework, are imagined, even if they are not explicitly realised in the realm of the text.

Ghosh notably does not end the novel on this negative tone. After this section, he travels to Mangalore in India in order to trace Bomma’s origins. While there he discovers that despite the fact that the shared history of the Indian Ocean region has largely been expunged, there are still a number of anomalies present in society that defy this erasure, and exist outside of the sphere of Western influence. While in Mangalore, Ghosh visits a Bobbaryia shrine. On its walls he finds the posters for a Hindu political organisation, known for its anti-Muslim sentiments. The presence of these posters in a historically Muslim area signals to Ghosh an interesting way of using history, as Tululand, “[h]aving transformed its social and economic position [...] was now laying claim to the future in the best tradition of liberalism, by discovering a History to replace the past” (*Antique Land* 273). The shrine becomes an amalgamation of a history of Arab Muslim traders, of current political alignment with Hindu zealots, while taking the structure of a Sanskritic pantheon (*Antique Land* 274). This moment is one of Ghosh’s most explicit suggestions about the relationship between the past and the future. The shrine purposefully represents a specific, and constructed, past in order to reflect, or to create, a specific future. This idea can be more broadly used to explain Western appropriation of Indian Ocean history as well. By constructing a particular version of the past, by erasing the history of connection, a particular future follows; in this case, the West having imposed rigid boundaries between nations becomes an intermediary in South-South relationships across the Indian Ocean world. The example of the shrine, with its ironies and contradictions, illustrates how the past “[revenges] itself on the present” (*Antique Land* 274), and thus represents how the past is defiant of the attempts to erase it, just as the Arab Muslim traders defied the Hindu zealots in the construction of this shrine.

Ghosh is insistent on this dialogic view of the relationship between the past and the present.

As Dixon points out, “although he is researching the history of medieval Egypt, the historian at every turn discovers continuities between the past and present” (19). While in Mangalore, he is taken to another Bhuta-shrine and is told the strange story of how the government tried to build a road through it, but was thwarted by some strange force that shut down the bulldozers every time they tried to knock it down, resulting in them giving up and building the road around it. This story is reminiscent of the attempt to build a canal in Nashawy through the gravesite of Sidi Abu-Kanaka. The workers, try as they might, could not dig through the ground of his grave, eventually giving up and redirecting the canal around this site. While both stories may seem insignificant, the presence of such similar occurrences in two geographically separated areas serves to draw a parallel between the belief systems of the two countries. However, the locals themselves cannot see the connection. The driver who takes Ghosh to the shrine in India does not believe Ghosh when he tells him that he has heard a similar story in Egypt, merely “[nodding] politely, but disbelief was written all over his face” (*Antique Land* 266). It is from his position as a researcher and an outsider, who has reference points in India, Egypt and the West, that Ghosh is able to view these relations with some clarity as he shifts the conversation back to the South, and in so doing, “[deconstructs] boundaries initially constructed by the West” (Abd El-Barr 23). This connection between these two stories shows that “human civilization has moved along the same line even at a distance of a few thousand miles. There is a method in history which may not be as inexorable as physical methods but still powerful enough to establish a pattern in the movement of events” (S. Majumdar 184). Whether locals realise it or not, the connections between these countries persist in defiance of a new global order of international and interregional relations.

The persistence of these connections underlines Ghosh’s belief in a fundamental connection between humans that transcends external attempts to segregate people based on religion or nationality. This is what Smith terms belief in the “existence of a recoverable human essence” (469). It is this humanity that cuts through the imposed boundaries, and which accounts for his ability to form connections with the villagers of Nashawy and Lataifa, on the level of friendship rather than as objects of study. This illustrates that a universal humanity “persists and remains communicable between the partitions and disjunctions of modernity and History” (Smith 469). Dixon, however, warns that this “investment in a utopian humanism is one version of a problem that besets contemporary theories of colonial discourse – their tendency to become globalized” (12). I would counter here, though, that Ghosh

presents us with enough examples of disconnection and difference to avoid an idealistic notion that this humanism connects us in a way that can prevent conflict. Instead, as reflected in the structure of the text, his focus is on conversations. In opening up a dialogue, connections can be discovered that cut across, while not erasing, the differences, allowing for more effective interpersonal and interregional relationships.

Despite the capacity to connect across these differences, the present in the text is more concerned with the apparent disconnect between cultures. In the final incident of the book, Ghosh tries to attend the mowlid dedicated to Sidi Abu-Hasira. When the police see him there, a couple of days after the majority of tourists have visited, they become extremely suspicious and take him in for questioning. As he sits in an interrogation room, he comes to a realisation:

He [the interrogating officer] was not trying to intimidate me; I could tell he was genuinely puzzled. He seemed so reasonable and intelligent, that for an instant I even thought of telling him the story of Bomma and Ben Yiju. But then it struck me, suddenly, that there was nothing I could point to within his world that might give credence to my story – the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago. Nothing remained in Egypt now to effectively challenge his disbelief: not a single one, for instance of the documents of the Geniza. It was then that I began to realize how much success the partitioning of the past had achieved; that I was sitting at that desk now because the mowlid of Sidi Abu-Hasira was an anomaly within the categories of knowledge represented by those divisions. I had been caught straddling a border, unaware that the writing of History had predicated its own self-fulfilment. (*Antique Land* 339-340)

This extract reveals the extent of the erasure of the region's history. Proof of the intertwined histories of India and Egypt, Hindus, Muslims and Jews, has long disappeared from common contemporary narratives. These police officers have no conception of this historical connection. The loss of Egypt's ownership of its own history is illustrated in the emptying of the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra. None of these documents bearing testament to an intertwined history remain in Egypt. Bomma's final documented reference lives on in Philadelphia. A more balanced view of the past that accounts for a history of connection across the region is not accessible to the average citizen of Egypt. The erasure of all traces of connection is emphasised again when Ghosh's research after this incident uncovers that the

name Abu-Hasira in fact descends from a line of zeddikim, the Jewish counterparts of Islamic marabouts and sufi saints. His tomb in Damanhour attracted a substantial number of pilgrims, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, with festivities very similar to those thrown on the birthday of Muslim saints. This comes as a revelation to Ghosh, as he remarks that “in defiance of the enforcers of History, a small remnant of Bomma’s world had survived, not far from where I had been living” (*Antique Land* 342). Yet these remnants of a cosmopolitan past are rendered insignificant, since no one recognises them. Just as the police interrogating him have no conception of the examples of an alternative history living on in front of their eyes, neither are the villagers of Nashawy and the surrounds aware of the similarities in the celebrations between them and Jewish locals. A more encompassing and cosmopolitan history of the region, while largely wiped out of history books and in the minds of the region’s people, lives on in many small and subtle ways, unnoticed by the people whose history it is.

The final line of the previous extract is crucial to understanding the role that the past plays in shaping not only the present, but also the future. Ghosh grants a significant amount of power to “the writing of History” and its ability to predicate “its own self-fulfilment.” By gaining control of the archive, the West has been able to write not only their own history, but the history of the countries they colonised as well. By writing a history for these countries, and in the process silencing a history of connection, the West aided the shift from “the fluidity of the medieval world” to “the inflexibility of modern boundaries” (Majeed 51). There is a suggestion that writing back to this history, and narrating an alternative history, in turn can also affect present and future relations. While Ghosh’s text, and the power of historians and novelists from the South and East, does not have the scholarly or cultural dominance that the West does, each time a different version of history is presented, a new possibility for conversations across borders and cultures is established. This possibility has profound implications for how transnational relations are and can be understood across the Indian Ocean region.

Travelling in the Future: Resuming Conversations

In his text, Ghosh has not simply given voice to the silenced figure of Bomma the slave, but has reconfigured a different notion of the past in this region. Iain Chambers voices the implications of questioning the archive. He notes the importance of re-representing the past in postcolonial writing: “Such a return of the excluded clearly offers far more than a series of

additions to fill in the gaps in the already established historical mosaic. The forgotten do not complete the picture; rather they query the frame, the pattern, the construction and advance what the previous representation failed to register” (59). An incomplete historiography inevitably cracks, and it is “through the resulting gaps [that] the silenced and the marginalized intercede in the telling of the world” (I. Chambers 59). Ghosh thus utilises one such silenced voice, Bomma, to question the representation of historical relations between India and Egypt in medieval times. Ghosh’s broader project is to question the very system of historiography perpetuated by the West; a system built on writing voices out of history, and writing a particular self-fulfilling history that imposes rigid boundaries on the world, enabling further economic and cultural control by the West. Yet the project of recuperating the past is, for Ghosh, always intrinsically related to the present. Belliappa sees this as a project that “demonstrates most powerfully how an excursion into the past is no escape from the present, but a coming to grips with the present realities of living” (65). Just as the Indian Ocean world existed as a fluid network, mimicking the fluidity of the ocean with its shifting tides, seasons and monsoons, in the same way the past has a fluid relationship with the present.

In an Antique Land moves away from Western conceptions of history, and its notions of linear time, teleological progression and whole truths. Ghosh sees the pre-imperial world as one of conversations. In this way, he escapes falling into an overly-nostalgic reading of the precolonial world as always harmonious, but speaks instead to the on-going conversations, which allow for disagreements and differences as well as connections. The world of the twelfth-century historical thread was a world, in Ghosh’s own words, of “cross-cultural conversations” (“Confessions” 38). He views the influence of imperialism as interrupting these conversations, but recognises that this was an interruption rather than a breakage, “[as] the conversations never really ceased” (“Confessions” 38). The late twentieth-century world in Egypt in the novel shows that the conversation has not seamlessly been resumed after decolonisation. Ghosh recognises that colonialism has not been the only force standing in the way of these conversations, with fundamentalism, both religious and linguistic, also contributing to temporary closure of dialogue (“Confessions” 41). The importance of this observation for the future is that Ghosh views these conversations as still open, ready to be picked up again. What enables these conversations to happen across boundaries is a belief in a particular brand of universalism:

I have pointed to that period [...] in order to evoke the desires and hopes that animated it, in particular to its strain of xenophilia, to its yearning for a certain kind of universalism – not a universalism merely of principles and philosophy, but one of face-to-face encounters, of everyday experience. Except that this time we must correct the mistake that lay at the heart of that older anti-colonial impulse – which is that we must not only include the West within this spectrum of desire, we must also acknowledge that both the West and we ourselves have been irreversibly changed by our encounter with each other. We must recognize that in the West, as in Asia, Africa and elsewhere, there are great numbers of people who, by force of circumstance, have been xenophiles, in the deepest sense of acknowledging – as Tayyib Salih did so memorably in *Mowsam al-Hijra ila-ash-Shimaal* – that in matters of language, culture and civilizations, their heritage, like ours, is fragmented, fissured and incomplete. Only when our work begins to embody the conflicts, the pain, the laughter, and the yearning that comes from this incompleteness will it be a true mirror of the world we live in. (Ghosh, “Confessions” 41)

Ghosh does not presume to advocate the idea of a complete and true history. He favours fragmentary knowledge, of the world, history, and self. This comes out in the texture of his novel as the narrative strands are woven together in a fragmentary way, incessantly moving between the past and present. The fragments often align to show points of connection between the twelfth and twentieth centuries, while at other times stand in contrast to each other, showing points of disconnection. Neither thread ends with a definitive conclusion, or some didactic vision of the future. Instead, Ghosh brings the two threads together in such a way as to suggest that in reconceiving our understanding of the past, there is potential to write a different future based on an alternative way of relating to one another.

Chapter Five: Re-imagining the Border

*For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own
concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.*

Walter Benjamin
(*Illuminations* 255)

As we have seen, Mahjoub and Ghosh's texts are similar in their portrayal of the medieval and early modern cosmopolitan worlds and trade networks of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean. Both *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land* demonstrate points of connection across vastly different regions, although in quite different ways. Mahjoub's portrayal of the Mediterranean trading arena is much more hostile than the largely peaceful medieval world that Ghosh envisions in the Indian Ocean network. Both environments cooperate for the purpose of trade, but Ghosh imagines a world that is more accepting of human and cultural differences, as opposed to Mahjoub, who excavates a fair amount of hostility. Both authors use marginal figures to illustrate the various hostilities as well as places of connection across these networks. Bomma and Rashid, the slave, and the son of the slave, thus experience different oceanic worlds. Ghosh's Indian Ocean world is kind to Bomma, as connections are established through conversations across borders, both physical and cultural. His position as an Indian and a slave does not limit his movement across Aden and Egypt, as he does his master's bidding along the trade routes, entrusted to handle the business often by himself. On the other hand, Mahjoub depicts a similarly cosmopolitan region, where diverse people are brought together by the trade networks and cooperate for this purpose. However, the liminal figure of Rashid encounters hostility in each location through which he passes, indicating a mutual wariness in both the North and the South of the world of knowledge and science that he represents. Where Ghosh finds connection in the ability of diverse groups of people to converse across their differences, Mahjoub suggests a more elite form of connection through the language of science and the flow of knowledge.

The texts speak to each other in terms of form as well. As the representation of history is important to Mahjoub and Ghosh, both authors interrogate the relationship between the past and the present by fragmenting their narratives. Using Ghosh's description of the double

helix, *The Carrier* and *In an Antique Land* interweave historical narrative threads with contemporary plotlines, thus setting up a contrast between the past and present. What is created is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “an *essential link* between the past and present” (36, emphasis in original). More so, “the past and present [are] linked to a *necessary future*” (Bakhtin 36, emphasis in original). A complex relationship is established between the past, present, and future, forming Benjamin’s constellation rather than a linear connection. This allows for a lateral movement between the three, suggesting that time is dynamic, and that a reconfiguration of one in turn affects the others. This illustrates the power inherent in narrating an alternative past. In addition, an interrogation of the present is also a means of re-examining the past. This indicates a fluidity reminiscent of the cyclical currents of the ocean. It is worth spending a moment on Bakhtin’s musings on Goethe’s treatment of history:

The living, dynamic marker provided by flowing rivers and streams also gives a graphic idea of the country’s water basins, its topography, its natural boundaries and natural connections, its land and water routes and transshipment points, its fertile and arid areas, and so on. This is not an abstract geological and geographical landscape. For Goethe it reveals potential for historical life. This is an arena of historical events, a firmly delineated boundary of that spatial riverbed along which the current of historical time flows. (37)

This quote is relevant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it picks up on the language of archaeology, Mahjoub’s field of expertise. It draws on the same imagery evoked by Mahjoub that an examination of the landscape reveals clues about the past. By utilising the imagery of water, in this case rivers and streams rather than the seas and oceans that form the basis of this thesis, the fluid and shifting quality of time is once again emphasised. Historical time thus takes place against a landscape whose topography shifts and changes continually, despite a human tendency to read geography as fixed.

What the focus on time illustrates is a preoccupation with history. In this thesis, I often alternate between the language of fiction and actual historical accounts. This reveals that there is a natural slippage between history and fiction, particularly in these texts whose chief concern is historical representation. This indicates the suitability of fiction as a medium to discuss history as well as raise pertinent questions about historiography and its dominant discourses. Literature, according to Geoffrey Hartman, “creates an institution of its own, more personal and focused than public memory yet less monologic than the memorializing

fables common to ethnic or nationalist affirmation” (85). Literature has a way of representing history that escapes the instability of public memory, and the fabrication or misrepresentation of history common to nationalist projects. It is not bound to represent narrow politicised imaginings of history, or nostalgic sentimentalising versions of the past. Fiction allows for a creative subversion of historical discourse in order to question public memory.

This interrogation of history and its relationship to the present falls under a broader project of interrogating boundaries. Both Mahjoub and Ghosh scrutinise binary divisions, between East and West, North and South, centre and periphery, Muslims, Christians, Jews and Hindus; as well as the boundaries that limit the flow of knowledge, those that demarcate fixed identity and those that interrupt conversations. Since a rigid imposition of boundaries is unnatural given the way they are inevitably artificially produced, as Migdal noted using the prime example of Africa divided into countries by Europe in the scramble for possession of the continent, the practice of crossing borders is common. Both Mahjoub and Ghosh’s text, and the authors themselves, cross many borders as they traverse the Northern and Eastern littorals of the Mediterranean, crossing into India, Europe and the United States of America. The focus, however, is just as much on the metaphorical border crossings, where the boundaries of identity, nationality, and centre-periphery binaries are traversed. The manner in which they cross these boundaries is important, as Shameen Black notes that “[t]o cross borders productively, works of fiction encourage both vivid affective responses to the lives of others and nuanced learning about their predicaments” (36). Mahjoub and Ghosh thus explore these crossings on a human and personal level by articulating these experiences through individuals. Mahjoub traces Rashid’s rebellious journey crossing not only physical borders, but many other imagined boundaries as well, most particularly the borders imposed on science in both Europe and the Islamic world, predominantly by the custodians of religion. Ghosh interlaces his own personal border crossings into his narratives, alongside those of the villagers of Lataifa and Nashawy. His text is concerned with the comparison of these twentieth-century experiences with the lived experience of Bomma and Ben Yiju, ordinary people living in a time with fewer obstructions in the form of mental maps and checkpoints.

The imposition of borders on the world has always been paradoxical given the long history of a world in movement, and therefore a world constantly in defiance of those boundaries. Clifford examines how theoretical paradigms have emerged out of the “paradoxical centrality” gained by borders, causing “margins, edges, and lines of communication [to]

emerge as complex maps and histories” (7). Theories of the translocal, or glocal, arise to articulate the relationship emerging out of the connection to both a local, defined by national and intra-national borders, and to a global identity. These theories include acculturation, to explain the transferral of culture, or elements of a culture, from one culture to another; and syncretism, “with its image of two clear systems overlaid” (Clifford 7). The proliferation of theories to explain the various entanglements of cultures illustrates the pervasiveness of border crossings and the uneasy relationship people have with inflexible boundary impositions. Inherent in these border crossings, according to Stephen Clingman, is the reality of gaps and absences; for him, the manner in which boundaries are traversed “depends on absence or gap – the nature of the boundary to be crossed, how navigation helps define and eventually create the nature of the boundary” (161). Boundaries depend on the possibility of boundary crossing in order to hold meaning. The threat of crossing those boundaries is what leads to their creation. There is a continual tension, then, between the desire to demarcate the world, yet make it freer, between fostering globalisation and cosmopolitanism and returning to narratives of national and cultural purity and narrow identity formation.

Inherent in the discussion of physical nation-state boundaries is the question of identity. National identity, and often the cultural and religious identity coupled with the nation, is crucial to the charade of ascribing meaning to those boundaries. The harsh imposition of these boundaries has profound implications as it paves the way for critics such as Samuel Huntington to make claims about an impending clash of civilisations, where “[t]he fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future” (22). This view depends on a narrow demarcation of the world into sweeping categorisations of Christian West and Muslim East. However, the way identity is constructed is much less clear-cut than this suggests. As Black points out, “to assume that identity is only constructed externally (by the state, by what others perceive one to be) or negatively (by discriminatory or exclusionary practices) is to overlook a wide range of practices that make a social identity rich and significant” (36). Amartya Sen agrees, noting that the broad division of the world into a collection of cultures, civilisations or religions ignores “the other identities that people have and value, involving class, gender, profession, language, science, morals and politics” (xvi). There are thus multitudes of ways in which people in their normal lives identify themselves, and not one “can be taken to be the person’s only identity or singular membership category” (Sen 5). The way of understanding identity along totalising lines is thus incomplete, and

ignores the many smaller, and often more relevant, identities that people hold. This raises a question about the stability of the link between identity and place.

In this system of prescribing broad sweeping identity along civilisational and cultural lines, there has also been an imposed hierarchy on those identities. So-called Western values have been elevated above those of anyone else, as seen in the imposition of Western value systems worldwide. However, as Sen pertinently remarks, “[g]iven the cultural and intellectual interconnectedness in world history, the question of what is ‘Western’ and what is not would be hard to decide” (129). As illustrated in the texts studied in this thesis, the world has always been in flux, where vastly different groups of people have been brought together through migration and trade. This entanglement of people saw “remarkable achievements in different fields, from science, mathematics, and engineering to philosophy and literature, in the history of different parts of the world” (Sen 183). Moreover, “the foundations of many features of what are now called ‘Western civilization’ and ‘Western science’ were deeply influenced by contributions coming from different countries across the globe” (Sen 183). This is perfectly illustrated in Mahjoub’s *The Carrier* as he traces the entanglement of science and knowledge, with modern knowledge emerging out of collaboration between East and West, rendering any designation of “Western knowledge” or “Western science” a fallacy. Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* is also concerned with entanglement, although his focus is on the entanglement of cultures and people. What both texts elucidate is that “the construction and negotiation of identity today lies in the complex relations between present and past, on a personal as well as on a social and historical basis” (Walder 35). In order to approach the notion of identity with any nuance and complexity, it is necessary to interrogate the past in order to understand how that identity was constructed and what the paradoxes present in it are.

Therefore, the interrogation of history is an extremely important project for a nuanced understanding of the present. Fiction is a useful medium for probing how this past is represented and how that representation then mediates the present and the future. Questions of representation are inherent in historical examination, as “[w]ords, whatever the realists might say, are more stubborn than facts” (Rancière 97). Representation is, of course, an inherently political project. According to Said, “we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the ‘truth,’ which is itself a representation” (272). Unburdened by the conventions, and problems, of historiography, fiction becomes a useful way of excavating the

idiosyncrasies of history, and of representation in history. “Given its capacity for multivocality,” says Black, “the genre of fiction is also well suited to the task of considering diverse and even conflicting perspectives simultaneously” (9). Unlike the academic disciplines of history and ethnography, fiction is free to present a diverse and contradictory narrative, echoing the complexity and paradoxes inherent in human nature and human relations. Fiction is able to play with historical representations not just through content, but through form as well: “The grammar of fiction has in this sense – among many others – been a grammar of journey, finding a way to the transitive, transnational” (Clingman 242). Through the structure of fiction, such as the fragmenting, interweaving narrative threads employed by Ghosh and Mahjoub, this type of text is more suited to journeying across borders, by subverting these borders on a number of levels.

Finally, this project of Mahjoub and Ghosh which critiques historiography’s failure to represent the world as intrinsically entangled and historically able to communicate across and in spite of vast differences, is important in a contemporary world that is more in flux than ever with growing world populations. While the world has always been in motion, the scale of that movement today is unprecedented. Michael Cronin cites the United Nations Population Division’s 2002 report which states that more than 175 million people reside outside their home countries, with the last five years of the twentieth century seeing more than 12 million migrants move into developed regions (44). Border crossings are thus happening daily, both physically and metaphorically, as cultures and various other identities interact, clash and co-exist. The task of narrating alternative histories that focus on the history of movement and the ways in which people were able to communicate over the differences encountered through this movement is crucial. Thus, texts that reflect and construct alternative histories offer new understandings of not just human history, but of present day transnational and transcultural relations. Jamal Mahjoub’s *The Carrier* and Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* do just that. In narrating alternative histories, they create a space to re-imagine the present and the future.

While the quest to imagine a more harmonious future may be accused of being idealistic, it is worth noting that for all the history of conflict in the world, there is equally a history of connection, of conversation, and of collaboration. I turn lastly to Howard Zinn in order to emphasise the importance of finding these instances of cooperation in history:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory. (208)

The world is complex and human history is complex. To impose a linear model of progression, a teleological understanding, or rigid definitions of clearly demarcated identities and boundaries would be to ignore the experience of ordinary human beings from all corners of the world. Reconceptualising time as something that is dynamic and involved in a continual web of interaction between past, present and future, conceptualised by Zinn as “an infinite succession of presents,” actively creates a space where the future of human interaction can be re-imagined. This complements Benjamin's constellation, where events across time are connected. I would argue that re-imaginings of the present and future should not ignore a history of conflict and violence, nor should they ignore the many differences between people, on a variety of levels beyond the broad categories of culture, nationality and religion. Instead, as Ghosh posits, conversations should be re-established across the boundaries, as we re-map our relationship to the various physical and cultural boundaries around us.

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