

Blue Water: A Thesis

Bruce Robbins

[published in OCEANAMERICA(S), guest-edited by Giorgio Mariani, RIAS 8:1 Spring-Summer 2015, 47-66]

The so-called Blue Water principle, from which I've borrowed my title, was articulated around 1960.¹ The context was a debate at the United Nations about decolonization. I quote a somewhat lengthy but very useful account by the Native American writer and activist Ward Churchill in his book Acts of Rebellion (2003):

Belgium, in the process of relinquishing its grip on the Congo, advanced the thesis that if terms like decolonization and self-determination were to have meaning, the various 'tribal' peoples whose homelands it had forcibly incorporated into its colony would each have to be accorded the right to resume independent existence. Otherwise, the Belgians argued, colonialism would simply be continued in another form, with the indigenous peoples involved arbitrarily subordinated to a centralized authority presiding over a territorial dominion created not by Africans but by Belgium itself. To this, European-educated Congolese insurgents like Patrice Lumumba, backed by their colleagues in the newly-emergent Organization

of African Unity (OAU), countered with what is called the ‘Blue Water Principle,’ that is, the idea that to be considered a bona fide colony--and thus entitled to exercise the self-determining rights guaranteed by both the Declaration and the UN Charter--a country or people had to be separated from its colonizer by at least thirty miles of open ocean (19-20).²

Discourse about self-determination has moved on in the past half century, but you can understand why a Native American writer like Ward Churchill would nonetheless remain interested by what was said in 1960. The Blue Water principle defines colonialism in a narrow, restrictive way--so restrictive that many “tribal” or, as we now say, “indigenous” peoples would not count as having been colonized. According to the Blue Water principle, colonialism requires sea-based conquest. It is only crossing the ocean to conquer that is scandalous, that provides a reason for outrage; what might appear to be the same condition of conqueredness and alien control, if produced without the conquerors getting their feet wet, is declared to be not a scandal at all. Thus the domination that follows land-based conquest quietly becomes normal, an unremarkable outcome of the natural course of human events, unworthy of comment or complaint.

Stop and consider. This is strange stuff. If you and your nation have not been colonized unless there are at least thirty miles of water between you and your colonizer, then Poland, say, could be colonized by Sweden if Swedish armies crossed the Baltic but not if the same armies marched around the Baltic. Poland could not have been colonized by neighbors like Germany or Russia. Russia’s long series of conquests to its east and

south do not count as colonialism at all. This would be something of a surprise to the Chechens and other indigenous peoples of the Caucasus and Siberia. You would think that the US's long series of conquests of its indigenous peoples *would* count, given the original arrival by sea, even if there is such a neat convergence between its nineteenth-century push westward and Russia's push eastward. But the US and the other settler colonial countries could always say that they are new nations, the products of someone else's colonization rather than colonizers themselves. It was the Europeans, they could argue, who sailed across the ocean. Thus it was the Europeans who colonized, not the Americans. Let *them* give up their empires; in fact we hope they will. Ours is not an empire at all but merely a nation. Having acquired it by land, like the Russians and the Chinese, this nation is ours to keep, thank you very much.

By the 1980s, discussions of the rights of indigenous peoples at the United Nations were no longer mentioning blue water. The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, passed in 2007 over the objections of the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (objections that were subsequently withdrawn), includes self-determination among those rights and does not allude to sea crossings. But in May 2013, at the 12th annual meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the American delegate said very firmly that though the US has now signed on to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it sees that document as non-binding, merely aspirational; the US does not understand its references to the self-determination of indigenous peoples as having the same meaning or force as the concept of self-

determination has in international law. In other words, mentioned or not, the Blue Water principle continues to define the legal status quo with respect to colonialism in the post-colonial era, at least as the United States understands it. This is still how certain governments decide what was and wasn't, is and isn't colonialism, what can and cannot be legitimately complained about.

I offer these initial thoughts on the Blue Water thesis as a tribute to the theme of this conference, "Oceans Apart: In Search of New Wor(1)ds." Among the valuable questions I imagine might have been aimed at by this choice of theme, one is to lay out new ways of thinking about the newness of the New World as opposed to the oldness of the Old World, perhaps ways that will not encourage the notorious American exceptionalism while they will allow us to recognize what is interesting enough about America to make it worth studying. That will be my aim as well. Another, related purpose the conference organizers may have had in mind was to address a new or revitalized geographical materialism, a "geographical turn" that has even gotten itself talked about in the New Yorker. According to the New Yorker's Adam Gopnik, where you are placed vis-a-vis land and sea is once again being offered as a causal explanation for various social outcomes and is therefore also having an effect on our ethics, on what can or cannot be cogently or legitimately objected to. (As in the case of the Blue Water principle, though Gopnik does not mention that.) We may feel some enthusiasm about how this geographical materialism challenges the culturalist paradigm, long thought universally attractive but now looking somewhat tattered. But I wonder whether we are

prepared for a radical paradigm shift from “chaps” to “maps,” as the historian and classicist Ian Morris puts it.³ Morris has become notorious in certain circles for proposing that, from the distant spatio-temporal perspective he has chosen for himself, the largest factor behind the modern decrease in daily violence is . . . our habit of going to war. Morris himself may not favor entering into more wars--I don't know--but one practical consequence of taking his perspectival distance seriously is, if not actual war-mongering, then a disabling of the usual moral case *against* war-mongering. An enlarged spatial scale demands an enlarged temporal scale, and an enlarged temporal scale has a subversive effect on ordinary ethical judgments. Take for example the discussion of the Iraq War by the journalist George Packer, who helped lead the US into it. Packer writes: “Since America's fate is now tied to Iraq's, it might be years or even decades before the wisdom of the war can finally be judged. When Mao's number two, Chou En-lai, was asked in 1972 what he thought had been the impact of the French revolution, he replied, ‘It's too early to tell.’ Paul Wolfowitz and the war's other grand theorists also took the long view of history; if they hadn't, there never would have been an American invasion of Iraq . . . There was no immediate threat from Iraq, no grave and gathering danger. The war could have waited. Who has the right to say whether it was worth it?” (447). Packer does not disavow “the long view of history” (448), even though, as he says, those who took that view in Iraq showed “a carelessness about human life that amounted to criminal negligence” (448). The risk of such negligence seems built into this enlarged temporal

perspective.⁴ The other, related risk most obviously built into that perspective is a softening of judgment on enlarged political units, such as empires, and on imperialism.

But here I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Let me go back to the seeming absurdity of the Blue Water principle. What happens if you reject that absurdity, as Ward Churchill clearly does? The alternative premise would seem to be that all colonialisms are equal, whether accomplished by land or by sea. If we throw out the Blue Water principle and declare all colonialisms equal, where does this leave us vis-a-vis the inhumanity of colonialism in general and of American colonialism in particular?

Perhaps you don't want to go so far. You may prefer to reject the premise that all colonialisms are equal on the grounds, say, that capitalism is what we have in front of us, and behind and inside us, so capitalism is what we should be thinking about. The formula "colonialism *plus* capitalism" may have been unspeakable in 1960, but it does the same job that "blue water" was asked to do then, one might say, and does it better. So why do we have to make the effort to drag modern European colonialism into the same frame as pre-modern and non-European conquests and massacres, pre-modern and non-European colonialisms, assuming you allow the term? It seems to me that there exist good reasons for doing so. One reason is the emergence of indigenous peoples as an international political movement. This movement includes, alongside the original inhabitants of the US and Canada, the Berbers of Algeria and Morocco, the Masai of Kenya and Tanzania, and the Chakma people in the Chittigong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, among many others. Such a movement can no longer accuse only whites or Europeans of

being colonizers. In other words, for anyone who takes the international indigenous movement seriously, colonialism can no longer be defined as an exclusively European phenomenon. I don't think we have begun to measure the ethical and political effects of this ongoing re-definition of the term--what it will mean if colonialism becomes something that non-western peoples are also guilty of, perhaps even including indigenous peoples themselves. For that matter, I don't think we have begun to take into sufficient account *other causes* of this semantic shift, quite apart from the political respect due to the international indigenous movement. What I'm trying to do in this essay is make a start with both of these topics.

I chose the title "Blue Water" in part because the seeming absurdity of an absolute distinction between sea-based and land-based conquest casts immediate suspicion on the line separating European and non-European, modern and pre-modern colonialism. Suspicion is not proof, of course. I think it also matters, however, that there *are* "other causes," other motives pushing us into this thought experiment. I will mention two, each of them strong enough, I think, to overcome the reluctance we may feel about seeming to lighten the moral burden that accompanies colonialism in the old, exclusively European sense.

The first motive comes from the logic of postcolonialism itself.⁵ In the wake of Edward Said's Orientalism, there was a predictable rush to pay more attention to cultures that had been misrepresented, excluded, or marginalized. Little by little, this entailed recognizing that many of them, like the cultures of China and India, had canons and

traditions that go back thousands of years. It is self-evident that you cannot do justice to such cultures without attending to their full history. The problem is that much of that history belongs to the period before European power had had any significant impact. Thus the great historical injury of European colonialism can at best be marginal to them. Such cases appear to be less the exception than the rule. As Alexander Beecroft has argued in New Left Review, the modern politicized model of European core, non-European periphery works well enough for the recent past, but it simply doesn't apply for most of the world's culture during most of the world's history.⁶ It would be temporally provincial, therefore, to take the particular inequalities and injustices of the recent past as if they were universal. The cosmopolitanism with which we are most familiar, call it cosmopolitanism in space, brings with it a corresponding cosmopolitanism in time, and this radical expansion in the time--frame or temporal cosmopolitanism ends up undermining our moralized geographies.

To put this another way: postcolonialism carries within it a self-subverting impulse. The postcolonial perspective demands respect for non-European cultures that have been disrespected. But to supply the missing respect is to find oneself moving away from the postcolonial premise of a unique and defining European injury to those cultures. All cultures must be listened to. But when you listen, what do you hear? For most of them, most of the time, Europe was not what they were speaking about. And when they were, were they less prone to caricature those not like themselves than Europeans were to caricature them? Did the Persians think in less stereotypical terms of the Greeks than the

Greeks thought of the Persians? I note in passing that speaking up for hitherto silenced cultures was not Edward Said's own method in Orientalism, as a number of his critics complained at the time; he did not counter Western stereotypes about the East by letting Eastern cultures speak for themselves. And in retrospect, this looks like a smart move. When these cultures do speak for themselves, there is no guarantee that they will sound any more secular, or humanist, or humane in what they say about the West, or about each other, than the West has sounded when it talked about them. Would it be surprising to find appreciable amounts of misrepresentation, essentialism, and what would have to be called racism? The charge of Orientalism in reverse, or "Occidentalism" --a symmetrical stereotyping of the West by the rest-- has not been slow to arise, and it is not easy to refute. You could of course answer, as I have myself, that Orientalism was different because of the greater power it wielded. But turning from culture's content to its power would not end the conversation, especially if you were willing to talk about earlier periods, other empires, non-European empires. Is there such a thing as an empire without the coercive exercise of power--less euphemistically, without the inhumanity of slaughter, enslavement, rapine, pillage, and plunder?

Watching pre-modern and non-European empires slowly swim into scholarly focus, as I did recently at an excellent conference at the University of Massachusetts, my instinctive reaction was a certain skepticism about the political motives behind this enterprise. Why are we Americans suddenly so interested? Can this be anything but a backhanded way of letting ourselves off the hook, absolving the West of the guilt

acquired during the centuries when it violently conquered and exploited so much of the planet? Pre-emptive self-forgiveness does seem one motive behind the new “big history” that accompanies the return to geography. But it’s obviously not the whole story. This temporal expansiveness and the moral effects that flow from it, whatever they are, are a logical if perhaps unexpected outgrowth of lines of thought that have their own autonomous momentum and command respect in their own right. The two lines of thought I’ve mentioned are the emergence of the indigenous movement and the logic of postcolonialism. A third is ecological.

“What enables the perception of postmodernism-as-past,” Mark McGurl writes, “is a new cultural geology, by which I mean a range of theoretical and other initiatives that position culture in a time-frame large enough to crack open the carapace of human self-concern” (380).⁷ For McGurl, this self-humbling geological time-frame has been forced on us by global warming and the realization (only since the year 2000) that human beings have become non-negligible factors or actors in natural history, with effects on the planet so decisive that the period since the Industrial Revolution is on its way to being re-named the Anthropocene. In the last 12 years Greenland has lost 15% of its territory to global warming. McGurl cites Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2009 essay “The Climate of History,” which lists climate change among processes that “may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations” (212). Common sense has long held that early non-European empires were fundamentally different creatures from later European empires because only the

latter combined imperialism with capitalism. In making the case for what he calls “deep history” (212), history on a scale of 10,000 or hundreds of thousands of years, Chakrabarty fights off all attempts to save the attractive hypothesis that capitalism is to blame for the state of the planet, and he makes it clear that his expanded temporal frame will necessarily result in some new global apportioning of blame, or at least a backing off from the old politics of blame, such as it was or is. Chakrabarty does not say, but I will, that the struggle against capitalism today is in no way undermined by admitting, as I think we are forced to, that capitalism’s degree of impact on ordinary people is not unprecedented--that earlier empires too emptied out farmland and closed off grazing land, produced ferocious transformations in the habits and possibilities of everyday life. If there is a choice of “[w]hether we blame climate change on those who are retrospectively guilty—that is, blame the West for their past performance— or those who are prospectively guilty (China has just surpassed the United States as the largest emitter of carbon dioxide, though not on a per capita basis)” (218), then even if the effect of global warming is to exacerbate existing inequalities both within and between states, blame can no longer be calculated in the same old way.⁸

For the moment, it seems to me that we have only begun to realize that blame can no longer be calculated in the same old way. We have not figured out in what new way blame might be calculated, assuming blame remains a politically necessary and appropriate concept. Where empire is concerned, therefore, what we see in the relevant

scholarship is a series of vacillations between strong moral denunciation, on the one hand, and on the other an almost shocking moral relativism.

Take for instance the book Empire: A Very Short Introduction (2002) by the historian Stephen Howe.⁹ Struggling with the problem of how to organize the very large subject of empire in his very short book, Howe devotes the two main chapters to “empire by land” and “empire by sea.” “Perhaps the most basic and important distinction,” he writes, “is between those that grew by expansion overland, extending directly outwards from original frontiers, and those which were created by sea-power, spanning the oceans and even the entire globe. The second, mainly European kind has been the most powerful and dynamic in the modern world--roughly the last 500 years. The first, land-based form of empire, however, is by far older, and has been created by more varied kinds of people: Asians, Africans, and pre-Columbia Americans as well as Europeans. It has also proved longer lasting. The European seaborne empires were almost entirely dismantled between the 1940s and the 1970s. But the Soviet state, which collapsed only in the 1990s, is seen by many as the last great land empire. Other commentators disagree, and would say that another one still exists...: the vast multi-ethnic political system ruled from Beijing” (35).

One strange thing about this passage is that it doesn't explicitly include the Anglo-Saxon settler colonies--the US, Canada, Australia-- in either category. The US does come up later: “it is the internal expansion of the continental USA...which evokes the most direct parallels with empire building elsewhere” (57). If American empire-building didn't run into the same problems as British, French, or Russian imperialism, Howe says,

it's because it was "almost uniquely complete. More totally than anywhere else since the first Spanish invasions of the Americas, native peoples were physically destroyed or marginalized" (59). On the one hand, the US doesn't seem to count clearly on the side of either land- or sea-based empire; it can therefore enjoy the possibility, at least, that it is not colonialism at all. On the other hand, it appears as one of the most flagrant and brutal versions of colonialism in history. It cannot be long before the educational system in the US is ready to teach its students the historical fact that the genocide of the Native Americans was a direct inspiration for Hitler when Hitler was planning the subjugation of Eastern Europe. I for one hope this will happen. But I have more mixed feelings about the conclusion that will no doubt be drawn if this line of influence does indeed become part of history as it is taught: that the killing and colonizing of the Native Americans is a moral analogue to the Holocaust, which is to say definitive of the worst things human beings have ever done to other human beings.

As Ward Churchill goes on to say, the obvious reason why the US could make common cause with the leaders of the newly-independent African countries over the Blue Water principle is that all of them were committed to defending the autonomy of the nation-state, such as it already existed. The Africans, like the Americans, were afraid that granting further rights of self-determination to indigenous peoples or minorities within the state would cause the state to collapse. "For either side to acknowledge that a 'Fourth World' comprised of indigenous nations might possess the least right to genuine self-determination would have been--and remains--to dissolve the privileged status of the

state system to which both sides are not only conceptually wedded but owe their very existence” (20).

Blaming the modern state helps Churchill envisage a moral leveling or equalization between European and non-European empire, the West and the rest. This equalization is bound to be controversial; it is by no means the consensus position even for indigenous activists. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, whom Churchill cites on the topic, disagrees with it, for example.¹⁰ Maintaining solidarity between indigenous peoples and the former European colonies, she opts in effect to keep supporting the Blue Water principle. The Belgian proposal, she argues, was merely a Western trick, intended to destabilize the newly independent states. Thus the newly independent states were right to reject it, even if that meant sacrificing the promise of indigenous rights of self-determination and even if it meant embracing a more or less absurd legalism. She has a point. There is of course a long tradition whereby interest by European powers in the rights of the local indigenous people could be and was cynically translated, by colonized peoples, into an imperial interest in dividing and conquering by undercutting the authority of local leaders. This is an obvious aspect for example of colonial British attention to the tribals of India and French solicitude for the Berbers of North Africa. (I can imagine some of my fellow Americans today feeling something similar about scholarly interest in Native Americans and other US racial minorities on the part of scholars based in Europe or elsewhere. There is a national or perhaps nationalist impulse to wonder why it is that these groups are so cool to non-Americans, why they possess so

much cultural capital, why the foreigners are so very, very fascinated.) The real question, however, is how much imperialism can be taken to explain: or, one might say, whether it is taken to explain everything that needs explaining. Churchill says imperialism's interest in indigenous people should not be decisive, and I think he's right. His global even-handedness, which spreads the responsibility between global North and the global South, both of them seen as practitioners of colonialism, has to be part of our scholarly consciousness, when we evaluate the United States and in general.

Churchill may also be right that in 1960 and since, what the First and Third Worlds shared, at the expense of the indigenous peoples, was a commitment to the modern state form. But I am not a fan of this anti-statism. It seems to me one of the more pervasive and debilitating pathologies for which American intellectuals and American culture today need to be treated.¹¹ As far as indigenous peoples are concerned, politically speaking wouldn't they require a more positive understanding of the state both in order to know what their aspirations to self-determination do and do not aim at, and, in the meantime, to control their own destiny as much as possible within the states where they find themselves? My own anti-anti-statism leads me to think that the state-form has been underestimated, where indigenous people are concerned, and that the American state is flexible enough to grant more self-determination to Native Americans without suffering some sort of apocalyptic collapse.

Accusing the state allows Churchill to maintain the indigenous peoples themselves within a political binary of innocence and guilt. By being placed outside the state, they

are allowed to keep the kind of innocence once associated with the “noble savage.”

There are of course solid political reasons for doing just this: for presenting the pertinent narrative, as it is presented by films like Dances With Wolves or Avatar, as innocence violated and thus waiting for revenge or redemption. After all, the historical injustice done to Native Americans is both real and ongoing, it’s a fact of the present as well as the past; something must be done about it, and something *can* be done.

Still, the intellectual framework in which political action can be fought for is changing, and I think these changes are not all bad. Innocent victimhood is a mixed blessing. You can’t hold onto it without, for example, a corresponding sacrifice of agency. So it is perhaps no surprise that other Native American writers and historians of Native American experience have taken a step beyond Churchill and have renounced it—renounced, that is, an identity first and foremost defined by their suffering of and resistance to the colonialism of the whites. They too are blurring the line between old and new or sea-based and land-based colonialisms. Take for instance historian Ned Blackhawk’s book about the Utes of the Southwest, Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West (2006).¹² Blackhawk describes his argument as follows: “Ute adaptation in the face of imperial expansion is [...] neither celebrated nor glorified. Utes responded in kind to the shifting relations of violence sweeping throughout their homelands, redirecting colonial violence against their neighbors, Spanish and Indian alike. Carrying violence to more distant peoples in New Mexico’s expanding hinterlands, Utes attempted to monopolize the trade routes in and out of the

colony while besieging neighboring groups, particularly those without horses” (6). Ute alliances with the Spanish, he says, “carried high and deadly costs for Ute neighbors, particularly non-equestrian Paiute and Shoshone groups in the southern Great Basin, whose communities were raided for slaves by Utes, New Mexicans, and later Americans. Like their neighboring Indian and Spanish rivals, Utes remade themselves in response to the region’s cycles of violence, and did so at the expense of others, as violence and Indian slavery became woven into the fabric of everyday life throughout the early West... *In short*, before their sustained appearance in written records, Great Basin Indians endured the disruptive hold of colonialism’s expansive reach, brought to them first by other Indian people” (7—emphasis mine).

The “in short” at the end tries to restore the firstness of colonialism, as if it were the sole and unique origin of the violence even if (as the sentence finishes) the violence was “brought to” the basin by other Indians. But the passage clearly flirts with an omission of origin stories, for example by making the subject of the action, if not the grammatical subject, “the *region’s* cycle of violence.” If the violence belongs to the region, it is not colonialism’s violence to the same degree, or Europe’s; at any rate they no longer possess a monopoly on it. The passage makes it hard to resist asking the question of whether there were such inequalities of violence and domination between Indian tribes before the arrival of the Europeans and of horses.

Blackhawk’s aim is to get Indians into the historical record. Getting them into the record often means admitting they have committed acts that, if committed today, would

be severely frowned upon. Such acts are front and center in the 2008 book The Comanche Empire by the Finnish historian Pekka Hämäläinen.¹³ Along with systematic and deliberate campaigns of slaughter and robbery directed as much at other tribes as at Spanish officials and settlers, these acts include the active participation of Comanches in the eighteenth-century slave trade and, as part of that trade, the public rape of captive women so as to encourage the Spanish colonial authorities to continue buying the women back. Here the presumption of innocent victimhood has disappeared completely. As Hämäläinen sees them, the Comanches were colonizers themselves. Hämäläinen's introduction, entitled "reversed colonialism," begins as follows: "This book about an American empire that, according to conventional historians, did not exist. It tells the familiar tale of expansion, resistance, conquest, and loss, but with a reversal of historical roles: it is a story in which Indians expand, dictate, and prosper, and Europeans colonists resist, retreat, and struggle to survive." I'm no expert in that time and place; I cannot vouch for the historical details. But what he says seems roughly convincing to me, and it's clear from his abundant footnotes, to Blackhawk among others, that he is far from the only scholar to be interested in what he calls "indigenous imperialism." If this phrase has become sayable, then we would seem to be at an interesting moment both in how we view colonialism and in how we view the US.

Hämäläinen is proud of the Comanches, but you couldn't exactly say that he takes their side. Focusing on their ability over more than a century to expand in territory and population, exploiting (it's his word) both the Spanish and the other Indian tribes around

them, creating and controlling trade routes, quashing or subduing competition, and generally doing a great deal of what colonizers do—this is not a way of helping the Comanches formulate legal demands for restitution. On the contrary, it's a powerful example of moral relativism about empire.

Or perhaps the better phrase would be moral neutrality. It's almost refreshing, but also a bit scary, that this telling of the story offers so little sympathy for colonialism's Native American victims. The victims are losers. Could those who are slower to adapt or less adept at it really have expected anything better? On what grounds could the winners be condemned? The single largest key to the Comanches' success as colonizers, as Hämäläinen sees it, is their ability to adapt to their environment, especially their natural environment (in brief: exploiting changes in climate and the new technology of the horse to move from the mountains to the plains and from a mixed life-style of hunting and gathering to sole dependence on hunting and the acquisition of surplus by trading and raiding). To stress environmental and evolutionary adaptation is to take a morally neutral stance toward the Comanche expansion--but also (why not?) toward expansion in general. After all, on what grounds could the same excuse be denied to the imperialism of the Europeans? Given Hämäläinen's methodological materialism, moral judgment does not seem a relevant option in discussions of any form or moment of colonialism, modern or pre-modern. What matter whether you cross the plains on horses or cross the ocean on ships? In any historical period or circumstance, it is equally natural to try to exploit the advantages you have been given by your geography and your technology. The

so-called “Big History,” as in David Christian’s Maps of Time, applies the same questions to every human society from the pre-historical through the pre-modern to the post-modern. This is one form—an eco-evolutionary form-- that the new cosmopolitanism in time has taken. The time frame opens up, and the pertinence of moral judgment shrinks, and vice versa.

In a longer version of this paper, I would have liked to speak about explorations of this expanded spatio-temporal frame which try to preserve or restore the line between European and non-European colonialisms as well as some which efface that line. It may be that the most characteristic examples are those that paradoxically do both. Consider, say, the enterprise of the still relatively new Journal of World History. Essays by the journal’s founder, the late Jerry Bentley, manage to talk about empire-building over one thousand years, from 500 to 1500 CE, by agricultural settlers as well as by nomads, without giving words like “empire” and “imperial” any ethical or political inflection of the sort that would be expected if we were discussing the modern European empires.¹⁴ If their ethical neutrality seems entirely natural and normal, I suppose it’s because we assume that ethical or political judgments would be inappropriate—these people were subject to ecological or evolutionary imperatives— and/or that ethical or political judgments would be anachronistic. After all, this happened a long time ago. In that time, wasn’t it literally unimaginable for such ethical or political judgments to be formulated? Was there any language in which they could be formulated? Could any notion exist of

refraining from the full exercise of powers of conquest, with all that exercise entails, including the attendant massacres of what had not yet come to be called civilians?

Bentley claims that he is virtuously rejecting presentism by refusing to use the ethical vocabulary of the as yet unborn nation-state, the vocabulary of democracy and freedom. (For him, as for Ward Churchill, the modern state is something like the villain of the story.) Too much world history, he says, is in fact patriotic history, its endpoint something like the American democratic state. We don't want that. But does the Journal of World History really avoid presentism? It's true that presumably anachronistic political objections to empire have no place in his account. On the other hand, trade, circulation, cross-cultural contact, and integration, which are all ethically positive terms for us now, are also positive terms for the Journal of World History-- in fact, they are its *key* terms. What it wants to show is that a kind of cross-border or large-scale inter-cultural contact that we value positively now but think is quite recent actually began much longer ago. It likes the idea of a world that is united, but is trying to get it united faster, to show that it was united earlier. In this sense it is not being any less "presentist" than anyone else, it's just dropping one set of value terms while retaining another: unity, cross-cultural contact, integration, a very American-globalist sense of peaceful integration by means of commerce. Why is it that "cross-cultural interaction" can be a positive for us but massacre, say, can't be a negative? From the perspective of core-periphery, West/rest models, the Journal of World History is trying to equalize things, but he equalizes them by eliminating the element of coercion *on both sides*. Empire is not

about coercion; it's about the free circulation of commodities. In offering us one thousand years of empire, but with not one drop of blood to be seen, it is offering us a picture of globalization today exactly as its champions wish to imagine it: all commerce, creative interaction, and free choice, with no coercion anywhere.

This is much the same point that Gaurav Desai makes in his reading of Amitav Ghosh's non-fiction book In an Antique Land, which made Ghosh famous when it came out in 1992.¹⁵ At the heart of Ghosh's retrieval of pre-European cosmopolitanism, however, Desai finds a "romance with free-market economics and the minimalist state" (134). If one assumes that it was "only with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 that violence enters the Indian Ocean trade," that it was only at that late date "that the unarmed, pacifist traditions of commerce were disrupted" (136), then of course one will overlook rivalries and conflict between rulers of Indian Ocean states. But this is simple idealization, Desai concludes. "It maybe true, as Ghosh suggests, that before the arrival of the Europeans no political power in the Indian Ocean ultimately succeeded in dictating the terms of trade, but it was not for lack of trying" (136). Then as now, states tried to use political and military power to dictate the terms of trade. Inhumanity, if that is the right word, did not begin with the arrival of the European ships.

According to historian Roxani Eleni Margariti, to whom I owe the Desai reference, this is a large-scale phenomenon: scholars erase aggression, especially aggression supervised and funded by states, from the zones of pre-modern, non-European

cosmopolitanism--a cosmopolitanism, usually based on maritime trade, that it is now highly fashionable to discover, explore, and celebrate.¹⁶ Thus recorded moments of violence at sea are presented as piracy-- casual, incidental, unorganized. It's as if the sea somehow disabled the state's attempt to wield power, as if water were a state-resistant element. Yet this runs counter to the facts, Margariti says. A great deal of what was happening in the Indian Ocean was "stak[ing] out of a claim over littoral and maritime space and routes, in other words, ... "mark[ing] water" in Emily Sohmer Tai's felicitous phrase" (545). Blue water was claimed, in effect, as territory. In a very real sense, surf *was* turf. And turf was violently fought over.

A cynical reading might conclude that, even when the apparent point is to present non-Europeans as natural pacifists, in profound contrast to the appropriative European empires, the deeper motive is to rehabilitate American and European empire—not directly, but by delegitimizing the terms of moral scrutiny usually applied to it. Those terms can be delegitimized by simply speaking and acting as if they did not apply to *non-European* empires. The implication will follow little by little that these terms don't apply *at all*--that they are no longer serviceable, or no longer needed. In showing that pre-modern non-Europeans were more like us Americans, it forgives them their sins-- the sorts of bad behavior that once upon a time would have gotten them called "barbarians"-- but does so within an immense exercise of self-forgiveness. It's not clear here that abandoning a power-laden core-periphery model for neutral-sounding talk of decentered "networks" represents any moral or political improvement. One would not like to think

that the conceptual fashion for “networks” has arisen to as to discourage us from realizing that coercion was a decisive part of the history of empires, and remains decisive today. But this may also be one hidden intention behind the turn from economic to environmental metaphors, another aspect of the new expansion of temporal scale. Because the environment is itself such an urgent ethico-political issue, you never notice that the ethico-political and the dynamic of power to which it responds are suddenly missing, evacuated not just from the account you are reading, but from the *kind* of account you are reading.

Nevertheless, I find I can’t quite decide that this expansion of geographical and temporal perspective about empire is intended simply to permit Americans to forgive themselves for their own empire-building, whether by territorial conquest or by de-territorialized commerce. It seems worth speculating that the US may be coming to think in larger units of time.¹⁷ The many voices that have announced the rise of Asia and the decline of American hegemony have perhaps done America a good service in the sense of getting us out from under the old idea that we are meant to be the glory and instructor of the world. My own provisional thesis about the absurdly long run that the Blue Water principle has had and about the tendency to overrule it that I’ve been discussing is that, in the end, the US does not turn out to be the most consistently evil power that ever existed, or indeed a totally exceptional one. But it does continue to be interesting, if interesting in ways that overlap with the interestingness of other countries and other empires.

¹ This paper was originally presented at the 6th Annual Conference of International American Studies Association, entitled “Oceans Apart: In Search of New Wor(l)ds” in Szczecin, Poland in August 2013. I am grateful to Giorgio Mariani and the other organizers of the conference for the opportunity to develop these ideas.

² Ward Churchill, Acts of Rebellion: A Ward Churchill Reader New York and London: Routledge, 2003

³ Adam Gopnik, “Faces, Places, Spaces: The Renaissance of Geographic History,” The New Yorker Oct 29/Nov 5, 2012, 108-116. On Ian Morris see Marc Perry, “The Shape of History: Ian Morris, Historian on a grand Scale,” The Chronicle of Higher Education. March 1, 2013, B7-B10.

⁴ George Packer, The Assassin’s Gate: American in Iraq New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2006

⁵ The next several paragraphs are adapted from my “Prolegomena to a Cosmopolitanism in Deep Time,” forthcoming in a special issue of Interventions edited by Sandra Ponzanesi.

⁶ Alexander Beecroft, “World Literature Without a Hyphen,” New Left Review 54 Nov-Dec 2008, 87-100.

⁷ Mark McGurl, “The New Cultural Geology,” Twentieth Century Literature 57:3&4 Fall/Winter 2011, 380-390.

⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” Critical Inquiry (Winter 2009), 197-222.

⁹ Stephen Howe, Empire: A Very Short Introduction Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002

¹⁰ Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, “Protection of American Indian Territories in the United States: Applicability of International Law,” in Imre Sutton, ed., Irredeemable America: The Indians’ Estate and Land Claims Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

¹¹ Here we Americans can learn a great deal from Europe, with its tradition of a stronger state: one idea for this talk was to discuss Scandinavian crime series and their American television adaptations, considering all of this television—some of it quite excellent-- as representation of the modern state and public meditation on its faults and virtues under present conditions.)

¹² Ned Blackhawk, Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006

¹³ Pekka Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008

¹⁴ See for example Jerry Bentley, “Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History,” Journal of World History 16:1 (2005), 51-82

¹⁵ Gaurav Desai, “Old World Orders: Amitav Ghosh and the Writing of Nostalgia,” Representations 85 (2004).

¹⁶ Roxani Eleni Margariti, “Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and ‘Pirate’ States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 51 (2008), 543-577.

¹⁷ This is something that I would have shown in the fiction of people like Jennifer Egan and Junot Diaz, in particular their use of prolepsis) not because it is thinking with imperial arrogance but on the contrary because it can finally begin to see itself as an empire in decline, like so many others before it.