# Introduction

On 1 July 1865, as the curtains were coming down on a still young American nation's fratricidal blood bath to resolve its original sin of slavery, there appeared in the columns of the *Christian Recorder,* an organ of the Philadelphia-based African Methodist Episcopal Church that circulated among Black regiments in the Civil War South, an item entitled "An Interesting Relic." Positioned beside an account of emancipation in Maryland, the piece described the discovery by a German ditch-digger of a copper medal gilded with gold, at a depth of two feet under the ground in Gloucester County, New Jersey. One side of the artifact was said to depict an "exquisitely modeled" uniformed bust of "Charles, Marquis Cornwallis, a most active general," whose surrender to American and French armies at Yorktown in 1781 had marked the end of military hostilities during the American Revolution.[1]

The coin's reverse, however, featured a symbol of the British Empire's formal rise in the Indian Ocean world (IOW), even as it waned in continental North America. Commemorating the defeat of Tipu Sultan of Mysore in 1792, this face of the medal represented, in fine relief, the British General's acceptance of the vanquished Indian ruler's two young sons—eight and ten years of age—accompanied by an entourage of attendants. The *Christian Recorder* report speculated that the medal may have migrated to America in the possession of some "old soldier of the Marquis" who had "lost it while hunting in the neighborhood." And in that ground the memento lay for over half a century before turning up at the end of a ditchdigger's shovel. A British Museum catalog entry for a replica in bronze translates the inscription on the medal's reverse as "Let it be right to spare an enemy."[2]

As the art historian Sean Wilcock has noted, the ostensibly "paternalistic reception" by Cornwallis of the Indian princes, as well as their captivity in British custody

for two years to guarantee their father's compliance with the terms of his surrender, captured the imagination of artists in Britain and India during the 1790s. The occasion was said to represent the "moral legitimacy" of a supposedly generous imperialism. Its imagery appeared in various media of arts and artisanry, including commemorative coins and medals.[3] It is thus entirely possible for a copper facsimile of the medal cataloged by the British Museum to have landed in the hands of a New Jersey resident who either traveled across the ocean or knew someone who did.

We might think of the 1790s British medal commemorating Cornwallis and the sultan's sons, excavated in 1860s New Jersey, as a multitemporal relic of imperialism serving as a metaphor for the times of transition and tissues of connection between disparate societies across two oceans. For as politics and destiny would have it, forty-seven years after the Anglo-Mysore war, a son of Tipu Sultan joined an interracial, intercontinental audience of abolitionists and imperial reformers in London's Freemasons' Hall. The group had gathered to inaugurate the British India Society (BIS), established to link the cause of the enslaved in North America with justice for the colonized in British India. There, the guest with Mysore roots would have heard one of the Society's architects, the fiery British abolitionist speaker George Thompson, declare that the path to striking the "manacles" off the "limbs of twenty-five hundred thousand of the colored children of the United States" lay through India: "When we prefer the Sugar of Bengal, and the Rice of Patna, and the Cotton of Bombay, to the produce of the despot-cursed regions of Carolina, and Louisiana, and . . . Texas! Then, my Lord, we shall have Cotton without Slavery, Sugar without Slavery."[4]

For key BIS pioneers, however, mining the promise of a free market for labor in India had to go hand in hand with colonial reform and the extension of the antislavery project to that subcontinent. Founding members who shared this thinking included William Adam, a Scottish Unitarian minister who had lived in India for decades before assuming a professorship in Oriental Literature at Harvard University. Adam was networked, together with his friend, the Indian social reformer and liberal constitutionalist Raja Rammohun Roy, into transoceanic abolitionist circuits of travel and correspondence unpinned by new technologies of communication. Adam's scathing critique of the colonial edifice of bondage in India, published the year after BIS was launched, would help fuel overlapping controversies from Calcutta through London to Boston and Charleston over what slavery and freedom really meant in different parts of the world.[5]

For as the nineteenth century dawned, global systems of capitalism and empire knit the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds into international networks of trade and travel, and conquest and colonization, of labor and capital, and politics and ideology. The debates over slavery, colonialism, and meanings of freedom that resulted from this integration offer US scholars a common "material and meaningful framework" for "cross-fertilizing" national histories, historiographies, and epistemologies

with the burgeoning scholarship on the Indian Ocean. Slavery and capitalism, locked in tight embrace, wove an Anglo-Atlantic exchange grid with distant lands, including those stretching from the Swahili coast of East Africa through the Persian/Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea, to the Indian subcontinent. At the same time, the shared legacies of British imperial influence and its protean politics of abolition splintered this international landscape along political and ideological lines. The tensions they produced played out within the diverse mosaics of hierarchy, patronage, and dependence that defined Indian Ocean societies, making them particularly rich laboratories for transnational comparison and connection. As such, they become theaters to problematize the meanings of slavery and freedom in different settings, as both historians and their nineteenth-century subjects experienced, codified, imagined, narrated, or contested the language and institutions defining those terms—whether as lived subaltern experiences,[6] work and family regimes, legal and administrative categories (often gendered), or political rhetoric. Moreover, it becomes possible to begin tracing the interoceanic transmission of these meanings, and to relate them to the various material structures and identity constructs they supported. In this context, our sprawling narrative mines multinational archives to shift the gaze of US slavery and abolition histories beyond the Atlantic world during the long nineteenth century. It fleshes out, on a granular level, the interface among the personal, domestic, and international politics of bondage and freedom, by tracking the circulation of people, the echo of ideas, and the resonance of policy among nodes of commercial exchange, imperial power rivalries, and reform activism extending from Anglo-America to the western Indian Ocean.[7]

Indian Ocean perspectives help to place notions of US historical exceptionalism within global contexts. They illuminate the fragile foundations and Atlantic reverberations of US mercantile projects, "free labor" experiments, and slaveholding in Afro-Asia, and illustrate the transoceanic reach of human rights campaigns. They show how discourses of poverty, kinship, and care could be adapted to defend servitude in different parts of the world, and reveal the tenuous boundaries that such discourses shared with liberal contractual definitions of freedom. Moreover, vistas trained on the western Indian Ocean enlarge our analytical canvas for reflecting on concepts that lie at the heart of the "Black Atlantic," such as diaspora and difference. From the vantage point of IOW historiographies, our intercontinental cast of past lives—of empire builders and émigrés, slavers and reformers, a "cotton queen" and courtesans, and fugitive slaves and concubines—offers windows to competing knowledge production and practices regarding "slavery in the East," and prompts reflections on the comparative workings of subaltern agency.

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The opening pages of this book set the stage for recounting how the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds "hemorrhaged" into each other in a moment of transition.[8]

The sun had set on British colonialism in continental North America's thirteen colonies even as it began a sharp ascent over Britain's expansion in Afro-Asia. This shift produced a common discursive context, bound by empire, for wrestling with the leading issue of political economy, international relations, and human rights in the nineteenth century, namely slavery. However we may define "human rights" movements and periodize their origins, many nineteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic abolitionists traced something akin to that concept to Protestant and Enlightenment impulses to endow "human nature with . . . new capacity for reason, benevolence, . . . moral choice, and . . . inherent rights."[9] But what happened to these Atlantic perspectives when Anglophone bureaucrats and diplomats, reformers and missionaries, and merchants and aspiring planters traversing the IOW encountered an immense variety of types of bondage divorced in some cases from formal ideas about race, and defying binary constructs of slave and free, market and family?

As scholars of Afro-Asia have shown, the antislavery professions of the British Empire collided with imperial investment in local forms of bondage—and the construction of new ones—motivated variously by colonial revenue priorities, deference to indigenous elites, and aversion to public relief. Administrators in South Asia, for instance, sought to resolve these tensions by devising a new way of talking about slavery's differences, East and West. Anglo-Atlantic traditions of legal pluralism placed slavery in the category of "domestic" law (and in India, religious freedom) ostensibly outside the purview of parliamentary regulation. Such conventions had established precedents for leaving colonial slaveries alone, although strictly within the limits of expediency as judged by the East India Company (EIC),—the mercantile monopoly that launched British colonization of South Asia. Perceived threats to Asian forms of servitude posed by the British Parliament's prohibition of the international slave trade in 1807 galvanized an imperial discourse of slavery's distinctiveness "in the East." Such discourse homogenized the diversity of Indian forms of servitude into the singular "Orientalist" construct of an organic and "mild" system of social insurance sanctioned since times immemorial by tradition and religious law. Here, we are using the term "Orientalist" to signify colonial knowledge production about the supposedly eternal and "inherent" nature of Indian "institutions," in this case, slavery. At the same time, imperial bureaucrats proposed to reconcile British Asia's ostensibly familial relations of slavery and its function as a "poor law" with liberal ideals by codifying informal practices of self-sale or destitute parents' sale of children during famines, into the "free will" to make formal contracts.[10] Thus, imperial abolition forged new forms of service that in certain instances elided distinctions between coercion and free will.

Back in the Atlantic world, American slaveholders and failed India-returned free labor entrepreneurs on the one hand, and transnational abolitionists and imperial

reformers on the other equally condemned colonial arguments that slavery in the "East" was different from slavery in the "West." But they did so from opposite ends of the political spectrum on human rights, within a riven global public sphere.

In the course of the century, Britain's campaign against foreign slave trading in the Indian Ocean embroiled American merchants and consuls in controversies over sovereignty and nationality involving their slave-trading Indian business partners in East Africa and African fugitives attempting to flee slavery in Indian Ocean islands on American merchant vessels. Aspiring American slaveholders who settled in the region following the US Civil War sought to acculturate to local norms of land tenure and labor control, adopting shifting approaches to such institutions as private property, contractual obligation, coercion, and patronage. The volatile landscapes of domestic and international politics—from local wars of succession and servile insurrections to great power rivalries and an officially antislavery US government—placed these would-be masters' fortunes on a roller coaster of uncertainty.

Recentering our vantage point on Indian Ocean slave trading "from below," we ask, In what ways did the captives, rebels, and refugees who crossed the Atlantic operators' paths—frequently women and children of African, South Asian, or Middle Eastern descent—use the institutions of colonial antislavery to assert their own claims to work, community, mobility, and security from poverty and violence? Subaltern interaction with structures of state and imperial abolition are worth comparing and contrasting from one oceanic world to another. For instance, in the resistance circles of North America, a feminist African American émigré to Canada such as Mary Ann Shadd Cary wielded the tool of diplomacy strategically to articulate a diasporic politics of freedom that inscribed Black women across the Atlantic as citizens, workers, wives, and mothers into an ostensibly color-blind, antislavery British empire ruled by a female sovereign. In the IOW, however, Britain's campaign against slavery served at least partly as a tool for buttressing the moral and material foundations of empire by integrating the emancipated as subjects and workers into the colonial state, often under duress. Moreover, some varieties of slavery in Afro-Asian societies assumed the form of patron-client relationships or served as strategies for kin incorporation, offering paths to social inclusion to certain categories of "dependents." There, while some subaltern rebels seized the language and structures of imperial abolition to support their claims to what the British defined as individual "rights," they could just as easily reject the option of colonial belonging in ways that interrupted linear and universalist narratives of liberty's progress under the British flag. They lead us to wonder, How might we theorize concepts at the heart of African American studies—such as agency, diaspora, and difference—against the broader horizons that materialize when we cross slavery's interoceanic boundaries?

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The themes of this book emerge from the perspectives of historical figures positioned variously within the power structures and ideological spectrums of societies with servile populations across two oceanic worlds. There are the South Carolina slave mistress and cohorts of "daughter-purchasing" guilds of Indian courtesans and dancing girls, embedded from opposite ends of the Anglophone world in a tangled web of Anglo-Atlantic defenses of bondage as private poor relief. Within the framework of larger arguments over the merits of paternalism versus liberalism in free societies, such defenses touched on the braided discourses of poverty and matriarchy, family and the market, race and caste, and slavery's differences in East and West, illuminating the global contexts of local proslavery polemics. We will meet overseers from the American South, whose experiments with the cultivation of "free cotton" in India illustrate how configurations of political economy, state power, social hierarchies, and cultural traditions thwarted the transplantation of American-style settler colonialism in British India. The landholding dreams of these white men from the margins of antebellum slave society ran headlong into the complex matrices of imperial governance and local structures that mediated control over land and labor.[11] The accounts of these disappointed aspiring entrepreneurs helped forge a narrative back home in Mississippi and its sister states, of the "true slavery" and stasis of the British empire, and the invincibility of a benevolent slave republic founded on King Cotton.

The Slave South's transnational antagonists, reviled as antinational cosmopolites and pro-British conspirators, cut a broad swath across the field of human rights activism, taking on causes ranging from slavery and *sati* (the practice of immolating upper-caste Hindu widows on their husbands' funeral pyres) to land reform and free trade. Their geographical range extended from North America through Europe to Indian Ocean societies. They critiqued systems of legal pluralism that established an imperial tradition of accommodating "local" slavery arrangements everywhere the empire struck root. They took the colonial state to task for reading Hindu and Muslim laws in a proslavery light. They objected to impoverishing the colonized in ways that fostered slavery as a mode of subsistence and then institutionalizing informal arrangements of dependence into contractual relations of servitude, while creating new Atlantic-style forms of chattel bondage to mete out discipline and punishment. They mounted "free produce" movements to connect the enslaved's cause with that of the colonized. These critics' withering exposés of a mighty antislavery world sovereign's feet of clay would offer warring Americans a framework for forging conflicting narratives of comparative slavery and empire from opposite ends of their own ideological spectrum on slavery.

Such contesting accounts drew on information circulating through the medium of social networks and material infrastructure that molded an interoceanic public domain. This emerging global square connected the principal cities of the Atlantic world with the "second cities" and rural hinterlands of three continents. A

submarine cable across the Atlantic, inaugurated in 1866, launched the wiring of the world. By the 1860s, revolutions in transport and communications had already begun to reconfigure territorial spaces of politics and international voluntarism. Steamships in the 1830s, and canals—the Erie in the 1820s, the Suez and Panama decades later—propelled maritime commerce and information sharing, even as railroads and tunnels that penetrated mountains promoted land-based exchanges. As Simone M. Müller has noted, the "shipping lines of Cunard, White Star, and Hapag-Lloyd" stimulated the global mobility of people, products, and we might add, news, while telegraph, postal, and parcel postal services disseminated word of goings-on in far-flung lands to distant corners of nation-states. Worldwide, information technologies that served as instruments of imperialism could also shape alternative geographies and ideologies of reform.[12]

The Civil War produced no consensus on slavery among Americans as they set out to seek their fortunes in the wider world. We track the travails of a Union surgeon from New Bedford, Massachusetts, transplanted as a wealthy slaveholder in the Comoros under the patronage of a business-minded sultan during Reconstruction. The commercial success of this New England planter later collided with the fallout from local wars of succession, enslaved soldiers and rebels, and colonial power rivalries, British anti-slave-trade patrols, and the wary indifference of an officially anti-slavery post–Civil War US government. Mediators make their appearance, such as US consuls and merchants who reported on Indian Ocean slavery through the prism of their interactions with the sprawling multiracial household of the Sultan of Zanzibar. That household, reproduced largely by enslaved mothers from Circassia to Ethiopia, was layered with complex hierarchies of rights and responsibilities attached to the varieties of kin statuses of both bonded and free members. Throughout the century, creditors, sailors, shippers, bureaucrats and missionaries played their parts, charting complex, contentious channels of exchange across oceans.

Above all, subaltern stories demonstrated how context—shaped by particular configurations of the nature of slavery and the workings of imperial abolition—shaped a diversity of relationships with the colonial state. Our marginalized rebels jostled with rulers as they sought to set the terms of their own lives, turning "freedom" into a hegemonic field of struggle over many meanings—of work, belonging, culture, mobility, and security against violence. The borders of difference over abolition and empire that emerged in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds in the nineteenth century, offer tantalizing prospects for unearthing elusive enslaved experiences. As slave trade scholars have shown, it is when subordinate groups cross realms of contention over slavery—whether legal, jurisdictional, or ideological—that their voices enter the official archives that influence history writing.[13] Within these zones, where ideas and identities are disputed, disrupted, and sometimes remade in transit, the invisible "objects" of history appear to speak. To be sure, their perspectives are heavily mediated by the language and institutions of

imperial abolition with which they interact, and which set the conditions of their presence in the archives: colonial police stations, law courts, reconnoitering cruisers, depositions, rhetoric, and policy. Still, however imperfect and fragmented, their interventions leaven and complicate the "truths" of slavery told by squabbling power brokers—whether local, national, or imperial—in different locales. The subalterns who populate the pages of this work include an international cast of women and children on the margins, enslaved and free, who appeared to seek reinvention through flight or emigration across borderlands erected by colonial campaigns against slavery. Other vignettes offer glimpses of elite *zenanas,* of East African fugitives making their way to the United States on American whalers, Africans landed in India on Arab vessels, and Indian concubines in the Gulf. The disparate circumstances of these historical figures, and the array of choices they appeared to make, raise the question whether fissures over slavery between different powers offered subordinate groups and individuals maneuvering space to assert their claims to citizenship or personhood, and community and mobility, while defying impressions about the neat polarities of "Oriental despotism" and English freedom.

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This work builds on, but departs from, the voluminous and splendid body of transnational and comparative histories of US slavery and abolition that focuses primarily on the Atlantic world. The genealogy of historical geography that integrated the United States and its pre–nation-state incarnations into the Atlantic Ocean as a meaningful unit of study may be traced at least as far back to such early twentieth-century scholars of slavery and the African diaspora as W. E. B. DuBois, C. L. R. James, Melville J. Herskovits, and Eric Williams. Meanwhile, Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen* (1946) would spur a series of debates among comparative historiographers of North and Latin America over the impact of formal institutions like church, state, law, and political economy, as well as demography on the enslaved's psychology, material conditions, opportunities for building family lives and community, and access to freedom and citizenship.[14] A few decades later, following the publication of Paul Gilroy's now canonical *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars revised Gilroy's New World focus by charting the flow of people and politics, commodities and currency, technology and culture, and diseases and dogmas, among all four of the Atlantic ocean's surrounding landmasses and the islands in between.[15] This research has illuminated the reverberations of these exchanges in societies flung far from the Atlantic littoral. We have learned that new systems of power and knowledge reconfigured the identities of people involved in these transactions around race, gender, and other tropes of difference, through structures of political economy, productions of culture, and technologies of representation. Some have