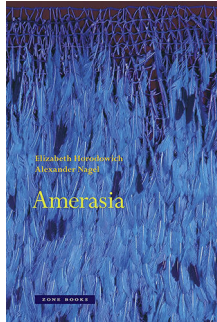


ELIZABETH HORODOWICH AND ALEXANDER NAGEL, *AMERASIA*

New York: Zone Books 2023, 464 pages with 13 color and 175 b/w
ill., ISBN: 978-19-42-13083-3 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
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Around 1595, the illustrious historian Abu'l-Fazl completed the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* (Institutes of Akbar), the tour de force account of the Mughal empire under Akbar. In a section focusing on geography and habitable lands, Abu'l-Fazl unexpectedly noted: “Of late years the Europeans have discovered an extensive and populous insular continent which they have called the New World [Alam-i Nau].”¹ Written almost within a hundred years of 1492, Abu'l-Fazl’s fleeting observation on the “New World” can be read as indicative of an increasing awareness of the Americas in Mughal India beyond the logic of European seaborne imperialism.² Within decades, American animals, plants, and minerals could be acquired in vast quantities in ports such as Surat and Goa and illustrated manuscripts describing the “New World” were being produced in

¹
Abu'l-Fazl, *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, transl. by Henry S. Jarrett as *The Ā'in i Akbarī by Abul Fazl-i-Āllāmī*, vol. 3, Calcutta 1894, 42.

²
Although the Mughals enthusiastically acquired objects, plants, and animals from the Americas, they were, as Manya Rathore notes, a “sea-conscious” empire as opposed to a seaborne one. Manya Rathore, ‘Floating Political Rhetoric’ in the Indian Ocean. Situating the Portuguese in the Mughal Foreign Politics, in: Pius Malekandathil (ed.), *The Indian Ocean in the Making of Early Modern India*, New Delhi 2016, 249–262, here 250.

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<https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2024.2.105482>



the subcontinent.³ The traffic between the Americas and Asia was, of course, never unidirectional. People, raw materials, objects, and even languages circulated across the West and the East Indies, in turn generating intimate networks that spanned the vast oceanic spaces. Only recently have art historians turned to these networks to write new narratives of global connectivity that do not centralize Europe as the catalyst of all histories in a post-1492 world.⁴ This is why I have awaited the publication of Elizabeth Horodowich and Alexander Nagel's *Amerasia* with great interest.

Coauthored by a historian and an art historian, *Amerasia* begins with that foundational confusion on the part of Christopher Columbus and other early modern European cartographers, explorers (read colonizers), historians, artists, philosophers, and naturalists; the explicit aim of the two authors of *Amerasia* is to write a history in which Europe "is emphatically not the center of the world and not yet in a commanding position in the world" (p. 11). Aptly, the authors begin with a serendipitous handwritten note in a Latin edition of Amerigo Vespucci's *De novo mundo* that asserts that Hernán Cortés has conquered the capital of China. This cognitive blunder on the part of a contemporaneous reader, one among many that the authors present in *Amerasia*, offers "a reflection of Europe's own unsettling as it went through its own process of identity formation, provoked in good part by the intensive awareness that its own position in the world and in history was being radically redefined" (p. 12). Over the chapters that follow, Horodowich and Nagel examine maps, globes, woodcuts and engravings, paintings, frescos, medals, and collections of Asian and American objects in Europe to argue that "Amerasia is not merely a Western idea imposed on other realities" (p. 23).

The unsettling of the world can be grasped in Chapter I where the authors consider a 1494–1495 fresco by the Italian painter Pinturicchio that includes one of the earliest visual representations of Indigenous peoples of the Americas. The fresco, along with contemporaneous woodcuts depicting the island of Hispaniola, offer an alluring archive to comprehend the "shared vision" (p. 19) of Amerasia. In another chapter, we read about the renowned painting by Vasco Fernandes of the Adoration of the Magi (ca. 1502–1506). As

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For this history see Marika Sardar, Emeralds in India. New World Gems at the Mughal Court, in: Radha Dalal, Sean Roberts, and Jochen Sokoly (eds.), *The Seas and Mobility of Islamic Art*, New Haven, CT 2021, 72–84; Sugata Ray, From New Spain to Mughal India. Rethinking Early Modern Animal Studies with a Turkey, ca. 1612, in: Karl Kusserow (ed.), *Picture Ecology. Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, Princeton, NJ 2021, 94–113; Nicholas Roth, Poppies and Peacocks, Jasmine and Jackfruit. Garden Images and Horticultural Knowledge in the Literatures of Mughal India, 1600–1800, in: *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History* 1, 2018, 48–78; and Baki Tezcan, The Many Lives of the First Non-Western History of the Americas. From the New Report to the History of the West Indies, in: *Journal of Ottoman Studies / Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 40, 2012, 18–38, among others.

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For the most part, scholars have focused on the Manila Galleon. See, for example, Florina H. Capistrano-Baker and Meha Priyadarshini (eds.), *Transpacific Engagements. Trade, Translation, and Visual Culture of Entangled Empires (1565–1898)*, Makati City/Los Angeles/Florence 2022 and Dennis Carr (ed.), *Made in the Americas. The New World Discovers Asia*, Boston 2015, among others.

the authors propose, the accoutrements adorning the middle king were not only based on the jewelry and clothes worn by Indigenous peoples in Brazil – as is usually suggested – but were an amalgamation of Brazilian and south Indian sartorial cultures. Brazil and India then became closely connected in the European imaginary. Elsewhere, we learn about American and Asian artworks in early modern European collections. Objects such as the Mesoamerican Cospi Codex – originally assumed to be a book from China – and an Indonesian dagger (*kris*) – originally assumed to be a Mexican idol – present Horodowich and Nagel exemplary case studies to theorize the notion of Amerasia in an expanded field. Other artworks – some seminal, such as Raphael’s ca. 1510 Vatican fresco, and some lesser-known (at least to me; a South Asianist by training), such as a ca. 1515 painting depicting hell attributed to Cristovão de Figueiredo – implicate contemporaneous viewers in a chaotic world where Mexico could easily become India and feathered headwear “counted as a common inheritance, not exclusive to America but rather an expected accoutrement of ‘Indians’ on both sides of the Pacific” (p. 346). In the end, the eminent historian Timothy Brook turns the table, so to speak, to offer a view of the world from China. Focusing on maps produced in Ming China, Brook’s *Afterword* argues that “[t]he process of constructing knowledge depended on where you stood and in what directions you looked, and that in turn depended on your history” (p. 370).

Indeed, we may recall that, as a concept-term, Amerasia has also been theorized from within the domain of Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies. Established in 1971, the *Amerasia Journal*, for instance, has been a key interdisciplinary publication in the field for several decades. More recently, scholars such as David H. Kim have suggested that the idea of Amerasia encapsulates the imperialist politics espoused by the United States in Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific worlds.⁵ In contrast, Horodowich and Nagel posit Amerasia as the early modern axis around which a “world imaginary was configured, an unsettled zone where east meets west, modernity folds into antiquity, and otherness, whether conceived in strictly antipodal terms or not, is always self-implicating” (p. 12). Following in a roughly chorological order, each chapter is consequently centered on enigmatic objects that allow the authors to unravel how Europe gradually determined its place in the world. While the recent past has seen a renewed scholarly focus on the mobility and global circulation of people and objects in the early modern period, what distinguishes *Amerasia* is its focus on the global as a discursive formation. It is thus not a coincidence that cartography plays a vital role in shaping Amerasia’s worldly contours in this book. The globe, we might recall, had materialized only in the age of the *Weltbild* and the world could be “conceived and

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David H. Kim, *Empire’s Entrails and the Imperial Geography of ‘Amerasia’*, in: *City* 8/1, 2004, 57–88.

grasped as a picture” in its totality thereafter.⁶ Thus maps such as Battista Agnese’s *Portolan Atlas* depicting the 1519–1522 Magellan–Elcano expedition’s circumnavigation of the earth while attempting to search for a western route to Southeast Asia and a 1558 copy of Caspar Vopel’s influential 1545 world map offer the reader a picture of a chimeric Amerasia. The Vopel map also serves as the basis for a collaborative digital project led by the authors that can be productively used alongside the book to explore cartography’s global histories.⁷ It is of great significance that this expansive Amerasia is not merely a top-down narrative of Europe’s desire to comprehend, classify, and control the world. Contra Martin Heidegger’s *Weltbild*, the authors propose that the geopolitical conception of Amerasia was shaped through interactions, (mis)communications, and exchanges between Europeans and the peoples they encountered in colonial worlds.

The book culminates with the Manila Galleon and histories of connectivity across the Pacific Ocean. Annotating this history as “Amerasia Made Real” (p. 346), Horodowich and Nagel highlight how Asian objects such as porcelain, silk, and lacquer “brought Asian and American people and material culture into ever closer contact” (p. 349). Along with the circulation of materials and objects, we also read about figures such as Catarina de San Juan of Puebla, the widely venerated seventeenth-century Catholic visionary of Indian origin, who has now been recovered in historiography as pivotal to early modern (South) Asian American histories.⁸ Indeed, this *longue durée* account of transpacific trade and migration offers a richer and more nuanced story of Asia America, one that does not begin with the California gold rush in the mid-nineteenth century. In doing so, the authors also show how Amerasia as a concept can cast “a world in flux, where migration continually unsettles the categories that would stabilize a worldview” (p. 367). Notwithstanding the concluding sections on tangible material histories of Asia in the Americas, much of the book focuses on Amerasia as a discourse in Europe’s imaginary before “later colonialist models of geography and history” (p. 25) indelibly shaped the world that we now inhabit. Thus, for Horodowich and Nagel, Amerasia’s potential to unsettle is perhaps most prominent before eighteenth-century Orientalism

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Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, transl. by William Lovitt, New York 1977, 129.

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See the project’s website: [Amerasia. An inquiry into early modern imaginative geography](#) (June 11, 2024).

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See, for example, Diego Javier Luis, *The First Asians in the Americas. A Transpacific History*, Cambridge, MA 2024 and Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico. From Chinos to Indians*, New York 2014.

became, in Edward W. Said's words, a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient".⁹

Yet, Empire is – and never was – solely a discursive formation. It would serve us well to remember that the very year an image of an Indonesian dagger or a "Zemes Idolum Diabolicum" was published in Linz as a paradigmatic example of "Amerasian assimilation" (p. 301), Jan Pieterszoon Coen of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie had declared genocidal war and massacred and enslaved 90 percent of the population of the Banda Islands in Indonesia in order to control the global nutmeg trade.¹⁰ Coen's intentions were always clear. In a 1614 letter to the Heeren XVII, Coen had avowed that "[t]rade in the Indies must be conducted under the protection and favor of Your Honors' weapons, and that the weapons must be paid for by the profits from trade; we cannot carry on trade without war nor wage war without trade".¹¹ On the other end of the Amerasian continuum was that shattering period in world history described by Jamaican cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter as "one of 'history's monumental crimes,' a brutal invasion and conquest that led to a degree of genocidal extinction and of still ongoing ecological disaster unprecedented in human history".¹² Even as the authors note that "Amerasia was inextricably bound up with the worst of what came to pass in new worlds East and West, including Coronado's and Oñate's murderous campaigns in search of Asian wealth or Gonzalo Pizarro's genocidal quest for cinnamon, the forced labor of the silver mines of Potosí" (p. 366), the concept-term presents Horodowich and Nagel a "basis of some of the most penetrating European critiques of European institutions and biases, from Thomas More to Michel de Montaigne and beyond" (p. 366). In the end, then, the book is about an imperialist Europe gradually but determinedly establishing its global power. While this post-1492 history might indeed be discursively posited as a "now largely forgotten 'pre-exoticist' model that dominated European representational practices" (p. 17), its concrete imprint in Asia, Africa, and the Americas was, as we know all too well, savagely brutal.

It is against the specter of Europe's Amerasia that we might, then, think of another Amerasia contrapuntally enunciated by people who actually inhabited and belonged to this expanded world. After all, Said had also noted that "resistance, far from being merely

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Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 2014 [1978], 3.

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For a recent reappraisal, see Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse. Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Chicago 2021.

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Reproduced in Herman T. Colenbrander (ed.), *Jan Pietersz. Coen. Bescheiden omtrent zijn bedrijf in Indië [...]*, The Hague, 1919, 97–98. Translation mine.

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Sylvia Wynter, 1492. A New World View, in: Vera L. Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (eds.), *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas. A New World View*, Washington, DC 1995, 5–57, here 5.

a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history. [...] [*W*riting back to the metropolitan cultures, disrupting the European narratives of the Orient and Africa, replacing them with either a more playful or a more powerful new narrative style is a major component in the process.”¹³ Recall Abu’l-Fazl’s *Alam-i Nau*. In the twentieth century, the obdurate traces of this other Amerasia can be found in the 1968–1969 demands by the Third World Liberation Front – a San Francisco Bay Area coalition of Asian American, African American, Native American, and Mexican American student organizations – for representation and recognition in university curricula.¹⁴ Of course, much like Amerasia, Europe as an idea or a territory is neither fixed nor homogenous. But taking Dipesh Chakrabarty’s hyperreal Europe – the Europe “reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern”¹⁵ – as the starting point in global histories of imperialism involves a categorical reevaluation of the concept-term Amerasia from our besieged present. As for Europe’s conjectural Amerasia, it continues to raise its head in the present not just in the polyglot world of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, as the authors note, but when I – a brown man of Indian origin living in California – am accosted as a “bad hombre” on the streets of New York City by a group of virulent white men during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and warned that I would soon be deported to Mexico. Where after that?

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Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York 1993, 216.

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For an art historical account of the Third World Liberation Front, see Atrayee Gupta, *Non-Aligned. Art, Decolonization, and the Third World Project in India, ca. 1930–1960*, New Haven, CT 2025 (forthcoming).

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Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ 2000, 28.