

Archipelagic Thinking in the Indian Ocean World: ‘The Story of Sindbad the Sailor’ and Alan Villiers’s *Sons of Sindbad*

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**Archipelagic thinking in the Indian Ocean World: ‘The Story of Sindbad the Sailor’
and Alan Villiers’s *Sons of Sindbad***

Sindbad himself, liar that he was, could not have concocted adventures such as were commonplace with them; Sindbad himself, that old Arab scoundrel, would not have been ashamed to ship out with us. I sometimes tried to imagine that old reprobate as one of these merchant-adventurers of ours. He must have been much the same kind of man. All our wanderers from the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf were potential Sindbads, even the sailors, each with his chest of goods and his readiness for any sort of profitable adventure. (Villiers 105)

Introduction

In the above passage, Alan Villiers calls the medieval character Sindbad the Sailor into the mid-twentieth century Indian Ocean world by imagining him as a contemporary on board the dhow *The Triumph of Righteousness*. *Sons of Sindbad* is both the title of his travelogue and the heading of the chapter in which the comment appears and, through the use of “*sons*”, Villiers overlays his empirical account with the rich, textural world of the fantastic. Since the translation of the story into the European literary canon, the figure of Sindbad the Sailor has captured the imagination of audiences around the world. For modern readers his name has become synonymous with wealth, adventure and exploration and to enter his world is to travel back in time and across imaginative and cultural frontiers. Investigating Sindbad therefore requires delving into both the medieval Indian Ocean world as well as the story as text. In this dissertation I will examine the story of “Sindbad the Sailor and Sindbad the Porter” and Alan Villiers’s travelogue *Sons of Sindbad* in an attempt to make connections

between the texts and to determine the why and how of Villiers's use of Sindbad in the modern Indian Ocean context.

A Brief History of 'Sindbad the Sailor' and the *Arabian Nights*

"Sindbad the Sailor" is one of the stories that we know from *Alf Layla wa-layla*, literally *One Thousand Nights and a Night* (Irwin 2) which has come to contain amongst others: "Aladdin", "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves", "The Merchant and the Demon", "The Ebony Horse" and "The City of Brass". On the collection of stories known as *The Nights* Jorge Luis Borges once said: "It is a book so vast that it is not necessary to read it, for it is a part of our memory" (574); it is thus, a collection that is transcendent of the written word. Borges's words point us backwards in time towards the collection's origin as a book without authors. Though often contained today in a single volume descended in form from Antoine Galland's 1704 French publication, "Sindbad" was originally independent, translated by Galland in 1701 four years prior to the emergence of *The Nights*. On "The Story of Sindbad the Sailor and Sindbad the Porter",¹ Muhsin Mahdi points out that "there is hardly any doubt that [Galland] translated it from one or more Arabic manuscripts that presented it as a self-contained, independent work having nothing to do with the *Nights*" (18). Francesca Bellino, in her recent study on the development and history of *Sindbad the Sailor*,² describes how the Sindbad cycle came to be included in *The Nights* between Galland's original publication in 1704 and the four major nineteenth-century recensions: Calcutta I (1814–1818), Breslau (1825–1843), Būlāq (1835) and Calcutta II (1839–1842).

¹ Often known by other names for example in the Bulaq edition merely as *The Story of Sindbad the Sailor*

² "I Sette Viaggi Di Sindbad Il Marino: Un Romanzo Arabo Nelle Mille e Una Notte" (2015): "The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor: A Novel in the Arabic Arabian Nights" (2015) (my own translation).

Though these editions contain some variation, it is clear that they are descended from a common ancestor and scholar Peter Molan says that the different editions “offer a marvellous example of the way in which an oral tale may be altered in its presentation and yet remain unaltered as to its significance, its ‘message,’ and its ‘structure’” (238). Editor of *The Arabian Nights: Norton Critical Edition* (2010)³ Daniel Heller-Roazen complements the idea of a transcendental “message” and “structure” when he says that, before the *Nights* found its way into European languages, it “already possessed one fundamental trait that it retains today: that of being a work in movement, caught in the passage from territory to territory, culture to language, language to language” (viii). The Sindbad cycle is an embodiment of this movement, a product of centuries of Indian Ocean trade which involved the comingling and entanglement of different cultural strands, resulting in a dense web of narrative bearing the marks of Greek, Persian, Iranian, Indian and perhaps even Chinese influence. It is this sense of dynamic movement that is both fundamental to, and responsible for, the fluid nature of the Sindbad cycle and its mercurial adaptability. The malleability and continued translatability of the narrative into different forms and interpretations (as well as languages) is a product of its origin and conception, a tale of adventure and mobility and resistance to settled domesticity and stasis.

Arabian Nights scholar Wen-Chin Ouyang embodies the transnational capabilities of the Sindbad cycle in her paper “Whose Story Is It? Sindbad the Sailor in Literature and Film” (2014). She describes how as a child living in Libya she came to the *Arabian Nights* through Sindbad, first in the Arabic language dubbed over a Japanese produced cartoon, and then in a Chinese printed text as she was learning her mother tongue (133). The Sindbad that Ouyang describes breaching across culture and language has, since Galland’s 1701 translation, been

³ This is the edition I will use for the purpose of this dissertation: Husain Haddawy’s translation of the Bulaq edition, translated by Muhsin Mahdi and edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen, as it represents a complete rendition of the narrative descended from the Syrian manuscript obtained and translated by Antoine Galland.

written into and adapted into the western canon in various permutations. Edgar Allen Poe added “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” in 1845 providing Sindbad with an eighth voyage while John Barth in 1991 re-interpreted the character in a modernist version *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* and recently, in 2003, the DreamWorks animation *Sindbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* used the structure of “Sindbad” for a skeleton on which to flesh out an alternative tale which was more Greek mythology than Arabian Nights.⁴

While the name “Sindbad” is known, the details of the narrative remain ephemeral and undefined. This is indicative of “Sindbad the Sailor’s” pervasive presence, repeated use and comingling with other tales. Ouyang points out that “[w]hen a story travels it absorbs the priorities of, or is absorbed into, the new host culture, genre or medium and comes to ‘represent’ them” (13–14). Sindbad, in various forms, therefore operates at the interstices between worlds or more pointedly, challenges traditional conceptions of boundaries and space, as I will demonstrate later in the way that Alan Villiers, informed by the western canon, uses Sindbad as a figure endemic to the Indian Ocean World, a figure that allows “translation” of this world between Orient and Occident.

The Indian Ocean World and the Era of Sindbad

“The Story of Sindbad the Sailor” is set in Baghdad at the time of the 7th Abbasid caliphate Haroun al’Rashid, thus locating it with historical specificity between 786 and 809 CE at the height of what is considered to be the Islamic Golden Age. Scholarship on the Indian Ocean agrees on a continuous history of trade, encouraged by the monsoon winds and mediated by the spread of common language and culture around the littoral zones.

⁴ This list is by no means exhaustive either culturally, across language, or across mediums but is inserted here to show some of the ways that the story is adapted while retaining the essence of the adventurer.

Trade and movement within the Indian Ocean world were regulated by the weather system of the monsoon seasons. In January, the Northeast monsoon winds, assisted by trans-oceanic currents, carried traders from the Persian Gulf down the East African coast as far as the Mozambique straits. In July this pattern of winds and currents reversed into the Southwest monsoon. A return trip from the Arabian Peninsula down the East African coast and back would therefore take up to a year. The journey between the northern rim of the Indian Ocean and the northwest coast of India is less strictly defined by these winds and so facilitates more frequent contacts.

The diversity of the ecological zones around the Indian Ocean, from the forests of Madagascar and the savannah of East Africa, to the nutrient-rich waters surrounding the desert zones of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, onward to the monsoon rainforests of the western Indian seaboard, contributed to the need for trade as a result of their production of complementary goods; for example: fish, pearls and dates from Arabia were traded for timber, ivory and gold from East Africa and timber and spices from India (20-23).⁵ The combination of the seasonal monsoons and the need to trade goods between the different ecological zones created the ideal conditions for the percolation of complex cosmopolitanisms within the Indian Ocean littoral. Michael Pearson stresses that sea trade was coastal, with entrepôts serving as nodes of connectivity across the water and as access points to the hinterlands. This maritime culture of trade via dhows saw people and ideas spread around and between the littoral zones.⁶ However, what made this world unique was the imposition of extended stopovers as sailors waited for the monsoon seasons to change.⁷

Zanzibari scholar Abdul Sheriff, in his book *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean* (2010), describes the centuries-old overlaying of existing trade routes that culminated in what

⁵ “The Sea”, Chapter two of Abdul Sheriff’s *Dhow Cultures*, gives fuller details of the workings and interconnections between these regions (15-23).

⁶ In “Introduction: Oceanic Cultural Studies” (1-9) Ghosh and Muecke describe this maritime flow of people and ideas as “cultural modalities” (2).

⁷ A point made most clearly by Michael Pearson in *The Indian Ocean*.

he calls the “Era of Sindbad”. He says that from as far back as the 6th millennium BCE there is a “very early circulation of men and goods” between the Oman peninsula and Baluchistan. The “archeological discovery of a copal pendant [...] ultimately from Zanzibar, Madagascar, Mozambique region of East Africa” (131), dated to about the 3rd century BCE, further widens the scope of these networks. What Sheriff is pointing towards is a history of Indian Ocean trade that stretches back into obscurity but which comes into focus and is witnessed through the first-century account of *The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea*. The *Periplus* is an account of trade from the Red Sea, down the East African coast and along the Malabar Coasts of India. Written by an unknown Greek merchant, its subject matter is that of ports, people, and customs, as well as an account of trade and trade goods. The author of the *Periplus* corroborates the idea of these already ancient exchanges when, describing the farthest point of trade down the African coast, he highlights the already well established cultural residue of this area, he says that “[u]nder the king the people of Mouza hold it by payment of tribute, and send ships with captains and agents who are mostly Arabs, and are familiar through residence and intermarriage with the nature of the places and their language” (30).

Sheriff suggests that the Roman monopoly and trade of exotic goods from the East was superimposed onto already existing trade routes when he writes that “local and regional networks were older and quantitatively more important than the long-distance trade in luxuries, which were extensions of the internal trade networks” (141). The use of already existing networks becomes a recurrent theme within the Indian Ocean and Sheriff points out that these networks – well documented by evidence of Iranian influence, specifically through those who claim Shirazi decent – can be found from the East African coast as far as Zanzibar

to the southern coast of China. Thus, the centuries before the rise of the Abbasids⁸ were already thick with cultural confluence.

Following the Iranian interval we arrive at what Sheriff labels “The Era of Sindbad”, a period constituted by “the almost simultaneous rise of wealthy empires at both ends of the so-called land and sea ‘silk routes’” (171).⁹ The political stability created by the rise of the T’ang and subsequent dynasties in China was complimented by the Islamic unification of the Fertile Crescent¹⁰ under the Abbasid caliphate. Under this broad peace, trade and commerce flourished and “with Arabic and Persian the common languages of administration and long distance trade, the older Arab, Iranian and other communities coalesced into a single though heterogeneous Muslim community” (172). The Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur founded the new capital in Baghdad and proclaimed: “[t]his is the Tigris. There is no obstacle between us and China; everything on the sea can come to us on it” (in Sheriff 172). Though the focus falls on Baghdad as the centre of the very cosmopolitan medieval Indian Ocean world, al-Mansur draws attention to the water as a medium of connectivity between cultural and economic hubs; the same waterways that are so central to Sindbad the Sailor.

The Indian Ocean at this time functioned with no political entity enforcing or seeking monopoly over trade and was therefore “a genuine *mare liberum* (open sea) in which the major actors were a series of small city-states strung around the rim of the Indian Ocean” (171). Sheriff describes a world of cultural diversity and communality which fostered a sense of “Indian Ocean mercantile solidarity” (173). The documents found in the Cairo Geniza (dating from the twelfth century AD) attest to this broad sense of connectivity which forms the basis for Amitav Ghosh’s book *In an Antique Land* (2010). The novel cum

⁸According to the encyclopaedia Britannica the “Abbāsīd Dynasty, second of the two great dynasties of the Muslim Empire of the Caliphate ... over threw the Umayyad caliphate in AD 750 and reigned as the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate until destroyed by the Mongol invasion in 1258”. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Abbasid-dynasty>.

⁹In *The Indian Ocean*, Michael Pearson gives an extensive account of the Indian Ocean world and the effect and influence of Islam on littoral communities (chapter 4: Muslims in the Indian Ocean” pp62-112).

¹⁰The Fertile Crescent describes the area from the Atlantic Iberian Peninsula across North Africa to Southwest Asia.

anthropological study cum historiography reconstructs this broadly cosmopolitan world of sailors and traders who travelled across the open sea and bartered along coasts. The narrative describes a cultural arena deeply connected through commerce, where slaves could hold positions of great power, Muslims and Jews lived side by side and trade sustained relationships that stretched across the breadth of the ocean. Sheriff says that it was an era of “mariners scouring the Indian Ocean, whose adventures have been immortalised in the stories of *Sindbad the Sailor* and *Kitab Ajaid al-Hind* (The Book of the Marvels of India)” (173). Looking at the story of “Sindbad the Sailor” therefore means not only looking back into the world of the medieval Indian Ocean, but also referencing the real from the imagined and the prosaic from the fantastical.

Fact, Fiction and the Shades Between

Though evidently a crafted narrative, the tale of Sindbad’s travels is often understood to have historic and geographic veracity which has rendered it an important source in a range of scholarly and maritime projects. Richard Van Leeuwen (2007) says that Sindbad “shows a remarkable effort to integrate storytelling and geographical knowledge” (ch.1), while Francesca Bellino (2015) links Sindbad to the classical figures of medieval travel writing: Tuleda, Polo and Battuta (105),¹¹ as well as to the medieval geographers Ibn Khurradādhbih and Zakariya al-Qazwini from the 9th to 13th centuries. Historian Tim Severin reconstituted Sindbad’s adventures into a single journey, literally translating and mapping it in his book *The Sindbad Voyage* (1982).¹²

¹¹“Il prototipo del viaggiatore, mercante, diretto ad Oriente e di ritorno narratore di cose straordinarie, può essere rintracciato in diversi personaggi della letteratura araba e in alcuni resoconti lasciati da famosi viaggiatori come Beniamino di Tuleda (m. 1173), Marco Polo (m. 1324) e Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (m. 1369)” (105).

¹² Published in 1982, *The Sindbad Voyage* recounts Severin’s reconstruction of a traditional sewn Arab dhow. Severin sails from Kuwait to China. Along the way he pegs specific episodes from Sindbad onto geographical

As an adventurer and a historian, Severin wanted to prove that the voyages of Sindbad could be based, at least in part, on fact and the geographical mapping serves to illustrate this point. He says that “with the lands described in the early Arab geography books, it was obvious that many of Sindbad’s adventures took place in countries which the Arab geographers also described in their texts” (ch. 1).¹³ Furthermore, Severin sourced building materials and craftsmen from around the Indian Ocean and had the *Sohar* constructed in Oman using traditional ship-building techniques. He then sailed to China, with a crew of Omanis, Indians and Europeans, mapping events from Sindbad’s adventures onto specific geographical locations. For Severin:

Sindbad the Sailor was a symbol for the whole extraordinary phenomenon of early Arab seafaring in the same way that the author of the adventures of Sindbad had used the figure of Sindbad, whether real or imaginary, as a peg on which to hang a whole series of escapades drawn from many sources. (ch. 1)

Through a process of mapping geography, commodities, resources, weather patterns and legends, Severin reduces Sindbad’s adventure to a single journey.

The above scholars all attempt to accentuate or enhance the story’s value by articulating Sindbad into a discourse of the historically-real and away from the marvelous. Severin’s project is particularly hyperbolic in that his efforts are directed at recreating a sense of authenticity of dhow culture in a manner that sits outside of quotidian experience. Sindbad functions as a relic, his narrative an exaggeration of existing possibilities. Alan Villiers, writing forty years before Tim Severin, focuses on the existing, lived experience of the Arab

locations, visiting the Laccadive islands “the first in a chain of stepping stones which led early Arab navigators to China” (ch. 6); the island of Minicoy whose matriarchal society he conflates with the Indian practice of “suttee or widow suicide” (ch. 6) and ties it to Sindbad’s fourth voyage; and the island of Serendeeb or, modern day Sri Lanka to which he draws parallels with Sindbad’s adventure in the valley of diamonds (ch. 8), and the island where he encounters the Old Man of the Sea, Java or Borneo. This list is not exhaustive. I have used the Kindle edition and thus use chapter numbers instead of page numbers.

¹³ Severin makes special reference to the book *The Marvels of India* written by Buzurg ibn Shahriyar around 955.

sailors whom he sees as connected through genealogy to Sindbad the Sailor. This too shifts the focus away from the fantastic and onto the real but where Severin recreates the voyage as spectacular, Villiers participates and in a more concentrated and sustained manner, uses Sindbad as a literary embodiment of these Arab seafarers.

Sons of Sindbad

In 1939 Alan Villiers travelled to Kuwait via the Arabian Peninsula in search of an Arab dhow to sail with into the Indian Ocean. He was looking for a fleet of pure sailing vessels, unaffected by what he perceived as the nefarious effects of steam driven modernity. His project, undertaken on the verge of World War II, is positioned on the edges between the past and the present, between steam and sail and on the outskirts of Empire. It is not just that wind-powered sailing was in decline but also that the magic and the mystery of the sea had been replaced by the sense that the world is now known, mapped and explored. Villiers's own voyage, without the danger of sea monsters and giant island-fish, is sedate when compared with the adventures of Sindbad and yet retains a subliminal tension being under duress from wider political machinations and the increasing possibility of another world war.¹⁴

Alan Villiers uses "Sindbad the Sailor" as a narrative mooring to tap into a romantic idea of the ocean and exploration that has long since died away. Grace Pundyk, in her Masters dissertation *Sea Change: Alan Villiers and the Subversion of the Arabian Travel Narrative*, notes the peculiar lack of representation that Villiers experiences in anthologies of travel writing. She discusses Villiers's important contribution to Arab travel literature and the ways

¹⁴ Villiers's attempt to seek a quieter, more peaceful and idyllic past can be read as a reaction to rising political tensions across Europe. His recourse to the idea of the Free Sea suggests that there is an alternative to the impending conflict, a solution that relied less on aggressive expansion but more importantly, could be found by looking to the periphery of empire.

in which his mission and style were both subversive and progressive. Her dissertation was subsequently used in the introduction to *Sons of Sindbad*, republished in 2010, as well as the publication of the complete collection of his photographs: *Sons of Sindbad the Photographs* (2006). The interest and republication of Villiers's work reflects the fact that it is one of the only Arabian travel narratives that focuses almost exclusively on the sea and dhow trade. Because of the nature of the text historians Michael Pearson and Abdul Sheriff call on Villiers's work for insight into the workings and importance of the dhow trade in establishing the well documented connectivity of Indian Ocean littoral societies.

In doing a close reading of the narrative of "Sindbad the Sailor", I hope to develop a better understanding of the Sindbad-ness of his character and to explore the inherent adaptability that has allowed him to travel from the medieval Indian Ocean world and into the contemporary moment. The story's movement through time, replete with constant reimagining has fired the imagination and lent itself to multiple fields across different genres from history, to literature and travel. The recent resurgence in interest in "Sindbad" and *The Nights*,¹⁵ points towards the need for engagement with these imaginative texts that move so effortlessly between the landscape of the real and imagined. I will begin by looking at the voyages of Sindbad and the ideas of transgression and the construction of ocean spaces; focusing especially on the trope of home and away. I will then move the discussion to an examination of Villiers's travel narrative *Sons of Sindbad* and look at the ways in which he adapts, calls on and constructs Sindbad into a modern moment.

¹⁵ Marina Warner, Ferial Gazhoul, Wen Chin Ouyang and Richard Van Leeuwen, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Francesco Bellino to mention only a few.

CHAPTER ONE:**SINDBAD THE SAILOR: HOME AND AWAY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD**

The story of “Sindbad the Sailor and Sindbad the Porter”, read through the lens of a well-documented Indian Ocean cultural continuity, raises interesting questions around the polarity of the terms home and away. We first meet Sindbad the Sailor in Baghdad from where the narrative reaches out, down the Tigris River to Basra and from Basra, out into the many seas and littorals of the Indian Ocean. The ocean, its coasts and islands, provide the stage for Sindbad’s adventures and is at once a space unknown and familiar, irrespective of the distance covered by the journey. Understanding the narrative means reconciling the seeming contradiction that as Sindbad travels he is figuratively always home but that at the same time, the further he travels, the stranger the world becomes. The various layers of the fantastical and the familiar intermingle throughout the tale creating a dynamic tension between the mobility inherent in the story and the physical immobility of Sindbad in the frame narrative.

In his adventures, every landfall is made upon an island and every island is presented as an entrepôt, a site of trade, commerce and exploration. The Indian Ocean World is usually approached in terms of trade but Sindbad – like Ibn Battuta – suggests that people travelled for a range of motivations. At the beginning of each voyage (except for the first), Sindbad is galvanized by a deep sense of longing “for travel and sightseeing and commerce and profit” (Heller-Roazen 316). His desire for sight-seeing prefigures and is suggestive of the modern concept of tourism and, quite typically of tourist narratives, the tale is recounted from a position of safety; from his compound an aged Sindbad imparts the adventures of his youth. The stories challenge and confirm domiciliary thought and function as part of a deeper tapestry of interwoven, overlapping and recurring themes.

This chapter will examine the frame narrative followed by the seven voyages of Sindbad the Sailor. I will tease out elements of the ordinary and the fabulous and scrutinise the construction of the ocean space and how, through the transgression of boundaries – real and perceived – the traveller is immersed and rendered irrevocably changed. The overarching theme will hinge on ideas of home and away and the resulting tension between movement and stasis and how through the exchange with the Porter the story resists the finality of a neat conclusion.

Sindbad at Home: The Frame Narrative

The frame narrative of Sindbad the Sailor is important to the story as it sets the tone and contains within it the seeds of the themes which permeate the seven voyages. Narration and not just narrative is central to the unfolding of the action. It is by relating the tale that Sindbad seeks reconciliation between the polarised forces of home and away. In the following section I will delve into the setting of the frame narrative and examine the relationship between Sindbad the Sailor and Sindbad the Porter.

Sindbad the Porter, exhausted by the heavy load that he must carry in the heat of the day, is drawn to the shade and cool sanctuary of a merchant's house. He sits on a bench outside and through the doorway can hear birds and the pleasant sound of musical instruments. As he looks into the compound he sees a paradisiacal garden. In this moment he despairs and recites a poem that laments the will of Allah who grants differing fortunes to different men and the injustice of the arbitrary distinctions; “[h]ow many wretched men toil without rest, And how many enjoy life in the shade! (Heller-Roazen 304). Hearing, and being moved by the poem, the lord of the house summons the Porter to meet him. Unable to refuse, the Porter steps over the threshold and into the walled garden. Once inside he is led into a

banquet hall filled with great lords and noblemen, and sees at the upper end of the hall “a venerable and majestic man whose beard was turning gray” (304). This ageing man is none other than Sindbad the Sailor. Sindbad asks the Porter to sit and eat with him and then begins his chronicle; “Porter, my story is astonishing, and I will relate to you all that happened to me before I attained this prosperity and came to this place” (305). The narration of each voyage spans the length of a day and into the night and at the end of each performance, Sindbad bestows a gift of one hundred gold pieces on the Porter.

The Garden of Paradise

Initially attracted by the shade, Sindbad the Porter looks through the doorway and sees “inside the house a great garden” (303). Frequently found within the *Nights* and redolent of both paradise¹⁶ and original sin across the Abrahamic religions, the garden is a place of quiet introspection and spiritual growth as well as temptation and betrayal.¹⁷ As a contained space, made safe and protected behind a wall, the garden is analogous with the paradisiacal islands – constructed as contained, unified spaces – visited by Sindbad during his voyages. Both instances, island and garden, become spaces which promise sanctuary and reward but are fraught with danger. In support of this space of paradox, Jane Brown, in *The Pursuit of Paradise*, says that:

[t]he secret garden, a hidden place of enchantment and peace, where all our ills can be cured, is one of the most powerful ideas in cultural history. It is a place of submission,

¹⁶ In Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise*, set on the Swahili Coast and shown to be a remnant of the world of Sindbad at the dawn of Euro-colonialism in East Africa, the walled garden owned by the merchant uncle Aziz, harbors both unattainable fantasies and desires but also dangers, the sickness of solitude and the madness of incarceration. The story explores Paradise and the transgression that crossing the boundary represents. The wall protects but also offers a glimpse of the secret and the unknown.

¹⁷ Moving outside of Adam and Eve’s garden of good and evil, the garden is where King Shahzaman witnesses the infidelity of his brother, King Shahrayar’s wife with the slaves. It is the episode that triggers Sharayar’s rage and leads him to marry a new virgin each night before beheading them (Heller-Roazen 5-13).

of refuge, of sanctuary and of looking inwards for hidden treasures. It is private, but more than that, it is a place for spiritual and soulful conversation, seclusion and once upon a time at least, a place to encounter both God and the devil. (50)

Sindbad's garden is surrounded by a wall, the utility of which can be conceptualised in two ways. It can be seen as protection from the dangers of the outside world or as a means of imprisonment. The gate, as an aperture, controls the movement between the outside world – full of dust and sun and toil – from the secret world of the garden with all of its earthly delights. It is only by invitation and the physical act of crossing over the threshold that the Porter enters Sindbad the Sailor's world. As he enters through the gate, the landscape transforms from the harshness of the beating sun to the delicate interplay of shadows and light. It marks a conceptual shift from the stark quotidian reality to the mercurial world of the inner reaches of the mind and imagination. Sindbad the Porter, by moving into the sanctuary, crosses the border between – what to him – is known and unknown. It is a movement from the literal world into the ambiguous world of narrative possibility. Crossing the border introduces the theme of transgression that will inform the narration of Sindbad's voyages.

The Act of Telling

Inviting the Porter into the compound and relating his story to him, rather than the already assembled group of nobles and merchants, suggests a particular performance and dialectic. Picking up on the disparity between the characters and their respective roles, Mia Irene Gerhardt noted that the regular function of storytelling in the pre-modern Arabian world, was as entertainment for the wealthy, saying that “[o]nly in Sindbad the Sailor, the customary roles are reversed, and the distinguished, wealthy man's entertaining—in every sense of the word—the poor man gives added point to the frame” (434). It is the incongruity of their relationship that invites further enquiry. The Sailor, wealthy beyond measure is in a sense

immobile and trapped behind the walls of his compound while the Porter, bound in servitude to a life of toil, moves between the inner and outer realms; free but enslaved. Sindbad effectively pays the porter one hundred gold pieces at the end of each recitation as if for a service rendered. The passive act of listening becomes suggestive of a load, a weight that the porter must bear. The Porter is enriched by the experience, receiving both metaphorical and literal reward, narrative and the gold.

Much of the resonance of the Sindbad cycle, elaborated by scholarship on the tale, emanates from the exchange between these two characters. On a superficial level the characters share the name “Sindbad” which is often interpreted as connecting them on a deeper psychological level, a device which places them on an equal footing. Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim saw Sindbad the Sailor as the id drive, a representation of restless disorder, while his foil or ego is embodied by the character of the Porter.¹⁸ The frame narrative for Bettelheim is an attempt to reconcile these two halves into a cohesive whole. He states that “in the story the two sides of our ambivalences are isolated and projected each onto a different figure” (85). Bettelheim is however disappointed with the end of the story, frustrated that the two characters are not finally reconciled and do not live happily ever after. It is this very refusal to neatly reconcile that suggests the limits of a modern psychological interpretation.

Gerhardt goes on to suggest that by reversing the roles, the powerful relating to the powerless, the narrative assumes an emancipatory function.¹⁹ Ferial Ghazoul, arguing similarly for the cathartic release, says that Sinbad is “enacting and reliving a personal experience, and a traumatic one at that. He is publicizing his inner self and thus, in a sense,

¹⁸ See Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 1976, pp. 83–84; see also Van Leeuwen, *The Thousand and One Nights: Space, Travel and Transformation*, 2007, (ch.2).

¹⁹ The emancipatory function evinced through the frame narrative is a common trope in the *Thousand and One Nights*. In the frame narrative that contains all the Nights, Scheherazade for example must save herself (and all women for that matter) from Sharayar the king, who kills each bride the morning after consummation to prevent their infidelity. Through the process of story-telling she saves both herself, all women and so the kingdom from ultimate destruction.

expelling the horrific visions” (ch. 6). In this respect the Porter functions as a vessel for Sindbad’s story which takes on the appearance of a pseudo-confessional but, beyond his utility for Sindbad, possess very little agency of his own. Gazoul, like Gerhardt, suggests that by baring all, Sindbad relieves himself of a burden that he was unable to share with the audience already present. The main emphasis must therefore fall on to the act of telling.

The exchange between the characters is congruent with Sindbad’s role as a merchant but also with the position of Baghdad as the centre of Indian Ocean born trade. The ebb and flow of the performance – recounting the stories and their subsequent movement into the city – resonates with Sindbad’s repeated adventures into the ocean a movement suggestive of the monsoon cycles. While the sea is rendered as an untameable mystery it is simultaneously a space of imaginative possibility. It is a place for the magical and fantastical realizations of an otherness that exists beyond the city, beyond the shore in the depths of the ocean itself. The fact that after each voyage and encounter with the fantastical and strange Sindbad returns to Baghdad implicates a discourse and performance between the two worlds. In the narrative world, after being invoked in the opening line, Baghdad is never fully explored. While the Porter is able to leave Sindbad’s compound, the audience is never made aware of his existence outside the ambit of the tale. In this way – at least for the audience – Baghdad, like the ocean in the voyages, is rendered as an unknowable space. While for Sindbad his compound is the site of settled domesticity for the Porter the scene of narration is paradoxically a site of wonder.

I suggest that the importance of the frame narrative is in the exchange and movement of the story. Through the act of telling, Sindbad resists the inevitability of a final conclusion. He passes on the tale to the Porter so that it may move beyond the confines of his compound and so allow Sindbad to transcend his circumstance. It is a movement that pre-empts the exchange of narrative during his voyages and therefore constitutes the recognition of

interdependence and interconnectivity within the Indian Ocean world. The reader, like the Porter, by bearing witness to the tale is inculcated in the perpetuation and exchange of the cycle thus deepening and thickening the web through both space and time.

The Tension of being at Home

If the central element of the tale is its transmission and movement across borders then this raises questions about the idea of settled domesticity. For Sindbad the Sailor, the domestic space is both a sanctuary and a site of tension. While he narrates from the safety of his compound, the formal patterning of the narrative is arranged so that each return is followed by a period of celebration and high living; a theme commonplace amongst sailors, as we will see in the next chapter when we turn to Allan Villiers and *Sons of Sindbad*. On the surface – his initial rapture at return and bouts of joyous celebration – home for Sindbad takes on the appearance of a site of repose, a shelter from the storm. However, once sequestered there, he is quickly overtaken by a desire and longing to voyage and adventure. When home, Sindbad is thus becalmed and what should be indicative of rest, instead threatens his desire for maritime mobility. In the world of folklore, says Ghazoul, “Sindbad is a special case, because unlike the more reasonable heroes of folktales, he has an internal resistance to equilibrium and an unexplained drive for disequilibrium” (ch. 6). The ‘disequilibrium’ experienced by Sindbad is the result, specifically, of being home. Home, as a resting point, becomes synonymous with the conclusion of the voyage, the end of narrative and so of life itself.

The paradox lies in the fact that for Sindbad home is also his most sought after destination, a destination that can only be reached by travelling. Sindbad relates the following:

One day, a group of merchants came by, showing signs of travel. Their sight reminded me of the *days of my return from my travel* and my joy at seeing my country

again and reuniting with my relatives and friends and dear ones. So I felt a longing for travel and trade, and I resolved to undertake another voyage. (Heller-Roazen 338; my emphasis)

In this moment Sindbad, ensconced in all the comforts of home, sees the merchants *returning* from travel which prompts him to undertake another voyage. The motivation is not trade or sight-seeing, nor tourism or profit, but return. It is symptomatic of his hybridity, the way in which he has been changed by his journeys; the longing to be in one place (home or away) disrupted by an over-riding but paradoxical desire for return.

The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor

The narrative begins “[t]here lived in Baghdad, in the time of the Commander of the faithful, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid” (Heller-Roazen 303), thus underlining the importance of the city for Sindbad’s tale. Baghdad forms the narrative anchor for Sindbad and though he travels extensively, it is powerfully foregrounded as the centre of his narrative world; it is both his point of departure and the point of return. Baghdad also conjures a sense of nostalgia for the Islamic golden age under the Abbasid Caliphate whose power was at its zenith in the mid eighth century. This was a time of opulence based on trade and commerce where luxury flowed not out to sea but up the Tigris River to the city and fortunes could be easily made or lost by the hand of the Caliph or the turn of a storm.

The seven episodes – seven days across which Sindbad the Sailor narrates his story to Sindbad the Porter – make Sindbad ubiquitous. As Ferial Ghazoul points out in her book *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context* (1996), medieval Muslim geographers saw the world as split into seven different regions or *kishvars*; therefore the use of seven reflects that “the travelogue of Sindbad implies his covering the entire globe. He

has, so to speak, been everywhere” (ch. 6). By virtue of having been *everywhere*, Sindbad gains a sense of universalism. It is the sea that forms the connective tissue between his, and by extension, the readers’ exploration of the world familiar and strange. The Indian Ocean, governed by the monsoon winds and extending from the East African coast, around the Arabian Peninsula to India, Sri Lanka and beyond, forms the backdrop to Sindbad’s adventure.

Aside from Sindbad’s first voyage – where he squanders his father’s fortune and is forced to seek riches across the sea through trade – all of the subsequent voyages are undertaken when Sindbad has a deep longing for travel. He expresses it variously as a longing for: seeing other countries and islands, sight-seeing, meeting other races, hearing new things, sailing the seas, the company of other merchants, trade, barter, commerce and profit. After departure, each voyage initially involves a period of stability where Sindbad and his fellow merchants barter and divert themselves until calamity strikes in one form or another and Sindbad is thrust into uncharted territory. The ocean, representative of the unknown, is populated by islands which each in turn present Sindbad with marvellous creatures, strange beings and cultural practices. In the first voyage he encounters an island-fish and otherworldly horses, the product of the union between the land and sea. The second introduces the rukh, a giant bird that carries Sindbad deeper into the unknown world to a land of giant snakes and jewels. In the third and fourth voyages Sindbad is confronted by ogres and magians respectively and faces burial alive after marrying into a culture that dictates – after his spouse’s death – that he must accompany her into the tomb. Sindbad buys his own ship in the fifth adventure only to see it smashed by the rukh and is subsequently enslaved by the Old Man of the Sea. Washed ashore after shipwreck in the sixth voyage, Sindbad survives his companions and is taken to the King of the land who, hearing of the opulence of Baghdad, entrusts him with a gift for the Caliph. On his return, so taken is al-Rashid with his story that

it is committed to paper for all to enjoy. The seventh voyage spans a period of twenty seven years in which Sindbad, after he is shipwrecked, marries into a merchant house. He achieves great status but when he learns that the inhabitants are devil worshipers, sells his possessions and returns to Baghdad once and for all. His archipelagic narrative – movement from island to island and between entrepôts – encourages the conceptualisation of the Indian Ocean as deeply connected. Sindbad's movement is not however a traversal of blank space in service of trade and profit, but rather a passage that results in complete immersion and hybridity which leaves him indelibly changed. In what follows I will discuss aspects of the voyages in detail, drawing them out around three major themes: transgression, hybridity and the construction of the ocean space. I will then turn to the overarching theme of home and away and the function of storytelling.

Transgression: Hybridity

Sindbad, by setting off to trade, transgresses the boundary between what is known and unknown. He departs from a world of terrestrial modalities and enters the ocean space. Through both literal and metaphorical immersion Sindbad undergoes irreversible change which leaves him caught between worlds.

In the first voyage, the island that Sindbad and his companions come to rest on turns out to be a giant fish. When the sailors light a cooking fire, the fish awakens and disappears beneath the surface of the water leaving Sindbad adrift in the ocean. While islands are sites of trade and respite from the ocean, this one proves that all is not as it seems as the ground beneath the sailors' feet moves; Sindbad's encounter with the fish-island is a performance and realization of this idea. It involves the marriage of two routine occurrences - an island

and a fish, in a marvellous and fantastical act of hyperbole.²⁰ The episode casts doubt on whether perceptions and received ideas can be transferred from terrestrial to oceanic modalities. The newly perceived world is a reality comprised of the familiar and strange; it is a fiction that makes itself complete through the blending of what is known into a hybrid that belongs wholly in neither world.

The episode with the island-fish foreshadows Sindbad's encounter with King Mihrajan's servants who breed earthly horses with sea horses that rise up out of the ocean to produce offspring "whose like is not to be found on the face of the earth" (Heller-Roazen 307). It is a deliberate act of hybridization and gestures towards the overlap and connection between the sea-world of fantasy and Sindbad's Baghdadi reality. What is notable with both the sea-horses and island fish is the movement between the worlds. The boundaries are not rigid but porous and each world acts on the other. They meet at the point where the ocean joins the land and the merger of the two results in a reality that transcends both. Sindbad's immersion and movement through permeable boundaries is not only endured but results in enrichment and reward; he becomes more than the sum of his parts.

In his second voyage, after landing on a lush green island, Sindbad falls asleep next to a stream; when he awakens, he realizes that he is alone, finding "neither man nor demon" (311). He has been left behind by his crewmates and the island is transformed from paradisiacal wonderland to metaphorical desert, devoid of life either human or fantastic. At this point in the tale even the company of demons is preferable to the horror of abandonment and the drift seems to imply that rescue lies in communion. Recovering his senses he wanders about the island until he discovers a huge white dome that turns out to be an egg of

²⁰ The Arabic term for this kind of hyperbole is "Al-mubalagha [...] is to reach the ultimate limits of meaning and its furthest borders. It does not twist but it stretches the traits as far as possible" (Ghazoul ch. 6). In these terms, what Sindbad meets is always of the familiar but a version of the familiar that stretches to the borders of what is known.

extraordinary dimensions belonging to the mythical rukh “a great bird, with a huge body and outspread wings, flying in the air and veiling the sun from the island” (312). When the rukh lands and settles down to roost on the egg, Sindbad binds himself to its leg with his turban; in the morning, when it takes flight, he is transported off the island. By binding himself to the rukh he physically ties himself to the world of the fabulous. It is an act in which Sindbad resigns to and is completely overtaken by fantasy and therefore represents an enabling transgression between the real and imagined.

Though still concerned with movement through space, the mode of travel shifts from sea-borne to air-borne; a shift which allows Sindbad to escape the island by interacting with the rukh, and by extension the fantastic. Not only is Sindbad transported further into the fabulous realm but he also draws the audience in by creating a sense of wonder at the impossibility of flight. In *Stranger Magic* (2013) Marina Warner says that “fantastically imagined displacements in the stories perform a series of delighting puns on the very idea of transport – as both travel and rapture” (78). Here, the rukh performs a similar function to that of the flying carpets in other *Nights* stories; doing so by mixing the mundane – bird or carpet, with the magical – flying, mythological and monstrous. While the interaction with the rukh results in transcendence and rapture experienced through flight, it does not however lead to redemption. Sindbad is confronted with yet another scenario from which he must escape suggesting that though fantasy does transport and provide release, it is fraught with peril.

Following his flight bound to the rukh, Sindbad finds himself in a valley and unties himself only to discover that the ground is covered with precious stones and the valley filled with giant snakes. When a sheep carcass suddenly falls in front of him, he recalls a story that he had heard about a land of diamonds in which animal carcasses were deployed to extract gems from an inaccessible valley. He fills his pockets with precious stones and again trusses himself, this time to the carcass of the animal. An eagle collects the carcass in its talons and

Sindbad is delivered to the top of the mountain where the eagle is then chased away by the diamond merchants so that they can recover the gems. Sindbad reveals himself to them and relates his story.

The act of binding himself, this time to a bloody carcass in order to transcend danger, is a macabre and disturbing repetition of the previous flight. Sindbad is able to re-enter the world of men by tying himself to the bloody flesh of the real world. Sindbad's slippage between the two worlds – the fantastic on the one hand and the base and grotesquely real on the other – furthers the idea that these worlds are not discreet but rather deeply connected and Sindbad by relying on his wits must use both in order to survive. He is not only delivered back to Baghdad but returns laden with gems. The movement between the worlds, though perilous, is richly rewarding.

Though Sindbad has entered the realm of the fantastic, it is still a world within which he feels at home. His experience of being simultaneously surrounded by the familiar and yet strange and the resultant gradual split from himself through the narrative, is suggestive of Homi Bhabha's essay "Signs taken for Wonders". Bhabha discusses hybridity as a reaction against colonial discourses of power, in which "[h]ybridity represents that ambivalent "turn" of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" (155). While the world that Sindbad travels through is not, as discussed above, made up of particular nation states or structures of power synonymous with colonialism, what becomes apparent, by looking at Sindbad in light of Bhabha's argument, is the particular rendering of the 'other' and the ways in which hybridity challenges these conceptions through a double-vision in which the self is one and the same, recognizable in the other. Indian Ocean societies, as represented here, anticipate the kinds of hybridisation that will be claimed as part of postcoloniality – and yet these are hybrids that come not out of colonial power relations but rather the merger between

the worlds of the land and the sea. Unlike the hybridization of peoples and cultures that occur through contacts, contact-zones, exchanges, assimilations and appropriations – expressed predominantly in postcolonial discourse, and concerning itself explicitly with the breaching of cultural border-lines – the merger of the fantastic and the real is the product of exchanges that can only happen outside of medieval societal norms.

“Sindbad the Sailor” is therefore not only about crossing the ocean and trading goods but about immersion and interaction with the otherness evident both home and away. The act of travel renders Sindbad indelibly changed. He becomes a sea-man who belongs fully in neither world. Sindbad’s narrative resists the neat compartmentalization of these worlds; through immersion and travel, “Sindbad the Sailor” illustrates a world of messy imbrications, blurred edges and porous boundaries that constantly interact.

The Construction of the Ocean Space

Sindbad’s voyage into the unfamiliar is a movement into what social geographer, Philip E. Steinburg, describes as the untameable and mysterious ocean space: a space that is borderless and vast, subject only to the weather and the waves. What happens to Sindbad within the ocean space is a reflection of the ways in which the ocean and especially the deep ocean is constructed. Steinburg observes that “the societies of the Indian Ocean constructed the sea in a manner similar to their construction of the desert” (49). In this respect, the desert, like the sea, is a space of distance and not of place. However, Sindbad’s immersion suggests deep engagement with the ocean and thus renders it not only meaningful but also culturally alchemic.

Each of Sindbad's departures is undertaken without a set destination; he simply travels "from sea to sea and from island to island"²¹ (Heller-Roazen 306). The lack of specificity not only reinforces the idea that Sindbad traverses the globe and travels everywhere, but is also suggestive of the medieval conception of the sea in Indian Ocean societies who "viewed the sea as a source of imported goods, but the sea itself was perceived as a space apart from society, an untameable mystery" (Steinburg 45). The ocean was therefore a space considered to be outside societal norms and Sindbad's transgressions into this space are representative of a deep encounter with the ocean. In the island fish episode outlined above for example, the perception of land is only a small, visible part of the giant creature. The bulk of the beast is submerged, hidden from view and so is not just a betrayal of the senses but a symbol complicit in conceptualizing a framework that exists completely outside of what is known, safe and expected. When its true nature is revealed, it has the effect of unsettling received ideas by expanding and deepening the inherent possibilities through the action of the fantastic.

Steinburg says that "[t]he sea and the sailors who crossed the sea served important functions *for* land-based society, but, at least while at sea, they were not constructed as being *of* society" (50). According to this statement Sindbad, a representative of Baghdad or land-based society, therefore moves outside of these social paradigms and the overt function that he performs at sea is that of self-enrichment through trade. However, his movement into the sea space brings him into direct contact with the mysterious other, a contact that through the unfolding of the narrative results in not only material enrichment but indelible hybridisation.

The third voyage produces an episode reminiscent of Odysseus's encounter with

²¹ In each of the seven voyages a similar refrain is echoed: first voyage (306), second voyage (311), the fourth voyage (323), fifth voyage (332) "we sailed from sea to sea and from island to island", while in the third voyage "from sea to sea and from island to island and from city to city" (317), the sixth voyage "we sailed from place to place and from city to city" (338) and finally in his seventh and final voyage "we sailed with fair wind in peace and good health until we passed by a city called the City of China" (343). The City of China here marks the limits of what is known, beyond which lie "the farthest seas of the world" (344).

Polyphemus highlighting the deep connectivity between ocean-going societies.²² After sailing too close to the Mountain of the Apes, Sindbad's ship is boarded by simians who maroon Sindbad and his shipmates on an island where they discover a giant mansion inhabited by a fearsome ogre,

in the likeness of a man, black in colour and tall in stature, as if he were a huge palm-tree, with eyes like torches; fangs like the tusks of a boar; a big mouth, like the mouth of a whale; lips like the lips of a camel, hanging down on his breast; ears like two barges, hanging down on his shoulders; and nails like the claws of a lion. (Heller-Roazen 318)

The beast proceeds to select the juiciest of Sindbad's companions, killing, roasting and eating them. The adventurers build a raft and before escaping blind the ogre with two iron-spits that they have heated in the fire. The ogre flees but then returns with another monster more terrible in appearance. As Sindbad and his companions attempt to escape, they are pelted with rocks. Only Sindbad and two others survive, but when they find themselves upon another island Sindbad's companions are soon eaten by a giant serpent. Sindbad is able to save himself by tying a series of sticks around his body so that the serpent is unable to swallow him. After passing a sleepless night, he sees a ship and is rescued and delivered to Salahita Island where he is reunited with the ship that abandoned him on the island in his second voyage highlighting the notion of well-travelled and populated routes. He proves that he is indeed Sindbad the Sailor from Baghdad and returns home having "gained what cannot be numbered or calculated" (323).

²² Growing out of the Indian Ocean world, and certainly not excluding Greek influence. Marina Warner in *Stranger Magic* commenting on the many forms the *Nights* have taken, says "[n]ow in this version, now in that, it has no known author or named authors, no settled shape or length, no fixed table of contents, no definite birth place or linguistic origin (India, Persia, Iraq, Syria and Egypt, have all contributed since the earliest vestiges of such tales were found in the ninth century). Late antique myth forms one deep layer of the palimpsest" (7).

Middle Eastern Scholar Peter D. Molan says that this fourth tale functions as a keystone story and that along with the scene with the Old Man of the Sea suggests that they:

serve to raise and then slow the tempo of violence and horror. They shock the audience into an awareness of Sindbad's potential for murder which culminates horribly in the killing of innocent people in the tomb of the fourth story. (244)

Molan suggests that the blinding of the ogre is a gratuitous act of violence and that Sindbad does not need to act as he does. Though ship-wrecked and island-bound, Sindbad and his crew are free to build a raft and leave the island at any time and are at no point prisoners in the ogre's castle. In fact, highlights Molan, they build the raft and then return to the castle to inflict their revenge. For Molan Sindbad's actions represent an awakening of his potential for violence which he carries over to the fourth voyage. What Molan does not account for is the horror of witnessing your companions being roasted and eaten and the notion that in the medieval Indian Ocean, revenge would be an acceptable response. Sindbad is the sole survivor of the voyage and it is plausible that the uncountable gains that he makes suggest that his experiences perhaps extend beyond the sense of overt materiality. It is the first time that Sindbad has been faced with his own mortality and the scenes foreshadow what is to follow.

In the fourth voyage, Sindbad and his shipmates are shipwrecked and cast ashore, where they are seized by a group of naked men. They are given food by these magians but Sindbad refuses to eat. He soon discovers that his companions are being drugged and fattened for consumption by the demon king.²³ Sindbad fasts and wastes away until he is no longer noticed by his keepers and then escapes. Walking for seven days and seven nights, he reaches another land where he finds favour with the king and through his own industry earns great

²³ Again reminiscent of Odysseus but this time the island of the lotus eaters.

wealth and marries into the community. When his wife dies however, Sindbad discovers that he is to be buried alive alongside her. Sindbad, his wife's corpse and enough food for a few days are lowered into a large communal tomb. Surrounded by the dead he gathers clothing and jewels from the variously decomposed bodies and hoards them in a corner of the cave. When other couples are lowered into the communal tomb Sindbad kills the living partner and takes their food, water, clothes and jewels;

I took a shin bone of a dead man and, going to the woman, struck her on the crown of the head and she fell down unconscious. I struck her a second and a third time until she died. She had on her plenty of apparel, ornaments, necklaces, jewels, and precious metals, and I took all she had, together with the bread and the water. (329)

Eventually, Sindbad finds his way out through a hole in the back of the cavern but continues to plunder the cave; murdering and hoarding until he is rescued by a passing ship and returns to Baghdad.

In the first movement, Sindbad refuses food which signals the beginning of a new phase of the story. In the Islamic tradition receiving guests and offering food is a sign of communion between the host, the guest and god.²⁴ It therefore represents a social contract between members of the community which accrues favour with the almighty. In the frame tale, before Sindbad relates his story to the Porter, he first presents him with food illustrating the societal and religious norm. With the magians, it is through the denial of these obligations and his natural impulse to eat, that Sindbad manages to escape. Sindbad's refusal signals the idea that he has entered an alternate paradigm constructed along different norms to those familiar to him. His abnegation of food is placed alongside the horror of cannibalism, thus

²⁴ Stacey, Aisha. "Treating Guests the Islamic Way." *Islam Religion*. Cooperative Office for Dawah in Rawdah. Web. 25 August 2014.

inviting comparison but more pointedly creating a sense of abhorrence that culminates in the next phase with murder.

When Sindbad is buried alive with his deceased wife he enters a reality that is completely sealed off from his known world. The tomb represents a schism and separation from both community and society. The violence that Sindbad exhibits takes place not just in the alternate world of the ocean space, but in the hyperbolic land of the dead. Within the tomb Sindbad goes against his own moral code of conduct and, through his actions, exhibits a depravity that Peter Molan describes as his “vicious determination to “get on” [...] at the expense of anyone who happens to be in the way” (244). The antipathy experienced through the unfolding scenario is registered first in the act of being buried alive but then continued as Sindbad visits death upon the people who are subsequently interred. Importantly, these sacrificed members of the society are already beyond the pale of life. Molan’s critique hinges on the idea that Sindbad inhabits the same moral space wherever he travels and therefore critiques him along those lines. However, for Sindbad it is a double movement where first – by sail – he moves into the ocean space, away from Baghdad and then is shifted beneath the ground, cut off from all that is familiar to him. He is symbolically transported to a realm that exists outside of the regular ambit of his social morality; he enters an amoral space. The effect of this movement is seen through the absence of narrative with both the magians and within the tomb and then, once rescued, his altered use of story.

Home and Away: The Importance of Telling Stories

Within the “Sindbad the Sailor” cycle of stories, narrative takes on multifarious modes and functions and is used in many different ways. It is a way of connecting locations, for example creating a sense of home by invoking safety through narrative familiarity or of concealing

and allowing the narrator to keep certain details hidden. Island hopping is central and common to the medieval Indian Ocean world and narrative contributes to the development of close knit archipelagic communities. The function of storytelling suggests an alternative construction of the ocean that is opposed to the idea of ocean communities existing solely as destinations accessible only through long distance trade routes.

The littoral zone, where land meets the sea, comes to be seen not as an impenetrable boundary that must be crossed or breached but as a porous edge through which people, ideas and worlds move and mix and so create a new reality; one that is at once familiar and strange, an amalgamation of the real and imaginative. It is the same sea that washes Sindbad ashore that produces the other-worldly sea-horses whose seed is so prized for breeding with King Mihrajan's horses. It is also through the recollection of narrative, as in the episode with the rukh and the jewel valley, that Sindbad finds traction in an otherwise strange landscape. At every point in "The Story of Sindbad the Sailor and Sindbad the Porter", Sindbad is engaged with the act of storytelling. It is as if story mirrors the ebb and flow of the sea and so – as the sea connects communities and distant lands – stories bind them together.

After reciting his story to King Mihrajan, Sindbad subsequently comes to serve as his agent to the port. The role designated to Sindbad is that of one who mediates movement between the sea and the shore. In the context of his own story – as a medium – he becomes a person of high esteem and so, his reality is fantastically transformed as he moves from bankrupt son to trader, ship-wrecked castaway to agent of the King and finally, when he returns to Baghdad, he returns to a life which exceeds the grandeur of his former existence. Sindbad embodies the port because he is the medium through which the audience accesses the tale. He is ultimately fully in control of the narrative journey and is able to bend, tease and twist the threads as he sees fit. Note also that Sindbad takes on the role of messenger in the sixth voyage when he delivers the gift to the caliph of Baghdad and then in the seventh

becomes the head of the merchants where “none of them purchased anything without his knowledge and permission” (Heller-Roazen 347). These examples serve to deepen his role as a medium and suggest an even stronger connection between himself and Sindbad the Porter. Both characters move stories; Sindbad between the deep ocean spaces and the Porter between Sindbad and the city. When Sindbad’s voyages come to an end he finds a way to perpetuate his own legacy through the cycle of the story by engaging Sindbad the Porter to take his story out and into the world. The exchange represents a continuous flow of narrative; into, from and around the city.

From his first encounter with King Mihrajan’s servants to his final meeting with the angels on the unholy mountain, Sindbad is involved with the act of storytelling. In the tale of his first voyage the reader is made aware of the importance of both storytelling and truthfulness. Sindbad recounts his tale no less than five times, to the grooms, the King and then to the ship’s captain. Each recitation relies on the faith and trust of the listener that Sindbad is telling the truth, and it is only at the end of each recitation that Sindbad’s veracity is accepted, “[t]he king was amazed and was even more convinced of my truthfulness in everything I had told him” (310). The story seems to be advocating that truthfulness and honesty are rewarded which is a pattern that is thematically repeated throughout the cycle. Sindbad cultivates a sense of homeliness through narration to maintain balance and equilibrium during his adventures.

The lack of narration becomes synonymous with discord and where story is not exchanged Sindbad encounters ogres, cannibals and demon worshippers, suggesting a lack of human reciprocity and sociality. It is the act of recounting the story itself that becomes important. As Sindbad confirms his own veracity, so he conveys the truthfulness of the tale for the audience, thus rendering it more believable. Having established the order of storytelling as an activity to confirm honesty and truth, the fourth voyage presents an

inversion of this order. On being rescued, rather than following the normative pattern of salvation through narrative truthfulness, Sindbad deviates from the established trajectory and alters his story for fear of his actions being discovered. He goes further than omission – regarding the countless people that he has murdered and stolen from where he himself becomes monstrous – and fabricates the story of his shipwreck and invents his acquisition of the bundles of cloth and merchandise. The next and only time that Sindbad refers to his ordeal in the cave, he says “but every time I recalled my stay with my dead wife in that cavern, I almost lost my mind” (331). The absence of communication, vis-à-vis story, is therefore directly associated with not only death but madness and is intimately tied to the construction of ocean space as lying outside of society. Sindbad’s potential for interlocution, frustrated by his movement underground and the cessation of social bonding, results in the loss of contact with his own mind. He is de-familiarised from himself and the episode brings into focus the multivalent nature of storytelling.

Sindbad’s narrative is one of shifting borders and unstable ground. It is a world that constantly disproves itself; or proves itself as something else. It frustrates easy binaries and challenges the perception of the audience by casting its own truthfulness in doubt. Sindbad shows in both a literal and a figurative sense that received ideas are always subjective and by extension always constructed by the narrator.

Every landfall that he makes, whether through shipwreck or intent, is made upon an island,²⁵ and each island – through the familiar – brings into our consciousness the fabulous and bizarre. It is a palpable tension that is written through the story that wherever Sindbad travels he experiences the familiar but paradoxically the familiar is mercurial, shifting into

²⁵ Note that “island” does not only refer to bodies of land surrounded entirely by water but that within the story the cities are seen as islands too; there is a split between centers of learning and trade and nomadic spaces characterised by the desert and the sea. At the end of his second voyage, for example, after being shipwrecked on an island Sindbad returns to Baghdad across the desert, via caravan (315–16).

the unfamiliar. Similarly, while Baghdad represents the epitome of home, it is also the site where, once he has returned from his voyages, Sindbad feels decidedly ill-at-ease.

Sindbad's relationship between home and away is one that is riven with complexities and paradoxes. It is an uneasy space of hybridity where he is at once familiar with the world and with himself but at the same time a stranger to both. No sooner has one defined a topic, subject or vantage point than the story shifts and forces the audience to reconsider the parameters. It is a world of shifting sands, where islands are fish and where the interweaving of cultures and ideas is far more wonderful than anything to be found on the face of the earth. It is also however a place of danger where one can just as easily be lost to oneself or consumed by an ogre. Each figure collapses into the other so that borders are messy and unwieldy at best and, at worst, non-existent.

The performance of narrative throughout the tale is suggestive of an alternative reading of the medieval ocean as a site of archipelagic cosmopolitanism. Sindbad, immersed in the oceanic world, confronts the fantastical, wonderful, horrific and strange and in each case finds a reflection of himself and, as Bhabha says "the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside" (158). Through his adventures, it is not possible for Sindbad to maintain a sense of distance from either the fantastic elements that he encounters or the darker sides of his own identity. Thus, when he travels, he is culturally surrounded by the familiar but, through acts of monstrosity, becomes strange to himself. As the symmetry and binaries of self/other, inside/outside collapse, so too do Sindbad's, and thus the reader's, conceptions of the boundaries between home and away.

CHAPTER 2:**ALAN VILLIERS AND SONS OF SINDBAD**

In *Sons of Sindbad* (1940), Alan Villiers writes of his travels on an Arab dhow in which he completes a voyage from the Arabian Peninsula, down the East African coast and back again. Villiers uses Sindbad as an archetype and totem for his journey and a means of accessing the Indian Ocean world. *Sons of Sindbad* – supplemented by a huge collection of black and white photographs that Villiers took during the voyage – is part ethnography, part journal and part travel narrative. His ethnographic project of documenting “the last days of sail” is a complex interplay between received ideas of a romanticised and fantastic world and the reality of a rapidly changing Indian Ocean landscape. The focus of the following chapter will fall on how and why Villiers uses Sindbad to evoke this romantic past – taking in ideas of orientalism, the imperial eye and Villiers’s position as both within and without these structures. At times I will call on other Indian Ocean narratives to illustrate the ways in which the space has been represented.

Alan Villiers, Dhow Sailing and the Triumph of Righteousness

Alan John Villiers (1903-1982) – according to the editors of the republished 2010 edition of *Sons of Sindbad* – from an early age “fell under the spell of old seafarer’s tales” (Facey, Hajii & Pundyk xiii). By the time he was fifteen he was an apprentice on board a barque sailing between Australia and New Zealand and soon joined the grain trade between Australia and Europe. In 1921 he fell from the rigging and his injuries curtailed his career as a sailor. He became a journalist in Tasmania at the *Hobart Mercury* where he discovered a flair for

writing and “used his pen to get back to sea” (xv). It was while reporting on an experimental Norwegian whaling fleet that he found his niche. Combining photography with writing and his experiences on the factory steam ship the *Sir James Clark*, he produced his first book: *Whaling in the Frozen South* (1925). Over the next ten years Villiers – moving towards his true passion – sailed on, wrote about and photographed wind powered vessels, creating “vivid accounts of the last days of the tall ships” (xvi). In 1934 Villiers bought his own ship and, inspired as he was by the prose of the Polish-English master mariner and writer, renamed it the *Joseph Conrad*. Joseph Conrad mourned the loss of wind powered sail in the face of modernity and steam ships. His narrative world is one of nostalgia and romance, the big sail ships, the open seas and the execution of sailing as craft. Villiers inherits or perhaps adopts this project from Conrad and it is through Sindbad that he seeks to re-create a sense of wonder in the timelessness of the ocean. At the end of a two year voyage circumnavigating the globe, Villiers decided to turn his attention to “seafaring in other, pre-industrial cultures” (xviii). *Sons of Sindbad* was intended to be part of a larger project in which he hoped to record and document sailing-vessels of the world,²⁶ but the project was abandoned with the onset of World War II.

For Villiers the paths and networks of the ocean are informed by modern science, navigable through charts and instrumentation and dominated by steam ships. His love of the sea stems from a childhood fascination with the adventure engendered through sea voyaging and his project is an attempt to rekindle this sense of child-like wonder. The Kuwaiti boom²⁷ on which Villiers sailed was called the *Bayan* in Arabic or, as Villiers loosely translated it, the *Triumph of Righteousness*.

²⁶ Ten years after *Sons of Sindbad* in *The Set of the Sails* (1949) Villiers states “[a] life of wandering in sailing ships appealed to me, and I proposed to make an exhaustive survey of the types of ship and trades I came across, and to photograph and make films as records” (231).

²⁷ Boom: The Boom has taken the place of the baggala as the general sea-going Arab dhow, particularly from the Persian Gulf. Booms are double-ended, have their straight stemposts built out into a sort of planked bowsprit, and are further distinguished by their yoke steering. The port of Kuwait uses booms almost exclusively for its deep-sea trade, and the Persians also prefer this type of vessel.

Inside the Outside: Orientalism and Dhow Travel on the Periphery of Empire

In 1939, on the cusp of World War II, Australian sailor, adventurer, journalist, photographer and author Alan Villiers embarked on a yearlong return voyage in the western Indian Ocean. The *Triumph of Righteousness* (referred to henceforth as the *Triumph*) was captained by Sheikh Ali bin Nasr el-Nejdi who had delivered a cargo of dates from Basra to British Somaliland and was outbound to pick up passengers on the Hadhramaut coast. The *Triumph* would travel south from Aden, calling at ports all down the east African coast as far as the Rufiji Delta before returning to Basra and the Gulf. The nine month voyage was recorded and documented in Villiers's travelogue *Sons of Sindbad* published in 1940.

In *Sons of Sindbad* Villiers draws on both his journalistic skills and acute ethnographic observation to document life on board the *Triumph*. Villiers notes the influence that colonial governments had on the dhow trade, and the ways in which the Arab traders operated within – and outside of – the regulatory structures imposed on the previously free-sea.²⁸ His subject is the daily workings of the ship, the dynamics between crew members and passengers, as well as the changing nature of the Indian Ocean dhow trade. In the narrative, Villiers places his own ideas about sailing and navigation alongside Nejdi's and uses Sindbad as an imaginative nexus between the two disparate world views. On discovering that Nejdi has the wrong chart for Lamu harbour, Villiers "pointed this out to him [and] he was not pleased, saying that charts were no good anyway, and he knew the way" (141). For Nejdi, both books and charts are an unnecessary nuisance that – the implication is – are associated with colonial authority and influence.²⁹ The art of sailing for Nejdi is a collection of memories, knowing by heart the safe channels, landmarks and anchorages. European technologies, steamships and

²⁸ See previous chapter's discussion on the *mare liberum* of the pre-modern IOW.

²⁹ Nejdi seems to neglect or omit knowledge of the fifteenth century Arab navigator, the famous Ibn Majid who wrote the *Kitab al-Fawa'id* or *Book of Lessons on the Foundation of the Sea and Navigation*.

compasses as well as the project of mapping knowing are therefore antithetical to Nejdi and the dhow culture that Villiers seeks to record.

Villiers chose an adventure not of new discovery, but one that had been taking place since time immemorial as witnessed through the percolation of tales such as “Sindbad the Sailor”. *Sons of Sindbad* conjures the timelessness of dhow craft and sailing and, at the same time, positions the narrative as a record of a dying tradition in the modern world of colonial restrictions on movement as well as technological maritime advancements. The loss of craft and the routinisation of sea travel is a lament that Villiers picks up from Conrad. But the imbrications between the two figures merge also along lines of identity and their insider/outsider status. According to Edward Said, what made Conrad, a Polish expatriate, different to other colonial writers was the fact that he was so self-conscious about his writing (23). His self-consciousness meant that he had an awareness of the pervasive mechanisms of empire which “has the power of a system representing as well as speaking for everything within its dominion” (24). The air of self-consciousness is another of Villiers’s traits and the narrative, while fitting into a long tradition of writing about the Orient, is never certain of the universalism of any one perspective. His representational stance plays along the fault line between what it means to be inside and outside and calls into question western narrative authority and constructions of time and space. These systems of narrative authority are often closely linked to the colonial project expressed through travel.

Travel narratives on Arabia produced by European explorers, adventurers and writers, tended to focus on the desert sands. The desert and its vast untamed and inhospitable heat, carries a peculiar place in the psyche of the European. As Professor of Modern History Billie Melman states: “desert narratives may be superficially described as stories of the conquest of the void, or wilderness, as well as tales of risk which position the individual explorer in front of a hostile nature” (114). What is without doubt the antithesis of the English countryside,

presents a fantasy of the exotic that has captured the imagination with its wild Bedouin tribes and shifting sands. In her Masters Dissertation completed through the Gulf Institute in Kuwait, Grace Pundyk points out that:

Villiers's journey was not only by sea, an obvious departure from a desert journey, but it was also a journey well-travelled – one taken for centuries by Arab, Indian and Persian sailors, following the ancient trade routes from India, along the African coast and around Arabia, and then picked up by the various colonialist enterprises, the Portuguese, Dutch, Italians and British eager to cash in on the lucrative trade. (53-54)

The dhow, operating along age old monsoon trade routes – reliant on the rhythms and cycles of nature – is an image that suggests a perspective that is mobile and transcendent rather than static and fixed. Its movement along the coast is a fluid transition between entrepôts and is less reliant on nationalist and imperial constructions of borders and boundaries which sought to divide the world along an axis of inside and outside. The conception of place envisioned by the colonial project was delineated by borders and boundaries. It was involved with maps and mapping history and took inspiration from the voyages of discovery and the fetish that the imagination of the west developed for new and unbound places. Melman says that “Arabia came to be imagined as an iconic place, the locus of a pristine and authentic Arab way of life, a land of utopian dreams and, for some of its most renowned explorers, an asylum from ailing and degenerate modern Western civilization” (113). The dhow, functioning on the fringes of these constructs, sits in uneasy comparison with the idea of a fixed and unmoving geographical centre.

When Villiers departs on his voyage, his intention is to “capture” the last days of sail. He is referring to the purely literal process and action of documentation to create a record of these ships. There is however an element of predation in his efforts to inscribe and preserve a

dying way of life and in this he exhibits the particularity of the European tradition of exploring and knowing the world. It is the central theme to Said's discourse of Orientalism which pivots on the relationship between knowledge and power and "assumes the primacy and complete centrality ... even as it includes, compresses, and consolidates" (Culture and Imperialism 22). In the preface Villiers says "[t]he Arab, friendly and hospitable as he always is, may be forgiven if he sees little reason to welcome us, less to co-operate in the production of another book about him" (5).

Said describes the assumptions behind the production of the other, in this case where the Arabs "are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves" (35). Nejdi – during his first meeting with Villiers – exhibits scepticism about his project of writing a book about the Arabs and the dhows and says "...that in his view there were more than enough European books about the Arabs already. Some of them were good – he mentioned Yawrens, and Stark" but continues that in many of those books "...the Arabs could recognise neither themselves nor their country" (Villiers 19). Nejdi's attitude is indicative of an insidious history of travel and travel writing about the Orient. Nejdi reminds the reader that Villiers is an English-speaking Australian coming to write *about* the Arab dhows and that he is therefore situated on the outside of Arab culture and society; it is a fact underscored by the necessary mediation by Ali the translator. Nejdi's disdain for European books reflects a reaction against European cultural authority in Arabia.

The nineteenth century British presence in Arabia was a specific and systematic project to map and know the Middle East as part of a strategic network of military and trade expansion. Imperial structures set about their work through the process of 'knowing' as highlighted by Smethurst in the introduction to *Travel Writing, Form and Empire*:

Through the structures of knowledge it derived from science and natural history, it also imposed spatial order: the hard lines of inside/outside, boundaries, orderly emplacement, and the symbolism of geometric shape, all of which projected order from the imperial centre to farther peripheries. (5)

The creation of empire was thereby associated with the science of knowing. It engaged with defining characteristics, borrowing from the language of taxonomy and placing into groups and categories and applying these methods to knowing the world. The eighteenth century traveller was therefore on the forefront of traversing and filling-in the blank spaces of maps; travel, travel writing and exploration had a key role to play in this Imperial project.

When Nedji mentions books about the Arabs, he signals the corpus of travel writing that was intrinsic to the expansion of colonial interests. The renowned explorers mentioned were the towering figures of the genre; Lawrence (1888-1935), Philby (1885-1960), Stark (1883-1993) and Thomas (1892-1950), all of whom were directly affiliated with the British presence in the Middle East through political and military agencies. When famous orientalist, Richard Burton travelled to the Orient in the mid eighteenth century, he travelled under the flag of Empire and with the innate sense of cultural superiority. Crossing the known borders of civilisation into the unmapped and perilous interior of the timeless Orient meant a wilful intrusion into ‘primitive’ cultures. The traveller and explorer returned with relics from once great civilizations, implying that these civilizations, no longer so, are no longer in need of their artefacts. The ancient past is therefore open to be not only explored and plundered but also dominated. Billie Melman points out that these travellers were distinctive because they were not just orientalists but specifically *Arabists* who believed that “...an Arab nationalism based in the peninsula would regenerate the entire Middle East under British tutelage” (113)³⁰

³⁰ Roy Bridges stakes a similar claim when discussing British travel between 1830 and 1880, he states that “[t]he encounter with Islam was very important to Britain because of its Middle Eastern strategic interests” (63).

and as such, lent Arabian patronage a particularly institutionalized form. Interest in Arabia was therefore overdetermined and by the time Villiers arrives, there is a well-established colonial presence, strategically important and essential to trade with the East via the Suez Canal.

Commenting on the strategic importance Villiers says: “[o]nce meeting place of East and West and still an important world and Arab port, Aden was now an outpost of Empire marked red on the map, guarded by guns and policed by booming aircraft” (10). He marks the encroachment of modernity but, also draws upon Aden’s pre-European history by continuing: “[y]et it was once Eudaemon Arabia, known for its convenient anchorage and sweet water to the anonymous sea-captain who compiled the *Periplus of the Erythraen Sea* in the first century of our era” (10). The close association of the pre-modern nation-less and militarised-modern, invites an initial comparison between *what was* and *what is*; a comparison that, in an arabesque movement, ripples throughout the text. Villiers, in this very early salvo, questions not only the imperative of *Rule Britannia*³¹ and Imperial aggression of modernity but also the uneasy imbrications of European and Arab culture.

The dhow is the vehicle that sustains not only the narrative but also Villiers’s idealisation and nostalgia for the Indian Ocean world; an idea that draws on his childhood fantasies of Sindbad and contains his personal romance with sail. In the beginning of the voyage, Villiers describes a scene that homogenises the historical sense of the journey where the dhow supersedes any sense of colonial intervention:

...the same old water lapped quietly at the stout teak planks of the same type of ship;
the same swarthy mariners strode their deck and squatted on her poop, with very

³¹ “Rule, Britannia! Rule the waves: Britons never will be slaves” is a patriotic song originating from the 1740 poem by James Thomson and trumpeted Britain’s maritime superiority.

much the same methods and the same ideas as all their seagoing ancestors for so long before them. (22)

But later he mitigates his imaginative recollections by invoking a clear sense of political history associated with ocean space:

I thought, as we ran down the bright fine morning, of all the great ships that had passed that way and of the sea history which had been made in those waters. The Arabs, the Persians, the Indians, the Chinese, and the Malays too, before fierce Arab rivalry had driven them to their own waters, then Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese, and after him the rest of the Europeans. (175)

The picture invokes a deep sense of global maritime history of the Indian Ocean world that reflects wave upon wave of traders, explorers and competitors. The nostalgia that Villiers draws on is defined through immersions and contacts which have left their mark in the form of language, culture and goods. What begins as a sentimental re-visitation of a kinder past refuses to settle on any single homogeneous vision. By making these temporal connections between a medieval history and the present day – and so evoke a sense of unchanging timelessness on board the *Triumph* – Villiers displays an anthropological attitude towards the subject of time.

Anthropology and Time

For anthropology and ethnography, time is of particular importance. In Johannes Fabian's book *Time and the Other* (1989), Fabian describes how the spacialization of time by the natural sciences resulted in the denial of coevalness between anthropologists and the objects of their study. He states that evolutionary or natural time "promoted a scheme in terms of

which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time – some upstream, others downstream” (17). Coevalness is the sharing of intersubjective time and as such its denial represents “...a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31). The result was that anthropologists, when investigating pre-modern societies or cultures, in effect sought to travel back in time.³² Villiers’s use of *Sindbad the Sailor* and his exhortation to keep to the “quieter ways of a kinder past” (11), functions as a spatializing tool and appears to support Fabian’s critique of anthropology, positioning the Arab sailors as relics, pre-modern or even primitive. However, Villiers never allows the reader to comfortably settle into an objectifying or spatializing discourse. Rather he identifies *with* the Arab sailors and in the process questions this kind of Euro-centric ethno-rationality and so pre-empts the anthropological turn that was to take place in the nineteen eighties with scholars like Fabian.

The title, *Sons of Sindbad* operates on the level of linear temporality, creating a sense of genealogical continuity and inheritance between the crew of the *Triumph* and the medieval Indian Ocean world of Sindbad. This device at first appears to be concomitant with Fabian’s critique of anthropology where the traveller travels back in time to primitive and less advanced cultures. However, invoking Sindbad requires the reader to make the distinction between what it means to be frozen in time versus present through time. Villiers suggests that the Arabs on board the *Triumph* are part of a tradition which has continued uninterrupted since “the time of the Commander of the Faithful, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid” (Heller-Roazen 303) and thus, from the eighth century. The distinction means that the Arabs exist

³² The classic literary example of a denial of coevalness and the idea of moving backwards through space and time is Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* (1899). Marlow’s progression up the Congo river, a traverse of space, is described as being a journey backwards through time where the tribes he encounters are seen as primitive says “Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings” (34).

simultaneously and so are as much a part of modernity as the technology that is rendering wind driven sail obsolete. In signalling this direct descent from Sindbad the Sailor, Villiers is trying to overcome a sense of loss due to maritime-modernity and revive the romance of the sea.

Much of his narrative reflects on the juncture and uneasy cohabitation between the Arab sailors and this modern world. "Time" says Villiers "was never definite: it depended on the nakhoda's whim" (42). The suggestion is that the dhow is somehow sealed off from the external demands; regulated not by western Newtonian time, but by the natural rhythm of the monsoon. Villiers further suggests that Newtonian time as kept and watched on a timepiece loses its relevance and function in the Indian Ocean. He observes that "there was a timepiece aboard, but it was only a very old Swiss watch of the cheapest kind, large and decrepit, which was kept in a drawer in the helmsman's seat ... it had a tick like an infernal machine" (42). Villiers cleverly reverses the idea that what is European is necessarily associated with progress. The watch, a symbol of European efficiency and modernity, is reduced to a decrepit and useless piece of machinery that instead of dictating the rhythm of life aboard the *Triumph*, becomes a subversive symbol, an ultimately useless and obsolete relic of the European world. The idea of European time with its 'infernal' noise – the rush and hubbub of modern trade – is therefore directly opposed to the natural rhythms of the *Triumph*. It is not that the dhows and the Arabs are stuck *in* time but rather that the natural rhythms of Indian Ocean dhow trade take precedence over the time intensive demands of the west.

Villiers's critique of time is echoed through his choice to investigate age-old trade routes. He cultivates a sense of nostalgia for a world free of modern time through his representations of the timeless dhow trade, its quieter rhythm, the repetitiveness of the voyage and the seasonal flow dictated by the monsoons. Early in the journey, Villiers is struck by his perceived loss of time on board the *Triumph*. He says,

[n]o one knew or cared what day it was, for to them days were not uniform periods to be named and numbered and regretted as they rushed by ... I was surprised how easily I slipped into this timeless state, how pleasant it was when attained ... It was primitive and, at the same time, a surprisingly satisfactory existence. (14)

Villiers's representation of the Arabs associates timelessness with 'them' but is surprised with his own easy assimilation. In *Orientalism*, Said describes the dangers of the orient according to an orientalist discourse. He comments that the threat conceptualised by western orientalism "...wore away the European discreteness and rationality of time, space, and personal identity" (167). Said links time to the identity formation of the European subject and the relationship to time becomes a marker of difference. For Villiers however, the cessation of time and identity is relished – as Billie Melman suggests – as a panacea for the ills of modernity.

His narrative thrust often seems directed towards reconstituting his own relationship with the passing age of sail; a connection that is deeply rooted within his childhood fantasies as well as his lived experiences in the face of maritime-modernity. He says of life on board the *Triumph*:

Upon that poop I found my mind turn easily down channels that led to pirates and slaves and all those long-gone far-off things, and could see again all the wondrous ships of my pre-maritime youth, when all the sea was wonderful and every ship an ark of grand adventure ... Yet here, on board this ancient Arab dhow lying at that stifling anchorage, hundreds of miles from anywhere upon that forlorn coast, it was easy to dream again of the sea there never was, knowing so well the sea there is. (101)

It is the interconnection of these two planes the idealised and fantastic past and the time-worn present that Villiers constantly draws the reader's attention to. Informed by his

childhood ruminations, he is self-consciously aware of his own received ideas and expectations pertaining to the voyage and offers the reader insight into these contradictions by way of self-reflexively questioning himself. Earlier in the same chapter, Villiers states “I had visions of a succession of pleasant ports up African rivers and in romantic bays ... but I had dreamt of these things without any knowledge of the Somali coast” (92). As the *Triumph* sails, Villiers is confronted with an alternate truth to what he had imagined and it is with a sense of stark reality that he describes the scene at Haifan, the first African port of call:

... it was nothing but a semi-circle of dull sand, the beach covered with sheep-dung and the entrails of fish, the centre of the scene a very modern saltworks sending out salt in steel buckets along an endless conveyor to a berth offshore. To the right of this salt plant were some Italian bungalows and the house of the Resident, with the Italian flag. To the left, a mean Somali village straggled along a hot beach, nondescript and squalid, soon giving up the hopeless attempt to find sustenance in such a place. (92)

In this passage Villiers registers that his idyllic conception of Sindbad’s world, a world that exists outside of Euro-modernity, is inherently flawed. His own world, that of the colonial subject, seeps in through the loosely woven edges of his tale and his attempt at manifesting a particular chronotope of the Indian Ocean is infused with European port officials, cheap trade goods from China, sailors who have worked in Chicago and other intrusions of a modern and globalised world. Villiers presence in the Indian Ocean, armed with a camera and the intention of compiling a travelogue, is anachronistic.

Imperial Eyes and Movement Along the Shore

As an Australian, Villiers expresses ambivalence towards his cultural affiliation to the commonwealth through characteristic “modesty and lack of pretension” (Facey, Hajji and Pundyk xxviii). Caught between the representors and the represented he shows an awareness of orientalist tropes and of what Mary Louise Pratt described as the “Imperial eye”.

On the way to Zanzibar Villiers reflects on his passage and his attempt to access life aboard the *Triumph*;

It was only by watching the proceedings of everyday, watching and observing them carefully ... that I came slowly to know what was going on. The obvious facts stood out plainly – the wind, the weather, and where the ship was. But the more interesting things – the social and economic life of the sailors, the business structure of the ship and her voyage, the human side of things, the questionable activities of ship and crew – had to be dug out patiently, waited for, pounced upon, inveigled out of friends, discovered somehow in spite of the attempt to hide them. (185)

In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said says that the European always watches. We see this echoed throughout Villiers’s voyage; be it on board the *Triumph* or from the veranda of the local port officer, he waits, watches and gathers. The language used confirms the act of hunting and capture, the extraction of information regardless of whether or not that information is available or welcome to be shared. In this sense the travel writer is predatory and his trophies are enshrined in book form through narrative and photography. This predatory gaze is synonymous with travellers and adventurers who lent their first-hand accounts and experiences to creating a very specific image of the Orient.

Nejdi, recalling the long history of European intrusions, holds the opinion that “the Arabs, having made their voyages unchronicled over so many centuries, might be left in enjoyment of that privilege” (19). Villiers however, establishes himself onboard the dhow as first and foremost a sailor, by virtue of the twenty years that he has spent at sea. His time at sea is equitable with the construction of Sindbad who has sailed the seven seas and so conceptually been everywhere. Villiers too – on board European ships – has been everywhere and seen everything. He returns to what he calls the “pre-industrial cultures” in order, not to know, but to document. In this respect Villiers boards Nejdi’s dhow with the intention to capture and record the passing age of sail and attitude that recalls the all-seeing European gaze; what Mary-Louise Pratt describes as the “‘seeing man’ – he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (7).

As a maritime man of the world, Villiers’s status is supposed to give him narrative authority over the voyage. His experience at sea positioned him with a broad perspective of global maritime traditions and movements and thus he is at home on all sea-craft. In this way he attempts to place himself on an equal footing with the Arabs, an inclusion which is necessary for him to integrate amongst the crew. However, the extent to which he has access to the culture of the *Triumph*, seen through a western, imperial framework and restricted by language is limited. Pratt’s all-seeing eye is transcendent, but Villiers also claims authority from his immersion in the ocean world, he is as such both inside and out, and each have limitations.

Villiers’s nautical expertise and knowledge allow him to move across binaries of self and other, coloniser and colonised or even East and West. It is a fluid movement facilitated by and mirrored through the passage of the ship between entrepôts and the cosmopolitan nature of the ship’s crew. The dhow, sailing along and down the East Africa coast travels across European protectorates, Italian Somaliland, British controlled Kenya and Zanzibar, German

Tanganyika and Portuguese Nyasaland. These colonial divisions are subtly challenged by the composition of the crew of the *Triumph* who come from around the rim of the Indian Ocean world.

Viewed as a trope, the ship and its crew are fluid between nationalist territories, facilitating transnational identities that exist outside of nation states. The ports of call, entrepôts which are sites of trade, commerce and transculturation act as contact zones. As seen in Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (2008) where contact zones refer to the frontiers of imperial expansion "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations" (8). Pratt's language of the "contact zone" is especially resonant when looking at Villiers. Her paradigm shift, aimed at reconceptualising the colonial frontier into a more universalized point of contact invokes a site of intersecting trajectories and exchange – albeit under unequal relations of power. Pratt states that *contact* "emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats colonizers and colonized, or travellers and "travellees", not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices" (8).

Pre-colonial East African trade operated in what has been described as the free sea in which tax duties and trade were regulated by individual city states rather than national or imperial projects. In *Sons of Sindbad*, Villiers describes the effect that colonial interests had on these flows of trade and the ways in which these impacted the dhow trade. The entrepôts, as points of access, are necessarily in a state of flux mediated by both external as well as internal forces. Calling at Mogadishu, the *Triumph* is prevented from landing her passengers due to restrictions placed by the Italian colonial government who sought to keep both Arab immigrants and traders at bay. The Suri, Beduin and other passengers from the Hadhramaut coast must therefore land elsewhere. In modulating the language of the Indian Ocean studies

that espouses the idea of connectivity and flow, historian Jeremy Prestholdt discussing the Indian Ocean points out that “rather than flows alone, it is the shifting apertures, closures, and frictions that define the contours of the Indian Ocean” (442). The idea of entrepôts as apertures encourages a reading of the Indian Ocean littoral as a dynamic space. The factors affecting trade within the western Indian Ocean are affected from afar, dictated by colonial governments of Europe. Villiers says that “the restrictions the Italians had been compelled by their home government to impose on trade made ordinary lawful business virtually impossible” (130). It is in almost direct opposition to these restrictions that Villiers goes on to explain the important role that the ‘Sindbads’ play in maintaining the informal economies of the dhow trade.

The dhow trade participates in a trans-colonial movement down the coast, between and through colonial states. Just after departure from Aden, Villiers meets one of the Suri merchants, an old, wizened mascara-wearing man in a turban who he describes as “...a venturer ready for whatever turned up, a veritable modern Sindbad setting off with his pack” (34). This is the first reference that Villiers makes to the Sindbads and they encapsulate for him the spirit of adventure and the freedom of the sea that he is in search of. It is these characters, according to Villiers narrative, that maintain the informal economy of the Indian Ocean world. Reflecting on these Sindbads and their pervasive role, Villiers says:

He has been everywhere, and is often useful to a young nakhoda. He is not on the passenger list and never appears anywhere on the ship’s papers. He has no passport. He does not wish to be identified, or identifiable, for it is easier to carry on his trade that way. He passes as a sailor in all ports ... he visits all ports in transit, and never officially lands anywhere. (131)

Villiers reuses the idea that Sindbad the Sailor had been everywhere, and reinserts him on board the *Triumph*. The Suri merchant is described as a vestige of Sindbad's world that has strayed into the modern era and yet is not out of place but deeply involved with this subversive but modern trade. The folkloric merchant who sailed the seven seas and found his fame and riches, is used by Villiers as shorthand representation for the traders and smugglers on the *Triumph*. The Sindbads encountered by Villiers come to represent a plurality of sailors, generic figures that – functioning on the fringes of Indian Ocean communities – are at once ubiquitous, unobserved and essential in facilitating trade. Of the Sindbad's merchandise Villiers says: “... almost every merchant there was prepared to make a deal; every stallholder in the *sug* was prepared to buy all the smuggled goods he could get, for duties were high and the Somali very poor” (130). As liminal figures, they exist despite the restrictive mechanisms of colonial power and yet are integral to this littoral trade.

Language plays an important role in the movement towards and eventual development of Villiers's identification with the crew of the *Triumph*. Facey, Al-Hijji and Pundyk suggest in the introduction to *Sons of Sindbad* that Villiers's fourth talent alongside sailing, photography and writing was his ability “of picking up a working language from scratch” (xv) but it is evident throughout the journey that what Villiers picks up is not any sort of pure Arabic but rather a working language of the sea, “[t]he sailors used many Swahili, Hindustani, and Persian words, all of which are simpler than Arabic, and their daily language also included some curious distortions of English” (31-32).³³ The diverse and cosmopolitan nature of the ship is therefore reflected through the means of communication however, it is

³³In his paper “[t]he lost Languages of Sail” which looks at the language of Lascari crews in the 18th century Amitav Ghosh says “That Lascars were a richly cosmopolitan group is beyond question. Yet, no matter whether they were from south Asia, east Africa, the Arabian coast, or the Malay archipelago, these sailors were lumped together once they stepped on board” (57). In terms of language, this meant that there was an “entire Babel of languages spoken on board”. While Ghosh is talking about ships captained by Europeans, the mix of different people on board these ships with different mother tongues, is indicative of the pervasive maritime culture of the region. It would have been important for any ship in this region to operate across the boundaries of language in a common language, the language of the sea.

Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism that excludes Europe for – as Villiers states rather bluntly – “[n]obody spoke any English” (32). The result is that it places him firmly on the outside and so, goes some way to destabilise the Eurocentric narrative voice.

As the voyage progresses Villiers continually shows an awareness of his own limitations of language and that this leaves him at a distinct disadvantage as to the general workings of the ship. Regarding the subtler nuances of life aboard the *Triumph*, Villiers remains ignorant. Illustrated succinctly at Mogadishu when, confronted with the fraudulent Suris, Said and Majid, Villiers says “[i]f my Arabic had been better I might have learned something of that place” (134). Villiers is referring to learning something of Mogadishu but hinting at the lack of common language that leaves him peripheral to the many and entangled plots. He is always cognisant that as an outsider his lack of language means that the world of the Arab sailors remains opaque. In addition to this, Villiers injury early in the voyage, serves to frustrate his sense of agency on board. Villiers is attuned to the tension between his own ideas about navigation and sailing and those held by Nejdi. The text moves backwards and forwards between positions that juxtapose European ideas against the Arab and then call them into question.

In this way Villiers negates the all-seeing eye of the European. It is taken a step further by Villiers as the narrative progresses. His position as an outsider highlighted by his early usage of ‘I’ and ‘they’, and by a lack of language, gradually as his Arabic improves, comes to be replaced by a collective ‘we’. While Nejdi remains in Zanzibar, Villiers decides to travel with the *Triumph* to its most southerly destination – the Rufiji Delta – to collect mangrove poles. On this leg of the journey Villiers says:

For my own part, I knew the sailors better and liked Hamed bin Salim more, for that hard month in the Rufiji. I was glad that I had gone with the ship, and I felt that I had learned

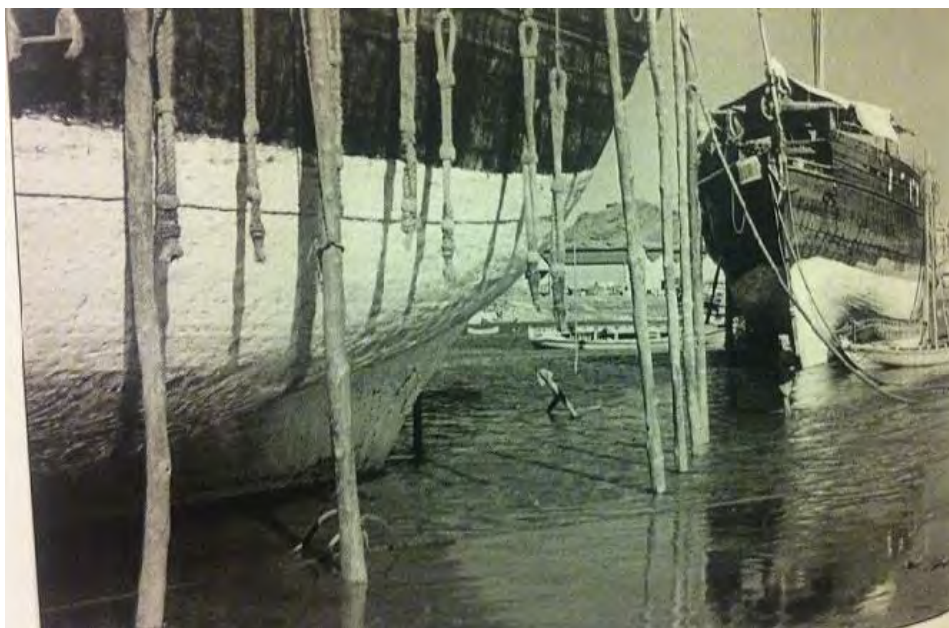
a great deal more in that way, and had got to know all hands better. It pleased Hamed and the crew, I think, that I had chosen to come with them to that dreadful place, when I could as easily have stayed with Nejdi at Zanzibar. We were good friends before that Rufiji loading; after it we were shipmates. (228)

This passage marks the turning point of both the voyage and Villiers's sense of inclusion as a member of the ship's crew. It is after the Rufiji that he begins to identify with the sailors. His observations and feelings are delivered in such a way that Villiers tentatively expresses his authority but at the same time attempts to negate his position as a representative of the west by first acknowledging that his narrative is not omniscient and then defining his relationship with the sailors in terms of a bond of the sea. However, Villiers cannot escape the slippage into orientalist tropes described by Said because the production of an authoritative text which reports on the words of others will always come under scrutiny as a mediated representation.

Behind the Lens: The Photographs

The collection of photographs that accompany Villiers's travelogue capture the action on board the *Triumph* and provide a visual compass to his intuitive and insightful text; mapping the journey graphically and providing a counterpoint to the sense of the fantastic invoked through the references to Sindbad. Examining the camera as a visualising technology as well as looking at the photographs can help to think about both representation and the authorial gaze in concrete and particular ways which often escape the more metaphorical "narrative gaze" of the author. Initially, of the hundreds of photographs captured by Villiers, only about fifty were published in the 1940 publications in Britain and America. The remainders were

deposited in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich until discovered and published in 2006 as *Sons of Sindbad, The Photographs*.



Booms propped-up on Ma'alla beach, Aden, for overhaul, in the late 1930's (Villiers 154).

The black and white pictures reflect Villiers' position on the poop which was a space of privilege, usually reserved for merchants and other people of importance. The poop is the slightly raised platform at the rear of the ship, which offers an uninterrupted forward-view for the purpose of steering, navigation and command. He manages to secure this position due to his status as a captain but also through his connections in Aden to the British Resident Adviser in the Hadhramaut, Mr. W. H. Ingrams who introduces him to the prominent merchant family, the al-Hamad brothers of Kuwait (17). Villiers, after his accident early in the voyage³⁴ captured many of his shots of the *Triumph* and her crew from this vantage point. The photographs are often slightly elevated, looking down at the action. They reflect Villiers's privileged position and so manage to capture his separation from the majority of the

³⁴ Villiers is struck by something the nature of which never becomes clear. The accident leaves him first unconscious and then blind for much of the voyage between Aden and Mukalla (45-49) and gives insight to what life beneath deck in the great cabin would be like, a reference that becomes important later on in the voyage with regards to the women who are stowed below deck.

crew who populate the deck below him. The pictures often seem to be squeezed out of cramped angles and are tightly cropped, showing the close quarters shared by all, especially when the *Triumph* had her passengers. They capture faceless crew members looking down or up as the work required, sprawling passengers passing time or snippets of rigging, sails or decking. Read in terms of the negative spaces, the close quarters of these pictures, shown through the truncated pictures seem never to capture the full scope of the scene. They draw attention to the limitless sea that exists just beyond the cropped borders of the exposed visual field and so heighten the sense of community on board ship.

The action shots of sailors and passengers on board the *Triumph* are balanced against images of booms, baggalas and sambooks; in full sail with the expanse of the sea behind them, at rest in port or propped up on the beach for repair. In the water, the booms conjure the romance of the sea and the majesty of these fine old boats but when grounded and propped up out of the water, their hulls white with lime, they take on an otherworldly aspect.

Describing the movement of the *Triumph* Villiers says: “[n]ext morning with a breath of air we ghosted on” (49). The passage of the ship – silent and peaceful – therefore takes on an ethereal quality. The word “ghosted” contributes to Villiers’s project, the capture of the last days of sail, and lends the dhows a spectral quality of vessels poised between worlds. The photographs of the ships laid up out of the water create a stark counter point to the ships at sea. Propped up on the beach, stranded and heavy with gravity, they are unable to perform their function, the business of sea and trade. The white hulls are reminiscent of bones and the poles that prop them up like skeletal protruding-ribs exposed by the tides of time in a sea-side cemetery. The ships, in this state of (dis)repair, captured at their most useless moment, recall Villiers’s “ghosting” phrase; they are poised, he would have us believe, on the brink of obscurity.

On photography, Roland Barthes, calls the subject of the photograph the *Spectrum* because of its relation to “spectacle” which he says “...adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). Considering the scope of Villiers’s journey and the many ships encountered along the way, his reckoning that these are the last days of sail, comes across as pre-emptive and belies the substantial trade that still exists along the coast.³⁵ Furthermore, Barthes highlights a specific spatio-temporal relationship that exists between the viewer and the photograph, he says:

The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*. (278)

Villiers, by documenting the dhows through the black and white pictures, creates a consciousness of them *having* existed at that moment through his own personal journey. The reader, traversing the space of the narrative, has recourse to a visual immediacy and so is transported, not to a living-time but to a spectral has-been. Echoing the existence of the Indian Ocean dhow trade into antiquity, Barthes says that the camera mechanically captures to infinity what can, in reality, only occur once. Villiers’s photographs of the dhows therefore reproduce them as a timeless memento mori which the reader has access to ad infinitum.

While Villiers primary focus is the dhow and life aboard the *Triumph*, he also engages with the human element, taking portraits of the sailors as well as some of the passengers. His

³⁵ Erik Gilbert in his book *Dhows & the Colonial Economy of Zanzibar 1860-1970*, referring to Zanzibar and the division of the port between modern and dhow trade states that “[i]t does not take long to see that the modern side of the port is running well below capacity, while the traditional side is booming” (1). This observation made by Gilbert comes over 50 years after the publication of *Sons of Sindbad* and goes against Villiers’s idea that dhow culture, pure sail and craft in the Indian Ocean was coming to an end.

interactions with the sailors echo his earlier conversation with Nejdi regarding European books about Arabs. He says of photographing the sailors, “[i]t was difficult to make satisfactory photographs of those dark faces, handsome as some of them were. Often my subjects did not recognize themselves when they were handed the finished results, and the lamentations were loud and long” (186). Villiers’s attempts to photograph the sailors are juxtaposed against the pictures that Nejdi commissions in Dar-es-Salaam presenting the reader with two sets of representation, one from within and the other from without. For his part, Villiers describes these images as “washed-out” and “character-less” (234) pointing towards a representational disparity. Nejdi’s criticism is levelled not at the photographs themselves but at the position of the photographer. The question posed returns to the rapacious European gaze, reminiscent of orientalist binaries between the West and the East, the Occident and the Orient, Christianity and Islam, rationalism and its absence, progress and stagnation. While Villiers attempts to justify his presence through the formation of his identity as a sea-man, the text moves between his position which inhabits both. Nejdi’s ownership of the photographs taken in Dar-es-Salaam, is one way that he rejects the European gaze by lauding the image that he himself has acquired from within his own world.

Barthes notes that the arresting nature of a particular photograph stems from the “...existence (its “adventure”) derived from the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world” (23). Barthes is discussing the picture frame itself, but if we apply this to *Sons of Sindbad* as an extended metaphor of the picture frame, then the heterogeneous elements that exist side-by-side and create interest are Villiers and the *Triumph*, her crew and the Sindbads on board. In these terms Villiers’s very presence on board with a modern piece of equipment like a camera seems to run against the grain of both his overarching project and his observations. It is the coexistence of Villiers

with Nejdī, the crew and the *Triumph* in one place and one time, and Villiers's awareness of the juxtaposition, that prevents the narrative from becoming another orientalist trope.



A Baggala (Villiers 90).

After listening to the Sindbad Said and the story of his life, his interactions around the Indian Ocean and the way that his trade is often determined by external influence for example the running of guns to assist the Turks “to help them in their fight against the Arabs under Lawrence”, Villiers says “[i]t was a mistake to look at these vessels and their goings-on only through European eyes” (109). The suggestion is that there are more vantage points than a single vision of European colonial authority; specifically as Villiers sees it, through narrative based at sea.

Sailing as Craft and the Citizenship of the Sea

From at least the middle of the nineteenth century, the technological advancement of steadier, more reliable and faster steam ships lead to the commercialisation of sea travel and subsequently to the decline of sail. The decline, lamented by Joseph Conrad in *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), was what he saw as a departure from the visceral connection between the deep water men and the ocean itself. Conrad says “[t]he machinery, the steel, the fire, the steam, have stepped in between the man and the sea. A modern fleet of ships does not so much make use of the sea as exploit a highway” (ch. 12). Villiers, like Conrad, fosters a romantic connection to the world of wind driven sail and is preoccupied with the notion of writing and sailing as craft. *Sons of Sindbad* is an attempt by Villiers to locate craft in pre-industrial sailing fleets. His affiliation with the sea allows him to operate outside of dominant power structures by identifying himself as a citizen of the sea.

While Villiers echoes the nostalgic Conradian voice, he also expands on it by loading his narrative with cultural content, not just traversing the Indian Ocean but immersing himself in it, thus simulating the movement of Sindbad’s first voyage. His representation of the decline of sail therefore moves away from a purely Eurocentric polemic and takes on a more universal aspect as a global phenomenon, reaching across time, space and culture. For his own project, Villiers believed that “these Arab dhows were almost the last unspoiled fleet of pure sailing vessels left in the world” (11) and it is for the purpose of documenting these ‘pure sailing vessels’ that he joins the crew of the *Triumph*.

As an Australian and thus a member of empire, Villiers expresses ambivalence towards his colonial identity. He benefits from the wide reach of the commonwealth but has no bureaucratic affiliation with the mechanisms of imperial power. In the introduction to *Sons*

of *Sindbad*, editors Facey, Al-Hajji and Pundyk comment on the split between colonial subject and the motherland saying that:

In Villiers's time, when white Australians still saw themselves as belonging to empire, there also existed a schism, an "us and them", felt as much in Australia as it was in Great Britain, the "mother country" [...] Villiers at once identifies with the collective, "we" while also looking upon it with disdainful and disconnected "I".
(xxix)

In addition to this disconnection the editors further point out that "neither Villiers nor the Arabs are colonizers, and both are travellers" (xxx). The Arab sailors however still identify Villiers as being a European representative. Villiers's status as an independent traveller, unaffiliated with colonial administration allows him to express his characteristic self-reflexivity, constantly calling into question and contrasting the two divergent worlds of the Orient and the Occident. In the narrative, Villiers loosens the bondage of national and imperial identity and attempts to resolve the 'us' and 'them' dynamic redolent of orientalism by focusing on the relationship between the sailors.

Villiers narrative shifts between his affiliative states using the pronouns: "I" first and foremost individual, sailor and traveller; "we" variously a sea-man or European; "them" the other, Australian or European to the Arabs. The transient nature of his narrative perspective reflects his position between the European centre and the Australian periphery. As a result his authorial gaze reflects the same uncertainty and resists a single perspective and Villiers is caught in the narrative attempting to look both ways. He manages to undo the exoticisation of the Arab sailors by finding moments of recognition amongst them in terms of his own western values and traditions. Villiers says of the Arabs that: "[a]ny enterprise which

promised profit he would follow,” but then brings the statement into consideration by drawing a comparison with his own inherited mercantile tradition:

our own sea commerce surely developed much along those lines. Were not such qualities the envied qualities of our glorious pioneers? Our own adventurers, wandering the globe in tiny ships, had opened up sea-routes and laid the foundation of empires. (107)

Conrad expressed a similar sentiment in *The Mirror of the Sea*; casting back to the very beginning of sailing vessels he describes the sea-men as being amongst “his own people” because all sailors “are descended from that adventurous and shaggy ancestor who, bestriding a shapeless log and paddling with a crooked branch, accomplished the first coasting-trip in a sheltered bay ringing with the admiring howls of his tribe” (106).

Margaret Cohen, in her book *The Novel and the Sea* (2010), draws attention to the idea of the mariner’s craft. The technology of steam power had been finding its way into the world from the early nineteenth century and, by mid-century, had taken hold and was supplanting the classical age of sail. She describes the project of knowing the sea, precipitated by expanding empires and maritime globalisation, as the routinization of the ocean or the “the demise of craft” (179). Before this time, the craft of sailing was synonymous with cultural prestige where navigation required knowledge and skill in handling a wind driven ship. With steam power however, crossing vast expanses of water could be easily achieved with greater speed and safety. The efficiency of these technological advancements meant conversely a loss of cultural prestige and performativity in the act of sailing. Cohen says that “for novelists interested in the dynamic Edges of modernity, sea fiction was a form that had lost its function” (180). However, she goes on:

As the working age of sail receded, [...] Herman Melville, Victor Hugo, and Joseph Conrad reworked sea adventure fiction to dramatize skilled work in other Edge zones that, like the maritime frontier, were murky, unknown, and risky, but that were qualitatively different: situated at the level of language and the human psyche, rather than the physical world. (180)

Thus, these authors sought to reimagine the sea, to resurrect the performance and performability of the sea through fiction. Conrad's "maritime modernism", to borrow the expression from Cohen, used navigational techniques in the composition of literature. Cohen says that by paying attention to the maritime frame we can see that "Conrad's seaman narrator brings to the demise of craft techniques that he has learned in the course of the mariner's work of navigation, *achieving orientation from partial information*" (my italics, 208). Navigation says Cohen – the craft of it – skill and art was achieved through interpreting the movement of the ship through the collection of partial information or in other words the "process of wresting intelligibility from obscurity" (209). From taking readings of celestial bodies to calculating the speed of the ship against currents and winds, cross referencing latitudes and longitudes, the role of the navigator was therefore to make sense of information garnered from the environment of the sea; to make sense of the "trackless ocean" (208). Conrad transposes these navigational problem-solving skills to the realm of literature where the object becomes to "understand the world and events depicted in narrative" (210), what Cohen describes as the struggle for intelligibility. She goes on to say that "Conrad's obscurity [struggle for intelligibility] calls attention to the craft of writing. ... this obscurity makes us reconsider the familiar by presenting it as strange" (212). Villiers, while drawing on Conrad, reverses this mode of expression by sketching the other – the strange and foreign – as familiar.

When Villiers first ships out with the *Triumph*, he carries stereotypical ideas of the Beduin and of the Arabs. On the first day aboard the *Triumph* his ideas are reinforced when he comes face-to-face with the passengers who arrive with Nejdi and describes them as “a wild gang of Beduin ... fierce-visaged men in black with their hands and legs and bodies covered with heavy indigo dye” (53-54). The horror of a world so different to what he is accustomed to is informed by received ideas of the Orient, constructed as abhorrent from the books he has read. The episode with the women taken on board as passengers is a point in case. On discovering that the dhow will be taking on female passengers, Villiers shows surprise saying “[w]omen? ... But surely Arab dhows never carried women. Migrating Arabs never took their women with them, according to the books I had been able to read” (54-55). The statement echoes his earlier exchange with Nejdi and illustrates the danger of relying on representations constructed from an exterior perspective.

The bints (girls) are kept below deck in the dark, dank and smelly hold; a place where earlier Villiers has convalesced after his accident and which he found to be unbearable (46). When one of the girls dies unexpectedly at Haifun, Villiers is summoned into the great cabin to assess the cause of death. The Arabs belie a trust and reverence in western medicine that contrasts to the disdain shown towards other western imports. Villiers remarks that “[t]he faith of the Arabs in my inconsiderable medical knowledge, merely because a few clean dressings I had put on some wounds did good, was pathetic. Here was death, and they thought somehow I could cope with it” (110).

The presence of the women on board reaches a climactic moment when they mutiny and burst from below onto the deck. “Suddenly the hatchway of the great cabin burst open with a wild bang and out rushed the women. Horror of horrors, what was this?” (136). The episode takes on the form of parody as Villiers expression “the horror” calls to mind the last words of Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness* “[t]he horror! The horror!” (Conrad 71). In the context of the

Triumph, while the horrors for the women below deck are very real, Villiers uses the episode to poke fun at the unshakable Nejdi whom he says “was so shaken by this utterly unprecedented episode that we actually did sail on the morrow, though this had not been his intention. It was extraordinary” (137). ‘The horror’ of the Other, the unknown and the dark secrets of the mysterious East are reduced to the level of a domestic squabble and the result is the alignment of identity that emerges through commonality and understanding.

His view from the boat brings him into the port cities of the Indian Ocean world, Mogadishu, Lamu, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Kwale island and Rufiji Delta, all of which are administered by either Italian or British representatives. With regard to identity and the notion of being tied to the nation state, Villiers makes an interesting comment on bureaucracy when he says that “[t]he bulk of our wanderers would have had difficulty in proving residence anywhere, for they were without official evidence that they had ever been born” (150). The need for an official recognition of place and origin, in order to exist, reinforces the need to have special demarcations of place within the mechanisms of empire as a means of creating structure, a process facilitated through the mapping of the world and the designation of identity directly related to place of origin. Villiers identity in this regard is particularly ambivalent because although he sees himself as a colonial subject, he exists on the periphery of Empire as an Australian. Furthermore, his life as first a mariner, then a journalist and finally a travel writer, was a series of voyages strung together with brief stays on land. It was through his occupation as a writer that he was able to join his talent for writing with his passion for the sea and sailing and by extension travel. At no point during his voyage, though he identifies as a European and makes references to both America and England, does he mention Australia or for that matter make any mention of home.

In *Sons of Sindbad*, after over three months at sea, the *Triumph* arrives at Zanzibar, the point that is considered the halfway mark of the voyage; where Nejdi chooses to wait for

the ship to return from the Rufiji Delta. Villiers, who has decided to go on with the *Triumph* comments that it:

meant a great deal to them [the sailors], and not only because it marked the end of our outward voyage. From there, even if the ship continued to the southward, as she must if she were to load in the Rufiji Delta, they would be homeward bound. (174)

The idea of home for the Arabs on board the *Triumph* means a return to what is known to them, their wives, family and friends. Villiers however is silent on the subject of his own personal return. We know that at the end of the voyage he continues on to England and serves as a navy reserve during World War II but his identity and his connection to Australia seems to be completely lost. There are intimations that with the coming war in Europe, he must return to England but even that does not represent a return home. Once the *Triumph* has returned to Kuwait, and Villiers has spent time on board the Gulf pearlers, by way of concluding he returns to Basra to make contact with Nejdi. The narrative however, for Villiers, does not end with a return to any fixed destination, city or port but rather with the departure of Nejdi, his crew and the *Triumph* as they set out once more. Of their departure Villiers says:

I thought of that hawk-eyed man standing there and of the long, hard voyage before him – out again along the nine-month, ten thousand-mile road that leads from the Basra River round half Arabia, along the Hadhramaut, and past the east coast of Africa, down to Zanzibar, and Tanganyika. Sail! Sail! That was all the merchants could say. And Nejdi gently murmured ‘*Tayib*’. (363)

While Villiers attempts in the narrative to record the last days of sail, the departure of the *Triumph* means a continuation of the tradition of dhow trade within the world of the Indian Ocean. What Villiers sees as the last days of sail, continues even as he himself moves

off and into war. Erik Gilbert's observation – made over fifty years after the publication of *Sons of Sindbad* – goes against Villiers' idea that dhow culture, pure sail and craft in the Indian Ocean is coming to an end. He says of the port in Zanzibar that “[i]t does not take long to see that the modern side of the port is running well below capacity, while the traditional side is booming” (1). The statement reiterates the subversive nature of the dhows that operated so successfully outside Imperial and colonial reach. More importantly, Villiers' vision of Nejd sailing off into the Indian Ocean is how he wants to remember them. Like the open ended narration of *Sindbad the Sailor*, where the story must go on, for Villiers the author and mariner, his journey does not end either. The *Triumph* sails again, and Villiers too sets off for his next adventure. The conclusion of the voyage, like *Sindbad*, is not the end but the beginning of a new horizon.

CONCLUSION:**VILLIERS AND SINDBAD: HOME IS THE SEA**

With so much of history being cast on the frontiers of the terrestrial world, it is of little wonder that the realm of the sea and the narratives that come from it are so neglected. Placing “The Story of Sindbad the Sailor and Sindbad the Porter” in conversation with Alan Villiers *Sons of Sindbad* provides an insight into the kind of readings that focusing on the ocean space can produce.

Villiers, as a traveller and author, functions in a similar manner to both Sindbad and the Porter. Like the Porter Villiers moves into the world carrying with him the story of the *Triumph* and the “sons of Sindbad”. His construction of life on board the *Triumph*, not only documents the dhow journey but also tells the story of the sailors and pearl divers. Villiers mediates his experience to a wider audience and so ensures the survival of Nejdî’s legacy. As author he acts as a gate keeper, or *bawab*, between the Orient and the Occident and it is through his narrative that the reader receives an account of the dhow trade. At the same time however, Villiers is essentially a similar character to Sindbad. Both operate in the margins and on the vast world of the sea. Their trades, Villiers as a journalist and travel writer and Sindbad as a merchant trader, mean that they are able to transcend the borders and boundaries of their terrestrial lives.

Sindbad’s transgressions into imaginative worlds result in the subversion of traditional concepts of home and away. Villiers, using his identity as a citizen of the sea, moves fluidly across orientalist binaries and nationalist occlusions. Villiers is not immune to the ambivalence of the home and away dichotomy. Though his travelogue reaches into the ocean space he frequently has recourse to his childhood memories and ideas of what the sea

was and it is through the trope of nostalgia that he attempts to construct this childhood romance. He is in effect then, contrasting his received ideas against the lived experience and at every turn encounters a world that refuses to be defined by the space that it occupies and instead bleeds out across boundaries.

The entire story of “Sindbad” is built around the tension between home - its implied safety and security, and away - with the desire to see the world and accompanying potential violence and adventure. This point resonates strongly with Sindbad’s sixth voyage when he returns to Baghdad and relates his tale to the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, “[t]he Caliph marvelled exceedingly, and he ordered his historians to record my story and deposit it in my library, so that whoever reads it might be edified by it” (Heller-Roazen 343). As noted, this is not the final chapter and Sindbad sets off again in the seventh voyage. Similarly, Villiers narrates the last days of sail but at the end of the travelogue, the *Triumph* departs once more.

By challenging the categories of home as a site of instability and away as one of regularity, the narratives unsettle political ideologies of nation states and nationalities. The world of the sea and ocean-based trade are not subject to the same rules that govern Empire. The Sindbads, across the vast scope of time, enable the construction of the Indian Ocean as both a pre-national and post-national space. Villiers movement into the world of Sindbad is complicated because of his ambivalent relationship to his own colonial and national identity. By identifying as a sea man and so as a Sindbad, Villiers unfetters the notion of identity as tied to a fixed geographical location that is centred on sedentary pathways. Rather, home becomes a mobile centre of shifting and complicated imbrications.

The ship, a means of travel becomes a trope for mobility; a moving and cosmopolitan community of the sea. Cast in the tradition of western travel writing about the Orient and balancing his own position as both inside and outside of empire, Villiers narrative

representation consistently resists any fixed sense of perspective. His romantic and nostalgic ideas of the Indian Ocean as a world apart and free of the trappings of modernity are complicated by the existence of vestiges of this world. The uneasy overlap of a mobile community of sailors resists an easy definition and while his locus is the dhow and its movement along the African littoral, Villiers's observations constantly point to far-off places beyond the Indian Ocean's rim:

[w]hen an Arab begins to wander he may turn up anywhere. Our curious old Seyyid on the poop for instance, had been an automobile worker in Detroit and had spent eight years in the stokeholds of ocean steamers. For a man who served so long under the British flag he knew very little English, but he used frequently to address me in a queer language. It was not Arabic. I was not sure of that, but Abdulla said so, adding that it was neither Swahili, nor Persian, nor Hindustani, nor any other language known in India. It certainly had not the slightest resemblance to English or to any other European tongue that I could recognize. It took me a long time to find out that he was really speaking very bad Polish, which he had learned in Buffalo and Detroit under the impression that it was English. He had lived in Hamtranck, the Polish suburb of Detroit, and his fellow workers must have been Poles. (Villiers 80)

The sailors not only have experience from around the Indian Ocean but also knowledge of places as far afield as America. Similarly, the objects both trophies and trade items – the Swiss watch, Chinese trinkets and Indian Sashes – hint at a deeply connected community that is every bit a part of the new and globalized world.

Sindbad moves around the littoral zones of the Indian Ocean with the repeated refrain, “we sailed under fair weather and journeyed from sea to sea and from island to island, and wherever we landed, we met merchants, high officials, and sellers and buyers, and we sold,

bought, and bartered” (Heller-Roazen 310). There is a fluid movement within the narrative from the known to the unknown and from the geographical and physical to the moral and metaphysical. It is through his voyages that Sindbad must negotiate these states of being and experience. It is not, however, merely movement through and across physical space but also movement across real and imagined geographies.

The familiarity with which Sindbad functions throughout his voyages is a direct result of the spread and exchange of religion, culture and by extension language, what Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Mueke describe as “cultural modalities” (2), where city-states or entrepôts function as nodes of connectivity in a transnational space. It is only in his sixth voyage for example, that Sindbad finds himself surrounded by people whose language he does not understand but, even then, he is quickly approached and addressed in Arabic (Heller-Roazen 341). The literal familiarity of the cultural modalities of the Indian Ocean world mean that no matter where Sindbad goes, he is to some degree at home. The cosmopolitan nature of this world is a continuation of the paradox characterized through the fluid movement between entrepôts, as well as the inferred common language that allows for easy communication wherever Sindbad goes. His exploration is therefore facilitated by a sense of commonality which he experiences everywhere.

Looking at the narrative of *Sindbad the Sailor and Sindbad the Porter*, keeping in mind its continued circulation in the modern era, gives us a template with which to re-examine the Indian Ocean world. The imaginative frontiers of *Sindbad*, applied to a contemporary moment of globalised, globalising and virtual frontiers open up possibilities for describing connections that have always existed and ways of breaching cultural divides that exist as super-structures over and above divisive categorisations. The story suggests ways of looking at modern modes and patterns of movement, but more importantly, it gives us a basis for exploring narrative exchange across language and national boundaries. Writers – like

Ghosh and Gurnah – have turned to this world as a way of responding to and imagining an alternative to the current world order. The narratives that they share resonate with cultural exchange and the movement of people from their home lands to far-off places. While they carry their cultural modalities across borders they unsettle ideas about nationalisms and what it means to be home.

While the modernisation of the Indian Ocean space into an expressway for tankers and cargo ships seems to make a character like Sindbad redundant, the shift in literature studies from a western hegemonic order to a global site of multiple centres emphasises the importance of trading stories and carrying narratives across borders, and out into a wider world. Just as the story of Sinbad developed out of the historical world of movement and oceanic exchange, so its core characteristic of motion ensures its perpetuation in new forms. To put it another way, the characteristics of the story cycle, born out of the movement within and around the Indian Ocean, naturally give the story over to translation and adaptation in ever re-imagined forms.

Grace Pundyk states that “Villiers captures two parallel worlds that exist in Kuwait – that of the ancient and the modern” (87). It is more than the meeting place of his imaginative construction of Arabia and his own narrative-modernity but rather, a multi-dimensional field of complex connectivity across space and time. But the reality is that while trying to re-imagine a world of timeless dhows and Arab navigators, Villiers crafts a narrative of connections and continuity across the globe: a voyaging that doesn’t end, even if his analytic frames cast it as “dying or passing” the ultimate message is of ships setting off to sea again.

Similarly, Sindbad’s narrative describes a world that is neither static nor one-dimensional but opens out imaginative possibilities that push the boundaries and borders of what is known. The Sindbads discussed: Sindbad the sailor, Villiers, Nejdi, Said the Suri and others, force a reconceptualization of the idea of home and what it means to travel in a

familiar world. They inspire what I have called archipelagic thinking, by which the relationship to the world is conceptualized through nodes of connection and the movement between; always at home in familiar places but simultaneously away, a citizen bound infinitely to transit. They function on well-worn trade routes which are exploited through a process of repetition, movement that can be adapted into patterns of reading that seek not the solid form of land but rather an archipelagic mentality that shifts its focus onto ways in which the world bleeds across representational and constructed borders revealing new patterns of movement, migration and interconnection. Always of course, setting out once again for unknown horizons.

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