

(Dis)connected History and the Multiple Narratives of Global Early Modernity

ZOLTÁN BIEDERMANN

University College London

quiet isn't always peace

(AMANDA GORMAN, "The Hill We Climb" [2021])

Cuba, early November 1492: "They were received with great solemnity, according to custom, and all, both men and women, came out to see them. They were lodged in the best houses. . . . [T]he chief people conducted them by the arms to the principal house, gave them two chairs on which to sit, and all the people who could fit in the house squatted round them on the ground."¹ Some weeks later, a little further East on the island of Hispaniola, another festive welcome: "The king [Guacanagarí] came out to receive them, and as they entered the town, they found that it was the largest and best disposed . . . that they had seen so far. . . . The king bestowed great honors on the Christians. . . . [H]e gave each of them some cotton cloth and parrots for the Admiral . . . and other things from his residence . . . and whatever the Christians gave them, however little its value, they received it and appreciated it as if it were a relic."² Pan to the other side of the globe, to Ajmer in north India, in January 1616:

At the Durbar I was led right before [Emperor Jahangir], at the entrance of an outward rayle, where mett mee two Principall Noble slaues to conduct mee nearer. . . . When I entred within the first rayle I made a reuerance. . . . The Place is a great Court. . . . The king sits in a little Gallery ouer head; Ambassidors, the great men and strangers of qualey within the inmost rayle vnder him, raysed from the ground . . .

I wish to thank Carina Johnson and Ayesha Ramachandran for challenging me to write this piece, which would otherwise not have come into existence. Much of it follows up on my book *(Dis)connected Empires: Imperial Portugal, Sri Lankan Diplomacy, and the Making of a Habsburg Conquest in Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

1. Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 5 vols. (Madrid, 1875–76), 1:331 (my translation).

2. *Ibid.*, 1:393.

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the Meaner men representing gentry within the first rayle, the people without in a base Court, but soe that all may see the king. This sitting out hath soe much affinitye with a Theatre—the manner of the king in his gallery; The great men lifted on a stage as actors; the vulgar below gazing on—that an easy description will informe of the place and fashion. . . . I deliuered his Majesties lettre translated . . . after, my presents, which were well received. . . . He dismissed me with more faouour and outward grace . . . then euer was showed to any Ambassador.³

Stories of early modern cross-cultural encounters and global symbolic communication hold much power today. Freed from older scholarly notions that societies in the Caribbean, in the Mughal Empire, in Europe, and elsewhere were too different to entertain meaningful conversations, historians have come over the past twenty years to emphasize the multiple and potent ways in which they did. We now tell stories of encounter and exchange where earlier generations told stories of ill faith, miscommunication, and conquest. We pack into our narratives the beginnings of a globalized, not a colonized, world. And indeed, there can be no doubt today that early modern developments brought many previously unconnected human societies into sustained contact with each other, widening multiple horizons and integrating multiple worlds into an overarching realm of planetary magnitude. Yet the very same shifts still paved the way for the global power imbalances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from which we are all either benefitting or reeling today.

The contradictions inherent to early modern processes of connection and disconnection—I shall use the term *(dis)connection*—call for a renewed historiographical debate. Should we, and can we, develop narratives that take into account both the tremendous increase in transcontinental connectivity after 1450 and the simultaneous buildup of cross-cultural tensions? Can we, when we are lucky enough to hear other voices in the archive than European ones, listen to them without losing sight of the clouds gathering in the distance—“seeing the clouds coming from far off,” as one author put it?⁴ How do we share stories of cross-cultural interaction today with audiences in formerly and currently colonized societies who may think about them differently? In the pages that follow, I suggest that we cultivate critical narratives of *(dis)connectivity*. My focus is on the early modern period, but the arguments apply more widely. On the one hand, I ask that we increase our efforts to understand how exactly connections worked or failed to work in the past. Understanding and theorizing the breakdown of communications is, I argue, as important as documenting their growth. On the other

3. *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615–1619*, ed. William Foster, 2 vols. (London, 1899), 1:108–9.

4. André Brink, *A Chain of Voices* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 14.

hand, I suggest that we sharpen our awareness of the methodological and ethical challenges inherent to the very selection of stories of (dis)connectivity from the historical record. I ask that, precisely as we “seek out opportunities to expand the explanatory power and scope of historical narratives,” we also think about the terms under which those narratives will be heard by audiences across the globe as they themselves become active participants in reconstructions of the past.⁵

CONNECTIVITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Much of the development of connectivity-related scholarship between Europe and Asia is owed to the galvanizing effect of Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s 1997 article “Connected Histories.” The article conveyed a reflection on the need to “delink the notion of ‘modernity’ from a particular European trajectory” and “argue that it represents a more-or-less global shift, with many different sources and roots.” The early modern period, Subrahmanyam conceded to the status quo, was an “age of travel and discovery, of geographical redefinition.”⁶ The one aspect uniting all others in Subrahmanyam’s catalog of early modern processes was surprisingly conventional: it was the emergence of a global space as a novel theater of political, commercial, and cultural action and perception.⁷ Crucially, however, the author asserted that the story of this global space needed to be told all over again, purged of long-held assumptions about the leading role played by Europeans in its making. While much remained to be explicated and fleshed out, the general proposition proved deeply attractive to an entire generation of younger historians working on “European expansion” and non-European regional histories, including myself. Subrahmanyam highlighted the notion of “the permeability of what are often assumed to be closed ‘cultural zones,’” the “existence of vocabularies that cut across local . . . traditions” on grounds of commensurable cultural and social structures,⁸ and the legitimacy of writing global history based on an examination of transcontinentally interconnected local and

5. Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, Caroline Wigginton, and Kelly Wisecup, “Materials and Methods in Native American and Indigenous Studies: Completing the Turn,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (April 2018): 236.

6. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” in “The Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland Southeast Asia, 1400–1800,” ed. Victor Lieberman, special issue, *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 1997): 737.

7. Advances in the “agricultural frontier and agricultural innovation, demography, urbanization and patterns of urban settlement, . . . travel, discovery and colonization as leading to an ecological shift of global dimensions . . . global trade flows . . . changes in political theology . . . the early modern construct of the Universal Empire . . . reworked the new geographical and political settings of the period” (ibid., 738–39).

8. Ibid., 748.

regional events. This promised an almost effortless improvement on classic comparative history with its perceived tendency to reify cultural differences (although elsewhere Subrahmanyam took a more conciliatory stance toward combining connective and comparative methods). The proposition seemed perfect for the dawn of a new, post–Cold War, post-nation-state, globalized academia. Nationalism had “blinded us to the possibility of connection,” and a majority of us agreed that the moment was right for change.⁹ As a result, connected history is now ubiquitous. It is the declared guiding principle of almost any book, article, exhibition, course, or research project ambitioning to engage with the making of the global order in the early modern period.

It is important to state the obvious: this has been an excellent development overall. Transcultural (transnational, transcontinental) histories have emerged everywhere from the Americas to the Far East, from North Asia to West Africa. While it would be a stretch to state that these have neutralized the older Eurocentric narratives of globalization and modernization, or indeed other chauvinisms elsewhere, they have certainly produced a counterweight, an alternative place for scholars to turn in their search for new materials and ideas. The study of “cultural crossings” has proved essential to “decentering history.”¹⁰ But where do we go from here? While connectivity is a capacious notion—or perhaps precisely because it is—it does not seem to generate much debate. Connectivity, like “circulation,” has come to mean almost anything, approaching the point where it means nothing much at all. While this is not the place for a detailed analysis of how the word has been used and abused—few can claim innocence on that front—a nod to the brilliant critique of the word “circulation” by Stefanie Gänger goes a long way to show that we have a challenge on our hands. Replace “circulation” with “connection” in the following quote, and we get a precise diagnostic: “‘Circulation’ is not only among the most widely used words in the language of global history; it is also among the most erratically employed. Amorphous in its usages and protean in its semantics, ‘circulation’ has come to describe any sort of movement.” As Gänger explains, the success of such words derives in part from their “seeming ‘untainted-ness’ and openness,” combined with a more concrete usage in a particular field of human activity—for example, in the case of “connection,” modern telecommunications. The latter offers a “sense of entity (independent existence) for the terrain in which [it] occurs.”¹¹

9. *Ibid.*, 745.

10. Natalie Zemon Davis, “Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World,” *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (May 2011): 188–202.

11. Stefanie Gänger, “Circulation: Reflections on Circularity, Entity, and Liquidity in the Language of Global History,” *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 3 (November 2017): 303.

A self-reflexive discussion about why and how exactly we should pursue the study of connections seems timely in the current context, where global history itself has begun to draw some opposition for its emphasis on integration rather than disintegration.¹² Is the “connected” in “connected history” really the best term we can come up with as we discuss the staggering complexity and volatility of early modern global interactions? To be very clear: I will not be pleading that we abandon our newly gained freedoms and chastise ourselves back to writing histories purged of connectivity. The past two decades have brought such advances in our understanding of early modern interdependencies that there is a risk of forgetting what we were up against in the first place: chauvinist, localist, sectarian discourses that remain threateningly alive. Accusations of “globalism” and “cosmopolitanism” are still widely used and hauntingly effective weapons in cultural wars that nationalists wish to reignite because they sense they can win them.¹³ My suggestion, then, is emphatically not that we abandon the study of things akin to circulation and connectivity. It is, instead, that we improve it by embracing the notion of (dis)connection.

CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION IN CONTEXT

Twenty years of “connected history” writing have brought little clarity over whether “connectedness” refers to connections as the object of study, a quality inherent to the objects studied, or the way any object might be studied—or indeed all three, or any given combination. I am inclined to argue, for the time being, that the first of these options most evidently aspires to originality and relevance once the initial, superficial thrill of doing a little of the second and third has ebbed. The question of how connections worked in the past arises compellingly from the realization that connections were abundant. To bring this into relief, it is in fact worth asking a related question first: How and why do so many connections fail?

A good example of a missed connection arises from the recorded meeting, in 1546, between a minor local ruler in the eastern lowlands of Sri Lanka, known as the “king of Batticaloa,” and a Portuguese envoy known as Friar Simão of Coimbra on his way from Goa to the mountain kingdom of Kandy.¹⁴ The conditions for a stable connection to be established were good in principle: diplomacy had flourished in the southwest and center of

12. See section “From Connected to (Dis)connected History” below.

13. See, e.g., the deeply flawed, yet immensely popular polemics in Elvira Roca Barea, *Imperiofobia y Leyenda Negra: Roma, Rusia, Estados Unidos y el Imperio Español* (Madrid: Siruela, 2016).

14. For a fuller rendering of the story, see Zoltán Biedermann, “Three Ways of Locating the Global: Microhistorical Challenges in the Study of Early Transcontinental Diplomacy,” *Past and Present* 242, supplement no. 14 (November 2019): 110–41.

Sri Lanka for decades. The local ruler at Batticaloa felt confident that he could replicate those logics, allying himself with the Portuguese by doing what others had done before. He hoped that the offer would be accepted, and that the Portuguese authorities would send him a gift in return: a pair of hunting dogs. Friar Simão, however, hurried onward to Kandy. The following year, another Portuguese envoy, António Moniz Barreto, again ran into the king of Batticaloa. Once more, the latter offered friendship and was ignored. We know nothing else about that little kingdom, which did not produce a lasting archive of its own; nothing, that is, until the Dutch saw their chance to deploy diplomatic efforts precisely there, in the early seventeenth century, eventually prompting the Portuguese to build a fort in 1628. The Dutch initiative, one hastens to add, also led to a breakdown, albeit of a different kind: whatever cooperation there was between the Dutch and the rulers of eastern Sri Lanka, who worked together to oust the Portuguese from Batticaloa in 1638, soon collapsed into a Dutch project to conquer much larger parts of the island. This, incidentally, was a project partly inspired by the Portuguese campaigns of conquest begun in the southwest of the island in the 1590s, about which more below. A missed connection followed by a briefly successful one inaugurated the second of three waves of European colonial aggression in Sri Lanka.¹⁵

Be that as it may, one could argue, the pair of dogs requested by the king of Batticaloa surely points to a powerful sense of connectability between elite cultures across Europe and Asia. A key proposition of connected history has been to revise the notion that early modern encounters occurred between societies fundamentally different from each other. Incommensurability (“that feeling of radical strangeness”)¹⁶ had been, partly at least, an assumption embedded in the logics of area studies, and as such related to the mechanics of reification inherent to Orientalism. Many of us felt liberated as we started to rethink early modern encounters as occurring not so much between “different cultures,” but between elite representatives of societies who turned out to understand each other’s languages to some extent—for example, by being able to “read” the spatial symbolism of diplomatic receptions, as invoked in the passages quoted at the beginning of this article.¹⁷ But what exactly can count as commensurable? There are

15. Chandra Richard De Silva, *The Portuguese in Ceylon, 1617–1638* (Colombo: Cave, 1972); George D. Winius, *The Fatal History of Portuguese Ceylon: Transition to Dutch Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

16. “Ce sentiment d’étrangeté radicale” (Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l’Amérique : La question de l’autre* [Paris: Seuil, 1982], 13 [my translation]). The phrase can also be translated as a “sense of radical difference” (Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999], 4).

17. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Par-delà l’incommensurabilité : Pour une histoire connectée des empires aux temps modernes,” in “Histoire globale, histoires connectées: Un changement

complementary pathways to answering this question, which together signal both the potency and the inherently fleeting nature of cross-cultural (and consequently transcultural) communications. First, their potency: for a moment, in the late months of 1492, even Spaniards and Taínos seemed capable of finding common ground. From the Caribbean through Africa to Asia, early diplomacy happened because people on all sides wanted and felt capable of making it happen. The mutually held desire to build predictable relationships and extract political, not just commercial, capital from diplomatic encounters meant that even across large cultural gaps bridges would be built. A key factor supporting this was the way kingship worked across many societies in the premodern world. Before the concept of sovereignty transformed European statehood in the sixteenth century, kingship was not attached to the notion of unified, equivalent, mutually exclusive territories. Kings could be kings while recognizing the superior authority of, and paying tribute to, other figures of authority further above in the hierarchy (the emperor, the pope). They could, at the same time, labor to subject other, lesser kings to their own overlordship without reaching administratively into their realms. If the monarchs of Portugal and of Kotte in Sri Lanka were both “kings of kings,” then their shared understandings of kingship could support a sustained relationship.¹⁸ There was no word for “commensurability,” but the very usage of the words *rei* or *rey* for rulers almost anywhere is proof in itself of the notion—an “implicit understanding”—that royalty was a shared ideal.¹⁹ As Bartolomé de las Casas put it after offering the narrative of the 1492 reception reproduced above, Columbus thought about whether *cacique* meant *rey*, and concluded that it did.²⁰

Transcontinental connections could thus be established at the intersection of societies structurally predisposed and politically willing to talk. The potential for political historians, but also for anyone interested in literature, is considerable: at the level of key characters in literary narratives across the continents, there are almost endless possibilities for linkages and dynamic comparisons. From virtuous and unvirtuous emperors, kings, queens, and chief ministers, through courtiers, priests, and merchants, to peasants, paupers, pirates, and outcasts, we can see social types and moral themes reverberate across stories told in many different societies. The

d'échelle historiographique?,” supplement, *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 54, no. 4 bis (2007): 34–53. For an elaborate refutation of incommensurability, also see William M. Reddy, “The Eurasian Origins of Empty Time and Space: Modernity as Temporality Reconsidered,” *History and Theory* 55, no. 3 (October 2016): 325–56.

18. Biedermann, *(Dis)connected Empires*, 23–30, 47–54.

19. *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart Schwartz (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

20. Las Casas, *Historia*, 1:394.

transcontinental readability of such aspects helps explain how connections came into being and gained meaning across many regions of the globe. This was the case in West Africa from the late fifteenth century, in many kingdoms and sultanates along the shores of Maritime Asia from around 1500, and at the great inland courts from Tabriz through Agra to Beijing from the 1520s. Crucially though, the conceptual bridges thus built were far from solid. Nor were mutual understandings necessarily bound to improve as people spent more time talking to each other. As the drunk novelist, Wade, and the private eye Marlowe put it in *The Long Goodbye*: “You and I talked, right?”—“For a long time, yeah.”—“And we made sense, didn’t we? We touched each other, didn’t we?”²¹ Well, yes, they did—and they did not. That is the story of many, perhaps even most friendships: people, courtly elites, entire societies often drift apart as they talk to each other. They touch, and then they cease to touch—or, in fact, one begins to assault the other. But why? The standard assumption implicit in much early modern history writing has been that things went relatively well for a while, until a problem appeared and things began to go wrong—often somewhere toward the end of the narrative, or indeed outside the timeframe of the article, book, or exhibition telling the story. What caused the breakdown is thus narratively isolated from the relationship itself. In this regard, there has been little to no theorization, perhaps because causality itself has become a notion few of us feel comfortable discussing.²² Immediate causes or trigger events (such as an inflection of imperial policy, or the actions of a particularly horrid commander in the field) are often taken to explain, in and of themselves, breakdowns and transitions to conquest. The deeper material, ideational, and political roots of disconnection often remain untouched.

My own work on Sri Lanka was originally framed by the premise that sometime after 1580 (an important date in Portuguese history, marking the beginning of the Iberian Union of Crowns under Phillip II) a policy shift occurred, putting an end to the diplomatic exchanges of previous decades. The breakdown resulted, of course, not in the Portuguese leaving the scene, but them crushing their former allies, replacing the Sinhalese king with the king of Portugal, and taking possession of their lands. Established wisdom had it that this was most likely due to a suddenly increased “influence” of the Castilian model of territorial conquest on policy makers in Lisbon and Goa after Phillip II became their king. At that point, the Portuguese side, unexpectedly enthusiastic about the nascent idea of

21. *The Long Goodbye*, directed by Robert Altman (1973; MGM Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

22. Frans van Lunteren, “Historical Explanation and Causality,” *Isis* 110, no. 2 (June 2019): 321–24; Theodore Arabatzis, “Explaining Science Historically,” *Isis* 110, no. 2 (June 2019): 354–59.

territoriality as a key element of statehood and empire, began to think about Sri Lanka as a land that might be taken possession of, rather than a distant backdrop to tributary transactions with vassal kings.²³ This entailed an abrupt transition from accepting the tribute of local kings to considering them as obstacles to be neutralized, standing in the way of full, sovereign, colonial rule over their lands and peoples. As I delved into the historical record, however, it emerged that the Spanish connection was far too simple an explanation. A widening of the chronological frame, in particular, brought into sight a whole string of earlier propositions made by Portuguese officials, soldiers, and missionaries to conquer Ceylon. Iterations of the idea of “taking the island” extended deep into the past, like the roots of a dandelion—requiring circumspect digging (they are very breakable) but retrievable nevertheless. In 1557, the last Buddhist king of Kotte was murdered, most likely by a Portuguese soldier serving a viceroy whose actions in 1551 had included the looting of the Temple of the Tooth, one of the island’s most sacred Buddhist sites. In 1539, there had been an outbreak of violence uncannily out of tune with the usual participation of Portuguese troops in local warfare: a Portuguese commander drove his platoon deep inland, not to impose tribute but to threaten the elimination of a local king, half a century ahead of the turn to conquest.

As I worked backward to the very beginnings of the story, a realization set in that clouds hovered over the conversations from the onset—a point made without much discussion by historians in the 1950s–1970s, and which I had hoped to disprove, but was now forced to revisit. Early diplomatic agreements, made in 1518 and as far back as 1506, the year of the first encounter, now appeared fraught by tensions. The subtle ironies of an early Lankan reaction to the newcomers—a mix of astonishment and sarcasm—morphed into something much more politically charged when read under such a light.²⁴ Two aspects hovering in the background emerged from the shade. First, while Portugal was not yet a fully formed territorial state in 1506, its elite cultivated a nascent sense of territoriality setting it already somewhat apart from the “galactic polity” of Lanka.²⁵ Though happy to act as a tributary overlord in Asia, the Portuguese Crown and many of its traveling subjects were by no means unable to consider the option of full and direct conquest: the conceptual tools were there already. Second, Portuguese

23. Michael Biggs, “Putting the State on the Map: Cartography, Territory, and European State Formation,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 2 (April 1999): 374–405; Biedermann, *(Dis)connected Empires*, 26–30, 202–15.

24. Chandra Richard De Silva, “Beyond the Cape: The Portuguese Encounter with the Peoples of South Asia,” in Schwartz, *Implicit Understandings*, 295–322.

25. Alan Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion: Portuguese Imperialism in a Buddhist Land* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27–30.

and other European agents and observers of “expansion” were quite deeply ambiguous about the way they valued other societies. While the transversal deployment of the notion of royalty indicates a level playing field—and there is no reason for us to stop seeking out this notion in the record—one also notes the signs of a more hierarchical understanding of things, where Portuguese monarchs appeared by default as receivers of tribute, not payers.²⁶ These dissonances, I remember, were barely perceptible in the earliest sources until I began to listen very carefully. But they were there, resonating with the uncanny cohabitation of the sublime and the sublate in the earliest Portuguese reporting on Tupi society in what is now Brazil (1500), where people were considered admirable and bestial at the same time.²⁷ This suggested to me something rather obvious that I had previously failed to grasp: that narratives of connection and disconnection were both valid. Connection and disconnection were two sides of the same historical developments. They offered stories running along different narrative paths while involving the same sources and events. Each one of the two had the ability to shine a fresh light on the other without disproving it outright. Studying them together, I realized, was what afforded us the most original insights. It was not separately, but jointly, that those apparently incompatible aspects of the past—connection and disconnection, convergence and divergence, buildup and breakdown—would be able to unfold their full heuristic potential.

FROM CONNECTED TO (DIS)CONNECTED HISTORY

The problem with focusing on deeply seated tensions in political and cultural history, of course, is that they raise the specter of essentialism. Divergences such as the one just described for Sri Lanka can unfold in the *moyenne* or even the *longue durée*: in this case, rather than happening suddenly around 1594, it grew gradually from as far back as 1506, and requires some understanding of both Lankan and Portuguese politics as far back as the late 1400s. While the divergence debate of economic historians has tended to lower the chronology, bringing the European takeoff ever closer to our own time and making European exceptionalism ever more ephemeral, the opposite could easily become the case as we trace cultural tensions back to the late medieval period.²⁸ Stories of early tensions and disconnections

26. António Vasconcelos de Saldanha, *Iustum Imperium: Dos tratados como fundamento do império dos portugueses no Oriente; Estudo de história do direito internacional e do direito português* (Lisbon: Instituto Português do Oriente, 1997).

27. See Lisa Voigt, “‘Por Andarmos Todos Casy Mesturados’: The Politics of Intermingling in Caminha’s ‘Carta’ and Colonial American Anthologies,” *Early American Literature* 40, no. 3 (2005): 407–39.

28. See Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, eds., “The Global Middle Ages,” *Past and Present* 238, supplement no. 13 (November 2018).

remind us that the destructive force of European expansion is not just an *explanans*, but also an *explanandum*. It threatens to take us back to the one issue we really wished to get away from in the first place: whether there was some sort of European exceptionalism.²⁹ Transitions from middle ground to colonial ground occurred in many places around the globe before 1800, but Europeans were involved in an inordinately large number of them.³⁰ Why? It is important at this point to emphasize that I am not suggesting a return to readings of early transcontinental interactions as clashes of inherently dissimilar, mutually incompatible societies. There is a difference between reifying cultural contrasts and exploring judiciously the deeper history of cultural tensions.³¹ I am also not suggesting that we go back to reading the early modern period as one long and sinister buildup to European global hegemony, with all non-European agency reduced to impotency, survivance, or resistance. Too many places were beyond the reach of European powers to warrant such a judgment. Rather, I suggest that we think critically about the very notion of a period of partnership after which things went more seriously wrong. This, again, is not to state that changes did not occur between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century in many places. It is simply to remind ourselves of how many changes also occurred at other times, in other places—and what this may tell us about the idea of modernity itself.

To avoid reinforcing, tautologically, the myth of early modern connectivity, we need to be frank about what we have achieved and what we want to achieve. It took a long time by the measure of an otherwise critical profession for a dissenting voice to caution, in 2013, against the dangers of putting all our eggs in the basket of catchall connectivity. An excessive emphasis on connections and networks, David Washbrook warned, could easily distract from historical “relations of force and coercion.”³² At the same time, Sujit Sivasunderam concluded a book on the colonial “islanding” of Sri Lanka musing that “after all, a connection is a disconnection, when

29. To be sure, (dis)connective transitions to colonialism existed in other contexts than those studied by historians working with Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and English documents—compare, e.g., the Chinese conquest of Taiwan in Tonio Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish, and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

30. See Biedermann, *(Dis)connected Empires*, 122–26.

31. Comparison itself is not synonymous with reification. See Alan Strathern, *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

32. David Washbrook, “Problems in Global History,” in *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century*, ed. Maxine Berg (Oxford University Press, 2013), 27. Subrahmanyam himself had cautioned against assuming “absolute” or “perfect” commensurability precisely with regard to some overenthusiastic work on Roe and the Mughals (“Par-delà l’incommensurabilité,” 44) and noted the early modern growth of “new or intensified forms of hierarchy, domination and separation” (“Connected Histories,” 739).

viewed from another direction.”³³ In 2011 already, Carina Johnson’s *Cultural Hierarchy in Sixteenth-Century Europe* had painted a rather darker picture than, say, Serge Gruzinski’s *What Time Is It There?*³⁴ In 2014, John-Paul Ghobrial expressed concern about what exactly our focus on an increasingly interconnected early modern world might actually be teaching us—apart from giving us a large, visually appealing, impressionistic tableau.³⁵ That same year, Ania Loomba warned how “work on ‘connected histories’ does not always pay attention to the fact that this single global modernity was forged, or at least drastically reshaped, alongside colonialism.”³⁶ Early modernists can find it difficult to listen to postcolonial and decolonial scholars. Then, in 2017, a global historian sympathetic to the study of connectivity, but wary of the way it had generated too much “do-good storytelling about our cosmopolitan commonness” and even produced “global history to give globalization a human face,” made himself heard more widely. Jeremy Adelman’s *Aeon* blogpost, now a classic, ignited the only controversy so far around what exactly narratives of global connectedness may be here to achieve. Interestingly, his insider push for “narratives of global life that reckon with disintegration as well as integration, the costs and not just the bounty of interdependence” was read by many as an outsider attack.³⁷

There can be little doubt that we need to be more ambitious than we have so far in our combining the study of connectivity and its opposites (divergence, rupture, collapse). Words matter. Entanglements, entwinements, crossed gazes, and acts of interweaving all have come with remarkably soft associations for a history deeply marked by violence. One could go as far as offering a gendered historiographical critique. Over the past three years, a shift has finally begun away from those terms, albeit somewhat quietly. References to “critical connected history” are in the air.³⁸ There is the

33. Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka, and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 336.

34. Carina L. Johnson, *Cultural Hierarchy in Sixteenth-Century Europe: The Ottomans and Mexicans* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Serge Gruzinski, *What Time Is It There?: America and Islam at the Dawn of Modern Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

35. John-Paul A. Ghobrial, “The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory,” *Past and Present* 222, no. 1 (February 2014): 56.

36. Ania Loomba, “Early Modern or Colonial?,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 145.

37. Jeremy Adelman, “What Is Global History Now?,” *Aeon*, March 2, 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>; Richard Drayton, David Motadel, David A. Bell, and Jeremy Adelman, “Discussion: The Futures of Global History,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (March 2018): 1–21.

38. Sujit Sivasundaram, “Towards a Critical History of Connection: The Port of Colombo, the Geographical ‘Circuit’ and the Visual Politics of New Imperialism, ca. 1880–1914,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 2 (April 2017): 346–84. On a new book series edited by Nira Wickramasinghe and Tsoin Nalbantian, see “Critical, Connected Histories—New

suggestion to study “transformative disconnections.”³⁹ German historians talk of “disentanglement” (*Entflechtung*) as the flipside of “entanglement” (*Verflechtung*), along with “noncirculation and nonentanglement”⁴⁰—again, without declaring the advent of a new paradigm, as if not to upset a consensus around the importance of studying connectivity. One also notes a compelling recent plea by young historians for those holding power in the field to allow it to become more inclusive.⁴¹ At such a juncture, it is important to clarify what words and concepts exactly we wish to deploy as we move forward, and what associations we wish them to carry.

We need a term that can account for connectivity and disconnectivity at the same time. It should reflect the harshness of the reality of connections being broken. It should not romanticize things by referring to glances exchanged between people or threads being interwoven. It should perhaps be a term both abstract and unwieldy enough to remain a stumbling block in every sentence it enters. To me, the most adequate term at present is (dis)connection. The key emphasis in “(dis)connection” is—in contrast, I believe, with other terms and approaches—that connection and disconnection are explicitly taken not as successive historical stages, but as the two aspects of, two qualities inherent to the same story. Connectivity is here conceived of as carrying simultaneously the potential for convergence and divergence. Disconnection is not the result of something happening to connections. It is a possibility embedded in connections. It is the result of the fact that a connection establishes a link between two nonidentical entities. To recognize this allows new historical narratives to emerge where disconnection is not a function of external forces, but of connectivity itself. This history accepts that connection and disconnection are complementary, interconnected, and interdependent. Their entanglement is the one

Series,” *Connections: A Journal for Historians and Area Specialists*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.connections.clio-online.net/project/id/fp-1236>.

39. Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Comment: Global History by Jürgen Osterhammel,” in *Debating New Approaches to History*, ed. Marek Tamm and Peter Burke (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 38. Note also the shift among science historians toward examining breakdowns: see Daniel Margócsy, “A Long History of Breakdowns: A Historiographical Review,” in “Breaking Scientific Networks,” special issue, *Social Studies of Science* 47, no. 3 (June 2017): 307–25; and Zoltán Biedermann, “Le jardin aux cartes qui bifurquent: La mer Caspienne vue de Venise et de Goa au XVIIe siècle,” trans. Cécile Dutheil de La Rochère, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 75, no. 2 (2020): 155–88.

40. Cécile Stephanie Stehrenberger, “Theorizing the Global Hispanophone as a Dynamic of (Dis)entanglement: Contributions from a History of Science Perspective,” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1/2 (March–June 2019): 100.

41. The EUI Global History Seminar Group, “For a Fair(er) Global History,” *CROMOHS—Cyber Review of Modern Historiography*, February 3, 2021, <https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/cromohs/FairHist>.

that cannot be undone—and it is the study of their developments, their tensions, their dramas, that (dis)connected history is about.

(DIS)CONNECTED HISTORY BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

At this point, it is legitimate to counter: Would we care about the potential for disconnection embedded in historical interactions if the latter did not break down? Would we be looking for (dis)connectivity in the Luso-Lankan conversations that took place in 1506 if we were not aware of the later policy shift to conquest? In other words, does a (dis)connective approach imply that we act with the benefit of hindsight? This would seem to infringe the deeply held principle that each case is a case in its own right, and that interpreting historical occurrences in light of later developments is objectionable. It may be good here to remind ourselves, first, that all history writing benefits from hindsight. We are inevitably looking at the past from the present—an almost unbearably banal truism that, however, somehow calls to be declaimed periodically as we persistently let it slip into some distant recess of our minds when working in the archive. Second, any claim that setting out to study early modern connectivity is somehow a more “objective” project than setting out to study (dis)connectivity would be patently misleading. In fact, the opposite is likely to be correct: the assumption of a single quality inherent to past occurrences signals far more prescient manipulation than an assumption of two dynamically interdependent qualities. Implicitly or explicitly, the perceived relevance of early modern connections depends on the heavily hindsight-based notion that full-on modernity was different and happened later. Studying (dis)connection allows us to keep all options open on this matter, encouraging multiple narratives where a focus on connection discourages them. Only a discipline intent on preventing debate would choose the latter over the former.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, it is attention to (dis)connectivity, not connectivity, that most soundly justifies studying together, today, such distinct occurrences as the ones invoked at the beginning of this article. Columbus and Roe, Guacanagarí and Jahangir: going back to the texts quoted, let us remind ourselves of how those excerpts have been put through, first, a process of selection, and second, juxtaposition. Both are actions that we perform as historians every day. The problem is an old one of course, but there is a strangely compelling way in which it gains renewed significance in the present context. To posit that 1492 saw the establishment of connections in the Caribbean somehow analogous to those that occurred a century later in north India amounts to revising an established story of aggression in the Atlantic. It puts a spin on that story suggesting that its beginnings were peaceful, and that the potential was there for

constructive cooperation. There is value to this in that it shines light on Taíno agency, an otherwise underrated aspect. But what exactly are we telling ourselves and our audiences by drawing together today those textual fragments and underscoring the cross-cultural readability of diplomatic theatricality? In principle, the reader of the first page of this article could have assumed that I would be talking about how the premonition of genocidal violence cast its shadow from the late fifteenth-century Caribbean over seventeenth-century Hindustan. Not so long ago, that would have been a plausible thing to expect. Today, most readers will rather naturally have assumed the opposite: that the Caribbean encounter would be revisited as a succession of theatrical acts (or speech acts) in the light of a Jacobean take on Mughal symbolic communication. There is a very profound difference between revisiting Columbus in the light of Roe as opposed to revisiting Roe in the light of Columbus. It is one thing to give the story of the doomed Taínos a bearing on our readings of Anglo-Mughal (or more broadly European-Asian) history. It is a very different one to do the opposite, importing notions of dialogue and negotiation from a supposedly inoffensive encounter between an Englishman and a Mughal emperor into one of the darkest chapters of Iberian-American history.

The interpretive shift is a manifestation of our power over the past. How we use that power and how we feel about the effects of wielding it are matters we must discuss. Do we care about the way the emphasis on “connection” diverts attention from the buildup of European hegemonic ambitions to some loose notion of Geertzian theater states being everywhere? Are we comfortable with the notion that some vague “dynamic” or “connection” went awry after promising beginnings? How do we react if someone tells us that our gesture undermines narratives of suffering and oppression that are crucial to people in formally colonized societies? It is a fine line that we are tasked to walk. On the one hand, fellow historians and wider audiences in many places are thrilled to hear about the agency of local power figures in a distant past, especially where they thought there had been no agency at all. Not to hear continuously about the threat of an expanding Europe can be liberating and inspire productive new research. To bring non-European agency to the fore as we study early modern and modern “worldmaking” will remain a key task for decades to come.⁴² Guacanagarí and his subjects do deserve to be written about as the shrewd initiators of diplomacy they were. On the other hand, stretch this argument too far, state too insistently that local elites “actually” attracted the Spanish, the Portuguese, or the English to their particular regions, manipulating them and showering them with attention to engage them in local trade and warfare, and the critical

42. Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

queries about whitewashing colonialism begin. Interactions with audiences in places that suffered the worst of European imperialism early on regularly force us into acknowledging explicitly the violence of the colonial past even as we talk about precolonial “encounters” and “exchanges.”

Those audiences do have a point when they ask us to adjust our narrative frame and bring back into the picture the things they consider crucial. As Frans van Lunteren put it, we humans “do not just want to know where we came from, we also want to know how we got here.”⁴³ To detach the early modern from the modern does not always do justice to that. Nor is it enough to just illustrate how we got here; we need to understand the reasons. In Sri Lanka, both academic and nonacademic audiences will happily accept that Buddhist rulers were diplomatically proactive in the sixteenth century. But they will also ask why it is in their country that people were systematically raped, mutilated, and murdered, temples looted and destroyed, lands expropriated and redistributed, a whole cultural landscape transformed during 350 years—while really no comparable aggressions happened to Portugal, Spain, Holland, or Britain coming from South Asia. How is it that a vast majority of high-end movable artefacts made in the island between 1500 and 1950 are today not there, but in collections in the West? What message exactly are we getting across by musing that the looting of the Temple of the Tooth was “actually” a part of a diplomatic agreement? Or that full-on conquest “only” began forty years after that desecration? Or that two further colonial occupations—the Dutch and the British, which ended within the lifetime of people sitting in the room—should not bear on our interpretations of that more distant past? Hindsight, we fear, is too “easy” a trick to pull as we delve into interpreting the past. The truth is, it is not easy at all.⁴⁴

Skeptics will retort that, by engaging with questions that seem to project colonial divisions into precolonial times (e.g., assuming that the Portuguese were aggressive foreigners confronting peaceful, autochthonous Lankans), we are playing into the nativists’ game. To be very clear, we are under absolutely no obligation to show any sympathy for nationalist narratives, and we must be vigilant when telling stories of conflict in association with spatial compartments (the local, the national, the regional) that are the home turf of deeply reactionary forces. If we reload a man like Thomas Roe as an exogenous agent of British imperialism in India, then what do we say to those who frame the Mughals themselves as foreign invaders in order to undermine South Asian Islam? How can we accommodate multiple narratives of (dis)connection without offering undue legitimacy to sectarian voices? How can historians allow matters of present and

43. Van Lunteren, “Historical Explanation,” 324.

44. Brink, *Chain of Voices*, 14.

past ethnicity, race, gender, and power to intersect?⁴⁵ These are serious challenges by the standards of any discipline, and we should have started discussing them a long time ago. Encouraging signs of debate now come from North American historical studies, where the links between early modern and modern are being discussed by way of a debate about sources and methods—historians with regional specialisms elsewhere may find some of the terms of the debate perplexing, but we should all listen in.⁴⁶ Another troubling question has been recently raised concerning the writing of the history of West Africa. Do we always have to tell any story in this region in relation to the enslavement of people, or can we shift our focus to diplomatic history, for example, to tell tales of an autonomous political system?⁴⁷ Both perspectives seem legitimate and important as long as we maintain our focus on the complexity of past power struggles and persistently monitor our own politics. What certainly is naïve is to assume that, by conducting business as usual and continuing to presume the universal relevance of our habitus, we will somehow make all sinister forces go away. As Steve Stern put it in the heat of the debate surrounding the fifth centenary celebrations of 1992, “the solution to the quandary is to welcome it.”⁴⁸ To defeat the nativist cavalry on the battlefield, we need to keep moving and thinking about our own intellectual and political configurations.

In sum, while (dis)connected history may seem problematically presentist at first, its politics are really much less dubious than those of purporting not to engage in modern politics. Early modernists have successfully resisted importing the great debates of the modernists, and there are many good reasons to affirm that things were indeed different before 1800 than after. But different in what ways exactly, and how do we know? Unless we do not mind ending up trapped in the study of a frozen, premodern world, we had better start reasoning about how to put into practice this otherwise abstract dictum by Gary Tomlinson (also coming out of the 1992 debate): postcolonial historiography should be about building a past that “resists our intellectual attempts to occupy it even while it takes its shape from us.”⁴⁹

45. See Valerie Traub, “History in the Present Tense: Feminist Theories, Spatialized Epistemologies, and Early Modern Embodiment,” in *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*, ed. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Farham: Ashgate, 2015), 15–53.

46. The challenges are clearly visible in the AHR Exchange “Historians and Native American and Indigenous Studies,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (April 2020): 517–51.

47. Herman L. Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

48. Steve J. Stern, “Paradigms of Conquest: History, Historiography, and Politics,” in “The Colonial and Post Colonial Experience: Five Centuries of Spanish and Portuguese America,” ed. Tulio Halperín Donghi, supplement, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24 (1992): 34.

49. Gary Tomlinson, “Unlearning the Aztec *Cantares* (Preliminaries to a Postcolonial History),” in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Sallibrass (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 261.

PRACTICING MULTIPLICITY: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Let us return one last time to the quotations opening this article. The first two of those encounters occurred in the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola in November 1492, and no reader today should need reminding that the decimation of the Taínos by war, forced labor, disease, and replacement began very soon after. The third quotation pertains to the—by comparison—reassuringly quaint world of diplomatic encounters that unfolded between Europeans and monarchs in mainland Asia, in this case the Mughal realm in North India, a land not subjected to British conquest for another century and a half. By telling such stories together, we can be fruitfully provocative in principle. It seems reasonable to be discerning, however, about how we deploy our interpretive powers in practice, and to what ends precisely. Like journalism and literature, history has the ability to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Like all narrative arts, history also has the ability to accommodate multiple tales and voices. A multitude of frames generates a multitude of stories, and while we must always work judiciously to distinguish between truthful and deceitful ways of rendering past developments, we are usually bound to be left with multiple truthful stories—or versions of the same story—in the end. Rather than shying away from the cacophony that may result from this, we should embrace the opportunity of sharing our doubts with our publics in a hospitable space where multiple stories can coexist and illuminate each other.⁵⁰ Perhaps a room where we move “to a relational, inclusional logic of . . . interdependent, complex identities”—although some may find this to be a step too far.⁵¹

In sum, we must ask ourselves what the frames and rules we create will do for an improved critical understanding of precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial developments in various regions—without assuming that regions have inherently been separated by strong cultural boundaries for millennia, but also without assuming that there were no borders at all. How do our frames improve our understandings of the past and the present, how do they help us avoid giving too much comfort to the comfortable (including ourselves), and how can we try not to afflict the afflicted? To those engaged in reinterpreting Spanish colonialism as a space of relatively benign “negotiations,” a reminder is in place that a total breakdown of dialogue inaugurated the entire period in contrast with most parts of Africa and Asia. Almost everything we contemplate in the Spanish American colonial archive follows conquest. However fascinating the prospect of “domination

50. Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

51. Alan D. M. Rayner, “Inclusional and the Role of Place, Space and Dynamic Boundaries in Evolutionary Process,” *Philosophica* 73 (2004): 51–70.

without dominance” may be—its story, both captivating and relevant, has been told most brilliantly—domination itself was an established fact across vast swathes of the New World, restricting Native American agency.⁵² To those engaged in studying the great Old World continuum and the polyphony of those three continents before British conquest, a few dissonant notes (Europeans in Asia taking inspiration from conquests in America; the fact that many dialogues led to aggression) should serve as a reminder that things were rather more complicated.⁵³ The global imperial projects of several European monarchies were well under way even as great Asian courts celebrated their own Universalist splendor, their power, and their unmatched wealth. Looking across the American-Asian-African (or Atlantic-Indian Ocean-Pacific) divides can open eyes on all sides. It matters whether we tell the story of even just a handful of hapless Europeans at a Mughal court gathering in 1616, with or without a reference to how Spanish and Portuguese empire building in the Americas and Africa may have inspired people anywhere to think about the world. It matters whether we choose to mention how and why at the same time Portuguese imperial troops were laying waste to villages in the island of Lanka. We are of course under no obligation constantly to cross-refer to conflicts happening elsewhere, but we ought to be aware of what such omissions entail.

We need a debate about the ways we frame early modern (dis)connections. Where, when, and how we take things out of context or keep them in context—how widely we cast the net, what shape we give to the frame—matters. There is no need to find a single formula: if one sentence shall reverberate from the 2018 controversy, it is that “global history has many futures.”⁵⁴ It should also be beyond doubt that, as Lynn Hunt put it and Richard Drayton and David Motadel reiterated, a “more globally oriented history” can “encourage a sense of international citizenship, of belonging to the world and not just to one’s own nationality.”⁵⁵ To achieve this objective we must make sure that our narratives come across as constructively critical rather than gratuitously revisionist. Despite the playfulness encapsulated in their name, our *jeux d’échelles* are not innocent. We use extensive powers to zoom in and out, both in space and in time, and with power comes responsibility. Acknowledging what happened before, after, and around any event as we attempt to understand it, (dis)connect it, compare it with others, can make all

52. Gonzalo Lamana, *Domination without Dominance: Inca-Spanish Encounters in Early Colonial Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

53. On this and some related points, see Biedermann, *(Dis)connected Empires*, 218–21.

54. Richard Drayton and David Motadel, in Drayton, Motadel, Bell, and Adelman, “Discussion: The Futures of Global History,” 15.

55. Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: Norton, 2014), quoted *ibid.*

the difference between empowering and disenfranchising ourselves and those who read us. Assuming that we are all interested in improving our discipline and the futures of the many communities it serves, an appeal for methodological and ethical clarification on the points here raised should not seem all too unreasonable.