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# The Curious Case of Sick Keesar: Tracing the Roots of South Asian Presence in the Early Republic

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RAJENDER KAUR

In the “Significance of the ‘Global Turn’ for the Early American Republic” (2011), Rosemarie Zagarri argues that historians of the Early Republic have been resistant to the global framework as a useful tool of analysis because they have been too focused on the nation state as a “crucial heuristic device” in a way that perpetuates the myth of American exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, she argues that the global and national can be productively reconciled and offers as a case study a “surprisingly understudied topic: the relationship between the early United States and British India in the decades immediately following the Revolution” (9). In studying missionary activity in India, shifting attitudes on race, and flows of people, ideas, and goods, she cites the “explosion in print media [which] brought British India and the United States into closer contact during the decades after the American Revolution” (5). In some ways, Zagarri performs the turn to transnationalism in American Studies analyzed by Shelly Fisher Fishkin in her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, “Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies.” Fishkin bemoans the obscurity of certain historical archives despite their importance and cites as an example Mark Twain’s powerful satire of racism toward the Chinese. In Twain’s piece, serialized in 1870–1871, a fictional immigrant from California, Ah Song-Hi, writes to his friend Ching Foo back in China and asks, “But where are the voices of the real Ah Song-Hi and his brothers?”<sup>2</sup> I cite these two important essays because in many ways they help me venture into the terrain of American history dating back to the colonial period and the Early Republic in the relatively little explored context of South Asian American studies, where I seek to trace the antecedents of contemporary South Asian America.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I attempt to make some preliminary claims about the South Asian presence in colonial America and the Early American Republic through a reading of a little-known document, a petition of grievance filed by a Bengali lascar/sailor, Sick

Keesar, on behalf of his company of thirty-five men in 1785, a scant few years after the American Revolution.<sup>4</sup> It is a “small story” marking the advent of the lucrative East India trade that would enrich the port cities of the Eastern Seaboard in America. As such, it illuminates global connections and the unregulated movement of people as well as the social, cultural, and legal interactions taking place in the underbelly of empire over two hundred years ago. The petition embodies an encounter in Philadelphia, a city at the very heart of the American nation, and it speaks, by way of such iconic American political and cultural figures as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, to the very foundational principles of individual freedom and fair play—particularly as these concepts were emerging as central to American notions of self. More significantly, though, it grants us some access to the canny subaltern subjectivity of the lascars, “among the world’s and India’s first global workers,” as G. Balachandran characterizes them.<sup>5</sup>

I should hasten to add that although the petition speaks eloquently and powerfully to us, Keesar’s voice comes mediated through the transcribing pen of the petition writer in the rehearsed legal rhetoric of the time. Nevertheless, despite the impediments of language and culture that probably marked the exchange between Keesar and the scribe, it is evident that Keesar conveyed his case forcefully enough to result in this moving petition to Franklin (see *Figure 1*).<sup>6</sup> Beyond the claims of individual subjectivity and authorship that are muddled by the institutional and legal structures in which petitions are located, however, I argue that Keesar’s petition enables, in Marcus Rediker’s terms, a “poetics of history from below” to suggest both the legitimacy and the urgency of relying on fragments of evidence in order to “bring a historical moment to life, even sear it into memory.”<sup>7</sup>

My reading of Keesar’s petition as an elusive yet illuminating fragment of the unrecorded, little-known history of South Asian presence in the Early Republic is informed by Vivek Bald’s pioneering work in *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (2013).<sup>8</sup> In his volume, Bald makes a critical intervention in the field of South Asian American Studies by focusing on the presence of Bengali peddlers and lascars in New York and New Orleans and traces the multiethnic networks and communities they established in New Orleans and New York dating from 1880 to the 1960s. Bald shifts attention away from scholarship centered on the West Coast that has so far focused on Punjabi farmers and lumbermen along the Pacific Coast, to reveal new pathways of arrival.<sup>9</sup> Bald’s scholarship extends the exciting explosion on scholarship on Indian sailors that has so far been studied in the British context in the foundational research of Balachandran, Ravi Ahuja, David Chappell, Michael H. Fisher, Aaron Jaffer, and Rozina Visram, among others, which suggests that a significant lascar population existed by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Fisher, for example, contends there were some “twenty thousand lascars in Britain.”<sup>11</sup> There, lascars were faced with an increasingly hostile reception, being treated as second-class citizens—religious and racial aliens—and receiving lower wages than their European counterparts.<sup>12</sup>



While Bald's is one of the pioneering studies of lascars in the American context, it is largely focused on the more contemporary twentieth-century context. In contrast, while research on lascars by the aforementioned scholars has done much to illuminate the conflicted history of lascar presence in Britain dating back to the seventeenth century, references to lascars in the American context are only found in passing in their work. In "Bound for Britain: Changing Conditions of Servitude, 1600-1857," Fisher cites the complaint by a serang (the gangmaster or leader of a crew of lascars on ships) in 1667 against Captain Lord of the *St George*, who sold two lascars as slaves to Captain Tillman of the American ship *Constant Friendship* bound for Virginia.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Charles R. Foy in *Ports of Slavery, Ports of Freedom: How Slaves Used Northern Seaports' Maritime Industry to Escape and Create Trans-Atlantic Identities, 1713-1783* (2008) cites the 1763 case of a sixteen-year-old boy who was confined in the Perth Amboy jail. Described as "not resembling the African Negroes," this young man said "he was born in Bombay, in the East Indies; and that he came to New-York from Santa Croix, in the *Snow Nancy*."<sup>14</sup> Foy writes that although lascars were not typically found in North American ports prior to the Revolution, they became a regular fixture after the war. He proceeds to detail some names of lascars in the Atlantic: "Thomas Culpea, John Derasoil, Robert Cato, John Oxford, George Romeo Dorset, George Peters, John Wallis and Antonio Domingo."<sup>15</sup> Anglicizing the native names of lascars for logbooks was a common practice and further exacerbates their erasure in the archives.

Another elusive reference to a lascar comes in the diary of William Bentley, pastor of the East Church of Salem, Massachusetts, from 1783 to 1819. Bentley notes the presence of a lascar from India brought to Salem by one Captain J. Gibaut, writing that he has "had the pleasure of seeing for the first time a native of the Indies from Madras. He is of very dark complexion, long black hair, soft countenance, tall, & well proportioned. He is said to be darker than Indians in general of his own cast, being much darker than any native Indians of America. I had no opportunity to judge of his abilities, but his countenance was not expressive. He came to Salem with Capt. J. Gibaut, and has been in Europe."<sup>16</sup> Bentley's detailed observation of this unnamed lascar reveals not just an ethnographic eye that measures the lascar's unspoken difference from himself, but also one that is cognizant of the darker complexion of this man in comparison to "Indians in general of his own cast." Bentley's interest in India as evinced by this entry was representative of the circulation of India in the form of goods, ideas, and more pertinently here, people, along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, a circuit mobilized by the profitable East India maritime trade that began in 1784 and as part of which, as noted in the diaries of sea captains, lascars were often employed on the Yankee clippers.

### **A Petition for Redress**

On November 3, 1785, a Bengali lascar, Sick Keesar, filed a petition for "redress and relief" at Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council in Philadelphia, against Captain

John O'Donnell of the *Pallas Indiaman*.<sup>17</sup> In all probability, "Sick Keesar" is an anglicized approximation of "Sheikh Kesar"; one may also surmise from the name that Keesar was Mohammedan given that most lascars from Bengal were Muslims from the Noakhali, Sylhet, and Chittagong districts, as noted by Rozina Visram.<sup>18</sup> The petition charged O'Donnell with reneging on his contract to secure a return journey home for Keesar and his company of thirty-five men and of having "compelled them by force of arms to navigate the ship *Pallas* from Batavia to Baltimore."<sup>19</sup> Keesar added that he and his men had been starved, "being only allowed one Biscuit per day" and that "his Son a Lad about twelve years old was Stole from him."<sup>20</sup> Keesar and his men had been hired in Canton, China, and O'Donnell had intended to discharge them in Batavia and replace them with European sailors; O'Donnell was unable to do so, however, "owing to some little jealousy" of the governor of Batavia.<sup>21</sup> Although much has been written about lascar petitions and protest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on land and on sea in the British context, Keesar's petition is unique in that it is located in the United States.<sup>22</sup> And while his voice comes mediated through many administrative filters, it nevertheless embodies a remarkable narrative of protest and agency in mobilizing the judicial system through a canny political understanding of a newly independent nation's spirit of idealism and its urgency about cultivating a good name for itself.<sup>23</sup>

The right to petition for redress of grievances in the US has its origins in English law and was a staple of life in colonial America. In "A Short History of the Right to Petition Government for the Redress of Grievances" (1986), Stephen Higginson argues that "in colonial America the right of citizens to petition their assemblies was an affirmative, remedial right which required governmental hearing and response," which subsequently foundered when abolitionists flooded the government with petitions against slavery and was collapsed into the First Amendment on free speech and expression.<sup>24</sup> There were petitions on everything from taxes and property disputes to divorce, and a huge number of petitions related to slavery.<sup>25</sup> Keesar's legal grievance gives us a rare window into the density of human experience and the subjective texture of the lascars in the US context.

Keesar's petition is evidence of the intriguing presence of "East Indian" lascars, slaves, and servants in colonial and postrevolutionary America and presents an alternative genealogy of South Asian America that is just beginning to emerge from invisibility.<sup>26</sup> The petition illumines a tumultuous historical period in the making of the American nation that, as yet, was just beginning to define itself, and how it related to its racial others. The *Pallas* had lately returned from a very profitable voyage to China and the dispute between Keesar and O'Donnell captures the beginnings of the lucrative oceanic trade with Indo-China that flourished from 1783–1860 along the Eastern Seaboard. The petition provides a fascinating "sidelight on the China trade" and in documenting a not uncommon case involving abuse, starvation, a broken contract, and a kidnapping, the plight of Keesar and his companions presents the unsavory underside of this bustling maritime trade.<sup>27</sup> Keesar appeals to the

compassion of the “Guardians of the Country” but, even more, he appeals to their sense of justice and—through the reference to Philadelphia, the city where the Constitution was framed—the founding principles of the United States.

The petition and the correspondence that ensued between the administrations of Maryland and Pennsylvania as they strove to settle this thorny problem without incurring too much expense or fostering any prejudice against the United States involves some of the marquee names of Revolutionary America. Urging the executive council to act, Benjamin Franklin, as president of the council, emphasizes that he “view(s) it as a matter of some importance that these people should not be permitted to carry home with them any well-founded prejudice about either the justice or humanity of these United States.”<sup>28</sup> The anxiety not to besmirch the reputation of the United States captures the self-conscious hewing to the principles that would come to define the American nation as it sought to distinguish itself from British repression and exploitation. Kesar’s plea for redress thus provides a fascinating glimpse into a transitional historical era and the emergent contours of national character shaped in part by the iconic American figures who were involved in this case. These men included Benjamin Franklin, a revered and influential Founding Father of America; Levi Hollingsworth, a prominent Philadelphia merchant and a staunch supporter of the American Revolution who had served under General Washington, fought in the battles of Trenton and Princeton, and supported Kesar and his company of lascars with food and lodging; Captain John O’Donnell, one of the principal citizens of Baltimore instrumental in galvanizing the city’s rise by making it an important player in the Indo-China trade; Charles Biddle, vice president of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania; Governor William Paca of Maryland; and Commodore Thomas Truxton, one of the first six commanders of the US Navy appointed by George Washington, aboard whose ship, the *Canton*, Kesar and his men sought to go home.<sup>29</sup> Even Washington is involved tangentially through a wish list of “Cups & Saucers ... Silk Handkerchiefs” and rough cloth for his servants clothing he wanted to purchase from the treasures brought by the *Pallas* from the East, though only “if great bargains are to be had.”<sup>30</sup> Beyond the humanizing details of Yankee thrift and the domesticity of Washington’s character revealed in his shopping list, the curious case of Kesar lays bare the competing relationship between Britain and the US while illuminating the entrepreneurial spirit of men like O’Donnell, who were key to establishing the fortunes and national spirit of the US.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Yankee Clippers and the Trade with Indo-China**

Kesar and his companion lascars arrived in Baltimore aboard the *Pallas*, captained by the swashbuckling Irish merchant and adventurer, John O’Donnell (1749–1805), on August 12, 1785, to much excitement:

She has on board a most valuable Cargo consisting of a Variety of Teas, China, Silks, Satins, Nankeens &c., &c. We are extremely happy to find the commercial Reputation of this Town so far increased as to attract the attention of Gentlemen who are engaged in carrying on this distant but beneficial trade. It is no displeasing sight to see the crew of the Ship, Chinese, Malays, Japanese and Moors, with a few Europeans, all habited according to the different countries to which they belong, and employed together as Brethren; it is thus Commerce binds and unites all the Nations of the Globe with a golden chain.<sup>32</sup>

The cargo of the *Pallas* is estimated to have been between sixty-five and seventy-five thousand pounds sterling.<sup>33</sup> The Irish-born O'Donnell profited so handsomely from selling his cargo that he acquired nineteen hundred-plus acres on the waterfront in Baltimore, married a local sea captain's daughter, and settled down in "Canton," a sprawling estate named after the important Chinese trading port.<sup>34</sup> He counted Washington, who was keen to expand the trade with China, among his important acquaintances. Over the next two decades, O'Donnell was instrumental in transforming Baltimore into the third largest city in the United States.<sup>35</sup>

The exotic goods carried by the *Pallas*—tea, china, silks, satins, and nankeens—were staples of the flourishing Asia trade of Yankee clipper ships that had commenced with great rapidity after the 1783 Treaty of Paris, in which the United States was recognized as a free republic by the international community. This trade proved to be advantageous: It is estimated that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, trade with India was the leading source of US custom duties.<sup>36</sup> In "The Beginning of American Trade with India, 1784–1812" (1938), Holden Furber details the arrival of the first tall ships and supercargoes at Indian ports and documents the exponential growth in US imports to India. As Furber notes, "[f]or Bengal, imports from America had increased between 1795/6 and 1803/4 from 8.43 lacs of *sicca* rupees to 45.12 lacs, and exports on American ships from 19.49 lacs to 67.60."<sup>37</sup> These figures do not measure the totality of American trade because they do not account for the numbers from other ports in India such as Bombay, Madras, Serampore, and Tranquebar (259).<sup>38</sup> But more than riches, trade with India was an important formative cultural encounter through which Americans crystallized a sense of self. The broadening of cultural horizons wrought by the travels to Asia and the incredible wealth it generated gave rise to a newly minted culturati who would come to be known as the "Boston Brahmins." In *Yankee India: American Commercial and Cultural Encounters with India in the Age of Sail, 1784–1860* (2001), Susan S. Bean argues that "the encounter between America and India in the age of sail warrants a closer look—for its important economic and cultural impacts in the nineteenth century and for its illumination of long-standing, deeply ingrained American attitudes towards morality and civilization."<sup>39</sup> She offers a



fascinating glimpse into the vigorous cultural and commercial interface between American merchants who, as a consequence of the American Revolution of 1776, sailed to India in search of new markets in the wake of trade restrictions to familiar markets such as the West Indies. There, these merchants and business agents brought back treasure chests of textiles, tea and spices, art objects as curiosities and luxuries, and books that helped form a curiously American sense of India far different from the British will-to-power sensibility that resulted in the latter's colonial occupation of India. Among the books carried back was Raja Ram Mohun Roy's translation of ancient Hindu texts such as the *Bhagvad Gita*, which sparked US interest in the Sanskrit classics of India and in Indian philosophy. This interest in and reconsideration of Indian philosophy and literature would eventually shape the Transcendentalist movement and influence American literature. Beyond the profound influence of Indian philosophy on Emerson and Thoreau, references to India abound in the print culture of the Early Republic, such as in the writings of a host of little-known early women writers, as well as canonical figures like Charles Brockden Brown.<sup>40</sup> The larger imperial public sphere resulting from the triangulated relationship between the United States, Britain, and India also ensured that India was very much on the mind of Americans in the decades preceding and following the American Revolution in newspapers such as the *Virginia Gazette*, the *Boston Magazine*, and the *Boston Advertiser*, among a host of other newspapers and journals.

The founding of the East India Marine Society in Salem, Massachusetts is one such testament of the curiosity about such Indo-American interactions. The organization was founded in 1799 by leading captains and supercargoes of the Yankee trade to East Asia, such as Nathaniel Silsbee, Charles Derby, and Richard J. Cleveland, members who had sailed beyond the Cape of Good Hope. The society's bylaws charged members to bring home "natural and artificial curiosities" as well as to maintain meticulous logs of their voyages as guides to other mariners.<sup>41</sup> In "Curiosity, Cabinets, and Knowledge: A Perspective on the Native American Collections of the Peabody Essex Museum" (2002), John R. Grimes contends that as the association "was also a social organization, inclusion on the Society's rolls conferred an elite status and provided opportunities for social interaction and camaraderie at its meetings, parades, and banquets."<sup>42</sup> It is not surprising then to find the Yankee mariners donating Asian artifacts and books to the East India Marine society, for it cemented the mariners' social status. Thus, for example, while Captain O'Donnell may have been less than an exemplary employer, as alleged by his Asian crew, his wife, Sarah Chew Elliot, donated several items to the Philadelphia museum, including "an East Indian match gun, a Damascus sword, Chinese chessmen, skull of the royal tiger, a live cockatoo, and other things."<sup>43</sup>

Although the US had as yet not established diplomatic relations with the distant countries that the Yankee clippers sailed to, the captains of these vessels carried "Sea-letters," diplomatic papers issued by Congress that testified to their character and requested fair passage. At a time when the US was still to consolidate itself into a

powerful nation, the “Sea-letters” reveal a nation impressively open-minded and cosmopolitan, eager to plead favor in order to do business. In this context, the approving and appreciative comment on the diverse racial origins of the crew of the *Pallas*, “Chinese, Malays, Japanese and Moors,” is a striking testament to the cosmopolitan sensibility and openness that would come to define the ports of Salem, Baltimore, and the Chesapeake Bay in the Early Republic. While the reporter of the *Maryland Journal* is thankful for the entrepreneurial spirit shown by O’Donnell and his patronage of the port of Baltimore, and offers an idyllic vision of the brotherhood engendered by the sea and the interdependence “of all Nations of the Globe” being bound together through a “golden Chain” of commerce, there is an ironic dichotomy between the opulence of the goods and the high cultural value attached to them and the laboring bodies of the lascars and the distressing story of starvation, kidnapping, and differential wages that provoked Keesar to protest.<sup>44</sup>

### **Re-membling the Past: The Petition as Affective History**

The moving memorial by Keesar provides an extraordinary window by way of thick description and an extended “web of significances” into a colorful era in early American history and the emergent contours of the nation’s cultural and political formations through cultural interactions and commercial ties courtesy of freshly opened trade routes to Asia in 1783. Keesar’s petition for “redress and relief” is noteworthy in many respects and exemplifies brilliantly the little-known history of early South Asian America in the colonial and postrevolutionary eras and the formative roles played by empire, race, and resistance in shaping this history. It also illuminates in symptomatic fashion the tension between the twin discourses of American orientalism and American exceptionalism that came to define the US in the late nineteenth century and in turn shaped racial formations and influenced American immigration policy.<sup>45</sup>

The to-and-fro exchanges between Pennsylvania and Maryland showcase a familiar resistance to assuming financial responsibility even as the Pennsylvania administration is keen not to tarnish the reputation of the “justice and humanity” of the US. Juxtaposed against a historical context when slavery was still prevalent in the US—although it had been eschewed by the northern states after the Revolution—and given, too, the bloody decimation of Native Americans by settlers, there is a glaring irony in Franklin’s emphasis on the humanity and justice of the US on behalf of a sundry crew of lascars from South Asia. Instead, what appears in relief through the petition of Keesar is an emergent discourse of US exceptionalism first voiced so strikingly by John Winthrop in his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” of 1630. Winthrop compared the founding of the new settlements in North America to a “city upon a hill,” and exhorted his fellow pioneers to hew to a higher moral standard since “the eyes of all people are upon us.”<sup>46</sup> In the heady years immediately following the revolution, this utopian vision of the US as an exceptional nation with a special mission that is

inextricably bound to special duties and prerogatives enthused American patriots and leaders. Clearly, men like Franklin and Levi Hollingsworth felt compelled to model the US in a more humane and just mold than the Old World. The unspoken assumption motivating Franklin's plea is that the new republic of the US is an exceptional state in its commitment to these utopian ideals, especially in contrast to the conduct of the British. Also, given the lucrativeness of the maritime trade to Asia, it would be safe to conjecture that Franklin's desire to redress the just grievances of Keesar was prompted as much by farsightedness concerning the dependence of the Yankee clippers on lascar labor as by the good image of the US in India and China, new trading partners of the US. Thus, for instance, John Adams's letter to John Jay, dated November 11, 1785, stresses the importance of good behavior on the part of Americans trading with the East: "Much will depend on the behavior of our people who go into those countries. If they endeavor, by an irreproachable integrity, civility, and humanity to conciliate the esteem of the natives, they may easily become the most favored nation."<sup>47</sup> In fact, the journals of various merchant captains and supercargoes of the India trade are remarkably non-judgmental in their observations about the native customs of India and China.<sup>48</sup> It is only in the late nineteenth century as the US became a more expansionist power that the laboring bodies of the lascars become hyperracialized and that racial attitudes toward "East Indians" and other Asians hardened.<sup>49</sup>

Although we do not know who composed "Sick Keesar's" petition, it is a finely calibrated rhetorical document that shrewdly marshals the formulaic phrasing of petitions and "memorials" and demonstrates a keen political acumen and diplomacy in speaking on behalf of Keesar and his crew of lascars. It is dispassionate and emotional in turns. It pleads and cajoles on the one hand, casting Keesar as the "poor distressed Stranger" appealing to "the Guardians of this Country" and flatters the members of the Executive Council while making an assertive demand for justice on the other.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, the petition succeeded spectacularly, since Keesar's cause was taken up by Franklin himself, who had just returned from a diplomatic embassy to France to become council president of Pennsylvania. On November 3, 1785, Franklin told the council that the sailors were "now without money, and at once unaccustomed to the manners, language and climate of this country, they were induced to pray for the interposition of government, and beg from it" a "supply of food and clothing."<sup>51</sup> Anxious that the case would cast the US in a disreputable light, Franklin urged the council to make provision "for their immediate health and comfort." Over the ensuing year, the council approved seven expenditures for feeding the sailors: five for hundreds of pounds of beef and two for bread.<sup>52</sup> The charitable spirit soon wore thin, however, and Hollingsworth, alarmed at the copious amounts of provisions consumed by the lascars, pleaded out. After a year had passed with the sailors still left penniless in Philadelphia, the council decided on September 2, 1786 that the Asian "natives" who had been "for some months past supported at the expence [sic] of this State," should be sent back to Baltimore and left to their own devices. Although Captain O'Donnell

was granted sea orders to ply the *Chesapeake* to India in June 1787 and the last council expenditure for the *Pallas* lascars was on October 3, 1787 to Dr. John Foulke, a friend of Franklin's, for his treatment of several Chinese and Indian sailors who had died, possibly of the yellow fever, it is unclear whether Keesar and his men found a return passage home to Asia, since there is some contradiction in the information available. While it is not documented, in *Truxton of the Constellation* (1956), Eugene Ferguson asserts that Keesar and his men sailed back to India on the *Chesapeake*, captained by O'Donnell, in 1789, despite their firm disavowal that "they would rather go into the Streets and perish, than come again under the power of Captain O'Donnells, as he has lately threatened to kill them if they should come."<sup>53</sup> Ferguson writes that "[w]hen Captain Truxton departed from Philadelphia, the lascars were still an unsolved problem; and so they remained for the better part of a year; until the shipmaster who brought them to America in the first place finally took them home on his next outward passage."<sup>54</sup> It is not known how many of the sailors survived, whether they found passage back to Asia—or whether any remained to become among the first Asian immigrants of the new nation.

The petition is an early instance, at least in the American context, of the political savvy and defiant spirit of the lascars in seeking legal recourse against exploitative authority figures before their rights and wages were curtailed by legislation. It neatly reverses orientalist stereotypes and images entrenched in public memory and discourse, and it provides an alternative genealogy of protest by and dissent of South Asians in North America that came to be exemplified in the activities of not only the San Francisco-based Ghadr revolutionary party, but also numerous other organizations that fought against British colonial rule and discriminatory immigration laws in the United States in the early twentieth century.

### **The Lascars: Master Mariners of the Age of Sail**

The petition gives a name and voice to a singular individual and provides, in turn, a unique psychobiography of the lascars, lending affective density and texture to the motley band of sailors from the Indian subcontinent and countries on the Indian Ocean rim who, as Amitav Ghosh argues, were "possibly the first Asians and Africans to participate freely, and in substantial numbers, in a globalized workspace."<sup>55</sup> By giving artful expression to a father's anguish at the kidnapping of his son, and the yearning to return home to their "native country," Keesar's petition provides a window into the affective life and affiliations of the lascars. Through the lascars' identification of themselves as "Natives of Bengal," the petition signals ethnic and regional political formations that predate nation states.

But even more, the petition by Keesar illuminates the colorful lives of the lascars. Mentions of those intrepid master mariners milling around the streets of Salem occur in many a memoir and newspaper account of the times, such as the following from the papers of Captain Stephen Phillips (1764–1838): "Salem must have been a

colorful place in those days, for lascars sailors were not infrequent along the wharves and not a few captains had brought home servants from India who retained their native costumes.”<sup>56</sup> These lascars were first recruited as marine laborers aboard Dutch, French, and English ships, and later by American trading ships that brought them to the Western Shore counties around Boston, Chesapeake Bay, and New York in the early and mid-nineteenth century. A heterogeneous crowd of varied ethnicities speaking in many tongues and belonging to the different countries and states bordering the Indian Ocean, the lascars were skilled sailors who worked for low wages. In many ways, they may be viewed as the migrant “hi-tech” transcontinental workers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The widespread diasporic movement of the lascars speaks to an international circulation of labor and trade that echoes the global economy of today. Scholarship on lascars by Raj Ahuja, Balachandran, Fisher, and Laura Tabili has analyzed how racial and imperial categories were reconstituted to create networks of subordination that negatively impacted lascars, severely undercutting any romanticized notion of lascars as a “transcultural, uncontainable, freely roaming proletariat of the seven seas.”<sup>57</sup>

The term “lascar” derives from the Persian and means an army, camp, or band of followers; it was first used by Portuguese explorers in the early 1500s to describe the sailors from India, China, Thailand, the Philippines, and East Africa they met on their travels. The lascars appear only in disconnected ways in historical archives, and then mostly in the European context. Little is known about them in the North American context. Although Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, Paul Gilje, and Charles Foy, more notably among others, have done a tremendous job of researching early American maritime history to make visible the motley crew of African American slaves and sailors, Asian lascars only find a passing reference in their work.

Situating the lascars firmly within an imperial ethnography and economy that labeled varied labor groups differentially, Tony Ballantyne argues in *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Past* (2012) that “lascar” is not a hereditary form of identification, but a category created by the recruitment of labor in an imperial maritime economy. More importantly, the widespread circulation of the term “lascar” in European print culture primarily signaled difference from European and British sailors. Thus, as Ballantyne states, “lascar was an imperial identity ... a category that was often implicitly and explicitly deployed against whiteness.”<sup>58</sup> By the seventeenth century, though, the lascars had begun increasingly to be employed aboard British trading ships as the empire expanded and new trading routes were established. They became invaluable to the European merchants for their cheap labor and master seamanship. By the early nineteenth century, however, the lascars, perceived as an unruly mob by the English, had become such a nuisance in England that a special district, Shoreditch, restricting them to a small area close to the port of Liverpool was created by British authorities. The 1660 Navigation Act and the 1823 lascars act (Merchant Shipping Act) were passed to restrict the use of lascars to save sailing jobs for the British.<sup>59</sup>

However, owing to the smaller presence of lascars there, no such legislative acts were passed in North America; one can find admiring portraits of lascars in

Melville's fictional works, besides sundry other references in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American publications.

Though fewer in number than in Britain, lascars were a significant presence in the US by the 1850s and an important part of the cultural imaginary, as is evident from characters like Fedallah in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), or from Melville's extended descriptions of lascars in *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849). Colorful characters and master seamen, they are presented by Redburn in notably orientalist terms: wily, exotic, inscrutable, chattering like monkeys in a babble of tongues, a conversation with whom can endow even the most humdrum of Americans with romance and insights into "things quaint, curious, and marvelous."<sup>60</sup> In *Moby Dick*, the *Pequod* is manned by a large gallery of non-Europeans and "Manila men," a catchall category that included Chinese, Malays, Oceanians, and mixed-race Asian seamen.<sup>61</sup> Melville depicts Fedallah as a mystic, somewhat ascetic, figure on the *Pequod* who interrupts the midnight dancing of the sailors to predict that a storm is coming. Melville's earlier work, *Redburn*, is a fictionalized account of his voyage from New York to Liverpool and depicts an encounter with a lascar, Dattabdool-mans, one of the few such accounts of a lascar in literature. Scholarship on lascars indicates that the sailors were recruited by European trading ships, and, on reaching Europe, succumbed to the promise of agents who enlisted indentured workers for the New World. Or else, as the journal of Captain Phillips indicates, they were employed in the household as servants, thus attesting not just to the wealth and status of the mariner and trader, but also to his wide travels.

The petition of Keesar has an uncanny contemporary resonance with its sophisticated deployment of a rhetoric of grievance against unfair labor practices in a familiar tale of abuse and differential wages paid to workers from the global South as compared to Europeans. Keesar's plea is compelling because it embodies a sharp note of dissent and thus can be seen as part of a long trajectory of protest and resistance that characterizes the history of South Asians in America. Although Fisher, Jaffer, Ahuja, and Sherwood, amongst others have noted the host of petitions by lascars that were filed in Britain and India, this petition by Keesar provides rare documented evidence of lascar entrepreneurship and independence in the early American context.

The fact that Keesar and his men did not mutiny at sea despite O'Donnell's alleged misconduct is contrary to the plentiful reports of mutiny by lascars in the age of sail as researched so meticulously in Aaron Jaffer's insightful *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest, and Mutiny* (2015), which recuperates the world of disaffected lascars on board the ships at sea against precisely the kind of mistreatment alleged by Keesar. Calling attention to European ships manned by lascars as "empty archival spaces" (in Claire Anderson's evocative phrase) because there is an acute paucity of information about the names and nationalities of lascars in the logbooks, Jaffer calls attention to instances of everyday resistance and open mutiny.<sup>62</sup> While Keesar's action of petitioning American authorities in Philadelphia rather than revolting on board the *Pallas* may be construed as being more akin to Balachandran's arguments in his article "Cultures of Protest in Transnational

Contexts: Indian Seamen Abroad, 1886-1945” (2008)—in which Balachandran argues Indian seamen resorted instead to a practice of collective protest and rationality—we simply do not have enough information on whether Keesar and his men banded together in resistance en route to Baltimore.<sup>63</sup> Three of the crew of thirty-five led by Keesar were Chinese, and apparently did not get on well with the other lascars. While in Hollingsworth’s charge in Philadelphia, these three Chinese lascars were separated from the others on grounds of constant discord; Hollingsworth decided to keep supporting these three while eschewing responsibility for the other thirty-two.<sup>64</sup> Whether the discord among Keesar’s men was brought on by the pressures of confinement in an unfamiliar land and uncomfortable climate, or whether it was a continuation of existing disaffection, it nevertheless may point to a possible lack of collective action against O’Donnell while at sea.

Balachandran presents an astute analysis of a tradition of collective protest by lascars that took advantage of legal directives and loopholes in the period 1886–1945. He argues that, different from mutiny at sea, “the culture of work and protest of Indian seamen appears to have been informed by a certain rationality—a certain careful weighing of costs, benefits, and opportunities for engagement and disengagement.”<sup>65</sup> While Balachandran’s focus of study is the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the memorial by Keesar can be read as possibly exemplifying this practice and pushes this history further back to the age of sail, belying the stereotype of subaltern resistance being everyday or violent. Instead, Keesar takes recourse to a legal petition of redress and makes a compelling case against O’Donnell. In doing so, Keesar challenges received categories of coolie and subaltern, corroborating what Jesse Ransley, a maritime archeologist at the University of Southampton, has argued in a research project on “Lascar Lives”: “Whilst historians have usefully employed notions of the subaltern and the coolie to examine the position of South Asian workers, these notions cannot be applied to lascars. They were neither indentured labourers nor enslaved people, but a uniquely multi-ethnic and international group, who at times held an unusual level of communal, and even individual, control over their labour and mobility. They therefore challenge the frameworks through which we address life and experience both on the colonial margins and within the flow of colonial networks.”<sup>66</sup>

Whilst most scholarship on lascars and their integral role in the transoceanic trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has focused on England and Europe, Keesar’s case illumines South Asian histories of mobility and labor formations forged against global networks of colonial capital and a maritime economy in the little-known context of the United States in the postrevolutionary era. While Bald’s meticulous *Bengali Harlem* (2013) excavates networks of lascars who jumped ship in the 1930s and 1940s and narrates their inspiring stories of strategic alliances and willful invisibility as they chose to live on in the US, what is remarkable by contrast in Keesar’s petition is the strong affective appeal to make the return journey home—a journey

that comes long before the US had become the beacon of hope to multitudes of the weary and oppressed, especially to those from the global South.

Neither coolie nor subaltern, the petition by Keesar nevertheless shows remarkable agency. Contextualized against larger historical processes such as the movement of labor across the informal circuits of the global maritime economy and the overlaps resulting from British colonial rule in the US and India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the presence of East Indian servants and lascars delineates the outlines of an alternative, more plebian South Asian America.

### **An Alternative Genealogy of South Asian America**

Although a petition by a lascar in the American context may be rare, it is not unique; a perusal of archival sources, congressional records, court documents, and the like reveal a plethora of petitions for freedom and redress filed by servants and slaves of South Asian/Asian origin protesting wrongful indenture or imprisonment as slaves.<sup>67</sup> Read in conjunction with the many advertisements for runaway “East Indian” slaves found in newspapers of the times, Keesar’s petition presents an alternative trajectory of South Asian presence in America dating back to the Early Republic. In tracing the antecedents of the South Asian community to the earliest history of European settlement in North America, Keesar’s petition sheds light on the unacknowledged presence and contributions of early South Asian settlers, as indentured servants, slaves, ayahs and lascars, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

While the traces of a South Asian American presence from the early decades of the twentieth century to the mid-twentieth century have been well documented,<sup>68</sup> research on the colonial period has only been recently facilitated by the digitization of archival materials. Newspapers, parish records, court records of petitions and rulings, and papers of the Continental Congress, among other documents, reveal an early American landscape peopled quite significantly by South Asians. Known then as “East Indians” or “Asian Indians” to differentiate them from Native Americans, who were called “Indians,” the presence of South Asians in early colonial America is linked directly to the British East India Company and its functionaries, who brought back servants from India to England, and thence to America, for either personal use or profit as early as 1622.<sup>69</sup>

Mapping this hitherto little-known history radically reshapes the genealogy of South Asians in America but also sheds new light on the making of the American nation itself. As racial and cultural others, these brown others also functioned as a foil against which American identity was defined. In many ways, the presence of these racialized bodies, in addition to the adversarial presence of Native Americans and the subjugated African slaves, contributed to the making of an American identity that rested on the assumption of the racial supremacy of whites. Their presence also complicates the racial binary of black and white inhabitants. In turn, the working-class, racialized, and subordinate status of South Asians as servants, slaves, and sailors reveals another



narrative of arrival in the colonial era—one that is in sharp contrast to the race-neutral meritocracy of the model minority myth embraced by the upwardly mobile South Asian professionals who emigrated in the wake of the 1965 Naturalization Act.

Although they may appear counterintuitive and anomalous, both the petition for redress by a Bengali lascar and the advertisements for runaway East Indian servants are part of a larger body of such advertisements and petitions that speak of a fairly substantive South Asian presence in colonial America that has hitherto been invisible in most nationalist historiographies. Arguably, this South Asian presence played a critically constitutive role in the self-fashioning of the United States as a nation. As Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease argue in *Cultures of US Imperialism* (1994), “while Chicana and Latino studies have shifted our notions of borderlands and ethnicity in the contemporary American cultural context, the presence of these raced bodies in the fledgling republic, in the very transitional and fluid era of colonial America and post-revolutionary America illuminate not just how the foundational principles of freedom, liberty were shaped but also how the discourse on race was taking shape in a nation that was still in the making.”<sup>70</sup>

In uncovering traces of these early South Asians in colonial America, I wish not just to map an alternate and hitherto little-known history of South Asian presence, but also to argue that this South Asian presence illuminates fresh insights into identity and diasporic community formations that transcend national and racial boundaries. At the risk of misrepresenting them as subversive agents rather than as indentured servants and exploited seamen, it is hard not to be impressed by them as transnational citizens with identities that superseded narrow national origins, who show remarkable political agency and enviable cosmopolitan sensibilities that allowed them to move between worlds.

In this essay, I have performed a symptomatic reading of one such petition for redress to uncover the disjunctive discourses of race, empire, and resistance that came to define the formative contours of early South Asian America. In many ways, Keesar speaks out to us through the gaps and inconsistencies of official archives and records. In the minutiae of the state’s business and in its preoccupation with the larger narratives of nation building through trade and consolidating a national reputation, Keesar’s voice, albeit mediated through the formulaic rhetoric of the petition, and transcribed by a practiced scribe’s hand, provides an extraordinary view into the distant, free-wheeling era of postrevolutionary America where East Indians like him clearly occupied a fluid racial position. By unearthing, reframing, and analyzing a case study of one individual of South Asian origins to complicate existing eurocentric paradigms of official history, I hope this essay will spark fresh avenues of research into early South Asian America, especially in the maritime history of the Early Republic.

## Notes

My thanks go to Richard Kearney at the Cheng Library at William Paterson University for his help in obtaining a scanned image of Sick Keesar's petition.

<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Zaggarri, "The Significance of the 'Global Turn' for the Early American Republic: Globalization in the Age of Nation-Building," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (Spring 2011): 1–37, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005), 25.

<sup>3</sup> With his pioneering article, "Lascars in Pennsylvania: A Side-Light on the China Trade," *Pennsylvania History* 7, no. 1 (January 1940): 20–30, R. L. Brunhouse was the first to perform archival work on the presence of lascars in the United States. Later, Joan Jensen's *Passage from India: Asian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) made a significant contribution. More recent scholarship, especially on the lucrative East India trade, includes: Susan S. Bean, *Yankee India: American Commercial and Cultural Encounters with India in the Age of Sail, 1784–1860* (Essex: Peabody Essex Museum, 2001); G. Bhagat, *Americans in India: 1784–1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1970); James Fichter, *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo–American Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Kelly Gray, "Whisper to Him the Word 'India': Trans-Atlantic Critics and American Slavery, 1830–1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 3 (2008): 379–406; J. M. Opal, "Common Sense and Imperial Atrocity: How Thomas Paine saw South Asia in North America," *Common-Place* 9 (July 2009), accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.common-place.org/vol-09/no-04/forum/opal.shtml>; Zaggarri, "The Significance of the 'Global Turn' for the Early American Republic," 1–37; and most recently, Jonathan Eacott, *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), which provides an excellent overview of the United States and British India connections in the colonial context.

<sup>4</sup> Philadelphia, November 3, 1785, *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, from its Organization to the Termination of the Revolution: Containing the Proceedings of the Supreme Executive Council from January 1st, 1784, to April 3rd, 1786, Both Days Inclusive*, volume 14, published by the State (Harrisburg: Theo. Fenn & Co., 1853), 569. The petition can be found at *Pennsylvania State Papers, 1775–91*, volume 2, in *Papers of the Continental Congress*, compiled 1774–1789, folder 3, National Archives.

<sup>5</sup> G. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who raised important issues about the mechanics of petitioning and authorship, and thus rightly cautioned against ascribing the authorship of the petition to Keesar. Although this is the only lascar petition I have come across in the colonial and postrevolutionary period, there is a long history of lascar

protests and petitions against injustice in the British context. Michael Fisher's recent work on lascar protest and violence, "Finding Lascar 'Willful Incendiarism': British Ship-Burning Panic and Indian Maritime Labour," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012): 590–623, and Aaron Jaffer's compelling narrative of lascar unrest in *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780–1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2015) provide a window into the acts of willful violence and mutiny by lascar crews. Tony Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) and Marika Sherwood, "Lascar Struggles Against Discrimination in Britain 1923–45: The Work of N. J. Upadhyaya and Surat Alley," *Mariner's Mirror* 90 (2013): 438–455, detail the sustained campaigns for justice by lascars in the twentieth century.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow this phrase from Marcus Rediker, "The Poetics of History from Below," *Perspectives on History*, September 2010, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2010/the-poetics-of-history-from-below>. See also Antoinette Burton's review of *The Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh in "Amitav Ghosh's World Histories from Below," *History of the Present* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 71–77, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See studies by, most recently, Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and earlier, Jensen, *Passage from India* (1988), Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Gary Hess, "The Forgotten Asian Americans: The East Indian Community in the United States," *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (1974): 576–96, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans, Updated and Revised Edition* (1989; repr., Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), and Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), which variously speak of the history of South Asian Americans, primarily focused on the West Coast Punjabi farmers.

<sup>10</sup> See Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*; Raj Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900–1960," *International Review of Social History* 51, no. 514, (2006): 111–41; David Chappell, "Ahab's Boat: Non-European Seamen in Western Ships of Exploration and Commerce," in *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*, ed. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (New York: Routledge, 2003), 75–89; Michael H. Fisher, "Bound for Britain: Changing Conditions of Servitude, 1600–1857," in *Slavery and South Asian History*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 187–209; Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004; paperback edition, 2006); Fisher, "Finding Lascar 'Willful Incendiarism,'" 590–623; Fisher, "Working Across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and In-Between, 1600–1857," *International Review of Social History (IRSH)* 51 (December 2006): 21–45; Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean*

*Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2015); and Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars, and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700–1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986; repr. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, “Bound for Britain,” 187.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that there is some debate on the differential wages of lascars. Lascar wages varied over time, region, and specific circumstances. Fisher argues that in the seventeenth century, lascars were paid higher wages than European sailors due to the shortage of European sailors (Michael Fisher, “Working across the Seas,” 35). From the 1660s onwards, a series of British mercantilist Navigation Acts actively suppressed the labor market for lascars by demanding that, to be classified as British, foreign sailors could not constitute more than one quarter of a ship’s crew (Fisher, “Working across the Seas,” 38). The superior nautical skills of British sailors are emphasized in the following statement from a debate arguing for the passage of a bill to restrict the employment of lascars on British Ships: The Parliamentary register of 1802 notes that although “Seven British Sailors are supposed to equal 12 lascars ... the difference in the loss of tonnage when lascars are employed more than counterbalances the cheapness of their wages.” *The Parliamentary Register or History of the Proceedings Record of the Debates of the House of Lords and House of Commons*, 1802. Brunhouse speculates that Keesar and his men travelled to Philadelphia in the hopes of higher pay and a passage home since once they landed in Baltimore they discovered that American seamen were paid much higher wages than what they had received on the *Pallas*. Brunhouse, “Lascars in Pennsylvania,” 23. O’Donnell himself ascribes the lascars’ desire to secure higher wages as a reason for their complaint: “they agreed to proceed the Voyage with me, provided I engaged to send them out again to India on their usual Allowances, which Stipulation I readily made and intended religiously to perform – When they found however on their arrival in America that the Wages of Seamen were considerably higher than theirs, and a few who were serviceable and had a knowledge of their Profession thinking they could get greater Pay, and as speedy Conveyance from Philadelphia, where they had heard many Vessels were equipping for Asia, misleading the others, The whole demanded their discharge, Arrears of Pay & Passports to your State.” Cited in Brunhouse, “Lascars in Pennsylvania,” 27.

<sup>13</sup> Fisher, “Bound for Britain,” 189.

<sup>14</sup> Charles R. Foy, *Ports of Slavery, Ports of Freedom: How Slaves Used Northern Seaports’ Maritime Industry to Escape and Create Trans-Atlantic Identities, 1713-1783* (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2008), 171. Also, interestingly, an advertisement for runaway slaves and servants in the *New York Gazette, or the Weekly Post Boy*, #1073, dated July 28, 1763, for this very lascar, describes in detail, his dress of “check shirt and oznaburg trowsers; speaks pretty good English” and further states that “since he was taken up on suspicions of being a runaway slave or servant; if he is such, his master on applying to the Gaoler in aforesaid Amboy, and paying the charges, can have him. Perth Amboy, July 20, 1763.” Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., “Pretends to be Free”: Runaway

*Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 105.

<sup>15</sup> These are names Foy excerpts from the logbooks of diverse ships: Paybook, Payroll, HMS *Asia*, 1773, TNA ADM 33/488; Paybook, HMS *Mercury*, 1774, TNA ADM 33/478; Muster Roll, HMS *Asia*, 1774, TNA ADM 36/8079; Paybook, HMS *Tortoise*, 1776, 34/761; Muster Roll, HMS *Minerva*, 1777, TNA ADM 36/8213; Muster Roll, HMS *Adamant*, 1782-83, TNA ADM 36/8817." Foy, *Ports of Slavery*, 171.

<sup>16</sup> *The Diary of William Bentley, Pastor of East Church, Salem, Massachusetts*, vol. 1, 1784–1792, <https://archive.org/details/diaryofwilliambeo4bent>, accessed July 13, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Philadelphia, Monday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1785, *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, from its Organization to the Termination of the Revolution: Containing the Proceedings of the Supreme Executive Council from January 1st, 1784, to April 3rd, 1786, Both Days Inclusive*, vol. 14, published by the State (Harrisburg: Theo. Fenn & Co., 1853), 561.

<sup>18</sup> Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars, and Princes*, 191. Citations refer to the 1986 edition.

<sup>19</sup> *Papers of the Continental Congress*, compiled 1774–1789, vol. 2, 537. Additionally, the accusation of having been forced to sail by force from Batavia is recounted by Charles Biddle, vice president of the Executive Council of Pennsylvania. See Philadelphia, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1785, *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania*, vol. 14, 569.

<sup>20</sup> *Congressional Papers*, vol. 2, 537. Relatedly, the practice of kidnapping free blacks to sell into slavery was widespread in states close to slavery, like Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia's growing black population made it a popular target for kidnappers. See for instance the famous 1799 petition of Absalom Jones demanding federal action against this interstate crime. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/fairfaxtah/documents/absalomjones.doc> Accessed July 22, 2016. It is not too farfetched to speculate that Keesar's son was possibly kidnapped thus.

<sup>21</sup> O'Donnell to John Dickinson, November 3, 1785, *Post Revolutionary Papers*, vol. 22, 8. Archives Division, Harrisburg; cited in Brunhouse, "Lascars in Pennsylvania," 23.

<sup>22</sup> See, especially, Fisher, "Finding Lascar 'Wilful Incendiarism'"; Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860*; Sherwood, "Lascar Struggles Against Discrimination in Britain 1923–45"; and Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*.

<sup>23</sup> Again, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer who cautioned me to modify my claims about Keesar's agency and authorship given the barriers of language, as well as the rehearsed language of petitioning that characterized lascar petitions. Even though the petition may be formulaic and is perhaps the work of a scribe, or another third-party person well versed in writing petitions and sympathetic to Keesar, surely the moving tale told in the petition demonstrates an empathetic writer who conveys Keesar's protest with force and eloquence? For more, please see note three.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Higginson, “A Short History of the Right to Petition Government for the Redress of Grievances,” *Yale Law Journal* 96, no. 1 (November 1986): 142.

<sup>25</sup> There are also several petitions for freedom by people with anglicized names like James Dunn, George Ballay, and Thomas Greene who are identified as being of Indian origin in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s archives. See Leela Prasad, *Live Like the Banyan Tree: Images of the Indo-American Experience* (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 2006), 17.

<sup>26</sup> I use “East Indian” in a descriptive sense to mirror the reference to people from India in colonial America and use South Asian in its contemporary and more expansive and political sense of people hailing from the Indian subcontinental countries of Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Pakistan, and India.

<sup>27</sup> See Brunhouse, “Lascars in Pennsylvania,” 20–30.

<sup>28</sup> “Philadelphia, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1785,” *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania*, vol. 14, 569.

<sup>29</sup> Truxton demanded the exorbitant sum of forty guineas to transport them to Calcutta and ultimately this money could not be raised despite the personal plea of Levi Hollingsworth. See Eugene S. Ferguson, *Truxton of the Constellation: The Life of Commodore Thomas Truxton, U.S. Navy, 1755-1822* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1956), 66.

<sup>30</sup> Signed invoice, and letter to Colonel Tench Tilghman, August 17, 1785, Alice Morse Earle, *China Collecting in America* (London: Lawrence and Bullen; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892), 235, 234. “One discerning shopper in Virginia was so excited by the arrival of the cargo from China that he wrote to a friend in Maryland with a shopping list of cups, jugs, saucers, dishes, silk handkerchiefs, and rough cloth for servant’s clothing for his friend to purchase but cautioned, “You will readily perceive, My dear Sir, my purchasing, or not, depends entirely upon the prices. If *great bargains* are to be had, I would supply myself agreeably to the list. If the prices do not fall *below* a cheap *retail* Sale, I would decline them altogether, or take such articles only (if cheaper than common) as are marked in the Margin of the Invoice.” George Washington, Letter to Colonel Tench Tilghman, August 17, 1785, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 2 Letterbooks, cited in Rukert, *Historic Canton*, 3:

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, although O’Donnell, an Irishman, made his fortunes in the Indo-China trade and is hailed as a founding father of Baltimore, he was tried in India by Warren Hastings, the governor general of India, on charges of having used excessive force in putting down a mutiny on a ship he commanded in Batavia. Elliott O’Donnell, *Confessions of a Ghost Hunter* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1928. Reprint, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2010), 130. O’Donnell is a descendent of Captain John O’Donnell and refers to this episode in his ancestor’s life, where he adds that O’Donnell was acquitted. This information about O’Donnell would seem to corroborate Keesar’s complaint of mistreatment.

<sup>32</sup> *Baltimore Advertiser (Maryland Journal)*, August 12, 1785. While this newspaper report notes a diverse crew of Chinese, Malays, Moors, and Japanese, it is difficult to corroborate the ethnic origins of these men from the signatures appended to the petition. Thus, beyond the three Chinese lascars who penned their name in the Chinese script, other names like “Raffeek,” “Nyaim,” “Caddeer” and “Mourad” that I could decipher seem to be of broadly South Asian Muslim origin.

<sup>33</sup> O’Donnell, *Confessions of a Ghost Hunter*, 131.

<sup>34</sup> John O’Donnell was typical of the adventuring marine merchants who made and lost enormous fortunes in the Asia trade. Born in Limerick, Ireland, he made a considerable profit from the India trade, and retired to become one of the leading benefactors of Baltimore. According to the inscription at the History Markers website, O’Donnell “sailed into Baltimore on a late summer day in 1785 aboard a ship laden with Chinese goods, thus opening Baltimore’s trade with the Far East. Armed with a small fortune and an aristocratic lineage, O’Donnell settled down, made a handsome profit on his cargo, and soon married Sarah Chew Elliott, the daughter of a Fells Point seas captain. Over the next twenty years, O’Donnell helped transform Baltimore from a promising town of some 12,000 into the young republic’s third largest city. He created a plantation, ‘Canton,’ on some two thousands of acres east of Baltimore, built wharves, warehouses and row houses, and represented local interests in the state legislature. When he died in 1805 at age fifty-six, O’Donnell was among the nation’s wealthiest men, his real estate holdings alone later valued at more than \$500,000.” [www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=6635](http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=6635). Accessed July 21, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> See Rukert, *Historic Canton*.

<sup>36</sup> In *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism*, James R. Fichter argues that “American trade to the East Indies as a whole had repercussions for society, economics, and politics on both sides of the Atlantic.” In particular, for the young American republic trade with Asia meant “the accumulation of wealth and financial capital into the hands of the wealthiest Americans, creating financiers who would profoundly alter the shape of American business” James R. Fichter, *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>37</sup> Holden Furber, “The Beginning of American Trade with India, 1784–1812,” *New England Quarterly* (June 1938): 258.

<sup>38</sup> David Chappell’s arguments in the European context hold true for the cultural exchange between India and the US as well: “The expansion of European shipping was indeed a two-way process of cross-cultural contact, as seafarers from African, Asian, and Pacific waters joined the enterprise and counter explored the new global maritime circuits. Despite the obvious inequality embedded in their relationships with European and American employers ... individually and collectively non-Europeans could extract from that fluid frontier profits and meaning all their own, from their status as cultural

brokers or the acquisition of titles.” David Chappell, “Ahab’s Boat: Non-European Seamen in Western Ships of Exploration and Commerce,” 86.

<sup>39</sup> Susan H. Bean, *Yankee India: American Cultural and Commercial Encounters with India in the Age of Sail, 1784-1860* (Essex: Peabody Essex Museum, 2001), 12.

<sup>40</sup> See Anupama Arora and Rajender Kaur, “Writing India in Early American Women’s Fiction,” *Early American Literature* 52, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 363–88.

<sup>41</sup> East India Marine Society catalogue (1821), 3; cited in Mary Malloy, *Souvenirs of the Fur Trade* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 61.

<sup>42</sup> See John R. Grimes, “Curiosity, Cabinets, and Knowledge: A Perspective on Native American Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum,” in *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, eds. John R. Grimes, Christian F. Feest, and Mary Lou Curran (New York: American Federation of Arts in association with University of Washington Press, 2002), 17–28.

<sup>43</sup> “A Swashbuckling Merchant,” *The Historical Marker Database*. [www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=6635](http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=6635). Accessed July 25, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Although Keesar’s petition does not cite wage differences per se, O’Donnell in his defense to the executive council offers this reason to explain the conduct of the lascars. O’Donnell counters the charge of reneging on his contract to secure a return journey to India for Keesar and his men by arguing that the lascar crew, finding upon their arrival in America that “the wages of seamen were considerably higher than theirs,” chose to travel to Philadelphia in the hopes of “getting higher pay and speedy convenience.” *Post-Revolutionary Papers*, vol. 22, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Meghana Nayak and Christopher Malone argue that American exceptionalism is a particular type of American orientalism, a style of thought about distinctions between the East and West that gives grounding to the foundational narrative of “America.” Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, “American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony,” *International Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (June 2009): 253. While their argument is geared to analyzing the transatlantic divide between the United States and Europe, its close nexus between the two also helps illuminate the evolution of racial formations in the US, and particularly the changing perceptions of Asians.

<sup>46</sup> John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630). [http://winthropsociety.com/doc\\_charity.php](http://winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php). Accessed April 9, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Raj Kumar Gupta, *The Great Encounter: A Study of Indo-American Literature and Cultural Relations* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1986), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Dated November 28, 1789, Captain Benjamin Crowninshield’s eyewitness account of sati he witnessed in Calcutta is remarkable for its refusal to judge this native practice. Contrary to most British accounts that interpreted the practice of sati as a symbol of



backward India, he concluded his account in the *Henry's* ship's log with: "Whether it is right or wrong, I leave it for other people to determine . . . [I]t appeared very solemn to me. I did not think it was in the power of a human person to meet death in such a manner." From "Log of the 'Henry,' Nov. 28, 1789." Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. Cited in Bean, *Yankee India*, 41. See also Michael A. Verney, "An Eye for Prices, an Eye for Souls: Americans in the Indian Subcontinent, 1784–1838," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 3 (2013): 397–431.

<sup>49</sup> For a well-researched and forceful argument relating to this point, see John Kwo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1760–1882* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> Journals of the Continental Congress, no. 69, vol. 2, 537.

<sup>51</sup> Minutes, vol. 14, 569.

<sup>52</sup> To David Rittenhouse, Treasurer of the Council: "Pay to James McCutcheon on order the sum of Twenty four pounds one shilling and sixpence in full of his account for 963 lbs. of Beef furnished to a number of the natives of China and India under the Resolution of November the 7th, 1785." PBA Auctioneers, <https://www.pbagalleries.com/view-auctions/catalog/id/383/lot/118586/>, accessed June 21, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> *Papers of the Continental Congress*, item 69, vol. 2, 537.

<sup>54</sup> Eugene Ferguson, *Truxtun of the Constellation: The Life of Commodore Thomas Truxtun, U.S. Navy, 1755–1822* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 66.

<sup>55</sup> See Amitav Ghosh's "Of Fanas and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and the Lost Languages of the Age of Sail," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 25 (June 21–27, 2008): 56–62. Additionally, Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2010) presents a lively portrait of a lascar, Serang Ali, set in the context of the opium wars of the nineteenth century.

<sup>56</sup> The papers of Captain Stephen Phillips (1764–1838), 130. See Duncan Phillip, "Captain Stephen Phillips, 1764–1838," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 76, no. 2 (April 1940): 97–135.

<sup>57</sup> Ravi Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment," 112.

<sup>58</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Past* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 55–56.

<sup>59</sup> See Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*, and Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), for a substantive discussion of the troubled history of lascars in Great Britain, as well as some of the Anglo-American movement of South Asians as indentured servants, cooks, and nannies.

<sup>60</sup> Herman Melville, *Redburn: Being the Sailor-Boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the First Voyage of the Son of a Gentleman, in the Merchant Service* (1849; repr., New York: Adamant Media Corporation, 2001), 190.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Rhys, “Manila Men and Pacific Commerce” *Solidarity* 95 (1983): 43–47, quoted in Chappell, “Ahab’s Boat,” 75. Chappell parses the closing scene of *Moby Dick* (Melville, *Moby Dick*, 520) where the white whale kills Ahab and drowns all his Manila men, including Fedallah, the Parsi harpooner. Queequeg, Tashtego, and Dagoos climb to the top of each mast, “The pagan harpooners still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea,” commenting that “[t]his dramatic scene challenges the triumphalist tale of European seafarers heroically globalizing the world and offers us instead an image of interdependency with alien others whose skills made voyaging so far from home possible and, if your captain was not fatally obsessed with a particular whale, even profitable” Chappell, “Ahab’s Boat,” 76.

<sup>62</sup> Claire Anderson, “‘The Feringees are flying—the ship is ours!’: The Convict Middle Passage in Colonial South and Southeast Asia, 1790–1860,” *The Indian Social History Review* 42, no. 2 (June 2005): 143. Cited in Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>63</sup> In contrast to the South Asian and other lascars in Keesar’s company whose names we do not know, the names of three Chinese lascars—Ashing, Achun, and Aceun—are identified by Asian American historian Jonathan H. X. Lee in *Chinese Americans: The History and Culture of a People* (Denver, CO: ABC-CLIO, 2015), xv.

<sup>64</sup> For Hollingsworth, part of the vexing task of looking after the lascars was the discord amongst them. He reportedly sent all but the three Chinese lascars to be housed aboard the frigate *Alliance* as they “latterly differed with the Lascars, and their quarrels arising to considerable heights, I thought it best to separate them.” Levi Hollingsworth to President and Council, December 10, 26, *Post Revolutionary Papers*, 23, 15, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*, 45.

<sup>66</sup> Jesse Ransley, “Lascar Lives,” research project overview, University of Southampton. [https://www.southampton.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/lascar\\_lives\\_and\\_the\\_east\\_india\\_company.page](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/lascar_lives_and_the_east_india_company.page). Accessed July 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Pioneering work in drawing popular attention to advertisements about runaway East Indian slaves, and to the presence of South Asians in early America has been done by the journalist Francis C. Assisi in South Asian community publications such as *India Abroad*, *IndoLink*, and *Indo Currents*. See, for example, Francis Assisi and Elizabeth Pothen, “South Asians in Colonial America,” *SPAN Magazine*, May/June 2007. Archived at <http://news.rootsweb.com/th/read/Melungeon/2005-09/1126987908>. Francis C. Assisi, “Indian Slaves in Colonial America: Evidence of ‘East Indian Slaves in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Virginia,’” *India Currents*, May 16, 2007. <https://indiacurrents.com/indian-slaves-in-colonial-america/>.

<sup>68</sup> It has become a truism in recent scholarship on South Asian Americans that the model minority moniker grossly misrepresents them and ignores the plebian roots of their long presence in North America. The work of Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, most recently, as

detailed above, and of Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*; and Jensen, *Passage from India*, most notably among others, has variously presented an alternative history of this community that foregrounds its humble working-class roots in the lumber mills and the fertile farmlands along the West Coast from British Columbia to California.

<sup>69</sup> Further, as South Asians mingled with the African population and because they were routinely misidentified as Negro/mulatto/Creole, it is difficult to estimate their numbers. In “‘To Swear Him Free’: Ethnic Memory as Social Capital in Eighteenth-Century Freedom Petitions,” in *Colonial Chesapeake: New Perspectives*, ed. Debra Meyers and Melanie Perrault (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 81–106, Thomas Brown and Leah Sims declare that “it is impossible to confidently estimate the size of the South Asian population in the Western Shore counties, but ‘East Indians’ outnumber ‘Indians’ in the extant colonial records after 1710 or so” (95). Relatedly, Brown and Sims also discuss the many other freedom petitions made by East Indian servants, such as William Creek and Mary Fisher. I focus on runaway advertisements featuring “East Indian” slaves and servants and their petitions for freedom in a longer article in progress, “Tracing an Alternative Genealogy of South Asian Presence in Colonial America: Servants, Slaves, and Lascars,” which is part of a book project on India in the American Imaginary.

<sup>70</sup> Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1994), 17.