



ARTICLE

Port cities storytelling: Drawing on materials of neglect

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Abstract

Odessa, Hong Kong, Casablanca(s), and the ports of the Niger Delta: this transdisciplinary article unfolds through four distinct vignettes, exploring how global historians across the disciplines may engage anew in the storytelling of colonial ports, by attuning themselves to the minor and anecdotal in materials of neglect. Our work of minoring stems from our collaboration as part of the network, Colonial Ports and Global History (CPAGH), co-founded by an anthropologist, historians, and musicologists. With shared interests in performance, temporality, and materiality, our vignettes highlight the ways in which identified materials of neglect may serve to articulate minor experiences and agencies—and a transdisciplinary mode of port cities storytelling in the plural that ventures in another direction from the sweeping coverage of global history. Together, these vignettes reflect our converging disciplinary orientations towards minor episodes and overlooked actors within colonial ports, advancing, variously yet in tandem, a major–minor continuum of people, things, and practices in transdisciplinary writing.

Keywords: colonial ports and global history; storytelling; materials of neglect; vignettes; major–minor continuum; transdisciplinary writing

Odessa, Hong Kong, Casablanca(s) and the ports of the Niger Delta: this transdisciplinary article unfolds through four distinct vignettes, exploring how global historians across the disciplines may engage anew in the storytelling of colonial ports, by attuning themselves to the minor and anecdotal. Our work of minoring draws on materials of neglect to bring to light events, practices, and actors often overlooked by grand narratives of economic and social trends that dominate many popular works of global history.¹ We take inspiration from existing philosophical ideas, amongst them Deleuze's and Guattari's propositions of the 'minor' (in the sense of 'minor literature' or 'minor scholarship'), which break open preconceived, fixed, and teleological notions of the past to reveal dynamic, shifting meanings, or 'deterritorialization' in their words.² In a similar spirit, our transdisciplinary writing embraces storytelling in fragments, crafting four vignettes across History, Musicology, and Anthropology. These vignettes may appear to be negligible ornaments on the margins of world history, yet they also go some way towards

¹See, for example, Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (W. W. Norton, 1997); John Darwin, *Unlocking the World: Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam* (Allen Lane, 2020); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

²Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Robert Brinkley, 'What Is a Minor Literature?', *Mississippi Review* 11, no. 3 (1983): 13–33. See also Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage: A 'Minor' History* (Zone Books, 2008).

reconceptualizing colonial empires through their so-called peripheries, putting entanglements into sharp relief.

Port cities are an ideal focal point for minoring global history. They serve not only as points of departures or connecting nodes of empire, but also as key sites of political, economic, and cultural negotiation across, and sometimes at odds with, existing and emerging ideas of class, gender, race, or ethnic affiliation.³ As the article proceeds, our vignettes delve into materials of neglect, identified and examined according to our respective disciplinary orientations. We focus on materials and sources that may not conventionally pass muster with global history writing, which are embedded here in the creative practices of opera and oratorio in Odessa and Hong Kong, in the correspondence of Chinese women stranded in African ports on their way to Asia, and in the material culture of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people in the Niger Delta. We argue that each of these vignettes provides a new vantage point for telling the complex stories of, around, and evolving from port cities: hence ‘port cities storytelling’ in our title. With shared interests in performance, temporality, and materiality, our vignettes highlight the ways in which materials of neglect may serve to articulate minor experiences and agencies and to understand port cities as vibrant and contested sites of empire. We propose a transdisciplinary mode of port cities storytelling in the plural that ventures in another direction from the sweeping coverage of global history. In this respect, our vignettes recast ‘global history’ on an always unpredictable, sliding scale—a major–minor continuum of people, things, and practices.

Echoing to a degree but also pushing beyond Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call for provincializing Europe,⁴ our vignettes will show, through the mutability of colonial port cities, that empire was often re-enacted and distorted by actors and agents other than the ‘major’ recurring protagonists of global historiography. Crucially, we do not treat and conceive of the minor as synonymous with the subaltern,⁵ understood to be situated at the margins of colonial societies. Rather, by weaving our vignettes together, we gain a textured sense of how the work of minoring exposes people, things, and practices, which cannot be easily placed on a clear-cut divide between hegemon and subaltern. Chinese elites studying abroad become displaced-in-transit in Africa during the Second World War. Material culture, like the Benin Bronzes, tells stories about royal African art and colonial looting as much as about the involvement of African elites in the transatlantic trade in enslaved people. Opera, generally associated with elite culture, becomes a contested site of negotiation about belonging and imperial transformation in colonial Odessa. The English oratorio, once associated with the British empire’s cultural transmission, invites pause and reflection on Hong Kong and its late-colonial condition in 1987.

We arrived at materials of neglect as co-founders of Colonial Ports and Global History (CPAGH), a network established at and previously funded by The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities.⁶ Our current vignettes, crafted in an extended spirit of port cities storytelling, spring from our individual areas of research, without recourse to a geographically clustered group of

³For related existing literature across the disciplines, see, for example: Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760–1900* (Indiana University Press, 2007); Alexander Morrison, ‘Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13 no. 2 (2012): 327–64; Nile Green, ‘Maritime Worlds and Global History: Comparing the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean through Barcelona and Bombay’, *History Compass* 11 (2013): 513–23; Bob van der Linden, *Music and Empire in Britain and India: Identity, Internationalism, and Cross-Cultural Communication* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); meLê yamomo, *Theatre and Music in Manila and the Asia Pacific, 1869–1946: Sounding Modernities* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2018); Suzanne Aspden, ed., *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House* (University of Chicago Press, 2019); Michel Abesser, ‘A Window to the South: The Russian Empire, the Black Sea, and Beyond’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 21, no. 4 (2020): 843–59.

⁴Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000, 2007).

⁵Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁶CPAGH was founded at TORCH | The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities in 2018 and funded between 2018 to 2021, accessed 9 January 2026, <https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/colonial-ports-and-global-history-cpagh>.

colonial ports. We draw on private correspondence, newspapers, artefacts, and oral histories as materials of neglect to explore. We uncover stories through their unveiling of people, things, and practices—and the very capacity of these actors and agents to navigate and disrupt colonial structures. Our vignettes show that power structures and relations in port cities should be understood in their situatedness on a sliding scale, where people, things, and practices transmute from major to minor and vice versa. In sum, we propose to rethink ‘colonial ports and global history’, not as a monolithic construct, but as assemblages of voices, contingent encounters, and interpretations along a major–minor continuum.

Odessa’s first City Theatre as a contested site of port city identity

Olivia Irena Durand

Port cities are a favoured locus for global historians, frequently depicted as hubs of exchange or nodes within transnational networks. This historiographical emphasis on flows, circulation, and connectivity, while productive, can obscure more static or locally rooted processes, particularly those anchored in urban space and embodied in intermediary sites where global and local histories intersect.⁷ The global lens also risks homogenizing port city histories, foregrounding cosmopolitan shared traits at the expense of their internal tensions and divergent trajectories—a tension reflected in Helena Lopes’s take on Casablanca as a neutral foreign space.⁸ Writing the *minor* histories of port cities, particularly those with colonial origins, requires working with materials and voices often neglected by global history. Such sources can illuminate how urban port populations lived within and responded to broader structures of colonialism and capitalism.⁹ In this vignette, I turn to the City Theatre of Odesa/Odessa, a Ukrainian metropolis founded in 1794 by the Russian empire as a settler outpost, using sources associated with performances staged there in its first half-century.¹⁰ For over two centuries, the theatre has served as a space where the port’s plural population negotiated languages, cosmopolitan identities, and cultural representations that frequently effaced the city’s colonial origins.¹¹

In 1948, when the Black Sea port had become a Soviet city, Ukrainian musician Michael Goldstein drew widespread attention after announcing he had discovered, in the Odessa Conservatory archives, a symphony written ‘for the dedication of the Odessa Theatre’ and performed at its grand opening in 1809.¹² The purported discovery carried symbolic weight: it seemed to contribute to the genealogy of a distinct Slavic musical tradition, an idea then actively encouraged by Soviet cultural policy seeking to distance itself from European influences, both contemporary and historical. The alleged composer, Mykola Ovsianiko-Kulikovskyy, a wealthy landowner from the Kherson region of southern Ukraine, was said to have woven traditional Ukrainian folk songs such as ‘Oh, the Viburnum is Blooming’ and Cossack dance motifs into his work. Goldstein further claimed that Ovsianiko-Kulikovskyy had donated his serf orchestra to the Odessa Theatre, linking the symphony to the early cultural life of the port city.

Following its supposed rediscovery, the piece was performed throughout the USSR to considerable acclaim, even recorded by the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yevgeni Mravinsky. The Soviet press hailed the symphony as a folk counterpoint to the city’s cosmopolitan—and therefore

⁷Lasse Heerten, ‘Mooring Mobilities, Fixing Flows: Towards a Global Urban History of Port Cities in the Age of Steam’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2021): 350–74.

⁸Nile Green, ‘The Waves of Heterotopia: Toward a Vernacular Intellectual History of the Indian Ocean’, *American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (2018): 846–74.

⁹A. F. Burghardt, ‘A Hypothesis about Gateway Cities’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, no. 2 (1971): 269–85.

¹⁰Though founded in 1794, Odessa’s site was earlier known as Khadjibey, a Tatar fort and port later under Ottoman control.

¹¹The spelling ‘Odessa’ (Russian) is used over ‘Odesa’ (Ukrainian) for consistency with nineteenth- and twentieth-century contexts and sources; however, this choice does not reflect the author’s view on present-day post-colonial toponymy.

¹²Ovsianiko-Kulikovskyy, *Symphony No. 21*, full score (Muzgiz, 1951).

politically suspect—foreign port heritage, recasting Odessa’s musical identity within a Slavic, socialist framework. In Soviet discourse, multiculturalism beyond the socialist sphere was reframed as ideological interference, while the symphony’s elevation reinforced narratives of Slavic cultural contributions to European music and positioned Ukraine as an integral, creative component of the Soviet Union.¹³ This enthusiasm also contrasted starkly with earlier moments of repression of Ukrainian language and culture—from the 1876 *Ems Ukaz*, which banned Ukrainian-language printing and education, to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s that targeted the country’s cultural intelligentsia.¹⁴

The narrative unravelled within a few years. Scholars began to question the score’s authenticity, leading to Goldstein’s prosecution for forgery and his eventual exile to the Federal Republic of Germany.¹⁵ He later admitted authorship, explaining that he had written the piece to challenge anti-Semitic prejudices which dismissed him—a ‘nationless cosmopolitan’—as incapable of understanding or engaging with Slavic and Ukrainian musical traditions and therefore denied artistic legitimacy.¹⁶ The story of Odessa’s inaugural symphony was subsequently excised from Soviet and later Russian narratives, revealing the instability of Odessa’s historical self-representation, with layered imperial, national, and multicultural narratives colliding within the port city’s identity.¹⁷

The episode surrounding the supposed discovery of Odessa’s inaugural symphony invites reflection on the longer processes through which the port city’s cultural and linguistic identities were negotiated, such as the significance of Ukrainian and Jewish attributes within a hegemonic Russian framework. The controversy over the history of one of the port’s key institutions—the city theatre—forms part of a wider story of transformation, from a colonial and cosmopolitan entrepôt of global significance to an imperial city symbolizing the integration of territorial peripheries. As both an architectural landmark and a locus of civic life, the first City Theatre embodied the imperial ambition to fashion Odessa as a modern, worldly metropolis. Yet, it simultaneously refracted the minor histories of empire-making along the Black Sea. The history of Odessa’s first theatre (1810–1873) overlaps with the city’s cosmopolitan ‘golden age’, a period of free-port status (1819–1859) that would later give way to a more narrowly defined Russian national imperialism.¹⁸

The theatre formed part of the carefully curated *Primorski* waterfront—an urban showcase perched on limestone cliffs 200 feet above the sea and among the first sights encountered by newcomers arriving by ship. Within this symbolic cityscape, the theatre functioned as a meeting place for communities who frequently lived and spoke in languages not their own. As such, it mediated the shifting patterns of immigration, multilingualism, and cultural hegemony in a colonial port whose population was perpetually in flux. Cultural performance in this context did not merely mirror the port’s social life; it actively reshaped it, translating Odessa’s cosmopolitan aspirations into a performative negotiation between imperial circumstances and global mobility, echoing Yvonne Liao’s discussion of the oratorio musical genre as a vector of empire.¹⁹

¹³D. Kolbin, ‘Pro pomylyk, zahadky i mistyfikatsiyyi v avtorstvi muzyky’, *Ukrayins’ka muzyka* 4 (2017): 135–50.

¹⁴The 1876 *Ems Ukaz* also banned theatrical productions in Ukrainian until 1881.

¹⁵Doubts over the symphony’s authenticity stem from the lost original score, lack of contemporary press mention, modernized title spelling, and the technical difficulty of the symphony for a provincial serf orchestra.

¹⁶Michail Goldstein, *Vospominaniya* (Literaturno-khudozhestvennyy, istoriko-krayevedcheskiy illyustrirovannyi al’manakh, 2004), 18. The symphony gained renewed popularity in independent Ukraine after being re-recorded in 2006.

¹⁷Nicolas Slonimsky, ‘Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky: Symphony No. 21, in G Major’, *Musical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1959): 574–5; ‘Mykola Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky’, in *Ukrainian Small Encyclopaedia*, ed. E. Onatsky, vol. 5, book IX (Talleres Gráficos “Champion”, 1962), 1182–83; İokhanan Petrovskii-Shtern, ‘The Construction of an Improbable Identity: The Case of Hryts’ko Kernerenko’, *Ab Imperio* 1 (2005): 191–240.

¹⁸Through this decree, Odessa became the third city in the Russian empire (and the first in Ukraine) to have a state theatre, just ten years after its foundation. The first theatre (1810) burned in 1873; the current opera house, modelled on Dresden’s, opened in 1887. See Caroline Humphrey, ‘Odessa: Pogroms in a Cosmopolitan City’, in *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities: Explorations of Urban Coexistence*, ed. Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja (Berghahn, 2012), 17–64.

¹⁹Deleuze *et al.*, ‘What Is a Minor Literature?’; Salah El Moncef, ‘Minor Literature’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press, n.d.); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Ethics in a World of Strangers* (Norton, 2007); Frantz

In 1804, an imperial decree allocated 20,000 roubles for the construction of an official theatre, recognizing the need to provide regulated entertainment for the city's growing population. This initiative formed part of a broader strategy to stabilize imperial governance and control the heterogeneous populations settling in Russia's newly acquired southern borderlands. These regions experienced rapid demographic transformation, with the port city drawing migrants from neighbouring Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, as well as from further afield in Italy, France, and Germany, alongside Ukrainian migrants from the rural hinterland. For many of these internal migrants, Odessa's urban environment was as foreign as it was for international arrivals, their own vernacular languages and cultures differing widely from those of the Russian officials and transnational commercial elites. The construction of a permanent theatre thus served not only civic and cultural functions but also the ideological project of colonizing the northern Black Sea. The very presence of a European-style institution signalled the neo-Russian domestication of a formerly Tatar and Ottoman region, inviting further settlement, capital, and trade.²⁰

Even before the completion of a permanent theatre building in 1809, local performances reflected this linguistic and cultural diversity. Russian, Ukrainian, German, and Polish itinerant troupes performed in makeshift spaces—barns, markets, and private houses—illustrating how theatrical culture adapted to the fluid and provisional conditions of the early port.²¹ Although there is no evidence that Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky's serf orchestra inaugurated the theatre, early ensembles led by P. V. Fortunatov (1810) and Prince Shakhovskiy (1811) featured Russian and Ukrainian performers.²² The repertoire soon adapted to Odessa's international population: an Italian troupe led by Zamboni and Montovani soon joined the resident companies, making Odessa the first city in the Russian empire to host Italian opera.²³ Here, linguistic and cultural plurality coexisted with imperial cultural consolidation, at a moment when no single language or nationality had achieved dominance. The vehicular languages of commerce—Russian and Italian, but also French and Greek—became, in turn, the languages of representation once transposed onto the stage.²⁴

The theatre's repertoire thus charted two intertwined shifts in linguistic mediation. First, the initial displacement of Russian and Ukrainian serf troupes by foreign companies performing in their native languages; and second, from the mid-1840s onwards, the gradual reassertion of Russian-language productions as the empire's cultural nationalism intensified.²⁵ Alongside Italian opera, Greek troupes appeared from 1814, while itinerant French vaudeville companies were frequent guests. The Société d'Amateurs Français, composed largely of local merchants and artisans, hosted regular fundraising performances.²⁶ Rossini's operas proved immensely popular,

Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (Grove Press, 1980); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 7, 17.

²⁰The plans for the theatre, drawn up by the French architect Thomas de Thomon, reflected expectations of continued population growth: the venue could seat up to 800 spectators, even though Odessa's population was still below 20,000. Leonid Ignatieff, 'French Émigrés in Russia after the French Revolution', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 8, no. 1 (1966): 125–31.

²¹Theatre troupes comprised both enserfed and free actors. The first recorded performance in Odessa was Alexander Ablesimov's *The Miller Who Was a Wizard, a Cheat and a Matchmaker*, staged by soldiers. Aîné Sicard, *Lettres sur Odessa* (De l'Imprimerie de Pluchart et comp., 1812), 42; N. Ostrouhova, 'Place and Significance of the Temporary Theatre in the History of Odessa Opera', *Musical Art and Culture* 16 (2012): 182–92.

²²Ostrouhova, 'Place and Significance of the Temporary Theatre', 188.

²³The Italian company paused during the 1812–13 plague (which killed c.10% of the population) but remained active until 1820. S. Kovbasîuk, *Odessa: Ocherk istorii goroda-geroïa* (Odesskoe oblastnoe izdatel'stvo, 1957), 29; Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 188.

²⁴On 'vehicular' and 'referential' languages, see Peter Zhang, 'Gilles Deleuze and Minor Rhetoric', *Etc.* 68, no. 2 (2011): 214–29.

²⁵Kovbasîuk, *Odessa*, p. 29. He saw it as a tragic decline in quality, caused by the taste of the foreign rulers of the city. The theatre became 'Not rich in talented singers, who had a meagre orchestra, the opera nevertheless firmly entered Odessa life and became a noticeable phenomenon in the cultural life of the city.'

²⁶Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa Recollected: The Port and the People* (Academic Studies Press, 2018), 139. Advertisements for these shows appeared in local newspapers. The May 1835 programme featured *Les Précieuses ridicules*, followed by *Naufrage, ou les héritiers* and *Monsieur Mouflet ou le duel au 3e étage*. In October 1842, the *Journal d'Odessa* reported that local

and Polish-language productions also featured prominently, supported by Polish landowners and grain traders who had relocated south after Poland's recent partitions.²⁷ In the 1839–40 season alone, of 205 performances, 144 were Italian and 37 French, underscoring the predominance of foreign-language culture.²⁸ By Odessa's fiftieth anniversary in 1844, the port city had become not merely a destination for foreigners but a culturally foreign city looking outward.

The Odessa Theatre thus acted as a deterritorialized space within a socially and ethnically stratified port. As historian Patricia Herlihy observes, it was 'nearly the only arena where all national groups met'.²⁹ Contemporary observers noted the enthusiasm of Odessa's rapidly growing Jewish population for the opera, describing them as 'fanatics' of the stage, underscoring the sizeable community of Odessa Jews and its cultural relevance from the nineteenth century to just before Goldstein's time.³⁰ The *Journal d'Odessa* remarked that 'the new city on the Black Sea contains many French and Italian residents, who are willing to sacrifice all but the necessities of life for the opera; the Russians themselves are passionately fond of musical and theatrical entertainments'.³¹ Such accounts illustrate the theatre's function as a shared and liminal civic space within a city that contemporaries described as 'no longer Russian, yet not yet European'.³²

From the mid-1840s, however, the theatrical landscape began to shift. Stricter controls on immigration and the rise of imperial nationalism fostered a turn towards Russian-language stage productions. Critics began to note, with some surprise, that 'Russian theatre has a public in Odessa', while performances in other languages became gradually restricted to particular genres.³³ As tastes evolved, Russian productions gained ascendancy, signalling a broader transformation in cultural belonging and allegiance.³⁴

The linguistic stratification visible in the theatre's programme mirrored the port city's gradual absorption into the imperial core, marking a shift in power dynamics with long-term ramifications for the contested storytelling of this colonial port, a transition also discussed by Julia Binter in the concluding vignette. Mid-nineteenth-century writers continued to describe Odessa as 'a city completely foreign, outside the great Russian unity', yet such characterizations of cosmopolitanism, often cast as problematic, also contributed to erasing the port's pre-Russian past and colonial present.³⁵ Another dimension of this imperial project lay in the marginalization of vernacular tongues within both commercial and cultural life. The existence of a largely Ukrainian-speaking peasantry and the memory of Tatar and Ottoman presence were downplayed in the urban space through the elevation of 'high' cultures—Russian and Western European—as civilizing or cosmopolitan instruments.³⁶ The theatre thus functioned not merely as a stage for

authorities had invited French amateur actors to stage a drama in aid of victims of a fire in Kazan. *Journal d'Odessa*, 7/19 May 1835 and 13/25 October 1842, 971, n. 82, Odessa National Scientific Library, Odesa, Ukraine (hereafter, ONSL).

²⁷Herlihy, *Odessa Recollected*, 41.

²⁸*Journal d'Odessa*, 12/24 April 1840, 971, n. 30, ONSL.

²⁹Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa: A History, 1794–1914* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 142.

³⁰Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794–1881* (Stanford University Press, 1985), 66. Yiddish theatre emerged after the Crimean War: in 1864, a short-lived troupe staged *Esther and Athalia*. The first professional Yiddish performance in Odessa followed in 1878, by Israel Rosenberg's company. Within a few years, Odessa became the centre of Yiddish theatre, aided by a Jewish audience already accustomed to Russian-language plays.

³¹John G. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Greece, Turkey, Russia and Poland* (William and Robert Chambers, 1839), 210.

³²J. I. Kraszewski, *Listy do rodziny, 1820–1863* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1982), 114; cited in Serhiy Bilenyk, *Romantic Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 85.

³³*Journal d'Odessa*, 18/30 May 1843, 971, n. 40, ONSL.

³⁴The audience shows its face to the Russians. To the French, they only show their profile; As for the Italians, it appears that for now they are turning their back to them ...' *Ibid.*, n. 41, 21 May/2 June 1843.

³⁵*Journal d'Odessa*, 6/18 April 1845, 971, no. 28, ONSL. The author noted that foreigners only made up a sixth of Odessa's population, an effect of the authorities' pressure to take up Russian nationality throughout the 1820s and 1830s.

³⁶Tanya Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine* (University of Toronto Press, 2008); Vitaly Chernetsky, 'Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine', *Ubandus Review* 7 (2003): 32–62; Olivia Irena Durand,

cosmopolitan display but as a mechanism of ideological transformation, converting the ‘wild fields’ of southern Ukraine into a naturalized neo-Russian landscape.³⁷ The relegation of some ‘minor’ languages and cultures, such as Ukrainian and Yiddish, to dialect and jargon, further removed the histories of demographically major communities from the city’s cultural stage.

Viewed through this lens, the history of Odessa’s first City Theatre may be read as a microcosm of the broader dynamics that shaped the port city’s cultural and linguistic life: a site where imperial projects of standardization intersected with the fluid connectivity of the maritime world. The tension between cosmopolitan display and cultural containment reveals how global exchanges were translated into hierarchies of language, taste, and belonging. Yet, these same processes also gave rise to what might be called the minor histories of the port—moments of improvisation and linguistic negotiation that persisted beneath the surface of imperial culture. The later rediscovery of Goldstein’s supposed ‘Odessa Symphony’ revisited these dynamics in the Soviet-era, moving beyond the binary of cosmopolitan versus Russian culture to reveal how hegemonic narratives of the city’s past were continually refracted—and occasionally unsettled—through the enduring significance of its theatre.

Oratorio’s continuum: Genre and a late-colonial port premiere

Yvonne Liao

What kind of a story emerges when a musical genre tells not of a port city, but of a *supra*-port moment? And how does that story materialize, beyond familiar nodes of music, migration, transmission, and technology in the existing work of global history?³⁸

These questions lie at the heart of my not-quite-‘porty’ vignette, still engaging in our article’s theme of port cities storytelling, but unfolding through rearticulations rather than routes. In thinking through such ‘portiness’, I propose exploring the English oratorio as a musical genre shaped by global empire, by all outward appearances—and the oratorio’s shifting internal meanings within a late-colonial port city, Hong Kong. The year is 1987, the start of the final decade of British colonial rule in the city, set in motion by the 1984 Sino-British Declaration and the agreed transfer of sovereignty from Britain to the People’s Republic of China on 1 July 1997. Casting an even wider historical net, my discussion first considers the oratorio, its dissemination, and its tacit connections with the British empire. Drawing on Lasse Heerten’s illuminating work in port city historiography,³⁹ particularly the notion of ports as fragmented spaces where trajectories (may) stall, this discussion then turns to the 1987 Hong Kong premiere of *The Kingdom*, an oratorio work by English composer Edward Elgar (1857–1934).

From the outset, materials of *material* neglect come to the fore.⁴⁰ Previews-cum-reviews—extended serial pieces once common in the written concert discourse of newspapers and the like, now virtually defunct in print and social media—take centre stage. I am interested in an accompanying port pause: pausing on this ‘obsolete worded stuff’, its layered subtext, and its late-colonial *supra*-port moment, which is temporally distinct from, but not entirely dissimilar to the fermata of intra-port sensibilities bound up with 1940s wartime waiting, discussed by Helena

“‘New Russia’ and the Legacies of Settler Colonialism in Southern Ukraine”, *Journal of Applied History* 4, no. 1–2 (2022): 58–75.

³⁷Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 69–70, 89.

³⁸See, for example, Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (Verso, 2015); Reinhard Strohm, ed., *Studies on a Global History of Music: A Balzan Musicology Project* (Routledge, 2018); Gavin Williams, *Format Friction: Perspectives on the Shellac Disc* (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

³⁹Heerten, ‘Mooring Mobilities’.

⁴⁰See also Yvonne Liao, ‘Penning the Stakes: Paper and the post/Colonial Music Archive in Shanghai and Hong Kong’, *Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 3 (2023): 448–68, accessed 12 March 2026, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13688790.2023.2243075>.

Lopes. The hidden textual tension that I observe between a preview and review also bears some affinity with ‘materialized relations’ as revealed by Julia Binter through the lens of gifts and West African port cities. My focus, meanwhile, is on a genre-affirming preview and a more ambiguous review of the 1987 premiere, regarding Elgar, an Edwardian composer, and the performance by the Hong Kong Oratorio Society. The divergence of this preview and review, penned by two Hong Kong-based music writers and just thirteen days apart in their publication in the *Hongkong Standard* (a widely circulated English-language broadsheet), raises a pointed question as to whether the oratorio as a genre of empire still holds consistent meaning. By foregrounding the English oratorio, this vignette brings into view the changing clout of a musical genre, in parallel with Olivia Durand’s observations of stratification in the nineteenth-century port and city theatre of Odessa. I propose the idea of oratorio’s continuum, informed by Deleuze’s and Guattari’s ‘lines of flight’—pathways of escape from dominant structures that disrupt territory and majority.⁴¹ Through the late-colonial port premiere of *The Kingdom* and the prism of a genre entwined with empire, I am interested in examining a minoritarian concert discourse, via its differing lines of view, namely the newspaper’s preview and review. As such, oratorio’s continuum moves between genre and premiere, opening new interpretive possibilities for port cities storytelling while deterritorializing empire’s grip on the genre.

The oratorio, by definition, is a large-scale choral work, usually religious in nature and set to biblical verses and texts, and typically with orchestral accompaniment. Prominent examples include Handel’s *Messiah*, J. S. Bach’s *Passions*, and Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*. Furthermore, the characterization of the oratorio as an English genre is not without validity, despite the oratorio’s popularity on the European continent. For one thing, the oratorio has become canonically synonymous with works attributed to, among other figures, George Friedrich Handel (1685–1759), a naturalized English composer, and Elgar, a late-Romantic English composer of *Pomp and Circumstance* fame, writing amid ‘the high imperialism of the Edwardian era’.⁴² For another, ‘choral power’, to borrow Fiona M. Palmer’s words, acquires sway through large oratorio choruses in nineteenth-century England, and it is also here where Handel’s *Messiah* establishes the prevailing status quo in oratorio performance, or ‘the [accepted] epitome of canonised music in the repertoires of choirs nationwide [and subsequently, worldwide]’.⁴³ Equally significant is the role of nineteenth-century choral societies as a vehicle for spreading oratorio music worldwide; relatedly, Joep Leersen has observed ‘an informal, self-organizing, bottom-up form of sociability ... [cementing] the [nineteenth-century] choral movement [culturally and globally] as a repertoire-carrier’.⁴⁴

In repertoire, canonization, and the nineteenth-century dissemination of the oratorio, the British empire (that is, from Queen Victoria’s reign) looms large domestically and globally. London’s status as a metropole, coupled with royal patronage, arguably shaped the development of the English oratorio. There is, for example, the London-based Royal Choral Society, zealously singing the Good Friday *Messiah* since 1878, with origins traceable to the patronage of Queen Victoria and the year 1871, following the opening of Royal Albert Hall, the prince consort’s memorial. Further afield, in nineteenth-century colonial Australia, the English oratorio served as a means of training and disciplining, in that it was ‘regarded amongst the most edifying and

⁴¹Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁴²Tristram Hunt, ‘Behind the Pomp and Circumstance’, *The Guardian*, 3 June 2007, accessed 12 March 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jun/03/comment.music>. Additionally, see Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876–1953* (Manchester University Press, 2001), and Nalini Ghuman, *Resonances of the Raj: India in the English Musical Imagination, 1897–1947* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴³Fiona M. Palmer, ‘The Large-Scale Oratorio Chorus in Nineteenth-Century England: Choral Power and the Role of Handel’s *Messiah*’, in *Choral Societies and Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Krisztina Lajosi and Andreas Stynen (Brill, 2015), 110.

⁴⁴Joep Leersen, ‘German Influences: Choirs, Repertoires, Nationalities’, in *Choral Societies and Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Krisztina Lajosi and Andreas Stynen (Brill, 2015), 16–17.

instructive artforms of the Victorian era', according to Sarah Kirby in her study of English composer George Tolhurst's *Ruth* (1864), an oratorio written and first performed in the British colony of Victoria.⁴⁵ Entering the twentieth century, the years after the Second World War saw the establishment of the Hong Kong Oratorio Society in 1956, within a British colony then bordering 'Red China'.⁴⁶ Judging from archival materials donated to the Hong Kong Public Records Office, the Society attracted members of different nationalities and Christian denominations across the decades, 'drawn from various walks of life, [who] all share the same vision that oratorio singing is a great delight'.⁴⁷ Repertoire-wise, they stick to the so-called classics. So, across land and sea, metropole and colony, oratorio's empire has doubtless expanded over time.

But what sort of a global phenomenon of empire is the oratorio, when put through the rearticulations rather than routes of port cities storytelling? Here, I choose to cite Heerten's reflections: 'Ports [beyond the familiar catchwords of "flows", "circulation" and "connectivity"] are per se also places where mobility comes to a halt. . . . Ports are intermediary spaces [and unpredictable spaces] . . . The various entanglements into which port cities were enmeshed [thus] created ruptures, friction, and fragmentation.'⁴⁸ In a similar spirit, I suggest placing the English oratorio along a continuum. Central to this continuum is a minoritarian discourse characterized by differing views, couched in the newspaper coverage of the Hong Kong premiere of an Elgar oratorio in 1987. Genre is articulated with a late-colonial moment, and with Hong Kong as a port city whose 'portiness' exceeds spatial bearings, not solely defined by a vocabulary of 'flows', 'circulation', and 'connectivity' typically associated with Hong Kong as an entrepôt.⁴⁹

Moving on, I want to explain Elgar's significance for my continuum. In contrast to the eighteenth-century Handel, the Edwardian Elgar stands as a pointed emblem of empire and Englishness, while his reputation has been complicated by the persistent association of his oeuvre with the imperial Zeitgeist. The stirring strains of his song *Land of Hope and Glory*, for instance, have become almost synonymous with the pageantry of the British empire at its zenith. This is echoed by Jeffrey Richards, who comments: 'Elgar was a patriot, a monarchist, and a Conservative, and his imperialism was a logical extension of these values.'⁵⁰ Meanwhile, *The Kingdom*, the oratorio in question, and a large-scale work scored for a double chorus and four soloists with orchestral accompaniment, successfully received its first performance at the Birmingham Music Festival in October 1906, a forum at the time for new commissioned music.⁵¹ With gusto, *The Musical Times* reported: 'The interest of musicians and the general public alike in the festival seemed to centre in Sir Edward Elgar's new oratorio, "The Kingdom". . . . [It] attracted the largest audience of the week [with keen demand in the run-up to the performance, including for standing places].'⁵² Yet, the enthusiastic crowd of 1900s Birmingham also brings into relief the oratorio's lukewarm Hong Kong premiere just over eight decades later, which took place in October 1987 in

⁴⁵Sarah Kirby, "'The Worst Oratorio Ever!': Colonialist Condescension in the Critical Reception of George Tolhurst's *Ruth* (1864)", *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 16, no. 2 (2019): 199–227, accessed 12 March 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409817000325>.

⁴⁶A notable piece of propaganda exemplifying colonial bias is the British Pathé newsreel from 1967, in which the narrator tersely contrasts: 'On one side, a British colony; on the other, Red China', accessed 1 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kibA-Sxn7QQ>.

⁴⁷Hong Kong Oratorio Society Bio, 16 December 1979, HKMS151-1-51, Hong Kong Oratorio Society Programme Brochures 1958–1979, Hong Kong Public Records Office, Kwun Tong, Hong Kong (hereafter, HKPRO).

⁴⁸Heerten, 'Mooring Mobilities', 351–2.

⁴⁹This does not mean disregarding littoral perspectives and insights on colonial Hong Kong. See, for example, Gary Chi-hung Luk, 'British Colonial Rule over Littoral Space and Watercraft in Hong Kong, 1841–1898', *Historical Journal* (2025): 1–23, accessed 12 March 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100988>.

⁵⁰Richards, *Imperialism and Music*, 34.

⁵¹For general background on the Birmingham Music Festival, see, for example, Anne Elliott, *The Music Makers: A Brief History of the Birmingham Triennial Music Festivals, 1784–1912* (Birmingham City Council Department of Leisure and Co., 2000).

⁵²'The Birmingham Musical Festival', *The Musical Times*, 1 November 1906, 757–758.

the Hong Kong City Hall with the Hong Kong Oratorio Society. In the *Hongkong Standard* can be found a tepid review by Hong Kong-based music writer Charles Milner:

[Elgar's] style is stately, has reserve and restraint and he certainly was one of the leading British composers. The chorus performed well especially for a basically amateur group. . . . The performance elicited a decent response from the audience [despite being a 'disappointing attendance'] for a composition that deserves to be performed but probably will not become a popular hit in the near future.⁵³

A flop of a *début*, no doubt: *The Kingdom* in Hong Kong, 1987, goes down as the first and only performance of this Elgar oratorio by the Hong Kong Oratorio Society.⁵⁴ Still, there is more to local coverage at the time, notably 'Gem for a loyal following', published in the same newspaper just thirteen days before Milner's review in October 1987, by which I refer to the preview by Keith Anderson, an English music critic and educator based in Hong Kong at the time:

It is unfortunate that Elgar has enjoyed a reputation for insular patriotism of a particularly imperial kind. . . . The sentiments of *Land of Hope and Glory* [as a patriotic song] sort ill with contemporary British cynicism in these matters, while the image of an Edwardian country gentleman, happier at the races than in the Concert Hall, a picture for which there is slight anecdotal support, cannot endear him to a different public.⁵⁵

Anderson could be credited for steering the reader away from crass imperialism, in the name of more nuanced publicity. He avoids the cliché of equating Elgar with 'insular patriotism of a particularly imperial kind', in favour of a more down-to-earth understanding of Elgar the composer as he sees it, and a more considered understanding of empire. *The Kingdom* may even be a 'gem' of a work as Anderson headlines it, affirming and celebrating the oratorio genre. It is not clear, however, whether the 'loyal following' that Anderson also headlines is showing incipient signs of decline in 1987, given the 'disappointing attendance' that Milner reports in his review, and his somewhat pessimistic prediction that the work 'probably will not become a popular hit in the near future'. Between Anderson's 'gem' and Milner's 'decent response from the audience' (at best), genre in a late-colonial port city begins to deviate from its established function as a genre of empire. Meanwhile, Elgar's style of 'reserve and restraint', to borrow Milner's words, no longer guarantees audience interest, let alone Anderson's 'loyal following'. Writing for the same Hong Kong newspaper—but writing at the two ends of an oratorio premiere in 1987—Anderson and Milner put a minoritarian twist on concert discourse, with differing lines of view as they relate to empire, Elgar the Edwardian composer, and audience appetite for English choral music in programming and performance.

Rearticulations exceed routes, to return to my curious 'porty' opening. The oratorio as a global phenomenon of empire inevitably raises more questions than answers, in 1987: between a preview and review, it rewrites meaning, in part-serial and part-fragmented fashion that speaks internally to the moment and to the newspapering of a premiere. A one-off *Kingdom*, variously documented, casts uncertainty over genre and empire, not only within a late-colonial port city but also in the

⁵³Charles Milner, 'Oratorio Society Does Justice to Hard Task', *Hongkong Standard*, 17 October 1987, HKMS151-1-18, Hong Kong Oratorio Society Press Cuttings 1964–1995, HKPRO.

⁵⁴*The Apostles* (i.e. *The Kingdom*'s predecessor), an Elgar oratorio first performed in Birmingham in 1903, also had mixed reviews after its Hong Kong premiere with the Hong Kong Oratorio Society in March 1989 in the Hong Kong City Hall. Elizabeth Norman, 'Edwardian Echo in Choir's Biblical Work', *South China Morning Post*, 7 March 1989, HKMS151-1-18, HKPRO; Gill Forestal, 'Brave First Run for Hongkong Singers', *Hongkong Standard*, 8 March 1989, HKMS151-1-18, HKPRO.

⁵⁵Keith Anderson, 'Gem for a Loyal Following', *Hongkong Standard*, 4 October 1987, HKMS151-1-18, HKPRO.

'last formal British colony' facing impending political transition.⁵⁶ Granted, such tapering of influence should come as no surprise, inasmuch as the formal process of 'decolonization', initiated by the Hong Kong colonial government for its own legitimacy, was already well underway—for instance, in its attempted construction of a brand of 'Chineseness' through official support of Chinese music, performances, and festivities from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.⁵⁷ Then again, empire's indelible mark on choral music-making yoked to the English oratorio leaves a complex legacy and print trail, touting 'portiness' as a 'portiotics' of port musical meaning, open to further interpretation. This is where, as the concluding note of my vignette, Heerten's idea of ports as intermediary spaces meshes well with Deleuzoguattarian trajectories of flight, since both enable new forms of understanding not tied to mobilities or structures. In tandem, they help to locate the English oratorio within the stuff of mediatized dynamics in a late-colonial port premiere, courtesy of a concert discourse of material neglect. And along oratorio's continuum, minoritarian sensibilities develop in response and in counterpoint to a genre of empire—as befits a supra-port moment.

Casablanca(s): Neutrality, wartime movement and waiting in colonial ports

Helena F. S. Lopes

With the exception of the RMS *Titanic*, interrupted voyages seldom make it to the major narratives of global history, even less so if the interruption was not life-threatening. What did passengers do when stranded in *in-between* ports during the Second World War? What if those passengers were themselves neglected by histories of port cities and of that foremost global conflict?

Studies of port cities in the age of empire and steam often focus on processes of transnational maritime exchange, urban spaces, and the technologies underpinning radical changes in transportation.⁵⁸ While this vignette intersects with some of these major aspects, its focus is on a minor case of passengers stranded halfway through: a group of Chinese citizens whose journey between France and China was interrupted in West Africa in 1940. The major–minor intersection here is not solely one of subject, but also of sources: this section draws on a neglected set of correspondence about these passengers kept among diplomatic papers on 'bigger' topics. The documents comprise letters from some of the Chinese women in the group and others written by French officials. They are in a folder with the generic title 'Chinois en France' (Chinese in France) held at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives in Paris.⁵⁹ Whilst concerning a minor episode, these documents illustrate a range of dynamics associated with modern global history, including migration, maritime travel, and transnational exchanges between individuals, groups, institutions, states, and empires. The papers in the folder allowed me to reimagine a voyage with many 'hiccups' that, albeit in a different way from the previous vignette, also shows instances when 'mobility came to a halt' and how those travelling responded to this.

I came across these files whilst researching a French colonial outpost in South China, Guangzhouwan, during the Second World War and the immediate post-war period. Focusing on parallels and connections between Guangzhouwan and other similar territories under European rule in the region—Macau and Hong Kong—I was particularly interested in wartime engagements between these colonial ports and the people who moved through them. With pandemic-related travel restrictions preventing research trips to Asia, I turned my attention to European archives. Some of their seemingly minor holdings held surprisingly illuminating clues on global wartime circulations.

⁵⁶On Hong Kong as the 'last formal British colony', see, for example, David W. McIntyre, *British Decolonization, 1946–1997* (Macmillan, 1998).

⁵⁷See Allan T. F. Pang, 'Entertainment, Chinese Culture, and Late Colonialism in Hong Kong', *Historical Journal*, 67, no. 1 (2024): 124–47, accessed 12 March 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X23000304>.

⁵⁸See, for example, Heerten, 'Mooring Mobilities'; Darwin, *Unlocking the World*.

⁵⁹Chinois en France, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Vichy Guerre, 1939–45, Asie, 3GMII/212, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de la Courneuve, Paris, France (hereafter, MAE, 3GMII/212).

Both Guangzhouwan and Macau have been described as Chinese versions of Casablanca,⁶⁰ the Moroccan city whose ambiguous experience of neutrality during the war inspired a famous Hollywood fiction film, Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942). Central to *Casablanca* is the idea of waiting in a neutral foreign place without a clear idea about if and when one could leave for somewhere safer. There are some echoes of what contemporary social anthropologists have posited regarding 'waiting as a temporal space where emergency dissolves into the ordinary'.⁶¹ Borrowing Elizabeth Sinn's conceptualization of Hong Kong as an 'in-between place', I have analysed the experience of neutrality in South China's colonial ports as 'in-between time'.⁶² This temporality of uncertainty and unintended immobility is also applicable to the case at the centre of this vignette that includes a passage through the real Casablanca.

This atypical Second World War story began on 7 June 1940 when a group of thirty-six Chinese citizens, both students and workers, boarded the Messageries Maritimes passenger liner *Jean Laborde* in Marseille en route to China. Some were heading for British-ruled Hong Kong, others for Shanghai, where the International Settlement and French Concession were, like Hong Kong, under foreign jurisdiction and technically neutral at the time. Their journey was interrupted on 27 June in Pointe-Noire, in today's Republic of the Congo, then under French colonial rule. The fall of France in 1940 had global reverberations, and the stoppage of the *Jean Laborde* was one of them. Two months later, the ship moved to Dakar, in Senegal, where some of the crew (but not the commander) joined General De Gaulle's resistance. British aerial bombings of the port city forced the ship to seek refuge in Casablanca.⁶³ Some of its Chinese passengers chose to disembark in the city, with twenty-five catching another boat to Dakar in October to then board another French passenger steamer, *Cap Padaran* to Saigon.⁶⁴ The other eleven passengers remained aboard the *Jean Laborde* and returned to Marseille in October. By late November 1941 they were still in France hoping to go to China.⁶⁵ This is, thus, a story about being in transit in the spaces between multiple port cities rather than how migrants transformed those locales.⁶⁶

Placing the comparatively minor history of these stranded Chinese passengers at the centre allows us to consider alternative global histories of colonial ports in the Second World War. These include seeing beyond European colonialism in maritime travel and migration, and considering links between European neutral states and other actors, global networks of Chinese wartime diplomacy, international educational exchanges, and the role of women—whose experience is often treated as of minor importance in war histories—in these. The involvement of Chinese diplomats in pleading the passengers' case to French authorities showcases the dynamism of China's wartime diplomacy in Europe.⁶⁷ The passengers' own initiative in rallying attention to

⁶⁰Chuning Xie, 'China's Casablanca: Refugees, Outlaws, and Smugglers in France's Guangzhouwan Enclave', in 1943: *China at the Crossroads*, ed. Joseph W. Esherick and Michael T. Combs (East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2015), 391–425; Philip Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese Occupation* (Yale University Press, 2003), 180.

⁶¹Zerrin Özlem Biner and Özge Biner, 'Introduction: On the Politics of Waiting', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29, no. 3 (2021): 787–99, 794.

⁶²Elizabeth Sinn, 'Hong Kong as an In-Between Place in the Chinese Diaspora, 1849–1949', in *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, ed. Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder (Brill, 2011), 225–47; Helena F. S. Lopes, 'The Impact of Refugees in Neutral Hong Kong and Macau, 1937–1945', *Historical Journal* 66, no. 1 (2023): 210–36.

⁶³Ressortissants chinois immobilisés à Casablanca', undated, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁶⁴Charles Noguès, Resident-General in Morocco to Vichy Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 30 October and 11 November 1940, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁶⁵E.g. Vichy Minister-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 February 1941; Secretary of State for the Colonies to Minister-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 28 November 1941, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁶⁶On the latter see Christina Reimann and Martin Öhman, eds., *Migrants and the Making of the Urban-Maritime World: Agency and Mobility in Port Cities, c.1570–1940* (Routledge, 2021).

⁶⁷E.g. Aide-memoire from the Chinese Embassy in Paris to the Vichy Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 16 August 1940, MAE, 3GMII/212. On China's relative absence from the historiography of the Second World War, see Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

their situation through official channels evidences the intersection of non-Western-agency in both non-state actors and state actors (the diplomats). The stranded passengers did not easily fit categories associated with occupied France or the French empire at war. They were not European refugees nor colonial subjects and they also did not fit neatly into a position of subalternity. Indeed, the fact that many belonged to families of high social standing made French authorities particularly keen to ensure they were well treated.⁶⁸

This episode demonstrates the importance of global maritime shipping routes in the 1940s, and their intersection with European imperialism. The *Jean Laborde* and other ships mentioned in the files belonged to French shipping companies and linked colonial ports in Africa and Asia.⁶⁹ These routes were taken by a wide range of passengers; global travel was not merely the privilege of white European colonialists.⁷⁰ Discussions on the possibility of the stranded passengers reaching China via French-ruled Indochina also allude to the connections between East and South-East Asia, links that predated European colonialism and that remained strong even at a time of global conflict. Here we have a case of a relatively minor *human* scale of the individual stranded travellers intersecting with the major scales of global steamship routes, the capitalist enterprises that ran them (in this case, the Messageries Maritimes),⁷¹ the imperial networks that underpinned them (in this case, French), and maritime flows connecting Europe and Asia—in this case, interrupted flows.

When considering how different connections disrupted by conflict can still function at a minor level, neutral states are a case in point. Indeed, they are usually treated as minor players in histories of the Second World War. This eventful, if neglected, case reveals connections between neutrals and what their status, however ambiguous, meant in practice for enabling transport and communications. Initially, correspondence between the Chinese embassy in France and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered the option of getting the stranded passengers to Madeira or simply onto a Portuguese ship going to Asia.⁷² Whilst that did not happen, some of the *Jean Laborde* passengers who returned to France did go to Portugal. Some of the correspondence concerns a woman, Madame Tsao Kuo-pin (Cao Guobin), and was conducted via the Chinese legation in Lisbon.⁷³ Suggesting further global connections, Madame Tsao was likely the wife of the Chinese consul in Seattle and she eventually returned to China via the United States.⁷⁴ These minor personal links, present in a disrupted travel episode, are echoes of larger histories of US–China migrations, themselves experiencing a moment in transformation during the Second World War.⁷⁵

⁶⁸E.g. Minister-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 April 1941, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁶⁹The names of these ships were themselves a way of constructing imperial culture and memory: the *Jean Laborde* was named after a nineteenth-century French businessman and official in Madagascar.

⁷⁰The irony of processes of European imperial expansion unintentionally fostering new opportunities for movement of a range of non-European actors (including anti-colonial activists) has been noted by some scholars. For example: Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2020); Gavin Murray-Miller, 'Empire and Trans-Imperial Subjects in the Nineteenth-Century Muslim Mediterranean', *Historical Journal* 63, no. 4 (2020): 958–79; Catherine S. Chan, 'From Macanese Opium Traders to British Aristocrats: The Trans-Imperial Migration of the Pereiras', *Journal of Migration History* 6, no. 2 (2020): 236–61.

⁷¹On the early history of the company, see Marie-Françoise Berneron-Couvencs, *Les Messageries maritimes: L'essor d'une grande compagnie de navigation française, 1851–1894* (Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007). On its presence in Hong Kong before 1941, see François Drémeaux, *La France et les français à Hong Kong (1918–1941)* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2022), 121–126; François Drémeaux, *Les Messageries maritimes à Hong Kong (1918–1941)* (Éditions Gope, 2014).

⁷²Aide-memoire from the Chinese Embassy in Paris to the Vichy Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 October 1940, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁷³E.g. Madame Tsao Kuo-Pin, Chinese Legation in Lisbon, to Vichy Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 May 1941, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁷⁴Chinese Ministry of Information, *China Handbook 1937–1945* (New York, 1947), 588; François Gentil, French Minister to Portugal to Vichy Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 November 1941, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁷⁵See, for example, K. Scott Wong, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Harvard University Press, 2005); Charlotte Brooks, *American Exodus: Second-Generation Chinese Americans in China, 1901–1949* (University of California Press, 2019).

The stranded passengers case also evidences the importance of educational networks and multilingualism. These major themes are not exclusively a story of colonial port cities but, as the following vignette will also illustrate, they do figure in surprising ways in the background of many of their global histories. Seven of the passengers that returned on the *Jean Laborde* to Marseille corresponded with French authorities from the Institut Franco-Chinois in Lyon. Some of the names in the existing files match those of alumni of the Institute, which was founded in 1921 and operated until 1950.⁷⁶ These include both men and women. It was precisely a woman, Tsi Lun, who wrote on behalf of the group to French authorities to negotiate their departure from France on terms acceptable to them.⁷⁷ Her actions as representative of the cohort of students bring to light the visible role played by multilingual Chinese women during the war, challenging the historiographical neglect of women in studies of Chinese in Europe.⁷⁸ Their correspondence with French authorities is a concrete record of what theorists of waiting have described as ‘waiting as an ordered activity’,⁷⁹ archival traces of ‘port pauses’ (echoing Yvonne Liao’s observations above). They are also suggestive of how peripheral subjects used languages of imperial power for their own ends, something already shown in Olivia Durand’s vignette on theatre in Odessa.

Arguably the best depictions of waiting in wartime global journeys are found in audiovisual fiction. There, the minor and the mundane are foregrounded for dramatic effect, being superimposed over a background of major structural dynamics. Visualizing that fleeting temporarily is evident in films such as the aforementioned *Casablanca* or more recent works such as the series *Transatlantic* (2023, set mostly in Marseille). These provide insight into the dangers and opportunities of temporary stays in neutral territories during the war. This vignette’s minor episode, however, demonstrates how those experiences were much more diverse and had a wider range of global connections than is *visible* in those Eurocentric works. The Chinese passengers forced to sojourn in the actual *Casablanca* in 1940 and the ‘East Asian *Casablanças*’ of Guangzhouwan, Hong Kong, and Macau provide glimpses of circulations written out of major histories.

West African port cities on the major–minor continuum of the Atlantic world

Julia T. S. Binter

The poles of the major–minor continuum seem particularly pronounced when looking at the transatlantic trade in enslaved people. The greed and cruelty of European enslavers stand in stark contrast to the survival and resistance of those people who were enslaved and forced to work on plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean. Looking at the coast of West Africa, the view becomes murkier.⁸⁰ In 2020, the Restitution Study Group (RSG), an NGO in New York working to ‘secure reparations and restitution from corporations complicit in the antebellum enslavement of Africans’,⁸¹ sued the Smithsonian Institution over their decision to return the so-called Benin

⁷⁶For example, Lo Ta Kang (Luo Dagang). On the activities and significance of the Institute see, for example, the special issue ‘L’Institut franco-chinois de Lyon (1921–1946), une école de la modernité: arts, littérature, science’, *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* 跨文本 跨文化 9 (2014), accessed 27 June 2023, <https://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/505>.

⁷⁷Tsi Lun to Vichy Minister of the Colonies, 24 April 1941, and to Vichy Minister of Foreign Affairs, 27 April and 30 May 1941, MAE, 3GMII/212.

⁷⁸This has recently attracted pioneering research. See, in particular, Coraline Jortay, ‘Feminist Entanglements in Sino-French Relations: Writing Women and Diplomatic Circles in Interwar France’, paper presented at the British Association for Chinese Studies Conference, University of Leicester, September 2025.

⁷⁹Ruth Ayaß, ‘Doing Waiting: An Ethnomethodological Analysis’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 49, no. 4 (2020): 419–55, 421.

⁸⁰For the varied roles of West Africans in the transatlantic slave trade see, for example, David Northrup, ‘West Africans and the Atlantic, 1550–1800’, in *Black Experience and the Empire*, ed. Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins (Oxford University Press, 2004); Paul E. Lovejoy and Toyin Falola, *Slavery, Pawnship and Colonialism in Africa* (Africa World Press, 2003).

⁸¹‘About Restitution Study Group’, Wordpress, 2020, accessed 6 October 2023, <https://rsgincorp.org/contact-us/>.

Bronzes from their collection to Nigeria. The artworks stemmed from the royal palace of Benin and had been looted during a colonial war that British troops waged against the kingdom in 1897. Later, the artworks were sold on the international market, dismembering the historically, culturally, and spiritually vital heritage of the kingdom.⁸² Following heated debates in Europe about the need to return cultural goods from colonial contexts to their regions of origin,⁸³ the Smithsonian was one of the first institutions in the United States to take action and return their share of the royal arts of Benin. The RSG, however, did not see justice done on the grounds of postcolonial truth and reconciliation. On the contrary, as a descendant of enslaved people from what is Nigeria today, Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, the NGO's founder, condemned the Kingdom of Benin's involvement in the enslavement trade, stating that the kingdom had been instrumental in raiding neighbouring people, enslaving them and selling them to European merchants in exchange for *manillas*, the very same metal currency that was used to create the Benin Bronzes. The restitution of the Benin Bronzes 'to the descendants of those who were essential in the trafficking of Plaintiff Farmer-Paellmann's and the Class's ancestors would cause yet another moral and economic injury'.⁸⁴

So, where to place, on the major–minor continuum, the political–economic elites of the Kingdom of Benin and other African empires in the interior of the continent and the city-states at the coast of West Africa, who participated in the trade in enslaved people from the late fifteenth to the early nineteenth century, only to be colonized by European forces at the end of the century? Looking at their histories in the *longue durée*, their position within the Atlantic world shifts from one of perpetrators to victims, from mighty monarchs to anti-colonial resistance fighters.

The role of West African port cities in the transatlantic trade in enslaved people from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, in the subsequent rise of the palm oil trade, and, since the 1950s, in the extraction of crude oil, has often been examined from political–economic perspectives.⁸⁵ Yet these port cities were crucial sites where local elites and European merchants negotiated and contested political, economic, and cultural relations, making them key arenas in the transformation from African sovereignty to European colonization. Written sources, such as eighteenth-century slave traders' memoirs and, from 1841 onward, the records of Britain's Foreign Office, when read critically against the grain, offer valuable insights into how these negotiations unfolded on site. At the same time, material culture—such as the Benin Bronzes—offers new perspectives on the complex negotiations and, ultimately, the violence that transformed trade stations and African coastal city-states into colonial port cities.

This vignette examines port cities in the Bight of Benin—today's Niger Delta—through the lens of material culture, in order to gain new insights into how West African elites shifted along the major–minor continuum. In this respect, it resonates with Helena Lopes's analysis of Chinese students stranded in Morocco during the Second World War, who likewise occupied a double position as both refugees abroad and members of the elite at home in China. Whereas the minor

⁸²Barbara Plankensteiner, *Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria* (Snoeck Publishers, 2007); Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (Pluto, 2020).

⁸³Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Restituer le patrimoine africain* (Philippe Rey-Seuil, 2018). Bénédicte Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat*, trans. Susanne Meyer-Abich (Princeton University Press, 2022); German Museums Association, *Guidelines for German Museums. Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts* (German Museums Association, 2021), accessed 4 February 2024, <https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/guidelines-on-dealing-with-collections-from-colonial-contexts-2/>.

⁸⁴Adriaen M. Morse Jr., Cory Kirchert, and Lionel André, *Civil Case No. 1:22-cv-3048. United States District Court for the District of Columbia* (Washington, DC, 2022), accessed 4 February 2024, <https://rsgincorp.org/2022/10/08/smithsonian-hit-wi-th-lawsuit-on-benin-bronzes-to-be-transferred-to-nigeria/>, 8–9.

⁸⁵See, for example, Obaro Ikime, *Niger Delta Rivalry: Itsekiri–Urhobo Relations and the European Presence 1884–1936* (Humanities Press, 1969); Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); K. Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* (Clarendon Press, 1956); Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City*.

archive of overlooked records in France reveals new traces of such actors in the port city of Casablanca, for port cities in the Niger Delta it is material culture—often neglected in historical research—that opens new avenues of inquiry.⁸⁶

In 1786, Jean-Francois Landolphe (1747–1825), a French merchant in enslaved people, cemented his commercial partnership with Olu Erejuwa I (also known by his Christian name Sebastião Manuel Octobia), the king of Itsekiri, with the gift of a staff: ‘This cane . . . can serve to make your will known when you wish to ask something from me. You can be assured that I will give you anything at this sign.’⁸⁷ The mutually benefiting aim was to set up a trade station for the export of enslaved people in the kingdom’s territory. The Olu granted him a patch of land at the Atlantic coast, the outskirts of his kingdom in today’s Delta State, Nigeria. There, the Frenchman built a house in European style, while the Olu’s men surrounded it with eight houses built ‘according to Warri fashion’.⁸⁸ The French king’s flag was hoisted in front of the factory, with thirty-two cannons fortifying the settlement. This fortification was deemed necessary not only against potential local enemies but also against European rivals. Attacks did follow by, for example, British merchants who had formed an alliance with the ‘King of Aunis, a tributary of the King of Benin’, most probably the ruler of Isale-Eko (later known as Lagos Island), which were crushed by the Itsekiri Kingdom. For six years, the inhumane business prospered, accruing Landolphe ‘immense [profit]: more than 30,000 francs a day’.⁸⁹

In 1792, rivalling British merchants again attacked the French outpost and burned it to the ground. Landolphe was to go on fighting in the French–British wars in the Caribbean. When he returned to the Niger Delta, the kingdom’s canoes still bore the French flag as sign of their former commercial enterprise and maybe also hope for ‘future gains’.⁹⁰ The hope was not unfounded as the Olu had invested considerably in the French–Itsekiri relationship. He had helped Captain Landolphe when he was stranded with his ship, its belly full of enslaved people and ivory tusks, coming from the Kingdom of Benin in the interior to the Itsekiri Kingdom on the Atlantic coast. The gesture of goodwill eventually led to the joint commercial enterprise and the founding of a French–Itsekiri coastal settlement. Moreover, the Olu had sent his nephew, Prince Boudakan and two servants with Landolphe to Paris to ‘learn the language and customs of the French’.⁹¹ It had been at least the second time that an Itsekiri royal made an educational trip abroad, the first one being Prince Dom Domingos who had studied at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, from 1600 to 1610 with the aim of establishing trade ties between the Itsekiri Kingdom and the Portuguese empire.⁹² International education for elites can, thus, be traced from sixteenth-century Nigeria/Portugal and eighteenth-century Nigeria/France to 1940s China/France (as analysed by Helena Lopes above).⁹³

In 1807, the British empire outlawed the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and European as well as African merchants shifted their commercial enterprise to a new up-and-coming resource: palm oil.⁹⁴ Palm oil greased the machineries of industrializing Europe and, as the basic ingredient for soap, would also enable the hygiene craze of the late nineteenth century.⁹⁵ With Britain’s

⁸⁶Giorgio Riello, ‘The “Material Turn” in World and Global History’, *Journal of World History* 33, no. 2 (2022): 193–232.

⁸⁷Jean Francois Landolphe and Jaques Salbigoton Quesné, *Mémoires du capitaine Landolpe contenant l’histoire de ses voyages pendant trente-six ans, aux côtes d’Afrique et aux deux Amériques*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1823), 38.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 98.

⁹⁰Jane I. Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 99.

⁹¹Landolphe and Quesné, *Mémoires du capitaine Landolpe*, vol. 2, 6.

⁹²For details of religious contact and transatlantic trade in the Itsekiri Kingdom, see A. F. C. Ryder, ‘Missionary Activity in the Kingdom of Warri to the early Nineteenth Century’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 1 (1960): 1–26.

⁹³For additional examples of early educational and cultural exchange between the African continent and Europe, see David Northrup, *Africa’s Discovery of Europe, 1450–1850* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁹⁴A. J. H. Latham, ‘A Trading Alliance: Sir John Tobin and Duke Ephraim’, *History Today* 24, no. 12 (1974); Toby Green, ed., *Brokers of Change: Atlantic Commerce and Cultures in Precolonial Western Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹⁵Martin Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

shifting commercial interests also came a steadier presence at the West African coast. In 1841, a consul was stationed at Sao Tomé, an island just off the coast of the Niger Delta, to function as an arbiter between the European merchants and the still sovereign African rulers of the coastal city-states who acted as intermediaries in the palm oil trade. When Olu Akengbuwa of the Itsekiri Kingdom and his potential heirs died in swift succession, the consul asked the Itsekiri to produce another reliable political representative to negotiate trade ties with European merchants. The decision fell on the leader of the Diare family, who, over generations, had held the post of foreign minister. To acknowledge the political appointment, the consul gifted the new *gofine* (governor) a 'staff of office',⁹⁶ echoing the gift that Captain Landolphe had presented a century earlier.

Similar to Olivia Durand's vignette on Odessa's theatre scene, the study of theatre in Nigeria provides new insights into how this gradual shift in power relations between European imperial actors and West African elites has been interpreted throughout the centuries. In 2015, the theatre play *Olu Akengbuwa* captured the audience in Warri, the port city which the British founded after the defeat of the Itsekiri Kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century. The play was meant as a lesson in good leadership in times of crises, past and present.⁹⁷ It centred on Olu Akengbuwa I (on the throne 1808–48) who had led the Itsekiri Kingdom in times of the drastic economic and political change, from enslavement to palm oil trade. A key dramatic moment was the handing-over ceremony of the staff of office to the *gofine* on stage. The audience gasped when the staff changed hands. It marked a severe change in the political structure of the kingdom, a first step in shifting power relations that would end in colonial war and the loss of lives, wealth, and sovereignty. Like the Kingdom of Benin, the Kingdom of Itsekiri witnessed the tightening grip of the British empire and, after decades of diplomatic skirmishes, was eventually attacked and looted by British troops in 1894, scattering parts of their material heritage across museums in the West. However, the cerebral reaction to the performance on stage was also due to the fact that the elongated wooden staff with a silver top was not just a theatre prop. It was the original staff of office, a much-esteemed heirloom which had escaped colonial ransacking and had been cared for by the Diare family in Warri, and which brought to bear the past in the present.

Much like the Benin Bronzes, the staffs of office may not only serve as mnemonic devices for competing narratives and painful or proud connections with the transatlantic past. Understanding them as materialized relations,⁹⁸ and tracing them through the shifting political economies of the transatlantic trade helps us to question preconceived notions of colonial port cities, their relationship with the continental interior, and their position within the Atlantic World.⁹⁹ It highlights the African agency involved in shaping port cities and asks us to reconsider clear-cut historical narratives of perpetrators and victims. Moreover, it helps us ponder the temporality of colonial port cities. When does a port city become colonial? Were the Portuguese–Itsekiri and French–Itsekiri trade stations already colonial ports? And when does a port city cease to be colonial? Since the 1950s, the Niger Delta has become a hub for the extraction of crude oil, perpetuating relationships of dependency and power along fault lines of the Global North and the Global South,

⁹⁶Obaro Ikime, *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta: The Rise & Fall of Nana Olomu, Last Governor of the Benin River* (Heinemann Educational, 1968); Julia T. S. Binter, 'Becoming Imperial: The Politisation of the Gift in Atlantic Africa', in *Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond*, ed. Philipp Schorch, Martin Saxer, and Marlen Elders (UCL Press, 2020); and Ana Lucia Araujo, *The Gift: How Objects of Prestige Shaped the Atlantic Slave Trade and Colonialism* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁹⁷The discussion of the staging of the theatre play is based on my ethnographic field work in the Niger Delta and its diaspora in the UK, 2013–16.

⁹⁸Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Harvard University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips, eds., *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Routledge, 2006).

⁹⁹Robin Law and Kristin Mann, 'West Africa in the Atlantic Community: The Case of the Slave Coast', *William and Mary Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1999): 307–34.

but also of the wealthy and internationally educated and the poor within Nigeria.¹⁰⁰ Interrogating the many ‘lives of things’ opens up ways of rethinking agency and temporality in colonial port cities along the major–minor continuum.¹⁰¹

An undisciplinable formulation

Our materials of neglect took us through nineteenth-century Odessa, late-colonial Hong Kong in 1987, Casablanca(s) during the Second World War, and a trans-historical Niger Delta across three centuries. Together, these vignettes reflect our converging disciplinary orientations toward minor episodes and overlooked actors within colonial ports, advancing, variously yet in tandem, a major–minor continuum of people, things, and practices. Telling stories along this sliding scale has had the effect of amplifying our encounters and disruptions of the so-called ‘elite’ as a locus of power. Indeed, we choose not to submit to class structures and hierarchies, as illustrated instead by our heightened engagements with theatre and language, genre and moment, mobility and isolation, and shifting political economies and an heirloom.

Our interweaving stories of a global minor, and our prongs of performance, temporality, and materiality, all signal back to a transdisciplinary mode of port cities storytelling, with its unruly tales and trajectories. Durand began by focusing on the space of an emblematic building of Odessa’s urban landscape, its nineteenth-century city theatre. A symbol of the port city’s multicultural past, it was also a space in which the Odessa myth can be examined critically through its connections with colonial origins and empire-making, existing in tension between cosmopolitan display and cultural containment. Pushing against binary oppositions between cosmopolitan and Russian culture in the history of the port city, this vignette examined how the discussion of language and performance on the stage of Odessa’s city theatre interwove the palimpsest of the colonial port’s major and minor histories.

Liao asked what kind of a story emerges when a musical genre speaks to a supra-port moment rather than a port city as such, emphasizing rearticulations rather than routes: hence, ‘oratorio’s continuum’. This vignette explored the English oratorio—a genre shaped by empire yet rearticulated in late-colonial Hong Kong through the 1987 premiere of Elgar’s *The Kingdom*. By examining materials of material neglect, as in the premiere’s newspaper preview and review in the *Hongkong Standard* and their differing lines of view, Liao highlighted shifting internal meanings of the English oratorio and opened new interpretive possibilities for port cities storytelling.

Lopes investigated forgotten traces of a global Second World War through a small folder of archival documents on a group of Chinese citizens, many of whom were women students with ties to high-ranking families in China, who sought to leave occupied France, but were left stranded in different ports of West Africa. These subjects took centre stage, arguing their case in several languages before the French colonial authorities. From a minor source base transpired major issues of education mobility, women’s position, neutrality, and maritime shipping across ‘neutral’ colonial ports, and the temporality of wartime waiting.

Speaking from a similar vantage of West Africa, but adopting a *longue durée* approach, Binter traced material culture like the so-called Benin Bronzes through the shifting political economies of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, colonization, and extractivism in the twentieth century to elucidate the changing agency and power relations of West African merchant elites within the Atlantic world. Binter, in this respect, threw light on ‘major’ West African actors of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people from the sixteenth to early nineteenth century, who became victims of territorial colonization during the scramble for Africa. This vignette queried the

¹⁰⁰See, for example, Ed Kashi and Michael Watts, eds., *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta* (London, 2010); Omolade Adunbi, *Oil Wealth and Insurgency in Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2015).

¹⁰¹Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

definition of colonial port cities, in tandem with the complex interplay between major global trends and minor actors at the periphery of empire.

Power and its twists and turns thus pave the way for scattered fragments of ‘colonial ports and global history’, an undisciplinable formulation in its major–minor continuum—and continua—of people, things, and practices. Power has also dictated why some sources have been privileged in global histories while others remain neglected. If only a microcosm among many of uneven global dynamics, our vignettes function simultaneously as complementary and context-specific commentaries, arrayed along a sliding scale. The nature of our vignettes suggests that transdisciplinary writing is necessarily unsmooth and ungainly, but that this collaboration transcends our disciplinary orientations in nuancing and minorning ‘the global’ as a collective rather than a stand-alone effort. Our work of writing, producing stories in a global minor, goes towards enriching an undisciplinable formulation, variously rethinking along and against the port city’s fibrous grain.

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