

# Introduction

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## “15000 Miles from Our Native Home”

SMITH WATTS LEEK watched with trepidation from the deck of the *Delta* on April 4, 1837.<sup>1</sup> His ship was approaching southwestern Madagascar, a place very distant from Leek’s “Sweet America.”<sup>2</sup> Leek and his fellow sailors were “15000 miles from [their] native home,” as he would note in his journal a few weeks later.<sup>3</sup> Having been at sea for nine months, the men eagerly anticipated a stop in Saint Augustin Bay. Despite their excitement, the men were also whispering fears of the unknown. Rumors of murder, barbarians, and “hideous wild animals” circulated through the crew of twenty-six. A few seamen stood with guns at the ready. As Leek reasoned, they believed there had “been crews murdered here.”<sup>4</sup>

What likely came into view next was an array of ship masts. Eighteen other whale ships lay at anchor, and three other vessels were entering the bay behind the *Delta*. Upward of five hundred foreign men were wandering the beaches, feasting on fruit or resting on ships. Wonders for Leek did not end there. As soon as the *Delta* was anchored, islanders came on board with milk, shells, melons, and chickens. Although Leek failed to mention the feast that surely commenced, this food would have been a welcome respite from hardtack

and salted meat. The next day, fifty or sixty vendors were again on board, along with a prince and his royal family.

Leek expressed feelings of astonishment in his journal: “All God’s creation this beats all I ever seen.”<sup>5</sup> He was evidently overwhelmed. Was it the juxtaposition of this lovely landscape with fearful stories he had heard? Was he not expecting “uncivilized people” to have such a finely honed marketing sense? Was he merely reacting to new experiences? Regardless of the reason, Leek wrote, “I soon wished myself out of this place and in my native land.”<sup>6</sup>

Leek spent the next month adjusting to new routines in the bay. As the ship’s carpenter, he went to work cutting wood but also had ample time to relax. Socializing with other whaling crews gave him opportunities to dance and sing (as well as consume alcohol). During these evenings, Leek was surprised that “everything went on with as much harmony as if they were at home.” The implication was that life on board was typically far less pleasant. This stop offered a break from uncertainty for the whalers and a chance to participate in the wider maritime community.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his fears, Leek learned that the islanders were “friendly if [he] used them well.”<sup>8</sup> Leek took walks, went bird shooting, and wandered near the mountains. Other Americans also explored the exotic features of Madagascar. The captain and first mate of the *Delta* each purchased from the islanders a lemur, which may have provided the crew with days or weeks of amusement, depending on how long the poor creatures survived. Leek himself examined “a great many curious things,” including the islanders’ huts and grass mattresses, as well as their sophisticated ironworks.<sup>9</sup> Within only a few weeks of his arrival, Leek expressed little surprise that disgruntled sailors would choose to run away as they “trusted themselves to the mercy of the waves or the cruel savages of the Island, rather than the cruel usages of their officers, for they could not reach any civilized nation within two thousand miles.”<sup>10</sup>

Leek’s words reiterate that, for all its positive qualities, Madagascar was not “civilized” according to his criteria. His encounters with “a very large allegator” and hunting “wild animals in the mountains” verified tales he had heard about the island.<sup>11</sup> The Malagasy had turned “very savage” following a conflict with a sailor.<sup>12</sup> The Americans began to carry arms while ashore. There are also

hints that Leek was determined to view the people of Saint Augustin Bay negatively, influenced by understandings he had brought with him for making sense of illegible cultures. For instance, he described one unfortunate sailor as being “scalped” by the islanders.<sup>13</sup> Yet this mention of scalping suggests American Indian, not Malagasy, violence. Leek also cast aspersions on women who engaged in sexual activity on board the ships. When his crew mates “had transactions of which decency” made it impossible for him “to mention at all,” Leek said little else but to imply that he declined to participate.<sup>14</sup>

While Leek’s worries upon entering the dangerous world of Saint Augustin Bay appeared confirmed, he also demonstrated that he believed the risks posed by people and animals were relatively minor for a well-armed American man. As the *Delta* continued its voyage and made stops at other Indian Ocean islands, he wrote less about his experiences. Even Port Louis on Mauritius, with its “civilized” appearance and multitude of diverse “coullors” and “linggo,” elicited few comments other than references to his state of prolonged drunkenness while ashore.<sup>15</sup> Madagascar, as Leek’s first foray into what he perceived to be an “uncivilized” world, had provoked detailed commentary and, one can imagine, colorful yarns with which to regale friends and family following his “joyful” return to New York the following year.<sup>16</sup>

#### YANKEES IN THE WORLD

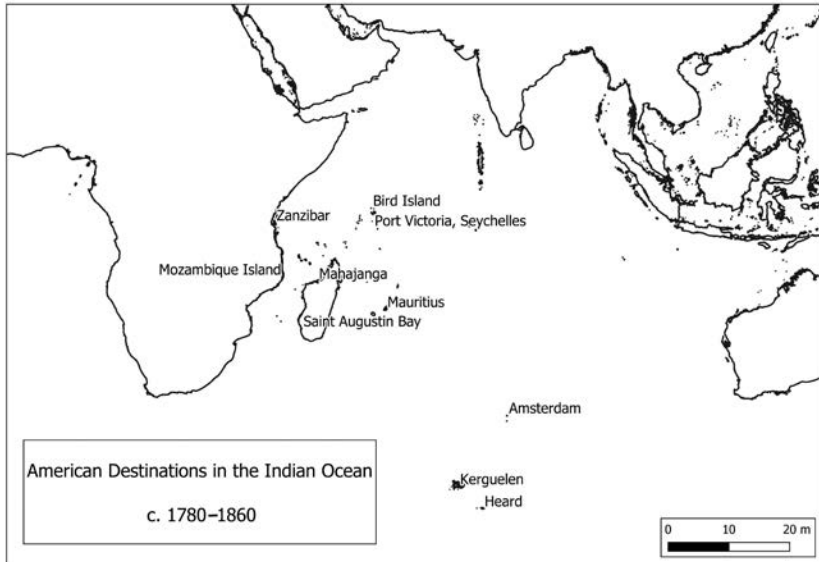
After Leek returned to the United States, his voice blended with those of other sailors who had traveled to Canton, Batavia, and Hawai‘i. These men outlined encounters with foreign people and places for the American public. Mariners’ descriptions joined with those within the nineteenth-century United States that insisted on the international importance of the expanding nation. Since the late eighteenth century, New England merchants had been primed to take advantage of new economic openings in Asia and Africa. These openings, created by turmoil in Europe and a burgeoning demand for raw materials, encouraged Americans to travel far from their homes. Their forays abroad reshaped the young nation’s understanding of the world, as well as the roles Americans should assume in it.<sup>17</sup>

The history of American involvement in the Indian Ocean during the nineteenth century remains largely unwritten. Instead, Asian ports have loomed large in recent publications.<sup>18</sup> This fixation reflects both the frequency with which Americans visited Asia as well as the monetary value of commodities purchased in India and China. These parts of the world were important in encouraging US global commerce but also influenced an array of developments within the United States.<sup>19</sup> Nineteenth-century Americans had profound encounters with peoples in places such as India that would challenge their preexisting views of the world but could also confirm deep-seated racial and religious biases.<sup>20</sup>

As US global commerce with Asia grew, Americans became frequent visitors to Pacific islands and the western shores of the Americas. Supplies from these locations supported oceanic commerce starting in the late eighteenth century and, again, US travels played a role in shaping American views of other societies and cultures.<sup>21</sup> The islands of the South Pacific were becoming well known throughout the United States while ideas about civilizational hierarchies were increasing in popularity. The islands came to be viewed as centers for sexual pleasure and were associated with illicit behavior.<sup>22</sup> Early visits to the Pacific contributed to a later phase of empire building for the United States. Perceptions of difference, as well as profit, were key in these developments.

But not all Americans venturing abroad sailed to Tahiti or Canton. Between 1786 and 1860, roughly 1,500 US ships visited ports in East Africa and offshore islands.<sup>23</sup> This number included an almost equal number of merchant and whaling vessels.<sup>24</sup> For roughly half a century, US vessels were routinely departing for the western Indian Ocean. While American merchants did visit a variety of Indian Ocean ports in Asia, including Bombay, Calcutta, and Batavia, the focus here is on ports and islands located in the southwestern Indian Ocean and East Africa.

US merchants first sailed to the island of Île de France (Mauritius) in the late eighteenth century when the island's ports served as transit hubs for Asian wares. Americans benefited from the publications of numerous European explorers, including James Cook, Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, and Marc-Joseph Marion Dufresne. Their travels served to redirect Americans to isolated locations in the



southern Indian Ocean, including Amsterdam Island and the Kerguelen Islands, where their nearly inexhaustible search for resources would have environmental ramifications. Late eighteenth-century voyaging also introduced US merchants to new markets, namely those on Zanzibar off East Africa and Mahajanga in northwestern Madagascar. These two locations would become centers of commerce for New England merchants by the mid-nineteenth century. The commodities available for purchase there were not high-value porcelains or teas. New Englanders instead bought lower-value gathered or extracted items with American-produced cotton cloth. As these exchanges became less profitable, Americans worked more closely with those engaged in slave trafficking. By midcentury, American voyaging in the Indian Ocean had contributed to unconstrained hunting and illegal slaving, with disastrous social and ecological impacts.

#### MANIFEST DESTINY AND ITS LIMITS

Desirable goods, accessible markets, and easily obtainable provisions drew American ships repeatedly to the southwestern Indian Ocean throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet US

officials made little effort to assert political pressure in Zanzibar or Mahajanga, despite an American monopoly on commerce from both places. The US State Department refused to send naval vessels to the region even when consuls requested military support. Despite dozens of US whalers and sealers visiting the Kerguelen Islands annually, there was no American attempt to claim the island chain. The US missionary presence in the southwestern Indian Ocean remained minimal.<sup>25</sup> There were no settled American communities in the western portion of the ocean, aside from a handful of consular officials affiliated with New England merchant groups. US merchants often represented themselves as anti-imperialist “Yankees” as a strategy to maintain market access in an era of political conflict.<sup>26</sup> These Americans asserted they offered a profit-minded alternative to European colonial actors.<sup>27</sup> Such rhetoric would not encourage the United States to officially expand its presence.

In short, US commercial contacts in the ocean never transformed into broader political or territorial claims.<sup>28</sup> The reasons for this American “failure” are worthy of attention as they cast doubt on teleological narratives of imperial expansion. American experiences in the Indian Ocean reveal that US expansion prior to 1898 was marked as much by caution and restriction as it was an impulse toward overseas empire.<sup>29</sup> While some writings on US history have presented the American westward expansion overland and the invasive activities of Americans overseas as sequential developments, many of these moves were in fact contemporaneous, and this history was far messier than often described. In the same year (1844) that John O’Sullivan was writing of “Manifest Destiny,” roughly forty American merchant and whaling ships were sailing through the western Indian Ocean searching for cheap or free commodities. Eight years later, Commodore Matthew Perry entered Tokyo Bay in order to “open” US commerce with Japan.<sup>30</sup> That same year, merchants from New England also sought to lower trade barriers in East Africa and Madagascar, although with far less success. Attempts at gunboat diplomacy in the Indian Ocean were complete failures. Americans lacked the guns (and governmental support) necessary to end commercial restrictions. Even those who desired to extend US hegemony in the Indian Ocean were ultimately unable to do so.

Before examining the challenges that Americans faced in the Indian Ocean, it should be noted that the anti-imperialist Yankees circling the western Indian Ocean were not wholly distinct from their counterparts marching across the continent or sailing into the Pacific. An ambivalence toward empire was shared by many within the United States. Americans often denounced imperial practices deployed by the British, even if they selectively borrowed their methods.<sup>31</sup> The “empire of liberty” espoused by Thomas Jefferson did not lend itself easily to the extension of US domination around the world any more than it provided a clear pathway forward for those claiming land on the American continent.<sup>32</sup> For most Americans venturing beyond the land of their birth, governmental support was absent; for US consular officials, the lack of military might was even more palpable.

In spite of this ambivalence, attitudes toward non-Western peoples and their lands were shared by those sailing abroad and at home.<sup>33</sup> US departures for Madagascar and other western Indian Ocean islands increased dramatically during the 1830s and 1840s. These were decades when wagons moving across the “empty” American plains were equated with ships sailing over rippling seas.<sup>34</sup> Whalers on Nantucket looked to the seas as unclaimed pastures, ripe for cultivation.<sup>35</sup> From these “fields,” harvested whales’ blubber would provide wealth for future generations. One nineteenth-century whaleman composed a poem about the fertile prairies of Missouri while sailing in the Mozambique Channel. In it, he explicitly compared ocean waves to fields “of grass and of flowers.”<sup>36</sup> Views at sea led him to reflect upon his homeland: “Dear, E’en in the Mozambique I still feel it near.” Beliefs about terra nullius motivated Anglo-Americans’ expansionary schemes in the nineteenth-century Pacific and western Americas.<sup>37</sup> Similar beliefs animated the US movement into seemingly unclaimed aqueous and insular spaces, including those in the Indian Ocean.

Words penned by US travelers served to transform previously unknown lands into palatable places to visit. Nineteenth-century mapping was essential to the extension of US control over land, as well as across the Pacific.<sup>38</sup> Connections between mapping and the extension of imperial control were not limited to Americans. During this period, the British also attempted to transform “the

vast emptiness of the oceans into an ordered and bounded grid.”<sup>39</sup> Mapping was not merely about locating places but also identifying people and environments. Americans were eager to acquire information about local ecosystems, human communities, and the availability of valuable flora and fauna. Repeated visits made the foreign knowable and, in turn, seemingly open to control. As anthropologist Greg Dening has observed for Pacific Islanders: “Being placed on somebody else’s map made them manageable in unreal ways, made them objects of abstract thinking, pieces in someone’s game of power or status or wealth, parts of strategies to civilize or Christianize or dominate the world, ports of call for voyagers who never voyaged.”<sup>40</sup>

By the first decades of the nineteenth century, Americans sought to project modes of understanding onto human communities, as well as the lands they occupied.<sup>41</sup> Merchants and whalers denigrated peoples they encountered abroad. Attacks on coastal peoples followed familiar lines. Travelers made references to savages, Indians, negroes, and squaws inhabiting lands outside of the Americas, including Madagascar, Mozambique, and Indonesia.<sup>42</sup> Coastal women involved in facilitating trade in these places came under particular scrutiny from US sailors. Scholars have presented various arguments about how sexual encounters shaped Americans’ views of the world.<sup>43</sup> In the case of Madagascar, the salacious details found in US logbooks have received more attention than the women peddling wares on the shoreline and on vessels. Little has been said about the economic and cultural roles played by women in supporting (or countering) American efforts abroad. American sailors’ relationships with island women were a crucial component of cross-cultural commerce in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as they were in coastal Atlantic Africa.<sup>44</sup> Yet American descriptions of these women, whether in the Americas, the Pacific Ocean, or the Indian Ocean, focused on the “exotic and the erotic,” rather than the mundane.<sup>45</sup>

While attitudes toward ownership and control were similar for Americans whether they were in Kansas, Hawai‘i, or Madagascar, outcomes for Americans in these locations were dramatically different. These geographic (gaining knowledge of foreign landscapes) and social (locating populations within a racial hierarchy) expressions of American dominance did not transform into the formal imposition



of control in the Indian Ocean. Americans gradually withdrew from the ocean after the middle of the century, as the British and French were claiming more imperial possessions. Americans would later return to the ocean in their hunt for guano and naval bases; rather than visiting earlier destinations, they instead frequented isolated islands.<sup>46</sup>

By contrast, through similar levels of involvement in Hawai'i during the mid-nineteenth century, Americans managed to transform their presence into a more permanent one by the close of the century.<sup>47</sup> It is worth remembering, however, that during earlier years the extension of US empire into Hawai'i was "hardly a foregone conclusion," according to David Igler.<sup>48</sup> Instead the circumstances that Americans encountered in the Pacific, unlike in the Indian Ocean, provided more openings for the extension of these formalized relationships. The exceptional case of the Indian Ocean thus offers insight into circumstances when American interests never progressed to imperial control by the late nineteenth century. How did the impulses that drove Americans across the Pacific and to Asian lands create such distinct results in the southwestern Indian Ocean?

#### OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Americans did not construct beliefs about global opportunities in a vacuum, a point that is missing from many histories focused on Americans in the world. The dynamics that Americans encountered in the Indian Ocean would shape their activities and strategies as much as the ideas they had brought from the Atlantic. There were several distinct periods of US engagement in the Indian Ocean. Early Americans moved from dealing primarily with Western settlers in the ocean starting in the 1790s to developing symbiotic (if unstable) partnerships with non-Western merchants by the 1820s, but then making desperate attempts to secure profits during the 1840s as geopolitical developments precluded further American commercial expansion in the ocean. Over time, competition from European and non-European imperial systems, all of which possessed robust cultures of trade, would minimize the numbers of American visitors, as well as their influence, in the southwestern Indian Ocean.<sup>49</sup> It would

not be until the middle of the century that the unintentional impact of US actions would be truly felt.

Before the nineteenth century, political boundaries in the western Indian Ocean were fluid and movement was relatively unfettered. States in Madagascar had expanded to rule over coastal and hinterland areas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>50</sup> But their rulers exercised little direct control over overseas commerce. In East Africa, outside of the minor holdings the Portuguese sought to dominate, most states declined to dictate rules for oceanic trade. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, leaders began to intervene actively in coastal exchanges, particularly as more Asian, African, Middle Eastern, American, and European merchants were visiting ports in the region.<sup>51</sup> Rulers of the Merina state in highland Madagascar initiated relationships with the outside world that enabled them to closely direct export trade.<sup>52</sup> The promise of profits encouraged the relocation of the Omani sultanate to the East African coast. After Sa'id bin Sultan moved his capital to Zanzibar in 1840, production and long-distance exchanges expanded dramatically as the island became a transit hub for commodities shuttled to and from the African continent.<sup>53</sup> American merchants were fortunate to be visiting just as such transformations were unfolding. Newcomers themselves, Americans posed little threat to newly established leaders.

US writings offer insight into these regional commercial developments. Scholarship on the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean has focused on the growing power of Britain and British India, with important recent correctives examining Muslim and Indian transregional networks.<sup>54</sup> Africans and Malagasy have often been viewed as only minor players.<sup>55</sup> Americans, by contrast, relied heavily on partnerships with those residing in East Africa and Madagascar and provide us with a different perspective on power dynamics in the ocean. Just as Americans were forced to deal with foreign systems of exchange in Canton, so too did they navigate economic systems that connected Western and non-Western populations in the Indian Ocean.<sup>56</sup> Americans had to learn about African understandings of value, as well as adopt rituals to establish trust with commercial partners; many of these rituals were carefully documented in ship logbooks and journals. US merchants also relied on non-Western

brokers for the credit necessary to enter into island markets. Indian Ocean port cities became a sort of “Middle Ground,” to borrow Richard White’s terminology, in which material exchanges were enabled by cultural accommodation on both sides.<sup>57</sup> The resolution of conflicts, particularly those involving sex and violence, required Americans to recognize their relative vulnerability vis-à-vis leaders and communities of the Indian Ocean.

American writings emphasized the importance of transregional connections, established by non-Western inhabitants, within the southwestern Indian Ocean.<sup>58</sup> Linkages between populations in Mahajanga, Mozambique Island, Ndzuwani, and Zanzibar influenced US itineraries. By accessing regional networks, an American captain could visit a variety of locations in the western Indian Ocean during a single voyage, as he sought to fill his cargo hold with an assortment of lower-value goods. None of these ports individually could rival Canton, but taken together they provided incentives for merchants to continue visiting into the mid-nineteenth century. This method of trade, however, had its drawbacks. Reliance on circuitous trading routes served to diminish the bargaining power of American merchants and dissuaded Americans, whether merchant or governmental officials, from investing heavily in any single location. This placed Americans at a distinct disadvantage in the Indian Ocean, where long-running political and economic practices tended to be stacked against them and in favor of Western powers who already controlled ports in the region that they could use for the coordination of trade.

Furthermore, the meandering itineraries taken by American vessels served to spread the environmental impact of their activities throughout the ocean. In and around the islands of Madagascar, the Seychelles, and Saint Paul, Americans noted environmental changes but also turned a blind eye to their role in it. In these settings, it does not appear that ecological transformations were accompanied by any conservation ideology such as that developed in nineteenth-century European colonial settings.<sup>59</sup> Indian Ocean islands were not envisioned as worthy of protection by US visitors, who never expressed a desire to safeguard long-term profits and instead viewed the globe as full of abundant resources available for the taking.<sup>60</sup>

This book investigates how and why Americans were drawn to the southwestern Indian Ocean in the years before the United States became a formal empire. It explores what Americans, whether mariners or landlocked, learned of the ocean, its inhabitants, and its resources, as well as the impact of their actions. The investigation is based on hundreds of sources, including newspaper articles, ship logs, sailor journals, and published narratives that offer insight into little-studied people and places of the Indian Ocean.<sup>61</sup> Americans, including consuls, captains, and sailors, left records that revealed shared beliefs that transcended class, occupational, and even racial boundaries.<sup>62</sup> Rather than presenting American whaling and merchant activities as separate, this book instead argues that New Englanders, regardless of the type of ship they arrived on, had common perspectives on foreign ports in the Indian Ocean.<sup>63</sup> Unlike in many parts of the world, whalers and merchants in the ocean sailed on intersecting itineraries and often encountered one another at Zanzibar, Mauritius, and Madagascar.<sup>64</sup>

It would be a mistake to focus solely on published accounts to tell the history of Americans in the southwestern Indian Ocean, although these sources can be helpful.<sup>65</sup> For most portions of the ocean, knowledge was acquired by word of mouth, either from counterparts in New England ports or while abroad. Saint Augustin Bay, for instance, rarely appeared in print, but Hawai'i and Canton were often described in detail for American audiences. Sailors such as Leek arrived at Saint Augustin Bay with a set of expectations for their stay, expectations forged following conversations with their peers. Whalers and merchants relied on one another for information about the waters around Madagascar, the Seychelles, or Kerguelen. Captains were known to be such a font of information on lesser-known parts of the world that prior to his voyage to Japan, Commodore Perry reportedly visited New Bedford to "obtain information from . . . whaling Captains in relation to the coast of Japan, and securing their co-operation in the enterprise."<sup>66</sup> The rapid circulation of geographical information on board and in New England is clear when you read through logbooks and journals, in which places never mentioned in published material were described at length and in a similar fashion.<sup>67</sup>

The grouping together of American reports is not to diminish the differences that existed between captains, officers, and common sailors, nor is it meant to imply that whaling and merchant ships sailed on identical itineraries.<sup>68</sup> Rather the point is that certain themes emerge when you bring these diverse writings together. For everyone, from prominent merchant captains to common sailors, the Indian Ocean appeared replete with exciting prospects and risks.<sup>69</sup> Logbooks and journals indicate that conflicts between captains and crew were common at sea. Ships' routes were influenced by these struggles. The constant need for fresh provisions encouraged Americans to visit new corners of the ocean, their ships stopping at uninhabited islands where sailors could not run away easily. Captains feared giving their crew unfettered access to the bars and brothels of the Indian Ocean, while sailors hoped to gain this freedom.

One of the primary distinctions between the writings of captains and officers, and those of sailors, was the degree of self-censorship exercised. These differences were less often produced by educational disparities, as some sailors were well educated, than by their separate goals and audiences.<sup>70</sup> Sailors (particularly those on whale ships) expressed more overtly racist views in journals and logbooks. They were also more upfront about their experiences with women. Commanding officers, by contrast, were focused on forging working relationships with coastal elites on whom they depended for resources and support. The writings of both groups, however, reveal that they shared many beliefs, including belief in White masculine power, at least judging by the frequency of comments about the lax morality of island women.<sup>71</sup>

Records left by the most reticent captains and officers still offer us insight into American encounters in the Indian Ocean. A line or two in a journal might reveal a captain's worries about the incidence of scurvy on board or hopes to find profit in a new port of call. Such comments can help to explain sudden shifts in itinerary. Once in port, log keepers sometimes neglected their daily observations, simply noting "trade commenced" or "water loaded." The ease with which such tasks were accomplished, however, reflected the acquisition of knowledge about where and how to acquire necessities. Other, more verbose, writers help us to fill in gaps about how these duties were accomplished and what Americans did once

in port. Their writings reveal that sailors and captains alike sought out pleasure during their travels in the ocean. On tropical islands controlled by European powers and home to lighter-skinned people, the Americans enjoyed relaxation time. Captains were better able to take advantage of social events on shore, but sailors also often had the ability to purposefully tour foreign landscapes while on leave. Such shared experiences heightened American understandings of the power of European empires in shaping the exotic islands of the Indian Ocean.

Examining American-written sources to study the history of Indian Ocean communities has a number of drawbacks, namely the privileging of American perspectives over those of the fishermen of Saint Augustin Bay, the dock workers of Port Louis, or the enslaved laborers of Zanzibar. Almost all of the sources used in this book were written by White American men. Despite the prevalence of non-Americans on board US whaling vessels, few of these sailors were tasked with keeping logbooks while at sea, and if they kept personal journals, their writings are not found in New England archives. Lascar sailors from the Middle East or India more commonly sailed on British or French vessels, rather than American ones.<sup>72</sup> More often, sailors were hired in the Canaries or Hawaiian Islands, with a handful of men picked up in the Comoros, Seychelles, or Zanzibar to work on short whaling hunts. These people left few permanent records, and in fact, many fled upon arrival in new Indian Ocean ports.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, this book relies on the words of US sailors who provide often superficial commentary of the peoples and places of the ocean, with details that reflected American perceptions and preoccupations. We should remember, as one journal keeper admitted, that “a sailor in a foreign port is apt to take the people inhabiting the town or city immediately contiguous as a criterion by which to judge of the whole body of the people inhabiting the country in which such town or city is situated.”<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, these stories, however incomplete, would be carried back to the United States, where Americans could read or learn of them. Such accounts of the exotic and dangerous would shape the trajectory of American expansion while also encouraging deleterious US activities within the ocean by midcentury.<sup>75</sup>

The first chapter uncovers how Americans gradually learned and shared knowledge about the southwestern Indian Ocean. It

opens with two accounts left by the earliest US whalers to travel within the Indian Ocean during the 1790s. Throughout 1792 and 1793, the *Asia* and the *Alliance* visited locations that would also be frequented by Americans in later years: Mauritius, Madagascar, Kerguelen, and East Africa. Rather than only examining the visits of US merchant ships to Mauritius, chapter 1 investigates how Americans learned about, mapped, and shared stories about the region's people and environment, encouraging more visits to the ocean in subsequent decades.

One of the first non-Western economic networks that Americans accessed was in northwestern Madagascar, as chapter 2 explains. By the 1820s, US merchants had begun to explore markets in Mahajanga. From their foothold in this port, Americans established region-wide commercial connections facilitated by African, Indian, and Arab individuals. This reliance did not lead to the dismissal of racist attitudes held by Americans but rather a desire to push them aside in favor of commercial opportunities. Americans developed trading practices in Mahajanga that would aid them when they later turned to Zanzibar. Despite briefly monopolizing Western commerce in these two locations, Americans remained outsiders to political disputes in the region and only a handful of Americans resided in the ports to facilitate trade.

Mahajanga and Zanzibar were not the only locations visited by Americans in the western Indian Ocean. Chapter 3 explores what attracted almost two hundred US whaling ships to Saint Augustin Bay during the 1830s. One after another, the vessels anchored offshore, and captains sent their men to the beaches of Madagascar in search of water and wood. US captains negotiated with a Malagasy prince for food while their men bartered for tubers and turtle shells from the men and women who approached their ships. Chapter 3 examines these informal cross-cultural exchanges alongside the continuation of American biases against islanders, particularly women.

Chapter 4 examines the rise of tourist practices that accompanied the influx of Americans into the region by midcentury and how these entangled with European imperial systems in the ocean. Historians have traditionally viewed US tourism as a development limited to the continental United States, but US mariners repeatedly took advantage of shore leave to tour the mountains, beaches, and

gardens of the western Indian Ocean, particularly those in Mauritius. In these travels, Americans sought to understand how European imperial control over the island had produced profit and increased economic opportunities.

By midcentury, as easily accessible locations were negatively impacted by Western hunting, US ships were forced to travel farther afield in search of commodities, fruit, and companionship. This need for cheap or free goods would have clear environmental impacts, as argued in chapter 5. Isolated and unclaimed locations such as Bird Island, Bassas da India, and Aldabra Island were visited by dozens or even hundreds of American vessels annually during the first half of the nineteenth century. The warm waters of the Seychelles appeared welcoming to US vessels. The seas around Amsterdam and Kerguelen were less welcoming, but their unclaimed natural resources in the form of seals and sea elephants would entice US visitors to visit.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, alongside merchant and whaling activities, an untold number of Americans were engaged in illegal activities, namely trafficking in enslaved East Africans. Chapter 6 examines how Americans had become enmeshed in local trading networks and used the issue of the slave trade to distinguish themselves from European colonial powers in the ocean. It also argues that Americans were growing increasingly desperate to find new sources of profit, even those gained through slave trading. This history showcases the true limits of American governmental control over the oceanic and coastal spaces of the Indian Ocean, as the US refused to take a strong stance against American involvement in illegal slaving in East Africa.

While these chapters range widely over time and geographical space, they reveal how Americans became deeply embedded in a variety of historical processes in the southwestern Indian Ocean. Over time, the United States became more reluctant to invest the necessary resources or personnel to forge lasting bonds in the region. Instead, Americans increasingly engaged in dubious projects, whether they were sailing to the far south of the ocean or evading British antislavery patrols. While Americans pursued diverse strategies in pursuit of economic wealth in the ocean, their actions were constrained in ways that would discourage the United States from becoming an enduring presence in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean.