CULTURAL MOBILITY

A Manifesto

Stephen Greenblatt

with Ines Županov, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, Heike Paul,
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Cultural Mobility is a blueprint and a model for understanding the patterns of meaning that human societies create. Drawn from a wide range of disciplines, the essays collected here under the distinguished editorial guidance of Stephen Greenblatt share the conviction that cultures, even traditional cultures, are rarely stable or fixed. Radical mobility is not a phenomenon of the twenty-first century alone, but is a key constituent element of human life in virtually all periods. Yet academic accounts of culture tend to operate on exactly the opposite assumption and to celebrate what they imagine to be rooted or whole or undamaged. To grasp the shaping power of colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unexpected, random events, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, cultural analysis needs to operate with a new set of principles. An international group of authors spells out these principles and puts them into practice. *Cultural Mobility* sets out a powerful intellectual agenda with which scholars across the humanities and social sciences will need to engage.

STEPHEN GREENBLATT is Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. The author most recently of *Will in the World* (2004), Professor Greenblatt is one of the most distinguished and influential literary and cultural critics at work today, as well as the general editor of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. His team of collaborators on *Cultural Mobility* all worked together at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin under Professor Greenblatt's overall direction, and represent a suggestive and unique range of voices and approaches.

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Cultural mobility: an introduction

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

In the latter half of the twentieth century many in the social sciences and humanities gleefully proclaimed the demise of a set of traditional assumptions about cultural identity. Notions of wholeness, teleological development, evolutionary progress, and ethnic authenticity were said to have been dismantled forever. A few lamented their passing, but most scholars energetically grappled with brave new theories of hybridity, network theory, and the complex "flows" of people, goods, money, and information across endlessly shifting social landscapes. But as the new century unfolds, it has become increasingly clear that the bodies of the deceased have refused to stay buried: those who thought to have bid farewell once and for all to the heavily guarded borders of the nation-state and to the atavistic passions of religious and ethnic identity find themselves confronting a global political landscape in which neither nationalism nor identity politics shows any intention of disappearing. While the older conceptions of rootedness and autochthony seem intellectually bankrupt, the heady theories of creative metissage have run aground upon the rocks of contemporary reality.

There is an urgent need to rethink fundamental assumptions about the fate of culture in an age of global

mobility, a need to formulate, both for scholars and for the larger public, new ways to understand the vitally important dialectic of cultural persistence and change. This dialectic is not only a function of triumphant capitalism, free trade, and globalization; it is, as we hope to show, a much older phenomenon. The essays in *Cultural Mobility* aim to reorient traditional understanding and to serve as a framework for new research in many fields.

There is no going back to the fantasy that once upon a time there were settled, coherent, and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities. To write convincing and accurate cultural analyses – not only of the troubled present but of centuries past – requires, to paraphrase *Hamlet*, more a chronicle of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts than a story of inevitable progress from traceable origins.[1] We need to understand colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of identity and language, and not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy. At the same time, we need to account for the persistence, over very long time periods and in the face of radical disruption, of cultural identities for which substantial numbers of people are willing to make extreme sacrifices, including life itself.

Beyond the recognition of this dialectic, there is an urgent need to address what we might call the rigid

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[1] For an elaboration of these views, see my essay "Racial Memory and Literary History," *PMLA* 116 (2001), pp. 48–63.

compartmentalization of mobility. Although in the past twenty years or so many academic disciplines have formally embraced ideas of "cultural mobility," they have for the most part operated with tunnel vision: the times and places in which they see significant mobility occurring remain strictly limited; in all other contexts, they remain focused on fixity. The fact, to cite a single example, that some of the prisoners at Guantánamo Bay are citizens of Western states simply has no place in a dominant understanding heavily influenced by ideas about the "clash of cultures." The complicated trajectory that led these prisoners from Europe to the Middle East or Central Asia and then to the no-man's-land on Cuba falls outside the available analytical framework, as does their tangled inner experience of alienation and adherence to various national, ethnic, and religious communities.

The problem is that the established analytical tools have taken for granted the stability of cultures, or at least have assumed that in their original or natural state, before they are disrupted or contaminated, cultures are properly rooted in the rich soil of blood and land and that they are virtually motionless. Particular cultures are routinely celebrated for their depth, authenticity, and wholeness, while others are criticized for shallowness, disorientation, and incoherence. A sense of "at-homeness" is often claimed to be the necessary condition for a robust cultural identity.

Everyone recognizes, of course, that the global economy has drastically altered the picture, but the pervasiveness and power of contemporary developments have paradoxically only reinforced the assumption that the originary condition was one of fixity and coherence. Academic departments are

routinely organized as if the division between English and, for example, French were stable and timeless, or as if the Muslim and Christian worlds had existed in hermetic isolation from one another, or as if the history of ideas were somehow entirely independent of the history of exile, migration, and economic exchange. The phenomenon of mobility is acknowledged in passing, of course, but as the exception to the rule or as its more or less violent disruption. Literary and historical research has tended to ignore the extent to which, with very few exceptions, in matters of culture the local has always been irradiated, as it were, by the larger world.

"Perhaps people will soon be persuaded," Goethe wrote in 1826, toward the end of his long life, "that there is no patriotic art and no patriotic science. Both belong, like everything good, to the whole world and can be promoted only through general, free interaction among all who live at the same time." These words lie at the heart of what Goethe called *Weltliteratur*, world literature, which he conceived of as a ceaseless process of exchange across the borders of nations and cultures. As Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus' essay shows, Goethe dreamed that "the general, free interaction among all who live at the same time" would liberate human genius from the vicious parochialism of competing communities, cultures, and nation states. If this prophetic dream by now seems shopworn and almost absurd – its optimism spectacularly disproved by almost two centuries of fathomless hatred and bloodshed – it was nonetheless based upon a canny insight into the restless process through which texts, images, artifacts, and ideas are moved, disguised, translated, transformed, adapted, and reimagined in the ceaseless, resourceful work of culture.

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This process obviously long preceded the internet or Apex fares or the spread of English on the wings of international capitalism. Such recent developments are, to be sure, significant factors in enabling us to effect a return to world literature and, more broadly, to world culture, for the digitization of library resources, the ease with which we can access newspapers and reviews from every continent, the rise of international discussion groups in multiple languages all pull away from national and ethnic exclusivity. But world culture does not depend on recent events or on a transient wave of American triumphalism or on recent technological innovations.

The apparent fixity and stability of cultures is, in Montaigne's words, "nothing but a more languid motion."[2] Even in places that at first glance are characterized more by homogeneity and stasis than by pluralism and change, cultural circuits facilitating motion are at work. This is not only true of trade, religious proselytizing, and education, where the circuitry is obvious. Tourism, for example, often depends on a commodification of rootedness: cultures that appear to have strikingly unmixed and local forms of behavior become the objects of pilgrimage and are themselves fungible as mobile signifiers. That is, not only do people from very diverse backgrounds travel great distances to view them, but they themselves are frequently broken into smaller units and, like the bands of Andean musicians on the streets of European and American cities, set in motion.

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[2] Michel de Montaigne, "Of Repentance," in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, tr. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), p. 610.

As Walter Burkert observed in his study of Near Eastern influence on Greek culture in the Early Archaic Age, the adoption of Phoenician script by the Greeks and its skillful adaptation to Greek phonetics, some time around the eighth century BCE, sparked an unprecedented intellectual, religious, and literary mobility.[3] This cultural mobility, facilitated by traders, craftsmen, and troops of mercenaries, is obviously uneven and at certain times and places has been sharply restricted. But once launched, it has proved unstoppable.

A vital global cultural discourse then is quite ancient; only the increasingly settled and bureaucratized nature of academic institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conjoined with an ugly intensification of ethnocentrism, racism, and nationalism, produced the temporary illusion of sedentary, indigenous literary cultures making sporadic and half-hearted ventures toward the margins. The reality, for most of the past as once again for the present, is more about nomads than natives.

Enhanced cultural mobility, Goethe ardently hoped, would foster a new cosmopolitanism, an unregulated free trade in expression and feeling, an epoch of global respect founded on the conviction that "poetry is the common possession of humanity and that it emerges everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of people." The actual effect, of course, has been far less reassuring. Mobility can indeed lead to heightened tolerance of difference and an intensified

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[3] Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, tr. Walter Burkert and Margaret E. Pinder (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

awareness of the mingled inheritances that constitute even the most tradition-bound cultural stance, but it can also lead to an anxious, defensive, and on occasion violent policing of the boundaries. The crucial first task for scholars is simply to recognize and to track the movements that provoke both intense pleasure and intense anxiety.

When it comes to the past, the enterprise of tracking the restless and often unpredictable movements of texts, ideas, and whole cultures is still at a very early stage. There are, to be sure, two powerful traditional models for understanding cultural mobility. The first is the account that historians and ideologues developed for describing the *translatio imperii*, the "translation" of power and authority from the Persians to the Greeks, from Greece to Rome, and then from imperial Rome to a succession of ambitious regimes in nascent nation states. The second is the account that theologians developed for describing the ways that Christianity "fulfilled" the Hebrew Scriptures and hence transformed the Torah into the "Old Testament." Each model possesses rich resources for grasping the mechanisms through which one cultural system is taken over or reshaped by another.

Hence, to consider the first, the symbols, regalia, and other literal trappings of Roman imperial power were physically carried, when the empire was no longer able to defend itself, from the ancient capital of the world to a succession of new sites of global ambition. In this displacement, of course, the conquerors were merely doing to Rome what Rome itself had long done to those it had subdued: appropriating the tangible emblems of authority, including the gods, of the conquered peoples, along with the treasure, grain reserves,

commodities, arms, slaves, and other worldly goods that it was able to seize. The urbane Propertius prays in one of his elegies for "the day on which I see Caesar's chariot laden with spoil and captured chieftains sitting beneath their arms, shafts from cavalry in retreat and bows of trousered soldiery, the horses oft halting at the people's cheers, and leaning on the bosom of my sweetheart I begin to watch and read on placards the names of captured cities!" (III.4).

The Roman custom of forcing captive leaders to sit on floats beneath their weapons or to march in chains behind the triumphal chariot of the conquering emperor or general is the most vivid instance of this appropriation: not only is the abjection of the defeated ruler displayed to the cheering populace, but with each shuffling step he takes that ruler's former power further swells the pomp of the victor. Mobility is not incidental here: physically displacing conquered chieftains, compelling them to parade through the streets, exposing them to the gaze of strangers are all key elements in what it means for the Romans to make a much larger cultural field available for transfer to themselves.

By the time Rome was vulnerable enough to have its own cultural field appropriated by others, it had developed complex institutions and traditions of such prestige, density, and symbolic force that no simple act of plunder, however greedy, could easily set in motion the process of translation. The fierce tribes of Germany and Scythia under the leadership of Alaric, who sacked Rome for six days in 410, hauled away on their heavy wagons massive chests of gold and jewels, costly vases, wardrobes of silk, precious statues of gods and heroes, barrels of the finest wine, and all the other portable wealth of a

population long accustomed to luxury. But rapine, even on a huge scale, is not the same as cultural mobility, and indeed there are indications that Rome's first conquerors, the Goths, were uninterested in (or incapable of) setting Rome's culture, as distinct from its riches, in motion.

Alaric, who died relatively soon after the sack of Rome, was interred in a sepulchre adorned with Rome's spoils, but he had not seized for himself the cultural authority of the empire he had brought low. Indeed his successor, his brother-in-law Adolphus, is said to have formally acknowledged the impossibility of doing so, at least for the Goths. "In the full confidence of valour and victory," Adolphus reputedly declared, "I once aspired to change the face of the universe; to obliterate the name of Rome; to erect on its ruins the dominion of the Goths; and to acquire, like Augustus, the immortal fame of the founder of a new empire. By repeated experiments I was gradually convinced that laws are essentially necessary to maintain and regulate a well-constituted state; and that the fierce untractable humour of the Goths was incapable of bearing the salutary yoke of law and civil government. From that moment I proposed to myself a different object of glory and ambition; and it is now my sincere wish that the gratitude of future ages should acknowledge the merit of a stranger, who employed the sword of the Goths, not to subvert, but to restore and maintain, the prosperity of the Roman empire."[4]

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[4] Orosius, 1.vii.c.43, pp. 584–5, cited in Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1910), 3:301.

Such a comforting declaration, or anything resembling it, seems exceedingly unlikely, given the dubious chain of transmission: Adolphus supposedly shared his views with a leading citizen of Narbonne who subsequently went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where he told the story to St. Jerome in the presence of the historian Orosius. It nonetheless reflects two important early perceptions about cultural mobility. First, the sheer brute fact of conquest does not necessarily set a culture, whether that of the victor or of the vanquished, in motion. And second, though material goods may at moments have powerful symbolic importance, at other moments those goods may carry very little cultural charge, and cultural mobility may lie elsewhere. Adolphus, or at least the historian Orosius imagining Adolphus, believed that in the case of Rome, law and civil government counted for more than treasure. To transfer masses of wealth was relatively simple, even if it involved stripping whole buildings of their fabric; to transfer a cultural system was a far greater challenge.

The true cultural mobility of the Roman Empire was sometimes said to reside in the person of the emperor himself: "Where the emperor is, there is Rome." But this piece of extravagant flattery lightly concealed the fact that the emperor was a transient, all-too-human place holder in an elaborate network of offices, laws, duties, titles, definitions, mutual understandings, and, above all, tax codes. This network was ultimately upheld by the power of the state to direct its violence against those who did not submit to it, but, though the guarantor of the whole system, violence by itself was not the "real" meaning of Roman culture. The medieval lawyer who wrote of the fiscal system of the state that *Ubi est fiscus,*

ibi est imperium – "Where the fisc is, there is the empire" – was appropriating something more essentially Roman than anything seized by the Gothic armies rampaging through the streets of Rome.[5]

It was this mobility of Roman codes, structures, and definitions – what we might call categorical mobility – that enabled the massive transfers of prestigious cultural norms from the ancient capital to a series of would-be heirs and successors. The rulers of the Eastern Empire in Constantinople first made the strong claim that the essence of Rome had migrated to the banks of the Bosphorus and that all that remained on the Tiber were mere bricks, stones, and rubble. The Byzantine claim was challenged by the Ottonian princes in the west, who claimed that Rome was to be found in in Aachen. And after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, the imperial claimants moved further and further to the west: Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, London. Each city was declared by its adherents to be the new Rome; each professed to be the site to which the imperial capital, the aspiring ruler of the known world, had been "translated." Lawyers steeped in law worked out the precise mechanisms through which codes that had been developed in the very special circumstances of Rome or Constantinople could be accommodated to the peculiar needs of the local elites; administrators helped to organize the court and the chain of command; rulers dressed themselves in robes that conjured up the illustrious imperial

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[5] Baldus, cited in Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 204.

predecessors; intellectuals worked out the historical processes that had inevitably and providentially led to this glorious outcome; and artists, architects, musicians, and writers provided the imagery that confirmed in the imagination of both the rulers and the ruled the successful transfer of cultural authority.

The lines of transmission, of course, are far more complex than this brief sketch can suggest. In the early centuries of the Catholic Church, for example, prelates often adapted political terms and ceremonies from the Roman state. These terms and ceremonies were in turn adapted by jurists formulating the principles of the secular state. Something of the empire survives then and is handed down, but only by passing through the prism of the papacy – a passage Hobbes described with mordant wit when he remarked that the pope is "no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof."[6] What is fascinating about this ecclesiastical medium of transformation is the riddle that obsessed Gibbon: the immense difficulty of deciding whether the Church was the fatal enemy of the Roman empire or the agent that saved much that would otherwise have been forever lost.

Something of the same intertwining of destruction and mediated transmission is conveyed by the second great traditional model for cultural mobility. For centuries the concept of *figura* served Christian theologians – and artists and writers – as an extremely subtle and flexible tool both for

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[6] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 47, in *English Works*, ed. William Molesworth (London: J. Bohn, 1839–45), 3:697–8.

appropriating prophetic signs and for reconceiving figures and events as living anticipations of the Redeemer. Abel was Abel, but he was also, in his goodness, in his piety, and in his death at the hands of the wicked Cain, a prefiguration of Jesus. Indeed Abel's full significance, his deeper meaning, could only be understood through the Christian story.

Mobility was facilitated through a wholesale reinterpretation of history, a change in its valence, so that Moses could be understood (and represented) at once as a significant person in the history of Israel and as a type or prefiguration of Christ. The cunning of this form of intereptation was that it left things standing in place and at the same time emptied them out, in order to claim that a full actualization of the precious cultural resource – in this case, the religion of Israel – could only be realized in the religion that had come to displace and triumph over it. Things – historical individuals, narratives, symbols, and ceremonies – that had once claimed an independent and substantial existence were revealed to be shadows. Conversely, shadowy metaphors and similes in the Hebrew Bible, meant to illuminate and intensify the narratives, were developed into substantial historical truths only disclosed to the world in the life of the Messiah.

What is most striking perhaps about the concept of *figura* is its blend of homage and aggression, a phenomenon that extends far beyond this particular instance of cultural mobility but that here achieves one of its most resonant forms. Thus the elaborations of the Passion story in the narratives and art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – a story notably spare and austere in the Gospels – almost all depend upon the appropriation of figures and imagery from

the Hebrew Bible. Not only are individuals – Jacob, for example, or Moses, or Job – revealed to be anticipations of the Redeemer, who gives them their true meaning by enacting, now in what is claimed to be a final and definitive form, their stories, but the enactment, the historical realization, is constructed out of imagistic fragments borrowed from scriptural texts. "He gave his back to the smiter," from Isaiah, thus becomes a whole full-staged scene of vicious flagellation. And the perpetrators of the torment and murder of the Lord are, of course, the Jews from whose sacred books the narrative hints have been taken. The clerical storytellers elaborate the Passion story by setting in motion and appropriating the sacred materials of the Jews and then use that story to call for Jews' destruction.

Cultural mobility then can take the form of attempted cultural (and, of course, actual) murder. The murder in this case stopped short of total extermination both because the Hebrew scriptures, though superseded, had to retain their sacredness in order to serve as a prophetic anticipation of the Redeemer and because an impoverished, immiserated and despised Jewish remnant could serve as a perpetual reminder to the faithful of the long-term consequences of rejecting the Messiah. Hence in response to repeated calls, especially from itinerant friars, for the final elimination of the Jews, a succession of popes ruled that it was in the interest of Christianity, in the time before the end of time, for some small number of Jews to survive and to eke out their lives in misery. A surviving remnant and a text transformed into a shadow became key elements in the symbolic transfer and transformation of sacredness.

For all of their interpretative richness, both of these models, the "translation of empire" and "*figura*," are severely constrained by the teleological triumphalism that helped to launch them. Outside the circles of the faithful, they are now generally approached with justifiable wariness, irony, and historical distance. Pieces can be isolated and savored: the triumphal chariot of the Roman emperor, for example, was revived by Renaissance princes and adapted to grand funerary processions. There it served as a symbolic affirmation of the continuity, the immortality even, of the *imperium*, however mortal and transitory the individual emperor. Its use, practical and symbolic, was not restricted to kings: the corpse of the Duke of Wellington was carried in such a chariot, and, with suitable democratizing modification, it helps to explain the black Cadillac hearse and the long procession of cars that accompanies it to the cemetery.[7] But this and comparable histories of literal and symbolic mobility no longer reinforce or confirm the grand narrative. When, in a singularly misguided moment, Richard Nixon chose to have the White House guards dressed in neo-imperial uniforms, the immediate outburst of ridicule compelled a quick change of costume.

We have more a sense of fragments than a set of coherent histories: Latin grammar arose when a Greek diplomat, Crates of Mallus, broke his leg in a sewer-hole in Rome and whiled away the time of his recuperation by giving lectures on language; Leone Ebreo fled from Spain into Italy, in the wake of the Expulsion of the Jews in 1492, encountered

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[7] Leopold Ettlinger, "The Duke of Wellington's Funeral Car," in *Warburg Journal* 3 (1939–40), cited in Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, pp. 427ff.

Florentine neo-Platonism, itself a recent Greek import, and was inspired to write his great dialogues on love; Giordano Bruno lectured at Oxford, where he almost certainly encountered and influenced Sir Philip Sidney, before returning to Italy and meeting his end at the pyre in the Campo dei Fiori.

Mobility studies, as these fragments suggest, are essentially about what medieval theologians called *contingentia*, the sense that the world as we know it is not necessary: the point is not only that the world will pass away, but also that it could all have been otherwise. This *contingentia* is precisely the opposite of the theory of divinely or historically ordained destiny that drove the imperial and figural models of mobility. And yet, to be fully convincing, mobility studies also need to account for the intense illusion that mobility in one particular direction or another is predestined. They need to account as well for the fact that cultures are experienced again and again – in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence – not as contingent at all but as fixed, inevitable, and strangely enduring.

How is it possible to convey a sense of *contingentia* (and its counterbalancing illusion of fixity) in practice? The answer in large part lies in the patient charting of specific instances of cultural mobility, that is, not in an attempt to construct new grand narratives (in the manner of the translation of empire or of *figura*) but in detailed, intellectually vital engagements with specific cases. "I cannot keep my subject still," Montaigne wrote in "Of Repentance." "It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness"(610).

These words can serve perhaps as the motto of the essays assembled in *Cultural Mobility*. Montaigne's response was not to try to construct an abstract system but to try to describe a

single object in motion, himself. Our projects are less resolutely autobiographical, but they are comparably peculiar, particular, and local. The case studies in this volume – microhistories of "displaced" things and persons – represent cultural connections between unexpected times and places. A resonant emblem of such a connection is the moment, discussed by Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, when Goethe read a Chinese novel and dreamed of "world culture." So too, as Heike Paul demonstrates, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) not only inspired a mass American audience to oppose slavery but also, in a series of encounters entirely unimagined by Stowe herself, inspired the rhetoric of mid-nineteenth-century German feminists to demand equal rights for women, of Russian peasants to call for the abolition of indenture, and of English maids to rebel against domestic abuse. The novel is paired in Paul's essay with a less easily adaptable signifier of the institution, namely a slave's iron collar traveling from the American South to England in 1849 in the luggage of the fugitive slave William Wells Brown. This circulation and the European reactions to both sentimental novel and iron collar demonstrate, as Paul observes, that American slavery and its critique have repeatedly served as blueprints for political empowerment far beyond America's borders.

These optimistic visions of cultural mobility are set against the more ambiguous story told by Ines Županov, who looks closely at the contrasting works of two Portuguese contemporaries in late sixteenth-century Goa. One, the humanist physician Garcia da Orta, wrote a book that manifested a remarkable openness to, and curiosity about, the unfamiliar Asian world in which he found himself; the other, Archbishop