Arun Saldanha (Geography, Minnesota) presented a lively talk, “A Tear in the Fabric of Time: the Immediate Impact of Jan Huygen van Linschoten’s *Itinerario* (1596),” to a crowded lecture hall, including many geographers and students who arrived early for UWM’s 17th Annual Mini-Conference on Critical Geography.

Already known in academic circles for his new materialist approach to race in his first book, *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (Minnesota, 2007), Saldanha, with tongue in cheek, explained his dramatic shift in topics from the contemporary global rave scene in Goa, India to his current project on the beginnings of Dutch colonialism: with so many skeptics wanting to know how “difficult” his research was on the sandy beaches of Goa, he felt it behooved him to address a more serious subject.

As background to his project, Saldanha presented some of the philosophies of space and time that underpin his work. Following many geographers, he agrees that space and time cannot be disconnected, that they form part of a four-dimensional continuum. The concept, originating in Einsteinian physics, is also of value to geographers (including his PhD advisor, Doreen Massey [Open University, UK]) who use the space-time continuum to argue that “we cannot think about history without thinking about geography.” A master of the deadpan understatement, Saldanha continued, “Since we study space, and since everything is spatial, it means that we can cannibalize all other disciplines. There is a geography of everything.”

As a subset of his space-time interests, Saldanha wants to understand “what an event actually is, and how it can happen.” To study the process of event-making, he called upon the early twentieth century French philosopher Henri Bergson, via the late twentieth century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Although Bergson might argue that the “entire past of the entire universe is...
implicated in one’s present,” Delueze would refine that by arguing that “gradations” of the past are being implicated in the present, so that “different pasts are being implicated in the present to different degrees.” For Saldanha’s work, it’s important to acknowledge that there is a multiplicity of temporalities. Depending on where one looks in the universe, there will be different rates of time—not just one universal time, but “a geography of temporalities.” For anyone attempting to situate an event in time and space, “the only unity of time is in the fourth dimension of space,” so that “space ultimately equals the unification of time.”

For geographers, anthropologists, and other social scientists, these sorts of meditations on time and space lead to the question, “Is there then a universal time for human society, for the rates at which cultures develop?” Western culture has, until recently, never critiqued its own conception of time, that of a linear, imperial timeline in which all the events of human history appear in consecutive order. Such a concept does not consider that there are various lines crossing, that there are various ways of movement. The historian Paul Carter (The Road to Botany Bay) and the anthropologist Johannes Fabian (Time and the Other) are two contemporary thinkers rejecting the notion of a single, universal time in favor of a multiplicity of histories, of “various temporalities and cultures clashing together and not one being able to subordinate another.”

One such history, Jan Huygen van Linschoten’s *Itinerario* (1596), published in Amsterdam at the outset of Dutch maritime dominance at the end of the 16th century, is a vast compendium of cartographic, cultural, and economic information on the Indian Ocean rim, especially the spice markets and non-Christian cultures.

At the time of its publication, the maritime routes of the spice trade were controlled by Portugal, but the book revealed much nautical and economic information, especially concerning the Spice Islands, that heretofore had been guarded carefully by the Portuguese. The book was so important that its opening section on navigational concerns was published a year early so it could be used by the First Voyage to the Indies organized by the Dutch.

As a geographer, Saldanha is interested in the way space-time allows for an event “to really change the coordinates, to change the ways in which things are organized.” In the case of the *Itinerario,* however, the actor instigating this event is not a human, but a book. Saldanha works from Foucault’s notion of the *episteme,* a body of ideas, a “discursive field,” at any particular time that determines what constitutes knowledge, so that the episteme at the time of the *Itinerario* was shaped by the field of Dutch geographical

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**Arun Saldanha, “A Tear in the Fabric of Time: The Immediate Impact of Jan Huygen van Linschoten’s *Itinerario* (1596)”**
knowledge at the end of the 16th century—which, for all of the great Dutch cartographers of the time, is still lacking the knowledge of the Portuguese regarding the spice trade in the Indian Ocean.

Up until the *Itinerario*, the “secret of India”—the importing of spices by the sea—had been in Portuguese control for a century.

The event, then, of the *Itinerario* has effectively ripped the discursive field as well as “the fabric of time”—until such time when the discursive field absorbs the event, thereby establishing “a new normal,” a new discursive field awaiting another tear.

Saldanha also relies on Foucault’s notion of the *author function* in which the author does not function as some sort of hero “whose own genius translates itself into a written work.” Instead, Foucault is concerned with “the conditions of a particular epistemic reality that allow for the individuality of the author to function.” In keeping with this line of thought, Saldanha, borrowing from Bruno Latour and Delueze, prefers to see books, as important as they are, not as holy or sacred objects, but as one “machine” in relation to other machines, or as one eddy within the midst of a larger current.

Given that the navigational portion of the book was published early and used during the First Voyage, Saldanha is interested in the book’s immediate impact, the “intensity in which it could effectuate the relationship between the Indies and Europe in space-time.” The book captures all sorts of information that the Dutch were waiting for. It had significant authorities supporting it: a governmental copyright meant that the book could not be censored for religious reasons and the book was dedicated to many in power, including the States Generals of Holland and Zeeland, and the Prince of Orange. The book provided very current maps, including some published for the first time; details on finding safe food and water during the voyage; locations of the much sought spices, especially clove, nutmeg, and mace; and information on the geopolitics of the region. The geopolitical information was especially important because up until the *Itinerario*, the “secret of India”—the importing of spices by the sea—had been in Portuguese control for a century. (Here, Portuguese power lay not in military might or financial strength, but in geographical information.) In the *Itinerario*, Linschoten remarked on the decadence of the Portuguese in Goa, capital of the entire *Estado da Índia* (all Portuguese possessions of the Indian Ocean rim), suggesting that the demise of Portuguese imperial rule was at hand; he also noted lack of a fortified Portuguese presence in Bantam, Java, which ultimately became the capital of the Dutch presence in the Indian Ocean.

Like the *Itinerario*, Saldanha’s presentation also enacted a “tear in the fabric of time” by bringing to bear the 20th century theoretical concepts of Bergson, Foucault, and Deleuze to van Linschoten’s fascinating 16th-century text.