

The background features abstract geometric shapes in shades of blue and grey. A dark blue triangle points downwards from the top left. A light blue triangle points upwards from the bottom left. A grey triangle points upwards from the bottom right. The text is positioned in the white space between these shapes.

Conference Reports



Migrants, Environmental Knowledge, and Consumer Society

Symposium at the GHI Washington Pacific Office, September 27–28, 2023. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington Pacific Office and the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, University of Mainz. Conveners: Atiba Pertilla (GHI Washington) and Axel Schäfer (University of Mainz). Participants: Marco Armiero (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), Anja-Maria Bassimir (University of Mainz), Kathleen Brosnan (University of Oklahoma), Colin Fisher (University of San Diego), Rebecca Herman (University of California, Berkeley), Gilberto Mazzoli (University of Konstanz), Mary E. Mendoza (Penn State University), Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern (Syracuse University), Jeannie N. Shinozuka (Washington State University), Daniele Valisena (University of Liège), Nino Vallen (GHI Washington Pacific Office), and Carl Zimring (Pratt Institute).

This symposium at the GHI Washington Pacific Office was designed to provide insights into histories of migrant knowledge in the context of environmental change and consumption practices. Bringing together expertise in history, anthropology, food studies, and other disciplines, the symposium sought to investigate how migrants have used their knowledge to react to existing environmental conditions, transform their homes and workplaces into new kinds of places, and to think about future environmental possibilities. One of the key themes of the symposium was to examine how migrants' environmental knowledge has often been submerged and what insights into adaptation to a post-consumerist society grappling with climate change might be gained from a deeper awareness and engagement with its history.

The symposium began with an evening keynote lecture by Kathleen Brosnan on the environmental history of the Napa Valley winegrowing region of California. Brosnan highlighted the role of successive waves of immigrants in shaping Napa's history, but also the fact that only certain groups of immigrants are written into the most prominent stories told about its development. In the early nineteenth century, first the Mexican government and then the U.S. government encouraged settlers to implement European-style agriculture, ignoring local Indian communities' land management practices. The establishment of vineyards was led by immigrant German property owners. They, in turn, relied on the manual labor of Chinese immigrant workers, who were barred from owning land and later largely forced out of the county by racial violence by the end of the century. Italian-Americans became the next important migrant group in the region and eventually came to fill an "ethnic niche" in facilitating the shipment of winemaking materials. In the wake of Prohibition, vineyards with Italian-American owners began to use tropes of Mediterranean architecture to establish Napa Valley as a winegrowing region comparable to those of France and Italy. The agricultural workforce began to shift toward Mexican-American immigrants, but Brosnan noted that their labor often went unacknowledged. As Napa Valley wines began to garner more and more prestige, the concept of *terroir* – or miniscule microregions, each producing a highly individual type of wine – came to be used as a distinctive marketing point. Wineries' *terroir* marketing strategies, however, often focused on the idea of unique climate or soil characteristics, as well as the expertise of the entrepreneurs who owned the vineyards and oversaw the production process, while ignoring the knowledge of agricultural workers who invented and experimented with different techniques over time to ensure the best growing conditions in a given area. Napa's history, Brosnan concluded, illustrates how consumer culture often obscures both the labor

and environmental transformations which create the goods marketed to the public.

The following day began with a panel focused on approaches to bringing together migration history and environmental history. Marco Armiero's talk reflected on methods of framing these two fields. Some studies, he noted, have taken an "assertive" approach, emphasizing how migrants have shaped the environment in which they found themselves, sometimes generating celebratory narratives. Others have used a "constructivist" approach, examining how migrants create narratives about particular spaces and places, and thus are particularly attentive to differences in how groups perceive specific landscapes. Finally, the "embodied" style examines how migrants' bodies are changed or adapt to specific working conditions, even as their labor and their own consumption practices change the places they travel to. Armiero noted that the embodied style can encompass environmental humanities, migration history, and labor history simultaneously, examining how power relations are embedded in both the environment writ large and in migrants' bodies, with the capacity to examine topics such as where landfills are sited and how specific types of cancer or other diseases emerge in industrial communities. Using memoirs and other literary documents sourced from migrant communities to provide accounts of the links between the body and workplace environment, Armiero argued, offers a particularly rich but as yet underutilized "insurgent archive" for such work.

Colin Fisher discussed how migrants use ideas about nature to form their own self-understandings. His talk focused on the experiences of African-Americans who traveled from the rural U.S. South to cities in the Midwest and elsewhere during the Great Migration in the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast to other rural migrants who might have looked back on their original homes with a kind of

pastoral nostalgia, Fisher noted that experiences of segregation and political terrorism often created a different viewpoint toward the South among African-Americans. In the 1920s, he noted, many were drawn instead to the Pan-Africanist environmental vision promulgated by Marcus Garvey, who melded a pastiche of concepts drawn from Egyptian, Ethiopian, and African history to urge that people from the African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere should travel to Africa and take up the opportunity to reclaim its majestic legacy from the deprivations of white and European colonialism. The appeal of Garvey's vision, Fisher suggested, was that it offered an alternative way of understanding development in cyclical terms of death, rebirth, and the just use of the environment, rather than as part of a linear framework of technological progress, extraction of natural resources, and environmental destruction.

The third paper of the panel, by Mary E. Mendoza, examined the role of environmental controls in the history of efforts to shape and define the border between the United States and Mexico. As early as 1906, Mendoza noted, the U.S. Department of Agriculture had sought to build a wall to prevent cattle carrying ticks bearing disease from entering the United States from Mexico. American ranchers, she noted, objected to efforts to implement animal quarantine policies by racializing "American" vs. "Mexican" cattle and arguing that their own cattle should not be subjected to government oversight. Over the following decades, people migrating from Mexico were increasingly likened in hostile rhetoric to undesirable natural phenomena (such as "fungus") or hostile military "invasions," and the idea that fences, walls, and other barriers could serve as buffers against migration gathered momentum. Environmental conservation organizations came to play a role in the creation of such barriers as well: concerns that migrants' movements through the most rural and wild stretches of the border have led to ground erosion,

trampling of vegetation, and increasing amounts of garbage have been used to bolster the creation of a carceral approach to migrants in transit. Ironically, Mendoza noted, the increasing sophistication of environmental technology and surveillance tactics at the border has not necessarily prevented migration into the United States but rather had the effect of trapping many migrants within the United States by limiting the benefits of their exercising freedom of movement, leading in turn to the development of a hostile law enforcement structure.

The second session examined the conjunction of environmental history and the history of knowledge. Jeannie Shinozuka's paper examined how xenophobic ideas about Asian immigrants were adapted into scientific discourse within the United States and Canada about species and plant diseases as foreign "invaders." For example, an insect labeled as the "Japanese" beetle was consistently referred to as an "invasive" species even after it had been present within Canada for over eight decades. In parallel, the idea that certain immigrants could not be assimilated was often mapped in terms of economic activity: in late-nineteenth-century Canada, Shinozuka noted, Japanese immigrants were often attacked for their undesirable consumption practices – namely, not consuming enough – and also for managing farms which were *too* productive, factors which in conjunction led to the placement of restrictions on their ability to purchase land, and later expropriation during the Second World War. Focusing on the 1880s to the 1920s, Daniele Valisena discussed rural Italian migrants in Naples, New York, and Paris, and their encounters with a variety of urban environments, such as waste dumps, which they often used as sources for discarded goods which could be returned to the cycle of consumption, as well as their adaptation of existing practices – such as keeping farm animals – to urban basements and other dwelling spaces in the city. Such arrangements, Valisena argued, often challenged the

ideas of the most proper and valuable use of space, creating opportunities for migrants to challenge existing property regimes which typically failed to provide safe and comfortable living conditions notwithstanding the incessant demand for migrant labor.

The third session focused on the association between knowledge and migrants' experiences. Anja-Maria Bassimir gave a paper which examined the work of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Extension Service in the early 1900s. The Extension Service was given a mandate to introduce "modern" techniques of farming, food preservation, and agricultural marketing to rural communities throughout the United States. In northern Maine's Aroostook Valley, French-Canadian migrants from neighboring Quebec were seen by extension agents as particularly needing instruction. The agents' advice to the community often led to the denigration of traditional foodways and the valorization of "scientific" nutrition practices. An important part of communities negotiating relationships with such experts was learning how to preserve their foodways even in the face of hostile denigration. The other paper, by Gilberto Mazzoli, looked at the gardening and farming practices of Italian immigrants in the United States from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. Mazzoli noted that farming skills were often seen as innate traits of Italian immigrants which could be adapted to any kind of agricultural labor, but that in practice Italian immigrants had specific ideas about the kinds of spaces they wished to cultivate and creatively appropriated empty lots, rooftops, and other marginal spaces.

In the final panel of the symposium, Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern and Carl Zimring led a roundtable discussion about using migrants' experiences as a methodological lens to shed light on the relationship between production, consumption, and waste in consumerist societies. Minkoff-Zern discussed her research on present-day migration, which focuses on

recent immigrants from Central America to the United States who have become small-scale rural entrepreneurs, especially as truck farmers growing produce for metropolitan farmers' markets. Zimring discussed using discard studies – a methodological approach which analyzes social practices around waste, recycling, and conservation – to understand migrant knowledge. The roundtable conversation touched on how migrant communities have often pursued practices that would fit under the present-day rubric of “sustainability” to make the most of scarce resources. Another thread of discussion was the recurring desire in societies experiencing migrant inflows to enjoy consumption without consequences and to blame any undesirable outcomes on migrant workers and their communities. The construction of borders, on both the ideological and structural levels, can often play an important role in abstracting consumption from the circumstances of production. The symposium concluded with agreement that bringing insights from the history of knowledge to bear on the history of consumption can be a useful methodology to meld labor history, the history of migration, and environmental history.

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