

# CONFERENCE REPORTS

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## CONNECTING ATLANTIC, INDIAN OCEAN, CHINA SEAS, AND PACIFIC MIGRATIONS FROM THE 1830S TO THE 1930S

Conference at the GHI, December 6–8, 2007. Conveners: Donna Gabaccia (Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota), Dirk Hoerder (Arizona State University), Marcel van der Linden (International Institute of Social History), Gisela Mettele (University of Leicester). Participants: Sven Beckert (Harvard University), Mary Blewett (University of Massachusetts, Lowell), Sugata Bose (Harvard University), Ulrike Freitag (Center for Modern Oriental Studies), Wang Gungwu (National University of Singapore), Pamila Gupta (University of the Witwatersrand), Matt Guterl (Indiana University), Silke Hensel (University of Münster), Madeline Hsu (University of Texas, Austin), Amarjit Kaur (University of New England), Akram Khatr (North Carolina State University), Erika Lee (University of Minnesota), Haiming Liu (California State Polytechnic University), Michael Mann (Fernuniversität Hagen), David Cook Martin (Grinnell College), Sucheta Mazumdar (Duke University), Adam McKeown (Columbia University), Lara Putnam (University of Pittsburgh), Christine Skwiot (Georgia State University), Elizabeth Sinn (University of Hong Kong), Hamashita Takashi (Kyoto University), Carl Trocki (Queensland University of Technology), Henry Yu (University of British Columbia).

Historians have only recently begun to study world oceans and their role in connecting formerly isolated societies. For a long time, oceans have instead been regarded as empty spaces between continents and barriers to communication. In addition, the approach to migration has undergone several changes in the last decades. Recent discussions have moved away from the traditional historical emphasis that isolates continents and nation-states and toward a broader concept of social spaces created by human relationships rather than geography. This conference aimed to bring together the new interest in maritime history and the history of migration in order to examine oceanic “worlds” as systems or networks of migration.

The conference rested on the assumption that transoceanic communication and exchange were major motors of transformation in the process of globalization. This meant broadening the perspective beyond the

Atlantic and looking at migrations in different oceanic world regions and at the relationships between these migration systems. The conference brought together scholars from all parts of the world, thus offering a truly global-history approach that was not merely postulated or done from the Atlantic core.

Though the century from the 1830s to the 1930s, when the Great Depression and World War II in Asia and Europe put a halt to much migration, seems to be an adequate periodization for several seas and migration systems, the participants agreed that global historians must be careful not to impose periodizations that make sense for some regions but not for others. As Adam McKeown pointed out in his keynote lecture, historians instead have to look closely at how each flow was shaped by its own specific history, regulatory environment, economic opportunities, and power relations, even when processes and cycles of migration grew increasingly integrated across the globe.

Questions of state regulation and the mechanisms of control that influenced the movements of people were recurrent themes of the conference. Mary Blewett focused on the shifts, from the 1860s to the 1920s, in markets, capital investment, acquisition of raw materials, and sites of production in the transatlantic worsted trade, and the preceding and ensuing labor migration. Showing how the United States McKinley Tariffs of the 1890s provided stiflingly effective protection for the huge American domestic market, she argued that the state is a powerful actor in structuring migration systems.

Other talks that examined how exclusionary laws regulated flows pointed to the underlying racial discourses. Erika Lee explored the similarities, simultaneities, and transnationality of anti-Chinese sentiments, campaigns, and policies in various locales in the Americas and across the Pacific Ocean. In her talk, she asked how stereotypes about the Chinese circulated across borders and oceans, prompting a global discussion over race and labor. Lee explored the impact of the racialization of Chinese coolies in Cuba, Peru, and the Greater Caribbean on racial discourses in the United States, as well as how not only stereotypes but also the exclusionary laws they inspired traveled from country to country. The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the US in 1882 had a domino effect, not only in Australia and New Zealand, but also in Canada, where the anti-Chinese campaign drew much of its rhetoric and organizational strategies from the United States, and where the 1923 Exclusion Act closely mirrored Chinese exclusion laws in the United States. The global debates over Chinese immigration, Lee argued, had far-reaching consequences for other migrant groups as well, since they were invoked to support restrictions directed at other groups, notably a variety of Asians, Jews, and non-Jews from Eastern Europe, and to oppose mass migration

of any kind. Xenophobic organizations in England attempting to fight the “alien invasion” explicitly appealed to the 1882 American legislation against the Chinese. The discussion emphasized that Chinese exclusion laws were part of larger racial discourses about whiteness. Speakers arguing in this vein included Akram Khater. He examined the multilayered identities of Syrian migrants to South Africa and the United States and their struggle with ethnic classifications. In characterizing race in terms of religion, Khater argued, Syrian Christians successfully forced the legal system to adjust its definition and consider them white Caucasians.

The complexities of outside labeling, self-identification, and political allegiances that shaped the migrant experience were also taken up by Lara Putnam. She explored how Caribbean Jews went from being routinely categorized as oriental to being routinely categorized as white, and presented the Caribbean migratory system as a key site within global debates over migration and the color line alike in the early twentieth century. Those debates, Putnam noted, reflected expectations about sex as much as expectations about race. In her examination of how debates over race mixture circulated within the complex cultural sphere of the circum-Caribbean migration system through newspapers, letters, pamphlets, and people, Putnam stressed that migrants were not only the objects but also the subjects of these discussions. She argued that knowledge about sex and race was manufactured not only by journalists, scientists, and politicians, but also by country doctors, angry tenants, and lovesick teens.

Elisabeth Sinn developed the concept of the “in-between space” as a possible paradigm in the study of migration situations, especially as an alternative to focusing solely on sending and receiving countries. She presented Hong Kong as an “in-between” place on several levels as a transit and intermediary place for things—money, letters, information, investments, etc.—and an “in-between home” for departing and returning migrants. Overseas migration, she argued, relied on dense and multidirectional networks of people and institutions linking overseas Chinese with their home villages and paving the way for the migrants. Charitable societies in Hong Kong supported people in transit, banks and exchange houses administered funds and remittances, and native-place associations ensured that the remains of deceased persons were transferred home. The migration trajectory, Sinn pointed out, was seldom a beeline from point A to point B; in reality, there were many detours and delays, diversions and dead ends. What lay in between often shaped the migration experience in profound ways and featured poignantly in the migrant’s mental landscape.

The significance of “in-between” spaces for shaping and transforming migrants’ identity was accentuated in several talks. In a certain way, discussants argued, the ocean itself was an “in-between” space. Migrants

spent an extended period of time on the ocean in the restricted space of a ship. They had to be organized somehow, and they perceived themselves in new identities and new gender roles. Participants agreed that the influence of the *rite de passage* of sea travel and the conditions onboard ship on the migration experience needs further investigation.

How the ocean was imagined in different cultures was another point of discussion. As Pamila Gupta pointed out, the sea has played a vibrant role in the life and minds of coastal people around the rim of the Indian Ocean. In the Caribbean, too, a profound relationship existed between the sea and the people, as Putnam demonstrated in her talk. Whereas in those maritime cultures the sea was seen as a source of livelihood and of food, a route of commerce and communication, a source of danger and of opportunity, Carl Trocki argued that the concept of the ocean in the imagination of the Chinese was much more negative. The opportunities oceans could provide were downplayed in the Chinese context, which had to do with the negative view of movement in Confucianism in general, but also with political imperial strategies. Whereas migration overland was seen as part of the expansion of the Chinese empire, going overseas was not viewed as acceptable, and until the end of the nineteenth century, was even criminalized. Neither ideology nor legislation stopped people from moving, Trocki noted, but both have to be taken into account in how we think of movement.

Rarely have scholars of different regions of the world cooperated as closely as they did during this conference. Even though, as one participant noted, it is not possible to talk about the whole world at once, the conference provided a good example of how historians can work in their provinces of knowledge with a global consciousness. Future research will demand far more exchange between historians from different cultural macro-regions of the globe. The conflict between being a specialist in a necessarily limited field and thinking about the big picture, the conference concluded, can only be resolved through a collaborative effort.

*Gisela Mettele (University of Leicester)*