Bucerius Young Scholars Forum
Histories of Migration: Transatlantic and Global Perspectives

Bucerius Young Scholars Forum at GHI West (Berkeley, California), Oct. 30–Nov. 1, 2017. Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Atiba Pertilla (GHI Washington), and Andrea Westermann (GHI West). Participants: Fatima El-Tayeb (University of California, San Diego), Paula Fass (University of California, Berkeley), Davide Gnes (University of Amsterdam), Michael Goebel (Freie Universität Berlin), Deniz Göktürk (University of California, Berkeley), Mairena Hirschberg (European University Institute), Michelle Lynn Kahn (Stanford University), Stephanie Lämmert (Max Planck Institute for Human Development), Ursula Lehmkühl (University of Trier), Barry McCarron (New York University), Nicholas B. Miller (University of Lisbon), Kristina Poznan (College of William & Mary), Allison Schmidt (SUNY Oswego), Kilian Spiethoff (University of Bamberg), Bryan Van Wyck (Michigan State University).

The inaugural Bucerius Young Scholars Forum, held in fall 2017, provided an opportunity for an interdisciplinary group of scholars to examine how migrants have created, exchanged, made use of knowledge, and been the objects of knowledge collection projects in a variety of contexts throughout the world from the nineteenth century to the present. The forum helped mark the official opening of the German Historical Institute’s new Pacific regional office, GHI West, on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. With generous funding provided by the ZEIT Stiftung/Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, the forum brought together ten early-career scholars—five based in the United States and five based in Europe—for a scholarly interchange on their research. The forum benefited as well from the active participation of five faculty mentors from both American and German institutions who chaired the forum’s panels and offered thoughtful perspective on how the new research being presented fits into earlier developments in the field.

The format of the Bucerius Forum borrowed from the long-standing Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar. The ten pre-circulated papers presented were grouped into five themed panel sessions, each chaired by a different faculty mentor. Each scholar who presented a paper also prepared a comment on the two papers presented in one of the other sessions. These comments, offered at the start of each session,
provided a useful springboard for the group discussion of the papers’ content, but for space reasons will not be covered in detail here.

The first panel, “Migrants’ Knowledge and Politics,” examined how governments use knowledge about migrants to shape immigration policies and how migrants use international networks of knowledge to shape local politics. Historian Nicholas Miller’s paper traced the formation of contract labor proposals in the mid-nineteenth century kingdom of Hawaii. In contrast to studies focused on the labor regimes established in Hawaii after the overthrow of the monarchy and its annexation by the United States, Miller traced the monarchy’s articulation of a future dependent on the labor of migrants from Portugal, a plan that depended in part on establishing an educational system for migrant workers’ children. In his paper on immigrant rights groups in late-twentieth-century Los Angeles, political scientist Davide Gnes examined how workers’ organizations established by migrants from Korea, the Philippines, and Latin America adapted mobilization strategies that had been successful in their home countries to organize immigrant communities to win political power. The success of these strategies largely depended on a continuous interchange of knowledge and activists rather than information flows that moved only in one direction. Both papers illustrated the value of avoiding the privileging of Western political frameworks in seeking to understand how migrants have shaped and been shaped by labor policies.

The second panel, “Migrants’ Knowledge and Childhood,” traced ideas about children’s roles as carriers of knowledge as migrants across and within national borders. Mairena Hirschberg’s paper examined New York’s Children’s Aid Society and Britain’s Child Emigration Society in the early 1900s. Both organizations subsidized the moves of thousands of children from poor, urban families to rural, agricultural communities. The Children’s Aid Society sent its charges on “orphan trains” to the U.S. Midwest and West. The families with whom the children were placed were expected to parent them and raise them to become solid, upstanding citizens. The Child Emigration Society program, by contrast, sent children from Britain to schools it established in Australia and other colonies, where the children were expected to learn up-to-date farming techniques that would prepare them to eventually become independent smallholders. Both schemes assumed that the knowledge children from the “dangerous” urban classes acquired in their home surroundings was
detrimental to social progress but that a shift to a rural environment would be sufficient to change children’s attitudes towards family, work, and respect for authority.

Michelle Kahn’s paper examined how migration reshapes children’s worldviews. Its focus was on the children of Turkish migrant workers whose families lived in West Germany for many years (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s) and then returned to Turkey. These children became marked with the identity of “Almancı” (“Germaners”). Adjusting to Turkish society often meant encountering pushback from peers who resented their aesthetic habits—such as “punk” haircuts—and dissatisfaction with the explicitly nationalist curricula they encountered in their schools. Reports of the use of corporal punishment in Turkish schools, coupled with persistent tropes in West Germany of Turkish culture as virulently misogynist and patriarchal, eventually led to a recentering of West German policy around the education of migrant workers and changes in migration law that made it easier for families to remain there. The idea that the knowledge children gained in the course of migration could not be “un-learned,” Kahn’s paper showed, had the power to reshape migration policy more broadly, dovetailing neatly with Hirshberg’s discussion of the prevalent idea that child migration from urban to rural homes was inherently certain to produce healthier and more productive citizens.

In the third panel, “Migrants’ Knowledge and the Media,” the first paper by Barry McCarron described how migrant diasporas in the nineteenth century deployed concepts of racial “knowledge” to define their own and other groups. Irish migrants to English-speaking settler societies, including Australia, South Africa, and the United States, created demeaning stereotypes of Chinese migrants in order to win political benefits for themselves that would make them economically secure. A wide variety of cultural materials, including plays and cartoons, were used to diffuse bigoted imagery not only within the Irish community but among all English speakers. In California, for example, McCarron traced the culmination of these efforts in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. He noted that Chinese migrants in the same countries simultaneously sought to thwart Irish influence, using their ability to secure diplomatic intervention on their behalf. McCarron’s paper illustrated how viewing stereotypes and racial pseudo-science as forms of knowledge provides a way to bring them into the same frame of analysis as policy debates.
Kristina Poznan’s paper described the role of Hungarian-language newspapers in both the Habsburg empire and in late-nineteenth-/early-twentieth-century North America in shaping emigrants’ and would-be emigrants’ views of the new cultures they could potentially encounter in the United States and Canada. The newspapers, she noted, were rich with information contributed by migrants themselves and thus likely served as a key vector for migrants to share knowledge with those outside their immediate circles of acquaintance. Advice for travelers and warnings about dangerous working conditions could all be found in Hungarian newspapers published in the United States. Moreover, these newspapers were often collected by diplomatic officials in order to inform imperial policymakers about how the Hungarian diaspora was adjusting to life overseas. Her paper noted the Austro-Hungarian empire’s evident interest in using newspapers as tools for publicizing its own views on desirable migration strategies and in collecting overseas journalism in hopes of anticipating potential political dissent. Thus, knowledge migrants circulated amongst themselves in newspaper columns was simultaneously being used by imperial authorities to develop strategies for managing migration policy. Together, the two papers illustrated the important role of media in creating knowledge of migrants both with respect to other migrant communities and with respect to how sending countries perceive their desires and demands.

The fourth panel’s theme was “Migrants’ Knowledge and Gender.” Stephanie Lämmert’s paper examined the experiences of workers in the Copperbelt of Zambia in the mid-twentieth century who had typically migrated to the region from countries (then colonies) further east, south, and west. Male and female migrants arrived in the Copperbelt with diverging agendas—most men to work in the area’s copper mines, while women traveled there to earn money by meeting miners’ demands for food and other personal services. Lämmert focused on the religious practices and (largely Christian) spiritual communities that developed among these migrants as they became long-term residents of the region. Lämmert argued that previous research on Central African history has often framed religious belief as an “obstacle to modernity” and implicitly assumed that investigating the workings of modernity necessarily means looking away from the worldviews and practices of the devout. For most migrants, religious devotion was one component of developing a framework of knowledge that also included determining which healing practices and medical treatment would best enable them to sustain their health.
in the face of arduous working conditions. Closer scrutiny, she argued, shows that migrants were discerning critics, moving from one community to another (or participating in several at once) to find a theology they found appealing, and sometimes melding ideas from disparate traditions to create entirely new churches—in other words, they took a “modern,” consumerist approach to spirituality.

Allison Schmidt’s paper examined how gender shaped travelers’ experiences of the regimes of migration control, focusing on the journeys of women traveling from Eastern Europe to the United States in the early twentieth century. She noted the importance of being aware that what has been defined in the American immigration historiography as the “typical” journey has tended to be the journey as experienced by male travelers. Female migrants were evidently aware that their gender and class identities—or more importantly their presentation of these identities—would affect how officials treated them at each stage of their voyage. Schmidt notes that these travelers typically drew on knowledge garnered from smaller-scale movement from village to village or from countryside to city in order to determine how best to make the transatlantic migration. Women travelers leaving Austria-Hungary obtained government documentation of their labor history and moral reputation to ensure they could make their way past internal border controls. Often, their experiences varied depending on whether or not they traveled with male adult relatives, which might determine how much scrutiny they faced from migration authorities and the degree of harassment or predation they might experience from ship or train personnel and other passengers. Schmidt’s analysis of several case studies of sexual assault, labor abuse, and sex trafficking indicated that notwithstanding female migrants’ diligent gathering of knowledge, they nonetheless often found their plans thwarted or undermined by arbitrary decisions they could not control, illustrating the limits of studying the history of knowledge for understanding the “typical” migration story.

In the final panel of papers, “Migrants’ Knowledge and the Professions,” Kilian Spiethoff and Brian Van Wyck presented research on the experiences of scientists and teachers in two very different contexts. Spiethoff examined the networks for exchanging natural specimens and academic publications created by naturalists and medical professionals from the German states who made their way to the U.S. Midwest—and particular Saint Louis, Missouri—in the years before the Civil War. Spiethoff argued that the emigrants were able
to make a name for themselves in German academic circles primarily through their ability to control access to rare and exotic scientific material and their use of publications to circulate news of their activities on the periphery of German-speaking scientific networks. Their contributions, moreover, provided a way for scholars in Germany to enhance their own prestige by enabling them to claim intellectual control over American as well as European research findings. In broad perspective, Spiethoff suggested, the case study suggests access to resources that are scarce or unavailable in the sending country has important bearing on whether migrant researchers can successfully participate in their home countries’ intellectual networks or face difficulty maintaining such ties.

Van Wyck’s paper, set more than a century later in West Germany and Turkey, studied the implementation from the late 1960s onward of a program that sent government-certified teachers from Turkey to German public schools to teach language, culture and history to Turkish-speaking children enrolled there. The teachers sent to West Germany labored under the “dual task” (doppelte Aufgabe) of both facilitating the adjustment of young Turkish students to the German educational system and ensuring that they would be able to integrate smoothly into the Turkish system if and when their families returned to Turkey. These teachers, Van Wyck explained, were placed in the unusual position of serving as “conveyors” of both “migrating knowledge” and “migrant knowledge.” They were expected to teach not only pedagogical subject content but also to imbue their students with “Turkishness.” Teachers rapidly learned that the children of Turkish migrants were not the same as children born and raised in Turkey and that their job would not be as simple as simply transplanting practices that worked well in Turkey’s classrooms to Germany. At the same time, assumptions that Turkish-born teachers would be experts in fulfilling their “dual task” meant that they received minimal scrutiny from German public authorities, even when Turkish families themselves raised questions about the quality of education their children received. Taken together, the two papers offered important insights into how migrants’ knowledge is incorporated with or is a barrier to intellectual and political nation-building projects.

In a concluding discussion session, the conference participants discussed several important themes that emerged over the course of the paper panels. There was broad agreement that using the heuristic
of knowledge provides a way for finding agency in migrants’ lives that moves away from the traditional framing of “high” and “low” skill levels. Focusing on migrant knowledge provides a way to think outside the nation-state “container,” but at the same time, it is noteworthy that migrant knowledge has both contributed to and helped to resolve cultural battles within both sending and receiving societies.

In addition to the panel sessions, the Bucerius Forum participants benefited from a visit to U.C. Berkeley’s renowned Oral History Center, where historian Paul Burnett gave a presentation on the use of oral history as a methodology for researching the history of migration and shared the rich variety of primary sources available there for studying the history of migration not only in California but also in other regions. The final day of the forum included a tour of the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life that shed light on the usefulness of material culture for studying the experiences of migrant and diaspora communities. We thank these institutions for their hospitality and the Center for German and European Studies at U.C. Berkeley for its logistical support.

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