

MIGRANT KNOWLEDGES: CONCEPTS, VOICES, SPACES

Conference at the Pacific Regional Office of the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI West), UC Berkeley, April 20-21, 2018. Sponsored by the Volkswagenstiftung. Keynote event co-sponsored by the Institute of European Studies, the Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies program, the Center for Latin American Studies, and the Center for Chinese Studies. Conveners: Albert Manke (GHI West / University of Bielefeld); Lok Siu (GHI West); Andrea Westermann, (GHI West). Participants: Eiichiro Azuma (University of Pennsylvania), Vivek Bald (MIT), Monica DeHart (University of Puget Sound), Jeroen Dewulf (UC Berkeley), Kijan Espahangizi (University of Zurich), Nicholas de Genova (Independent Scholar, Chicago), Fredy González (University of Colorado), Leslie Hernández Nova (European University Institute), Madeline Hsu (University of Texas), Evelyn Hu-Dehart (Brown University), Simone Lässig (GHI), Ana Paulina Lee (Columbia University), Kathleen Lopez (Rutgers University), Kevin Ostoyich (Valparaiso University), Massimo Perinelli (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation), Claudia Roesch (GHI), Julia Roth (University of Bielefeld), Carlos Sanhueza Cerda (University of Chile), Sofie Steinberger (University of Cologne), Sören Urbansky (GHI).

As the first major event after its official inauguration in November 2017, GHI West hosted the workshop “Migrant Knowledges: Concepts, Voices, Spaces.” With particular but not exclusive focus on the inter-area and interdisciplinary history of the Americas from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, the workshop explored possible methodologies, narratives, and empirics that facilitate a critical engagement with the concept of “migrant knowledges.” The notion brought various aspects to the fore: Knowledges differ in kind and form across space, time, and cultures; knowledge is produced in specific (gendered and class-structured) contexts on the one hand; it also is constantly in transit, translated, forgotten, or questioned on the other.

The format of the workshop aimed to spark exploratory discussion and debate through one keynote talk and three consecutive roundtables with each participant submitting short pre-circulated statements. As it turned out, the workshop was a dialogue across U.S.-American and European communities of research. Welcome addresses were given by the directors of the two co-hosting institutes, Simone Lässig and Jeroen Dewulf.

Keynote speaker Evelyn Hu-Dehart presented a global history that reaches back to the early Spanish colonial period and argued that the first “American” Chinatown emerged in present-day Philippines and that the growth of the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines was central to the consolidation of the Spanish Empire. The Chinese played an essential role in facilitating the trans-oceanic Manila Galleon trade that connected Asia, the Americas, and Europe. The area of Manila where the Chinese congregated and were later forcefully relegated marked the first “American Chinatown” because it was not only one of the earliest Chinese settlements outside of China but was situated within the legal territorial jurisdiction of the Americas-based New Spain. Throughout the lecture, she presented early colonial representations of these Chinese that resonate with stereotypes that have prevailed to the present, including the Chinese being “overly hardworking,” “economically over-competitive,” and “expert artisans in replicating” items for trade. Hu-Dehart connected these early stereotypes with her current research on Barcelona, where she suggested that similar practices are taken up by recent Chinese migrants. One critical difference, she pointed out, is that these migrants are not creating ethnically-distinct cultural institutions like Chinese food restaurants. Rather, these migrants are economically integrating into Spain without asserting their ethnic difference. She used the example of Chinese bodega entrepreneurs to illustrate this point, which was questioned by some participants in the subsequent Q&A session moderated by Lok Siu: The entrepreneurs might not culturally assert their ethnic difference; sociologically it makes a difference though whether you stand behind or in front of the bar.

During the first roundtable dedicated to the topic of concepts, Kijan Espahangizi argued for studying the emergence of knowledge on migration and re-settling as a way to reframe societal history in comprehensive and transnational ways and come to a history of the present post-migrant societies, in his case, Germany and Switzerland. Espahangizi, just as Claudia Roesch, urged us to keep in mind the vital while selective interdependencies of multiple producers of migrant knowledges: state authorities, civil society actors including migrant organizations, and academic disciplines such as an emergent “migrant sociology.” Interestingly enough, not only in the USA but also in a seemingly secular postwar Western Europe, churches, in particular, made sure to mediate between international debates on refugees, migrants, developmentalism, or the U.S.-American civil rights movement. A culturalist turn in the 1980s shifted perceptions, categories,

and notions of migration — an epistemic shift with far-reaching political consequences and in need of further analysis. Julia Roth emphasized the intellectual and epistemic afterlives of empires in the contemporary history of Latin America. She made a point of including less politically or scholarly formalized types of knowledges such as music, dance, or poetry in order to come to a better description and understanding of the world. Expanding on the research agenda of the history of science, Carlos Sanhueza Cerda presented a history of German-European-Chilean networks of scientific knowledge-making in the nineteenth century with a particular emphasis on the processes of translation and adaptation that made knowledge travel. All three papers exemplified what in German-speaking Europe has come to be known as *Wissensgeschichte*; an approach emphasizing, for instance, the benefits of transversal reading, i.e. symmetrical and relational reading across genres of literary and non-fiction texts (which also includes economic statistics, building plans, etc.). Grounded in an autonomy of migration approach, Nick de Genova confirmed that in the middle of both activist struggles and activist research epistemological questions are repeatedly addressed, if often unassumingly or without any disciplinary claims or “grandiose pretensions.” De Genova highlighted the fact that migrants of necessity inhabit the categorical contradictions and conflicting goals they interrogate — making their subversion one that comes with embodied experiences and at a high cost. One of the questions that spilled over to the next roundtable was how to deal with ignorance as the other side of knowledge in the history of knowledge but also in the history of migration.

Roundtable 2 was entitled “Voices.” Massimo Perinelli’s example of the German neo-Nazi terrorist group NSU murdering nine migrant citizens and one female police officer without ever coming into the focus of criminal investigators shows, in an extreme case, the inadvertent and willful effects of structural racism producing and maintaining collective ignorance. While it is important that the many stories that had too long been silenced have been told and researched in the aftermath of the terrorists’ self-disclosure, the protracted powerlessness, injustice, and psychological after-effects the concerned families have suffered are here to stay. Leslie Hernández Nova’s paper took the psychological after-effects of migration as a starting point. She argued for combining the methods of memory studies, oral history, and visual studies for better capturing and understanding the individual self-positioning of young migrants. Madeline Hsu and Fredy González explored a problem that contemporary historians face when

trying to make the individual lives of Asian immigrants such as the Chinese railroad workers in the American West more visible. Limited English proficiency or limited literacy are the reasons why sources written by migrants in their new (labor) environments are rare. Hsu highlighted two strategies to deal with the challenge: First, past lives and labor histories can be more generically reconstructed through the legacy of archaeological ruins of the working camps and construction sites. This allows for collaboration with historians of material culture and might yield insights that are contributing not only to a history from below but to overarching concerns in historiography, for instance, questions of temporalities or ideas of the environment as archive. In a similar vein, Kathleen Lopez argued for what could be called an archaeology of political cultures. Efforts at nation building come with their own temporalities and the possible consequence of privileging or erasing the presence of either earlier or more recently arrived groups of ethnic minorities. The second strategy to write richer histories from below is offered by multi-lingual and multi-sited research efforts, also endorsed by González and other participants. Harking back to the questions of Roundtable 1, the question was raised whether a necessary and persistent look at minority identities and state power was blinding us, perhaps, to overall societal developments at the same time? To put it bluntly: How could we make use of the alternative migrant archives once we got rid of the too readily homogenized national accounts Western research institutions and state organizations have been crafting and, perhaps inadvertently, still tend to craft? Should there be yet another wave of reading the archives against the grain? And what could such “pieces” of migrant knowledges look like?

Roundtable 3 was dedicated to “Spaces.” Structuralist approaches to migrant subjectivities and agencies, just like the material culture approaches, have much to offer. Participants of this roundtable agreed that spatial metaphors are conceptual frames, even epistemological containers that shape our perception of the “area” of analysis, the research questions we pose, and the methodologies we deploy. Each scholar elaborated on how the spatial metaphors of diaspora, borderlands, hemispheric and the Pacific have informed their research and ongoing work or were, on closer examination, discarded. Ana Paulina Lee reconstructed how migrants produced knowledge about their relational position in Brazil by placing themselves in the larger history of race, labor, and nation building in Brazil and elsewhere, such as the USA, for instance. Eiichiro Azuma underscored the metageographical

dimension implicit in concepts like the Pacific. Historians of different areas, he argued, are conditioned “to envision a geographical bounded space in particular prescribed ways when they frame their own studies around the theme of the Pacific.” This results in many Pacifics, which are often incompatible with each other. Vivek Bald, in his archival project “Bengali Harlem,” switched from a range of methodological notions of diaspora to the concepts of circuits and networks when researching the history of South Asian peddlers and ship workers in the USA. He did so first to highlight the sojourn labor realities and multiple mobilities involved and second to include into the analysis the labor history of women in support of the peddlers and workers; women who stayed put in the home villages and agricultural holdings when male villagers left, and those African American and Puerto Rican women who became the wives of the South Asian migrants in the U.S., connecting their husbands to their own local and economic environments. In her research on Mexican borders in the twentieth century, Sofie Steinberger suggested to focus on border zones as a lens for a globally-informed (economic) history of Mexico by combining the macro analysis of national and international regulations, negotiations and interests regarding territory, security, and (shadow) economies with micro analyses of political, geographic, and economic knowledge held by those on the move; knowledge that helped scale and re-scale, shape, and furnish the territorial and social spaces within Mexico and beyond. Roundtable 3 definitely called our attention to processes of scaling— from the local to the national to the regional to the global. The spatial metaphors discussed in this roundtable created different maps that indicate different spheres of power and nodes of importance as well as coextensive or alternative power relations. The metaphors or concepts allowed for absences to become apparent and different or previously submerged knowledges and phenomena to emerge. At GHI West, these questions will be further pursued in upcoming conferences and initiatives, such as a website drawing together ongoing historically-minded research and contributions around the notion of migrant knowledges while at the same time presenting this research in ways that cut across the many disciplinary fields of research on migration.

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