

Editorial Foreword

COMMENSURABILITIES Reckoning relationships between two or more objects of study—of difference, sameness, similarity, analogy, and more—presupposes a degree of commensurability. Without commensurability there can be no comparison. There is little gained, for example, by contemplating the relationship between snow tires and friendship, or sandpaper and sadness. (Though no doubt we can imagine fictional worlds in which they could become or be *made* commensurate.) Sociology, Anthropology, History, and other disciplines presuppose sufficient commensurability between scholars' objects of inquiry to allow for conversation about almost anything to take place: “societies,” kinds of “work,” “religions,” “aesthetics,” and so forth. But determining how much commensurability must be stipulated for comparison to advance is anything but straightforward. How are objects of inquiry selected out of the flow of life and made into a phenomenon or an event that then warrants interpretation? **Martha Lampland's** “The Illusion of Abstraction” digs into the processes of constructing and representing an object of study, including stages of conceptualization, choice of analytic strategy, and formal representation. Using the notion of *time* as employed by early socialist Hungary, Lampland argues that these processes of formalization both index and incorporate features of the context in which they were carried out, rendering pure abstraction or analysis a (useful) fiction.

In “‘Our Roots Are the Same’: Hegemony and Power in Narratives of Chinese Linguistic Antiquity, 1900–1949,” **Gina Anne Tam** explores the question of linguistic proximity. To what degree do local Chinese languages preserve the language of antiquity, and by extension some authentic Han-ness, better than Mandarin does? Exactly how are linguistic likenesses determined? Tam shows how such matters have high political stakes, since they are leveraged to forge claims to authority that can be used to challenge the hegemony of the so-called “national language” and thereby the state itself.

FRONTIER COMMODITIES The two papers juxtaposed here explore natural landscapes along different kinds of frontiers—the sea bottom in one case, and the mountains of Minas Gerais, Brazil in the other. Both essays recount the transfiguration of nature into commodity and show how these processes open out to broader histories and ways of seeing. **Tamara Fernando's** contribution, “Mapping Oysters and Making Oceans in the Northern Indian Ocean, 1880–1906,” navigates the world of pearl harvesting on reefs of the Indian Ocean. Fernando plunges into environmental history from a new point of view, working from the seafloor up, attending along the way to the work of divers in mapping and making the seafloor visible. Yet even when made visible, the seabed presents an *unruly terrain*, mostly out of the reach of political authorities. The seafloor holds alternative histories within it;

even humans take on a different shape when seen prismatically from below the waves. Like rays of light, environmentally histories are bent and refracted by the water.

In “Global Territorialization and Mining Frontiers in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” **Tomás Bartoletti** demonstrates the tangled imperial forces brought to bear on the extraction of gold from the mines of Minas Gerais in the early nineteenth-century rush. British and Habsburgian alliances in engineering and finance were built and secured in the cause, rivals to the Brazilian state, yet even these global powers could not erase local forms of agency. Enslaved miners and freelance prospectors continued to seek their own avenues of wealth alongside and within the joint imperial venture. In this careful study of the Brazilian mining frontier, Bartoletti reveals the complex interplay between the making of expert knowledge systems, global politics, and international finance.

POLICE AND STRIKES IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL BUREAUCRACIES Populist calls for “law and order” are nothing new, nor is the demand to decolonize the police. **Eilat Maoz** shows how both of these impulses were widespread in Jamaica of the 1970s. While such demands are perhaps routine, “Black Police Power: The Political Moment of the Jamaica Constabulary” shows something surprising: namely the transformation of a mostly radical leftist police force forged in the ideals of Black power into a repressive populist force over the course of a single decade. The hinge of this turn was the question of the Constabulary’s social mandate, namely: who are the police supposed to serve and protect? In Maoz’s analysis, Jamaican populism emerged out of the perceived failure of the emancipatory campaigns waged in the postcolonial watershed decade of the 1970s.

Student strikes against colonial administrations are likewise a familiar twentieth-century phenomenon, as an aspirational strategy of reform. In “Peaceful Wars and Unlikely Unions: The Azhar Strike of 1909 and the Politics of Comparison in Egypt,” **Aaron G. Jakes** visits Azhar University in Cairo, the famed Islamic institution of learning. The student demonstrations sought self-government in the face of unwelcome administrative changes. By identifying as a “union,” they linked the ideals of labor movements to the student strike, and also hailed the memory of constitutional revolution. Jakes shows how the Azhar Strike, though mostly forgotten, produced new tactics and representational resources that inflected the mass political mobilizations in the decades that followed.

VICTIMS AND UNFORGIVENESS Memory, victimhood, and transitional justice intersect in the three articles joined together here. **Joshua E. Rigg’s** article, “Why don’t I forgive? They didn’t ask for forgiveness!?: Manich Msamah and Tunisia’s Politics of Unforgiveness,” attends to the role of emotions as they infiltrate and suffuse judicial spaces of transitional justice. Rigg reflects on the “affect of unforgiveness” and the “I Do Not Forgive” movement in Tunisia in 2015 as it grew in resistance to a proposed Reconciliation Law that promised to restore figures from a previous repressive regime to public life. Even more, Rigg inquires after the relative stickiness of the feeling of unforgiveness. How did this affect adhere to certain people and things, and less so to others, and with what kinds of consequences?

In “Palimpsests of Violence: Ruination and the Afterlives of Genocide in Anatolia,” **Anoush Tamar Suni** tours the ruins left from the 1915 Genocide of

Ottoman Armenians and explores their afterlives. For the Kurds who now occupy and form communities in these sites of terror, the memory of the Armenian Genocide and contemporary violence against Kurds are linked, seen as sequential chapters in a century-long story of continuing violence. Suni demonstrates how physical spaces shape historical narratives, even as those narratives recursively infuse the physical space. This back-and-forth movement between space and narrative generates new possible futures for the Kurdish community, sometimes and in small ways making sites of wreckage into sites of hope.

Finally, **Kristin Foringer** interrogates the construction of the legal category of “victim,” introducing us to the case of Colombia and the 2011 Victims’ Law. In “Defining Victimhood: The Political Construction of a ‘Victim’ Category in Colombia’s Congress, 2007–2011,” Foringer guides us through labyrinthine negotiations between international human rights organizations, local judicial regimes, and partisan politics and politicians. While the law proffered the possibility of reparations to victims of civil conflict, it remained unclear exactly who should qualify for the status of “victim,” and by what criteria. In Foringer’s view, the originally capacious United Nations version of “victim” was progressively whittled away to a smaller and smaller population, as it passed through prolonged political negotiations over the content of the historical narrative, the duration and temporal framing of “victimhood,” budgetary constraints, and politicians’ personal understandings and experiences of the civil conflict. All three essays point to the affordances and the constraints—social, spatial, semiotic, and judicial—placed on the possibility of justice and the experience of resolution in the wake of trauma and violence.