


ROUNDTABLE

In Transit: Lives and Afterlives in the Suez Canal: An Introduction

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Movement is a defining feature of life, for humans, for other living beings, for the inanimate, and the Suez Canal is a place that resonates with a promise of mobilities. The discussions of this roundtable were inspired by conversations among participants at the 2021 MESA annual meeting around both the human and other-than-human that have channeled through the Suez Canal. For this roundtable, we combine the histories of fish, pathogens, prevailing winds, iron ore, sewage, and peoples—seemingly disparate and unconnected circulations and histories—all in motion through, above, under, and around the canal. Their afterlives highlight both the historical depth of the processes propelled by the canal and the unruliness of vibrant matter and living beings, each with their own life projects and interdependencies.¹

“In Transit” is structured by a beginning—1869—and extends the notion of the chronologies, shifting seafaring cultures, and causalities propelled by the Suez Canal’s opening. Tracking back seems ambitious in scope, and it is. However, we also look forward to developing this approach through a longer conversation exploring the relationships defined by trade networks, ecosystems, and sea routes, re-envisioning them as histories of social worlds involving actors that enable certain lifeforms, processes, and mobilities, while preventing others.

Unfettered by categories such as species, living or dead matter, agency, intention, nature, and culture, our roundtable considers forms of world-making that involve humans and other animals and agents. It will, we think, encourage examination of moments in history and changes in mobilities that lay bare the central political, economic, and legal transformations that have accompanied the Suez Canal. As fragmented and spread out as the protagonists in these essays appear, they provide a fascinating basis for understanding the effects of global shipping on human life and nature. Conceptually, modes of non-human types of mobilities help us understand more clearly how living and dead matter circulate and why some forms flourish while others peter out or are forced into blind alleys.

From the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, when the Egyptian ruler Isma‘il Pasha announced that human ingenuity had removed Egypt from Africa and placed it in Europe, the waters of the canal have been at the center of imperialist ambitions, technological progress in shipping and communication, commercial rivalries, and wars.² With the discovery of

¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

² Lucia Carminati, “Port Said and Ismailia as Desert Marvels: 1859–1869,” *Journal of Urban History* 46, no. 3 (2020): 622–47; Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

oil in the Middle East in the early twentieth century, the peripheral desert scenery on the way between the transit zone—East and West—now became a prime concern of world economies. The economic and political importance of the Suez Canal today cannot be overstated: one-tenth of global trade passes through it, and oil from the Middle East accounts for eighty-five percent of the canal's northbound traffic.³

From shipping routes and trade networks to technologies and commodities, the merging of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean set seafaring infrastructures, cultures, and various other elements in motion. An exciting field of current research has emerged from environmental studies and revolves around the Middle East's changing ecologies. For example, in *The Lived Nile*, Jennifer Derr makes the Nile River her protagonist, tracing how transformations of the river over the course of the twentieth century altered agricultural practice and products, and impacted labor, economies, and the bodies of those working the land.⁴ At play here is the role of scientific experts in reshaping the river, generating profit, and diagnosing ailments. This is just one of the timely works of scholarship at the forefront of environmental histories and ethnographies of the Middle East, demonstrating the interplay between human and non-human forms of life.

It is not only ships that pass through the Suez Canal, but also a host of other entities. With this roundtable, we ask who or what is being brought into the histories of the canal and who or what is being left out? Living beings have their projects and social worlds, and creating constructs for understanding individuals, be they human or other species, is to account for these life projects and their relationships. On a general level, this roundtable presents a rescaled view of the Middle East, tracing often overlooked past and present passages through the Suez Canal.

The Suez Canal is monumental in the history of the world's oceans from every possible perspective, human and other. Monumental for both the desired and pernicious marine life that made its way through the canal and their migrations connecting the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea, establishing new and often unwelcome colonies of fishes and jellyfish; and monumental for the people who urbanized the canal, controlled its accessibility, were quarantined in its port cities and camps, settled there but later moved on to further shores, and for whom the Suez Canal was either a gateway or an obstacle to desired citizenship.

Given the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and local character of the nodes and networks revealed, even created, by the opening of the Suez Canal, our roundtable includes ethnographic histories of distinctive areas and mobilities touched by the canal, from Arab East Africa to the Mediterranean: Zanzibar, Oman, Port Said, Ismailia, El Tor, Beirut, and Nice. These essays are about “histories in the now” and aim to inspire a fresh way of thinking about all sorts of movements along a central Indian Ocean-Mediterranean corridor connected by currents from the Suez Canal, which can be imagined as a series of linked, intersecting offshore regions and seafaring cultures of strikingly different types.

The Suez Canal is a “terraqueous predicament,” to borrow the words of Liam Campling and Alejandro Colaás, meaning “consisting of land and water,” as well as a connecting point between land and seas.⁵ As these essays reveal, neither entries into nor exits from the canal to seas beyond were straightforward, intentional, or predictable; instead, mobilities resisted and refashioned species, material, and human life. The contributors to this roundtable write from different perspectives—from under, above, and along the Suez Canal and between, inside, and outside the different journeys that occupy its sea lanes—but always

³ Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020).

⁴ Jennifer L. Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁵ Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Verso, 2021), 3.

with water under our feet. This approach undermines the divides made through land-fixed territories and nation-states.

While most of time this desert isthmus dividing Africa and Asia is scorching, on March 23, 2021, a cold front swept eastward across Egypt. As these powerful winds came southeast along the Red Sea into the southern end of the Suez Canal, accompanied by the seasonal khamsin of heat, sand, and dust, the Ever Given—one of the largest container ships in the world—somehow became wedged sideways into the canal's bank, blocking this essential artery of world trade for six days. Whether or how the winds and dust played a role in the grounding the Ever Given raised questions about climate change and its impact on global trade. However, for some who grew up along the Canal Zone, such events are just part of the landscape. Jacqueline, with whom I have enjoyed an ongoing conversation since early 2020 and who figures prominently in my research on the community of foreign women of the Canal Zone, was born in 1935 in Port Said. She shrugs at the fuss; vivid in her memory, these winds have always swept back and forth across the waters of the African Mediterranean.

Jacqueline—the name she uses—now lives with her niece in southern France, on the European shores of the Mediterranean. She was one of my grandmother's neighbors in Alexandria, Egypt, and recently reminisced with me about their long friendship. The two women lived in the same building in Alexandria. Jacqueline's apartment was on the second floor, facing the mosque, but she preferred to visit my grandmother in her apartment, as it was on the top floor with a direct view of the Corniche and sea beyond. They would sit on a spacious window seat with large soft cushions, Jacqueline sitting across from my grandmother, and they would smoke, chat in French, drink strong coffee, and enjoy the *bahrī*, the salty summer breeze that comes directly from the sea.

Jacqueline liked my grandmother's open window to the Mediterranean because it reminded her of her young, happy days in Port Said. Jacqueline was born into a Maltese family who came to Port Said in the nineteenth century, after the canal opened, to find work; they came as “entrepreneurs” and settled and stayed until “foreigners were no longer welcomed.” While most of her family left in the latter part of the twentieth century for Australia and the Mediterranean's northern shores, Jacqueline found work in a foreign consulate in Alexandria. Although she only spoke some Arabic, her French and Italian were fluent. Summer was the time of the *bahrī*, the breeze that brought relief from heat so brutal that she got a sunburn and sunstroke in the shade, and when her next-door neighbors in Port Said, “Syro-Lebanese” families, with snacks in hand, pulled their TV onto the porch or balcony—because the heat was unmanageable inside—and turned the volume up so that whoever went in for more refreshments would be able to follow. Jacqueline and I talk on Messenger and sometimes she turns on the video. For her, the summer breezes on the south coast of France might be different, but “still they are tender visits from my life,” she says.

The prevailing winds Jacqueline speaks of now have traveled far across the face of the Mediterranean before they reach her in Nice. Her story, Port Said, and the summer sea breeze is a familiar narrative about people and the journeys they take, willingly or under duress. When Jacqueline and my other Port Said interlocuters speak of their past lives along the Suez Canal, they speak of a world that had no such a thing as frontiers or borders. The group of people I write about dispersed from the canal region to various areas around the Mediterranean in the latter half of the twentieth century. I refer to them as the “Suez Canal Society” because that is how they refer to themselves, with the word “society” in the singular. Their sagas tell of journeys that begin in and, at least in their minds and memories, return to a particular place—the Suez Canal—even when it is no longer where they live and, in many cases, a place to which they promised never to return. The women in my current research were born in Port Said between 1928 and 1942 to second- or third-generation families that migrated from Italy, Lebanon, Greece, and Malta. Gradually, they developed notions of culture that made them specifically Port Saidians and characterized their understanding

of what they call a “Suez Canal Society.” They attended a French Catholic school called Le Bon Pasteur, spoke French, Italian, and “many other languages,” and learned to speak English “because there were nice English men around.” They worked in family-run hotels and shops, hospitals, and schools, as nannies, secretaries, and teachers, vacationed in rented cabins on the “Port Said Mediterranean beach,” met their spouses and gave birth to at least one of their children in Port Said.

Jacqueline never married; she declares this in a way that stops me from asking more on that matter. It was a time filled with eating ice cream at a Swiss pastry parlor, evening strolls along the canal, night life in Port Fouad, driving in convertibles with a scarf tied just like Brigitte Bardot, invitations to the French 14 July celebrations, the shops opening and closing according to the schedule of ships passing through the canal, and all of this with the saltiness of the summer breeze.

The troubles—crises and wars—found the women and their families lost. They remember the troubles, and their comments are clipped: “We were not welcomed anymore,” “Arabs hated us,” or in Jacqueline’s condensed response, “the canal closed [to us]. Nothing to keep us in Port Said.” She moved to Alexandria because it was a place she knew, her uncle lived there, and the Mediterranean and soft summer breeze reminded her of Port Said.

The lay of this maritime space opens themes in its history that have resulted in losses, but also in a kind of amiability between peoples and communities that weaves in and out of Jacqueline’s memories. Conviviality, though, is a trap that anyone who writes about life during Egypt’s cosmopolitan moment between the 1850s and 1950s can easily fall into. Notions of cosmopolitanism created by the Suez Canal get caught up in discussions of whether this phenomenon belongs to an imaginary distant past—à la Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*, for example.⁶

Another discussion warns of the importance of steering away from tragic narratives that obfuscate the history foreigners shared with Egyptians, both Muslim and Christian; narratives suggesting that post-colonial nationalism was axiomatic and the movement of foreigners out of Egypt was both inevitable and necessary. A more recent nostalgic literature, written mainly in the form of memoirs, interviews, and Facebook group posts, seems to marginalize the very fault-lines in cosmopolitanism surrounding the Suez Canal, the First World War and Second World War eras and their aftermath, which people lived through. I call attention to these approaches, but not for reductive purposes; on the contrary, such are mere indications of some of the unique operations of the politics of memory that the Suez Canal engenders. Although migrant spaces regarded as culturally different had acquired designations reflected in neighborhood vernacular—place names such as the “Greek Club” or “the quarter of the Maltese”—this did not preclude broader patterns of convivencia, at least for a particular period in history.

The journeys of Jacqueline and other members of the “Port Said Society” are among the itineraries I follow in my current research on the peoples whose lives were shaped by the canal, as they arrived in the ports or traveled through the canal and beyond. Neither boarding ships to sail to oceans beyond nor disembarking from them in ports along the way were straightforward, intentional or predictable acts. These travelers’ sagas are just one facet of the many kinds of mobilities that have passed through or lingered along the Suez Canal.

In the imagination of its architects, the Suez Canal was a site of splendid and prosperous maritime cities that looked outwards. Indeed, voyages through the Suez Canal were fabulous journeys for those who could indulge in all-inclusive comfort. Lucia Carminati writes about the beginnings of Port Said. The story is complicated. Physical development involved massive land reclamation, mostly in the form of the extension of wharves into the sea. In Carminati’s essay, we get the deep history of the distances and connections between Port Said and the rest of Egypt after the port-town’s foundation in 1859 as the first and northernmost site of Suez Canal excavation.

⁶ Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1992).

Hygiene was another growing concern in Port Said, as it grew into a dual city split into Arab and “foreign” enclaves marked by affiliations, nationality, and class. Mohamed Gamal El-Din explains in his essay how the Suez Canal Company (SCC) engineers looked to Paris, where a sewer system that put all human waste into a system of pipes had been constructed in the 1890s. Concerns over the spread of cholera arriving with ships and the miserable living conditions of the canal cities pushed the SCC to build indoor plumbing, with a system of drains and pipes to carry waste away, first in European neighborhoods, and only later, well into the twentieth century, in the Arab quarters.

The Suez Canal also channeled a corridor between two seas through which other-than-humans would drift. “Microbes moved through bodies, and bodies moved on ships, and ships moved up the Gulf of Suez, and through the Suez Canal,” writes Beth Baron. In El Tor, on the Sinai Peninsula far to the south of the city of Suez, a quarantine station was set up in 1877 with the aim of protecting Europe from “Asiatic” diseases. With its quarantine station in El Tor, the Suez Canal contributed to some major shifts in scientific thinking in the nineteenth century, with the growth of the laboratory as a site for study resulting in breakthroughs in bacteriology and the rise of new scientific methods for stopping the spread of disease carried by pilgrims traveling to and from the hajj. Indeed, the crossings of the canal were structured, supported, and circumvented by an array of laboratories—for colonial medicine and post-colonial medications, destinations for studying diseases—especially those labeled tropical—and testing and refining surgical methods and vaccines.

The essays of “In Transit” follow many other kinds of movement through the canal, including those of migrants from the African and European Mediterranean who overlapped with peoples crossing from the canal’s Red Sea passage. We are acutely aware of the canal’s range of affiliations with its Indian Ocean route, anti-colonial resistance, and alliances in post-colonial struggles. For this series, Mandana Limbert’s essay recounts how families in Oman tell of the vicious assaults against descendants of Arab families in the aftermath of the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar. For those trying to flee, the “choke point” was Zanzibar’s harbor, which was both an oceanic crossroad of British, French, German, and Omani imperial power interests and reinforced the legal limits on human mobility—in this case, through the Suez Canal and Port Said—that followed the introduction of the global passport at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The opening of the canal put the waters and shores of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean in direct contact, blending with what marine biologists term “Lessepsian migration” (LM)—after Ferdinand de Lesseps, founder of the Suez Canal Company—the northward movement of marine species through the Suez Canal from the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. Early on, the dramas of underwater trails went unnoticed; they were secondary to cargo and therefore considered less important. But the seawaters were brimming with visible and invisible life. For this roundtable, Samuli Lähteenaho follows *Pterois miles*, the lionfish. An at first unremarked upon seafarer native to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean that made its way through the Suez Canal, the lionfish, once established and at home on the shores of Casino du Liban in Beirut, became an invasive and venomous nuisance. An ocean literacy campaign aimed at mitigating the damage promoted the non-human migrant as an exotic gastronomical experience. The gush of warm water through the Suez Canal brought another migrant creature that continues to make headlines: *Rhopilema nomadica*, the jellyfish. Karin Ahlberg writes how, in the shadow of imperial projects, the mobility of all species, large and small, influences the course of history. This pale blue creature, measuring about sixty centimeters across, with thousands of stinging tentacles, makes its own history by choking power plants and damaging tourism and human health.

My colleague Karin Ahlberg and I convened the 2021 MESA panel during the global Covid-19 pandemic. The seas, oceans, and seafarers that keep global trade, food circulations, and energy moving had been shut down. The realities of that moment contribute, I think, to

the essays of “In Transit” Movement is the common theme of this roundtable, and studies of the Suez Canal may also begin, as we have attempted here, from a comprehensive view of the different seafaring cultures and circulations, on and under the surface, that considers expected and practical outcomes alongside unruly afterlives that return to haunt human and other-than-human maritime ecosystems. We hope our essays will bring the Middle East further into the maritime conversation and the maritime conversation further into the Middle East.

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