

Pacific Circle Newsletter

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Liana Chua, “‘If God is with Us, Who Can Be against US?’: Christianity, Cosmopolitics, and Living with Difference in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo,” *Current Anthropology* 63:6 (December 2022) 714-736.

Abstract:

This article puts the analytic of “indigenous cosmopolitics” (as used by Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena) in dialogue with the anthropology of Christianity through an ethnography of a dam construction and resettlement project in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. Drawing on long-term fieldwork in the area, I explore how both God and Christian ethno-theology became imbricated with a group of indigenous villagers’ legal struggle to resist the scheme and the template of progressive, modern citizenship bound up with it. I suggest that the villagers’ efforts constituted a form of Christian cosmopolitics that sought to disrupt Sarawakian politics as usual by bringing a previously inconceivable outcome—and a different way of being different—into being. Their eventual victory and its aftermath, however, raise critical questions about the limits and untapped possibilities of “cosmopolitical” proposals, as well as about contemporary anthropology’s own ethico-political approaches to difference.

Book Reviews

Michael A. Verney. *A Great and Rising Nation: Naval Exploration and Global Empire in the Early US Republic.* American Beginnings, 1500-1900 Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 320 pp. \$105.00 (cloth) [ISBN 978-0-226-81838-2](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58231); \$35.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Abby Mullen (United States Naval Academy) **Published on** H-Environment (January 2023) **Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58231>

In *A Great and Rising Nation*, Michael A. Verney argues that to understand the United States' imperialist impulses in the antebellum period, we must pay closer attention to the activities of the US Navy, particularly the navy's exploration expeditions from the 1830s to 1850s. Navy explorations, Verney contends, helped to bolster the United States' aspirations to being a great power without the requisite military and diplomatic buildup that had corrupted its European counterparts. The United States tried to use knowledge and science as a way to gain credibility in the European community, establishing an empire of knowledge in far-flung regions of the world. In each chapter, Verney argues that explorers appealed to varied facets of white, middle- or upper-class anxieties and interests to execute a number of expeditions funded in part or in whole by the federal government under the auspices of the US Navy.

Chapter 1 addresses how men like Jeremiah Reynolds tried to convince white Americans to support an empire of knowledge, cultivating relationships with many elite members of society to fund his expeditions to the Pacific. He had to convince commercial, naval, and government interests to turn away from their concerns about imperialism and toward the good that might result from exploration.

Though Reynolds himself was not extremely successful, as chapter 2 demonstrates, the groundwork he laid bore fruit in the US Exploring Expedition of 1838-42. The expedition illuminated to men like President Andrew Jackson the value of an empire of commerce; thus, despite its tremendous scientific accomplishments, the expedition, Verney notes, was "a

voyage for capitalism first, natural history second” (p. 69). Securing the seas for commerce turned out to be a compelling argument for naval exploration.

In chapter 3, perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book, Verney argues that the success of naval exploration hinged significantly on public relations; how explorers, specifically those involved in the US Exploring Expedition, talked about themselves matters. The publication of scientific volumes allowed members of the expedition to control the narrative and assert national and racial dominance over the places and people the expedition surveyed, as well as over the European powers who were doing their own explorations. This flurry of publication helped to change the tide from skepticism over American state-sponsored exploration to full-throated support.

In chapter 4, Verney turns to one of the more bizarre expeditions in the antebellum period: the state-supported expedition to survey the Dead Sea. He argues that we have to understand this expedition in the context of evangelical fervor as well as empire. As officials in the government saw threats to Christianity mapped onto threats to the nation, they were eager to learn more about the roots of Christianity and perhaps even prove, definitively, that the Bible was a historically accurate document. However, ironically, the expedition relied heavily on the support of Muslim locals, not just for labor but also for help in interpreting the findings the expedition made.

If the Dead Sea expedition was primarily about the ideology of an American empire, the pro-slavery expeditions discussed in chapter 5 were purely practical: southern enslavers who were concerned about revolts by enslaved people and the need for virgin land suddenly became interested in exploration when such men as Matthew Fontaine Maury proposed the idea of finding suitable land in the Amazon for the expansion of slavery. Maury selected Brazil as the ideal location, and the naval lieutenant William Lewis Herndon who went on the expedition came back with great news: the Amazon was exactly the right kind of place to expand into. But in both this expedition and the subsequent Rio de la Plata expedition, the American explorers failed to consider a key factor, namely, that the countries of South America might not want the United States to encroach on their territory. So despite the success of the expeditions, the end goal was never achieved.

In chapter 6, the author argues for exploration as a tool for successful foreign relations, presented in terms of chivalry and medieval manhood. When Sir John Franklin went missing on an expedition to the Arctic, both American and British explorers rallied to the cause of finding him, in part at the encouragement of Lady Franklin. Americans saw their participation in the search for Franklin as a sign of “civilizational maturity,” putting them on par with the British (p. 176). In an era of strained relations between the United States and Great Britain, the two Grinnell expeditions allowed the two nations to work toward the same goal and perhaps even smooth over some of the conflicts elsewhere. Even though the Grinnell expeditions were a public-private partnership, they were seen as a nationalistic project, and the navy supplied ten of seventeen members of the second expedition. But none of the expeditions of this era found Franklin.

Whether through the solidification of religious beliefs, the ability to know the world fully through science, or the enactment of medieval fantasies of white manhood, all of the explorations of the antebellum period, Verney argues, point to a single idea: the establishment of white, middle- or upper-class American identity. He takes care to explicate all the ways these expeditions would not have been possible without the intervention of non-white actors, however. And in the end, this age of exploration came to an end when the United States entered into the Civil War, which changed almost everything about how the United States saw its place in the world.

A Great and Rising Nation is an important addition to the scholarship of the antebellum navy, especially the period between 1830 and 1860, which has been sorely underexplored. Each chapter is clearly intended to be able to stand largely on its own, making it an ideal candidate for assigning portions in undergraduate or graduate classes. Despite this structure, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the reader will be richly repaid by reading the whole work and considering its many facets as a unit.

Citation: Abby Mullen. Review of Verney, Michael A., *A Great and Rising Nation: Naval Exploration and Global Empire in the Early US Republic*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. January 2023. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58231>

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Fellowships, Awards and Prizes

Royal Society Early Career Research Award

This award consists of a cash prize and publication in the Society's Journal and cash prizes for the runner-up and honorable mentions. Applicants should submit a previously unpublished essay of no more than 12,000 words based on original research. It can relate to any aspect of the history of science, technology and medicine in any historical period.

The deadline for submission is February 28, 2023.

Further information at <https://royalsocietypublishing.org.rsnr/essay-award>.

Annals of Science Prize for 2023

This prize is awarded by the Annals of Science to the author of an original, unpublished essay in the history of science, technology, and medicine not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. The prize is intended for those who are currently doctoral students or have earned their doctorate within the past four years.

The deadline is January 31, 2023.

Please send submissions to Mordecai Feingold at feingold@caltech.edu

IUHPST Essay Prize in History and Philosophy of Science

“First Research Article” Fellowship Program

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin

September 1, 2023 – February 29, 2024

The Max Planck Institute is offering two fellowships for outstanding graduate students. Applicants should demonstrate their commitment to a research topic related to the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine, or Science and Technology Studies and a need to work with an international community to prepare and publish their first single-authored research paper in the English language. Eligible students should be in good standing through February 29, 2024, and should have completed the archival research for their work and can devote six months to writing and preparing an article in English for journal publication.

Applicants should send the following in English through the online portal:

<https://recruitment.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.ed/position/23330824>

1. Official proof of enrollment and good standing in an accredited graduate program from your PhD thesis or confirmation by your university.
2. Brief description of the dissertation.

3. CV and list of publications.
4. Title, abstract and outline of intended essay (maximum of 750 words).
5. English writing sample.
6. Letter of recommendation from one supervisor.

Please submit the above no later than February 15, 2023.

Upcoming Conferences

- The 32nd Annual World History Association Conference will be held from June 22 - 24, 2023 at the University of Pittsburgh's World History Center. To learn about the keynote speakers and/or register at the early rate go to <https://www.thewha.org/conferences/2023-energies/>. If you have specific questions, email info@thewha.org.
- The School of Pacific and Asian Studies (SPAS) and the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) invites proposals for papers, performances, and panels that seek to move beyond the 'traditional' regions of Asia for the 34th annual Asian Studies Graduate Student Conference, held in-person at the Center for Korean Studies on the UHM campus in Honolulu, Hawai'i, on April 27–28, 2023. Beyond the constructed and narrow boundaries of South, Southeast, West, Central, and East Asia, the conference presents participants with the opportunity to think particularly about the movements of peoples, ideas, forms, and technologies across space and time through the perspective of Inter-Asia. Applicants should submit a 250-300 word abstract by **January 25, 2023, 11.59PM (HST)**. Visit <https://spasgraduateconference2023.wordpress.com/> for more information.
- The UHM Center for Southeast Asian Studies invites paper proposals for its Spring 2023 symposium, "Climate Change and South Asia." This symposium invites scholars in the interpretive social sciences, humanities, arts, architecture, business, planning, public health, and policy studies, among others, to share research and artistic work, and join together in conversations about climate change in South Asia. The virtual event will be held April 18 & 19, 2023. [Abstracts can be submitted here](#) until **January 31, 2023**.

Indigenous Histories of Encounters in Asia-Pacific

University of Cambridge, 19–20 June 2023

Keynote speakers: **Lynette Russell** (Monash University) and **Michael T. Carson** (University of Guam)

The field of global history has embraced a call for new histories that cross borders and emphasise migrations and connections across large scales. Yet, in doing so, the field has at times overemphasised the history of European empires. This conference will explore new decolonial approaches which emphasise the agency of Indigenous and other non-European

actors within the bustling, cross-cultural worlds of Asia-Pacific. Taking inspiration from the field of Pacific history, we will explore entanglements across oceanic spaces, shifting the focus from the dominance of European traditions towards analyses of cross-cultural exchanges.

We seek to broaden the geographical focus to incorporate the worlds of both the Pacific and Maritime Southeast Asia and beyond, including Latin America. This wider scope will allow for an exciting, boundary-shifting dialogue between Pacific, Asian, and Latin American historians working within the fields of Indigenous history and non-European histories of globalisation and cross-cultural exchange. We call for abstracts concerned with any time period but especially encourage those focussed on the pre-modern era, which has been underrepresented in scholarship. We welcome contributions that cut across different methodologies and forms of historical evidence, including Indigenous studies, decolonisation, visual and material culture, ethnography, and archaeology.

We invite proposals for individual 20-minute papers that focus on:

- Non-European conceptualisations of the Pacific or Maritime Spaces in Asia-Pacific
- Indigenous connections across maritime space
- Decolonial approaches to empire in Asia-Pacific
- Indigenous knowledge systems and Indigenous historical methodologies
- Non-European global histories of exchange

We especially encourage contributions from **PhD students** and **early career scholars**. We also aim to publish a selection of papers from the conference as a Special Issue in a peer-reviewed journal.

Please submit an abstract (c.250 words) and a brief bio to Indigenous.AsiaPacific@gmail.com by **20 January 2023**.

Biennial ANZSHM Conference

12-15 July 2023

Health & Medical Science Building, University of Adelaide

The Australian and New Zealand Society of the History of Medicine (ANZSHHM) invites participants to its 18th Biennial Conference with the theme of “Second Opinions.” Grants for postgraduate students and early career researchers are available. For further information, please visit: www.anzshm2023.com or ncosta@ncevents.com.au