



Renisa Mawani. *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire.*

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Renisa Mawani has written a beautifully conceived, deeply researched, and elegantly argued book that all of us should read. In it, she takes us (as the title suggests) on a voyage across several oceans—the Indian, the Atlantic, and the Pacific—weaving together a rich tapestry that moves backward and forward across broad stretches of time. In my reading of it, the book is at its core a history of the juridification of the sea, but truthfully, it is about much more than that, taking on questions of technology, mobility, race, empire, and anti-colonialism that unfolded across a broad canvas of space and time.

To appreciate what Mawani has given us, we ought to anchor it within a growing body of literature on oceanic history—on thinking about oceans as arenas of connection, circulation, and exchange, rather than as barriers to communication. Thinking about oceans, scholars now argue, allows us to write between and beyond the analytic containers of continents and empires that once characterized the world history project, and allows us to foreground the movement of people, goods, texts, and ideas across geographical and political boundaries. Mawani invites her readers to think within a framework she calls “oceans as method”—a form of historical writing that, drawing on the metaphor of oceanic currents, em-

braces heterogeneity and plurality along with connection and mobility, and trains our focus on the competing and overlapping attempts by which different groups tried to impose their visions of order onto the seascape.

And this is where Mawani’s book most clearly situates itself: in oceanic *legal* history rather than oceanic history more broadly. The oceanic turn in history has only recently drawn in legal historians, many of whom have focused on the process by which oceanic arenas emerged as sites of legal contestation, but also as productive sites for thinking about transregional legal histories.[1] By anchoring her writing in the ocean, Mawani explores the circulation of parallel (and often competing) visions of law and order at sea. One part of this is a known story of the process by which an emerging European imperial and capitalist regime sought to establish the sea as an arena of free trade, focusing principally on the technologies they mobilized to govern the sea and regularize movement across it. However, Mawani takes apart the standard narrative and re-braids it, interlacing it with the history of the movement of slaves, indentured workers, and immigrants. In her telling of it, the story of the ship *Komagatu Maru* brings into focus the currents and counter-

currents of law that animated the movement of colonial subjects across oceanic spaces.

Mawani's telling of the story of the *Komagatu Maru* unfolds along five substantive chapters, sandwiched between an introduction and epilogue in which she frames and reflects on the broader methodological and theoretical issues that motivate the book. In the first chapter, Mawani lays out the debates that unfolded over the early modern period between European jurists—principally Hugo Grotius, William Welwod, and John Seldon—over the status of the sea in global imperial regimes, and discusses how the British Empire sought to impose order on the waves through technologies like the chronometer and the global regime of Greenwich Meridian Time. After establishing this broad context, she pivots to the story of Hussain Rahim, an Indian lawyer who arrived in Vancouver before the *Komagatu Maru*. She reads the challenges he issued to immigration restrictions there as having posited an alternative vision of order in which European supremacy was challenged by the movement of Indians and the flows of people and ships to and from India, across both land and sea. The chapter sets the stage for the rest of the story, establishing the competing visions of the world of empire and mobility that would frame the history of the *Komagatu Maru*.

In chapter 2, Mawani takes on the history of the *Komagatu Maru* itself: its multiple lives, ideas surrounding its personhood, and the longer histories that shaped them. The *Komagatu Maru*, we learn, was the ship's third incarnation: it had previously served as an Atlantic passenger ship and a coal barge. As she traces the ship's three lives, Mawani layers on the histories of empire, slavery, and indenture that carved the routes it plied, and charted out the concomitant development of regimes that fixed the status of ships at sea. Readers are treated to a tour de force of admiralty law, deodand, and ship flagging stretching back several centuries—an unfolding narrative of the legal

personhood of the ship that Mawani skillfully contrasts with a parallel history by which ships' human cargoes were stripped of their personhood. She ultimately brings this back to the *Komagatu Maru* itself, where technologies like the passenger list bore the imprint of those intertwined histories.

By chapter 3, readers will have already arrived off the shore of Vancouver, where debates raged on about whether the *Komagatu Maru*'s passengers had the right to disembark. Drawing on the case material, Mawani picks apart the discourses that animated these discussions, which reflected on the place of Indian immigrants vis-à-vis Europeans within the long march of civilizational progress—a discourse that affirmed the existence of a clear racial hierarchy within the dominions of the British Empire. The chapter includes an interesting aside on the ship manifest, both as a subject of discussion in the case itself and as an object from which to reflect on the maritime histories of the paper technologies of governance.

Mawani pivots away from the narrative of the ship in chapter 4, where she instead reflects on the discourses of indigeneity that circulated within the British Empire, framing them as an “anti-colonial vernacular.” Grounding her discussion in India and South Africa, she explores how discussions surrounding the history of dispossession of indigenous people in North America circulated within the press and buttressed Indian challenges to the racial hierarchies of the British Empire. Mawani is careful to point out that this was neither a frictionless nor an unproblematic discourse, as those same Indians would frequently highlight their superiority to Africans and would present themselves as willing partners in the settler colonialist project.

In the final substantive chapter, readers follow Gurdit Singh, the ship's captain, back to India from Vancouver. She details the event that would become known as the Budge Budge Massacre, in

which twenty of the ship's passengers were shot by colonial police in Calcutta after resisting their attempts at forcibly removing them to Punjab. In the wake of Budge Budge, Singh fled colonial authorities and spent the next several years moving around India, meeting with various anticolonial political figures, including Mahatma Gandhi. Drawing on his movements and memoirs, Mawani teases out Singh's political imaginary and its relationship to broader currents of anticolonial and nationalist thought in India at the time.

Although *Across Oceans of Law* is ostensibly about the *Komagatu Maru*—and the ship and its passengers do feature prominently in the narrative Mawani presents us with—it is much more about the world that swirls around the ship as it crosses the ocean and anchors outside of different ports than it is about the ship itself. The ship might be a useful narrative device, but the real subject is the ocean of laws, of colonialism, of migrants, and of regulation that the *Komagatu Maru*'s journey brings into focus. This is a voyage in which the reader accumulates more than three hundred years of history, of debates on freedom of movement at sea, of changing notions of time in both the temporal and civilizational sense of the term, and of empire and immigration. What Mawani presents us with is no less than a world history at sea—one that eschews Whiggish narratives of technological progress and triumph in favor of “an alternative set of coordinates and chronologies through which to analyze circuits of law, race, and empire as regimes of power that worked horizontally, vertically, and in several dimensions” (p. 236).

Mawani's grounding of this broad history in the voyage of a single ship is a laudable move. The voyage of the *Komagatu Maru* allows for a more textured and readable narrative, which Mawani amply delivers on. It allows her to move down from the realm of abstraction, which her broader analytic interests often draw her toward, and into the concrete movements and trials of the ship and

its passengers. Without the ship as a narrative anchor, the conceptual apparatus she erects over the course of the book would have become too unwieldy: the broad issues of law, race, indigeneity, technology, empire, and anticolonialism that she takes on would have made for a virtually unreadable book.

Mawani is of course not the first person to follow a single vessel to illustrate broader world-historical concerns: Robert Harms's *The Diligent: A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (2002), Sean M. Kelley's *The Voyage of the Slave Ship Hare: A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina* (2016), and Michael Wintroub's *The Voyage of Thought: Navigating Knowledge across the Sixteenth-Century World* (2017) all take the same approach of using a single ship's voyage as a way to explore its era. What distinguishes Mawani from these other texts is less her approach than the broader historical tapestry that she weaves across the book, one that stretches out over at least a few hundred years. Hers is less a story about a particular moment in history than it is a set of reflections on the production of the modern world. The somewhat exceptional voyage of the *Komagatu Maru*—and there is nothing ordinary about the ship or about Singh—constitutes a breach in the fabric of twentieth-century history that allows us to see not only the fabric as a whole but also the individual threads that comprised it.

Because of Mawani's primary interest in the world around the *Komagatu Maru*, those who are invested in learning the story of the ship itself and its passengers might find themselves somewhat disappointed. Mawani firmly grounds two of the five chapters in the story of the ship and its travails; the rest mention it in passing, preferring instead to focus on much broader issues that the ship's movement raises. Readers do not learn much at all about what took place on board the ship itself, and only a little more about what was going on in many of the places—Calcutta, Hong Kong, and Japan—it stopped at on its way to Van-

couver. Mawani tells us early on that some of these places are important—that Hong Kong, for example, was a hotbed of radicalism—but we rarely learn much more. This is not a critique but rather a warning to readers who expect to find in Mawani’s work a global microhistory of the *Komagatu Maru*’s voyage. The voyage drives the story, yes, but Mawani is more interested in reflecting on the *longue durée* of law and empire in the ocean.

Given its subject matter, I imagine that this book will likely find its principal audience among oceanic historians, who will find in it a provocation to think more seriously about the process by which the sea is produced and regulated as a site of mobility and circulation. Historians thinking about questions of international law and the sea will thus find themselves particularly drawn to it, but those interested in the history of migration and empire will find much to engage with as well. Beyond the discipline of history, this book will find an interested readership among social scientists thinking about international migration, particularly in maritime contexts: the recent refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and the question of the Rohingya immediately come to mind.

I would be remiss if I did not dedicate at least a few sentences to Mawani’s prose. She writes beautifully, in graceful prose that sometimes borders on the lyrical. Her writing moves us effortlessly through the thickets of legal history and animates what could otherwise have been an intensely dry topic. I often found myself copying out entire sentences as I read them; her writing is really that good. The book is also beautifully produced and includes a number of images that help bring the story to life. All told, Mawani’s book deserves a broad readership; and with writing like hers, it will undoubtedly enjoy one.

Note

[1]. Interested readers should consult the special issues “Travels of Law: Indian Ocean Itineraries,” special issue, *Law and History Review* 32, no.

4 (November 2014); and “The Indian Ocean of Law: Hybridity and Space,” special issue 2, *Itinerario* 42 (August 2018).

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