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A MARITIME RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IN AREA STUDIES

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ABSTRACT. The area-studies model of global scholarship, based on dividing the world into a set number of large, quasi-continental regions, is under assault from a variety of intellectual and institutional forces. New, less rigid models of global scholarship are increasingly being called for by both scholars and funding agencies. One useful alternative, currently being explored at Duke University, reframes area studies around ocean and sea basins. Putting maritime interactions at the center of vision brings to light a set of historical regions that have largely remained invisible on the conventional map of the world. Keywords: area studies, metageography, oceans, world regions.

The area-studies enterprise has arguably been the most successful interdisciplinary project in American academic history. It has unquestionably internationalized U.S. intellectual life, facilitating a nascent movement beyond the parochial limitations of a national and, more broadly, a Western framework. At its best, the area-studies model has nurtured a global perspective, one in which every part of the world—or at least every world region—is considered in its own right. Owing largely to area-studies initiatives, the geographical scope of the U.S. academy is more global than that of any other nation.

Ironically, the discipline of geography has never figured prominently in those initiatives. On the contrary, it has often been virtually invisible. Among the twelve fields represented at the most recent meeting of the Association for Asian Studies—an umbrella organization that covers no fewer than four area-studies communities (those devoted to East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia)—geography was not even listed. (Philosophy, by contrast, was represented by twenty-six scholars, roughly 1 percent of the total participants.) This situation should be more than a little disturbing for practitioners of a discipline the original mandate of which was to span the earth in its entirety and the purview of which includes the delineation of regions—a process upon which the entire area-studies edifice rests.

But there is another reason for concern as well. Although area studies may have been successful in the past, its future is by no means secure. The entire enterprise is

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now under assault from a variety of intellectual movements and institutional forces (Shea 1997). Among other things, the resulting crisis has prompted sober reflection on the ways in which the area-studies complex has divided and studied the world. The Ford Foundation, a crucial funding source for language and area training, is currently engaged in a major effort to revitalize area studies, lest it be supplanted by a vague "globalism" that avoids place-, culture-, and language-specificity. Central to this revitalization effort is the imagining of new geographies—new spatial frameworks that encourage alternative ways of seeing the world, in an effort to capture some of the elusive, emergent relationships and realities of our day.

The ongoing effort to critique and redraw the area-studies map presents a timely opportunity for geography. By engaging with this project, geographers may be able to offer more subtle and sophisticated ways of thinking about the world and its spatial contours than have hitherto been the norm. In the process, they may also revitalize geography itself. The discipline's failure to become invested in the original area-studies effort—and to sustain a tradition of global-level analysis more generally—has in some ways severed the field from its intellectual roots. By reembracing the global scale and by joining the effort to rethink the ways in which the world is divided and examined, geography may be able to begin reclaiming the central intellectual position it once enjoyed.

The following essays take a step in this direction by interrogating scholarly geographies and the ways in which international scholarship is pursued. Although many of the authors were not trained as geographers, all of them grapple with a fundamental spatial challenge: to put maritime connections at the center, rather than the margins, of academic vision. Before we proceed, however, one caveat is in order. Even though this essay, like the collection that follows, advocates greater attention to maritime regions, it is not our intention that an oceanic scheme should replace the traditional area-studies framework. We offer it, rather, as one of many needed supplements to the conventional model, one of many alternative ways of viewing the world. Every global vision occludes even as it reveals, allowing us to see some things clearly while making others difficult to detect. Only by entertaining multiple frameworks and vantage points, we believe, can global geography begin to capture the complexities of the world.

**Origins of the Area-Studies Model**

Although the area-studies map has come to be widely adopted through much of the world, its roots lie deep in European and North American intellectual traditions. A distant intellectual predecessor can be found in the threefold global division of the ancient Greek geographers, distinguishing Europe, Asia, and Africa (then Libya). Following the European voyages of discovery, this tripartite geography was eventually transformed into the seven-continent model of the modern elementary-school classroom (Lewis and Wigen 1997). The continental scheme never proved to be particularly apt for making sense of the world, in part because such divisions as Asia were simply too large and diverse to constitute meaningful units of analysis.
Eighteenth-century geographers and cartographers accordingly divided Asia into a number of distinct subregions, typically including Asiatic Russia, Tartary, China, Turkey in Asia, Arabia, Persia, and India (the latter encompassing all of South and Southeast Asia). All of these divisions remained loosely defined. Together, however, they provided a powerful template for thinking about suprapolitical divisions of the world.

Until World War II, American academics habitually resorted to this underconceptualized melange of continental and subcontinental divisions, intermixed with colonial labels. Yet, at a more abstract level, scholarly divisions of labor showed that the tripartite global model of the ancient Greeks was deeply entrenched. The West (North America and Europe) was conceptualized as the site for serious history and the social sciences; the East (stretching from Morocco to Japan), as the zone where Orientalists could ponder the cultural flowers of supposedly fossilized civilizations; and the rest of the world was the domain of anthropologists, who specialized in "primitive" cultural and social systems.

When the United States entered World War II, the limits of this approach quickly became apparent. Military and political leaders found the nation's universities ill equipped to support a war of global scope. Few American scholars spoke Asian languages, and fewer still knew anything about contemporary Asian societies. Moreover, the academic community did not even have the tools to provide the needed knowledge, in part because of the way geographical frameworks impeded interdisciplinary exchange. It was therefore seen as necessary literally to remap the world. To that end, the U.S. government called upon the Smithsonian Institution, the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Research Council, and the Social Science Research Council to form a body known as the Ethnogeographic Board. It was this board's mandate to fashion a new system of global divisions.

The founders of the Ethnogeographic Board aimed for a regional framework that would facilitate both language training and the inculcation of cultural fluency, activities seen as essential for prosecuting the war effort across large spans of the globe. A related goal was to establish an interdisciplinary framework for study, one that would bring scholars from the humanities and social sciences together to exchange insights about various parts of the globe. As the prefix ethno makes clear, anthropologists were meant to have a key role in devising the new map. But so too were geographers, whose understanding of place, cartography, and regionalization were seen as crucial to the project. Two prominent geographers, Isaiah Bowman and Robert Hall, were appointed to the board, and one of its leaders, Wendell Bennett, went so far as to argue that "among the social sciences, geography is the most logical leader for the area approach" (quoted in Lewis and Wigen 1997, 163).

As it turned out, however, few geographers became involved in the intellectual work of the board, and the task of delineating areas fell primarily to anthropologists and other social scientists. The anthropological imprint is evident in the use of the term area (derived from ethnological studies of "culture areas"), rather than region, to describe the resulting divisions of the world: East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia,
the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, North America, Russia and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Oceania. This schema of global division quickly came to replace, for most institutional purposes, the continents and European colonial empires of the prewar era; eventually, its divisions would also be adopted as the “world regions” of introductory college geography.

The area-studies approach became fully institutionalized during the cold war (Parsons 1996). The United States was now operating in a truly global context, and cultivating expertise on all parts of the world was deemed necessary by the political and military establishments. The 1958 National Defense Education Act, Title VI of which supplied the funds to establish university area-studies centers, cemented the approach. The Ford Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and other agencies poured hundreds of millions of dollars into area research and training. By 1990, some 124 National Resource Centers had come into being, each devoted to the interdisciplinary study of a particular world region (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 166).

**The Crisis in Area Studies**

With the stalling out of the growth of U.S. universities in the 1970s, however, the area-studies complex began to come under pressure. The end of the Vietnam War resulted in a major loss of funding for Southeast Asian studies programs, as foundations such as Ford shifted their priorities (May 1987, 177). A broader crisis came in the early 1990s, when the end of the cold war undercut the geopolitical rationale for area expertise just as the demise of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence rendered the postwar area-studies map outdated. Overnight, the boundaries needed to be redrawn: Central Asia had emerged as a newly visible (and strategic) area, and the status of “Eastern Europe” was suddenly controversial. Meanwhile, the accelerating globalization of the world economy appeared to be destabilizing the boundaries that had separated, or at least had been imagined to separate, the major regions of the world.

It was also in the 1990s that a series of intellectual challenges to area studies were launched from within academia. Critics from the traditional political left charged that the entire edifice of area studies had been constructed to further the strategic interests of the United States, making it intellectually as well as morally suspect (Wallerstein 1997; Cumings 1998). Critics from the cultural left added that the area-studies map objectified intellectual constructs that were rooted in the Western colonial project (Rafael 1994). A very different critique emerged from certain mainstream social scientists, who castigated area-studies scholars for reveling in the cultural particularities of their own regions rather than seeking to construct and verify more universalistic, “rigorous” models of human behavior and organization (Bates 1997). And even those who remained committed to place-based research increasingly criticized the area-studies framework for impeding the examination of interstitial zones and supraregional processes that transgressed its arbitrarily constructed borders. For these scholars, the whole area-studies enterprise, with its well-staffed centers, had simply become too bureaucratized—and ghettoized—to promote genuine scholarly creativity.
The vehemence and variety of these attacks galvanized a search for new approaches that might revitalize the endeavor. In 1996 the Social Science Research Council commissioned six leading international scholars to examine the history of area studies and its relationship with the disciplines. The resulting document—published as *Open the Social Sciences* but often referred to as “the Gulbenkian Commission Report”—recommended a number of innovations in area scholarship. Among them was the idea of funding short-term, inter-area initiatives on specific themes, to bridge the divisions between disciplines and areas studies as well as to encourage interchange among the different area-studies communities. The Ford Foundation began its own program of rethinking area studies, commissioning a white paper from the University of Chicago entitled *Area Studies: Regional Worlds* (Globalization Project 1997). One of its key recommendations was to move away from static “trait geographies” (in which East Asia was defined as the land of ideographic writing, Confucianism, chopsticks, and the like) toward “process geographies,” in which regions could be conceptualized as both dynamic and interconnected.

The culmination of this intellectual ferment was the initiation of a new Ford Foundation program in 1997 called “Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies” (Ford Foundation 1997). Initially, Ford offered modest seed grants to thirty universities across the country to support new ways of thinking, writing, and teaching about the world—approaches that were place-specific and language-centered but that could also cross the boundaries between different disciplines and scholarly communities, between different areas of the world, and between U.S. academics and their counterparts in the regions they studied (Volkman 1999). In June 1999 the foundation awarded larger, three-year grants to allow eighteen of the initial thirty universities to continue their efforts. Among the programs funded in both phases of Crossing Borders was a Duke University initiative entitled “Oceans Connect: Culture, Capital, and Commodity Flows across Basins.”

**The Oceans Connect Initiative at Duke University**

The premise of Oceans Connect is that the kinds of border crossings envisaged by the Ford Foundation can be accomplished by regrouping area scholars around maritime basins. The project is accordingly designed to encourage research, teaching, and scholarly exchange in ocean-centered forums. Shifting the maritime realm from the margins to the center of discussion has had a variety of implications. In the first place, it has brought the world’s major seas into focus as lively zones of contact (and conflict). This in turn has highlighted the role of littoral societies, not merely as the peripheries of one or another territorial civilization but as diverse, cosmopolitan communities in their own right. Finally, designating maritime basins as the focus of attention has brought scholars, students, and bodies of knowledge together in novel ways. Just as oceans link the lands across their respective shores while also connecting the globe as a whole, so the basins framework has facilitated scholarly interaction at multiple levels.
One discovery resulting from this interchange is the revelation that oceanic connections—and, indeed, oceans themselves—are understood in fundamentally different ways by scholars in different fields. Historians tend to conceive of maritime basins as sites of human interaction, stressing the ways in which technological developments, imperial designs, and cultural dynamics have alternately blocked or bridged communication across particular stretches of water in particular eras. Social and environmental scientists often tend to take a more policy-oriented approach, insisting that oceans are not just surfaces to be navigated or fought over but three-dimensional environments, requiring scientific scrutiny and multinational management. Scholars in the humanities, by contrast, often perceive the challenge of oceans in cultural and discursive terms. Locating the value of a basin framework in its foregrounding of movement and flux, the literary scholars and cultural critics associated with this project invoke oceans primarily to challenge static modes of thinking about place-based identity. The goal of the ongoing Oceans Connect project is to take advantage of the insights afforded by all three of these modes of apprehension.

At the core of the project are four basin-centered working groups, each of which has evolved a distinctive set of questions and methods. The Indian Ocean group has taken up a historical and geographical approach to cross-basin exchange; the Eurasian Seas initiative emphasizes environmental geopolitics; the Mediterranean forum is keyed to issues of epistemology and the politics of knowledge; and the Atlantic group focuses on cultural exchange and the problem of genre. A brief elaboration of each group’s agenda reveals the striking range of themes engaged by the program as a whole.

The Indian Ocean group has come together around a critical historical issue: whether and how oceans continue to connect in a postmaritime age. Whereas the bulk of existing scholarship on the Indian Ocean concentrates on the period before 1750, this working group has chosen to focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Developments such as the extension of the Atlantic slave trade to the east coast of Africa, the rise of sugar plantations on the previously uninhabited southern Indian Ocean islands, the revolutionary impact of the Suez Canal on global shipping patterns, and the South Asian diaspora in Africa and Southeast Asia suggest the continuing salience of basin connections within the Indian Ocean. They also reveal the growing entanglement of this region with the Mediterranean and Atlantic communities over time.

The second working group is pursuing a policy-oriented project, focusing on environmental and security issues in the Black and Caspian Seas. These international water bodies represent unique ecological regions, with abundant but contested resources and daunting pollution problems. The Eurasian Seas working group focuses on the connections between international security, economic development, and environmental change. Animating its agenda is the urgent need to elaborate suitable models of sustainable development for these regions.

The Mediterranean working group, by contrast, has a core constituency in the humanities and is deploying water-based enquiry to challenge the categories of tra-
ditional area studies. Viewing the Mediterranean Sea as a kinetic space of economic, social, and cultural dialogue, participants seek to develop a more open epistemology that may be labeled “Mediterranean thinking.” Rejecting a positivist methodology that ties essential features to a particular region, they propose a more fluid approach, envisioning the basin as an interregional arena through the prisms of movement, exchange, and transformation.

Finally, the Atlantic Studies group has adopted as its central goal the challenge of rethinking the disciplines from an Atlantic perspective. Issues to be addressed include the influence of Black Atlantic and diaspora studies on the emerging discipline of African American studies; the potential of an Atlanticist perspective (one that takes the slave trade as foundational) for reconfiguring the anthropology of Africa; the role of the visual and performing arts in shaping a circum-Atlantic cultural imaginary; the challenges posed by “unrooted identities” (for example, those of cosmopolitans, hybrids, and Creoles) to the narrating of Atlantic history; and the possibilities for recasting conventional British literary genres in light of connections across the Atlantic world.

The four basins outlined above obviously do not cover all of the earth’s maritime space (although the most conspicuous gap is being addressed by a nascent fifth group, centered on the Pacific). Nor do these agendas exhaust the range of issues that could be approached through a basin perspective. Duke’s project was designed to allow the specific interests and inclinations of those who participated in the first round of Oceans Connect to determine how regions were framed and what problems would occupy the attention of the working groups. On another campus, a Mediterranean Studies program might have chosen to focus on ecological issues, and an Atlantic-oriented group could just as well concentrate on geopolitics. The underlying point of the Oceans Connect initiative, in other words, is not to assign particular issues to particular basins but to explore the value of maritime basins as spatial frameworks for examining any number of themes.

The Oceanic Model and Further Geographical Scholarship

Since the inception of the Oceans Connect program, recruiting geographers for this project has been a high priority (particularly since the present authors represent the entire geographical contingent on the Duke campus). Carolyn Cartier was one of several geographers who participated in the interdisciplinary Oceans Connect workshop that convened at Duke in October 1998. We are pleased to include her contribution here. In subsequent months, we have been delighted to discover a number of other geographers who are working on issues framed around maritime basins and maritime space. Two such scholars, Paul Blank and Philip Steinberg, generously agreed to contribute to this special issue of the Geographical Review.

The participation of geographers in the larger program of investigating oceanic connections could prove very useful in addressing some of the empirical questions that have been raised—and left unanswered—in the course of the Oceans Connect initiative. One thing that became clear at the October 1998 workshop was that differ-
ent scholars have very different opinions on the continuing significance of trans-basin connections. Some argue that Internet sites and airports have essentially displaced maritime networks in the geographies of our day. Others contend that the legacies of earlier marine linkages remain vitally important (notably in the cosmopolitan culture of major port cities) but that since 1500 the relevant global unit has been the network of seas as a whole, rather than individual basins. Still others insist that a region such as the Indian Ocean retains a very immediate reality for most of the peoples who inhabit its littoral and port communities. The specific geographical shape of this Indian Ocean world, however—both at present and in earlier eras—remains controversial even among the latter group. (To what extent, for example, is Western Australia part of the Indian Ocean world?)

A great number of empirical puzzles, epistemological challenges, and little-explored landscapes await those who engage with this quest for a global maritime geography. To the extent that geographers become interested not just in specific oceanic connections but more fundamentally in reimagining the globe by entertaining novel spatial configurations and regional schemes, both areas studies and geography may find new sources of revitalization.

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