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To cite this article: Donna R. Gabaccia (2014) Spatializing gender and migration: the periodization of Atlantic Studies, 1500 to the present, Atlantic Studies, 11:1, 7-27, DOI: 10.1080/14788810.2014.870702

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2014.870702

Published online: 04 Mar 2014.

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Spatializing gender and migration: the periodization of Atlantic Studies, 1500 to the present

Donna R. Gabaccia*

Despite recent efforts to describe the changing relationship of the Atlantic to the wider world, scholars do not agree on the periodization of global integration and the end of the Atlantic’s status as a unique macro-region. They do, however, agree that mass migratory flows are a constitutive element of global integration; some social sciences argue further that recent global integration has produced the feminization of migratory movements across all world regions. This paper traces the gender composition of long distance migrations from the early modern slave trades to the twentieth century. It finds convergence in gendered patterns of migration beginning already in the early twentieth century and argues that feminization of international migrations was complete by 1960. Global convergence toward gender balance in the twentieth century—commonly called feminization—was neither the product of predictable gender relations of power nor was it indicative of the feminization of the global—formerly understood as masculine realm of conflict—as a new domestic, cooperative space of female emancipation. While the figure of the female migrant does increasingly represent contemporary global migrations discursively, the iconic female is viewed as a victim of trafficking and exploitation.

Keywords: migration; migration systems; gender; slavery; Atlantic; globalization; labor markets; macro-regional systems; feminization; early modern era; nineteenth century

For scholars of women and gender, whether in Atlantic or Global studies, the past decade of scholarship poses something of a paradox. Scholars are now creatively engaged in mapping webs of connections between the Atlantic and the wider world, yet no one has offered a firm periodization of the ensuing global integration.¹ How long the Atlantic remained a distinctive region and when global integration surpassed in importance long-existing macro-regional systems of circulation and exchange remain unresolved issues. Surprisingly, however, as feminist scholars such as Doreen Massey and Merry Wiesner-Hanks have deplored the limited attention to gender in global studies,² social scientists have instead regularly pointed toward the “feminization” of current global migrations and have emphasized sharp rupture between the globally integrated present and the years of male-predominant migration before 1945.³ One plausible interpretation of such contesting argumentation is that global integration was accompanied both by a new relation of gender and migration and by the end of the distinctively Atlantic pattern of male predominance in migration. In this periodization, global integration of Atlantic and the wider world occurs only after World War II, supporting a view of a long Atlantic history that stretches from 1500 to the recent past.

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In the work of both historians and geographers of migration, the space across which migrants move is understood to be gendered, with local, small-scale spaces most often understood to be female, domestic, and intimate, while larger scale – national, macro-regional or global – spaces are more often understood to be public, conflict-ridden, and male. Scholars long assumed that women and girls predominated among short-distance, “domestic” migrants whereas men formed the majority of international, long-distance and cross-cultural movers. Scholarship on internal or domestic and on international migrations then developed as quite separate research fields. Recent theorization and some empirical work has pushed attention to gender into spatially larger scales of analysis by demonstrating how the creation of nations and diasporas required the imagination of both as spaces of intimacy, where relations modeled on hetero-normative and gendered family love made national and nationalist solidarity possible. Studies of the early modern Atlantic also illustrate how scholars are increasingly pushing analysis of gender to macro-regional scales, albeit (to date) without any claims to the creation of the Atlantic as a space of intimacy. Only in the social sciences, as described earlier, is a feminized global space of contemporary migration explicitly compared to the historical male space of the Atlantic.

World historians uniformly recognize migration as a significant element in global integration. Thus, this paper offers a longue-durée analysis of gender composition in long-distance migrations as one contribution to the unresolved problems of both the periodization of global integration and the role of gender in differentiating between an historic Atlantic world and the globally integrated present. Gender composition refers, quite simply, to the numbers of women and girls relative to men and boys in any migration; it is usually represented by the percentage female among migrants. As this suggests, gender composition, especially at a global scale, is almost always measured with empirical data and analyzed using quantitative methods. Because these are data and methods that many feminist scholars have rejected as epistemologically implicated in the creation of gender inequality, progress toward gender analysis on a global scale, in both migration studies and other arenas, has remained limited. Thus, a 2006 UN report on female migrants around the world has been one of only a handful of studies to answer migration theorists Patricia Pessar’s and Sarah Mahler’s call for a “gendered geography of power” that explores gender and migration across all spatial scales, up to and including the global. This paper’s analysis of gender composition will use the methods of positivist social science while keeping in mind the concerns of feminist scholarship, especially its awareness of gender as an ideological and discursive phenomenon.

The underlying assumption of this paper’s analysis is that convergence in gender composition across migration systems provides one useful indicator of global integration. In a fully globalized world, gender composition should be roughly similar in all migration systems; in a regionally fragmented world, by contrast, migration systems are likely to vary significantly in their gender composition – in large part because gender ideology and differing material conditions of life constitute migration differently as a gendered practice within each system. By focusing on gender composition in migration systems of the Atlantic and beyond, the paper seeks to develop a periodization of global integration as a gendered process and to call attention to the quite early decline in the distinctiveness of the Atlantic – already over the course of the nineteenth century. While presenting evidence for convergence – first over the course of the nineteenth century toward very high proportions of male migrants worldwide and then toward gender balance and higher
proportions female beginning in the early twentieth century—the paper concludes by cautioning scholars against any simplistic view of the relation among gender composition, gender ideology, or gendered relations of power. Nor, furthermore, has the world become a more intimate or feminized space as the relative numbers of women moving through that space increased. Global and macro-regional analysis of empirical data nevertheless points toward migrations occurring in particular times and places where the relations of structure and discourse might most productively be explored at many spatial scales.

**Gender and early modern migration systems, 1500–1800**

The gender composition of the early modern Atlantic migration systems was indeed distinctive, as a comparison of its migrants with those in other migration systems of that age reveals. Janet Abu-Lughod’s identification of a late medieval world system of overlapping circuits of trade and mobility provide a kind of baseline for such comparisons. While the early modern Atlantic system of labor recruitment and settlement emerged from this earlier world system only after 1450, many of the older Afro-Eurasian circuits also persisted and have been studied. Histories of slavery and of empire-building have been particularly important in describing both the development of the new Atlantic system and the movements of slaves and merchants that continued in the old world.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database’s map of the early modern coerced movements of enslaved Africans points both to the emergence of a very large transatlantic slave trade of more than 12 million and to a second, large, trans-Saharan migration system that reached from central and western Africa into North Africa and the Arabian peninsula. A third system of slave migrations stretched across the Arabian coast into the Arabian peninsula, Persian Gulf, western Asia and coastal India, and a fourth system emanated from the Swahili and southeast African coasts into the nearby islands (including Madagascar) in the southern Indian Ocean. Not visible on its map but of considerable importance was a fifth, less-well understood or mapped African migration system of slave trading within sub-Saharan Africa. Of these systems of coerced slave migrations, all except the Atlantic system and the trans-Saharan system appear in Abu-Lughod’s mapping of the markets forming the world system of the fourteenth century.

While empirical data on slaves as coerced migrants remains extremely limited for systems outside the Atlantic, the two-volume collection, *Women and Slavery*, edited by Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, provides a good starting place for the comparative analysis of migrant slave gender composition in the early modern world. Paul Lovejoy’s article describes the trans-Saharan migration system as 75% female and the editors suggest that perhaps two-thirds of the slaves traded away from eastern Africa were female. By contrast, of the 12 million Africans forced into the Atlantic slave system, fewer than 40% were women and girls. Scholars thus long summed up Atlantic slave gender composition as “two men for every woman.” Not only was Atlantic slavery distinctively gendered, its distinctiveness identifies how Europeans transformed slavery as an institution as they introduced it around the Atlantic.

Before and after 1500, household slavery created demand for slave women as domestic workers and as child-bearers and child-minders in Afro-Eurasia and beyond—for example in both the Viking North Atlantic and China’s dynastic households—causing the editors of *Women and Slavery* to speculate that historically most slaves did
not, in fact, originate or work in Africa. Nevertheless, for Africa, in the years after 1500, such household slavery persisted. G. Ugo Nwokeji has described how African lineage groups expanded their local territories and consolidated their power and influence through the purchase of slave women’s reproductive power and domestic labor.21 In most of the world – but not apparently in the Atlantic – purchasers preferred women slaves because, in non-state societies, slavery served familial, lineage, domestic, and reproductive ends. The lower percentage female among Atlantic slaves was thus most likely a consequence of the application of slavery as system of labor to large-scale, commercial, plantations developed by European investors and empire-builders. The labor system associated with plantation production later spread to other parts of the world with European empire-building, influencing newer systems of recruitment (e.g., of coerced and migrant plantation labor – Hugh Tinker’s “new system of slavery”22) in the nineteenth century. Waged labor too would be based on the temporary employment (and in the case of chattel slavery, often quite literally the consumption) of male labor rather than on the reproduction onsite of enslaved, coerced, or waged workforces.

Comparisons of Atlantic slave trade migrations to other, contemporaneous migration systems highlight how unusual it was for women and girls to remain a minority among coerced migrant slaves. Even the analysis of the earliest data in the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database documented that women had initially formed a higher percentage – approaching 50% or more – of enslaved migrants in the Atlantic system.23 Jennifer Morgan’s study of gender and the slave trade, with its particular emphasis on the British Caribbean and colonial North America, not only provides an exemplary study of how to undertake gender analysis with demographic data but also offers a powerful argument that slave purchasers, especially in the first two centuries of the slave trade, were as concerned with the reproduction of their slave work force – through the purchase of women – as they were with the purchase of male laborers.24 The domestic and reproductive dimensions of older slave systems were not, apparently, eradicated automatically or entirely by the salt air of the Atlantic. While archival sources clearly document European purchasers’ preference for male slaves, comparisons of regions shipping slave cargos of differing gender composition – relatively more women from the Bight of Biafra, for example, and relatively fewer women from western Central Africa – have continued to document how African gender relations (operating through labor and slave markets and through practices of kinship and warfare) could constrain Europeans’ choices by generating few male captives for sale.25 Where slave gender composition became more balanced furthermore, as in continental North America, slave workforces did reproduce themselves and slave households and families created small spaces of intimacy within an exploitative plantation system.26

The enslaved Africans of the Americas stand out as distinctive in another way. Scholars who analyze the gender composition of the Atlantic slave trade have emphasized that enslaved Africans in the Atlantic continued to include relatively higher proportions female than almost all the European-origin Atlantic migrations of the same era.27 Among those crossing the Atlantic between 1500 and 1800 were 3–4 million Europeans (with 0.5–1.5 million from Spain; 1.5 million from the much smaller country of Portugal; 400,000 from Great Britain; 100,000 from Germany; 25,000 from The Netherlands; 75,000 from France). About 80% of these Europeans traveled under some form of indenture, coercion or “orders” from their superiors (think of career soldiers and Catholic missionaries); the remainder, a very mixed group, traveled as religious or political refugees, artisans, adventurers, businessmen, colonial administrators, and investors.28
Unknown numbers of Europeans also traveled to the formative European colonies of the Pacific and very large numbers moved about within Europe.29

The poorest and most coerced of the early modern European migrants in the Atlantic were much more heavily male than the coerced slave migrants from Africa. Soldiers and Catholic missionaries were of course almost entirely male, while estimates for Spain’s sixteenth-century “servants” describe the percentage female rising from only 5.6 to 6.3% at the beginning of the century to 28.5%, in the 1560s and 1570s, before declining again.30 The gender composition of indentured servants in the British Empire was also extremely imbalanced. For example, the earliest servants destined for Virginia were only 11% female,31 a 1635 register kept by English custom officials described indentured migrants heading for the West Indies as only 6% female.32 In the eighteenth century indentured European migrants to North America rarely surpassed 25% female.33 More than one author has suggested that, contrary to what we believe today, many of these migrants – accustomed to European traditions of adolescents leaving their families in order to enter short-term indentures or apprenticeships – may have also hoped their American sojourns would be short ones; eventual reproduction was not intended.34 It should be noted that European migrants in the early modern Atlantic did return, although few had been servants.

By contrast, the much smaller groups of slightly more prosperous migrants – whether Spanish or British settler colonizers – included far higher proportions of women and girls. Peter Boyd-Bowman even concluded his studies of the sixteenth-century migrants from Spain by contrasting a composite picture of the typical male emigrant as an impoverished labor migrant – “a poverty stricken Andalusian [...] aged 27 ½, unmarried, unskilled and probably only semi-literate, driven by hunger to make his way to Peru in the employ of any man who would pay his passage and had secured the necessary permit” with a composite female migrant who was a settler colonizer, “already in her early thirties […] travelling to Peru with her 36-year old husband, two young children, a manservant, and a maid.”35 Refugees and religiously motivated Puritans and other religious dissenters destined for British North America also traveled more often in family groups, and women and girls constituted about a third of their numbers.36 Studies have described the so-called Great (Puritan) Migration to Massachusetts, 1630–1640, as 40% female, with at least one ship transporting a female majority.37 Finally, Bernard Bailyn has described the Scots recruited as settlers by North American land speculators as traveling in gender-balanced family groups toward peripheral farming areas.38

The remaining early modern migrations originating in Europe more resembled the Atlantic servant labor migrants than the Atlantic settler colonizers. England sent unknown numbers of poor convicts to newly developed penal colonies in the Pacific during the second half of the eighteenth century39 and studies of the British Antipodes describe female convicts as roughly 18 to 20% of the migrants.40 Historians who have recently estimated intra-European migrants at 107.9 million between 1500 and 1800 – a number that far outstrips the transoceanic voyages of Europeans and Africans combined – also describe migrants as belonging to heavily male occupational categories such as soldiers, journeymen, and sailors; among the migrant groups surveyed by Jan and Leo Lucassen only “vagrants” may have included significant numbers of women and also children.41 At least around the early modern Atlantic, local movers may not have been more heavily female than longer-distance ones.

Overall, then, the Atlantic migration systems were characterized by lower percentages female than in the migrant slave systems of Afro-Eurasia. New analysis that brings
together data on European and African migrants in the Atlantic suggests further that a convergence in gender composition characterized African slaves and indentured Europeans. Sociologist Katharine Donato and historian Donna Gabaccia have documented that the gender composition of African slaves converged toward that of the heavily male European Atlantic indentured migrants over the course of the eighteenth century as the numbers of African slaves peaked and the percentages female among them dropped. By the end of the 1700s, the Atlantic slave trade system, a small imperial British system of European prisoners banished to the Antipodes, and the coerced European indentured servant Atlantic system had all become more heavily male, with female migrants varying between 20% (of Europeans) and 35% (of Africans). At present we do not know but we can plausibly guess that other Afro-Eurasian migration systems – of small populations of traders and sailors perhaps – more resembled the Atlantic labor migrants than the Afro-Eurasian slaves. Still, the Atlantic migration systems were distinctive in a world where mass migrations were still largely made up of slaves, and most of those slaves outside the Atlantic were still female.

**Global convergence in migrant gender composition during the long nineteenth century**

In the so-called long nineteenth century that stretched between 1800 and the immediate aftermath of World War I, the abolition of Atlantic slavery and the extension of plantation production to Europe’s expanding empires in Africa and Asia resulted in the global spread of waged labor from Europe’s youthful journeymen and indentured servants to factory workers and indentured plantation laborers alike. The nineteenth century would become, as demographers later asserted, the era of the “proletarian mass migrations.”

Most of those proletarian migrants would be men. To a considerable extent, the contrasting patterns of the early modern Atlantic – of heavily (and often coerced) male labor migrations and of more balanced empire-building migrations of European settler colonialists – became global in the nineteenth century, with impoverished Asian and European wage-earners eventually surpassing considerably the numbers of European settlers. Already in the early nineteenth century, the Atlantic migration system began to appear less distinctive; by the latter years of the nineteenth century the heavily masculine European migrations typical of the early modern Atlantic migrations had become the global norm. With migrant gender composition as a measure of the integration of the Atlantic into the wider world, one is forced to conclude that the integration of the Atlantic into the wider world was largely complete already during the second great period of globalization in the nineteenth century. Evidence on the subsequent feminization of global migrations beginning in the twentieth century confirms this finding.

In a first effort to compile and interpret migration data on a truly global scale, Adam McKeown has estimated the total numbers of trans-continental migrants between 1846 and 1940 at 155 to 172.5 million. According to McKeown, 55 million people left Europe and the Middle East and about 3 million left East Asia and India to travel to the Americas. Another 50 million departed from South Asia and South China and 5 million from the Middle East and other places in China to transfer to Southeast Asia, Australia and other circum-Pacific destinations. Fully 48 million migrants left from East Asia for frontier areas in Central Asia, Siberia and Manchuria. McKeown did not estimate international moves within Europe (where there was no obvious frontier of settlement closer than Siberia or Ukraine) but international and intra-European migrants certainly
equaled, if they did not greatly surpass, the 55 million Europeans who migrated to the Americas.45

Combining the numbers of McKeown with the macro-regional analyses of migrations in Gabaccia and Hoerder’s Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims46 produces a world map of eight major nineteenth-century migration systems. These included north Atlantic and south Atlantic systems that both drew from somewhat different parts of Europe and a Pacific system that increasingly brought Asians into the Atlantic, the Caribbean, and the countries of North and South America. To these Atlantic and Pacific systems can be added both the older intra-European system that now drew workers from the European peripheries towards urban European industrial centers and an extension of the early modern diasporic British imperial system that now expanded to deliver British and Irish migrants towards former and persisting settler colonies in North America (Canada, the USA), the Antipodes (Australia and New Zealand), and south Africa. Around the coasts of Asia and Africa, furthermore, a south China seas system linked East Asia to southeast Asia and its colonial mines and plantations, an Indian ocean system connected the major British colonies in India, the Hong Kong hinterland and Africa, and a Siberian/Manchurian system drew from both east and west Asia and from eastern and even central Europe.

Already in the first half of the nineteenth, the impact on migrant gender composition of the gradual abolition of Atlantic slavery47 can be documented well beyond the Atlantic, largely through the continued extension of the British Empire into Asia and the Antipodes. Using data on migration flows from the Atlantic Slave Trade Database and early immigration records from North America and Australia, Gabaccia and Donato have documented increasing synchronicity in gender composition during the era of abolition. See Figure 1 which demonstrates that the gender composition of Atlantic slave trade, North American Atlantic immigration (before 1835) and imperial/penal immigration to Australia and New Zealand varied together. In the Atlantic, however, the existence of slavery so problematized European servitude and threatened claims to creating an egalitarian white, republic that the newly independent USA ended indentured migrations from Europe by 1830.48 Synchronicity in gender composition between European immigrants to North America and slaves ceased permanently with indenture’s demise after 1830. But abolition in the Atlantic continued to have consequences in the Pacific where the parallel synchronicities of slave and indentured gender composition persisted at least until data for the slave trade ended in 1860. Convict transport and release in Australia also continued until that date.

While rising percentages of women and girls accompanied the waning of indentured and penal migrations from Europe to both North America and the Antipodes, settler colonization proceeded in somewhat different fashion on opposite sides of the world. The proportion female among European immigrants to the USA increased steadily from 1820 to 1840 and then stabilized at just above 40%, indicating that settler colonists traveled to western areas in family groups that not only expected to reproduce themselves but found themselves welcome to do so as free, white subjects and citizens-to-be.49 In the Antipodes, by contrast, gender-balanced and occasionally even female-predominant migrations developed among settlers after 1830. This was the result of imperial planning. Britain’s strategists hoped that unmarried women might effect both improved morality and higher rates of marriage in Australia, rendering governable the heavily male populations of Botany Bay. The British Crown’s financial support for assisted immigration, especially of young married couples and of gender-balanced shipments of
unmarried men and women, produced higher proportions female than among America-bound settler colonialists.50

When schemes to assist emigration to Australia ended abruptly in the face of economic crisis in 1841, the gender composition of European migrations to North America and to the Antipodes diverged sharply, if temporarily, terminating the short period of gender-balanced Antipodean immigration and providing a first indicator – appropriately, from the Pacific – of the masculinization that would soon characterize almost all labor migrations worldwide. In Australia, a renewed masculinization of immigration followed the discovery of gold in 1851 as Figure 1 shows; migrant gender compositions in the late 1840s and 1850s sometimes matched the heavily male predominance of the more coerced labor migrations of the previous century.

Masculinization was obvious across almost all of the worlds’ migration systems by the late nineteenth century. Although little systematic empirical data describes the nineteenth-century migrations of laborers traveling out of Asia, almost all scholarly studies describe both the free and the indentured migrant workers from China and India as heavily and persistently male.51 Migrations of Chinese and Indian laborers developed in different ways, however, and somewhat different gender composition characterized the two groups as a result.52 With its long history of penal transportations from Britain to Australia and from India to Mauritius,53 British imperial administrators again saw the regulation of the gender composition of Indian indentured laborers as essential to the maintenance of colonial order. They sought to assure that fixed proportions of women

Figure 1. Percentage female among African slaves and immigrants to North America and to Australia and New Zealand, 1800–1860.
(which varied over time and place from 15 to 40%) accompanied indentured male Indian laborers. By 1870, both Chinese and Indian laborers worked under indenture in places such as Panama, Peru, Malaysia, Australia, Trinidad, British Guiana, Jamaica, and British Honduras. But in the British Caribbean only 14% of the Chinese were women; elsewhere the proportion female among Chinese was even lower, exacerbating the contrast to the workers from India and making the Chinese the brunt of racist and nationalist complaints about both their homosexuality and the sexual threat they supposedly posed to native women. Even the Chinese migrants without indenture – the majority of those who traveled to work in North America – were usually heavily male.

Because the main generators of migration data in the nineteenth century were nation states (or occasionally semi-autonomous colonies), evidence on migrations for this period do not map precisely onto the eight major migration systems described earlier. A comparison of two figures that track gender composition among emigrants and immigrants over time nevertheless reveals the extent of masculinization across migration systems and hints at the persistence of variations in gender composition across systems. Figure 2 compares emigrants leaving Europe and Asia as recorded in data compiled by the International Labor Office in the 1920s, supplemented by data on Chinese emigrants, kindly provided by Adam McKeown and Elizabeth Yuk Yee Sinn. Figure 3 then compares immigrants to the USA, South America, the Antipodes and Northwest Europe during the same time period.

Figure 2. Percentage female among emigrants from North and West Europe, South and East Europe, Japan and China, 1860–1924.
Viewed together, these two figures confirm that Pacific migrations remained more heavily male than the still largely Atlantic migrations to the USA and South America for most of the century. Figure 2 also confirms the particularly heavily male composition of emigrants from China. In the north Atlantic system, the USA attracted relatively more women among its immigrants than did South America, perhaps because more of the USA immigrants originated in northern and Western Europe. Of the Atlantic migrants departing from Europe, northern and western Europeans certainly included considerably higher percentages female than southern and Eastern Europeans. The sharp drop in percentage female among immigrants to the USA in the last decades of the nineteenth century also almost certainly reflects the shift in its transatlantic immigrants from those originating in northern and Western Europe toward those originating in southern and eastern Europe (and to a lesser extent Asia and Mexico). This means that the gender composition of the north Atlantic system in the late nineteenth-century system fell toward the level of the south Atlantic system (that had long involved immigrants mainly from southern Europe). Furthermore, the gender composition of migrations within both systems converged both with each other and with the Pacific migration system while the percentage female among emigrants from Asia crept upwards, converging toward the gender composition of the Atlantic. The intra-European migration system stood sharply apart from the others, however, for it now had the highest percentage female, a pattern that probably reflected the high demand for female domestic workers in northern Europe’s expanding cities. Certainly historian Marlou Schrover has argued that European
migrants achieved gender balance in the nineteenth century, long before the other migration systems of the world. In the twentieth century other systems would converge toward the European pattern.

According to Gabaccia and Donato, gender composition on a global scale had almost certainly fallen to 25% or below by the 1890s; by that date it was also somewhat lower than in the eighteenth-century Atlantic. Case studies of Atlantic and Pacific migrant systems have offered many of the same explanations for the heavily male gender composition of the late nineteenth century. Male emigrants from both southeastern Europe and from China typically found only temporary or seasonal work in agriculture, mining, and construction; they were sojourners with very high rates of circulation and return to their homelands, where new generations of migrant laborers were born and raised. Both Indians and Chinese were far more likely than Europeans to earn wages on colonial plantations, often, before the 1880s, alongside slave laborers in Cuba or Brazil. Migrant populations from both Europe and Asia included a mix of married and single men traveling without families but as part of groups of male friends and kinsmen, often under the leadership or control of a labor recruiter, padrone “boss” or “snakehead.” The more circulatory the migration stream, the more likely it was to be heavily male and to involve predominantly working-age males from 15 to 55 years. Studies of Chinese and Italian sojourning also suggest that men’s desire to provide infusions of cash for their families, through short- or longer-term wage-earning “campaigns,” became the foundation for improving or reproducing households struggling to remain engaged in subsistence agriculture. Structural inequalities in an increasingly global labor market created some similarities between the freer labor migrants from Europe and the Asian workers who not only traveled under greater coercion, including indenture, but who also increasingly faced greater restrictions and legal barriers as they traveled.

Beginning around 1900, both Figures 2 and 3 document a reversal in these trends and point toward the onset of feminization. The timing of this feminization appears to have varied across migration systems and in some cases to have reversed itself temporarily in the years bracketing World War I. In the intra-European system, women and girl immigrants outnumbered men and boy immigrants during the 1920s, while in the USA and the Antipodean Pacific, the percentage female climbed rapidly to over 40% without moving higher. While China’s emigrant gender composition lagged well behind these figures, Adam McKeown has also compared Chinese and Europeans as emigrants and as returners and has noted the same twentieth-century feminization revealed in Figures 2 and 3. He has argued for a global convergence toward higher female representation at this time. However, the kinds of comparative case studies that were helpful in explaining the masculinization of migrant gender composition in the nineteenth century have not yet offered comparable explanations for the early twentieth-century female-predominant and gender-balanced migrations documented in Figures 2 and 3.

Twentieth-century feminization and the end of the distinctive Atlantic

Across the twentieth century, the tenuous feminization of migrant gender composition revealed in Figures 2 and 3 not only persisted but also became increasingly apparent and consistent across all migration systems. Distinctions in the gender composition of the Atlantic and other migration systems became ever more difficult to discern. As the UN’s Hania Zlotnik has sensibly observed:
Already in 1960, female migrants accounted for nearly 47 out of every 100 migrants living outside of their countries of birth. Since then, the share of female migrants among all international migrants has been rising steadily, to reach 48 percent in 1990 and nearly 49 percent in 2000. Although this trend is consistent with an increasing ‘feminization’ of international migration, the increase recorded is small compared to the high level of feminization that already existed in 1960.68

Zlotnik’s data were not organized by migrations systems but – reflecting the national censuses from which they were compiled – revealed that in the year 2000 Northern Africa and Southern Asia had the lowest percentage women (42.8 and 44.4%, respectively) among their resident immigrants. Compared to the very large early-modern variations in gender composition in Atlantic and other migration systems, the differences between regions with higher than average percentages female (52.4 in Europe; 51.0 in North America; 50.5 in Oceania and South America) and lower than average percentages female (42.8 in North Africa; 44.4 in Southern Asia; 47.2 in Sub-Saharan Africa) in 2000 seem modest, another indicator of global convergence. Zlotnik’s observations thus posed an important – and still unanswered – challenge to the many social scientists who beginning in the 1990s described the feminization of migrant gender composition as a new dimension of the globalization of the late twentieth century and a sharp contrast to the male-dominated Atlantic in the nineteenth century.69 In fact, male predominance was a global, not merely an Atlantic, pattern in the nineteenth century; it is the shift toward global gender balance in the first half of the twentieth century that now cries out for explanation.

Historically-informed authors have offered three different but probably compatible explanations for the feminization of global migrations. One important factor was the imposition of restrictions on immigration worldwide. According to Gabaccia and Donato, the twentieth century began and remained an era of restrictions aimed at ending the free movement of the unskilled, male laborers who had roamed the world in search of work between 1850 and 1914. By the mid-twentieth century hostility to and exclusion of the laborers of Asia had extended to the laborers of southern and eastern Europe and eventually to workers of almost all backgrounds. As a result, and contrary to popular belief, today’s labor and refugee migrations are smaller, relative to global populations, than those of the nineteenth century. As volumes of circulating male migrants fell, the percentage female among global migrants rose.70 Donato and her co-authors have also demonstrated how the aging of earlier migrant cohorts also pushed the UN measures of migrant gender composition beyond 50% female, especially in places with long histories of immigration such as North and South America, Europe, and Oceania.71 Finally, in their recent edited collection Proletarian and Gendered Mass Migrations: A Global Perspective on Continuities and Discontinuities from the 19th to the 21st Centuries, historians Dirk Hoerder and Amarjit Kaur offer a sequence of case studies that point to the rising worldwide demand for female laborers as “care-workers” in health and human service industries as the third force driving global feminization.72 In their analysis, global migrations have feminized for many of the same reasons that made intra-European migrations gender balanced already in the nineteenth century.

Empirical migration data in Atlantic studies and gender studies

This paper has presented a sequence of convergences in migrant gender composition as evidence for a quite early integration of Atlantic into global markets for male and female
labor. While this is only one indicator of global integration — one that must ultimately be read alongside evidence on trade, international relations and the circulation of ideas — it constitutes an important finding and a challenge to arguments for a “longer Atlantic” in work by both historians and social scientists. If the long nineteenth century saw the almost complete integration of Atlantic into global markets for circulatory male labor, it is tempting to see the early twentieth-century transition to feminization and the onset of worldwide restrictions on human migration in the 1920s and 1930s as truly constituting the end of the road for the distinctive “longer Atlantic” which I, for example, advocated a decade ago in the first issue of this journal. 73

Global convergence toward gender-balanced migrations has accompanied a new geography of migration which is organized not around east/west transoceanic systems but instead around north-south hemispheric systems. It is striking that this new geography has not been gendered as male or female in the way, for example, that local and long-distance moves were gendered in the nineteenth century. Thus, while Hoerder and Kaur include a section on the Atlantic in their recent collection of case studies of gendered labor migration, it is also obvious that their Atlantic is composed, already in the nineteenth century, of separate continental migration systems. Authors explore intra-European movements, a shift in North America from Atlantic to Pacific and Latin American immigration, intra-South American and intra-Russia/USSR migration systems independently. (The rest of the volume too is organized around sub-continental systems – the Asias, the Africas – with only the Mediterranean surviving as a watery conduit into the Atlantic, for Lebanese Syrians, and into Europe, for North Africans.) In all these systems, female migrants are portrayed as historical agents and as important participants in all migrations, even those that were heavily male.

As this suggests, attention to empirical data on gender composition across half a millennium of human migration history and across the ever-changing macro-regional migration systems of the world suggests work to be done beyond the periodization of global integration of Atlantic history. It suggests also fresh grounds for discussion between feminist scholars of gender and feminist scholars working with the data and methods of the social sciences. The analysis of gender composition presented here should remind readers, first, that quite diverse gender ideologies and relations of power produced feminization. The sale of family members deemed superfluous — almost always a gendered determination — could produce female-predominant slave migrations in early modern western Africa. But so could nineteenth-century imperial policies that viewed women as the “tamers” of unruly, unmarried males in New South Wales or young women’s sense — either among nineteenth century Irish women or among Mexican women today — that moving to a big city across the border to work as a domestic servant might constitute an adventure. While it is extremely unlikely that scholars will ever find a single explanation for feminization or masculinization in gender composition, empirical study does raise important questions about how gender works across spatial scales.

Clearly, too, gender composition did not drive changes in gendered relations of power among migrants. While Afro-Eurasian slave migrations were feminized, their feminization was neither the product of female empowerment, nor was empowerment a consequence of their slavery. Slavery operated primarily within intimate and domestic spaces in the old world; intimacy even at the local level proved harder to achieve for slaves or indentured servants in the Atlantic. On the contrary, in the Atlantic, in the European imperial migration systems, and in the intra-European migration system, the complex inter-twining of female labor and reproduction — characteristic of traditional slavery in
pre-capitalist and non-state societies – had already been picked apart. As slave populations began to reproduce in North America the result was not greater intimacy or female power but the coerced fragmentation and break-up of slave households and families to provide new generations of workers for the cotton plantations of the expanding antebellum American plantation economy. While theorists and a few empirical studies suggest how gender imbalance can empower the outnumbered sex in their personal or marital negotiations with the more numerous sex, neither suggests that exercise of interpersonal power undermines gender inequalities expressed ideologically or through structural politics.  

Most importantly, however, empirical evidence on gender composition does unsettle any effort to create a fixed relationship between gender and the spatial scale of mobility, thus forcing scholars to ask new questions about how and under what circumstances the space created through migrations systems is gendered discursively. With the possible exception of nineteenth- and twentieth-century migrations within Europe, all of the gender-balanced and female predominant migrations discussed in this paper occurred over very long distances. All, even within Europe, involved the crossing of cultural and international borders. Rising representation among women and girls among those traveling the Atlantic and the Pacific did not automatically make either physical travel across such spaces or the discursive construction of the spaces they traversed more female, intimate, or domestic. Whether or not the predominance of female slaves made Afro-Eurasian slavery a discursively more female institution juxtaposed to the “male” slavery of the Atlantic may be worth discussing given the centrality of feminization of the Middle East by western Orientalism. Finally, while the feminization of migration well before 1960 had almost no impact on the gendering of the labor migrant as a uniformly male subject in the social sciences, the current importance of female global care-work and sex trafficking as part of discourses of moral panic could ultimately make female victimization as much a symbol of contemporary globalization as the threatening and primitive male labor migrant was a symbol of the global economy of the nineteenth century.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are owed to the editors of Atlantic Studies (for convening a lively workshop in Hong Kong in August 2013), to City University of Hong Kong for hosting our talkative group, to Ms. Wong Hiu Man for arranging our visits, and to Brian King for an initial round of trenchant commentary on the first draft of this paper. I am also indebted to Johanna Leinonen (Turku University) and to Elizabeth Zanoni (Old Dominion University) who first assisted me in compiling and analyzing data discussed in this paper and to Audre Lorde, Benjamin Disraeli and Mark Twain for encouraging humility and skepticism to feminists desirous of tackling gender analysis on a global scale through renewed encounters with data.

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Notes
1. See the challenge by Gabaccia, “A Longer Atlantic” and recent efforts to link Atlantic and global or world histories; e.g., Kupperman, The Atlantic in the World; and Cañizares-Esguerra and Seeman, eds., The Atlantic in Global History.
2. Massey, Space, Place and Gender; Wiesner-Hanks, “World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality”; and Hughes, “Gender at the Base of World History.”
3. Castles and Miller, The Age of Migration.
4. In migration studies, too, scholars have noted the association of gender analysis with local and national scales: Silvey, “Geographies of Gender and Migration”; Silvey and Lawson, “Placing the Migrant”; and Sinke, “Gender and Migration.”
5. E.G. Ravenstein, “The Birthplace of the People and the Laws of Migration”; Ravenstein, “The Laws of Migration” (1885); Ravenstein, “The Laws of Migration” (1889); and Gabaccia and Donato, Beyond the Feminization of Migration document the important role of female demographers in scholarship on internal or domestic movements and suggest that the scholarly field of migration studies has itself been bifurcated by gendered discourse.
6. King, Skeldon and Vullnetari, “Internal and International Migration.”
7. Davis, Gender and Nation; Herzfeld, Cultural Intimacy. For a diasporic approach, Gabaccia and Baldassar, eds., Intimacy and Italian Migration.
8. Shammas, “Household Formation, Lineage, and Gender Relations.”
9. Manning, Migration in World History; and Hoerder, Cultures in Contact.
10. Some scholars instead call this measurement a “sex ratio.” But since no one has ever seriously suggested it is biological sex that drives variations in migrant composition and since most instead agree that variations are the product of fluid gender relations and ideologies, gender composition seems the most appropriate analytical term. For a fuller discussion, see Gabaccia and Donato, Beyond the Feminization of Migration.
11. Westmarland, “The Quantitative/Qualitative Debate and Feminist Research.” On this point, many feminist scholars cite the poet Audre Lord’s observation that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” First read by Lord at a 1979 conference on Simone Beauvoir, the talk from which this quote comes was later published in Lord’s Sister Outsider.
12. “A Passage to Hope: Women and International Migration.” For an earlier report focused more narrowly on global gender composition; and see Zlotnik, “Data Insight.”
13. Pessar and Mahler, “Gendered Geographies of Power.”
15. Abu-Lughod, Before European Hegemony, 34.
16. “Map 1: Overview of the slave trade out of Africa, 1500–1900,” Transatlantic Slave Trade Database.
22. Curtin, The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex; and Tinker, A New System of Slavery.
24. Morgan, Laboring Women.
25. Compare for example, Miller, Way of Death to Nwokeji, The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra. For further analysis, see Gabaccia and Donato, Beyond the Feminization of Migration.
27. Eltis, “Free and Coerced Transatlantic Migrations.”
29. Lucassen and Lucassen, “The Mobility Transition Revisited.”
31. Moller, “Sex Composition and Correlated Culture Patterns of Colonial America.”
32. Games, Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World.
33. Bailyn, The Peopling of British North America; and Bailyn, Voyagers to the West.
34. For Spain, see Altman, Emigrants and Society, 191; for the British Atlantic, Matt, Homesickness, 15–19.
38. Bailyn, The Peopling of British North America; and Bailyn, Voyagers to the West.
40. Robson, The Convict Settlers of Australia; Uxley, Convict Maids; and Damousi, Depraved and Disorderly.
41. Lucassen and Lucassen, “The Mobility Transition Revisited”; and Wevers, “Swept up from the Streets or Nowhere Else to Go?”
42. Willcox and Ferencezi, eds., International Migrations.
44. McKeeown, “Global Migration, 1846–1940.”
45. Harzig and Hoerder, What is Migration History?, 36.
46. Gabaccia and Hoerder, eds. Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims.
47. Guasco, Abolition of Slavery.
52. Northrup, Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, Table 3.1.
55. Campbell, Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries within the British Empire; Stewart, Chinese Bondage in Peru; Cohen, “The Chinese of the Panama Railroad”; and Meagher, The Coolie Trade.
57. Compiled as Willcox and Ferencezi, eds., International Migrations.
58. In Pacific Crossings, Sinn – an historian at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences – has compiled evidence from Hong Kong and other Pacific port records.
59. McKeeown, Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change.
61. Schrover, “Feminization and Problematization of Migration.”
63. Gabaccia, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ and the ‘Chinese of Europe’”; Gabaccia, Italy’s Many Diasporas; and McKeeown, Chinese Migrant Networks.
65. Ramirez, On The Move; Hsu, Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home; and Gabaccia, “When the Migrants are Men.”
66. McKeeown, Melancholy Order.
68. Zlotnik, “Data Insight.”
69. Castles and Miller, The Age of Migration, 12.
70. Gabaccia and Donato, Beyond Feminization, chapter 5.
71. Donato, Alexander, Gabaccia, and Leinonen, “Variations in the Gender Composition of Immigrant Populations.” In this interpretation it is the presence of sizeable populations of aging earlier migrants and not the gender composition of newer arrivals that produced female predominance.
72. Hoerder, “Transcultural Approaches to Gendered Labour Migrations.”
73. Gabaccia, “A Long Atlantic in a Wider World.”
74. Guttentag and Secord, Too Many Women? For a review of empirical studies based on Guttentag and Secord, see Gabaccia and Donato, Beyond the Feminization of Migration, chapter 1.
75. Morokvasic, “Birds of Passage are also Women…”

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