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978-1-107-03060-2 - Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914

Valeska Huber

Excerpt

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Introduction: mobility and its limits

At a time of global connections, localities matter. On several occasions in 2008 and 2010, when deep-sea cables running through the Suez Canal were damaged, the internet connections of about 75 million people were disrupted: these cables carry most of the data traffic between Europe and the Middle and Far East. Even in an age of digital information transfers, physical spaces of transmission play a decisive part. In an interconnected and interdependent world, hubs and chokepoints are also crucial to understanding the ebbs and flows of natural resources. One might look at the example of those large shipping companies, for instance, who have decided to redirect their oil tankers from the Suez Canal to the much longer Cape of Good Hope route because of the fear of pirate attacks near the Horn of Africa or at commentators calling attention to the Suez Canal as a weak point in the West's oil supply, which was under threat during the upheavals of early 2011 in Egypt.

The aim of this book is to study the Suez Canal as a nodal point and lynchpin of various forms of mobility during an earlier wave of global interconnection, showing that the history of globalisation can best be understood by analysing one specific – and specifically global – locality. After its opening in 1869, the Canal developed into a thoroughfare carrying not only information and goods but also individuals and their ideas. Rapidly, the desert strip of the isthmus became an important crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa, where the growing passenger traffic shuttling between, for example, Great Britain and India intersected with caravan routes and the circuits of dhows in the Red Sea.

Tensions between different forms of mobility became particularly tangible where the caravan route connecting Cairo and Damascus crossed the Suez Canal: at a location where camels had for centuries been the only mode of conveyance, they now had to wait for steamers to pass before they could be shuttled across the new Canal with the help of a float – a powerful symbol of the simultaneous acceleration and deceleration that was characteristic of this global junction. Travellers admired the image of gigantic steamships crossing the desert while associating the caravans with a

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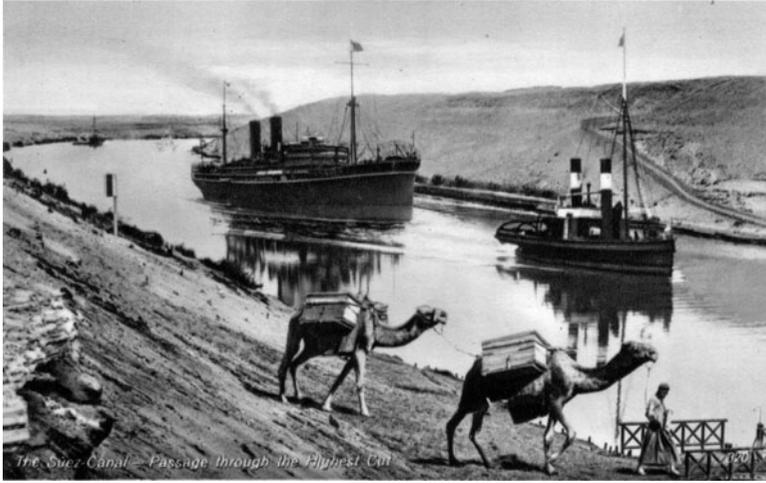


Figure 1 ‘The Suez Canal – Passage through the Highest Cut’, postcard published by the Oriental Commercial Bureau Port Said (Egypt), no date.

bygone age. The supposed ‘backwardness’ of caravans and other traditional forms of desert mobility, however, could not be judged so easily when it came to the emerging international control regimes: during epidemics, for instance, camel guards patrolling the Canal were essential in securing the strict prohibition of contact between the Canal and the surrounding desert. In countering the dangers connected with an acceleration that was otherwise so desirable, recourse to practices deemed traditional or ‘backward’ was thus inevitable.

The simultaneity of steamship and camel in a single location encapsulates the gap in the scholarship that the present study sets out to fill. Mobility and acceleration are conventionally seen as central processes in shaping the history of globalisation. The Suez Canal appears in the literature on global history and the history of globalisation as soon as the ‘time-space compression’ starting in the second half of the nineteenth century is mentioned.¹ In works on imperial expansion, the Suez Canal is equally present.² Yet the increasingly rapid mobility which the Suez Canal came to symbolise had two sides: on the one hand a modernising force in the eyes of western observers, on the other a force that was difficult to control

¹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 240; Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting*, esp. pp. 352–7.

² Headrick, *The Tools of Empire*, pp. 150–6.

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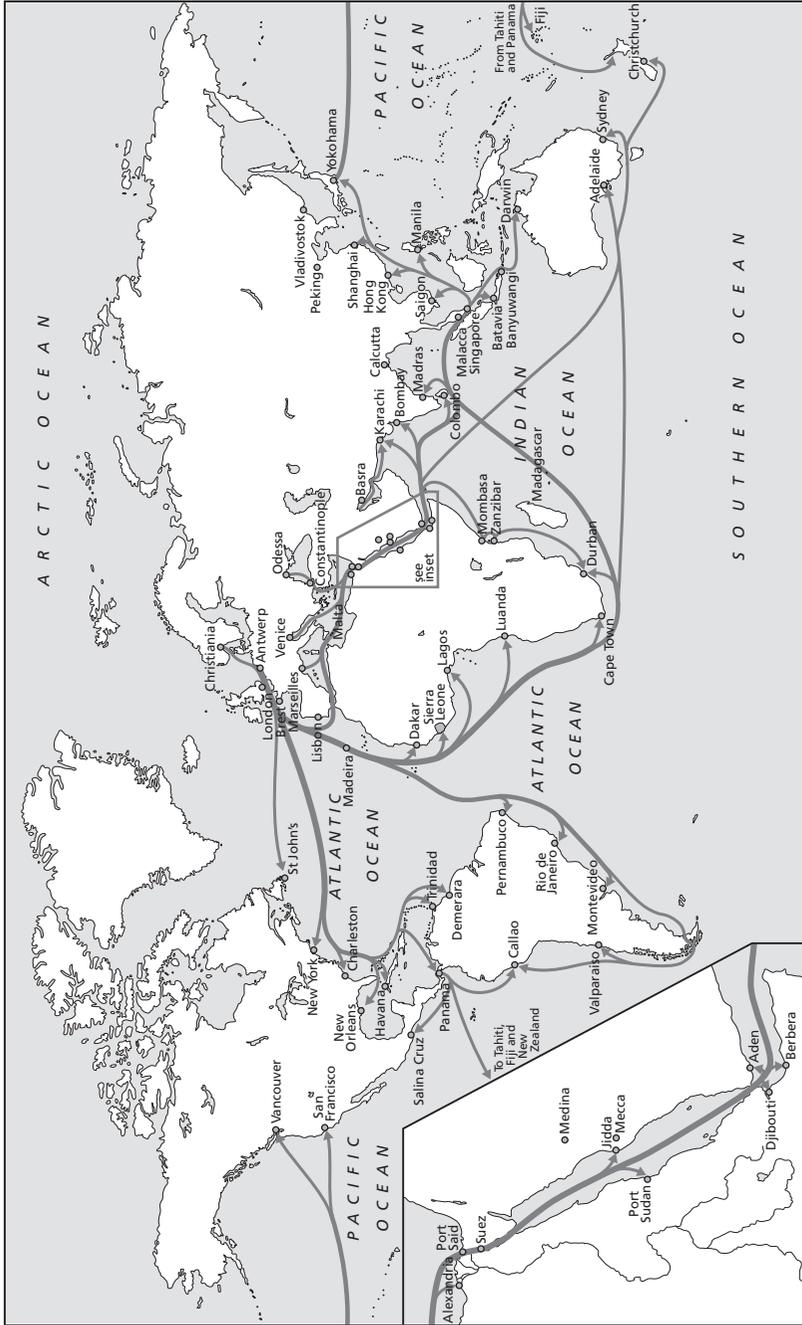
and which was connected with problems such as the worldwide propagation of disease or the movement of unruly individuals or groups. The period around 1900 was neither – as often implied – an era of unhampered acceleration, nor one of hardening borders and increasing controls. Rather it was characterised by the *channelling* of mobility, or to be more precise, the differentiation, regulation and bureaucratisation of different kinds of movement.

The maritime shortcut of the Suez Canal is perfectly suited to this revision of global history. It has become a symbol of the ‘shortening’ of distances around 1900 and of the triumphant version of acceleration that stressed the transformation of a desert by means of modern technology. Yet it also highlighted the dangers and anxieties connected with this same acceleration. At this very location colonial traffic and troop transportation crossed the circuits of tourists, the journeys of pilgrims to Mecca, the trajectories of nomads and caravans, the work-related movements of seamen and coal heavers and the illicit passages of stowaways, smugglers and microbes. This kaleidoscope of movement shows how, in the context of the technological innovations of the second half of the nineteenth century, mobility became a marker of Western modernity. But it also makes clear how certain forms of mobility were increasingly regulated and stigmatised. While acceleration is often taken for granted, multiple processes of exclusion and deceleration were in fact in play.

With the aim of developing this thesis, the book asks a number of questions. Although the Canal is frequently mentioned in passing in narratives of globalisation and empire, and there are a number of surveys depicting the engineering achievement and its diplomatic and economic context, it has not so far received attention as a global locality worth being studied in detail. Yet in order to understand the tension between acceleration and deceleration as crucial to the process of globalisation, it is useful to ask what happened on the ground in one particular location. Who travelled through the Canal and why? How was the passage between Europe, Asia and Africa perceived, described, staged and controlled from the opening of the Canal to the First World War? For whom was the Canal experience pleasurable and for whom hard work? Where and how was political, military and police control present in a waterway that was by no means a no-man’s-land, yet did not belong to one single political entity? Who had the power to move at full speed or to hamper the movement of others? For whom did travelling become an increasingly standardised routine and for whom did it mean resistance and the breaking of (globally drafted) rules and regulations?

Three main themes will help to systematise these questions. First, the distinction between different *categories of mobility* is at the core of the

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World map with principal steamship routes. Inset: Suez Canal and Red Sea.

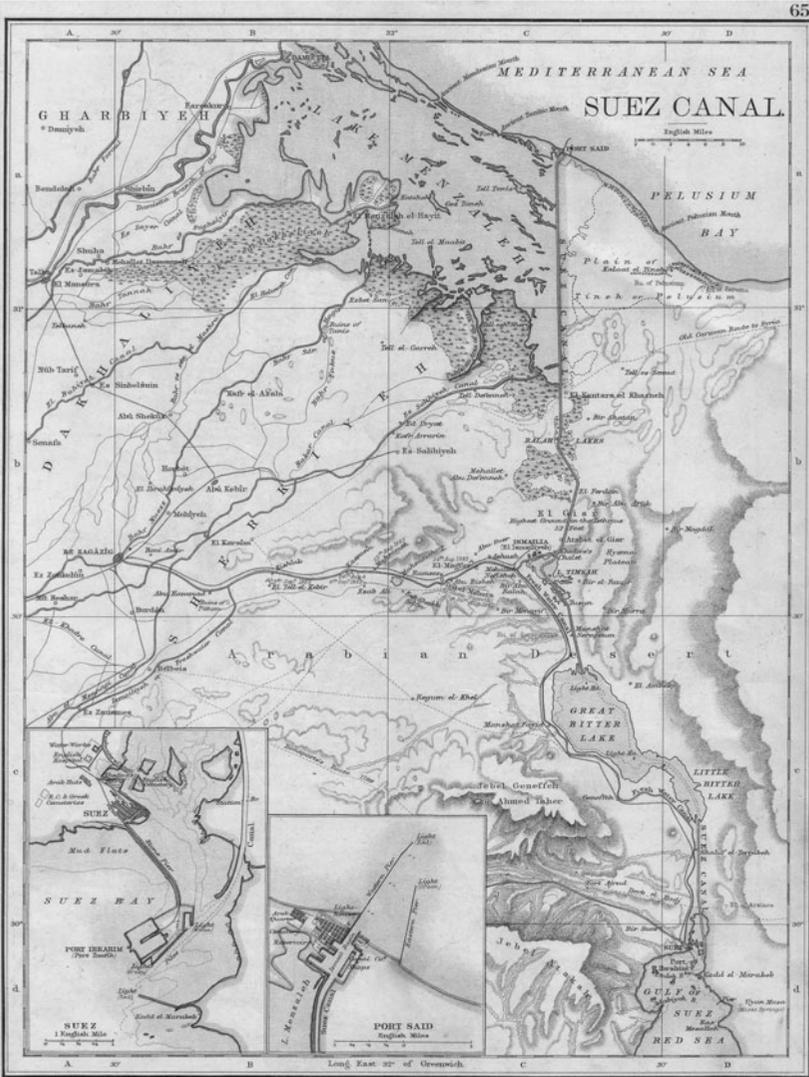


Figure 2 Map of the Suez Canal: *The World-wide Atlas of Modern Geography* (Edinburgh: W. & A. K. Johnston, 1897), p. 65.

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argument. Whereas it is undisputable that migration and mobility were crucial to the transformation of the late nineteenth century,³ mobility is often used in a monolithic way with authors either conflating different forms of mobility in the sense of a global population ‘on the move’ or shedding light on a single form of mobility, for instance transatlantic migration, only. Yet it is crucial to develop a more multifaceted analysis of ‘multiple mobilities’.⁴ Mobilities were discriminated according to the mode and purpose of movement associating them with different velocities and different historical moments, calling some forms of movement modern and others ‘backward’ relegating them to a bygone age.⁵ Increasingly, the distinction between different mobilities – at the level of the imagination and of politics – was also effected by classifying them according to race, class, gender, religion or nationality. It was a central political project of imperial and internationalist actors to define and maintain the boundaries between these categories. At the same time these boundaries were frequently contested and transgressed.

Secondly, and connected with the above, by focusing on the differential treatment of various mobilities, the chapters of this book will highlight various facets of the tension between *acceleration and deceleration* already alluded to. The distinction between categories of movement became a central instrument to speed up the movement of some of them, such as troops and colonial travellers, and develop a bureaucratic apparatus to control and if necessary detain or repatriate others. Acceleration and deceleration were partly related to the technological developments creating expectations of unhampered speed.⁶ Western travellers often perceived the shortcut to Asia and Africa as slow and easily corruptible, for instance when it came to strike movements and accidents, but also to the increase of bureaucracy and logistics connected to the Canal passage. Such controls were particularly burdensome at specific instances, for instance when epidemic disease outbreaks loomed, or concerning specific travellers, such as pilgrims on their way to Mecca. These implementations point to the political imperatives relating to fast connections on the one hand and controllable movement on the other. The interruption of the caravan route in order to construct the Canal was thus only the most visible and

³ See, for example, Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation*, p. 13; Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, pp. 183–252: ‘Sesshafte und Mobile’.

⁴ Huber, ‘Multiple Mobilities’; Roche, *Humeurs vagabondes*; Urry, *Mobilities*; Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans*. See also the growing field of ‘mobility studies’ represented by journals such as *Mobilities* (since 2006) or *Transfers* (since 2011).

⁵ Fischer-Tiné and Gehrman (eds.), *Empires and Boundaries*, pp. 1–7; Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*.

⁶ On perceptions of speed and slowdown in Egypt, see also Barak, *On Time*.

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extreme contrast between acceleration and deceleration that shall be explored in the chapters to come.

Third, the book contributes to the investigation of the emerging *rules of globalisation* including the arsenal of forced mobility (in the guise of expulsion or repatriation) or forced immobility (such as the refusal to grant travel permits), for instance when dealing with pilgrims, unwanted workers or illicit travellers without funds.⁷ It does so by combining a focus on mobile agents of globalisation with the close examination of a specific space, which was never regulated by a single system such as an empire. Rather the global and the local as well as many levels in between were especially tightly enmeshed.⁸ The book uncovers the different levels of rulemaking and standardisation, ranging from the local and regional to the level of empire, defined as ‘an interconnected zone constituted by multiple points of contact and complex circuits of exchange’,⁹ the often neglected level of inter-imperial contact and competition and the level of international conferences and meetings. By unearthing this interaction, it offers a more precise meaning of ‘the global’ as precisely the interplay and competition between these different levels. Additionally, the book points to the limits of such rule making and to incidences of ‘rule breaking’, not only because of the often contradictory interests of these different levels, but also due to the multiple evasions of mobile individuals who undermined the bureaucratic control measures.

The book thus adds to recent debates regarding globalisation and its history. Ten years after the publication of A. G. Hopkins’ *Globalization in World History*, several authors have convincingly argued for the need to historicise this concept of the social sciences and buzzword of our times.¹⁰ Others have contributed to our understanding of the ‘global’ more generally by providing broader synthetic works on worldwide interconnectedness and its limits.¹¹ Yet some have also questioned the concept and called for caution. Frederick Cooper contended that globalisation is too broad (and too fashionable) a term to carry much analytic value and criticised the Eurocentric, generalising tendencies brushing over the various levels between the local and the

⁷ For different sets of such ‘rules of globalisation’ or ‘world orders’, see Conrad and Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Competing Visions of World Order*.

⁸ See Hopkins, ‘Introduction: Interactions Between the Universal and the Local’, in Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History*, pp. 1–38, at pp. 7–11.

⁹ Magee and Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History*; Osterhammel and Petersson, *Geschichte der Globalisierung*.

¹¹ Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*; Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*.

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global.¹² Jürgen Osterhammel has also recently warned historians to use the concept of globalisation in a naive and imprecise way.¹³

Other authors have taken a different road, using the concept of globalisation in a more differentiated and flexible way meaning more than mere interconnectedness. Adam McKeown has convincingly shown how borders, sometimes seen as antagonists of globalising forces, in fact were part and parcel of the same process.¹⁴ In imperial Germany, nationalism and globalisation, also often seen as opponent forces, were intricately linked and in fact drew on each other, as Sebastian Conrad demonstrated.¹⁵ Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson have compellingly connected ‘empire’ and ‘globalisation’ in terms of the ‘cultural economy’ of the British world.¹⁶

The present study contributes to these more cautious and multifaceted approaches, analysing the Canal both as hub and as chokepoint and teasing out the contrast between free flows and controls. ‘Global’ is not used indiscriminately in this book, but carries several distinct yet overlapping meanings, which are developed in successive chapters, such as new perceptions of time and space, economic interconnection and worldwide labour migration. What is more, visions of the global were often competing, ranging from conceptualisations of the global as universal, the global as imperial or the global as juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements. Hence this study uses globalisation neither as a mere cliché of unlimited interconnectedness nor as a precisely defined analytical tool, but rather as an overarching and flexible concept that binds the different levels and actors together instead of referring to one set of institutions or one centre of power. In this manner it highlights the layering or *jeux d’échelles* and the multitude of actors belonging to different entities, such as empires, private companies or international conferences, as well as the friction between them.¹⁷ The study of mobility in the Suez Canal and its regulation can thus show that globalisation ‘was made’ rather than simply happened.

In order to develop these themes of hub and chokepoint, free flows and control, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* follows different agents of globalisation who are not usually in the spotlight and whose trajectories met at this global crossroads. In the manner of a historical ethnography interested in a multitude of actors, it tries to catch a glimpse of the different mobile people it encounters.¹⁸ It takes snapshots with the tourists

¹² Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, pp. 91–112. ¹³ Osterhammel, ‘Globalizations’.

¹⁴ McKeown, *Melancholy Order*.

¹⁵ Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation*, esp. pp. 316–24.

¹⁶ Magee and Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation*.

¹⁷ See Revel (ed.), *Jeux d’échelles*, esp. pp. 15–36.

¹⁸ See also Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans*, p. 9.

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enchanted or bored by what they are seeing and spends time during the passage with routinely travelling troops and colonial officials, as they complain about the latest health restrictions. It follows workers in their attempt to find employment in global labour markets and accompanies pilgrims trying to get to their holy destination in Mecca, with or without travel permits. It shares the (often unsuccessful) adventures of 14-year-old stowaways from Liverpool, encounters destitute travellers from different colonial territories and meets seamen from Europe and Asia looking for hire in the Canal area or complaining of their rough treatment on board. It joins caravans and boards dhows facing new restrictions on income opportunities and freedom of movement.

To follow these individuals on the move, a wide variety of sources will be used. Clearly, the material available on the different forms of mobility is highly unequal. Ego-documents and literary sources describing the Canal passage are mainly available for privileged travellers, while the voices of other mobile people make themselves heard through consular and police records. This reliance on official sources with their obvious emphasis on those ‘problematic cases’ coming into contact with official authorities and the information that the officials found useful to preserve obviously shapes the findings of this study. Also, with an emphasis on global mobility and imperial circuits, the perspective of the local population, of Egyptian newspapers or Ottoman travellers for example, is largely omitted. Yet, these official documents are used to tease out individual stories as well as broader patterns of bureaucracy and control. Colonial and consular archives are furthermore complemented by the documentation of international conferences as well as company archives.

In the remainder of this introduction, the main themes of the book will be explored in four sections, setting the scene for the following chapters. Beginning with a global perspective that highlights the new modes of transportation and communication and their implications for the mobility of people around the world, the introduction then turns to a consideration of the political uses of and attitudes toward this mobility in imperial contexts. The discussion will then gradually narrow the focus, via the maritime spaces of the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and finally settle on the central arena explored in this book – the Suez Canal – before outlining the arguments presented and providing a map of the individual chapters.

Global connections

That the influence of the Suez Canal radiated far beyond its Egyptian locale became evident in 1871 at a famous meeting a long way from the

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Nile. Henry Morton Stanley's first greeting to the missionary and explorer David Livingstone, on the occasion of their encounter near Lake Tanganyika in Central Africa – the famous explorer had by then been missing for four years – has been called 'one of the best-known remarks' of the nineteenth century and 'a classic example of Victorian banality'.¹⁹ In the exchange that followed, Livingstone apparently said: 'tell me the general news: How is the world getting along?' To this wide-ranging question, Stanley answered by reporting the opening of the Suez Canal as the one decisive event that Livingstone had missed while out of touch with the 'civilised world'.²⁰

The Suez Canal did not stand alone in the nineteenth-century revolution of technology and transportation, yet for Stanley and Livingstone, both travellers by profession, it was its most impressive element. In the three years before the Canal's opening, the interested public witnessed two other spectacular and mediated moments of global unification. First, on 27 July 1866, the American continent was connected to Europe, after many years of effort, by the transatlantic telegraphic cable.²¹ Messages could now overcome the distance between the continents within a couple of hours. Another connective moment of global resonance occurred some months before the opening of the Canal. On 10 May 1869 the Union and Central Pacific Railroads, linking the United States from coast to coast, joined up at Promontory Summit in Utah, just north of the Great Salt Lake with the president of the Central Pacific Railroad, Leland Stanford, fastening the last rail with a golden spike and a silver hammer. The telegraphic message 'it is done' was dispatched to destinations across the country and – via the newly laid cable – to Europe, and the event was celebrated worldwide.²²

The telegraph connecting Europe and America, the new railway between America's east and west coasts, and finally the opening of the Suez Canal on 17 November 1869, represented high points in the development of global connections. This moment found forceful expression in Jules Verne's novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, published in 1872. When Verne's hero, Phileas Fogg, accepted his wager, travelling around the globe in 80 days had become feasible for the first time in history. The technological successes led to a novel perception of global unity – at least among Europeans and North Americans – and expressions such as the

¹⁹ Anstruther, *Dr. Livingstone I Presume?*, p. vii; see also Driver, *Geography Militant*, pp. 121–2.

²⁰ Stanley, *How I Found Livingstone*, pp. 414–15.

²¹ Gordon, *A Thread Across the Ocean*, p. 207. ²² Orsi, *Sunset Limited*, p. 17.