In 2001, Africanist Frederick Cooper called for a reevaluation of the social scientists’ conceptualization and use of the term “globalization.” Cooper’s principle concern in his article is that the concept of “globalization” fails to capture the complex processes of international exchange of goods, ideas, and people that are of interest to scholars. Particularly problematic for Cooper are the implications that all humans exist in a mass web of interconnectedness that has reached every spot on the earth, and that we are living in a “global age”—a wholly new and differentiated social moment. This grandiose and overbearing conceptual framework, according to Cooper, obscures vital questions about how processes of “internationalization” and “interconnection” work, and also how they should be historicized.

Contemporary historians of labor and immigration are among those social scientists that have increasingly deployed various notions of the global in their analyses. In this essay I will be discussing Leon Fink’s *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South*, Gunther W. Peck’s *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West*, Cindy Hahamovitch’s *No Man’s Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor*, and finally, Deborah Thomas’s *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica*. I will measure Cooper’s critiques against these scholars and their use of “the global” in their analyses. In addition, I will consider how their conceptions of globalization processes have modified their understandings and analyses of cultural formation. Some of the authors use the term globalization while others

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do not, so one project of this essay will be to deduce how they conceive of globalness and how it operates in their narratives.

Secondly, I will consider how they perceive the impact of processes of globalization on the culture of the subjects in question. It seems notions of the global have opened new questions and opportunities for the place of culture in labor history. The new labor historians, led in large part by Herbert Gutman, reexamined workers as full humans and offered new frameworks for understanding labor conflict that rested on new interpretations of class and political formation. The undeniable legacy of the new labor historians has been the prevailing understanding that culture matters. How people live their everyday lives, order their families and social relationships, and even honor their dead, are vital to the project of understanding and historicizing political action. The scholars discussed here, though, illustrate that new “global” realities and interpretive frameworks, perhaps not sufficiently represented by the term globalization, yet endowed with real analytical purchase among contemporary scholars, demand reinterpretations of culture among mobile working class people. Overall, in response to Cooper’s critiques, I argue that these scholars have actually succeeded in many ways in using “the global” to sharpen their interpretations of migrant labor narratives.

One of Cooper’s major critiques of the scholarly use of the concept of globalization is that scholars’ assertions that those vaguely described processes are distinct are vastly overstated. The trade of goods and slaves throughout the Atlantic world, for example, can be defined by a similar constellation of global networks of exchange. Some labor historians, though, have demonstrated that certain legal and extralegal institutions, structures, and developments have created dramatically new patterns of labor mobility and organization. The patterns and networks

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of mobility that existed in the age of the Atlantic slave trade are qualitatively different than those existing in the recent past and contemporary moment—different for capital’s beneficiaries as well as its beleaguered.

For example, through her historicization of the rise of nationalism, Cindy Hahamovitch describes the mechanisms of a global capitalist market that fundamentally altered the experiences of mobile laborers. She explains, “as the final fetters that had bound Europeans to particular lands and lords and as Europeans blasted open the doors to China’s massive labor force, 60-70 million Europeans and seven million Chinese workers emigrated in search of gold, land and work. And the more people moved—sped by railroads, steam travel, and global markets—the more they fed the fires of nationalism.”\(^3\) The strict regulation of migrants’ movements across national borders that resulted from these “global” processes including new networks of mobility, along with the rise of welfare states in the nineteenth century set the stage and provided context for twentieth century H-2 guestworker programs.

In *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West 1880-1930*, Peck portrays a vivid flashpoint of the processes of “globalization” by centering the role of padrones in the facilitation of the movement and employment of laborers from their home countries. In the book, Peck describes how padrones mediated the cultural, geographic, and political spaces between immigrant workers and North American institutions. One of Peck’s primary interventions in the historiography of Italian, Greek, and Mexican laborers is his reinterpretation of padrones as “fundamentally modern” actors in an international labor market. As ports of trade and commerce constructed from places like El Paso and Ciudad Juarez coagulated into single, industrial metropolises, padrones unified those sites of labor

demand and isolated sites of labor supply. Padrones helped build “truly international labor markets.” At once, a space was created for padrones, and they were making the space in which they operated. By exploiting the fungible boundaries laid by the Foran Act and Canada’s Alien Labor Act, padrones forged a niche in a global market economy much less coherent and omnipotent than the term “globalization” might suggest, and made the mobility of laborers profitable for themselves. Unlike Hahamovitch, Peck depicts globalization as a process transpiring on the ground and largely at the hands of immigrants, as opposed to a state/capital-orchestrated process. So, these scholars are in fact not guilty of “uniting diverse phenomena into a singular conceptual framework and a singular notion of change.” Rather, they offer unique, highly contextualized, and historicized accounts of “the global” at work in their narratives.

Cooper defines globalization as a process that “reconfigures the local.” Exposure to media, dress, music, new imaginaries of what determines a ‘good life’ are “bits of imagery” that allow people, for our purposes migrant laborers, to negotiate and modify cultural meanings. Although this is a smaller point of contention for Cooper, I think it has been a vital point for recent labor histories. Not all of these authors are concerned with the deportment or musical tastes of their subjects, but each is dealing in some way with cultural adaptation and transformation (the local) as reconfigured by their unique interpretations of the global. Cooper argues, though, “even differentiation, the globalizers argue, must be seen in a new light, for the new emphasis on cultural specificity and ethnic identification differs from the old in that its basis now is juxtaposition, not isolation.” The “globalizers,” according to Cooper, share the idea that only when people migrate do they become more aware of their cultural specificity and begin to

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5 Cooper, “What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For?,” 212.
6 Ibid., 193.
7 Ibid., 196.
identify more strongly with their cultural community. His critique is that that interpretation misses the complexities of identity and cultural identification, which are “built out of specific lines of connection.” All but one of the authors discussed here undermine this leg of Cooper’s critique as well because they deal extremely carefully with the cultural identities of their subjects. Fink, Peck, and Thomas are deeply invested in representing nuanced processes of cultural transformation that draw explicitly on “specific lines of connection” to fellow migrants, sending countries, settler communities, and subjective cultural attachments.

One of the central questions in Peck’s work is, simply put, how did padrones command authority over other migrant laborers? Here we can evaluate the work that globalness has done in terms of how scholars interpret culture. Peck argues that padrones used prevailing conceptions of manhood and fraternity for example to exploit lower class migrant laborers. In the end, though, many migrant laborers had reformulated their conceptions of manhood that challenged those employed by the padrones to assert authority over their clientele. These “modern” labor relations, then, elicited a cultural response that ultimately undermined the padrone power. The padrones in the book are not depicted as “representative” of their home cultures, nor are those cultures depicted as coherent and tidy entities that are either transplanted or obliterated in the migration process. The opportunities afforded by or, rather, the requisites for economic survival in rapidly changing legal and economic structures facilitated the padrones’ access to power, which they in turn shored up by drawing on very specific cultural references and resources. The migrant laborers in the same way drew on particular cultural meanings in order to navigate their experiences. However, Peck offers no distinct conflict between the beliefs and practices of a pre-existing cultural community and a more modern world. Migrant workers’ cultural beliefs are not butting directly up against a modern, globalizing world in his narrative, nor is their cultural

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8 Ibid., 209.
specificity simply and evenly reified in a new locale. Rather, Peck proves that they are complicit in the making of this world. As a result, he is able to offer culture as a more meaningful analytic in his history of migrant laborers and modernity.

Leon Fink, in *The Maya of Morganton*, asks “how do we make sense of the entry of some of the world’s most traditional agricultural producers into the epicenter of the world’s consumer economy? Better yet, how did they make sense of it?” It is the “making sense” of one’s position in what one understands to be a ‘global market economy’ that is what I find exciting and new about interpretations of cultural practice in recent labor histories. Fink, for example, is interested in how Mayans in Morganton, North Carolina made and remade community and culture in a foreign locale within the context of a globally interconnected web of production, distribution, and consumption. Fink acknowledges that, as a result, conceptions of cultural change must be reformulated. He stated, “long consumed with the question of disruption (or ‘uprooting’) versus continuity (or transplanting) of group identity, immigration history here appears to demand a kind of conceptual hybridity.”

This reflects an acknowledgement of the demands being made on scholars by new conceptualizations of processes of global exchange.

Fink affords, for example, a particular self-awareness to the transnational subject. He demonstrates this as he cites sociologist Malcolm Waters, stating that Waters defines globalization as “‘a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding.’” What happens when culture is *self-consciously* de-territorialized? Although Cooper argues that scholars wrongly assume the reification of cultural specificity, Fink describes a much more

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
complex process. The ‘hispanicization’ of Mayans in the United States for example, according to Fink, was not “merely ‘laid on’ by ignorant North American natives but became a functional aspect of the immigrants’ socialization process.”

As Leon Fink and Deborah Thomas use first-hand accounts such as oral interviews of cultural and ethnic identification and processes of cultural change as evidence, they echo Peck in highlighting the importance of how “cultural knowledge” is constantly navigated and deployed as people and ideas cross geographical boundaries. In such subtle ways, “globalization” processes, real or imagined, have entered the interpretive frameworks of labor and migration historians. Fink describes the complexity of cultural transformations and adaptations. He states, “rather than simply absorption into the logic of the global marketplace, the case of Justo and Transita suggests an alternative form of transnational identity…Justo and Transita used the tools of the computer and internet access precisely in order to not be appropriated into a Ladino (or otherwise westernized) nation.” The recognition of variegated, highly self-aware, and self-interested constructions or reconstructions of identity under modern conditions of national and cultural or ethnic relationships depart from the social history model of class formation and constitute social histories of globalization.

The newer interpretations of culture within labor history might be no more than an iteration of the dialogue around the characterization of immigrant laborers as “uprooted” or “transplanted.” Handlin’s study of Irish immigrants in the United States published in 1951 is both an origins story for a twentieth century American identity and also marks the beginning of a generation of scholarship on American immigration. In 1985, John Bodnar substituted the paradigm of Handlin and his successors with his understanding of immigrant identity and

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12 Ibid., 155.
13 Ibid., 144.
community formation as a process of “transplanting;” institutions, religious practices, etc. were adapted to new needs by migrants in the United States. In her article “Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History,” U.S./Italian labor historian Donna Gabaccia argues that scholars are very much still bound by an “immigrant paradigm,” generated in large part by Handlin, when writing histories of immigrants to the United States.¹⁴ Historians often leave under-examined questions of nationalism and national identity, and also reiterate notions of American exceptionalism. In the case of Italian migrants, Gabaccia states that only a third of Italy’s migrants sought work in the United States at the peak of its industrialization after 1890. However, many labor histories in the “age of globalization” portray the U.S. as “extraordinarily attractive to humble settlers” who are “seeking freedom and prosperity from abroad.”¹⁵ For Leon Fink and Deborah Thomas in The Maya of Morganton and Modern Blackness, respectively, the “Americanization” of migrant laborers, or the development of anti-Americanness in some cases, is in fact a theme in their analyses—Americanness being generally characterized by individuality and consumerism.

Fink is skeptical of an abstract process of “Americanization.” For example, while he concedes that “for many migrants, the rhythms of subsistence farming agriculture are traded for a consumer-oriented world in the United States,” which he supports with first-person testimonies, he asserts that “the changes and innovations in the migrant worker’s world are not simply a matter of ‘Americanization,’ let alone the imposition of universal world capitalist norms.”¹⁶ Fink describes a “hybrid, cultural space as distinct from the culture of destination as from the culture

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¹⁵ Ibid., 1128.
¹⁶ Fink and Dunn, The Maya of Morganton Work and Community in the Nuevo New South, 154.
of origin.” Further, Fink explores the complexities of identities borne out of the migration process. He relays a few stories that demonstrate the range of responses to the new needs of a culture in motion. The “bird of passage,” or a temporary migrant worker who identifies overwhelmingly with her home country may be “all but unaffected by his economically forced migration.” Second-generation migrants on the other hand, for example the daughters of Q’anjobal strike leader ‘Don Pancho’ Jose who identified as “Hispanics” or “Latinos” as much as “Guatemalans,” might latch on to or create new cultural/ethnic identities. Finally, to illustrate this point further, Fink discusses Marco, a non-immigrant who was fully aware of the Chicago Bulls’ performance in the NBA playoffs, but had no knowledge of a volcano that had erupted in a nearby town. Fink describes this as evidence of “a new ‘transnational’ reality affecting Guatemalans, to a greater or lesser degree, in both host and sender countries.” Fink has deployed ever more precise and malleable concepts of culture and identity in order to deal with new contexts for the “conflict of labor and capital in a globalizing economy.”

Deborah Thomas, on the other hand, names the cultural transformation of working-class Jamaican youth plainly as some form of Americanization. “By engaging, appropriating, and resignifying dominant Euro-American cultural—and to a degree political and economic—practices,” she states, “poor and working-class Jamaicans have aspired to a modernity of their own making within the context of their own history.” In the book Thomas offers an ethnographic analysis of Jamaican nationalism and cultural identity in the postcolonial and post-post-colonial period. She argues that “modern blackness,” a departure from the “folk blackness”

constructed by middle class Jamaican nationalists of the 1960s, emerged in Jamaica in the
generations following Jamaican independence and can be gleaned from contemporary popular
youth culture such as dancehall. Globalization, as evidenced in the title, is an essential factor in
the reconstruction of Jamaican national identity.

Cindy Hahamovitch’s *No Man’s Land* deals very unevenly with the cultural transformations of Jamaican guestworkers. Her analysis offers an interesting complement to Thomas’s work because it describes the external, legal, and/or institutional forms of globalization alluded to by Thomas, who relays ideological and cultural shifts among working-class Jamaican youth. Hahamovitch acknowledges, though, the importance of this modern, transnational movement of labor for both the U.S. and Jamaica as she encountered scores of returned “veterans” of the H-2 program during her fieldwork in Brandon Hill. The authors differ on an important point, though, in terms of how they interpret the practice of migrant labor among Jamaicans. While Thomas finds voluntary transnational migration to be a fairly recent phenomenon among Jamaican youth, Hahamovitch dates this practice to a much earlier period. Hahamovitch claims, “Those black Jamaicans who changed their fortunes often did so by leaving the island in search of work. Jamaicans began traveling for work and opportunity soon after emancipation, but by the late nineteenth century, leaving for offshore work had become almost a rite of passage.” The “globalization” process and its impact, then, for these two authors appears to be quite different.

As mentioned earlier, Hahamovitch cites “global trend[s] toward exclusion,” nationalism, war, the rise of welfare states, global markets and networks of transportation as the context for the experiences of Jamaican migrant workers. Hahamovitch deals with Jamaican “cultural identity” in the context of the United States. She emphasizes the fact that Jamaicans played up

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21 Hahamovitch, *No Man’s Land*, 52.
their British subject-hood to American reporters in northern states and how this was undermined by racial prejudice in the American South. A similar keenness to identity claims is not applied to more contemporary Jamaican guestworkers, though, as they are simply described as achieving some level of social mobility for themselves and their families when they return home. According to Thomas, returning migrant workers bring much more than money back to Jamaica. Further, much like Marco who never left Aguacatan, it wasn’t even necessary for them to leave to facilitate and participate in a cultural transformation.

Thomas describes modern blackness as “a notion of blackness in the here and now that accepts and validates the immediacy of contemporary popular cultural practices, such as dancehall, and reflects the transnational experience of the majority of the population.” She argues that a younger generation of Jamaicans has rejected the cultural expectations of their parents and grandparents as a result of various processes of globalization. Through their consumption of other cultural forms, American hip-hop for example, and their experiences being educated and working in an increasingly globally interconnected cultural and economic world, they have developed a new, racially based politics that departs from the folk, creole multiracialist form of the post-colonial generation.

Cooper asks in “What is the Concept of Globalization Good For?”, “Can we do better?” He answers with a “qualified yes,” urging scholars to “seek concepts that are less sweeping, more precise, which emphasize the nature of spatial linkages and their limits, which seek to analyze change with historical specificity rather than in terms of vaguely defined and unattainable end-point.” The authors discussed above have done just that. By historicizing and contextualizing global process of movement and exchange, they have provided rich and nuanced

22. Thomas, Modern Blackness, 12.
analyses of the experiences of migrant laborers. Labor and immigration scholars have long recognized the transnationality of their subjects, but these authors have stretched even further those prevailing concepts of cultural identity and community in order to account for the various globalizing or internationalizing forces that their historical subjects have encountered. Movement has always generated challenges for cultural and ethnic communities. However, it seems in recent decades, the nature of cultural exchange, discourse around cultural identity, and the stakes of cultural identification have changed in important ways for scholars as well as for migrating laborers. As imprecise as ‘globalization’ might be as a term to describe recent and contemporary processes of international exchange, the authors discussed here have sidestepped Cooper’s critiques by deploying both flexible and rigorous notions of globalness to understand the experiences of migrant laborers. Further, they have responded to Cooper’s demands for a reinvention of existing paradigms to describe the experiences of migrant laborers and to make sense of culture in an increasingly interconnected world.