

“Of Inlands and Insular Realms: A View of the World from the Sierra Madres and Sulu Sea”  
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Historians of the modern world often contrast the insularity of “inlands” to the outward-facing, globalizing horizons of oceanic space, juxtaposing “small worlds” to “the world at large.” I disrupt the terrestrial-maritime binary in my chapter through an *amphibious* approach, linking these *terrestrial inlands* and what some call these *inland seas* (shallow, often-island-bound spaces; eddies in a larger globalizing stream) with an eye to relations of *insularity* (a term usually associated with terrestrial isolation, but literally tied to island spaces).

I focus on the terrestrial inlands of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (anchored in the Sierra Madres, an iconic symbol of refuge and insularity) and the aqueous spaces of the China Seas (especially the Sulu Sea, a local anchor of a series of “inland seas” running south from Luzon to Sulawesi). I begin with a sailor who washed up in the foothills of the Sierra Madres in 1850 after a decade in the Sulu Sea, a nomadic realm that Samal and Iranun “pirates” controlled much as Apaches and their Native neighbors controlled the borderlands of northern Mexico. My sailor, a creature of a world-encompassing empire, moved beyond the imperial pale into the Indigenous “interiors” of nonstate space—realms structured by local networks and protocols.

The nature of these spaces had everything to do with their “insularity,” their relative autonomy from globalizing state spaces. Yet what was “in” and what was “out”? The answer is tied less to natural features (remote mountains, shallow seas) and more to state and nonstate politics, and my paper will parse these aspects—jumping off from my traveler’s tale (and the on-the-ground parallels he witnessed) to develop a broader portrait of these inlands as “borderlands” between state and nonstate realms and among local (largely Indigenous) peoples. In this context, I focus on kinetic Apache and Samal-Iranun regimes that built power by keeping others in motion, and I juxtapose their tales to the incursions of empires (and adventurers, such as the “White Rajah” of Sarawak, my sailor’s patron in the China Seas, or U.S. soldiers of fortune that he encountered in Mexico), ending with the ideological work of empires in later incorporating these realms, casting them as new, state-contained “inlands” by century’s end.

If these were resonant inlands, they were also entangled spaces, connected by empires but also smaller-scale relationships—inland-to-inland matrices that ran village to village, across land and sea, encompassing more of the world than we may remember. I will conclude with a discussion of connections that entangled the Sierra Madres and Sulu Sea before the “modern” era (looking especially at Indigenous trade networks) and how these networks changed shape over the long nineteenth century. If later paths were less Native-centered, they were often just as *local* as they always had been. It is through a more localized, open-ended understanding of resonant tales and pathways, ultimately, that inland-centered frameworks can change our view of the world, moving beyond the “modernizing” telos and blind spots of global history.