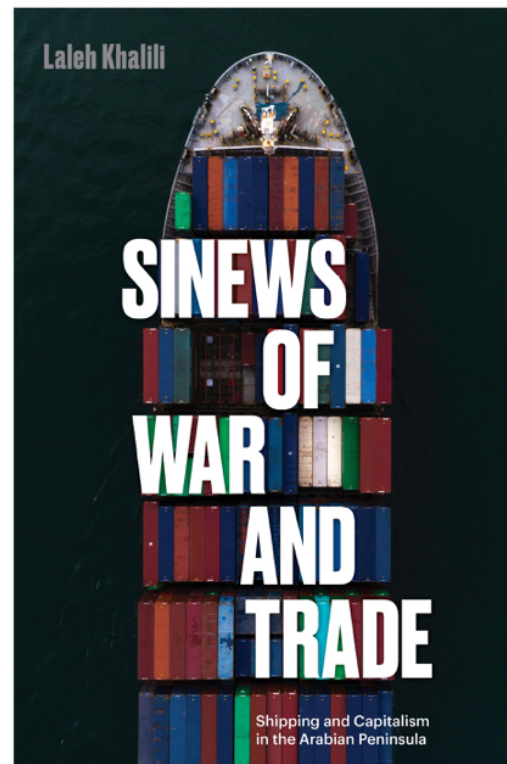


BOOK REVIEW: Laleh Khalili,  
*Sinews of War and Trade:  
Shipping and Capitalism in the  
Arabian Peninsula*

Guy Mannes-Abbott



Laleh Khalili announces the *raison d'être* of her new book, as well as its primary call on our attention, in the second sentence; 'Ninety per cent of the world's goods travel by ship'.<sup>1</sup> Within this overwhelming figure, 70 per cent of global cargo by value is carried by container ships, and 60 per cent of oil trade travels by sea. The resulting system of marine transportation is not, she continues, 'an enabling adjunct of trade but is central to the very fabric of global capitalism' (p 3). *Sinews of War and Trade* traces the histories of a fast-developing present, now centred on China as the 'factory of the world' and the Arabian peninsula as the infrastructural heart of flows through post-Independence era ports, with 'Dubai's Jabal Ali foremost among them' (p 2).

Khalili is a Professor of International Politics at Queen Mary University, London, a sharply engaged speaker and Tweeter who describes her book as 'untidy' (p 6) in its attempts to shuck off disciplinary constraints. This appealing untidiness betrays a consciousness of dimensions beyond the academic, signalled by her prefacing *Sinews* with Derek Walcott's famous words 'the sea is history', amongst many other literary references. I associate Walcott's words with Dionne Brand's expansively resonant memoir of a Caribbean childhood in which 'The sea was its own country, its own sovereignty',<sup>2</sup> everything beginning and ending in water. I also think of Michel Serres' contention that water is finite on our planet and more enduring than rock,<sup>3</sup> as well as

<sup>1</sup> Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade*, Verso, London, 2020, p 3

<sup>2</sup> Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Vintage, Canada, 2011, p 7

<sup>3</sup> See Michel Serres, *Biogea*, Univocal, 2012, in which he makes these references in the context of asking 'what philosopher thinks like a river' or the earth

Christina Sharpe's painfully exact construction of 'residence time', in relation to massacred Black bodies and the Atlantic Ocean, a time that is ongoing.<sup>4</sup>

Powerful and unconstrained conceptual and poetic tools establish the shorelines of Khalili's sea, then, and it is here that global capitalism takes its tightly woven place. *Sinews* narrows its focus to the northerly Indian Ocean world, the Arabian and Red Seas, as well as the Persian Gulf itself, where sinews of war and trade form a knotty profusion around the Arabian Peninsula in ports, free zones and naval bases. These are connected by peculiarly indelible shipping routes and communication infrastructure, as well as interconnected levers of military and financial control described as invisible or hidden here. Khalili took two trips on CMA CGM-owned container ships in 2015 and 2016 that involved variant length journeys to Jabal Ali, 'the biggest port in the Middle East, and the ninth-busiest container port in the world' (p 10). Thus, in conception and content, the book approaches its peninsula-world 'written from the sea, gazing at the shores' (p 4), only venturing landside on arrival at Jabal Ali Port, with its extended Free Zone, transport infrastructure and labour accommodation a distant haze.

*Sinews* sets up a further specific question, to be addressed with temporal, geographic, economic and legal scope, well-digested data and startling examples: 'The emergence of Jabal Ali (and its smaller cousins Khor Fakkan, Port Khalifa, Hamad, and Salalah, among others) in the Arabian Peninsula calls for an explanation: what accounts for such a proliferation of destination ports, when the population of the Peninsula is only around 60 million?' (p 15) Those cousins are in Sharjah's Indian Ocean enclave, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and Oman's southern coast, respectively.

Jabal Ali's port, construction of which began in 1976, was only part of the Jabal Ali Free Zone that commenced operations in 1985 and was planned as 'a symbiotic whole' (p 113) from the offset, to produce goods, trade and services, and act as an export processing, special economic and free trade zone. It is the largest of the twenty free zones that form Dubai, making it 'an offshore financial centre for the whole of its territory',<sup>5</sup> in Keller Easterling's conclusive phrasing. Dubai was the region's first designated free port in 1904, a model that has since proliferated, not least in the form of Dubai Ports World with its empire of seventy-eight port terminals ranging between Gujarat, Djibouti and London/Essex.

Khalili offers an authoritative portrait of the Jabal Ali Free Zone, which now hosts 7,000 companies after opening to foreign transnational businesses in 1992, when it also became 'a hub for US military logistics' (p 114) during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan – warring that also diverted transshipment traffic to Jabal Ali, just as the Saudi Arabia/United Arab Emirates invasion of Yemen and destruction of the port of Aden does today. Khalili describes the 'organism' of Port and Zone as 'heaving... with pollution, cloaked in secrecy, protected by

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<sup>4</sup> 'they, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; in sodium and chlorine. This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time.' Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, 2016, p 19

<sup>5</sup> Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Verso, London, 2014, p 45

scrubland and high-security fencing and underpaid Nepalese security men’ (p 115). She concludes that the fact that under one percent of the work force is Emirati ‘speaks to the regime of control at work there’ (p 116).

I know that scrubby hinterland well, especially the Industrial Areas full of labour camps operated by Laing O’Rourke, Arabtec, G4S, and other regional and global household names. I’ve spent days on foot and alone there,<sup>6</sup> as well as with Gulf Labor Artist Coalition colleagues,<sup>7</sup> speaking with entrapped South Asian men fresh from servicing the American warships at the port or building the western-branded museological spectacles on Saadiyat Island – including the Louvre and the Guggenheim, just across the border in Abu Dhabi.<sup>8</sup> Testimony gathered in this way from Al Quoz in downtown Dubai formed the core of a successful International Labour Organization (ILO) complaint on forced labour, which forced the UAE to introduce laws in 2016 allowing migrant workers to change their jobs – just one of the restrictive components of ‘modern day slavery’.

*Sinews* begins with excellent introductions to the route- and harbour-making that brought transformation, drawing together pre-colonial histories, European domination, post-Independence development funded with oil revenues, and the new century with its gravitational shift ‘eastwards’, even if many financial, legal and engineering services underpinning it remain in old colonial centres like London and Rotterdam. As Khalili remarks: ‘Today’s shipping businesses in the Arabian Peninsula continue to provide a route to comfortably paid jobs for British, Dutch, and other northwest Europeans’ (p 147).

On board her 363–366 metre-long CMA CGM container ships, owned by the French-Lebanese Saadé family headquartered in a Zaha Hadid building in Marseille, the author notes that charts are still kept by hand: ‘a palimpsest of past pencilled routes, erased and replaced on every trip [following] the same latitudes and longitudes’ (p 16). Many routes ‘have a solidity, a durability that their marine ephemerality belies’ (p 14), she adds. Before Europeans stiffened these waves, the peoples of the northerly Indian Ocean world and Gulf had, of course, ‘already developed sophisticated navigational methods for travel across the unruly waters’ (p 19).

Kachchh (Kutch) in western India, bordering the easternmost mouth of the Indus, is celebrated for these ancient skills and dhow-making ports that recur across the Gulf of Kutch in western Saurashtra. There is a several hundred-year-old graveyard and mosque for Iranian seamen on its coast, while Greek amphorae have been found buried inland from even earlier

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<sup>6</sup> See Guy Mannes-Abbott, ‘Utopian Dust or Perfumed Amplification: Object Lessons from Saadiyat Island and Gehry’s Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi’, in *Future Imperfect*, Anthony Downey, ed, Sternberg Press, 2017, pp 292–309; an early online version can be found on *Ibraaz* <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/94>

<sup>7</sup> See Gulf Labor’s campaign handbook, with essays by myself and others: *The Gulf: High Culture, Hard Labor*, Andrew Ross, ed, OR Books, 2015 [www.gulflabor.org](http://www.gulflabor.org)

<sup>8</sup> See Guy Mannes-Abbott, ‘Laboring One to Seven (Island of Terror)’, in *Supercommunity: Diabolical Togetherness Beyond Contemporary Art*, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle, eds, Verso, London, 2017, pp 247–253; online version available at <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/authors/guy-mannes-abbott/> (NB the names used are not, of course, real)

trade. I have watched the last dhows coming in from Dubai to Mandvi on the Arabian Sea, weighing their reduction to flotsam in the massive pre-monsoon waves. Those seasonal winds determined routes throughout these waters until the coming of steam, and the need for coal bunkering to facilitate British merchants and warships.

‘Steamships’, Khalili writes, ‘changed the face of navigation and the pathways of trade’ (p 22). Ports were forced to specialise; ‘new monetary and credit regimes were introduced. Racialised hierarchies and various forms of exploitation of labour ... were institutionalised by law’ (p 21), territories and floras mapped for extractive value. The years 1839 and 1869 consolidated these changes, with 1839 marking the snatching of Aden by the British to establish ‘the first coaling station annexed to any empire’ (p 23). The latter year marks the opening of the Suez Canal, thus completing the transformation, a process underscored with the coming of telegraph to Aden and elsewhere, ‘technology crucial to the control of the colonies’ (p 25).

Undersea cabling now under-scored established shipping routes; this concretised ‘the British Empire’s claims to rule the waves and transformed the less visible pathways of its dominion into materially substantial subsea passages’ (p 26). Today the peninsula is tightly ringed with cable infrastructure and Khalili cites the Falcon network, part of the Ambani family’s Reliance empire in India with its links from port to port across the region. Falcon even makes a suddenly crucial landfall at Al Ghaydah, on Yemen’s eastern coast, now occupied by the Saudi/UAE coalition, picking up where European colonisers left off.

*Sinews* reproduces the inglorious photograph of Lord Curzon arriving at Kuwait on his Viceregal tour of 1903, fresh from Bandar Abbas and Sharjah, carried to shore by Arab porters in order to be able to ride horseback into Kuwait City in more characteristic pomp. Today, the same site is occupied by Shuwaikh’s thriving cargo port. In 1925 Walter Benjamin visited Genoa’s cargo port on a freighter, and ‘was titillated by the sensory profusion’ of orchestral clanging and rattling, which he called “‘the music of the world’” (p 76). This musicality is now confined to ports or creeks where the dhows still thrive, as they did until recently in Sharjah’s downtown Creek and as they do in Dubai’s founding Creek. Dhows inhabit realms beneath official containerised networks but are complementary to them, making connective runs between ports and deploying their ‘fine-grained knowledge of local conditions’ (p 42), cannily adaptive to changing circumstances. After the 2008 crisis, dhow trade boomed, the size of the boats grew and new exchanges developed; cars and white goods headed from the Gulf to Zanzibar, goats and charcoal flooded back.

Meanwhile, ‘today’s container ports: vast, distant from the town centre, and thoroughly and entirely secured’ (p 64) are automating the musicality of unruly humans away in service of an economy dominated by ‘petroleum and chemical tankers, offshore loading and unloading platforms, and the importance of bunkering to the economies – at least, of the UAE’ (p 76). Aden was the major bunkering port in the region but lost that traffic to Dubai and other Gulf ports. Fujairah, near Khor Fakkan on the UAE’s eastern coast, is now the world’s second largest

refuelling stop, serviced by a pipeline from Abu Dhabi. The deliberate inaccessibility of these complexes ‘not only shapes landscapes but labour regimes and living and working conditions for those who work there’ (p 78). Yet, and this is the value of Khalili’s informational blizzard of a book, even at Khor Fakkan she admires the gracefulness of men at work, noting the way the ‘contrast between the complex gantry and the stevedores’ rudimentary poles embodies the tension between automation and cheap labour’ (pp 189–90).

So, finally, to labour and the real potential for untidiness in a book which proceeds with steady flows of data and incident that tend inevitably to mirror the steady flows of global capital, imperial and post-imperial event. Khalili uses the word ‘story’ ten times in the short introduction and says the book ‘wanted to tell stories’ (p 6). However, the problem with settling exclusively for the view from the sea, mirroring exactly the approach that British colonisers took to the Arabian coast of the Gulf, is that you don't get close enough to the storied realms of humans – the often overwhelming majority of whom are migrant here – and their potent anecdotes. So when Khalili mentions Walter Benjamin, it reminded me of Benjamin’s contrast between the marching of narrative history and the insurgent force and spatiality of the anecdote, or ‘story’.<sup>9</sup>

The best chapters here are the two that attempt to make up for that, ‘Landside Labour’ and ‘Shipboard Work’, and it is a pity the book was not organised around them. The chapter on port labour concentrates around pre-Independence histories of organisation and strikes, and the tailing off of such possibilities as autocratic regimes crushed any protest with ‘deportations [that] were brutal, rapid, and irreversible’ (p 199). In the 1960s and ’70s, Khalili reports that migrants in Dubai and the Gulf were from Iran, Baluchistan or Pakistan. By 2015, foreign workforces ranged from 33 per cent in Saudi Arabia to 88 and 90 per cent in the UAE and Qatar respectively. ‘In all these countries, South Asians outnumbered all other foreigners, with 7.2 million Indians, 3.3 million Bangladeshis, and 3.2 million Pakistanis’ (p 200). In highly concentrated passages Khalili describes the transformation of “‘native” workers’ into “‘migrants” after such categories were invented by modern states to classify and control workers’ (p 194). Post-1948 Palestinians were in high demand, making up 17 per cent of the workforce for Saudi Arabia’s Aramco in 1951. By 1970, 140,000 Palestinians were living in Kuwait, until they were expelled after the first Gulf War.

I like Khalili’s story about protests against autocratic British rule in Bahrain during the Suez War in 1956, when Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt. ‘The leaders of the strike were detained, put on a show trial and exiled to St Helena’ (p 204)! Meanwhile, in Aden, Antonin Besse, a ‘ruthless businessman’ (p 71) and a powerful agent of Shell (Trading and Transport

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<sup>9</sup> ‘The constructions of history are comparable to military orders that discipline the true life and confine it to barracks. On the other hand: the street insurgence of the anecdote. The anecdote brings things near to us spatially, lets them enter our life.’ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, 2000, p 545; this is a reference that has arisen often in my work – see, for example, Guy Mannes-Abbott, ‘Forting’, *AA Files 42*, London, 2001, pp 2–21

Company, founded by an Iraqi Jew born in Whitechapel, London), made a founding donation to St Anthony's College Oxford, which generated a strike in protest at the size of the gift.

Khalili reminds us of Michel Foucault's description of the ship as 'the heterotopia par excellence. In civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates' (p 220). Rhetorically spicy, it is almost laugh-out-loud funny and wrongheaded in equal measure. I write that as an occasional sailor, picturing Timurid Emperor Jahangir, taking his 400,000-member court to the coast of Gujarat to stand in the sea for the first time. However, the reality of labour at sea is all too often 'mind-numbing, boring, repetitive labour for everyone, including the officers, and back-breaking toil for the seafarers' (p 220). Khalili found that port visits are exhausting and stressful for crew on understaffed ships, often unable to go landside in peninsula ports. In contrast comes a Foucauldian paean to the 'copious artisanal skill' witnessed in the engine room 'always hot and loud and throbbing with the motion of the cylinders and the rotation of the massive one-metre-wide drive shaft where the handful of people who work in the engine room are engaged in reparative or regular maintenance' (p 221) hand-machining damaged pieces of the 'awesomely powerful engines' (p 222).

Khalili writes movingly of crew members tasked to watch the horizon for anything that the Automatic Identification System (AIS) doesn't pick up. AIS monitors all shipping movement across the world, with wikis on every vessel it picks up, but various clandestine actors, smugglers or pirates, escape it. The watchers mystify her with their ability to detect the slightest of movements through the 'haze and heat and shimmer of the Indian Ocean' (p 222). It is a world that Bombay-based studio CAMP brought alive in their film of dhow traders on these routes, *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* (2013),<sup>10</sup> triangulating Gujarat, Dubai or Sharjah and Zanzibar via Salalah, etc. The sweet camaraderie, layered cargo, praying, exercise and strangely liberated unofficial status that crews enjoy even in the Gulf is highly affective.

I made a film with CAMP for the Folkestone Triennial in 2011,<sup>11</sup> called *The Country of the Blind, and Other Stories* – which did something similar, working with amateur coastal watchers who filmed and spoke over clips from their bunker above Folkestone's harbour, recording exactly the same flows of global capitalism as Khalili writes about, with all the same names: CMA CGM, Maersk, the IAS, and flags of convenience. The latter identifier 'transforms the ship into a quantum of sovereignty of that country' (p 236) with 'absolutely no restrictions' (p 237). Flags of

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<sup>10</sup> *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf*, exhibited at Sharjah Biennial 2013, Sharjah, UAE, and as part of The Boat Modes installation at DOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, Germany <https://studio.camp/works/g2g2g/>

<sup>11</sup> See CAMP, *The Country of the Blind*: Photolog <https://studio.camp/photologue/gallery/countryoftheblind/>; and reviews by Colin Perry in *frieze*, 1 November 2011 <https://frieze.com/article/2011-folkestone-triennial>, and Adrian Searle in *The Guardian*, 26 June 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/jun/26/folkestone-triennial-2011-artists-review>

convenience began in Panama in 1916 and were taken to their abstract extreme in the ‘Liberian registry’ headquartered in the US state of Virginia.

From the bunker above the English Channel, activity at the Port of Dover was visible to the east, Dungeness nuclear power station to the west and the Sangatte ‘refugee camp’ over on the French shore. In between a world of socio-political complexity bloomed, including boats cheating fishing quotas, P&O strikes, aggregate dredgers, and the Algerian, British Royal and Belgian navies. Small scale activity reminded me of the intimacies of the dhow world in the Gulf, in whose vessels I have also admired the engine rooms, accessed via rough wooden steps, below the water line, and stifling hot even when the engine is being fixed. A beach beneath globalisation’s spanking new public realm.

*Sinews* ends with a short chapter that draws together the bounties of war since the age of independence, like the tripartite invasion of the Suez Canal and the Israeli assault on Egypt in 1967, both of which disrupted movement through the canal with significant impacts, and maps an ongoing geopolitical shift. The canal reopened in 1975, by which time Khalili claims that regional power had already shifted from Cairo to the Arabian peninsula, a process that accelerated during the Lebanese Civil war, which saw most major international companies moving their headquarters to Dubai and Sharjah. A ‘massive rerouting of petrodollars from Beirut to the Gulf resulted in a frenzy of construction and consumption’, she adds, plus ‘wholly new ports’ (p 249). Desert Shield/Desert Storm consolidated these trends, the main beneficiary of which was Jabal Ali.

A new race is now on to access or develop ports and naval bases along the Red Sea coast and beyond that ‘echoes the European competition over footholds in the Gulf a century ago’ (p 256). The so-called War on Terror generated a US naval presence at Jabal Ali, Fujairah, and the Musandam Peninsula in Oman proper, as well as Kuwait and especially Bahrain. Nevertheless, Jabal Ali is, of course, ‘the US Navy’s busiest port of call, receiving up to 200 warship visits per year’ (p 260). US forces lurk offshore in massive vessels, their AIS turned off. The Saudi/UAE invasion of Yemen and belligerence towards Qatar has hurt Jabal Ali, Khalili writes, but they have achieved ‘total domination of navigable harbours and port structures’ in Yemen; ‘future strategic bases for commercial and military control’ (p 268). She concludes that Al Ghaydah may become a future version of the Gulf oil terminals.

*Sinews* is a stimulating read and a surefooted introduction to the subject, with deep pockets of research. It performs a task that multiple books should have done already and ought to inspire further correction of that kind. It might have been sufficient to add a chapter or two here to develop landside connections, given the inherent human hinterlands but also the classic colonial framing and missed entanglements. It is a lament made in a comradely and writerly way, given the enormity of the patch of sea Khalili has taken on so ably.

My own view of the region is the all-too commonly constrained one of the Deportees Room at Dubai International where I was detained last time I was invited to the UAE, and despite a

Residency and Production Award contracted by the Government of Sharjah to develop a work focused on the landside consequences and residues of port activity.<sup>12</sup> Abu Dhabi is the power centre in the UAE; its autocratic regime's insecurity is unlimited when it comes to organised migrant labourers, artists, writers, academic researchers and Emirati reformers, as well as human rights workers who challenge their abuses and the failing western institutions that profit so shamelessly from the enslaved migrant labour building their container-scaled spectacles.

Khalili reminds us that the Persian Gulf is a young sea in geological terms, yet its 'world' will be significantly impacted by climate change. Change is not something that fazes the region; *Sinews* details a scale and speed of changes over the last couple of hundred years that is mesmerising. I am struck by the simple fact that the port- and Free Zone-addled UAE only acquired a concrete plant in 1975, the year before work on Jabal Ali's port began. Yet, weirdly, wind-worn desert sand is the 'wrong sand' for its purposes: 'Concrete mixing requires angular sand, which is either marine or riparian, mined from beaches or rivers' (p 83). There is something elemental in this paradox that resonates throughout all that *Sinews* offers, as well as in my own experience of its peninsula, which is a generator of deep ambivalences, for sure, but which also possesses an entangling dynamism that resists a firm, or fixed, grasp. You wouldn't want to miss out on that.

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<sup>12</sup> See Guy Mannes-Abbott, 'Tales from the Deportees Room, *Porting One* (DXB)', *di'van*, issue 4, 2018, pp 46–64  
[https://issuu.com/unswartdesign/docs/di\\_van\\_issue\\_4](https://issuu.com/unswartdesign/docs/di_van_issue_4)