The opportunity to discuss the working culture and research environment of the Fernand Braudel Centre presented itself through the visit of two senior scholars - Ramon Grosfuguel (University of California, Berkeley) and Thomas Reifer (University of California, San Diego) to the MnM’s first international symposium “ReOrient the World: Decolonial Horizons”. The Fernand Braudel Centre was founded in 1976, at State University of New York, Binghamton. Named for the famous French historian, who is seen as one of the precursors of World-Systems Theory, the Braudel Centre was established for the critical expansion of world-systems analysis through the study of economics, historical systems, and civilization. The Centre has been home to several leading thinkers of world system theory – Immanuel Wallenstein, Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, and Andre Gunder Frank, putting the Braudel Centre at the forefront of studies focusing on commodity chains, regionality, core, periphery and semi-periphery and anti-systemic movements. Ramon and Thomas were part of the Fernand Braudel research institute and were invited to talk to the MnM staff and students about their experiences at the Braudel Centre, how it was structured and their mode of research.

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At the heart of the Braudel Centre was a collaborative and inclusive research community, primarily driven by several research working groups. Each working group was led by one senior scholar who would locate a broad topic of analysis in collaboration with post-doctoral scholars and PhD students. Through collaborative analysis and discussions working members of the group would eventually locate key areas of study to develop, i.e. frame their own ‘angles of vision’ within the broader topic. The research working groups would meet approximately once a week to present their research findings, some of which over time evolved into papers for journals or chapters in books. Meeting regularly meant that all working members of the group had the opportunity to engage with each other’s work, give feedback, pass ideas around and discuss the direction of the research. By working on different themes/topics within a common theoretical language all the members of the group learnt more from and with each other, than individually directed research. The Braudel Centre would also invite esteemed international scholars to respond to the papers presented at the working groups, holding intensive seminars during the 6 weeks of the visit. This meant that the members of the group were critically analysing their research in conversation with senior scholars in the field. The work that would eventually be published had therefore been discussed with and honed by a number of peers and senior scholars.

In the case of PhD students, these research interests were often related to their thesis topics. When the research working groups began, there was no assumption about the amount of knowledge expected from the PhD students. Debate and questioning were encouraged. There was respect for the work done by the students and there was often an overlap between their graduate seminar classes and the research working groups. Differences of opinion were respected amongst all levels of researchers. Some working groups went on for 10 years, replacing individual members circumstantially but not losing their focus of research. Both Ramon and Thomas found working in such an environment very productive and remember it as the most memorable time in their research lives.

However, research working groups also face several challenges. Such a collaborative working culture is not the norm within Western academic practices. One major obstacle to such a
research culture would be how to deal with differences of opinion. These also occurred at the Braudel Centre from time to time, but working within a larger theoretical framework helped them to negotiate these differences as debates, generating further research. Some disagreements were minor while others were major which led to certain research working groups diminishing or breaking apart. Taking this into account the MnM Centre understands that by implementing research working groups one will encounter disciplinary disagreements on research findings which may become an issue for collaborative writing. Therefore the MnM Centre should develop interdisciplinary research groups, where all points of difference are recognized and respected, to the point that the difference is seen as a positive tool in creating collaborative research. One way to understand this is through the analogy of language – a broad theoretical framework becomes a common language that all the researchers speak, which does not mean that all the members have to necessarily agree with each other or share the same research positions. Ramon Grosfuguel and Thomas Reifer, by relating their experiences of the Braudel Centre’s structure and mode of research, encouraged the MnM Centre staff and students to fashion a working culture which advances discussion, debate and the development of critical research through collaborative principles.