Maritime Literary Cultures – Reading and Writing at Sea

Veranstalter: Susann Liebich, Research Group „Floating Spaces", Cluster of Excellence, „Asia and Europe in a Global Context", Heidelberg University
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In late October 2016, SUSANN LIEBICH, postdoctoral fellow in the research group on „Floating Spaces" at the Cluster of Excellence, „Asia and Europe in a Global Context" (Heidelberg University), organized the workshop „Maritime Literary Cultures: Reading and Writing at Sea" (28 to 29th October 2016), bringing together historians, literary scholars, library curators and museum practitioners interested in practices, encounters, and developments of written, printed, and drawn texts and images on board ship.

In the Call for Papers and her introductory remarks to the workshop, Liebich noted how the sea has received much scholarly interest across history, literary, and cultural studies, „in part spurred by a desire to understand the processes and effects of globalization in its historical and contemporary contexts". This included scholarly attention to time spent at sea, which is understood to be more than just a delaying interlude between places of departure and destination, and recognized as having an influential significance of its own. As a site of human interaction and experience, what happens at sea shapes ideas, creates knowledge, and changes biographies. Maritime journeys therefore often represent temporary states of being in transit: As Liebich stressed, „literally transiting through space, and metaphorically and imaginatively transiting to new worlds." Based on the premise that „reading and writing are key cultural practices that facilitate and negotiate such emotional, imaginary, and mental transitions", the workshop aimed to shed new light on the cultural aspects of maritime history, as Liebich wrote in the conference's Call for Papers.

The first of five panels drew on these thoughts with a focus on religious reading, community and authority. CHRISTIAN ALGER (British Library, London) reflected on the power and influence of books and reading on a ship's hierarchical order. Throughout the English Civil War, the Puritan minister John Syms served as naval chaplain on the warship „Providence" and presented in his „daybooke" a narrative that hints at the vital role of written texts in a maritime confrontation between the competing authorities of chaplain and captain.

Next came STEPHEN BERRY (Simmons College, Boston), who questioned the equation of „the Sea [as] School of Vice" (Cotton Mather 1699) by stressing the potential of 18th century British sailing ships to serve as sites for evangelistic reading and writing in the era of the Great Awakening. Famous preachers such as John Whitefield and John Wesley used their travel weeks to compose zealous sermons and embraced the educational opportunities for passengers and sailors alike. The sailing ship could therefore easily turn into a school of virtue.

A school was also what Sister Mary Paul Mulquin and six other members of her order from Limerick were heading for. TAMSIN BADCOE (University of Bristol) introduced these nuns who embarked the „SS Great Britain" in 1873 to found an educational center in Australia. Sister Mary recorded the voyage in a diary written for the convent back home. The reader encounters the atheistic captain, steerage passengers, and upperclass travelers through the eyes of an attentive woman, who combines a coherent narrative of various natural events with religious reflections, thus leading to an intersection of shipboard and devotional culture and the nature of the temporary community created by the journey.

The second panel dealt with „whalers, logbooks and literature". Again, communities played an important role in the literary constitution of sea experience. JIMMY PACKHAM (University of Birmingham) took Melville's „boggy, soggy, squitchy pictures" (Herman Melville 1851) and reflected on conspicuous instances of marginalia in American whaler logbooks. Captain Jernegan's six-year old

daughter Laura and the anonymous 40-year old sailor both captured a different „maritime self" in their logbooks filled with animal drawings, sorrowful love compositions, or song verse drafts. Thus, the apparently dry notes of logbooks gain an additional layer. They depict a unique journey and a unique subject position occupied by an individual at sea.

However, by keeping track and recording numbers, data, and places, logbooks also form a truth-constituting genre. FELIX LÜTTGE (Humboldt-University Berlin) showed how with increasing functionality and expertise due to the first oceanographic charts whales gradually turned into objects of knowledge. The professionalized practice of log-keeping in the 19th century therefore served amongst other goals especially the purpose of depositing evidence beyond the waves of the sea. As authoritative voices in a modern discourse on nature, law, and science, they provided facticity and formed a reliable foundation on which legal and intellectual claims could be asserted.

In FELIX SCHÜRMANN's (University of Kassel) contribution another aspect of whaling questioned the aspect of reality. In contrast to officials, the crew was not obliged to return geographical data, but occupied themselves with various narratives. The impact of such written and oral (re)telling becomes visible when looking at the expectations linked to the island of Mauritius. In the imagination of many whalemen, who stopped at the harbor of Port Louis for provisions, the bestseller novel „Paul et Virginie" (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 1788) turned the place into an exotic paradise. Utopian conceptions led to desertions, touristic sightseeing tours, and even memorial buildings for the fictional lovers – a telling example of how human spatial perception vividly interacts with read, heard, and received material.

In the third panel the focus shifted to „narrating and recording life at sea". Literary masterpieces in the wake of the British Romantic Era did not only emerge on „Tintern Abbey" (Wordsworth 1798), but also on board warships. LENA MOSER (University of Tübingen) presented stylistically sophisticated narratives by Royal Navy navigators, whose far-reaching influence has been neglected throughout maritime research so far. Nonetheless, these masters held an indispensable position in the ship's hierarchy. Understanding their multi-layered role in the production, transfer, and circulation of knowledge is therefore traceable in the literary characteristics that also shed light on the constitution of genres, strategies of self-fashioning, and constructions of identity.

MARK HENGERER together with MATHIAS MÜLLER, SOFIA PRUMMER and SEBASTIAN SCHÄFER (all University of Munich) presented yet another example of 18th century writing on the sea. Covering trips from 1744 to 1779, the sailor Rörd Knuten held different positions on several expeditions, and recorded these at length in his journal kept throughout his life. Drawing on statistical and quantitative methods to analyze Knuten's narrative and language, the Munich research team showed how depending on the career level Knuten occupied, the choice of words, syntactic modifications and length of sentences varied.

Tables and charts also account for a large share of ship surgeons' reports, the maritime sources DANIELA EGGER (Heidelberg University) analyzed. 19th century convicts and migrants at sea were confronted with mental, psychopathological, and sociocultural challenges within a network of emotional communities and intertwined hierarchical structures. With the help of the surgeons' reports the experiences of those men and women's coping with fear, anxiety, and distress, who usually did not leave personal writings, can be revealed. Standing between those passengers, the ship's crew, and the colonial offices in Australia and Great Britain, the physicians' mediatory documents provide insight into the emotional body practice in a transitory context.

Shipboard publications as artifacts were the key issue discussed in the fourth panel. MARY ISBELL (University of New Haven) suggested that the weekly warship newspaper „The Young Idea" (between 1850s-1860s) can give answers to questions of censorship, the process of editing, and (print) culture between the East Indies and China Station. Contributions to this Victorian journal reflected on

warships, foreign ports, appropriate behavior, and hierarchical tension. But there was enough room for creativity as well. Poems, songs, satirical verses, theater performances were equally announced, printed, and criticized in this shipboard publication.

According to SUSANN LIEBICH (Heidelberg University) „The Young Idea" was no exceptional phenomenon. Other warship passengers invented and produced similarly printed newsletters and chronicles, as can be seen in the example of New Zealand troopship magazines during the First World War. While being stuck in the overcrowded and confined space of the ship, soldiers were keen for any distractions of mind. Additionally, the ship was also the space of initiation into a military identity, with time on board used to prepare the men for war. To support this change of status and to overcome the monotonous routine, troopship journals not only conveyed news and shaped the general experience of transit, they also crucially facilitated the transition from citizens to soldiers.

The next panel focused more on reading than writing or editing. HELEN CHAMBERS (Open University, Milton Keys) presented her findings concerning Joseph Conrad as a reader. Although the author was a multilingual and eclectic reader, little is known about the books he (dis)liked before the start of his literary career, when Conrad was engaged in the Merchant Navy. The impressions he collected and the libraries he visited in many ports and ships all contributed to his own stories and narratives. By using an investigative strategy that combines historical probability with bibliographic credibility, Conrad's maritime reading can be reconstructed – and this in turn supplements knowledge about the availability and distribution of printed material in seaports and outposts of the British Empire.

Books were available to sea travelers in ports, and they were also accessible through ships' libraries, as the next two papers showed. The library on board the Antarctic expedition ship „Discovery" (1901-04) stocked an unusually large number of books. The printed catalogue with various genres as well as personal accounts of some of the men taking part in the polar expedition pro-

vide rich sources that BILL BELL (Cardiff University/Göttingen University) explores in a larger project („Crusoe's Books") on itinerant reading communities. The library provided entertaining and educating material, symbolized power and knowledge, but also served as opportunity of socialization and imagination in the middle of otherwise unhospitable surroundings.

An unfamiliar setting is what most passengers on Dutch steamships also found themselves in. But libraries as architectural masterpieces brought comfort and consumerism on board these vessels. With a rich number of printed matter, photographs, and personal documents, RON BRAND (Maritime Museum Rotterdam) gave an overview about the practical use of these places, including rules and guidelines, opening hours, and lending restrictions. In course of time, first and second class passengers were provided with and used two different libraries for their reading material, leading to a clear separation between reading travelers. The division of classes and the question of luxury is thus reflected in the library situation and the development of a maritime reading culture as well.

Passengers who did not only read, but also write, however, often neglected the scientific aspects of voyaging. In the last panel, LAURENCE PUBLICOVER (University of Bristol) showed that those who nevertheless took interest in the art of navigation did not always succeed in mastering that unknown matter. The findings in migrants' diaries and other documents from the Caird and British Library and the Brunel Institute range from explanations of charts to diary headings with coordinates. Where the seamen's language entered a civilian's personal notes, an initiation to a foreign domain might take place. Literally „coming to terms" did not only mean a confident use of specific words, but a deeper understanding of the vertical depth beneath, the global dimensions passed, and the quest for orientation in the middle of a hostile element.

The workshop's last paper picked up on the literary and linguistic creation of the sea. DAVID PUNTER's (University of Bristol) analysis of the book „Down to the Sea in Ships" (Horatio Clare 2014) pointed to the au-

thor's verbal treatment of his experience of traveling on a container ship in 2011. Like the 19th and 20th century passenger diaries before, Clare encountered ambiguous feelings of helplessness when facing the monotonous waters, and total dependency on other people's navigating expertise and the benevolence of nature. His observations suggest a critical definition of modernity in view of the seemingly timeless ocean.

Together, all papers in the workshop highlighted the sea and ships as sites and spaces of literary production, circulation, and reception and the ways in which the practices of reading and writing were closely interconnected with practices of sea travel. The participants are planning to develop these ideas further in a forthcoming collection of essays, through the founding of a research network, and in future collaborations.

Conference Overview

Introductory Remarks
Susann Liebich (Heidelberg University)

Panel I: Religious Reading, Community & Authority
Chair: Roland Wenzlhuemer (Heidelberg University)

Christian Alger (British Library, London): 'Books with providence'
Stephen Berry (Simmons College, Boston): 'The sailing ship as a school of virtue'
Tamsin Badcoe (University of Bristol): '"All were in the same boat": Sister Mary Paul Mul¬quin and Brunel's 'Greyhound of the Seas'"

Panel II: Whalers, Logbooks and Literature
Chair: Johanna de Schmidt (Heidelberg University)

Jimmy Packham (University of Birmingham): '"Boggy, soggy, squitchy pictures": marginalia in American whaler logbooks'
Felix Lüttge (Humboldt University Berlin): 'Deposito¬ries of evidence: towards a history of the logbook'
Felix Schürmann (University of Kassel): 'The impacts of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's „Paul et Virginie" on American whalemen's perceptions of Mauritius, c. 1838-1878

Panel III: Recording and Narrating Life at Sea

Chair: Laurence Publicover (University of Bristol)

Lena Moser (University of Tübingen): 'Masters of the sea of words: eighteenth-century British navigators as literary authors'
Mark Hengerer, Matthias Müller, Sofia Prummer, and Sebastian Schäfer (University of Munich): 'Careers and authors: on a missing link in texts on the sea - the ex¬ample of Rörd Knuten's expeditions (1744-1779)'
Daniela Egger (University of Heidelberg): 'Nineteenth-century surgeons' reports, mental illness and emotional distress on emigrant and convict ships'

Panel IV: Shipboard Publications
Chair: Tamsin Badcoe (University of Bristol)

Mary Isbell (University of New Haven): 'Editing The Young Idea: a nineteenth-century handwritten shipboard newspaper'
Susann Liebich (University of Heidelberg): 'Transit expe¬riences in troopship magazines of the First World War

Panel V: Books on Board and in Ports
Chair: David Punter (University of Bristol)

Helen Chambers (Open University, Milton Keys): 'In „a great Eastern port": reconstructing Joseph Conrad's maritime reading in his ports of call'
Bill Bell (Cardiff University/Göttingen University): 'Bound for Antarctica: reading and writing on The Discovery, 1901-1904'
Ron Brand (Maritime Museum, Rotterdam): 'Books on board; luxury and reading on board Dutch passenger ships'

Panel VI: Writing on Board, Navigating Oceanic Experience
Chair: Susann Liebich (Heidelberg University)

Laurence Publicover (University of Bristol): 'Are we there yet? Passengers as navigators in voyages of migration'
David Punter (University of Bristol): 'Down to the Sea in Ships'

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