

**S. 1. 3. – ON THE RISING TIDE OF HISTORY ENVIRONMENTALISM AND NEW
STUDIES OF MERCHANT SHIPPING**

Chair: Valerie Burton

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Panel Abstract

In this panel we bring environmentalist concerns to the conference theme of “Old and New Uses of the Oceans”. All presenters, whether or not they have a track record in environmentalism, are concerned by the difference made by an environmentalist reframing of the oceans. We seek audience involvement in our plan for furthering historical concern with the ship and how it might be involved in the change-making that is so urgent in a present where the threat of environmental disaster is unabated.

Our proceedings start with the chair profiling the cultural and material themes involved in our approaches to oceanic time and space where the environmental impact of merchant shipping as a means of transport and communication is the key factor. The first presenter is the early modernist, Gisele Conceição, a researcher of knowledge-producing encounters in the Portuguese Atlantic empire. With reference to the ship as a vehicle of imperial expansion and of transcultural exchange, she re-examines scientific knowledge acquisition. Environment shifts in its reference with our second speaker: Meaghan Walker moves to the affective qualities of the virtual ship to consider how in the twenty-first century popular video games engage their audience in historicizing the socialized, politically coveted, but ultimately unpredictable ocean space of the wooden sailing-ship. Finally, an anthropologist, Johanna Markkula, is the spokesperson of an environmentally-concerned research group based in Norway that tackles container ships across their entire life cycle, from their “birth” in shipyards in Korea and the Philippines, to their working lives out at sea and in ports, to their final “death” on the ship-breaking yards on the beaches of Bangladesh. Her team adopts a life-cycle approach because it allows for the “flow” in which hidden connections between technology, labour, and health and welfare might be recovered. Presenters hope to encourage audience participation towards compiling an agenda for environmentally engaged maritime scholarship into the future

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Biography of Chair and Facilitator

Valerie Burton is Professor of History at Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John’s, Canada and Chair of the Maritime Studies Research Unit. She was PI in grant-funded project that created website More than a List of Crew <https://www.mun.ca/mha/mlc/>, a website that makes accessible her university’s unparalleled collection of nineteenth-century British imperial merchant seafarers records to the public and to academics with a focus on method in maritime history. Her review essay in a recent *International Journal of Maritime History* is a critical account of scholarship in maritime history at Memorial across four decades prefacing work that results from the recent engagement of emergent scholars with the university’s archival holdings. In addition to publishing about maritime labour, ports, and seafaring communities, Valerie has edited collections in gender studies and post-secondary pedagogy.

New ecosystem, new knowledge: processes of knowledge constructions about marine fauna in the coastal areas of the Portuguese Atlantic Empire.

GISELE C. CONCEIÇÃO (CITCEM - University of Porto)

Abstract

Which kind of processes of construction and circulation of marine fauna knowledge can be observed in the Portuguese Atlantic Empire during the 16th and 17th centuries? In the last twenty years, from a fundamentally historical perspective, the production of knowledge has been understood by scholars of the Nature of Scientific Knowledge (NOS) as an essentially communicative practice. In this case, in historical terms, the production and circulation of knowledge would be closely linked to the establishment of communicative processes, which occur in borderlands, mobile, changeable and selectively permeable. In the Early Modern period, starting with European maritime expansion, these processes, here understood not only as the simple dissemination or transmission of ideas but as transcultural interactions that occurred in contact zones that stimulated the construction of new philosophical models that sought to understand the natural environment. In this sense, this paper aims to analyse, through the Portuguese sources, the evidence of conflict and transcultural exchanges that involved these knowledge-producing encounters.

Keywords

Old uses of the ocean, transcultural knowledge, Atlantic boundaries, Early Modern history, Environmental history.

Biography

PhD in History at the University of Porto, Portugal. Researcher at CITCEM – Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória – U.Porto. Recently concluded a Post-Doctoral Researcher at University of São Paulo/USP. I have been working on the History of Science, especially History of Natural Philosophy and Medicine in the Early Modern Portuguese Empire. My research focus is on the processes of knowledge production, emphasizing the entanglement and dynamics of knowledge forms in their historical making.

Memento Mortem: Ecological Disaster in Return of the Obra Dinn and the Franklin Expedition to the Northwest Passage

MEAGHAN WALKER ((Department of History, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada)

Abstract

In 1803, the British East India Company (EIC) ship *Obra Dinn* went missing with all its crew between England and its rendezvous. In 1807, the ship reappeared with jury-rigged sails and no living crew. A mysterious book and a compass were delivered to the EIC office in London from Morocco, purporting to be aids for discovering the fate of the ship and its crew. In 1845, H.M.S. *Erebus* and *Terror* departed from England on an expedition to discover the northwest passage through the Arctic so an alternate route to Asia from Europe might be mapped. Three years later, the Board of Admiralty sent a search party to look for Franklin's now lost expedition.

These two cases are remarkably similar. They both arose through imperial motives, they ignored the expertise of non-Europeans then later scapegoated them, and both tragedies involved incomprehensible natural (or supernatural) forces worsened by the crew's increasing hopelessness and isolation. Still, in one aspect they diverge: while Franklin's expedition is a real historical event, the story of the *Obra Dinn* is the plot of a video game released in 2018 by independent developer Lucas Pope.

Although video games have become an increasingly important part of global popular culture few academics and fewer historians have considered them. However, as the popular and award-winning *Return of the Obra Dinn* reveals, games are significant mediums of historical memory and even historical methods. The player's task is to link the names of the ship's company to their bodies and to uncover how they died, not to the end of memorializing them but to determine the financial cost for the EIC. The *Obra Dinn* reimagines the fate of the *Erebus* and *Terror*, a similar tragedy (though yet to be gamified) where goals of imperial triumph were dashed on the ice of ecological reality and European hubris. Further, the recent discovery of the two vessels, while significant for archaeological and historical research, turns attention on the Canadian government's push to strengthen sovereignty claims over the warming northwest passage. In this respect, both stories offer a warning against capitalist and imperialist greed and future climate disaster. They also allow historians to question how imagining (or re-imagining) the past can help imagine our future, where we are increasingly fated to experience climate catastrophe.

Keywords

video game, *Obra Dinn*, Franklin expedition, global warming, imperialism

Biography

Meaghan Walker was awarded a PhD by the University of Alberta, Canada for her SSHRC-funded doctoral project about the clothing of seafarers in the Royal Navy, 1793-1815. She now holds the Ewart A. Pratt Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Newfoundland and Labrador Military, Naval and Maritime History at Memorial University of Newfoundland where she is furthering her research into the means and relations of clothing and cloth retailing in a variety of maritime contexts. Her master's work was published in the May 2019 issue of the *International Journal of Maritime History* as "In the Inventories of Deceased Merchant Seafarers: Exploring Merchant Shipping and Material Culture, 1860-1880". Meaghan is also interested in the gamification of history, especially narratives about the maritime world. In April 2019 she spoke about the *Return of the Obra Dinn* in Dr. Robert Whitaker's program *History Respawned* (<https://www.historyrespawned.com/home/2019/4/1/return-of-the-obra-dinn-podcast>).

The Container Ship: icon of globalization and environmental concern

JOHANNA MARKKULA (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Norway)

Abstracts

The container ship is one of the most significant icons of economic globalization, with more than ninety percent of the world's goods being transported by sea. Yet, as Campbell (2019) points out, the cultural and representational work performed by images related to ships and the sea has tended to disguise or efface environmental concerns. While Campbell's focus is on the sailing ship, in this paper we look at a different type of vessel, the container ship, and how it similarly both reveals and conceals various issues related to the environment, labour and other aspects of the maritime industries. Using ethnographic research on and around these giants of global transport, we follow the ships through their entire life cycle, from their "birth" in shipyards in Korea and the Philippines, to their working lives out at sea and in ports, to their final "death" on the ship-breaking yards on the beaches of Bangladesh. We trace both the material and representational work performed around and onboard these ships, as well as the results of this work with regards to the global environment and economy more broadly. We suggest that the container ship as an image of globalization, modernity, efficiency and industrialization often conceals the ships' entanglements with environmental and labour issues, for example with regards to pollution, health effects for workers, as well as labour inequalities in different segments of the life cycle of the ships.

Keywords

container ships; environment; maritime labour; shipbuilding; shipping; shipbreaking

Biography

The research team of "(Dis-) Assembling the Life Cycle of Container Ships", a 3-year research project (2018-2021) funded by the Norwegian Research Council, consists of Elisabeth Schober (PI), Camelia Dewan and Johanna Markkula. Elisabeth Schober is an economic anthropologist and globalisation studies scholar with research and teaching interests in maritime work, gender / sexuality, and the anthropology of energy. Her present research focuses on South Korea's shipbuilding industry and its responses to the current global crisis in the maritime world. Camelia Dewan is an environmental anthropologist and postdoctoral fellow on the project where she focused on 'Death' through the shipbreaking industry with the ethnographic case of the beaches of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Johanna Markkula is a maritime anthropologist and shipboard ethnographer. As a postdoctoral fellow in the project she researched the working lives of the ships and the people onboard them.