

# Editorial – being in transit: ships and global incompatibilities\*

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‘Where was the nineteenth century?’ asks Jürgen Osterhammel in his magnum opus, *The transformation of the world*. It was to be found, he says, in the European ‘discoveries’ of new lands, in the naming of the world, in the ‘mental maps’ of how the world’s regions were imagined to be interconnected, and in the relationship between the land and the sea.<sup>1</sup> In the articles that make up this special issue, we argue that the critical sites of the nineteenth century, broadly defined, were the phenomena that connected these discoveries, mental maps, world regions, and the land and the sea: ships.

Ocean-crossing ships are at once obvious yet obscure candidates for the title of quintessential nineteenth-century *lieux d’histoire*. Their significance is obvious in the sense that they played such a fundamental role in the geopolitical transformation of the world and in its ‘shrinking’ or its so-called ‘great acceleration’.<sup>2</sup> Ships are of obvious historical importance, too, because they were always more than just material objects, especially when (again in the age of steam) their construction necessitated labour regimes and complex structures of finance that were industrial and capitalist phenomena in themselves.<sup>3</sup> But their obscurity lies in the fact that, despite their centrality to the literature of ‘global’ or ‘world’ history, ships as historical

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1 Jürgen Osterhammel, *The transformation of the modern world: a global history of the nineteenth century*, trans. Patrick Camiller, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 77–113.

2 On shrinking, see Yrjö Kaukiainen, ‘Shrinking the world: improvements in the speed of information transmission, c.1820–1870’, *European Review of Economic History*, 5, 1, April 2001, pp. 1–28; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, ‘Railroad space and railroad time’, *New German Critique*, 14, 1978, pp. 31–40. On acceleration, see C. A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004, pp. 455–64. We focus especially on ocean-crossing ships; for the impact of steam on riparian cultures, see Walter Johnson, *River of dark dreams: slavery and empire in the cotton kingdom*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 73–96.

3 See, for example, Alastair J. Reid, *The tide of democracy: shipyard workers and social relations in Britain, 1870–1950*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010.

arenas in their own right have often remained beyond the global historian's gaze, featuring merely as 'other spaces' in our work.<sup>4</sup>

'Of other spaces' is Michel Foucault's label, the title of a 1967 lecture in which he explored the idea of heterotopias. Heterotopias (which Foucault had previously discussed within the realm of language<sup>5</sup>) are 'real places' which are also 'counter sites': though they may be located in reality, they 'are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'. Cemeteries, gardens, museums and libraries, love hotels, brothels, and even colonies are heterotopias, he argued; and in his final paragraph he observed, almost as an afterthought, that 'The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*'.<sup>6</sup> This enigmatic line, which alongside the overall idea of 'heterotopias' has been criticized for its 'banality',<sup>7</sup> has nevertheless framed much theoretical discussion of the maritime world, and it would seem to be the obvious place to start our discussion of 'being in transit'.<sup>8</sup>

To understand the problem of historiographical gaze, however, we turn first to Foucault's discussion of another key mode of transport in nineteenth-century transformations. 'A train', he explained in the same lecture, 'is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by'.<sup>9</sup> As with trains, so too with ships. Moreover, despite Foucault's passing observations, the under-theorization of ships as sites of history has come about precisely because they have so often been studied merely as objects that pass by or that connect one point to another, rather than as 'something through which one goes'.<sup>10</sup> The problem can be visualized, for example, through the history of art. In the Internationales Maritimes Museum, Hamburg, there are literally hundreds of paintings depicting historical ships in profile, as passing by. By contrast, representations in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art of the on-board are far more rare. In Hamburg, there are but two; worldwide, paintings by Jean-Antoine Theodore Gudin (Pinakothek, Munich), Henry Bacon (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and James Tissot (Tate Britain, London), are the best known of a small group. Artists, like historians, have seemingly also seen ships as moving through a historical environment, as somehow part of that environment, rather than as historical environments in themselves.

4 Historical geographers have led the way in recent research: see William Hasty and Kimberley Peters, 'The ship in geography and the geographies of ships', *Geography Compass*, 6, 11, 2012, pp. 660–76; Anyaa Anim-Addo, William Hasty, and Kimberley Peters, 'The mobilities of ships and shipped mobilities', *Mobilities*, 9, 3, 2014, pp. 337–49.

5 In Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966 (translated as *The order of things*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1970). See David Harvey, 'Cosmopolitanism and the banality of geographical evils', *Public Culture*, 12, 2, 2000, pp. 536–7.

6 Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces', trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics*, 16, 1, 1986, pp. 24, 27.

7 Harvey, 'Cosmopolitanism', p. 538.

8 The theoretical impact of heterotopias is noted by Hester Blum, 'The prospect of oceanic studies', *PMLA*, 125, 3, May 2010, p. 675, n. 1. For citations of Foucault's enigmatic line, see Paul Ashmore, 'Slowing down mobilities: passengering on an inter-war ocean liner', *Mobilities*, 8, 4, 2013, p. 603; Allan Sekula, *Fish story*, 2nd edn, Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2000, p. 116; Jan Rieger, *The great naval game: Britain and Germany in the age of empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 140; Roland Wenzlhuemer and Michael Offermann, 'Ship newspapers and passenger life aboard transoceanic steamships in the late nineteenth century', *Transcultural Studies*, 1, 2012, p. 85; and, in the field of literary studies, Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in crisis*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, pp. 11–17, 27–8.

9 Foucault, 'Of other spaces', pp. 23–4.

10 For a similar critique on the under-theorization of oceans, see Philip E. Steinberg, 'Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions', *Atlantic Studies*, 10, 2, 2013, p. 157. See also William Hasty, 'Metamorphosis afloat: pirate ships, politics and process, c.1680–1730', *Mobilities*, 9, 3, 2014, pp. 350–68.

But Foucault's much-cited analytical language of 'heterotopias' in fact contributes to the problem of gaze. Shifting his terminology with a carelessness that would verily appal the ancient mariner, he argued that 'the boat [!] is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea'; it goes from 'port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel', to the colonies and back, and is thus 'the great instrument of economic development ... [and] simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination'.<sup>11</sup> In himself imagining boats/ships in this way, perhaps Foucault still had in mind *Das Narrenschiff* (the ship of fools), as articulated by Sebastian Brant in late fifteenth-century Basel, about which Foucault had written in his earlier *Madness and civilization*: a place for madmen to be set adrift from society, once a part of and now apart from the world.<sup>12</sup> What Foucault's possible allusion to this earlier trope tells us about 'fools' is one thing; but with regard to ships, the authors of this issue are unconvinced that they were ever 'closed in' on themselves in any meaningful sense.<sup>13</sup> That is, to think of historical ships as heterotopias is ultimately to privilege a land-based imagination of 'floating spaces' and 'places without a place' at the expense of understanding the sea-based experiences of those who found themselves on board a particular ship at a particular moment in time. It is to speak as if ships have no history.

Individually and as the sum of their parts, the following articles thus aim for a more rigorous empirical and theoretical understanding of the on-board within the practice of global history. We tackle some of the key themes of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history: transoceanic migration, imperial rivalries, imagined communities, discourses of race, the disciplining of the body, the emergence of new international powers, and, above all, the revolutionary impact of new technologies. But we do so through the material and figurative frame of the ship – an object that was not (unlike the telegraph, train, or later the aeroplane) itself a new mode of communication or transport. Indeed, precisely because ships had a long, pre-nineteenth-century history, they serve for us as a kind of laboratory, a space in and through which historians can observe processes of transformation.

In referring to 'laboratories', we draw on a rich body of research that has emerged at the intersection of historical geography and the history of science in the past two decades. As part of the spatial turn, scholars have shown how the practice of science must be situated or 'put in its place'. David Livingstone reminds us that historical place has been essential to both the generation and the consumption of knowledge, such that a laboratory must be understood not as a producer of 'universal' knowledge but rather as a site embedded in particular local environments.<sup>14</sup> Ships, as 'mobile spatialities', have much to offer this literature of 'sites of knowledge' (*lieux de savoir*).<sup>15</sup> But their importance extends also to the broader field

11 Foucault, 'Of other spaces', p. 27.

12 Michel Foucault, *Madness and civilization: a history of insanity in the age of reason*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, reprinted edn, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 5–10.

13 Roland Barthes also conceived of the ship as an emblem of closure: see his essay 'The *Nautilus* and the drunken boat', in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, London: Vintage, 2000, pp. 65–7.

14 David N. Livingstone, *Putting science in its place: geographies of scientific knowledge*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003, pp. 1–16; for an early articulation, see Adi Ophir and Steven Shapin, 'The place of knowledge: a methodological survey', *Science in Context*, 4, 1, 1991, pp. 3–22.

15 Veronica della Dora, 'Making mobile knowledge: the educational cruises of the *Revue Générale des Sciences Pures et Appliquées*, 1897–1914', *Isis*, 101, 3, 2010, p. 469; see also Richard Sorrenson, 'The ship as a scientific instrument in the eighteenth century', *Osiris*, 11, 1996, pp. 221–36. On *lieux de savoir* more generally, see Christian Jacob, *Qu'est-ce qu'un lieu de savoir?*, Marseille: OpenEdition Press, 2014, <http://books.openedition.org/oep/423> (consulted 14 March 2016).

of global history. For, like laboratories, ships were never ‘placeless’ entities: the space of the ship was central to its connecting function from port to port.<sup>16</sup> And, once the spatial significance of the ship’s environment to its journey is conceded, there are temporal implications too. As Roland Wenzlhuemer and Michael Offermann argued in their introductory survey of ship newspapers, ‘During a long-distance voyage the passengers’ lives were not on stand-by. The people on board continued to be social beings.’<sup>17</sup> Historical time continued on board the ship. Or, to reframe the argument in the by now ubiquitous language of ‘global connections’, a connection was a process with its own spatial and temporal dynamics.

To take the ship as a site of history in its own right thus enables historians to grasp the multiple ways in which ‘connections’ in global history were in fact mediators, as Wenzlhuemer argues in the first article of this special issue. Connections, he suggests, ‘do not merely bring their endpoints into contact; they interject themselves as mediators and thereby gain a strong bearing on that which is connected’. By focusing on the period of the passage and by asking how the meanings of the on-board changed across time, each of the following articles explicates and adds heft to this idea. In taking the ship as a key temporal and spatial mediator, we offer social and maritime history perspectives to a body of literature that addresses the issue of ‘brokers’ or ‘go-betweeners’ more within the realm of intellectual history. That literature ‘offers a possible remapping of the notorious “view from nowhere” that philosophers often associate with the position of the objective knowledge-bearer’.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, we seek to remap the occasionally bland language of ‘connections’ – of analyses that locate the place of a journey’s beginning and end but assign it a character of placelessness or ‘nowhere’ during the in-between – by focusing more precisely on *transit*.

The intellectual challenge posed by the ‘transit’ is threefold. The first point concerns the perspectives that historians gain from placing ships in specific temporal and spatial frames. Immediately, our sources – or lack thereof – reveal that there were multiple transits on board even a single ship. We see (returning to Foucault) that there was no singular ‘one’ who went through the ship. Transits instead depended, among other things, on one’s class of passage, on whether or not one conceived of the ship as a place of work, and on the particular route travelled. At the most basic level, these differences are explicit in the topics of our articles: Wenzlhuemer reconstructs the North Atlantic flight of a London murder suspect; G. Balachandran explores both a case of British Indian passengers denied disembarkation in Canada and the similar on-board confinements of Indian and Chinese crews; Tamson Pietsch foregrounds the bodily experiences of free migrants to Australia to question how spillages undermined discourses of order; Johanna de Schmidt digs deeper into the significance of English-language shipboard newspapers for the social construction of on-board communities; Frances Steel emphasizes the lack of a uniform ‘steamship globalization’ in her analysis of transpacific Anglo-worlds; and Martin Dusinberre juxtaposes discourses of Japanese ‘civilization’ with the on-board conditions of poor labour migrants to Hawai‘i. But the shipboard transit means something different from an explicitly ocean-based experience or sea narrative.<sup>19</sup> For, other than as a background constant, the oceans themselves are oddly absent in many of

16 Ashmore, ‘Slowing down mobilities’.

17 Wenzlhuemer and Offermann, ‘Ship newspapers’, p. 80.

18 Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, and James Delbourgo, ‘Introduction’, in Simon Schaffer, et al., eds., *The brokered world: go-betweeners and global intelligence, 1770–1820*, Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2009, p. xv.

19 On sea narratives, see Casarino, *Modernity at sea*.

our articles (the exception is Pietsch), despite a growing body of work on the ‘geophysicality’ of the sea that reminds historians of how important were the oceanic environments through which a ship passed.<sup>20</sup>

Building on this idea of multiple transits, we suggest that global time and space looked fundamentally different as seen from a ship’s deck or hold from how they appeared from the solid foundation of the shore. By way of comparison, mathematicians learn two key approaches to understanding fluid mechanics, often explained through the analogy of ships. The Eulerian approach describes movement from a single point: one can measure the velocity of a flow as if sitting on the shore and watching ships pass. The Lagrangian approach, conversely, describes the velocity of a particular particle, a movement imagined as if one were on a ship. For Euler, the rate of change is measured in terms of the flow of ships in and out of his stable viewpoint on the shore. For Lagrange on the ship, the rate of change is zero.<sup>21</sup> Or, as Philip E. Steinberg explains the same theoretical model, the Lagrangian perspective, working ‘without reference to any stable grid of places or coordinates’, suggests ‘an alternate route for developing decentred ontologies of connection’.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the view from a nineteenth-century ship suggests not just a different historical perspective per se but in some ways a fundamentally different set of questions about connections, mobility, and the transformation of the world. One key question is not whether the aforementioned ‘great acceleration’ is best understood as a process of acceleration and deceleration or shrinking and inflation, but rather whether, from on board a ship, the world really seemed to be accelerating or shrinking at all.<sup>23</sup> For us, the gap between the two frames of reference is underlined by the passengers who were oblivious to their role as protagonists in a global news story (Wenzlhuemer), by the steamship as a site of both mobility and confinement (Balachandran), and by the dual temporalities on a Japanese migrant’s Hawaiian grave (Dusinberre). It might seem counterintuitive to take the steamship, an object that epitomized accelerated connections at the turn of the twentieth century, in order to question whether, from the perspective of that self-same object, the world really appeared to be accelerating, ‘free’, or connected; but this, we argue, is the first theoretical significance of ‘transit’ as a time and place.

The second challenge then plays on the lexical flexibility of the word ‘transit’. If the ship was a mediator or a go-between, then we must also turn to the question of what was being mediated and by whom, and address what Miles Ogborn calls the frictions between ‘potentially incompatible worlds, different cultures and contradictory desires’.<sup>24</sup> Did the transit mark some kind of fundamental transition from one set of imagined worlds to another? Was that transition transitory, or did it have longer-term consequences that lasted beyond the arrival of

20 David Lambert, Luciana Martins, and Miles Ogborn, ‘Currents, visions and voyage: historical geographies of the sea’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 32, 3, 2006, pp. 479–93; Steinberg, ‘Of other seas’.

21 Martin Dusinberre thanks Anke Friedrich for suggesting these terms of reference. The approaches are named after the mathematicians Leonhard Euler (1707–83) and Joseph Louis Lagrange (1736–1813) respectively. See also Gilbert Strang, *Introduction to applied mathematics*, Wellesley, MA: Wellesley-Cambridge Press, 1986, pp. 227–9.

22 Steinberg, ‘Of other seas’, pp. 160–1.

23 For an insightful discussion of deceleration, see Valeska Huber, *Channelling mobilities: migration and globalization in the Suez Canal region and beyond, 1869–1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; on shrinking and inflation, see Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the nineteenth-century world: the telegraph and globalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 256.

24 Miles Ogborn, ‘It’s not what you know...: encounters, go-betweens and the geography of knowledge’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 10, 1, April 2013, p. 170. Ogborn takes the word friction here from Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Between a rock and a hard place: some afterthoughts’, in Schaffer et al., *Brokered world*, p. 430.

a ship in port? In addressing the extent and limitations of land-based biopolitical regimes as they were practised on board (Pietsch), or in considering the relationship between land-based imagined communities and their very visible counterparts at sea (de Schmidt), or in highlighting inter- and intra-imperial tensions (Steel), we explore from new angles the transitions from shore to ship.<sup>25</sup>

But, as Balachandran argues in his conclusion, ships as historical objects also force us to think more broadly about ‘states of transit’ as they acted in the opposite direction, from ship to shore. In a physical form, states of transit included camps, immigration centres, plantations, even islands. More intangibly, as the literature on the ‘middle passage’ has demonstrated, the experiences of the ‘transit’ had potentially profound transformative effects months and even years after the moment of physical arrival.<sup>26</sup> In a less well-known example than the middle passage, repatriates from Japan’s former colonies in 1945 were labelled *bikiagesha*, a neologism which combined ‘person’ (*sha*) with the verb *bikiageru*, most commonly used to denote the lifting and landing of cargo on a dock. Unlike the English word ‘repatriate’, which included the stem *patria* (fatherland), *bikiagesha* thus referenced not the colonial identities of the returnees or their relationship to Japan, but rather the act of returning itself. To the returnees, *bikiagesha* was a ‘postwar moniker [which] categorized them based on the moment of their immediate postwar return’; it was a label of transit made permanent.<sup>27</sup> With these examples in mind, a key issue in all the articles is therefore the question not only of a transit’s beginnings and endings but also of whether some transits ever really have an ending.

Thirdly, by focusing on ‘being in transit’, we aim to address problems relevant to the study of global history that go beyond the arena of the ship per se. For example, the frictions, hierarchies, spillages, confinements, national and racial labelling, and blocking of information that our articles discern on board nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ships speak not only to what Steinberg calls ‘decentred ontologies of connection’ but also, more generally, to the idea of disconnections in global history. Sujit Sivasundaram’s recent work on Sri Lanka is suggestive in this regard, especially his refusal to take concepts of ‘highland’ and ‘coastal’ or ‘island’ and ‘mainland’ at face value. In discussing Sri Lanka’s colonial transition to British rule in the early nineteenth century, Sivasundaram stresses the partitioning of the island (Crown) from the mainland (East India Company). This process, which he calls ‘islanding’, was fundamentally an act of disconnection.<sup>28</sup> Although we do not use ‘shipping’ as an analytical equivalent of ‘islanding’, our focus on transit nevertheless seeks to problematize and deepen

25 For previous examples, see Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh’s bad language: passion, power and theatre on the Bounty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Scott Ashley, ‘How navigators think: the death of Captain Cook revisited’, *Past & Present*, 194, 1, 2007, pp. 107–37; Douglas Hart, ‘Sociability and “separate spheres” on the North Atlantic: the interior architecture of British Atlantic liners, 1840–1930’, *Journal of Social History*, 44, 1, 2010, pp. 189–212; della Dora, ‘Making mobile knowledge’; Ashmore, ‘Slowing down mobilities’.

26 Robert Harms, *The Diligent: a voyage through the worlds of the slave trade*, New York: Basic Books, 2000; Marcus Rediker, *The slave ship: a human history*, London: John Murray, 2007; Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus, and Marcus Rediker, eds., *Many middle passages: forced migration and the making of the modern world*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007. On Hawai‘i as a place of transit, see Toake Endoh, *Exporting Japan: politics of emigration toward Latin America*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009, p. 18. See also Tamson Pietsch, ‘A British sea: making sense of global space in the late nineteenth century’, *Journal of Global History*, 5, 3, 2010, pp. 423–446.

27 Lori Watt, *When empire comes home: repatriation and reintegration in postwar Japan*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 56–7.

28 Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka and the bounds of an Indian Ocean colony*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 11–17.



historical understanding of connecting and disconnecting processes similar to those described by Sivasundaram.

In turn, the fact that our histories emerge from one of the quintessential symbols of modern connections suggests that historians need to reconsider the metaphor of ‘scales’ in our work. We have been told that ‘playing with the scale of our analysis’ or ‘climb[ing] the ladder between the local and the global’ are practices central to the work of transnational and global history.<sup>29</sup> Some scholars have urged us to engage in ‘global microhistory’, partly as a much-needed way of avoiding the modern period’s historical and historiographical reification of the nation-state.<sup>30</sup> But, as the first generation of microhistorians pointed out some decades ago, the microanalytical lens will never just reflect a macro-perception of the world, nor will the latter find a clear counterpart in the stories of the former.<sup>31</sup> Practitioners of microhistory have long emphasized the need for fluid conceptualizations, considered classifications, ‘and a framework of analysis which rejects simplifications, dualistic hypotheses, polarizations, rigid typologies and the search for typical characteristics’.<sup>32</sup>

Yet there is a risk that the metaphor of scales, which ultimately implies a basic compatibility between different levels of analysis, can itself sound simplified and rigid. For example, if we are to take seriously the Eulerian–Lagrangian notion of fundamentally different frames of reference, then we may also consider the ship as a site of global *incompatibilities*, in which ‘the world’ could be imagined by different historical actors in contradictory ways: my acceleration as your deceleration and my freedom as your confinement. There is no ‘ladder’ between these perspectives; or, to shift the metaphor to one inspired by the twenty-first-century digitization of primary sources, there is no simple change in resolution that connects one perspective to the other.<sup>33</sup> To recognize that the ship’s time and space cannot always ‘scale up’ to be made commensurate with the historian’s analysis of global time and space better helps us to understand competing conceptions of ‘connection’ in global history.

The challenges presented by ‘being in transit’ are thus manifold. They even extend, as Dusinberre argues, to the ways in which historians negotiate the spaces between archives, especially when the documentary record for so many transoceanic journeys is so sparse. Our focus on ships, particularly steamships, narrows those challenges to a defined period in history, between roughly the mid nineteenth century and the early twentieth, and thus primarily to the *people* on board. There would, of course, be other ways of approaching our topic. By focusing

29 Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris, and Jacques Revel, ‘Introduction: space and scale in transnational history’, *International History Review*, 33, 4 (special issue, ‘Size matters: scales and spaces in transnational and comparative history’, ed. Bernhard Struck et al.), 2011, pp. 578–9. See also Adam McKeown, ‘What are the units of world history?’, in Douglas Northrup, ed., *A companion to world history*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 79–94.

30 Tonio Andrade, ‘A Chinese farmer, two African boys, and a warlord: toward a global microhistory’, *Journal of World History*, 21, 4, 2010, pp. 573–91; John-Paul A. Ghobrial, ‘The secret life of Elias of Babylon and the uses of global microhistory’, *Past & Present*, 222, 1, 2014, pp. 51–93.

31 Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Microhistory: two or three things that I know about it’, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry*, 20, 1, 1993, p. 33; Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, ‘The name and the game: unequal exchange and the historiographic marketplace’, in Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., *Microhistory and the lost peoples of Europe*, trans. Eren Branch, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, p. 9. For recent discussion, see Francesca Trivellato, ‘Is there a future for Italian microhistory in the age of global history?’, *California Italian Studies*, 2, 1 (special issue, ‘Italian futures’, ed. Albert R. Ascoli and Randolph Starn), 2011, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq> (consulted 14 March 2016).

32 Giovanni Levi, ‘On microhistory’, in Peter Burke, ed., *New perspectives in historical writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 114.

33 Emma Rothschild, *The inner life of empires: an eighteenth-century history*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 278.

on coal in transit, for example, we could not only address environmental history but also gain different insights into imperial politics. To try to avoid paying export tariffs, for example, the British Minister in late 1860s Japan proposed that much-sought-after Japanese coal was not really an export as such because it was consumed in transit. Here and in other examples from around the world, the export and transportation of a commodity indispensable to steamships offers historians an alternative perspective on transit and nineteenth-century geopolitics.<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein (as it were), a fast-forwarding to the twenty-first-century era of mega-ships would suggest – given the extent of contemporary containerization and thus the dehumanization of the on-board – that our special issue be called ‘containers in transit’.<sup>35</sup> This was a post-1950s transformation of ships, docks, and the global economy lamented not only in television shows such as *The wire* but also in Allan Sekula’s final oeuvre, for which he returned to the ‘ship of fools’ trope.<sup>36</sup>

But while the shipboard life we reconstruct in our articles has largely disappeared, the contemporary experience of transit has not. In 2016 we should not need television images of capsized rubber dinghies in the Mediterranean to remind us of the dangers and tragedy that were also a central aspect of the ‘transit’ experience for some of the historical actors whom we discuss in our articles. Perhaps, conversely, we do need the presence of such historical actors to remind us of the imaginative leap required to understand the complexities and human toll of ‘being in transit’ today – a leap which some constituencies in host countries seem unwilling to make. Being in transit was a key characteristic of the nineteenth-century world; from today’s juncture, that will apparently be true of the twenty-first century as well. If we are all in this particular ship together, then the more fool those of us who would deny it.

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34 Catherine L. Phipps, *Empires on the waterfront: Japan’s ports and power, 1858–1899*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 94–5; Trevor Boyns and Steven Gray, ‘Welsh coal and the informal empire in South America, 1850–1913’, *Atlantic Studies*, 13, 1, 2016, pp. 53–77.

35 Marco D’Eramo, ‘Dock life’, *New Left Review*, 96, November–December 2015, pp. 85–99.

36 Hilde Van Gelder and Allan Sekula, *Ship of fools: the dockers’ museum*, trans. Jean-François Cornu and Corinne Faure-Geors, Rennes: La Criée centre d’art contemporain, 2015.