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Siren call of the sea: disenchantment and estrangement of seafarers

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ABSTRACT

In cultural studies, as in the social sciences, the sea and the ships that travel upon it have often been used as metaphors for conceptualizing various social, economic, political, and cultural processes, such as globalization, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Yet, the sea and ships are more than just metaphors – they are actual material and empirical objects central to the very processes that their metaphorical imagery depicts. This special issue on ‘cultures of water’ invites us to reflect on the transformations of small-scale local communities, whose cultures, lifestyles, and traditions are intimately entangled with different bodies of water. With my contribution, I make a prepositional leap from ‘cultures *of* water’ to ‘cultures *on* water’, as the community I work with lives not by the water, or even off the water, but on it – or, rather, *on* ships *at* sea. Drawing on long-term, ethnographic research carried out onboard cargo ships of various types, flags, and with seafarers of many different nationalities, I argue that while the sea is the seafarers’ work environment writ large, their more immediate and significant work environment is not the sea itself but instead their ships and crews. Nevertheless, the particular and unique conditions of the sea as the larger environment in which their work takes place fundamentally shape nearly every aspect of their lives. In switching from of/f to on then, I highlight that, rather than constituting a specific relationship of intimacy and connection with the sea itself, the particular condition of living *on* ships *at* sea shapes seafarers’ intimate relationships and connections with the social worlds of which they are part, whether at sea or *at* home. This condition produces multiple meanings and complex, contradictory, and shifting relations of intimacy and estrangement, connection and separation, and isolation and togetherness between seafarers and various people, places, and practices.

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Introduction: 'You say you like seaman's life?'

'You say you like seaman's life?' Raul[1] scoffed. I had just made the mistake of saying how much I love being at sea, and now Raul, second mate onboard *Arctic Wind*, a Finnish-flagged Ro-Ro-ship,[2] was on an impassioned harangue about how much life as a seaman sucks. 'Seaman's life is no good! Okay, seaman's life is very nice when you are a tourist or passenger', Raul continued, 'but when you are working, no! It's like a prison! The only day you are free is when you have your plane ticket in hand and you go ashore. That's freedom!'

We were at sea – somewhere off the coast of El Ferrol, Northern Spain, according to the charts – but I could see neither the sea nor the Galician coast in the dark of the night. The colored lights from the navigation control panels made the bridge feel cozy, like a deck dressed in fairy lights. Raul and I sat in the two helm seats while Chuck, Ordinary Seaman onboard and watchman for Raul's 20–00 watch, kept look-out by the windows. Raul and Chuck were both from the Philippines, with contracts ranging from six to nine months, while I had only been onboard *Arctic Wind* for two months.

'At home, they say, 'Oh, you're in Bilbao. You're in Antwerp. In Santander!' Yes, very nice, but fuck no! It's not nice. We don't have time to go ashore. We have to work'. Raul continued, 'Ashore, you can fuck your wife every night. Here, you come home after seven months, you're too tired to fuck'. 'Here you can fuck every night too', Chuck chipped in, 'your hands!' He giggled at his own joke, but Raul ignored him. 'Maybe you heard about *Arctic Fox*, our sister vessel? One of the crew jumped overboard. Because of family issues. Did you hear?' I nodded, 'Yeah, I heard about it. His wife left him or something?' 'Yeah, maybe his wife wanted to fuck some other man, and he said 'fuck this' and jumped'.

The crass language aside, Raul's animated rant captures some essential elements of life and work at sea that are at the heart of this article. First, the romantic idea that life at sea is about freedom, traveling the world, and seeing beautiful places is contrasted with that of the ship as a prison, of feeling stuck in an endless rut of work with no possibility to go ashore. The freedom *of* the sea is reframed as freedom *from* the sea and is only possible the day you leave the ship. Second, while Raul's speech may sound insensitive, even vulgar, on the surface, I believe it tells of a much deeper, existential condition of life at sea. 'Fucking', I dare suggest, is here a metonymy not only of physical intimacy with one's partner but of meaningful connections and relationships at home more generally, as well as the everyday pleasures of life ashore that seafarers miss while onboard. Similarly, Raul's remark that when 'you come home after seven months, you're too tired to fuck' also alludes to a more profound emotional experience and challenge of seafarers struggling to reconnect with life at home and with their loved ones once they return after many months at sea. Finally, Raul's mention of the tragic suicide on the sister ship shows how life at sea can mean death for relationships at home, while life and relationships at home can mean actual death for those at sea.

This special issue on 'cultures of water' invites us to reflect on the transformations of small-scale local communities whose cultures, lifestyles, and traditions are intimately entangled with different bodies of water. With my contribution, I make a prepositional leap from 'cultures *of* water' to 'cultures *on* water', as the community I work with lives not *by* the water, or even *off* the water, but *on* it – or, rather, *on* ships *at* sea. Drawing on long-term, ethnographic research carried out onboard cargo ships of various types, flags, and with seafarers of many different nationalities, I argue that while the sea is the seafarers' work environment writ large, their more immediate and significant work environment is not the sea itself but instead their ship and crew. Nevertheless, the particular and unique conditions of the sea as the larger environment in which their work takes place fundamentally shape nearly every aspect of their lives. In switching from *of/f* to *on* then, I highlight that, rather than constituting a specific relationship of intimacy and connection with the sea itself, the particular condition of living *on ships at sea* shapes seafarers' intimate relationships and connections with the social worlds of which they are part, whether *at sea* or *at home*.

At sea, on ships, at home. I structure the article around these three prepositional locations while insisting that they are not separate but deeply entangled with overlapping webs of meaning that constitute what can be termed 'cultures at sea'. While 'culture' is the central concept of anthropology as well as cultural studies, both disciplines have tended to overlook the sea as a social and cultural space. Anthropology has long had a territorial bias, with a tendency to conflate culture with rootedness in place, nativeness, and territory (Malkki 1992). Indeed, the word 'culture' itself has agricultural undertones, as has anthropology's methodological toolkit, with notions such as the 'field' and 'field-work' conjuring images of land and rootedness (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The maritime anthropological studies that did exist were few and far between and primarily focused on coastal communities whose relations with the sea seemed to mimic those with land, centering practices such as sea tenure and management of common fishing resources (Cordell 1989, D'Arcy 2008, Hviding 1996, Sharp 2002; Smith 1977). Even though, as Gísli Pàlsson (1994) points out, early anthropologists often traveled *by sea* to get to their fieldsites *overseas,* rarely did they study life *at sea*.

Despite the lack of ethnographic attention to social life at sea, anthropology's growing interest in the transnational, global, and mobile has contributed to oceanic metaphors gaining enormous currency. Water, Stefan Helmreich writes, has become a theory machine, 'prevalent in figuring social, political, and economic forces and dynamics' (2011, p. 133) and in light of tropes such as 'currents, flows, and circulations', 'globalization' might as well be called 'oceanization' (2011, p. 133). In cultural studies as well, the sea has similarly been prolifically both used and reduced to a metaphor for conceptualizing fluidity, mobility, and transnational connections, at the expense of the perspective of 'those for whom the sea was simultaneously workplace, home, passage, penitentiary, and promise' (Blum 2010, p. 670).

However, since I first began researching the maritime industry and labor in 2009, there has been a veritable sea change in terms of scholarly interest in the sea – both in the social sciences and the humanities – with a tidal wave of sea-themed publications, conference panels, and funded research projects. This is perhaps partially a result of a disciplinary fascination with the cultural and social processes that the sea and ships have been used figuratively to think through, and partially a reflection of current societal interest in ocean matters, especially in the context of the global environmental crisis and climate change. Recent ethnographic work by anthropologists such as Ben-Yehoyada (2018), Carse (2022), Das (2018), Dua (2019), Helmreich (2009, 2011), Leivestad and Schober (2021), Mannov (2015), and Mevik (2023), to mention just a few, along with scholars from other disciplines, such as De Beukelaer (2021), Chua (2018), and Khalili (2021b), have tackled the sea blindness of their respective disciplines by considering the actual role of the sea, ships, and maritime workers for contemporary society. The present article adds to this maritime literature by continuing to unmoor ethnographic research from its landbound field sites, bringing it out to sea, onboard the ships, and, finally, back to shore again, to the homes of seafarers around the world.

The elements, challenges, and contradictions of life and work at sea that Raul articulated in his tirade and that my ethnographic material further explores form the subject matter of this article. Before diving into my ethnographic material, however, I give a brief overview of some of the key processes with regard to the role of the sea in contemporary society and certain key transformations of the maritime industry that I argue have contributed to seafarers' increasing separation, isolation, and estrangement from the social worlds that exist outside of the ship, including from society at large, from the places their ships travel to, and – most importantly – from their loved ones back home. This multi-layered, or multiscalar separation, I suggest, is often experienced by seafarers as feelings of estrangement and disenchantment with their work and life at sea. These feelings, I further propose, are reinforced by memories of displaced pasts, disappointed dreams and expectations, and lingering thoughts of loved ones who are physically distant yet constantly present in their minds, leaving many seafarers with the sense that they are alive but not really living.

The current conditions of living and working at sea, I ultimately argue, produce multiple meanings and complex, contradictory, and shifting relations of intimacy and estrangement, connection and separation, and isolation and togetherness between seafarers and various people, places, and practices. These shifting relations, in turn, bring to the surface larger existential questions for seafarers, such as the very meaning of life and death, metaphorically as well as literally, at sea, on ships, and at home. Consequently, seafarers struggle to make sense of, make a meaningful life in, and make a living from their work at sea, as they experience a loss of meaningful connections and a sense of purpose in their everyday life onboard, a lack of meaning in their everyday matters, and a sense that they are spending their lives on things that do not matter, all while being absent from the lives of those who do matter.

Backdrop – the invisible canvas of the sea

The sea is an exceptional space but a strange exception in that it covers three-quarters of the globe's surface. It has been a source of livelihood across the world for thousands of years, a key space for people, goods, and ideas on the move, as well as a conduit for global-scale transformative (and often violent) projects and processes, such as colonialism, imperialism, the slave trade, warfare, migration, and international trade. At present, however, the sea and the ships do not play as visible a role as they have in the past. With air travel having largely replaced sea voyages for passenger transport, the sea as a space of movement has been reduced to its function as a transport surface for goods in the global economy. As geographer Philip Steinberg (2001) has argued, this usage of the sea for transport entails a 'social construction of the ocean' as an empty void, a space-in-between-places, for ships to travel across as seamlessly and speedily as possible. This shallowing of the sea into a surface for transport has not only made our imagination of it more superficial by reducing its depth of meaning but has also led to its demystification and disenchantment.

From the 1970s onwards, the 'logistics revolution' (Cowen 2014, Chua 2018) spatially rearranged maritime infrastructure through containerization, automation of ports, and standardization. While this increased the ease and speed with which goods move, it also further invisibilized maritime transport and its workers. With ports relocated from the heart to the outskirts of cities, ships today are usually only seen from afar (if at all), whether spotted from a coastal highway, an airplane window, or when passing remote container terminals from a distance. Maritime shipping has been called an 'invisible industry' (George 2013), the sea a 'forgotten space' (Sekula and Burch 2010), and ships 'hidden societies' (Aubert 1965), and this despite the fact that an estimated 90 percent of the world's goods are currently shipped by sea, carried by over 100,000 ships, crewed by 1.6 million seafarers.

Only when dramatic disruptions to the seemingly seamless flow of maritime transport happen does the veil of invisibility sometimes lift momentarily. The upsurge in attacks by Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden between 2010 and 2012 was one such moment of disruption (Dua 2019). The spectacular stranding of *Ever Given*, one of the world's largest container ships, which blocked the Suez Canal for nearly a week in March, 2021, resulted in memes of the ship going viral (Khalili 2021a, Markkula 2022), while the supply chain crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic led to delayed deliveries with photos of hundreds of container ships stuck outside of ports making head news. More recently, throughout 2024, the Houthi movement's attacks on ships off the coast of Yemen in the aftermath of Israel's invasion of Gaza offer another example. However, even in these dramatic instances, the working lives of the people onboard remained remarkably invisible. Just as shipping containers conceal cargo behind their metal walls, container ships effectively hide social worlds behind theirs. In short, although nearly everything we interact with on any given day has come to us by ship, most people have little awareness of, or insight into, the lifeworlds of the workers who bring us our stuff.

The sea is a space that both connects and separates. For the seafarers whose everyday work connects distant shores across the sea, it is also the sea that separates them from the rest of society ashore and isolates them onboard their ships. Like society's estrangement from the maritime world due to its increased invisibilization, remoteness, and marginalization, the present separation of seafarers from land is a consequence of changes in the maritime industry over the past few decades. New technologies, like automation of cargo handling and electronic navigation, have reduced the number of workers needed to operate ships, while developments in shipbuilding technologies and infrastructural developments in ports (Carse 2022, Carse and Lewis 2020) have allowed ships to be built larger and larger (Leivestad and Schober 2021). This, in turn, has pushed ports and shipping terminals further away from commercial and residential areas to the outskirts of cities where land is cheaper. Furthermore, with post-9/11 antiterrorism regulations, terminals have become more securitized and inaccessible to outsiders while stricter border regimes have limited seafarers' shore leave, a two-directional dynamic of double separation that both disconnects the shore from the ships as well as encloses the seafarers onboard their vessels (Markkula 2021). Consequentially, the inhabitants of port cities and the crews of ships calling these ports rarely, if ever, encounter one another but remain strangers.

At the same time, if seafarers today rarely meet foreigners ashore, they still do so onboard their ships. As ships are floating mobile machines, deterritorialized pieces of space detached from land, they fall outside the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1992). This deterritorialized condition of ships at sea has enabled the Flags of Convenience system of commercial ship registers that enable shipowners to evade labor regulations, in particular, allowing shipowners to recruit seafarers from different source countries on unequal working contracts and conditions, often pitting seafarers within the same crew against one another. In the ethnographic sections that follow, I show some consequences of these developments, arguing that, whatever enchantment with the sea that seafarers described as having initially felt, has often since turned into disenchantment and a general feeling of estrangement that seem to condition nearly all of their relationships, including with the sea, their work, their colleagues and social worlds onboard, as well as with their families and friends at home – indeed, even, at times, with their own lives.

At sea

At sea again! We were steaming westward through a wintery Mediterranean Sea. After nearly three months ashore waiting for a new ship after signing off *Arctic Wind*, I was excited to finally be onboard my new field-ship, *Lusoria* – a 300-meter-long containership. I hovered eagerly by Dimitri, the ship's burly and ruddy Ukrainian chief mate, who stood wide-legged and steady with arms crossed on the glassed-in panoramic deck of the bridge: 'The most beautiful office in the world!' he declared loudly, half in jest, half in pride.

The view was indeed beautiful, with crisp blue February skies above azure waves that crested with white horses as far as the eye could see. The sole interruption to the seamless, seemingly endless blue was *Lusoria*'s row after row of perfectly ordered, rectangular metal boxes that stretched out ahead of us, superimposing a harsh regularity on the undulating surface below. Their muted colors of rusty red, dusty orange, and faded teal looked strangely vivid – garish even – painted on the sea's blue canvas.

We were approaching the Strait of Gibraltar, and I was excited about that, too, wondering aloud what it would be like without really expecting an answer. But Dimitri, relieved to have left a string of busy ports behind and with ten days of uninterrupted sailing ahead, was in a good mood and humored my enthusiasm with the kind of spontaneous sailor lyricism that I have come to appreciate so much during my fieldwork at sea. 'It's not like here!' Dimitri said and threw a nonchalant nod through the bridge windows toward the sea outside. 'The ocean is different, and you feel it! You feel when the ocean is near. Long before the Strait, you feel the swell. You don't see it, but you see the horizon rise and fall. It's the breath of the ocean. The heartbeat'. Dimitri's hoarse voice melded with the deep beat of the engine and the soft hum of the bridge's cooling fans – as if the ship wanted to show she was animated, too! 'The ocean – the **real** ocean – has a soul!'

Later that evening, over dinner, I babbled on about approaching the Strait with my messmate Ovidiu, *Lusoria*'s Romanian electrician. At 54, he was the oldest crewmember onboard. Still, although his white overalls nearly burst in their embrace of his bulging belly, he nevertheless climbed nimbly up and down vertical ladders around the ship many times a day. Furrowing his untamed grey eyebrows, Ovidiu peered at me over rimless glasses and grunted, ‘So what? What difference does it make? Atlantic, Mediterranean … It’s all the same anyway’.

Seafarers’ relationship with the sea

Seafarers’ relationship with the sea is not singular but situational and contextual, shaped by personal as well as cultural and social factors. As my conversations with Dimitri and Ovidiu illustrate, people within the same crew may have different perceptions, meanings, and values attached to the watery element that constitutes their livelihood, while one individual crewmember may have distinct relations with different bodies of water.

In Dimitri’s and Ovidiu’s case, their respective position within the labor division onboard was one such factor that shaped their relation to the sea. As Chief Mate, Dimitri had the 4–8 watch, morning and evening, and thus saw every sunrise and sunset from his panoramic ‘office’. For him, the sea – especially the ocean – was alive: moving, breathing, and unfolding a continuously changing spectacle before him. In contrast, Ovidiu hardly ever caught a glimpse of the sea. As *Lusoria*’s electrician, his work was either inside the accommodation tower, in the engine room nestled deep within the ship’s bowels, or on the narrow lashing bridges between containers. This didn’t bother him much, though, as he had little desire to contemplate or admire its beauty anyway. Contrary to Dimitri’s enchanted vision of a breathing, heart-beating, soulful Ocean, Ovidiu’s feeling toward the sea was rather one of indifference – maybe even jadedness.

During fieldwork, when asking my shipmates about the sea and their relationship with it, I often faced blank expressions or puzzled looks, as if they didn’t understand what I was talking about. Many then proceeded to talk about the sea as a never-changing, monotonous space of boredom and drudgery where each day was just like the one before – filled with the same work tasks and the same limited spaces and faces on constant repeat. However, when I asked them in the over one hundred life-story interviews that I carried out with seafarers onboard different ships why they had chosen the seafaring profession, regardless of how they currently felt – or didn’t feel – about the sea, nearly all of them spoke of their initial fascination with the sea as a space of freedom, and promises of adventures and the possibility to – as the Filipino sailors liked put it – ‘see the world for free’ that seafaring life offered. The indifference they felt in the present wasn’t indifference at all but rather a disenchantment that stemmed from a discrepancy between their past expectations and experiences and their present reality. Life at sea was simply not what it used to be, or what they had once hoped it would be.

The call of the sea …

This enchanting power or magnetic pull of the sea and seafaring life that so many of the sailors had experienced was sometimes referred to as the 'call of the sea'. As Mircea, *Lusoria's* 3rd officer from Constanta, Romania, put it, 'I was born in this city really close to the sea. I used to watch the sea all the time from my window, and I feel like it's just calling me or something like that'. Many had dreamed of going to sea from a young age, like Vellamo, the Finnish Chief Mate onboard *Arctic Wind*, who, as a five-year-old, had announced that she was going to be a captain.

Sometimes it was not the sea so much as those who had worked at sea that made the call. Many of my shipmates had relatives who shared stories from their own work at sea, like Sasha, *Lusoria's* Russian Chief Engineer, whose occupational choice was influenced by his uncle, who had also been a ship engineer and respected in the community. As Sasha recalled, 'He was able to repair everything, from a pencil to a cosmos rocket, and I saw that people really respect my uncle. Maybe all of Arkhangelsk knows this guy'.

Although Boo, a Filipino AB onboard *Lusoria*, grew up far from the sea in a small mountain village in the interior of Luzon, Philippines, he dreamed of going to sea ever since he was in elementary school and a seaman came to his village and told Boo that if he wanted to earn money, he should become a seaman too. 'He told me like that, when I was still young, and it was planted in my brain. That was my dream that I followed', Boo said. Boo's mother opposed the idea, but he told her, 'Even if I will be the poorest of my brothers and sisters, I will still be the luckiest because I will travel around and see the world'.

The association of seafaring with freedom and the possibility to travel had been especially strong for those who had grown up under communism. For them, going to sea had not just been about 'seeing the world for free' but 'being free to see the world'. 'You must understand', Sasha explained.

> I was born in 1971. I was born in communist country. I would like to be free. I would like to see world. See how people live around the world. I don't want to work for government, for some Ministry of Defense. No, I don't like that, so I decided to be seaman.

Even Ovidiu, who grew up in communist Romania, had dreamed of going to sea.

> My intention was to see the world. And in the communist time, there were only two ways: To be a seaman was one opportunity. The second was to be the top

> of the communist party. But my family were workers. No chance to be the top of the party. So I chose seaman.

… Or a siren call?

As the reality of life and work at sea settled in, so did the disenchantment. Many of the older sailors reminisced with nostalgia the times when ships stayed in port for days, even weeks, and they could visit exotic places, party, and meet women, and contrasted it to the present. 'It's all so rushed now. We are in and out of ports in a few hours. There is no time to go ashore', said Tony, a 54-year-old Finnish AB on *Arctic Wind*. 'This is not sailing anymore. It's sea logistics. We are transport workers. Not sailors'. Similarly, Boo, shortly after he had told me about his seafaring dream, lamented, 'Why I studied seaman? I don't like anymore. If I could go back, I would listen to my parents who wanted me to take electrical engineering'. For Mircea too, the call of the sea had turned out to be a siren call. 'To be honest, it attracted me that I would go around everywhere, but I'm on this container vessel now, and most of the time you are going around, but you just go on the sea and stay on the sea'. He added,

> It's not like before when it wasn't so strict and regulated. It was like no security at all and everybody was partying and entertaining and everything. Now, you are not able to go anywhere. You are like a prisoner in a metal box. A Floating prison.

Before moving on to the ships, I want to return for a brief moment to the sea, to the beautiful view from *Lusoria*'s bridge and to Dimitri's soulful ocean, and ask how we make sense of his enchanted ocean with the so pervasive disenchantment or indifference. For Dimitri, as well as for Mircea, Ovidiu, and others who at some point had heard and heeded the call of the sea, the enchantment seemed dependent on a certain degree of separation. Both Dimitri and Mircea watched the sea from a distance – Mircea from his window back in Constanta and Dimitri from the ship's bridge. To be able to view and admire its unfolding spectacle, to be able to feel its breath and hear its call, necessitated a certain distance, physical, and, even more so, experiential perspective. When too immersed in life and work at sea for too long, the siren call of the sea eventually seemed to drown the once enchanted sailor.

Finally, turning from such metaphorical relationships with the sea to more concrete ones, when working onboard a modern-day cargo ship, one never really touches seawater. Seafarers are always *on* the sea, or rather *on* ships, *at* sea, never in the sea itself, except in cases of shipwreck or, as previously mentioned, the readily available suicides. The ship is the mediating relation that both links and separates the sailors and the sea, just like the sea both separates and connects the sailors onboard ship with land. But now, let's get onboard.

On ships

> **On ships,** most of the time, I'm low in life, far away from everything. I have to make a lot of sacrifices, and I'm just like a robot with the same schedule from when I sign on to when I sign off. From Monday to Sunday, it doesn't matter. Christmas, Easter, New Year's Eve, it doesn't matter. You work the same. You never have a break.

Mircea was lounging on the bunk of his cabin on *Lusoria* as I was interviewing him about his life and work at sea. His description of feeling 'low in life' and 'like a robot' echoes the disenchantment with life at sea from the previous section. However, a moment later in our conversation, Mircea shifts to talking about the ship in a way that instead mirrors Dimitri's evocation of an animated ocean. 'Sometimes I'm staying with my head on the pillow, and I can feel these pins from the main engines, you know … like a heartbeat or something'. Mircea's likening of the vibrations of the ship's engine to its heartbeat is not idiosyncratic; I have heard similar comparisons many times during fieldwork from sailors of different positions and national backgrounds. For many seafarers, despite their disenchantment with the sea and their life at sea, their ships seemed to have an enchanted vitality to them, vibrating with life-like energy fuelled by their beating engine hearts.

'The ship is like a person, and you should take care of it, because otherwise it will misbehave', Mircea continues, expressing two other sentiments I often encountered among sailors: first, the personification of the ship, and second, an ethic of care vis-a-vis their vessels that seems to indicate a relationship of intimacy and emotional attachment that go far beyond their duties of maintenance work and repair, instead resembling more of a duty to love it. 'You have to love the ship', said Rafael, a Filipino third officer onboard another field-ship – *Atlantica*. 'So, do you love her already?' I asked as he had only recently arrived onboard. 'I loved her already from the first day I stepped my foot onboard', Rafael answered.

Considering the widespread disenchantment with life *on* ships, what is going on here with the enchanted life *of* ships? Paradoxically, in the socio-technical assemblage formed by the ship and its crew, the ships – the actual machines – were imagined as persons, animated and with agency, while the sailors, the actual persons, felt like robots, emptied of life, lacking control over their time while being limited in their movements, reduced to replaceable, moving parts in a large machinery. While the ships were 'more-than-machines', the seafarers instead felt 'more-like-machines'.

Life of ships

One reason for the attribution of these life-like qualities to ships, as well as for the affect and affection the ships seem to evoke, I propose, is because of how essential these vessels are for seafarers' actual lives. Not only do the crewmembers depend on the ships for their livelihoods, but as long as they are at sea, their very lives depend on their ships in a real, existential sense. In a maritime safety course for seafarers during my fieldwork in Manila, our instructor told our class on the last day, 'Take care of your ship. It is your best lifeboat'.

Ships can indeed be considered lifeboats, or vessels of life, in the sense that they are shelters from the inhospitable environment that surrounds them. As long as seafarers are onboard they are safe from the danger of the sea, yet paradoxically always exposed to the potential danger of it. This forms the basis for the symbiotic and reciprocal relationship of sailors with their ships. In order to stay alive while at sea, the ship has to work, and for the ship to work, the crew has to work with it; operate it, maintain it, steer it, and care for it. Caring for the ship is consequently, in a concrete way, life-sustaining for sailors as a badly maintained ship is a dangerous one. This constant care work of tending to the ship and thus to oneself creates forms of attachments and affections that result in seafarers' personification and animation of the ships. It is not with the sea then, but rather with the ships *at* sea, that seafarers form a 'symbiotic, intimate, reciprocal' relationship. Still, this intimate relationship of sailors with the ships is conditioned by the sea or, rather, by the condition of being at sea.

Another aspect of work of the personification and animation of the ships was offered by Rafael's colleague, Julius, also from the Philippines and second officer onboard *Atlantica,* a Swedish-flagged Ro-Ro ship. Like Mircea, Julius also spoke of ships as persons, describing how every ship 'has a different character' that demands specific things from its crew. In a context of increasing standardization and automatization where people are treated 'just like robots', Julius felt that the challenge of having to adapt to the individual traits of different ships was one thing that still made his work stimulating and interesting. As he put it:

> 'Whatever a certain ship demands from you, you should be able to do it. And that is very challenging because it is not like a box with four corners'. He explained further, 'Every ship has a different character. Like, this ship might be a little bit sluggish, that one might be a little bit stiff. It encourages your brain to grow. As long as they don't take this intellectual part away from us … then they will treat us just like robots. And I think it is already challenging enough to be back here'.

Life on ships

The challenge that Julius described of having to adapt to different vessels highlights a key aspect of the international, modular machinery that is the global maritime industry. With its containers, cranes, and ports, it forms an interlocking, intermodal system that is both fixed and flexible at the same time. The seafarers are like other moving parts in this modular system and have to be able to come onboard any ship and immediately find their bearings within the division of labor with minimal explanation and introduction. Ships have clearly defined social structures, with specific ways of organizing time, space, and the division of labor onboard. The muster list of all the positions onboard is like a 'role list' that is mostly the same on all ships, regardless of vessel type, flag-registry, or country of ownership, with predefined roles that fill specific functions within the sociotechnical system that is the ship.

However, even if all ships are similar, no two ships are the same. In coming onboard a different ship with each new contract, as many seafarers do, they have to adapt, as Julius explained, to the challenge of each ship having its own character. However, more than being able to adapt to the particular technical requirements of individual ships, seafarers also have to adjust to an entirely new social world, as each crew is an 'accidental community' composed of individuals from different backgrounds who have to cohabit and collaborate in a very confined space for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for months on end. As most ships' today are crewed by workers from diverse national, cultural, and social backgrounds, these adjustments may, at times, be socially challenging. While the crews make up a global workforce with occupational practices, values, regulations, and traditions that transcend those of national maritime traditions, individual crewmembers nevertheless also have their own interpretation of this broader occupational culture based on their own culturally and socially specific values, habits, expectations, and practices.

Returning to the notion of cultures at sea then, while on the one hand, we can talk about a transnational occupational culture of seafaring, on the other hand, every ship is also a particular, local, social world of its own, with each crew forming a particular, temporary constellation of persons from various cultural backgrounds who work and live in physical proximity for extensive and intensive, yet limited, periods of time. Every ship and crew can thus be considered to form their own distinct 'articulation of culture at sea' while simultaneously being a distinct 'constellation of cultures at sea'.

Social maintenance work as 'life support'

In a context of short-term flexible contracts, smaller crews, and more intensive work hours, the possibilities for seafarers to create meaningful relations with their shipmates have been undermined. In addition, with crews increasingly composed of seafarers from different nationalities pitted against each other in direct competition for positions, and with unequal contracts and hiring practices adding fissures to the social cohesion onboard, the maintenance of social relations onboard – much like the material maintenance work of the ship – seemed to be primarily about 'life support'. That is, socializing on the ships was usually expressed as a tool for mitigating loneliness and homesickness, thereby making life onboard tolerable rather than a way to form real friendships. Romeo, a Filipino OS onboard *Atlantica,* explained, 'For most of us, the socializing we do is … How could I describe this? We're socializing, like drinking, karaoke, sometimes a few games. But if you mean we are sharing personal things, personal feelings, something like this. I don't know about this'. Mircea also expressed the instrumental aspect of socializing onboard, 'Because you need something to relax you for all this period of time, just to put you in a different mood. You are not a robot. You cannot stay for months on end and just work, sleep, work, sleep, work, sleep, without nothing else. No alcohol, no sex, no nothing'.

There was a general feeling among seafarers that life onboard is 'not life'. Instead, 'real life' was happening elsewhere, like in the places where the ships dock but sailors can't go ashore; or at another time, like in the past when life at sea had been different. Mostly, though, life was happening at home, in their absence. 'On the ship, every day is Monday', was a common expression, as if time stood still onboard, like a perpetual Groundhog Day that only ended once they had their 'plane ticket in hand', as Raul put it in the opening quote. When onboard, they felt suspended in time, while everyone everywhere else kept on living. And, although improvements in communication technologies have made it easier for seafarers to keep in touch with people back home, it has also led to seafarers being even less inclined to create meaningful relationships with others onboard, focusing instead on connecting to their physically distant relations at home. Moreover, while being in touch with people at home was important for both seafarers and their families' well-being, more frequent communication sometimes also aggravated the sense of estrangement that seafarers felt at sea, making life onboard seem even more empty, lonely, and meaningless. To constantly be reminded of what they miss at home was like standing by the railing to watch life float by in the distance.

At home

'At home, they don't understand what it is like to be on ship. You can't send bad news to the ship because there is nothing you can do. And you might already feel alone and lonely onboard'. *Arctic Wind* had stopped in Vellamo's hometown in Southern Finland, and she took me to visit her house—a lovely, old, wooden house that had belonged to her grandmother, the one who helped Vellamo get her sailor tattoo when she was 13. Vellamo's grandmother had died there. As had her grandmother's partner. He killed himself five years to the day of her grandmother's death. Vellamo found him. She had just come home from the ship. He had called her the day before, asking if she would come by in the morning. ‘Of course, I’ll come. I always do’, Vellamo had said. She had told her family and friends that she did not want to be told any bad news while onboard. ‘It can wait’, she said, ‘because you are helpless onboard. You can’t do anything about it. And it can be very dangerous when you are out at sea, without social support. You need to be focused on your work for the ship to be safe’.

Vellamo told me about when she joined one of her first vessels and there had been a very strange ambiance onboard; like the whole ship was wrapped in sadness. She soon found out that a cadet, a young woman, had jumped overboard a few days earlier. The girl had received a message from her boyfriend that he was breaking up with her. ‘If only she had talked to someone. Anyone! They could have told her that life is not over. But she didn’t say anything to anyone. She just left the ship’.

Vellamo’s experiences bring us full circle to the article’s opening vignette, when Raul told of the crewmember from the sister ship who had jumped overboard after finding out that his wife had left him for someone else. One minute he was standing by the pilot ladder, then, suddenly, he was gone. As Mircea noted, ‘If you’re the jealous type, you better stay home with your family. Because you cannot sit on board and imagine what your wife is doing. You’ll just go crazy or jump overboard’. On ship, at sea, death is easily accessible – just one little step away – while life at sea can make living seem unbearably hard. When I asked Lukas, *Arctic Wind’s* Finnish Captain, what kind of person it takes to function in this kind of work environment, on ships, at sea, he said:

> Well, at least, everything has to be fine at home. Because if you’re coming here, working on ship and things are not good at home—let’s say you’re fighting with your wife or with your parents—then you can’t function well here. You’re always thinking of the problems you have at home. You are not sleeping here. I think that’s the main thing. When you have everything well at home you are able to function here onboard also.

Alienating absences

While, as Lukas put it, things have to be ‘well at home’, being at sea for long periods can in itself create problems at home. Over the years, I have visited many of my shipmates in their homes and have gotten to know their families as well. The first time I visited the Philippines, in 2010, I stayed in the home of Rafael, a Filipino officer from my first field-ship. His mother, Laila, told me she often worried about him, and when I asked why, she said:

> Because, simply, he is not with us. He is not with his family and he is in a distant place. His absence will always be part of our mind, of our thinking, because he is away from us and from his family. We are always praying that everything must be safe and okay. I am worried because there are sometimes accidents.

Many of my shipmates told me that they felt guilty for not being present at home. Sasha, *Lusoria's* Russian Chief Engineer, explained:

> Sometimes, my son needs Papa at home, but he grew up alone. I am really ashamed. I feel guilty because I am far away. I try to do my best, of course. It's one thing to talk via satellite or e-mail or Skype, yeah, but sometimes you need, you know, just to take his arms and explain, 'Okay, son, like this'. It will be better if I stay at home, of course.

Many seafarers also spoke of failed relationships, multiple divorces, estranged children, and how, when they come home, their life at home sometimes no longer exists. The things that made life meaningful at home, such as their close relationships with partners, families, and friends, were sometimes emptied out because of their long absences, and when they finally arrive home, those meaningful relations are no longer alive. Seafarers' work at sea creates haunting absences in the lives of those they leave at home, as well as in their own lives once they return home.

Romeo, the Filipino OS on *Atlantica*, elaborated, 'Yeah, you will be far away from your family most of the time. If you would compare the lifespan of a seafarer, in the end – with the terms and agreements that I'm doing now – I will be spending most of my time at sea rather than home'. When I asked how he felt that this had affected his personal life, he answered:

> Well, I didn't get to see them much. Especially when doing a 10-month contract, everything has changed when I get home – the fashion, the music, the faces of my relatives – everything has changed. And then, you know, everybody's growing, everybody's getting old. Sometimes, I even have friends or relatives that have passed away, and when I get home, they're not there anymore. I think that's a bad thing!

The reason why …

'The reason why I'm called Savannah is that he left the night I was born..'.

I was interviewing Savannah, the 15-year-old daughter of another seafaring friend in the Philippines. We were sitting cross-legged on her bedroom floor, flipping through her photo albums with pictures of family, friends, and numerous Christmases and birthday celebrations. 'I think for 15 years, there were only three birthdays that he was here', she said as she turned another page over. 'And same for Christmas. And when I graduated, he wasn't here also. So, I don't really feel the father presence. I know he is providing for us, but, you know, the father presence is really something you need, and I don't really feel much of it'.

Named after the port city in the U.S. that her father traveled to when he joined a ship for the very first time, Savannah's life seemed already from birth deeply entangled in the wide net cast by the maritime industry. With its complex web connecting distant ports, cargo ships, and outsourced, flexible labor, this net produced not only connections but also separations and absences for seafarers and for the people who remain at home. Savannah knew that it was no coincidence that her dad went to sea on the very day she was born. He left to give her a better life. For Savannah's father, as for millions of other Filipinos, working abroad was the surest way to do so. Seafarers, in particular, are among the most well-paid of the 'Oversea Filipino Workers' (OFWs), the official term in the Philippines for those who work abroad. Being an international seafarer meant salaries manifold what they could ever hope to make at home, and work at sea was consequently often referred to as 'money for home-sick'.

Having myself grown up with a father who worked at sea, I could easily relate to Savannah when she spoke of her father's absences, which she quantified in birthdays missed. We were both the firstborns of our parents and, much like Avelino, Savannah's father, my own father had also made an occupational change when I was born. However, whereas Savannah's dad had embarked on a career that kept him away from her for months on end, mine had instead changed from working on long and irregular contracts with many months at sea to a position with a one-one system, meaning one month at sea followed by one month at home, which since the 80s has been the norm for Swedish sailors. Even though Avelino also worked on a Swedish ship, his contract followed the employment rules for Filipino seafarers, with 6–11 months at sea followed by 1–3 months of leave. Despite our shared experiences as daughters of sailors, Savannah's and my experiences were, in many ways, worlds apart.

Distance, detachment, and 'then there is a dull pain'

Just as national differences in working conditions profoundly shape seafarers' work and life onboard, they also shape the lives of people at home. Captain Lukas, the Finnish captain, worked on a similar one-one system to my father, with three weeks onboard followed by three weeks at home. He didn't find this very hard, he told me, because 'it is only three weeks'. A majority of his crew onboard *Arctic Wind*, however, including Raul and Chuck from the opening vignette, were from the Philippines. 'These guys are six to nine months', Lukas said. I asked if he could imagine doing such contracts. 'No. That's not a life. It's not right. But they do it only because of the money'.

The sense of alienation from home seemed to increase with the length and irregularity of contracts, for the seafarers as well as for their families. As Romeo told me:

> I mean, for you, when you go away from your family for a few weeks, you terribly, terribly miss them, don't you? But in our case … in our case, yeah, we miss them.

> But, I think, it's only, let's say, the first two, three, four months, that you miss them terribly. Then you get used to it. Of course, you still miss them. But, you know, when you experience pain, there's a very sharp pain, and then there's a dull pain.

Savannah expressed a similar dulling of her pain and numbing of her feelings due to the long absences, but also because of the intermittent short presences of her dad, explaining how she distances herself from her dad even when he is home.

> When he comes home, actually, I don't know if I would be happy or something, because I don't know how to adjust. For half a year, he is away, then he comes back again, but then, after a month or so, he leaves again. So, I'm pulling myself away from him because I know when he goes away again, I will just hurt, so I just try to not be so close to him so that when he leaves, I won't hurt.

However, she also reflected on how this emotional detachment is not just a self-protecting mechanism but also a form of emotional labor out of care for her dad so as not to add the burden of guilt on him. 'I can't attach myself to him too much because if I attach too much, I would be hurt, and then he would be hurt, and then everyone's hurt. So, it's better if I distance myself from him', she said, then quickly adding:

> But, when you think of the consequences of him being here rather than there, I think he would feel guilty because a provider should be providing a comfortable life for his family. And if you work here, it's hard to do that, so …

Returns: 'Home is the sailor, home from the sea … '

Returns. Before closing, let's return for a moment to the beginning of this article, to Raul's crass rant about being "too tired to fuck" when returning home after months away at sea. As I noted then, his crude words seemed to shield a much deeper sense of disenchantment and estrangement—a different kind of homesickness altogether—and one echoed in many of my conversations with other seafarers. Rather than belonging in the world, as the call of the sea and its promise to "see the world for free" had suggested, or feeling at home anywhere, which ships as "travelling dwellings" might have implied, many seafarers expressed a lingering sense of estrangement even after their return home—as if they no longer belonged anywhere, not even in their actual homes with their families. It was as if life at home had been infected by the emptiness and disconnect of life at sea and by the disenchantment and boredom that permeated the suspended time on ships, where every day was just "another Monday"—a homesickness, not in the sense of longing *for home* but of not belonging *at home*.

Here, to conclude, I wish to draw on yet another sea/land metaphorical relation. 'Land-sickness' is a term for the dizzying or disorienting feeling that some people feel when returning to land after an extended time at sea, a sort of mirror condition of the more familiar condition of seasickness. In a parallel way, I argue, the homesickness that many seafarers felt while at sea had its own corresponding mirror condition when coming home. This 'homesickness in reverse', orl, as I propose to call it, 'ship-sickness' at home, captures the emotional disorientation and estrangement that many seafarers felt when they finally arrived home. This feeling of not belonging in their actual homes was for many even more troubling and strange than the homesickness felt while at sea. After so many months of waiting and longing to belong again at home, this emotional disorientation was perhaps the most extreme form of their disenchantment with life at sea. Some even found this feeling of estrangement in a place where they should belong to be so difficult that they longed to go back to the ship and to sea. At least at sea, on the ship, the feeling of estrangement was not as strange. It made sense and was, in comparison, both more familiar and easier to bear than the disenchanting experience of no longer belonging at home.

Note

1. I use pseudonyms for all persons and ships to protect the confidentiality of research participants, though individuals may still recognize their stories or voices in the narrative. Given the small and hierarchical structure of ship crews, where most positions are singular (e.g. one captain, one chief cook), I have at times also omitted or altered details—such as nationality, position onboard, or time of research—which, when combined, could risk identifying individuals. Any such changes were made with careful consideration of the accuracy of stories and experiences shared with me and the integrity of my presentation and analysis of the ethnographic material.
2. Roll-On Roll-Off, a ship with a ramp that carries rolling cargo, e.g. cars.

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