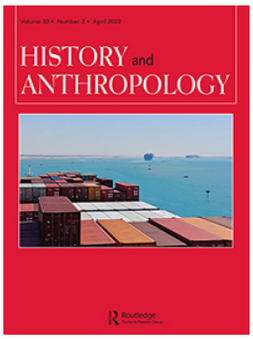

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The ship

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ABSTRACT

When *Ever Given*, one of the world's largest container ships, ran aground and blocked the Suez Canal for six days in March 2021, it dramatically brought to light the fragile dependency of global trade on maritime infrastructures. It also drew attention to ships as actors within this global system of mobility. In this article, I centre on the figure of the ship to reflect on maritime passages and blockages and the particular forms of sociality that emerge through them. Drawing on ethnography from onboard container ships, I explore how crews interact with various actors, such as authorities, pilots, boatmen and peddlers, who, at times facilitate, at times obstruct, ships' passages. Through this ethnographic lens, I make visible the intersecting dynamics of mobility and immobility, flow and friction, and connection and isolation that permeate the Suez Canal and the contemporary maritime, and which shape the social worlds on and around ships.

KEYWORDS

Suez Canal; ships; maritime; socialities; passages

Passages

The second time I passed through the Suez Canal, the container ship I was on was 'Number One', as it is called in Suez Passage lingo, in the Convoy of Vessels. I remember sitting perched up in the porthole of my cabin with the over 300-meter-long vessel stretching out in front of me, rows and rows of containers. One side of the canal was dry and arid, the other side much lusher (Figure 1).

We had waited in anchorage for quite a few hours before it was our turn to make the passage, and a lot of smaller boats and skiffs had approached us to try to purchase spare metal, junk, ropes, whatever leftover materials we had onboard. The gangway had been lowered down towards the azure water to allow the pilots and different authority representatives to board the vessel. Sailors often refer to the Suez as the 'Marlboro Canal', and to Suez pilots as 'pirates', as many of these 'figures of maritime passage' come onboard expecting 'gifts', usually in the form of boxes of cigarettes, in exchange for offering the ship a smooth transit (this in addition to the hundreds of thousands of dollars that the shipping company has to pay to the Canal Authority formally). But, there were many others who wanted to do business with the vessel as well. The crew members who were off duty came to hang

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Figure 1. 'Number One in the Convoy', view of the Suez Canal from porthole. Photo: the author.

out by the gangway, hoping to purchase SIM cards from the peddlers. The Suez passage allowed the crew a rare moment of being close enough to shore to get good signal for an extended period of time, but without the intensive workload of calling a port. Everyone was eager to get online, check messages, and call home to their families (Figure 2).

In this article, I centre on the figure of the ship to explore the different forms of sociality that emerge in and around ships in passage. The figure of the ship has long been productive for social theory. Foucault used the figure of the 'Ship of Fools' to describe a practice (real or symbolic) of European renaissance towns ridding themselves of their mad people by sending them off on ships, which then meandered from port to port with their undesired cargo of persons. 'Locked in the ship from which he could not escape … He is the Passenger *par excellence*, the prisoner of the passage', Foucault wrote ([1961] 2001, 11). For Paul Gilroy, writing on the Black Atlantic diaspora, the ship was a 'chronotope of passage' and the image of the ship 'a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion' (1993, 4). For Peter Sloterdijk (2013), the ship provides a key figure in his theorizing of different historical periods of globalization, from the nautical ecstasies of the Age of Discovery to the trivialization of traffic on a global scale that characterizes modern capitalism.

But ships have also provided very real experiences and localized sites of anthropological knowledge production. Claude Lévi-Strauss first made the rite of passage to become an anthropologist by travelling by ship from France to South America, and later escaped World War II Europe also by ship, but this time as a refugee. In *Tristes Tropiques* (1961), he describes the very different social experiences onboard during these disparate passages. Similarly, Malinowski arrived by ship to the Trobriand Islands, also escaping a world war (WWI) as an enemy national in a British colony (and later wrote of the *Kula* maritime trade and passages in the archipelago) (Malinowski [1922] 2005, [1967] 2000). The ship can thus be both prison and a technology of evasion and escape. It is, as Sloterdijk puts it, 'the

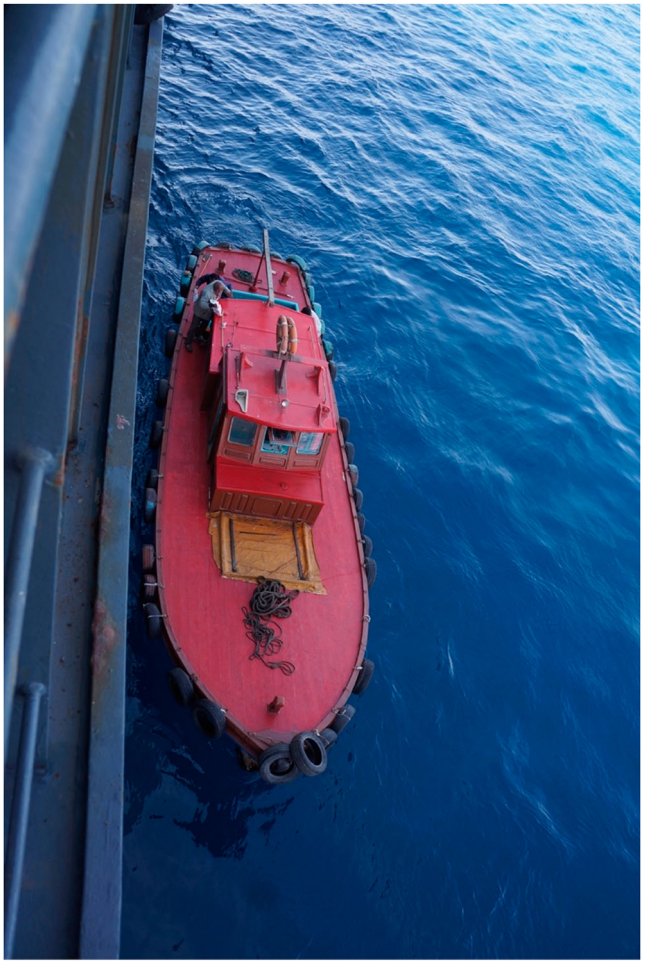

Figure 2. Peddlers at the Suez Canal anchorage. Photo: the author.

archetype of the resolved contradiction' (2013, 122), 'bridging the particular and the general' (Leivestad and Schober, this issue).

The figure of the ship, then, powerfully highlights the tensions between passage and blockage, between mobility and immobility, between flow and stuckness, which characterizes shipping at large. When *Ever Given* got stuck in the Suez Canal, the massive media attention it provoked seemed to suggest exceptionality. Yet, as several authors in this special issue point out, interruptions are indeed part and parcel of shipping's normal workings. As Dua (this issue) writes, 'life at sea, then, is about navigating these interrupted itineraries'. In what follows, I explore how seafarers onboard ships navigate blockages by forming various social constellations.

Blockages

When my father first started working at sea in 1974, his first voyage as a cadet (officer student) took him to Nigeria. Nigeria had experienced an oil boom and there was not

enough port capacity to accommodate all the ships arriving with goods, especially cement for the many construction projects. His vessel, *M/S Vikaren*, a Swedish owned cargo ship, had to drop anchor in the waters outside of Lagos along with close to a hundred other vessels where they lay in anchorage for two months. My father, together with the second officer and the motorman, was tasked with taking the lifeboat to go ashore daily to get the mail from the ship's agent and to buy more supplies on behalf of all the Swedish (and some Norwegian) ships that were waiting offshore. They exchanged goods with other boats in anchorage, as well as movie rolls which they showed on deck, using an old sail as projection screen. They watched 48 films in 48 days (Figure 3).

When I myself arrived to Lagos by ship three decades later in 2009, also as a cadet, during my first fieldwork at sea, there were once more hundreds of vessels laying idle outside of the port. This time, not an economic boom but the financial crisis had resulted in a crisis in shipping too, and as world trade came to a near halt, many shipping companies went bankrupt and abandoned their ships, sometimes with their crews still onboard (Figure 4).

More recently, in the fall of 2021, many ships were reported to be laying idle outside of major US ports. The global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an enormous upswing in global trade with an increased demand for consumer goods, at the same time as it hasproduced a number of logistical challenges in the global supply chain, including labour shortages, scarcity of shipping containers, and closures of ports, which haveresulted in enormous backlogs in delivery and blockages outside of ports. At the time of publication, in April 2022, a fifth of the world's container ships are estimated to be stuck in port congestions (*The Maritime Executive* 2022).

When on 23 March 2021, *Ever Given*, one of the world's largest container ships, was thrown off course by heavy winds and ran aground in the Suez Canal, blocking

Figure 3. The movie theatre onboard M/S Vikaren, on which the crew watched 48 movies in 48 days. No reruns. January 1975. Photo: Kaj Markkula.

Figure 4. Ships offshore of Lagos in 2009. Photo: the author.

passage through the canal for six long days, many older sailors were reminded of another six-day disruptive event in the history of the canal: The Six-Day War between Israel and Egypt. This conflict led to the abrupt closure of the canal in 1967, causing the 14 merchant ships that were transiting the canal at the time to get stuck in the Great Bitter Lake[1], not for six days but for eight years! The ships belonged to eight different countries on both sides of the Cold War (West Germany, Sweden, UK, France, Poland, US, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria).

The crews of the different ships organized various activities and formed a support network which they named 'The Great Bitter Lake Association'. Like my father and his crewmates had done when stuck outside of Lagos, the crews of the 'Yellow Fleet'[2] used their ships' lifeboats to travel between the different vessels, trading supplies, such as food, alcohol, and movies (Senker 2017). One ship captain estimated that an astonishing 1.5 million beer bottles were thrown into the lake during these years (https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/great-bitter-lake-association/). The crews celebrated holidays, hosted regattas with the lifeboats, and even held their own 'Bitter Lake Olympic Games' concurrently with the summer Olympics of 1968. They formed their own 'nation', which crossed Cold War lines and even created their own postage stamps which they used to send letters home.

Ship socialities

As these brief passages through time and space show, maritime blockages can be caused by both booms and busts in maritime trade. The oil boom in Nigeria in the 1970s, the

financial crisis in 2008–2009, and the increased demand of goods coupled with scarce supply of port space, containers and labour of the COVID-19 pandemic, all resulted in the blockages of passage, or – as Dua (this issue) calls them – 'interrupted itineraries'. Others are caused by political turmoil, or even wars, which, as critical logistics scholars such as Laleh Khalili (2020) and Deborah Cowen (2014) have shown, are closely entangled with trade and economic fluctuations. For instance, the eight-year-long Suez Canal blockage after the Six-Day War meant that shipping companies had to reroute their ships to take the much longer passage around the African continent. This in turn led shipowners to invest in building ultra-large tankers. Once the Suez Canal reopened again, these ships became redundant as they were too big to pass through the canal and most of them were taken out of operation, scrapped, or repurposed for other functions. However, as Leivestad and Schober point out in the introduction to this special issue, these enormous tankers set a precedent for the ultra-large container vessels that now dominate the container trade, and thus provide a direct linkage with *Ever Given*'s blocking of the canal in 2021, with her size being both part of the cause of the accident as well as a key factor in determining the magnitude of its consequences.

However, what I have been concerned with here is that which is produced, socially, in these passages and blockages. Maritime interruptions, as we have seen, are productive of a diversity of social forms. In the 'friction' (Tsing 2005) – the physical term for the tension between something that moves and something that hinders that movement – new forms of sociality emerge. And, at the centre of these maritime passages, blockages and socialities, figures the ship. For those on and around ships, to navigate these interruptions entailed forming various social constellations, collaborative practices, and relations of exchange, thus highlighting the different forms of sociality, such as 'accidental communities' (Malkki 1997) and 'stranger socialities' (Povinelli 2011), that emerge in and around ships.[3] Being stuck, far from home, out at sea, seafarers creatively engage with other people they encounter in these situations.

In the Great Bitter Lake, the cultural forms and social activities that emerged out of this stuckness have been documented and have left material traces, as with the stamps that the sailors produced to send letters home. *Ever Given* getting stuck also resulted in the production of social forms that spilled over, not into stamps, but images and memes. Importantly, there are histories, precedents, to these stories of trade, travel and traffic, and the social worlds that emerge from them, and anthropology has been documenting them since the early days of Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss. For example, the SIM cards sold to sailors to call home and connect with loved ones far away, the scrap metal solicited by peddlers, and the boxes of Marlboro demanded in return for a smoother passage through the bureaucracies of paperwork during each transit of a vessel through the Suez Canal are reminiscent of the Kula trade where the ritual necklaces and bracelets formally traded also entailed a secondary trade in everyday commodities, relationships formed with others, with strangers becoming allies, in distant places across bodies of water.

The figure of the ship

Leivestad and Schober (this issue) situates '*figures* participating in maritime passages' in the 'interconnected human, economic and infrastructural formations, central to the everyday making of global shipping'. The ship is a key figure of such maritime passages. Firstly,

the ship is itself a vessel – a container – for the goods transported. But it is also a self-contained social world. 'It is the crew that makes the ship', was a saying I often heard onboard during my fieldwork on different ships. Ships are social worlds, accidental communities of strangers who live and work in close proximity for extended periods of time, and whose collaborative work makes the ship work, and thus, by extension, makes shipping and the global economy work too. Furthermore, the ship is a social world that moves, that connects other places, while the people who live and work inside of it have multiple connections to the outside world as well. It also is a vector of all sorts of political and social processes, of trade, colonialism, imperialism, individual trajectories, and relationships between people and places far from each other. Yet, ships are also concrete objects, each with an individual material existence. They are both strangely enclosed, isolated, self-sufficient and self-contained floating pieces of machinery and space, at the same time as each ship forms part of a global infrastructure of mobility made up of other physical structures, like ports, nautical highways and canals. With all of these qualities and contradictions in mind, it is perhaps no wonder that the ship has been such a productive figure for social theory.

Notes

1. The Great Bitter Lake is a large saltwater lake that is part of the Suez Canal.
2. The 'Yellow Fleet' was in reference to the desert sand that coated the vessels.
3. Jatin Dua in his book *Captured at sea* (2019) describes the socialities of capture that emerge through co-habitation in the ships' holds onboard the dhows captured as motherships by pirates.

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