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Shipping – An afterword

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ABSTRACT

The *-ship* suffix in “kinship” and the seagoing “ship” are terms that describe forms of relation that bind and collect amid oceanic unboundedness and dispersal. This afterword proposes that shipping in sea parlance and shipping in fan culture (a speculative practice of forging connection between fictional characters beyond the bounds of their original media) share a constitutive commitment to imaginative and material provisioning, transportation, and the creation of surplus value. Shipping allows for generative possibility beyond the foreclosure of formal, terrestrial bounds.

KEYWORDS

Shipping; fan culture;
oceanic studies

As the essays in this volume explore in provocative ways, *transoceanic kinship* names certain forms of oceanic relation even as it acknowledges the amorphousness and annihilation that can characterize their expression. What is conveyed – what borne, what excluded, what abandoned – by the ships of transoceanic kinship? The question is freighted with historic weight, as recent works by Christina Sharpe (*In the Wake*) and Tiffany Lethabo King (*The Black Shoals*) on the sea’s continuous recycling of antiblack and settler colonial violence are particularly astute in tracing. Such scholarship has transformed my own understanding of oceanic studies, which in the earlier manifestations of my work could have been far more attentive to and engaged with how the ocean conveys, records, and yet obscures the ongoing legacies of slavery and colonialism. The sea, “that grey vault” (as Derek Walcott writes), submerges and memorializes history, often indiscernible to the human eye.¹ If, as Michel Foucault memorably wrote, “in civilizations without boats, dreams dry up,” then it is equally the case, as Paul Virilio notes, that “when you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck.”² The task of studying transoceanic kinship is to recover and repair, to forge and connect, to create future narratives of mobility and liberation.

These connections are linguistic as well as historical. The *-ship* suffix in “kinship” does not etymologically share a clear source with the seagoing “ship,” evocative as such an echo might be. Yet both ships describe forms of relation that bind and collect amid oceanic unboundedness and dispersal. The state of being kin, or relation by blood or affinity, is created as the shared experience of kinship by the suffix defined as a “state or condition of being.”³ The nautical ship, similarly, gathers human and nonhuman cargo into singular units, carried by yet separate from the water. It is often said that

the salinity of human blood matches the salinity of the sea. This is not entirely accurate, but close enough to be evocative. There are a number of ways this figuration appeals – human connection to paleoceanography or deep time on a planetary scale, transcorporeal affinity – but I wish to dilate a moment on the idea of the kind of kin-ship that bears imaginative freight. To recognize the ocean’s capacity for recombinatory collection is to recognize its capacity for recollection, mourning, and the creation of new narratives of kinship and connection.

I ask a reader’s indulgence as I take this point in a somewhat unexpected direction, to the practice in contemporary fan culture known as *shipping*. In the past several decades, some fans of television and film have engaged in a speculative practice of forging connection between fictional characters beyond the bounds of their relationships as depicted in the original media. Facilitated by early internet communities, such fan fictions envision relationships and sexual and emotional encounters between characters who do not hook up in the TV series or movies in which they first appear. Shipping (sometimes rendered with an apostrophe, ‘shipping) is the name given to this popular practice of fan culture, derived from the -ship suffix in “relationship.” Early shippers focused on FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully in *The X-Files* (1993–2018) (a pairing known in fan culture as “The Mothership”); other ships expand upon queer relationships only teased on screen (such as “Johnlock,” the fan term for the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson in the BBC series *Sherlock* [2010-2017]).⁴ Like kin-ship, a relation-ship is a state of connection, and shippers see potential for new forms of contact beyond the bounds of what the media might promise.

In this sense, shipping in fan culture and shipping in sea parlance share a constitutive commitment to imaginative and material provisioning, transportation, and the creation of surplus value. Shipping allows for generative possibility beyond the foreclosure of formal, terrestrial bounds. Dead ends become fantastic beginnings; loss or violence is recuperated and set newly in motion as relationship, kinship, affinity. The -ship suffix, etymologically, establishes a state of being. To ship is to imagine future motion, speculative exchange, and recuperative connection; Melody Jue, following Stacey Alaimo’s work on transcorporeality, calls this the “porosity of embodiment.”⁵ My proposal in this afterword is that maritime ships, too, are states of being that bear within them the conditions for human fracture and reconstitution. Like seawater and human blood, the ship-ship kinship may be more suggestive than literal, but if oceanic studies teaches anything, it is that there are non-planar, non-linear, and omnidirectional physical forces at work in a world too often envisioned as two-dimensional.

Notes

1. Walcott, “The Sea is History,” 364.
2. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 27; Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst* 89.
3. The etymology of the suffix -ship, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “In Old English *-sciepe, -skiepe (rare), -scipe, -scype, Anglian -scip, (occasionally -scioþ) strong masculine = Old Frisian -skipi, -skip, -schip (West Frisian -skip, -schip, North Frisian -skep, -skap), Old Saxon -scepi, -scipi, Middle Low German, Middle Dutch -sc(h)ip, -sc(h)êpe, -sc(h)êep, -sc(h)êp, West Flemish -schip, -schepe < Germanic *skapi-z, < skap- to create, ordain, appoint.” The earlier forms of the noun *ship* are virtually identical, but the *OED* concludes that “the ultimate etymology is uncertain” – that is, the vessel *ship* does not clearly share the suffix -ship’s

etymological meaning “to create, ordain, appoint”: “Common Germanic: Old English *scip* strong neuter = Old Frisian *skip*, *schip* (North Frisian *skapp*, *skep*, West Frisian *skip*), Old Saxon *skip*, Middle Low German *schip*, *schêp* (Low German *schipp*), Middle Dutch *sc(h)ip*, *sc(h)eepe*, Dutch *schip* (oblique *scheepe*, combining form *scheeps-* beside *schip-*), West Flemish *scheep*, Old High German *scif*, *skef* (Middle High German *schif*, *schef*, German *schiff*), Old Norse *skip* (Swedish *skepp*, Danish *skib*), Gothic *skip*; the ultimate etymology is uncertain.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed 1 July 2021.

4. For a great primer on ‘shipping (and “slash” or “femslash” fan fictions that specifically imagine queer relations between characters), see Klink, “To Ship or Not to Ship,” or Merriam-Webster’s article “Words We’re Watching.”
5. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 19.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Hester Blum is Professor of English at Penn State University. Her most recent book, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration*, was published by Duke University Press in 2019. Her new edition of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* for Oxford World’s Classics is forthcoming in 2022. She participated in an Arctic climate change expedition in 2019 with the Northwest Passage Project, and was a 2019–2020 Guggenheim Fellow.

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