An anthropology of the sea voyage

Prolegomena to an epistemology of transoceanic travel

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Abstract This paper draws a distinction between an anthropology of the sea and an anthropology as sea travel – using the latter as an epistemological window to understand immigrants’ experiences of long-distance sea travel which have rarely been considered in the anthropology of immigrant societies.

The paper reviews Bronislaw Malinowski’s own travel linked to some explorations of archetypical sea voyages among the Trobriand Islanders (Argonauts of the Western Pacific, 1922). In a further step, the ‘shipboard notes’ of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Tristes Tropiques (1955) are used to consider what might have been gained if early and mid-20th century anthropologists had turned their ethnographic eye on ships, their crew and immigrants travelling on them. This paper then takes inspiration from early and mid-20th century anthropologists on sea voyages (not or only rarely related to immigrants’ travel), and applies insight from this to material from 20th century immigrants to Argentina. Though some of the empirical evidence has been published previously (Schneider 2000), it is here complemented with more recent material (from fieldwork in 2014), and interpreted in a new comparative and theoretical key.

Keywords sea voyage, transoceanic travel, onboard ethnography, Argentina, epistemology

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1 Fieldwork in Saladillo, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina (see section III) was carried out in November 2014. I am grateful to the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo for a travel grant. Special thanks are due to Nélida Cimino of the Sociedad Italiana de Saladillo who opened many doors for me, to Marcelo Pereyra and Claudia Ana Calcedo from the Museo y Archivo Histórico de Saladillo, and to filmmakers Fabio Junco and Julio Midú who invited me to Saladillo in the first place. I am also grateful to Joachim Schlör for having invited me to contribute to this special journal issue, and for comments by two anonymous reviewers.
The sea voyage has long occupied poets, writers, philosophers and even cultural critics and social scientists. Whilst this paper is written in view of the specific topic of this journal issue, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to claim a particular relation of anthropology to the ‘sea’, both in terms of a subject of study and as a means through which anthropological exploration was enabled or carried out. An anthropology of the ‘sea’ has covered variously traditional and non-traditional fishing and coastal communities, seamen working on ships, as well as off-shore work and habitats. There is no pretense here to review the enormous range of anthropological work done on topics related to the sea, port cities, the global shipping industry, and so forth. Topics covered range – to name but a few – from the subsistence economies living off the sea, to maps and navigation, to the seasonal work of those working on ships, and to the expected returns from such travels, including the past (e.g. nostalgia) and future projections involved in them.  

However, lying right at the heart of this paper, and not just a fancy epistemological twist, is the distinction (and at the same time connection) between the anthropology of the sea (and sea travel) and anthropology as sea travel. Anthropological exploration and research up until the increasing predominance of air travel in the latter part of the 20th century was largely dependent on sea travel, and in fact constructed as an enterprise of the far-away ‘other’. The substantial journey times involved provided opportunity for, and were deliberately used to, formulate and revise research questions, read up, and ponder the (un)expected research field and subjects lying ahead, or conversely on the return journey, contemplate and analyse the recently concluded research stay, through re-reading notes and diaries, and producing first draft manuscripts. Before air travel, and in analogue times (as opposed to current digital times), sea travel also clearly put a temporal break and barrier between ‘us’ (the researchers, or other travelers) and ‘them’ (the subjects of study), and between metropolitan academia and remote research locations (further compounded by the long relay times of postal communication) – whilst at the same time serving as a distinct step in the rite of passage which fieldwork was to become for any novice anthropologist. 

Similarly, for immigrants during the age of mass migration, travelling just like the anthropologists also on ocean liners, sea travel signified the most important rupture in their lives. Yet the two experiences, anthropologists travelling towards a new research site, and immigrants heading for a new life – whilst structurally similar – did rarely connect. However, heuristic and epistemological insight for a possible ethnography of past transoceanic travel on regular passenger services (which came to an end in the 1970s) can be constructed arguably from anthropologists’ testimony (mainly onboard diary entries), as I seek to demonstrate in this essay. 

All sea travel involves structural elements of embarkation, stay on board, and eventual disembarkation. Transoceanic sea travel, of course, includes many days, even months on board, and affords ample opportunity for socialization with fellow passengers, but also in terms of personal perception and rationalization of the voyage as the forward projection towards the new, and not least for anthropologists it became a site of intense personal reflection. I will start with reviewing some travels linked to explorations of archetypical sea voyages among the

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Trobriland Islanders by Bronislaw Malinowski (Argonauts of the Western Pacific, 1922), one of the emblematic founding figures of modern anthropology. This is set against Malinowski’s methodology of extensive fieldwork, the future signature practice of anthropology, and in fact the result of sea travel at the outbreak of WWI which suddenly became a voyage of uncertain return.

Thus in anthropology the trope of sea travel is intricately bound up with the development of the discipline and its new standard method of ethnographic fieldwork, i.e. the long-term immersion into another culture, involving participant observation.

In a famous passage, Malinowski writes:

“Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable to waste time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea." (Malinowski 1992[1922]: 4)

The scenographic, indeed cinematic qualities of this passage are immediately apparent (and have been commented upon; Marcus 2010: 88), as is the sense of abandon, separation and dislocation inherent in and resulting from sea voyages. For the anthropologist, as an important rite of passage, this physical separation was (and for some still is) the precondition of the cultural separation and distance deemed necessary to achieve the cultural understanding of others, but it has been also much criticized since anthropology’s hermeneutic turn and writing culture critique of the 1980s (Clifford/Marcus 1986). Ethnographic fieldwork required for its eventual mise-en-scène (Marcus 2010) severing the ties that still connected the ethnographer to his or her own recent sea voyages, the ultimate purpose of which was arrival in the field. The last leg of these voyages was done in Malinowski’s case with a small craft – see the above quote – and was preceded by shorter connecting travels, and of course the transoceanic voyage itself. But fieldwork for its successful closure also needed the return trip – another essential step in the rites of passage, now re-transiting once more into the ‘civilized’ world of learning and academia. However, bringing the results back to that world and analyzing them was not only achieved in the private study or university offices in London, but also through further dislocations, involving (then) again sea travel, such as Malinowski’s writing up period on Tenerife in 1920/21 (cf Malinowski 1992[1922]: xvii, Firth 1957: 3-4, Wayne 1985: 535 ).

Significantly, for Malinowski the outbound trip to the Antipodes was not only a means to an end to arrive at the British Association meeting in Australia and to do fieldwork in the British part of Papua New Guinea (Young 2004: 245-46, 264-269, 289-292); it also confirmed him in his vocation for a scientifically grounded anthropology. The sea voyage and its conclusion was literally a watershed in his career, demarcating and putting into relief his philosophical convictions in contradistinction to his close friend, the Polish avant-garde artist Stanislaw Wiktiewicz, who had accompanied him on the trip and with whom he briefly toured Ceylon (taking also photographs, which unfortunately don’t survive). Immediately after this trip Mal-
inowski fell out with Witkiewicz, and when Witkiewicz returned from Australia to Europe to join the Tsar’s army, Malinowski stayed behind in Australia. Originally from Krakow (then, as some other parts of Southern Poland, under Austrian rule), Malinowski possessed an Austrian passport, and therefore in Australia had the status of an enemy alien. Internment in Britain, or conscription to the Imperial Austrian Army, might have awaited upon his return to Europe, but in Australia – whilst having to report regularly to the police – Malinowski effectively turned the prospect of a stay of uncertain length into an opportunity for fieldwork, for which he even obtained funding (Young 2004: 245-246, Kuper 1983: 12). Importantly, as several commentators have remarked upon (Young 1998, 2004, Wright 1991, Coote 1993), with his artist friend Witkiewicz having abandoned him, any potential creative challenge, doubts or threats to Malinowski’s new realist paradigm of fieldwork were also removed. The paradigm forming character of Malinowski’s first full research trip is also intrinsically connected with sea voyages of a specific kind, which were to become the principal topic of his researches – that is the kula ring exchange system in Trobriand islands; a system of non-monetary exchange that became important in theoretical debates about exchange systems and economy in non-complex, non-western societies (starting with Mauss[1925] 1966). The Kula ring consisted of many trading sea voyages between the islanders of the Trobriands, following an elaborate ceremonial and ritual set of rules, with long necklaces of red shell moving in one direction and bracelets of white shell moving into the other, where they are constantly exchanged for each other (Malinowski 1922: 81). However, in terms of actual fieldwork and participant observation Malinowski’s account of Kula ring voyages is largely reconstructed. Whilst he did do rowing trips close to shore and went on shorter trips, he never actually joined a kula expedition; in fact he missed one about to depart (Malinowski 1922: 385, Young 2004: 539, Stocking 1983: 107). His biographer, Michael W. Young, has drawn furthermore a neat comparison between Malinowski’s fieldwork founding myth and that of the Kula ring he investigated:

“Yet anthropological posteriority would come to view his fieldwork achievements as singularly heroic, and the recursive pattern of his charter myth is discernible even in his brief expedition to the Amphletts. The hero sails to unknown shores, confronts natural and supernatural dangers, overcomes obstacles with trickery and magical help and returns safely with the treasures he has won. In the manner of such heroes, too, he would claim a wife and rightful fame. Did it perhaps occur to him that his own quest for ethnographic riches mirrored the heroic quest for fame and fortune of the Kula traders who plied these islands?” (Young 2004: 539-40)

An entire chapter of Malinowski’s classic monograph is dedicated to shipwreck. Shipwreck is the one constant of sea travel throughout its history, always present as a threat and possibility (for the philosophical implications cf. Blumenberg 1996, also Thompson 2014), and Trobriand Islanders have an elaborate system of magic and spells to make their voyages safe, threatened incessantly by witches sent by enemies, bad weather (also the result of bad magic), and so forth (Malinowski 1922: 237 – 266). Malinowski, later famous for his theories on Magic, Science, and Religion (Malinowski 1948), rationalized his own misfortunes in different ways, but according

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3 Witkiewicz was originally from the Lithuanian village of Pašiaušė (or Poszawsze in Polish), then ruled by the Russian Empire and hence would have travelled on a Russian passport.
to his biographer was no stranger to superstition for impending sea travel (Young 2004:537). For instance, when travelling back to Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea) from the island of Mailu, his ship gets stuck on a coral reef; Malinowski is afraid of losing his field materials, and has a ‘hysterical fear’ of shipwreck (Young 2004: 353, Malinowski 1967: 75). The loss of field materials is of course one of the anthropologist’s worst nightmares, and the anthropologist Gunnar Landtman, for example, paid a diver to retrieve them (Landtman 1927: ix). Whilst on the whole (but vide the Titanic and other maritime disasters), transoceanic sea travel in steamships was considered safer than that on the small indigenous crafts and outriggers of Trobriand islanders, WWI with its increased dangers also for passenger and merchant ships clearly added uncertainty to such travel, acknowledged in Malinowski’s diary (1967: 199), which also reveals his bouts of seasickness (Young 2004: 342), and other apprehensions of sea travel.

Malinowski is acutely aware of the special qualities of sea travel and evokes them, for instance, in powerful descriptions of the ship leaving port or arriving, or the changing landscapes and coastlines, slowly receding or approaching.

“There was a lovely green sea, but I could not see the full sweep of the [Great Barrier] Reef. Many little islands along the way. Would have wanted to learn the principles of navigation, but feared the captain. Marvelous moonlit nights. (…) We left Brisbane Saturday, 9. 5. 14, arrived Cairns Wendnesday, … The bay was lovely seen in the morning half-light – high mountains on both sides; the bay cuts deep into a broad valley. The land was flat at the foot of the mountains; at the end of the bay, thick mangrove forests. Mounts in fog; sheets of rain kept moving down the slopes into the valley and out to the sea. ” (Malinowski 1967: 5-6).

For Malinowski, sea travel is a means to an end, either as long-distance transoceanic travel to reach a final destination, travel between the islands of Melanesia, or in a number of shorter trips in coastal waters on small boats to do research in the Trobriand islands. On the whole, and apart from a few recorded instances in his diaries, and despite his intense friendship with the artist-writer Witkiewicz who accompanied him, life on board of passenger ships is not worthy of ethnographic description or anthropological analysis.

A generation later, another towering figure of 20th century anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, undertakes several memorable sea voyages, two of which have been immortalized in particular detail in his famous *Tristes Tropiques* (1955): one to take up a position in Sociology at the University of São Paulo in 1935, the other his flight of refuge to New York in 1941 from persecution in Nazi-occupied France and certain deportation to a concentration camp. *Tristes Tropiques* is the swan song on any romantic possibility of travel to the exotic other, and a concurrent indictment of the spread of Western civilization – what today we would call globalization. Written in retrospect of these travels and published in 1955, *Tristes Tropiques* rationalizes sea travel, provides acute depictions of life on board, and offers philosophical reflection on the forever changed status of (sea) travel in the dawning age of massive air travel and a world of shrinking distances and increasing cultural homogenization (a topic Lévi-Strauss famously addressed in his essay ‘Race and History’ in *Structural Anthropology* 2, Lévi-Strauss 1973: 358-59).
Intriguingly, during his first journey inland, and with an eye which had been trained on the sea before, the future ethnographer transposes the sea view also onto solid ground, and applies an almost maritime field of vision to the landscapes he describes. Sea voyage and land travel seem to be of one long sliding movement, absorbing and recording the vagaries of travel – frequent break downs of trucks and long delays – and the slow changing environments, vistas and landscapes (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 189-192). This maritime rhapsody on land – including also riverine boat travel – is replayed with rich photographic material in the much later published *Saudades do Brasil* (Lévi-Strauss 1995), constituting almost a counterpoint to the elegiac description of a sunset – taken directly from his notes written on board (and published in a section, entitled ‘Shipboard notes’, Lévi-Strauss 1970: 66-73).

“At twenty to six in the evening the sky in the west seemed encumbered with a complicated edifice, horizontal at its base, which was so exactly like the sea that one would have thought it had been sucked up out of it in some incomprehensible way, or that a thick and invisible layer of crystal had been inserted between the two. (…) Meanwhile the sun was gradually coming into view behind the celestial reefs that blocked the view to the west; as it progressed downwards inch by inch its rays would disperse the mists or force their way through, throwing into relief as they did so whatever had stood in their way, and dissipating it in a mass of circular fragments, each with a size and a luminous intensity all its own.” (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 68 – 69).

These poetic ‘shipboard notes’ in *Tristes Tropiques* are the surviving part of what Lévi-Strauss intended to be a ‘vaguely Conradian novel’ (Debaene 2014: 177), and as a whole, *Tristes Tropiques* is regarded as an important work of literature. It is a prime example of the ‘second book’ which according to Vincent Debaene (2014: 3) is the distinctive feature of French anthropology for most parts of the 20th century, where scholars would famously publish a scientific monograph followed (or in some cases preceded by) a work with literary ambitions. This literary, ‘second’ book, however, was decidedly not a travelogue, or travel book, but rather a book about travelling that was explicitly fighting the stereotyping and cheaper forms of depictions of alterity inherent in such literature, as Lévi-Strauss made very clear in the opening pages of *Tristes Tropiques* (1970: 17-18, Debaene 2014: 199). 4 Literary ambitions apart, in more prosaic (and indeed structural ) terms, of course, the sea voyage is not restricted to the sea, but preceded and followed, in fact preconditioned by a range of other travels and formalities. These include dealing with port authorities, immigration and health officials on land which were common in the age of massive sea travel, described in considerable detail by Lévi-Strauss in chapter 2 ‘On Board Ship’ of *Tristes Tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 23-30; – here as the trials and tribulations of getting safe passage to the US fleeing Nazi persecution), and surface also in immigrant accounts to which I shall turn now.

4 I am grateful to George Marcus for having pointed me to Debaene’s book.
II

Both Bronislaw Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss are examples of the single anthropologist as ‘hero’ (the term Susan Sontag famously applied to Lévi-Strauss, Sontag 1963), travelling as it were at certain moments of high modernity which collapsed arguably in the 1980s (cf. Jordheim 2014), preceded only by a decade by the final suspension of passenger services to South America.

Malinowski’s, and later Lévi-Strauss’s, sea travels, as those of other early and mid-20th century anthropologists, also take place during periods of unprecedented migrations of Europeans across the Atlantic in particular, part of the age of mass migration. These resumed briefly in the inter-war period, with smaller contingents of refugees fleeing Fascist, Francoist and Nazi persecution into the first years of WWII (Lévi-Strauss being one of them), and a last period of migrations after WWII till the early 1950s (mostly of economic migrants, but also consisting of smaller contingents of those wanting to escape prosecution for their Nazi or Fascist past), with passenger services coming to an end in the 1970s. One of the main countries of immigration was Argentina.

Yet European sea travel itself, indeed the study of immigrants, would have been far removed from the anthropology of the time. Sea travel of Europeans for the purpose of emigration or research was of course taken for granted by early and mid-20th century anthropologists, but not considered a subject of study – that, obviously, lay elsewhere in an exotic location in the tropics, not among one’s own on board of an ocean liner.

However, the perceptiveness and sensibility applied by anthropologists in both their descriptions and reflections of their own sea voyages and, when the sea became a subject of research, might be a useful foil for the understanding of immigrant accounts of sea travels. Indeed such a heuristic procedure might be apposite both for the historic times of mass migration (which still remains a much under-researched field in anthropology) and for the more recent past and present, with massive maritime movement of refugees and immigrants, for instance from South East Asia (e. g. the ‘boat people’ fleeing after the Vietnam war) or across the Mediterranean to Europe (e. g. Pinelli 2015).

Argentina – though it was not on the orbit of either Malinowski’s antipodean, and later transatlantic travels, nor of those by Lévi-Strauss (to Brazil in 1935; and to the United States in 1941), is an interesting case among immigrant societies, and the multiple cases of sea travel this involved. Argentina is second only to the United States in terms of absolute numbers of immigrants received during times of mass migration, and ranks first by number of immigrants in relation to its original population before 1870. Among the classic immigration countries (including the US, Canada and Australia) it is perhaps unique in that it took a different path to economic development then what was forecast still in the 1920s, when it was ranked 8th among the world economic powers.

In this context it useful to look at some immigrant accounts of sea travel. It is here that I turn to some of my own material on Italian immigrants in Argentina (taken from Schneider, 1995, 1999, and the further literature contained therein.

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5 For the Argentine context, see Schneider (1995, 1999), and the further literature contained therein.
6 With some notable exceptions in the US, e. g. Franz Boas (1912) and Paul Radin (1935). Only much later Malinowski’s student Raymond Firth would turn to study Italians in London (Garigue and Firth 1956).
7 For the historical and socioeconomic background, see Schneider (2000) and the further literature contained therein.
In a further section, I complement this material with some recent interviews carried out in Saladillo, Province of Buenos Aires in November 2014. Whilst during my first fieldwork with Italian immigrants in 1988/89, I was able to still interview people who had come as very young children during the times of mass migration before WWI to Argentina, the recent interviews are in terms of generation from the last that still came by boat to Argentina after WWII.

We find here, albeit in different context, similar preoccupations of sea travel: the transitory nature of the travel, the projection towards the new, the uncertainty of travel itself, including shipwreck, and the material objects associated with travel. Certainly, Malinowski’s insights from the kula ring, his own notes on sea travel in the posthumously published diary, or Lévi-Strauss’s shipboard notes cannot be applied directly to such material, but they nevertheless show the potentials to think through the migrant experience at sea. It remains fascinating to contemplate what material early and mid-20th century anthropologists could have produced on sea travel if they had applied to it their ethnographic sensibilities and the newly invented method of participant observation. Both the surrealist writer and anthropologist Michel Leiris(1980, [1934])

8 in his L’Afrique fantôme, the highly personal account in diary form of his travel with the French Dakar-Djibouti expedition 1931 – 1933 led by anthropologist Marcel Griaule, and Alfred Métraux (who did fieldwork in South America, Haiti and on Easter Island) in his posthumously published diary (1978), commented to some extent on their life on board at the beginning and end of prolonged fieldwork travel. During the research travel, Leiris even dreamt that the whole expedition party found itself on a sinking ship, but the ship turned out to be the building of his Paris flat (Leiris 1980: 86; diary entry for 1 August 1931). At another instance, when the Volpi with which he had arrived in Djibouti had just disappeared out of sight, he planned to write a fantastic ship story, in which the ship would be doomed by desaster (Leiris 1985: 365; diary entry for 11 January 1933).

It is unfortunate that Malinowski did not keep a diary on his two –months return journey to Europe in 1920. 9 However, more examples by other anthropologists could surely be added, and future research would have to establish what possible diary entries, written onboard by early and mid-20th century anthropologists, could yield in terms of ethnographic and theoretical-analytic insight.

A glimpse of these more implicitly analytic possibilities can be garnered again from Lévi-Strauss ‘shipboard notes’ in Tristes Tropiques:

“The passengers were preoccupied neither with our position, nor with the route we had to follow, nor with the nature of the countries which lay out of sight behind the horizon. It seemed to them that if they were shut up in a confined space, for a number of days that had been decided in advance, it was not because distance had to be covered but because they had to expiate the privilege of being carried from one side of the world to the other, without making themselves the smallest exertion. …Nowhere on the ship was there any visible sign

8 I am referencing the German editions of L’Afrique fantôme – to my knowledge; it has not yet been translated into English. For an early appreciation in English, see Clifford (1988, respectively Ch. 6), for a recent appraisal Debaene (2014).

9 Michael W. Young personal communication 12/06/2015, Grażyna Kubica, personal communication 17/06/2015.

10 For instance, Koch-Grünberg (2004: 23 -35) on his way to Brazil on a steamer at the turn of the century, leaves some extensive, and witty descriptions of life onboard.
of the efforts which, somewhere and on someone’s part, were being made. The men who were actually running the ship did not want to see the passengers more than the passengers wanted to see them. (The officers, too, had no wish for the two groups to mingle.) All that we could do was to drag ourselves round the great carcase of the ship; a sailor retouching the paintwork, or a steward in blue overalls swabbing down the first-class corridors – these are much as we saw, or would ever see, in token of the thousands of miles that we were covering.” (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 68)

Fieldwork, ethnography, participant observation – the methodological toolkit of the anthropologist provides something akin to an epistemological window, a potential view on the first-hand experience and meaning of sea travel by immigrants, now only possible through retrospect conversation and material remains of such travel. Life histories, of course, are collected in retrospect and the episodes of sea travel contained within them often refer to a distant past.

In the following, I will briefly review three immigrants accounts of their sea travel. When I collected these in 1988/1989, my main interest had not been in the details of the voyage itself, but in the larger canvas of their life histories, and how they inserted themselves into the process of making it in Argentina, epitomized by the proverbial expression of ‘making it in America’ (hacer la América, in Spanish, or fare l’America in Italian).

Enrique Gerardi, recounted his sea voyage as part of his life history to me in downtown Buenos Aires in 1989. He had become a successful industrialist, but was five years old when he disembarked at Buenos Aires on 26 October, 1906. His father, his mother, a brother and two sisters had accompanied him. One of his mother’s brothers had come to Buenos Aires in 1899.

“I can still remember the crossing. The steamer took the route, Genoa-Dakar-Buenos Aires. In Dakar, I remember the young black kids who swam near the boat where the passengers threw them coins. One of them smashed his head [on the ship]. – When we arrived at Buenos Aires we had to disembark in a small vessel because the port lacked sufficient depth.” (Schneider 2000: 116)

Children diving for coins thrown by passengers, especially in African and Brazilian ports, are reported in many accounts of the time. Looking back at the end of his life, without any sentimentality or nostalgia to what he had observed as a five-year old, it would signify the exact antithesis to his own achievements, making money through hard work, and eventually becoming a successful industrialist, not off the alms thrown by others.

The next account of which I only reproduce here the part relating to the sea voyage is framed by Domenico Donatello telling me the history of his anarchist father rebelling against the moral and political order at the time, and his own later live as a melancholic music lover.

“I embarked in Genoa on a French ship, the Formose of the Lloyd Latino based in Marseilles. And [by chance] I witnessed the sinking of the Principessa Mafalda. 11 We were near the Brazilian coast and eating on the lower deck. When we came up on deck, the

11 The sinking of the Principessa Mafalda on 25 October, 1925, “... resulted in 314 fatalities out of the 1,252 passengers and crew on board the ship. With a casualty rate ten times that of the Andrea Doria, the sinking is the greatest tragedy in Italian shipping and the largest ever in the Southern Hemisphere in peacetime.” (wikipedia, “SS Principessa Mafalda”, accessed 12/06/15)
sun, which had been on one side of the ship was on the other. So I thought that the ship must have turned around. And in fact it had got a message to help the shipwrecked from the *Principessa Mafalda* and we took almost 200 of the shipwrecked to Brazil. I got my suitcase stolen by them. Some came on life boats and some just swam to our ship and they went to sleep in the cabins wherever they could find a place. I did not travel first class, but in the ‘ordinary’ class. I was lucky to have some things stored in the hold. [In Buenos Aires] I disembarked and spent the night in the ‘Immigrant hotel’ (*Hotel de los Inmigrantes*) and then went to the city centre. I could not get in touch with the relatives of my grandfather because they lived far away, up north in the provinces of Tucumán and Salta. ” (Schneider 2000:130)

The following account, full of melodrama and deserving to be reproduced here at some length, I heard from Marta Zanone in Buenos Aires in 1989. Here we find Stefania Devoto, Marta’s mother, liberating herself from oppressive circumstances in early 20th century Genoa. The mother’s ‘escape’ from Genoa in 1925, the meeting of her future husband and founder of the later family business on the ship, and the take-over of responsibilities as director of the company after his death in 1949, are the main themes.

“As time went by, my mother felt suffocated or oppressed in the environment of the family which was too closed for her – the lack of freedom, the impossibility of having male and female friends and going dancing. My uncle did not want her [to go dancing] and that was the custom of the time. … For example, when my mother liked to go dancing on Saturday or Sunday, my uncle waited for her at the exit of the ballroom and dragged her home like a sheep. As the situation got worse, she started thinking about emigrating … Unbeknown to my uncle, she started to fill in immigration forms because she had some relatives living in Argentina. She had some cousins and uncles in Argentina, but I do not know from which side. They lived in the *barrio* of La Boca, where all the *genovesi* live, but I do not know where exactly. Hence she started writing to these relatives. And these relatives answered her that, yes, she should come to Argentina, that here she could start a new life … I often asked my mother: ‘Why, instead of coming here to Argentina, didn’t you go to Milan, to Rome, or to Austria?’ But she thought that her brother would have had ‘long arms’ to hold her back, since she was still a minor of 20 or 21 years old. On the other hand, by putting an *ocean in between* [them], it would be more difficult. Thus, quietly she started to fill in the immigration forms, with the hidden approval of my grandmother and my other uncles and aunts. All knew that she would go, except Giuseppe Lombardo[her brother]. He didn’t know anything. And thus my mother went from Italy with a suitcase as small as this [makes a gesture with her hands] with just a few things, so that my uncle couldn’t find out. Not only did my uncle not find out till the last moment, but he only found out after the ship had departed. It was all part of the plot. I don’t know exactly which year that was, but it is certain that my mother suffered tremendously when she had to say good-bye to her mother and her brothers, without knowing if she would ever see them again. She was all on her own, travelling to such a far-away country. Nowadays it’s different going by plane: one arrives in 12 or 13 hours. Then, it was a month by ship without knowing what she would find over here or what kind of people. My mother just had incredible courage for the times. Nowadays, a young woman
travels rapidly to the U. S., England, France or anywhere. But bear in mind that my mother travelled with very little money, just the little bit she had been able to save. From the moment she decided to emigrate, she started saving money, also with the help of her other brothers and sisters. But she did everything hidden from Giuseppe Lombardo, the application at the Argentine consulate, medical tests etc. There were many bureaucratic prerequisites, but she did everything silently. Even her uncles and aunts in Genoa didn’t know anything. Eventually, she embarked on the ship, which was a real drama, because my grandmother could not even come to say good-bye, because she didn’t want to arouse my uncle’s suspicion. So my mother came of age on the ship. She had her 21st birthday on the ship. When, that night, my uncle came home and found out that my mother had left, you can imagine what a confusion started. He sent a telegram to the captain of the ship – I can’t remember which ship it was -, saying that he should force my mother to disembark in Barcelona [Spain], which was the first port of call. What happened? My mother had thought about everything: she just departed at the right moment, coming of age on the ship. Thus the captain sent another telegram to my uncle [laughing at this stage, Marta Zanone, gave the telegram text in Italian, in what was otherwise a Spanish account]: “La signorina Lombardo non poteva essere sbarcata perché già maggiorenne.” (Miss Lombardo could not be made to disembark, because she is already of age). You understand? So my uncle had to stay [in Genoa] and couldn’t do anything to get my mother back. It seems that God helped my mother, because on the same ship she got to know my father, who was returning from business travel. My father was 11 years older than my mother. On the ship, they got to know each other and it was love at first sight. They liked each other immediately. And my father, who was about 31 or 32 years was already a ‘self-made’ man (hombre hecho), returning from a business visit to Italy. And during the whole crossing, he had the opportunity to get to know my mother, make friends and sympathize with her. So that when the ship reached Buenos Aires, they were already engaged. And he promised to help her, and do everything so that she would feel comfortable here. And when she arrived, she first stayed with her relatives in La Boca. But my father immediately tried to get a better place for her in a more central location. And after a few months they married. I think, it must have been in 1925.” (Schneider 2000: 185 – 187).

Whilst idiosyncratic and singular, these are also archetypical immigrant experiences, each standing for paradigmatic cases of the sea voyage and how it is framed within the life history. In the first account, Enrique Gerardi’s sea voyage stands at the beginning of a life history in Argentina, characterized by hard work, astute business decisions, and later success as industrialist and achievement of relative wealth. It is not the rupture with the old that sea travel signifies here, but the onset of the new, setting already the themes of a later life (the antithesis between children diving for money, and his own work for money as a young boy and adolescent in Argentina). What we get with Enrique Gerardi then is an extremely hermetic, short story of his sea travel encapsulated by its limitations of time (in transit, and in the distant past) and space (the ship on the sea), and his own working life (coins not thrown but earned).
In the second life history of Domenico Donatello, we find a melancholic and nostalgic music lover, son of an anarchist father whose life he was living once more in a kind of quiet rebellion. Here the sea travel marks on the one hand the break-away from the old, a restless lifestyle as a young man taking on jobs in several European countries in the crisis-ridden twenties (Schneider 2000: 127-134), but it also includes, recounted with melancholic sensibilities a singular, and tragic event, the sinking of the Principessa Mafalda. Set in the first half of the life-history, on a deeper level the event points to the vagaries of sea travel, and the implied possibility of failure, or disaster. Sea travel with its imponderability, and of course, shipwreck in particular, are metaphors for a life’s journey; but specifically the contemplation (or even witnessing of shipwreck) from safety has been taken as a metaphor for existence (famously by philosopher Hans Blumenberg, 1996). It is exactly this view from safety which characterizes Domenico Donatello’s description of the event, but also his later withdrawn attitude to life.

In the third account, the sea voyage represents the primordial flight from oppression and beginning of a new life, further heightened by the fairy-tale like encounter on the ship with the future husband. Here the voyage not only is a rupture with a previous life (although much later Stefania Devoto reconciled with her relatives, and they also emigrate to Argentina), but migration becomes a means of empowerment, and the voyage signifies also one great movement towards the new, and a reflection of the single determination of a woman, who later (after her husband’s death) would lead the family business in Buenos Aires.

III

The cruel factuality of passing time and inexorable historical change presents itself immediately when doing ethnographic research now with those having still first-hand experience of transoceanic sea travel to Argentina. Unlike in 1988/89, it is now impossible to find anybody who had arrived before WWI, even as a child, and very few who had come between the wars. The last generation of European immigrants to Argentina is now in their 70s and older. Most of them form part of a last wave of immigration after WWII attracted by the initially good economic fortunes of the Peronist governments (up until 1955). Since then European migration to Argentina has been more sporadic, and by the mid-1970s more people migrated from Argentina to Europe than newcomers were arriving. Sea travel, not fundamentally changed from earlier parts of the 20th century, still characterized this last wave. Some of this immigration was channeled through Peronist immigration programmes, and ships were met at port by officials from a United Nations agency, the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (Schneider 2000: 97, 101). A retired CIM official (who had worked for the agency from 1953 to 1961) described the procedure to me in 1989:

“(...) The Italian immigrant who had family in Italy – and who after World War II might not have seen them for 20 years – came to us. We filled in forms, taking details of the composition of the family, and gave a list of those relatives the immigrant wanted to bring from Italy, to Argentine Immigration Bureau (Dirección de Migraciones). They issued a passenger list and sent the documentation to the CIM headquarters in Geneva and to the Argentine Immigration Offices (DAIE) in Europe. Before embarkation, the immigrants were examined by doctors. When the departure was fixed, we received a list of passengers –
usually a fortnight before arrival—allowing us to give notice to the relative in Buenos Aires. The CIM regulations required that 50% European ships and 50% Argentine ships should be used. The ships from Italy were Eugenio C, Giulio Cesare, Anna C, and Federico C; from France, Bretagne and Provence, and from Spain, Capo San Roque. The Argentines had Salta, Corrientes, Yapeyú, Liberty and Santa Fe. So, we had lists of the immigrants when the ships arrived at the harbour. Wonderful scenes occurred which could make you cry. Many relatives did not recognize each other at first. They looked at each other, saying ‘Dad, is that you...?’ and then the kissing and embracing, hugging so strong that it squeezed the bones together. I had more than 700 records, I had bought them in order to bring them to the port and played songs like ‘The Emigrant’, ‘My Darling’ and ‘How many memories’ (L’emigrante, Caro, Quanti ricordi) to welcome the immigrants. And there were the brides (sposine): the arranged marriages by proxy (matrimoni per procura), where bridegroom and bride had not seen each other before, and also the ‘bogus’ marriages to get permission to enter the country. With the arranged marriages it sometimes happened that the man did not want his bride any more... Also, there were always about 20 girls of lose morals on board whom we had to repatriate. There were crooks on board who had ‘bought’ emigrant passports in order to carry illegal merchandise, because under CIM-regulations the immigrants were allowed to bring their removal goods. More than 900 people came with each ship. The European ships went to Montevideo [Uruguay] first, and the Argentine ships had to anchor at high sea and were then visited by a medical commission. I received more than 150,000 immigrants: Italians, Greeks, Spaniards and later Koreans and Taiwanese. “(Schneider 2000: 101)

From a few accounts I gathered in November 2014 in the small town of Saladillo (Province of Buenos Aires), a diverse range of topics emerge, ranging from the loss of the old, and projections towards the new, framed by discourses of nostalgia and expectant hope (as was characteristic also of earlier generations of immigrants; for which see Schneider 2000: 291-308).

Angela Marano was born in 1945 in the province of Cosenza, Calabria, Southern Italy. Her father went in 1947 to Argentina, worked in the textile factory La Bernalesa in Quilmes, Greater Buenos Aires, and in 1950 had saved enough money to call the rest of the family. Angela Marano was just five years old at the time, but conserves some vivid images and memories of the travel to Argentina. She was accompanied by her siblings, her mother and her paternal grandmother. Yet her maternal grandmother stayed behind, cried, and tore her hair, knowing that she will not see her daughter and grandchildren again. The emigrants then boarded a train, eventually embarking on the Conte Grande (it is not clear whether they embarked in Naples or Genoa). They had booked second class and stayed below deck near the ship’s hold – Angela’s mother virtually for the whole journey because she was seasick. “And I went up, and up and up and saw the women dancing in long dresses – I had never seen anything like this. Because I’m very curious I went upstairs (five or six floors I don’t remember), but my mother got angry, and didn’t want to let me go. …At night, I went as well. It was a dream how the women danced all well dressed with long dresses and wearing jewels. Oh, what a beauty! I will never forget this. At a certain time of the evening my mother sent for me to come back, and I went downstairs again, and so it went every day... Below, there were also the round windows and one could see the fish swimming past. “And did you ever go on the open deck, did you ever see the sea?”, I
asked. “No there they wouldn’t let me, but to go upstairs inside the ship was no problem.”

Lisa Cusiniello, born 17 February 1926 in Apice (Province of Benevento), was called by a sister-in-law to Argentina who told her family that in Argentina one would live very well, and travelled in 1954 on the Belgrano with a group of twelve relatives (including her three children – one more daughter was born in Argentina, father-in-law, and several brothers of her husband). She didn’t want to go because her husband already worked in Switzerland and earned well, and they worked land as sharecroppers.

“I didn’t want to go”, she told me, “We lived well in Italy. My father had worked seven years in the US, and bought land.” She was sea sick during the travel and at the beginning didn’t speak Spanish – “Here they say aceite (oil), the Italians say olio”, her daughter, present at our conversation, jokingly interjected.

“What did you think about Argentina, what expectations did you have? How did you imagine Argentina?” I asked her.

“I don’t know what I thought, I didn’t think anything, I wanted to go back to Italy, and if I could have flown I would have flown back! Leave the family, leave everything, here was nothing!”

Whilst in the previous story the emotional pull and nostalgia for the home left are so strong that Lisa Cusiniello wanted to “fly back” (thus crossing in an inverse movement that ocean once more which Stefania Devoto in section II wanted to put in between herself and an oppressive situation back home), in the following story of Antonia Vertuccio, the ‘staying behind’ remains a vignette of temporariness, halting but not hindering the travel party to emigrate. Eventually it is a doll, in curious alliance with the child staring at it (who would also see its own image in the glass of the shop window), that stays behind – ultimately signifying what is forever lost.

Nélida Cimino (born in Saladillo, Prov. of Buenos Aires, 1946), and in 2014 president of the Italian Association of Saladillo, told me the story of her mother, Antonia Vertuccio (1922 –
2001), from Teggiano (Province of Salerno), who came to Argentina in 1933 on the Principessa Giovanna. “She was only 11 years old and on the journey gets lost in the port of Naples. The father and grandfather start looking for her. The grandfather says, ‘I know where she is’. They had been passing a toy shop and she saw a doll, but it was too expensive and they couldn’t buy it. And they found her eventually in front of a toy shop looking at the doll, which they couldn’t afford. The other thing my mother told me was that they were used to drink home-made wine in Italy – including the youngsters -, but the wine on the ship was so bad that she never drank wine again. Also, she experienced two thunderstorms and the ship almost hit a rock in the Strait of Gibraltar. In Brazil she saw black kids diving for money. The family came from Italy with a big trunk full of hand woven linen (from the dowry), with their initials sown in. ”

Later, when I visited Nélida Cimino at her home, she showed me the enormous trunk which she couldn’t open (since she had lost or misplaced the key), but she also didn’t want to open any longer – “it’s just old heavy linen” she said laconically. She also told me that the family brought machines to make pasta, and a big copper pot which they later sold to a Spaniard. But when they saw the small farms and pigs in the countryside near Saladillo, they wanted to turn back. The grandfather (father of her mother) had been a farmhand ‘swallow’ (peon golondrina, Sp.) and had made the journey seven times.

Annunziata Peppe, born in 1938, in Sasso di Castalda (Potenza) told me:

“I didn’t have children. I married through marriage by proxy (por poder Sp. / per procura It.). Me and my husband went to school together. But he went to Argentina with his parents already in 1957, a brother had gone earlier. “Were you engaged?” I asked her.

“Not engaged, but we knew each other. I followed him in 1966, he had been here already for nine years. He wrote letters, there was no telephone. He ‘called me’ and proposed marriage. He didn’t come for the wedding – my brother took his place in the wedding ceremony, that’s how it is in the marriage by proxy. My brother was the personero (proxy) substituting the bridegroom. My husband also married on the same day, but here in Argentina. And then we had another wedding party here in Argentina when I arrived. “Were you happy to leave?”, I asked.

“Well, I left my mother, my sister, my brother …. Here I had nobody. I left on 23 August 1966. He paid for the voyage. In Naples I took the boat, the Giulio Cesare. I travelled for 17 days with four other ladies in the cabin, on the lower deck. We ate well on the ship, and if you didn’t like one thing, you could order something else. There was a swimming pool – but we didn’t swim; [laughs] there was no custom of that in my hometown. We went to the theatre – but I don’t remember what we saw. … There was a cinema, and a church. We were just idle.”

“What did you think about Argentina?”, I interjected.

“Well, I didn’t think much, whatever would come up … My father had been to Argentina, he had also traveled previously on the Giulio Cesare. In 1980 I made one more trip on the Enrico C. from Genoa, lasting thirteen days. But it wasn’t as nice as the previous one, the ship wasn’t as nice. We went by plane but returned by ship, to bring things, up to 100kg. We brought the machine to make salami, and the one to make tomato sauce (la salsa). The food onboard wasn’t as nice.”

“But did you ever think of returning to Italy?” I asked.

“No, now I have the family here.”
For most immigrants the sea voyage represents transit *par excellence*; it is thus the rite of passage which lies in-between the old and the new. Although there might be a certain danger to overemphasize the transitory nature of this event, it is precisely in the experience of transatlantic sea travel (and its later narration and use in life histories) that the meaning of the in-between, and its heterotopic value\(^\text{12}\) arguably are constituted and must be sought through ethnography and oral history. This is true both for the individual experience, but also, historically speaking, for the socially and culturally constitutive work of large-scale migratory movements (based on economic and political regimes of unequal exchange and forced labour, as for instance in the the slave trade). As is well documented, these migrations resulted in new socio-cultural formations, such as the ‘Black Atlantic’ (Gilroy 1991), new types of political consciousness among seafarers (Linebaugh/Rediker 2000), and new ethnically refracted or hybrid forms of belonging and identity onboard and onland – a kind of ‘rowdy cosmopolitanism’, as Anna Tsing has called it, discernible also in shipboard descriptions contained in the great novels of the time, *Moby Dick* (Melville 1851) foremost (Tsing 2012: 56-61).

Moreover, much like Victor Turner had attested for rituals (Turner 1969), the liminal status of the journey affords a view into another world possible, and constitutes itself a transitory world of temporary rebellion with the downside turned up and vice versa, such as when a five-year old girl from the poor lower deck class glimpses the glamour and amusement of the restaurant and ballroom of the first class, or the bohemian Armenian traveller (see below) finds a congenial group of friends and nurtures his passion for the cinema, or the rebellious young woman getting of age on the boat finds the love of her life which sets her on course for a busi-

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12 For ships as heterotopias, see famously Foucault (1997).
ness in Argentina. In each single case the liminal and transitory experience on the ship (which seemingly follows its own historic time), is somehow suspended from events at the points (or rather ports) of departure and arrival, bearing already the seeds of the futures yet to be realized (or remaining unrealized) by the immigrants in transit.

Thus one of the most interesting themes to appear from the immigrants’ accounts is that of the multiply fractured movements of time. Like stoppages on a railway network, each life history is linked up to the whole of the migration network, but also individually represents a set of both realized and unrealized possibilities of human action. The journey to reach the destination was normally split up between the segments of coming from the home (village) to the port of embarkation (Naples or Genoa, in the case of the Italian immigrants), the sea voyage itself, and disembarkation in Buenos Aires. But other times of expectation and promise were also involved, for example, through marriages by proxy. Migration was often a business of single men, who later would arrange for a marriage with a woman from their home town. These marriages were carried out at a distance, with a wedding ceremony (where a male relative of the bride would accompany her to the altar) carried out first in the home town, and a second one performed in Argentina, after arrival.

The idea of ships as sites with their own temporary order, as ‘nomadic wanderers through time’ as Michael Taussig (2006: 109) calls them, in fact as a temporal state in-between (for the duration of the travel), comes powerfully to the fore in the following account. Hayrabet Alacahan, born 1950, now a historian of cinema, organizer of film festivals and director of the cine/video library and screening space Cineteca Vida in Buenos Aires, grew up in Istanbul of Armenian origin and came to Argentina in 1970 on the MS Augustus from Genoa. When I interviewed him November 2014 in Saladillo where he was attending a film festival, he spoke about his enormous desire for the new and the unknown. He had travelled through Europe, and joined some French young women on the train but then left them and found himself in Genoa, where he bought a ticket for the equivalent of $300 (‘much cheaper than a plane ticket’). Not one day was boring, in his own words the trip ‘awakened in me the curiosity towards the new’ and ‘I wished that the trip wouldn’t end’. 3000 people travelled on the MS Augustus (the sister ship of the Giulio Cesare – both important ocean liners on the South America route after WWII). He deepened his love for the cinema and watched seventeen movies, and most importantly, made friends with his cabin mates, including an Italian and a German, who not only became a close-knit community for the time of the travel but with whom he would stay in touch for many years to come. What for Domenico Donatello (featured in section II) had been the observation of a shipwreck at a distance, for Hayrabet Alacahan became the simulation of the event, when the crew and passengers had to exercise for the case of emergency.

Perhaps the most powerful enigmatic, but also poetic images are those from the accounts which encapsulate the experiences of children: the view of another, mysterious maritime world through the lower deck porthole, the glimpse into an unknown world of amusements and riches when peeping into the first class restaurant and ballroom on the upper deck (which could stand proverbially for the image of an Argentina still to come but never met in this form – as a country of infinite goods, food, and wealth). Add to this the girl lost or left behind, and who

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13 For another extended use of the notion of stoppages (expanding on the artist Marcel Duchamp), see Gell (1998: 246), also more generally, Gell (1992).
standing in front of a shop window staring at a doll, sees inevitably also her own mirror image; or the more austere image of the boy observing the black kids diving for money in Dakar in 1906 (Enrique Gerardi in section II) – then these images – not unlike Walter Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’ (Benjamin 1968: 253) or in film theory, Gilles Deleuze’s ‘crystal image’ (Deleuze 2013: 72) conjure up the complex temporal spatialities or spatial temporalities of future’s potentials and past’s possibilities now unobtainable (just as the contents of the travel trunk now left unopened (Nélida Cimino above) which are intrinsic to these immigrant experiences and their sea voyages.

Just as Malinowski’s sea voyage to the antipodes ushered forth the possibility of fieldwork, and Lévi-Strauss’s first transatlantic travel brought for him the possibility of direct encounters in indigenous South America, so too the immigrants’ voyages, belonging to same age of massive sea travel, implied the multiple possibilities for the realization of future projects, or cutting off a past life (with its unrealized projects).

IV

I opened this essay with a reflection of anthropological researches of sea travel as well as the anthropology as sea travel. It is clear that the ship, and here the transoceanic ocean liner used by immigrants, would lend itself to ethnographic observation, since it is – in spatial terms – a restricted and well circumscribed space similar to the seemingly ‘closed’ tribal, village, and island societies once in favour (and thus constructed as research subjects) by anthropologists for a better part of the 20th century. Whilst we can speculate (and have by way of conjecture and juxtaposition in this paper) about the (unrealized) potentials if early anthropologists, contemporary to the experience of mass migration, had turned their ethnographic eye on the ships, the crew and their passengers, now an ethnography of the immigrants’ sea voyages is only possible in retrospect, as a kind of narratively situated oral history, not as participant observation. What such an ethnography could yield has however been put into relief by ethnographies of contemporary transoceanic seafaring, not of passenger ships, but of modern cargo ships (e.g. Aubert 1965, Weibust 1969, Karjalainen 2007, Sampson 2013). Here the picture emerges on the one hand of a ship as a total institution, closed off and with clear hierarchies of its own (cf. Karjalainen 2007) – a fact that also did not escape Lévi-Strauss (see the first vignette from his ‘seaboard notes’ in section I) –, and on the other hand of transnational and global communities of workers (Markkula 2011, Sampson 2013). Yet it is also a world completely different from that of passengers on previous passenger ships, as kinship and marriage do not play a part for the crew on board, but belong to life on land (Karjalainen 2007). This is evidently different to passengers who can be married already and travel with their spouse, or are unmarried and find a new partner on the ship (as the story told about Stefania Devoto in section II). Women might also travel precisely to join a husband who had emigrated before them, and whom they had married by proxy before departure (Annunciata Peppe in section III). Whereas for the crew the travel on the ship means work, and despite the overall connotation of this work with a certain notion of unbound ‘freedom’ (Karjalainen 2007), for passengers on transoceanic liners

14 I have been inspired to use these concepts here by the writings of Michael Taussig (for Benjamin, for instance, Taussig 2006) and Bruce Kapferer (for Deleuze, for instance Kapferer 2013), two anthropologists who have worked in extenso with the two philosophers.
the travel itself in most cases has no other purpose than to reach the destination (the idleness Annunciata Peppe mentions above), and only in a few instances it is turned into something else which will have a lasting effect on life after ‘transit’, such as Stefania Devoto getting engaged to her future husband, or Hayrabet Alacahan forming a group of close friends, and cultivating his love for the cinema. Whilst periodes of idleness and the purpose to reach a destination also characterize anthropologists’ long-distance sea travel, the prolonged travel times play an important part in forming ideas in relation to research left behind or lying ahead, and the time on board is also used to read and writing first drafts for publication.

For the most part, in the immigrants’ accounts of sea travel relatively little is said further beyond the immediate surroundings of their life on board; the perspective remains centred on the self and its experiences – this is perhaps not unsurprising given the dramatic and existential nature of this type of travel. For almost all of them it is the first time on a large passenger ship, and even though they might later repeat the journey – this first overseas journey, including novel experiences with port cities and their control regimes of migration at disembarkation, remains the decisive turning point, or rupture, in their lives. With the anthropologists, descriptions include more views and reflections of others and things on board, and outside, and beyond the immediate surroundings – it seems that the view widens beyond the immediate self – although with Malinowski in particular, there is also a great deal of psychological self-inspection (cf. Young 2004). Whilst the accounts of the immigrants in retrospect are more like an inverse telescope focusing just on the immediate details of travel, for Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss, other people, the landscapes, and the sky, also come into view.

This paper has been somewhat experimental in that it used early and mid-20th century accounts by anthropologists of their sea travel to contemplate, like an epistemological window which remains impossible in its empirical historical application but employed here as a heuristic device, a retrospective ethnography of immigrants on passenger ships in the age of mass migration. Whilst such an ‘ethnography’ remains an impossibility of the past, the potential ethnographic eye (Leiris 1930, Grimshaw 2001) or gaze these anthropological accounts from the age of high modernity entail, could become an important epistemological tool ‘on board’ when juxtaposed with immigrants’ empirical testimony, as indeed for research with contemporary seafarers and maritime immigrants.

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