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Rüegg, Jonas

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Lüttge, Felix: *Auf den Spuren des Wals. Geographien des Lebens im 19. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2020. ISBN: 978-3-8353-3680-3; 279 S.

Rezensiert von: Jonas Rüegg, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University

The emergence of pelagic whaling out of British and New England harbors in the mid-eighteenth century ushered in a new chapter in the relationship between humans and the open ocean. Whalers had exploited coastal whaling grounds for centuries, but it was not until the 1760s that whale blubber could be tried out at sea. This innovation dramatically expanded the scope of voyages, rendering the vessels independent of try pots on shore. No longer was the sea a mere place of passing, an empty space in-between: the industrial mode of pelagic whaling turned the ocean into a place of resource extraction. The frequency and the sheer scale at which Euro-American seafarers plied first the Atlantic and, later, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, fundamentally altered the way humans regarded the offshore and its resources. Felix Lüttge's *Auf den Spuren des Wals* analyzes this process of exploring, inventorying, and categorizing that defined the relationship between whaling and oceanography in the nineteenth century.

Felix Lüttge argues that the pursuit of whales was both condition and end to the inquiries around which oceanography constituted itself as a scientific field, as only the whaling industry with its bureaucratic culture of record-keeping made it possible to collect data at a sufficient scale for the compilation of scientific „Whale Charts of the World“, sensitive to seasonal change. The effort of „tracing down the whale“ created a new, collective empiricism that fully relied on the „nomadic knowledge“ of whalers who knew to navigate uncharted seas. Essential formats of record-keeping – immutable mobiles, as Bruno Latour would say – were standardized and implemented in this process. The state-led endeavor of incorporating thousands of punctual observations into a big picture of currents, winds, and whale habitats was an equally formative process for America's naval

ambitions, as it expanded the frontier into the maritime space (p. 47). The protection of American whalers also became a pretext for the expansion of naval power to the Pacific. Yet, more than a history of whaling per se, Lüttge's *Auf den Spuren des Wals* is a book interested in the mediality of knowledge, and, accordingly, it pays close attention to the forms of record-keeping, mapping, and data transfer as they evolved in the mapping of the open oceans.

Auf den Spuren des Wals seizes on a wave of historical scholarship that has, in recent years, discovered the ocean as a catalyst of change in various settings and qualities. Accordingly well-known are some of the episodes at the core of this book, such as the role of „intelligent whalemens“ in the discovery of the Gulf Stream, or the way Matthew Fontaine Maury, the Superintendent at the U.S. Naval Observatory who created a network of data collection from private voyages. Detailed discussion is given of charts, tables and statistics that connect the records of hundreds of voyages in the manner of a „search engine“ (p. 138) that allowed participating whalers to structure their subsequent voyages according to an integrated but speculative geography of the ocean. I enjoyed learning about Maury's exchange with Alexander von Humboldt, whose thematic cartography, as Lüttge claims, inspired the prominent oceanographer's way of charting the ocean to such degree that „one may conclude that state-sponsored science in the United States only emerged at all as Humboldtian science“ (p. 92). Here, it is good to remember that Maury, stigmatized without a college degree, was not accepted readily in the scientific community at his time, among other things due to the bigot undertone that pervaded his rhetoric of manifest destiny, and because of his very decision to involve the broader public into the production of knowledge. Though visionary, the Superintendent at the U.S. Naval Observatory who later abandoned his office to join the Confederacy remains an ambivalent figure.

Rich in interesting observations and episodes that illuminate the way oceanography in the nineteenth century was intimately tied to geopolitical tensions, *Auf den Spuren des Wals* gives voice to a great number

of archival sources, and it does not treat theory lightly. The book demonstrates how in the gaze of academic oceanography that compiled and analyzed whale sightings and whale killings remotely, cetaceans became epistemic objects (p. 231). For example, they served as evidence for the ostensible existence of a Northwest Passage – the oceanographic whale in Lüttge’s terminology – or to estimate the probability of encountering whales – the stochastic whale „that, seen or unseen, caught or uncaught, expressed nothing else than the probability of running into whales in a specific region in a specific season“ (p. 232). For other exponents in the chain of knowledge production, whales naturally carried a different meaning, such as the inherently monetized whale-for-the-hunter or the sensational whale-in-the-tank, exhibited to the broader public on Broadway in New York.

American vessels represented the overwhelming majority of pelagic whale ships active in the nineteenth century, making for as many as 722 out of 900 vessels in 1847 (p. 28). Accordingly, the history of American whaling is extraordinarily well documented. Given the industry’s significance in the United States’ emergence as a naval power – whale ships were drafted for war both in 1812 and in the Civil War – and in the development of science and capitalism, there is major academic interest in its analysis. Taking it from here, I see great potential in globalizing this story by looking beyond the nation, and beyond the Anglophone world. Hence, I wonder why Lüttge, writing in German and citing in English and French, chose to remain uniquely focused on the relatively well-researched American case. Pelagic whaling was a global industry throughout its history, both since know-how migrated internationally with the emergence of new whaling metropolises, and because whalers incorporated labor from the remote regions they plied. By no means is this an exclusively Atlantic story, as for example Japan’s efforts to appropriate foreign whaling technology and know-how in the mid-nineteenth century illustrates. Just because Lüttge shows so convincingly that the whaler’s experience on the (whale) ground was constitutive for the impe-

rial project of mapping the ocean, the actions of the numerous Native Americans, Africans, and Pacific Islanders among the crews should deserve more attention. If told as a story of captains, bureaucrats, and scientists alone, history of science risks to reproduce ethnocentric narratives of modernity.

One way to contextualize the global network of data production that distinguishes „modern“ science from alternative cultures of knowledge is to embed it in its diverse cultural context by examining frontier encounters with actors such as Japanese, Aleut or Inuit whalers, an approach explored productively by Ryan Tucker Jones and Bathsheba Demuth.¹ The author may further find it productive to engage in a conversation with recent works on whaling and fisheries by environmental historians such as Carmel Finley or Jakobina Arch who have written about the way knowledge and the interests of pelagic industries co-evolved in environmental contexts beyond the Western world.² Embedding intellectual history in its environmental context can reveal less obvious, yet central drivers of scientific innovation: how did the changed behavior of whales undermine Maury’s representation of the ocean as a timeless place? How did declining whale grounds inspire technological innovation that, again, guided the scientific gaze to different sites in the ocean? Asking such questions would further underline the significance of the processes at the center of Lüttge’s work.

These points of conceptual critique are, of course, meant as an encouragement for future explorations. *Auf den Spuren des Wals* is a diligently researched and attractively presented book. It is well-written and full of interesting detail. I recommend the read espe-

¹Ryan Tucker Jones, Running into Whales. The History of the North Pacific from below the Waves, in: The American Historical Review 118,2 (2013), pp. 349–77; Bathsheba Demuth, Floating Coast. An Environmental History of the Bering Strait, New York 2019. Also see: Bathsheba Demuth, The Walrus and the Bureaucrat. Energy, Ecology, and Making the State in the Russian and American Arctic, 1870–1950, in: The American Historical Review 124,2 (2019), pp. 483–510.

²Carmel Finley, All the Fish in the Sea. Maximum Sustainable Yield and the Failure of Fisheries Management, Chicago / London 2011; Jakobina K. Arch, Bringing Whales Ashore. Oceans and the Environment of Early Modern Japan, Seattle 2018.

cially to those interested in the history of science and oceanography, as well as the history of the United States as a naval power.

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