

## Joint Annual Conference of GAPS and IACPL

30 May-2 June 2019, University of Bremen

### Organisers:

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### Postcolonial Oceans – Contradictions and Heterogeneities in the Epistemes of Salt Water

Postcolonial studies have a vested interest in embodied and discursive, social and political, historical and ecological dimensions of oceans. They foreground histories of colonization, imperial wars, the dispossession of territories, enslavement of people, and circulation of goods and ideas, in their entanglements with contemporary postcolonial societies, substantially shaping decolonial knowledge production, postcolonial literatures and academic discourses until today. In his interview on the third space, Homi Bhabha (1990) has pinpointed the inherent contradiction in the genesis of Western modernity: the progressive development of Western societies, individuals and thought traditions according to ideas and values that were monumentalized as the “Enlightenment” on the one hand, and the history of the West as despotic power pursuing various forms of colonial aggression and possession, on the other. Walter D. Mignolo (2000) and Paul Gilroy (1993) have likewise defined histories of colonization and enslavement as Western modernity’s well-concealed darker side. Studies of oceans and coasts have generated a variety of heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory academic and public discourses from a range of different disciplinary perspectives, including postcolonial studies, the sociology of knowledge, anthropology, literary studies, linguistics and social studies of science and technology. A more systematic perspective on the relations between colonialism, postcolonialism, oceans and lands, rejecting and/or complementing one-sided terrestrial perspectives, emerged only gradually. Rupert Emerson, for instance, defines colonialism as “imposition of white rule on alien peoples inhabiting lands separated by salt water” (1969, 3), understanding salt water – in line with widespread Western ideas of seas and oceans – as *separating* lands, cultures, people and ideas. In contrast, Gísli Pálsson (1991, xvii) argues that different and isolated worlds were connected by colonial sea voyages into a “global but polarized network of power-relations”. Epli Hau’ofa (1994; 2008), working from a perspective grown in a marine epistemology, understands diverse Pacific islands, cultures and environments as a network, not separated but *linked* by the ocean – a “sea of islands”. Extending this idea, Édouard Glissant’s (1997) “archipelagic thinking” shifts understanding the entire world as a connected archipelago, an epistemic shift that is a counterpoint to insular thinking and allows registering the heterogeneities and myriad entanglements and creolization processes in our globalizing world. Early anthropology saw the sea as “atheoretical”, while it became an explicit category of study in environmental history (Gillis 2004, 2011; Bolster 2012; Kehrt/Torma 2014), in geography (Steinberg 2001; Peters 2014, 2015) and maritime anthropology (Astuti 1995; Helmreich 2011). In the construed nature/culture divide, water appears as natural form and “uncontainable flux” as opposed to culture imagined as “land-based idiom”, or it is perceived as materiality to channel (nature) as opposed to being a medium of pleasure, sustenance, travel and disaster

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<sup>2</sup> Research network “Worlds of Contradiction”

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<sup>5</sup> Research network “Fiction Meets Science”

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(culture) (Helmreich 2011). The nature/culture divide implicates water as one domain “open to control and colonization by the other” (Strathern 1980). Critical maritime history grappled with the opposition between a fully historicized land vs. a supposedly atemporal, “ahistorical” sea that is “outside and beyond history” and researches oceans as polymorphous and transnational contact zones (Klein/Mackenthun, eds. 2004). Indigenous seascape epistemologies are often approaches “to knowing through a visual, spiritual, intellectual, and embodied literacy of the *‘āina* (land) and *kai* (sea)””, explicitly stressing the nexus between sea and land, and knowing the ocean, wind, and land as interconnected system (Ingersoll 2016). Colonial exploration, colonization and (forced) migration via oceans have created cultural, linguistic and epistemic contact zones where transcultural processes, creole and pidgin languages, and pluriversal knowledges and narratives emerged, however implicated in a hierarchical power matrix (Pratt 1992; Warnke/Stolz/Schmidt-Brücken 2016). The sea prominently features in colonial literatures as both facilitating sea voyages and sustaining colonial myth-making (e.g. Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe), whereas in postcolonial literatures it often appears as lethal force enabling colonization and enslavement (e.g. Fred D’Aguiar, George Lamming) or life-giving force and as life itself, integrating all elements and beings (e.g. Eden Robinson, Patricia Grace, Linda Hogan, Alexis Wright). Contradictory and heterogeneous views and ideas of the ocean are commonplace, while knowledge production on and with oceans and saltwater appear to be under-researched through multidisciplinary scholarship. We want to extend the study of oceans and salt water as “theory machine”, an “object that stimulates theoretical formulation” (Galison 2003), and research saltwater knowledge systems, knowledge production and narratives from various epistemological, geographical, cultural and disciplinary perspectives. We are particularly interested in:

- imaginaries of the seas and oceans in various discourse formations as well as colonial, postcolonial and decolonial genealogies of ocean, coastal and marine spaces;
- contradictory and heterogeneous concepts of marine spaces; likewise pluriversal ocean and coast-related epistemologies;
- entangled colonial histories of oceans with regard to the Black, Red and White Atlantic, the Black Pacific, and early non-Western cross-ocean contacts; the circulation of ideas and goods and their role in shaping ocean-related epistemes;
- salt water spheres as zones of epistemic and cultural contact, neo- and postcolonial communicative practices and linguistic smoothness;
- linguistic overlaps and language contact, the universalist spread of colonial languages and their status in contact zones, the threat of local languages;
- the role of European Atlantic port cities (e.g. Bremen, London, Rotterdam, Antwerp) in colonial histories of oceans and the role of port cities outside Europe (e.g. Dakar, Cape Town, Dubai City, Hong Kong) in world trade and global relations, incl. changing discourses constituting such port cities;
- the ship as vessel enabling and as metaphor for colonization, enslavement, migration, global trade, scientific exploration and various forms of harvesting marine and ocean floor resources;
- ecological and resource-related aspects of oceans such as rising sea levels, hurricanes, earthquakes, overfishing, resource extraction, and ocean pollution;
- symbolic oceans in colonial literary and non-literary texts and postcolonial constructions of oceans and salt water epistemologies in literature, theatre, film, electronic and other media.

### Keynote Speakers:

Anne Collett (U Wollongong)  
 Robbie Shilliam (Johns Hopkins U)  
 Anne Storch (U Cologne)

Karin Amimoto Ingersoll (U Hawai'i) invited, tbc  
 Rita Astuti (LSE London) invited, tbc  
 Nicholas Faraclas (U Puerto Rico) invited, tbc

Please send abstracts outlining your theoretical approach, subject of study and argument (max 400 words) and short bios (max 150 words) to [woc@uni-bremen.de](mailto:woc@uni-bremen.de) by **20 Nov 2018**.