Ship Matters: The Changing Politics and Poetics of Care in Maritime Labor

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Beginning with the life story of one particular ship, this paper tells a larger story of continuity and change in the maritime industry, in particular the shifting politics of maritime labor and the changing materialities of ships.

Based on several months of ethnographic research onboard contemporary cargo ships and with maritime institutions ashore, the paper shows how these changing politics and materialities intersect with the social and intercultural relations onboard ships, and with the seafarers’ physical and affective engagement with their vessels. While crewmembers of different nationalities share the same confined workspaces and living quarters, they do so under highly unequal employment conditions, which in turn shapes their relationship to the ship and to their shipmates.

I propose to look at these processes through a framework of “care”. I conclude by showing what happens at the “end of care”, as failures to fulfill expectations of care create rifts in the social body and in the material body of the ship alike, sometimes even ending with the material “death” of ships and with the breaking down of crews’ social relations.

Johanna Markkula is a dissertation writer in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. Her research is an ethnographic study of the global maritime world and of maritime workers, such as seafarers and coastguards, who make and shape this world through their everyday practices and movements. More broadly, her research engages with issues of globalization, global governance, transnational labor and intercultural relations in the context of the maritime world and work at sea. Johanna has carried out eighteen months of ethnographic research, including six months with the Philippine Coast Guard; six months on cargo ships with multinational crews; and six months with key maritime organizations and institutions ashore.

MONDAY
May 14th, 2018, 12:30 - 1:20pm
Building 50, 51A