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Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* and the Ephemeral Promise of Transnational Community

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In the 1920s and 1930s, transatlantic steam travel was at its fastest and most accessible. During voyages lasting mere days or weeks, shipping lines used onboard aesthetics and ephemera to construct community, attempting to replace national belonging with transnational solidarity. But could this attempt to transcend passengers' national loyalties counter the rising international tensions of the period? Katherine Anne Porter's novel *Ship of Fools*—published in 1962 but written largely after a 1931 trip—suggests it could not.

This article considers how Porter's inclusion of the ephemera of Interwar steamship travel—menus, seating cards, cabin cards, tickets, etc.—allows her to represent transnational solidarity as, at best, temporary and, at worst, illusory. It argues that Porter uses the intrinsically flimsy foundations of transnational solidarity aboard the ocean liner to indicate that international cooperation in the era will not succeed. Alongside this, this paper asserts that Porter's treatment of shipboard community runs counter to existing narratives about the exceptionalism of Interwar shipboard experience, and that the novel reveals something new about the ways fiction can preserve the temporality of ephemera differently than the archive can.

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Introduction

Newly embarked ocean liner passengers in Sinclair Lewis's 1929 novel *Dodsworth* comedically survey 'their fellow-citizens in this brave village amid the desert of waters' (Lewis, 1929: 37). This affiliative language also appears in 1934's *Tender is the Night*, when F. Scott Fitzgerald calls the liner's denizens 'citizen[s] of a commonwealth smaller than Andorra' (Fitzgerald, 1963 [1934]: 205). Both novels emphasize the attachments formed aboard ships when transatlantic passenger travel was at its peak in popularity and ease. Ensconced at sea, travelers were thrust into community with people from around the world. In this new milieu, as Fitzgerald and Lewis point out, they were encouraged to temporarily replace national belonging with shipboard solidarity. The finite nature of these crossings meant that these bonds must be swiftly established and might dissipate just as quickly upon disembarkation.

In Lisa Gitelman's book about the power of quotidian documents, she writes that 'documents are integral to...the social order that [people] inhabit' (Gitelman, 2014: 5), and shipboard materials clearly establish the parameters of a short-lived society.[1] One means of inviting passengers into community with their fellows lay in placing the name of the line or liner prominently throughout the ship. It was engraved on glassware and painted on dishes; woven into curtains; carved into furniture; embroidered on ribbons; stamped on playing cards, napkins, stationery, and more. This repetition provided passengers with visual reminders of their new, albeit temporary, affiliation.[2] The record of this shipboard solidarity persists in two ways—in the discussions of transient belonging that appear in *Tender is the Night, Dodsworth,* and other novels of the era, and in the persistent travel ephemera that can be read in parallel with the novels' narrative accounts.

Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* (1962) engages both these records: narrating shipboard community, while incorporating shipboard ephemera.[3] The only long novel by the Pulitzer prize winning American author best known for her short stories, *Ship of Fools* is set aboard a steamship in 1931. The fictional S.S. *Vera*, sailing from Mexico to Germany, preserves in language the documents designed to become the detritus of travel—referencing tickets, seating cards, cabin cards, shipboard newspapers, lunch and dinner menus, and other ephemeral materials. Like Fitzgerald and Lewis, Porter

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[1] I take Susan Briet's invitation to define the 'document' capaciously to include a variety of shipboard materials (see Briet, 2006).

[2] For examples of this, see the exhibition book from the V&A museum's 2017 exhibit 'Designing Liners' (Finamore and Wood, 2017).

[3] I opt for the capacious definition of ephemera that defines this loose term as 'Materials, usually printed documents, created for a specific, limited purpose' (Altermatt and Hilton, 2012: 173).

recognizes the steamship as a contained society, where the passengers will adopt new commitments: a 'temporary haven' as she describes it on the opening page (1962: 3). Like Gitelman, Porter suggests that documents create a social order—the book's beginning tells us the *Vera*'s passengers hoped their 'papers might establish for [them] at least a momentary immunity from the hazards of [their] enterprise' (1962: 9). Yet, ultimately, in Porter's book, documents betray their bearers, and are as likely to cause division as they are to build solidarity. Set during a period of transnational promise but also increasing national tensions, Porter uses the ship as a space to stage the failure of the international project.

By exploring how the community ephemera creates is, at best, temporary and, at worst, illusory, I will argue that Porter uses the intrinsically flimsy foundations of transnational solidarity aboard the ocean liner to indicate that international cooperation in the era will not succeed. This reading of the book carries two implications beyond Interwar geopolitics. First, Porter's treatment of shipboard community runs counter to existing—and persisting—narratives which view shipboard time and space as a state of exception from everyday life. And second, the novel reveals something about the ways fiction can preserve ephemera differently than the archive can, maintaining not only its material aspects but its temporal nature as well.

'Embarkation': Aboard the ship of fools

Ship of Fools charts the voyage of the North German Lloyd ship the S.S. *Vera* from Veracruz, Mexico to Bremerhaven, Germany in 1931. The fictional *Vera* is 'none of those specialized carriers of rare goods, much less an elegant pleasure craft', instead it is 'a mixed freighter and passenger ship, very steady and broad-bottomed in her style' (Porter, 1962: 19). The crossing takes the ship four weeks, rather than the week-long journey other liners of the era were capable of. The book hews closely to Porter's first crossing of the Atlantic, when she made the same journey on the homophonous S.S. *Werra* with her third husband-to-be, Eugene Pressly. Much of the novel emerges verbatim from a twenty-page, single-spaced letter Porter wrote to her friend Caroline Gordon over the course of her journey.[4] This letter describes nearly all of the book's characters, save the trio who have been identified as stand-ins for Porter herself. These fictional surrogates include the young American artist Jenny Brown, who is traveling with her romantic partner, David; the older American woman, Mrs. Treadwell, whose biography overlaps with Porter's; and Frau Rittersdorf, who spends the whole voyage

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[4] For more on the genesis of the novel, and its relationship to Porter's letter to Gordon, see Givner.

writing down every minute aspect of the journey in her notebooks, generating enough content, one imagines, to later produce a novel (Givner, 1977: 20–21).

First published in 1962, several pieces of *Ship of Fools* appeared decades earlier in magazines including the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Mademoiselle*. Porter dates the book on its closing page to both 1941 and 1961, although, considering that much of it originated in the observations she addressed to Gordon while aboard the *Werra*, it seems appropriate to date it to 1931 as well.[5] Taking place almost entirely on a German liner in the period when 'the Nazis dramatically moved in from the nationalist margins,' the book 'depict[s] the approach of the Third Reich' (Kuhn, 2015: 196, 187). Porter called it a 'parable of political action' (quoted in Kuhn, 2015: 187), but this may over-complicate its subject matter—global politics are explicit on the page, the anti-Semitism and national bigotry of its German characters not allegorical but literal.

Although Dorothy Parker enthusiastically closed an early review of the novel by saying 'My God, here is a book' (Parker, 1962: 129), and it was 1962's number one best seller in the United States, its reviews were largely negative—with particular emphasis on Porter's misanthropy and the book's full complement of detestable characters.[6] Alexandra Subramanian has written about the book's reception, with Thomas Austenfeld glossing her conclusion that the characters were so dislikable they 'nauseated not only Porter's readers but led to a crisis inside the publishing house of Little, Brown' (Austenfeld, 2015: 11). This widespread distaste for the book may explain why there is relatively little scholarship on the only long novel from this major American writer.

It has been common for existing scholarship to point out that from the vantage point of its 1962 publication it was easy for Porter to describe the German National Socialist party's rise as inevitable.[7] But the book nuances hindsight with Porter's first-hand familiarity with German sentiment in the early 1930s and reading the triumph of German nationalism as inevitable oversimplifies international relations in the book. At first glance, there is every expectation that if transnational solidarity were possible for the steamship's passengers—or anyone else—the *Vera* would be a site of it. David—the stand-in for Porter's then-boyfriend Pressly—describes the ship's passengers as uncommonly international, 'roaming around foreign countries, changing money and language at every border' (Porter, 1962: 41). The ship's passengers appear to be inherently cosmopolitan figures: women and men who work in international sales,

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[5] Tracing this book's creative genesis is the most common topic for critical studies of the work, from its publication through today. This takes its most comprehensive form in a 2015 piece from Beth Alvarez (Alvarez, 2015).

[6] For more on the book's reception see Austenfeld, 2015: 2–3.

[7] Kuhn, 2015 counters this frequent dismissal of Porter's geopolitical expertise.

run hotels for international clients, and operate international newsstands. The German-Jewish Julius Löwenthal is a 'manufacturer and salesman of Catholic Church furnishings' (Porter, 1962: xi) who travels between Europe and North America twice a year; and Herr Siegfried Rieber and Fräulein Lizzi Spöckenkieker, described as the book's 'proto-Nazi[s]' (Givner, 1977: 196), are regular transatlantic commuters for their work in the ladies' garment business. There is a German oil executive who works for a Mexican company; a Texan chemical engineer *en route* to Berlin; and the wife of the attaché of the Mexican Legation in Paris. These middle-class passengers are joined by a Spanish Zarzuela troupe who make their living performing—and plying a side trade as pimps and prostitutes—around the world. The *Vera*'s steerage passengers—who are numbered but never named in the novel—are Spanish fieldworkers returning to their homeland after the collapse of the Cuban sugar industry. All of these figures are representative of the world of globalized labor: citizens who are accustomed to engaging with those from other nations in shared enterprise.

Beyond the characters' international origins, the novel's multilingual epigraphs suggest a cosmopolitan—if Eurocentric—atmosphere. The book is divided into three parts, each opening with a quotation. Part I, 'Embarkation,' comes from Baudelaire, in French—'Quand partons-nous vers le bonheur?'; Part II, 'High Sea,' in German from Brahms—'Kein Hause, Keine Heimat…'; and Part III, 'The Harbors,' begins with an English translation of a line from the Hebrew bible: 'For here have we no continuing city…' (Porter, 1962: ix).

And yet, despite this early invocation of the multinational and the polyglottal, the ship's passengers seem to be retreating from failed experiments with transnationalism, thereby admitting that the promise of a globalized world was fleeting. Middle-class passengers including the Huttens, Baumgartners, Lutzs and Herr Glocken are all abandoning their lives in Mexico to return to European homelands; the ship's genteel prisoner, the Spanish La Condesa, is being deported from Cuba back to Tenerife; and, below deck, the fieldworkers are being sent back to Spain after working abroad. The book's German characters, in particular, appear to be doubling down on their nationalism. As the captain explains in a letter accompanying a bottle of wine he sends La Condesa, 'we Germans no longer use the word "champagne" nor indeed, drink that rather pretentious wine any longer. So I am happy to say this modest offering is not French, but only good Schaumwein from an honest German vineyard' (Porter, 1962: 234).

This refusal to embrace the potential of a globalized world is established before the novel's characters are even introduced: the book opens in Veracruz, a port city, where

residents might express cosmopolitan enjoyment of their access to international commerce. Yet everyone is locally retrenched, eager to be rid of international visitors as quickly as possible. The citizens of Veracruz are described as sharing a 'methodical brutality...towards the travelers who must pass through their hands,' 'wish[ing] only to see the last of them' (Porter, 1962: 3). The book's underlying pessimism, which turned off so many readers and critics, pervades not only the passengers' interactions, but the whole idea of international cooperation. *Ship of Fools* appears to demonstrate, from the vantage point of its 1962 publication, that although the early 1930s was rife with the possibility for global cooperation, this promise was temporary: nationalism and self-interest would prove more powerful forces.

'High Sea': The Interwar Ocean Liner

In a headnote to the novel, Porter writes that 'I took for my own this simple almost universal image of the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity' (1962: vii). Despite this emphasis on a governing allegory, the ship Porter describes is not merely a figurative one—it is historically situated in the global shipping industry of the Interwar period. Porter relies on this historical context to explore the potential and promise of transnationalism in the book. Ships were integral to international exchange in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and major technological shifts made overseas travel in this period faster, more comfortable and more affordable than ever before. By the early 20th century, ocean liners could weigh up to 50,000 tons, and might carry thousands of passengers coming from and going to locations around the globe.[8]

The ship appears to be a space where the official narrative of national belonging might—temporarily—weaken, to be replaced by other forms of shared commitment. Shipboard life for sailors has been described as a 'forcing house of internationalism' (Rediker and Linebaugh, 2000: 151), frequently drawing seamen from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.[9] While passenger travel represented less diversity than maritime labor, it still allowed for more international contacts than most passengers experienced in daily life. Ships sailed on international waters, carried a collection of goods and passengers from around the world, and presented an easy opportunity for passengers to form social bonds across national boundaries. An August 1933 issue of the French Line's onboard newspaper *L'Atlantique* included images of dignitaries from Mexico, America, France, Russia, and Siam who had recently traveled on the line's ships

[8] For more on the size and scale of early 20th century liners see Roka, 2013.
[9] For more on literature, and globalized maritime labor see Feinsod and Rizzuto (Feinsod, 2015; Rizzuto, 2019).

(*L'Atlantique* August, 1933: 2–4), and an issue of the onboard magazine from earlier that summer told readers that passengers from Russia, Poland, Belgium, New Zealand, Japan and the US had been 'seen on the deck' in the preceding days (*L'Atlantique* July, 1933: 4).

The amenities on board liners facilitated transnational exchange. Liners stocked books in many languages in their libraries.[10] They housed transnational businesses such as the Ritz restaurant, founded in France by a Swiss hotelier and operating aboard German ships (Hammill, 2020: 6). Ships served international menus. For instance, the celebratory 'Farewell Dinner' on the British Cunard Line's R.M.S. *Ausonia* in 1935—sailing between the UK and North America—offered French 'Potage Solferno' and 'Pate de Foie Gras; British 'Melton Mowbray Pie,' and 'Leicester Brawn'; American inventions including 'Prune Juice' and 'Thousand Isles' dressing; and something described as a 'Salade Japonnaise' (R.M.S. *Ausonia*, 1935).

The intimations of transnational identity aboard ocean liners was part of a broader interwar assumption that cooperation across borders should be possible. This was a period marked by the rise of the term 'internationalism,' which, 'in its most optimistic usages...was conceived as overcoming the narrowness of national affiliations with broader views of the common destiny of the human race' (Cuddy-Keane, Hammond and Peat, 2014: 130–131). After the First World War, talks were underway for a 'liberal international order' that emphasized international cooperation and cosmopolitan belonging (Hankins, 2019), and the League of Nations was founded in 1920, with the declared intent 'to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security' (Cuddy-Keane, Hammond, and Peat, 2014: 130).

Some of Porter's fellow writers in the period embraced the possibility of transnational solidarity. Claude McKay, Porter's peripatetic peer, famously explicated his national commitments by saying 'I was born in the West Indies and lived in the United States and [...] I was an American, even though I was a British subject, but I preferred to think of myself as an internationalist' (1939: 300). H.G. Wells 'argued for a world state rooted in a fundamental cosmopolitanism' (Chambers, 2020), claiming in 1928 the League of Nations had not gone far enough in pushing global citizens to imagine a form of belonging beyond the nation state.

However, despite the sentiment that it was both possible and desirable to develop affiliations outside one's country of citizenship, the international projects of the period often explicitly reinforced the power of nations. The League of Nations and the Liberal

[10] For more on the shipboard library see Liebich, 2019.

World Order—the system of international cooperation imagined in the wake of the World Wars—were dependent on the ongoing existence of the nation state (Hankins, 2019: 6), strengthening countries' individual self-conceptions even as they tried to think beyond them.

Steamships were firmly imbricated in this tension between transnational possibility and international interests, as historian James Fortuna makes clear when he describes the ships of Fascist Italy as connecting a 'self-interested new regime to the outside world' (2022: 164). Although they sailed international routes, ships were often constructed as manifestations of national strength, built 'to surpass those of rival countries' (Coons and Varias, 2003: 140). Many lines included their national origin in their name, including the French, United States, and North German Lloyd lines: asserting the power of the nation far beyond its borders.[11] National aesthetics were often a core component of ships' design. Historian Melvin Maddocks notes that 'German liners struggled heroically to emulate Wagnerian castles, and English liners fell into the dark-wood-and-leather habits of a London club, the French conjured up visions of a magnificent chateau on the Loire' (1978: 97). Ships' aesthetic reflection of their national origins are taken for granted when Evelyn Waugh, a frequent ocean liner passenger, assures readers that the Norwegian *Stella Polaris*, 'as one would expect from her origin…exhibited a Nordic and almost glacial cleanliness' (1947: 17).

Porter is both aware of the promise for transnational cooperation shipboard space provided, and keen to emphasize the eventual failure of the project of internationalism, a fact recognized by scholar Anne-Marie Scholz when she writes that Porter uses 'transnational interactions on board a ship travelling to Germany to shed light on the most sinister dimensions of nationalism and prejudice' (2015: 150). As soon as the possibility of global cooperation is intimated in the novel it is undercut. Although the passengers are intimately imbricated in a globalized world, Porter's ship is a distinctly national space. This is evident when the German Lizzi Spöckenkieker boards the *Vera* and exclaims, 'with what delight I find myself on this good German boat going back to Hanover again' (Porter, 1962: 22). It is clear that Lizzi, and the other Germans on board, consider the *Vera* a floating piece of national territory. To Lizzi's eyes, the passengers 'were all going home, home at last, and in this ship they had in common for the first time the feeling that they had already set foot upon a mystic Fatherland' (Porter, 1962: 40). The *Vera*'s very infrastructure is marked as German: Jenny claims she is 'boning up on German from the water taps and all the little signs about', and oil executive Wilhelm Freytag puts his laundry in a bag 'with the word WÄSCHE embroidered [on it]' (Porter,

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[11] For more on the nationalist naming conventions of liners see Tent, 2023.

1962: 41, 411).[12] For Porter's passengers, their time aboard the *Vera* provides not a cosmopolitan interlude but a reminder of national tensions.

An Ephemeral Promise

These manifestations of German identity in the ship's design are an example of ephemera constructing onboard identity. Gitelman describes documents as 'integral to the ways people think and live,' emphasizing their 'know-show function', highlighting that people use documents both to understand their own standing within a social order, and demonstrate it to others (2014: 4). On board the *Vera*, as on historical ships, documents are essential in determining the parameters of a newly constituted society. With passengers no longer among a familiar group of friends, family, and neighbors, shipboard ephemera helped outline new hierarchies and detailed when and where they ate, slept, and socialized during their days or weeks aboard. These materials created community where none had previously been.

Ships relied on a dense ecology of ephemera to build this temporary community. Prior to departure, there were brochures, rate cards, deck plans, sailing cards, lading lists, gangway cards, and baggage stickers. Once the ship had sailed, there were passenger lists, seating cards, activity programs, daily menus, shipboard newspapers, stationery, and maritime telegrams; and upon disembarkation, customs and immigration papers. All of these materials were frequently imprinted with the name of the shipping line or liner: creating a shared sense of belonging in the ship's enterprise.[13] Shipboard documents underscore the temporary nature of steamship community—they played critical roles during the passenger's journey, and yet transformed immediately into discardable objects upon disembarkation, if not sooner. A seating card might last an entire journey, a menu a single day.

Despite their eventual obsolescence, extensive aesthetic effort went into many of these materials: liners used art by established artists, such as George Barbier and Alistair K. MacDonald on the covers of menus, and even stamped paper napkins with elaborate flourishes.[14] It is, in part, these aesthetic elements that are responsible for these materials' frequent preservation in archives and personal collections. These objects were designed to move smoothly from their functional roles to souvenirs retained by passengers after the journey had ended.

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[12] Fortuna writes that German ships in particular were prone to nationalist insularity in the Interwar period (2022: 171).

[13] The exhibition catalog for the V&A museum's 2017 exhibit 'Designing Liners' documents many examples of these materials (see Finamore and Wood, 2017).

[14] Many of these historic materials can be found in the digital collection of the The Gjenvick-Gjønvik Archives www.ggarchives.com.

As highlighted earlier, ships worked to immediately establish community among former strangers. This community, like the documents that helped shape it, was ephemeral. One of the first documents connecting the new passenger to their ship was the passenger list. In theatre critic Alan Dale's comedic account of his fifty transatlantic steamship crossings, *The Great Wet Way*, he writes 'for two whole days the passengers are busy with the passenger list. They sit poring over it, and trying to "place" people' (1910: 67). The ship's name and sailing dates were printed on the pamphlet's cover, and on the inside passengers and crew were named. Sometimes all travel classes were listed in a single passenger list, and sometimes each class received their own.

Porter's novel duplicates the design of the passenger list, but makes an important change from historic documents. The novel begins 'On board the North German Lloyd S.A. [sic] *Vera*, between Veracruz, Mexico and Bremerhaven, Germany, August 22-September 17, 1931' (1962: xi). Like a historic passenger list, it introduces the captain, ship's doctor, purser and officers, then names the passengers. There is a key difference between a conventional passenger list and the *Vera*'s, though: where the historic list differentiated between passengers' class or boarding location, Porter's list explicitly separates them by nationality, naming Germans, Swiss, Spanish, Cubans, Mexicans, Swedes, and Americans separately, and concluding with a note about the Spanish in steerage (1962: xi-xii). While historic passenger lists built transnational solidarity by grouping all the passengers together in the shared environment of the ship, the fictional list in Porter's book emphasizes national divisions.

Porter's novel also uses passengers' tickets to undercut ephemeral materials' potential to create a stable social order. Historic tickets fixed passengers in their place: bearing the names of both steamer and individual, they confirmed the passenger's imminent participation in the ship's community. 20th-century liner tickets often carried an entire 'contract of carriage' on one side, creating not just social bonds between the passenger and the ship but legal bonds as well. These contracts sometimes concluded with the declaration that 'such conditions are binding'—language that makes their assertions sound fixed.[15] Yet the order created by passengers' tickets in *Ship of Fools* proves unreliable. While the American Mrs. Treadwell's ticket, 'said Boulogne, clearly' (Porter, 1962: 137), once on board she learns that the ship will bypass France entirely to arrive in Germany. Her ticket's designated destination is no guarantee of where she will land. William Denny, the Texan oil man, also finds his ticket misleading— despite

[15] An example of a ticket using this language can be found in the National Maritime Museum Archive, Greenwich, London, MS1987/055 among the "passenger documents from a voyage from Australia SS *Jervis Bay*, 1931.

having booked a double berth, when he arrives at his cabin 'he noted three names instead of two' listed on the door (Porter, 1962: 25).

Cabin and seating cards are another category of document ostensibly establishing order, yet instead undercutting it in Porter's novel. Demonstrating Gitelman's know-show function, historically these cards informed passengers of their designated place to sit or sleep during the voyage. Such a card from the T.S.S. *Moreton Bay*, for example, states that its bearer would eat during the '2nd Sitting' in seat number 152.[16] But, like Mrs. Treadwell's ticket, these documents are unreliable in *Ship of Fools*. David is outraged to find when he boards that although 'he had been promised a cabin on the promenade deck...he was actually on Deck C, with a porthole instead of a promenade' (Porter, 1962: 27). Freytag, shunned by his table-mates when they learn he is married to a Jewish woman, finds himself relocated from the Captain's table to an undesirable corner table by the act of having his name moved on the purser's records (Porter, 1962: 241). The sense of order provided by documents disappears as quickly as it appeared.

One implication for the instability of this social order written on scraps of paper is that it can easily be manipulated. Frau Rittersdorf knows documents need not keep their word and takes advantage of this. Although 'her ticket specified the upper berth' she takes the lower one upon boarding the ship (Porter, 1962: 33). Rittersdorf further shows off her ability to exploit ephemeral indications of social position by sending herself 'two enormous floral offerings,' with falsified amorous attestations attached to them (Porter, 1962: 33), presenting herself to her fellow passengers as other than she is.

The flimsiness of paper promises is joined by other ephemeral materials that fail to unite the *Vera*'s passengers. Most glaring among these is the shipboard newspaper. Ships had long carried printing presses (Hoag, 2001: 81), and 'with the expansion of the travel and cruise industry' the materials printed on board might 'resemble a conventional newspaper' (Rickards et al, 2000: 296). The major shipping lines published daily papers onboard, including French Line's *L'Atlantique* and the Cunard Line's 'Atlantic Edition' of the *Daily Mail*. As Benedict Anderson identifies in his famous formulation, newspapers play a critical role in narrating shared events and generating community (1991: 46). The *Vera*, however, as a small and second-class ship, lacks an official newspaper, with the bulletin board serving as the locus of communication, the passengers' 'morning gathering place' (Porter, 1962: 136).

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[16] This seating card is held in the National Maritime Museum Archive, Greenwich, London, MS1987/055.

Performing the role of a shipboard paper, the daily schedule appears on the *Vera*'s bulletin board, including 'religious services in the morning…horse races at two o-clock, swimming at all hours, music on deck at five, tea in the bar, a band concert after dinner, dancing on deck later', as does as 'the ship's pool…with the name of yesterday's winner' (Porter, 1962: 136). Recent events are reported on, both the nautical in dispatches concerning 'the movements of ships unknown to landlubbers,' and the personal, with 'passengers advertis[ing] on little thumbtacked slips of paper that they had lost or found jeweled combs, down pillows, tobacco pouches, small cameras, pocket mirrors, rosaries' (Porter, 1962: 136). The bulletin board helps passengers visualize their shared space, charting the *Vera*'s progress with 'little flags on pins, stuck every day in the map… marching in a curve across the blue field of the Atlantic' (Porter, 1962: 136). But the bulletin board proves even more ephemeral than the printed newspaper in establishing community: when land is sighted, 'the bulletin boards were swept clean of landlubbers' irrelevant doings' (Porter, 1962: 354). This leaves not even an expired record of the ship's previous days—the passengers' shared history erased.

Although there is no official newspaper on board the *Vera*, there is an unofficial one: the ship's boisterous group of students seize the small printing press to print 'a miniature newspaper bearing in highly visible type the banner *El Pi-pi Diario*' (Porter, 1962: 171). Rather than creating shipboard community, this document allows the students to 'become more than ever a hermetic society,' with 'a jargon so recondite they referred constantly in speech to small typewritten code sheets' (Porter, 1962: 170). Rather than using the newspaper to establish community among the *Vera*'s many passengers, they instead use it to further bond amongst their small group and differentiate themselves from fellow travelers. The paper they print forces passengers apart, rather than bringing them together.

The novel includes other documents that serve to alienate passengers instead of facilitating collective identity. Travelers peruse the lunch and dinner cards as a means of side-stepping interpersonal interactions. When all eyes turn to the Spanish prisoner, La Condesa, upon her first appearance in the dining room, the woman sits 'quite still…bending to read the dinner card beside her plate' instead of looking at her fellow passengers (Porter, 1962: 106). Similarly, Herr Löwenthal, the lone Jewish passenger, studies his limited Kosher menu to avoid the eyes of his fellow passengers (Porter, 1962: 49). When the Zarzuela company sells raffle tickets, Jenny refuses to buy one, deliberately avoiding participation in the paper community they have organized (Porter, 1962: 352).

When *Ship of Fools* opens, it seems that documents will provide passengers with the stability they crave. Before being allowed to board the *Vera*, each passenger presents 'signed, stamped papers as proof that he had been born in a certain time and place, had a name of his own, a foothold of some kind in this world' (Porter, 1962: 9). The passengers put faith in these documents, and this faith makes their ultimate failures to build community or provide stability all the more glaring.

'Second Class Passenger Ship': Ocean Liners' Failed Promises

In the 1930s, nowhere was the prospect of internationalism more visible than the steamship, as it sailed global routes, carried global passengers, and relied on global labor. This makes the ship the perfect site for Porter to stage the failure of transnational possibility. But international cooperation is not the only element of the ocean liner's familiar figuration that Porter resists. Her book also calls into question two more, long-held, beliefs about interwar travel: the idea that the ship was a space of personal growth for its passengers, and the idea that shipboard life was cut off from the outside world.

The former is an oft-repeated assumption that, on ships, passengers had the opportunity for transformative experiences. In Dale's account of his many crossings, he highlights this, writing: 'You never change your identity when you stay at a big hotel on land. But just because that big hotel floats...you are temporarily somebody else' (1910: 21). A century later, literary scholars including Anna Snaith and Faye Hammill have used travelogues and fiction to show that the promise of transformation was commonly discussed by travelers, with Hammill noting that, in Canadian fiction set on ocean liners, the 'voyage as transformative experience' was one of the main themes the liner allowed writers to explore (Hammill, 2023: 35).

This transformation was generally credited to the passenger's exposure to new perspectives, via their fellow travelers. In a formative scholarly article on Interwar passenger travel and literature, Mark Rennella and Whitney Walton write that travelers 'found themselves particularly open to contacts with people and ideas they might not encounter during their normal daily routine' (2004: 371). But Porter's passengers resist, or are denied, the opportunity to transform on board. In an early piece of scholarship on the novel, critic Myron Liberman recognized this intransigence in *Ship of Fools*' characters, writing that 'given their natures, the *Vera*'s passengers will not improve their lot by sailing to Bremerhaven' (1969: 136). The global positions the characters inhabit are fixed, and their international interlude leaves them no more sympathetic to their fellow humans. Jenny vocalizes this when she complains she has no 'earthly

chance to pick up any language' because her Swiss roommate 'will speak only English' (1962: 41)—refusing to participate in transnational exchange by speaking German or Spanish with her.

The Baumgartners provide a particularly striking example of Porter's characters rejecting the potential to change during their transatlantic interlude. The couple are returning to Germany from Mexico to seek treatment for Herr Baumgartner's debilitating alcoholism. Frau Baumgartner hopes that 'the peaceful long voyage, the easy safe life of the ship' will provide distance for her husband to shed his vices (Porter, 1962: 49). Instead, she realizes as soon as they board that nothing will change. Readers' last glimpse of the couple, near the novel's end, sees 'Herr Baumgartner hanging over the rail looking sick' (Porter, 1962: 481)—as inebriated as ever.

The other commonly held belief Porter's novel counters is that shipboard space is exceptional from the everyday world: that the ship offers a world apart from that on land, a suspension of quotidian commitments. It is famously encapsulated in Foucault's description of the ship as a 'heterotopia' or a 'a place without a place' (1986 [1967]: 27) and echoed by Christopher Isherwood's assertion that the ship is 'like a hospital. Miles from land, home, love, sanity' (1966: 144). This idea—explicitly oriented on national belonging—is what Lewis and Fitzgerald suggests when they describe passengers as newly-acquainted citizens of a novel nation. Porter herself seems to allude to this idea of placelessness in the book's second epigraph 'Kein Haus, Keine Heimat'—no house, no homeland [translation mine] (1962: 69). But the *Vera* is a space where the global tensions and nationalist sentiments are not absent but heightened, and passengers' fundamental selfishness and misanthropy are enhanced by the enclosed environment of the ship, not temporarily abandoned.

'Harbors': Preserving Ephemerality

I have invoked both 'ephemeral' documents and 'ephemeral' journeys as a means to argue that Porter's incorporation of shipboard ephemera accentuates her vision of the Interwar promise of transnationalism as constructed on a flimsy foundation. Literary critic Sarah Wasserman has recognized this temporal duality in the fictionalized ephemera in late 20th-century novels, arguing that the inclusion of innately temporary materials 'dramatize[s] the dynamics between the temporary and the permanent, between extinction and longevity' (2020: 4). Porter's inclusion of ephemera fundamentally calls into question the very premise of transnational solidarity in the Interwar years, making visible the fleeting nature of the community shipboard documents attempted to construct.

But what are the broader implications for fiction of this choice to use ephemera to illustrate geopolitical fragility? Here, I differ slightly from Wasserman, who claims that '[the] ephemera we encounter in an archive or a novel … retain their message of disappearance, reminding us of their intended absence' (2020: 15). I would argue this message is something that only fictionalized ephemera can communicate. Writing about the temporal and the material, Bill Brown glosses Nicholas Thomas in claiming that 'however materially stable objects may seem,' they are, in fact, 'different things in different scenes' (2001: 9). To illustrate this, it is tempting to invoke the word ephemera's centuries-long association with short-lived insects: the pinioned butterfly is hardly the same as the one a-wing in the garden. In archives and personal collections, ephemera become something new—preserved in time, despite their intended expiration. But in fiction these ephemeral objects maintain their original purpose—preserved in the pages of the text while fulfilling their intended functions and their inherent ability to expire. Upon disembarkation, historical documents become souvenirs, stripped of their power yet destined to persist, but in *Ship of Fools* these tickets and seating cards maintain their control over their bearer's actions, or would, if their power was not so easily circumvented. The novel permits these materials to persistently perform their original roles, while the puissance of their 'real world' counterparts expires.

On the historic steamship, ephemera helped establish shipboard community. In Porter's novel, the power of documents to unite passengers is no match for the international tensions at play during steam travel's final decades. At the beginning of the book, readers are forewarned of the impossibility of global solidarity: before the passengers board the ship, we are told that their 'common predicament did not by any means make of them fellow sufferers' (Porter, 1962: 11). Porter's book asserts that, despite the possibilities for transnational experience and international cooperation available in an increasingly globalized world, nationalism was destined to triumph—a position she could comfortably confirm from the perspective of the book's publication in the 1960s. In *Ship of Fools*, Porter warns readers that the temporary society within ship space—and the wider world it represents—is built on an inherently ephemeral foundation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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