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Review of Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (2019)

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Reviews

Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019). 328 pp. ISBN 9781478003878

The News at the Ends of the Earth is an intriguing addition to the burgeoning research on nineteenth-century periodicals due to the so far overlooked corpus of periodicals that Hester Blum investigates: she studies newspapers which appeared on board exploratory voyages to the Arctic and Antarctic. Blum's point of departure is a simple yet surprising fact: at a time when much of the world's poles was still *terra incognita*, the ships bound for these regions carried printing presses, from which sprang not only an array of periodicals but also entertainment ephemera such as playbills.

Blum quickly clarifies what distinguishes polar expeditionary print media from other forms of periodicals — and it is not so much that their creation occurred under conditions of transience, mobility, and displacement. After all, the fortune seekers on ships travelling to the California gold fields in the 1840s as well as the emigres on transatlantic ships also produced print artifacts on board. Instead, it is the constantly life-threatening cold and the environment shaped by these sub-zero temperatures that both set forth the special conditions of periodical production and, at the same time, are mirrored by the periodicals' contents. Or as the author puts it: 'Within such extreme environments, polar ecomedia are not just responding to climate conditions but encoding their effects within the very evolution of the media themselves' (p. 30). The term 'ecomedia' demands a closer definition here because it serves as the conceptual frame to Blum's discussion of polar periodicals and print ephemera. 'The evanescent printed records generated in polar extremity', Blum argues, 'offer [...] devices for describing, comprehending, and, most ambitiously, surviving climatic

extremity. These texts, which constitute one form of what I call *polar ecomedia*, are examples of environmental writing' (p. 5). This conceptual framing, however, does not apply to all of Blum's chapters equally.

Strictly speaking, newspapers are the focus of three of Blum's altogether five chapters. The last two present some deviation from her course. In chapter four, the author turns to cairn messages, notes in bottles, cached documents and other communication artifacts from the high latitudes. They include both printed and hand-written materials. In the last chapter, Blum pursues the case study of the American Charles Francis Hall. Hall lived with the Alaskan Inuit and — benefitting from their survival epistemologies and understanding of the extreme environment — was in a notably safer and different situation than the polar seafarers throughout the first three of Blum's chapters. Thus, some readers might find issue with the wide variety of cultural artifacts that Blum conceptualizes as 'ecomedia'.

The author offers a thoroughly researched and highly enjoyable narrative of the anatomy of nineteenth-century Arctic expeditions. After sailing as far north as possible during the polar summers, the crews would plan to winter over — in the best-case scenario, close to a harbour and amid relatively stable ice which would encase their vessels for months. The men lived aboard ship or in huts during the total darkness and prepared for overland (dog-, pony- or man-hauled) exploration in early spring, then focusing on zoology, botany, geology, mineralogy as well as hydrography and meteorological research. Blum's narrative of Arctic and Antarctic exploration is highly informative for readers unfamiliar with

the topic and an absorbing recapitulation for an audience better versed in it. Both audiences must appreciate the book's numerous illustrations. The images include newspaper covers which not merely adorn the book but can be of interest to media scholars who investigate the aesthetic idiosyncrasies of periodicals. The images convey the notable heterogeneity in the design of polar newspapers.

Printing presses had first been stocked on British expedition ships in service of the search for Sir John Franklin's two vessels, *Erebus* and *Terror*, which had left Britain in 1845 never to return again. But the rescue mission crews requisitioned the print technology for their entertainment during the sunless months of the polar winters. Blum shows that the newspapers in high latitudes were generally comic and parodic. At the same time, they exhibited an intriguing degree of meta-reflection on both the polar environment as well as the periodical production. The newspapers appear to have succeeded in shifting the crew's attention from the icy outside to the damp inside of the ship, as the playful example taken from the *Queen's Illuminated Magazine* suggests: 'The term Editor I affirm & maintain was originally derived from *Boxers* — Head hitters, one who was capable of giving the hardest raps — Johnson defines it as one who reviews or prepares any literary work for publication but before the great [...] lexicographer had his being, words were commonly spelt as pronounced and amongst the Cockneys was spelt — Ed — iter (Head Hitter) as they pronounced it. [...] Therefore I propose that Johnson be corrected and in lieu it should be put as follows — Editor — One who is capable of giving hard raps and also reviews any literary work for publication' (p. 121).

Blum delves deeply into the motives for as well as the importance of the polar periodicals, discussing them as coping mechanisms in the threatening and surreal surroundings where neither day nor night existed in the same form as the sailors had experienced throughout their lives. At

the same time, the periodicals betray an alienization on the part of the crews from their far-away homes which become the 'outer world' (p. 161) or the 'external world' (p. 162), while the high latitudes, at times, turn into the 'home of "many wonderful birds and beasts, also useful plants and herbs, and vast quantities of gold and precious stones"' (p. 166). Blum is highly alert to the psychological adaptation processes that helped the polar crews to survive and function in the sub-zero environment. Free from the rationales and commercialism of the periodical market — and, thus, an additionally interesting offspring in the genealogy of printed periodicals — the polar newspapers also differed from other print media due to the public they created. Here, as the author observes, invoking Benedict Anderson, the audience was not an 'imagined community' but a single intimate body. Editor and reader shared a sleeping hammock.

As a historian of science rather than a media scholar, trained to think of historical developments as contingent to time and place, I cannot end this review without briefly grouching over Blum's occasionally ahistorical reasoning. The author writes: 'I came to realize that twenty-first-century news of polar resource circulation and climate observation, facilitated by textual and other media representation, was not just a contemporary analogue of the story I was telling about the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it was the same story' (p. xix). Blum is deeply aware of the threatening and unsettling environmental changes of our time which are becoming highly visible in the polar regions. She is conscious of human exploitation of nature. It seems that this awareness occasionally prompts her to combine past and present into questionable arguments and interpretations. But that is not necessary because Blum's absorbing book is first and foremost about the human being becoming one with a challenging environment by way of an imaginative cultural artifact. Here, the periodical is not only an instrument but also a symbol of adaptation to the

conditions set forth by nature. One can only wish we could rise to this form of adaptation today — and not draw on nature and its resources according to our current and unsustainable conditions.

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