

## MAIN SECTION

# Globalization, Nautical Nostalgia and Maritime Identity Politics. A Case Study on Boundary Objects in the Future German Port Museum.

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## ABSTRACT

The future *German Port Museum* is scheduled to open in Hamburg in the late 2020s as one of Germany's currently largest and best-funded museum projects. It is pursuing an ambitious programmatic agenda that aims not only to narrate the historic dimensions of ports and seafaring, but to assess ports as hubs of globalization and thus help the understanding of a globalized world. This paper approaches the Port Museum's first and central artefact, the historic four-masted barque *Peking*, as a crucial organizational and epistemic entity in the museum's development process. The *Peking* is of significant interest to actors from diverging social worlds, who approach the ship either as a starting point for critical debates on globalization and colonial heritage, as a symbol of nautical nostalgia, or as a vehicle for Hamburg's maritime identity politics. Relying on the theoretical concept of boundary objects by Star and Griesemer, it is argued that the *Peking's* interpretive flexibility enables it to mediate between these potentially conflicting individual agendas and facilitate a cooperative process between different communities of practice. Thus, the Port Museum is brought into being as a suspenseful, yet stable entity, that is situated in a field of tension between decolonial critique and revisionist maritime heritage politics.

## KEYWORDS

*Museum Studies; Material Semiotics; Globalization; Maritime Heritage; Colonial Heritage*

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## Introduction

Port city cultures are often discussed in terms of their urban maritime identity, of a self-conception relying on the city's claim for a cosmopolitan and mercantilist tradition of resilience.<sup>1</sup> These identity constructions, simultaneously working as an internal means of community building and as an asset in global intercity competition, evolve from a complex network of diverse actors and processes, involving economic players, governance structures, local communities, cultural institutions and many others. Historically, museums play an outstanding role in this as bearers and producers of identity, while bringing together within themselves a large number of different actors and contradicting views. "The mix of co-creators in identity construction and the resulting potent soup of identity negotiation are symptomatic of the very nature of the museum," as Fiona McLean writes.<sup>2</sup>

The future German Port Museum that is scheduled to open in Hamburg in the late 2020s, is no exception. The Museum is currently being developed by the "Stiftung Historische Museen Hamburg" (Historic Museums Hamburg Foundation) and is funded with a €185m budget from the federal household. What distinguishes the museum from other comparable institutions is that the developers aim not only at narrating the historic dimensions of ports and seafaring, but at assessing ports as hubs of globalization and thus help the understanding of a globalized world. Globalization is therefore addressed as an inherently contemporary matter, involving complex economic, social and cultural interrelations, and is made accessible to the museum public by turning towards ports and global maritime trade.

Spatially, the Port Museum will consist of three locations: first, the historic warehouse 50A, that has already been home to an outpost of the Labor Museum since 2005, will offer a mainly local and historical perspective on the port of Hamburg. Besides the display of the Labor Museum's collection of historic vessels and handling equipment, it will provide a space for performative demonstrations of traditional work techniques and participatory workshop formats. Second, a new museum building is planned in the future neighborhood of Kleiner Grasbrook, which will be committed to the discussion and display of contemporary global connections through maritime trade. The architectural competition for the new building will not take place until 2023, hence spatial as well as conceptual considerations are rather rudimentary at this point. Finally, the historic four-masted

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1 Alice Mah, *Port Cities and Global Legacies: Urban Identity, Waterfront Work, and Radicalism* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Carola Hein and Dirk Schubert, "Resilience, Disaster, and Rebuilding in Modern Port Cities," *Journal of Urban History*, 2020, 009614422092509, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144220925097>.

2 Fiona McLean, "Museums and the Representation of Identity," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. B. J. Graham and Peter Howard, Ashgate Research Companions (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co, 2008), 283.

barque *Peking*, will eventually be docked next to the new building at Kleiner Grasbrook as the museum's leading object and as a floating third location.<sup>3</sup> Although the Grasbrook-location and the warehouse 50A are both located in the north-eastern part of the port area, they are separated from each other by two port basins and a 3 km drive. Concepts to connect the two locations and make them perceivable as a unit are still in the works.

Not least due to this ambitious programmatic and spatial framework, the museum's development is a highly contested process, requiring numerous actors inside and outside the museum world to cooperate, to balance divergent agendas and to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between their different communities of practice. I will therefore discuss in this article how the historic vessel *Peking* as the museum's central object allows different stakeholder groups to cooperate in the Port Museum's planning process. In drawing upon Star and Griesemer,<sup>4</sup> I discuss the *Peking* as a boundary object that facilitates cooperation and knowledge transfer between different stakeholder groups. I therefore follow an approach that moves between museum studies, organizational studies and material semiotics, as I understand the museum as an actor-network dedicated to the production and distribution of knowledge, and its formation as an inherently epistemic process that is carried out by a complex web of diverse agents.<sup>5</sup> In applying this approach to the future German Port Museum through an ethnographic description of different stakeholder's accounts, this article contributes from a humanities-oriented perspective to the ongoing discussion on port cities and maritime heritage.<sup>6</sup>

In the next section, I give a brief overview on the *Peking's* history to provide the basic backdrop for the following arguments. In section 3, I discuss the main perspectives, stakeholders and interpretations that can be identified around the *Peking* in the Port Museum's development process, in order to illustrate the complexity of the ship as an epistemic and organizational object. I therefore refer to my own ethnographic material and to public discourses on the *Peking*, mainly represented by articles from the local newspaper *Hamburger Abendblatt* and non-academic publications by journalists and amateur historians. In section 4, I introduce the concept of boundary object and adapt it for a discussion of the *Peking's* positioning

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3 SHMH, "German Port Museum," accessed November 27, 2020, <https://shmh.de/en/german-port-museum>.

4 Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39," *Social Studies of Science* 19, no. 3 (August 1989): 387–420.

5 Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10060851>; Kevin Hetherington, "Museum Topology and the Will To Connect," *Journal of Material Culture* 2, no. 2 (1997): 199–218, <https://doi.org/10.1177/135918359700200203>.

6 i.a. César Ducruet, "The Port City in Multidisciplinary Analysis," in *The Port City of the XXIst Century. New Challenges in the Relationship between Port and City*, ed. RETE (Venecia: RETE, 2011), 32–48; Alice Mah, *Port Cities and Global Legacies: Urban Identity, Waterfront Work, and Radicalism* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Carola Hein, ed., *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2011).

in its wider discursive context.

## 2. Background: the historic vessel *Peking*

The four-masted barque *Peking* was built in Hamburg on behalf of the shipping company F. Laeisz to join its fleet of so-called “Flying P-Liners”. After its launch in 1911, it sailed on the so-called “saltpeter route” between Hamburg and Chile for more than 20 years.<sup>7</sup>

Saltpeter, or sodium nitrate, was one of the most sought-after resources in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, since it was at the same time essential to industrial-agricultural production as a fertilizer and of particular military relevance as a main component in the production of explosives. The saltpeter trade therefore generated enormous profits, predominantly for those actors involved in the business on the European side.<sup>8</sup> Sodium nitrate was systematically extracted from the Chilean Atacama desert, one of the driest regions of the world, by a booming mining industry since the 1850s. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chile was producing about two thirds of all commercially used saltpeter worldwide, with Germany being one of the main purchasers.<sup>9</sup> The *Peking* sailed the saltpeter route, interrupted by its internment in Valparaíso at the outbreak of WW1 in 1914 and its confiscation after the war,<sup>10</sup> until transcontinental saltpeter trade came to its end in the early 1930s due to the increasingly efficient synthetic production of sodium nitrate and a sharp decline in international markets after the Great Depression.<sup>11</sup>

In 1932, the *Peking* was sold to a British company that turned it into a floating boarding school until it was put up for sale again in 1974.<sup>12</sup> Influential voices in Hamburg at that time discussed the acquisition of the *Peking* as a museum ship, but failed with their suggestion due to financial concerns in the local political landscape.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, the ship was sold to an American foundation and was transferred to the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City, where it remained until the German parliament decided to acquire it as the future German

7 Andreas Gondesens, *Die letzten Flying P-Liner: PAMIR, PASSAT, ihre Schwestern und Halbschwwestern der Baujahre 1902 - 1926*, 2. durchgesehene Auflage, Schriften des Deutschen Schiffahrtsmuseums, Band 69 (Bremerhaven: Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, 2014), 63f.

8 Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, “Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift: Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 3–4 (June 2009): 311–34.

9 Jaime Wisniak and Ingrid Garcés, “The Rise and Fall of the Salitre (Sodium Nitrate) Industry,” *Indian Journal for Chemical Technology* 8 (2001): 428.

10 Heinz Burmester, “Die Deutsche Seglerflotte in Und Nach Dem Krieg 1914-1918,” *Deutsches Schiffahrtsarchiv* 15 (1992): 105–22.

11 Michael Monteón, *Chile in the Nitrate Era: The Evolution of Economic Dependence, 1880-1930* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

12 Burmester, “Die Deutsche Seglerflotte in Und Nach Dem Krieg 1914-1918,” 117.

13 Christoph Strupp, “Im Bann Des Authentischen? Historische Schiffe Und Maritime Museen in Hamburg,” ed. Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, *Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg* [Nachrichten Aus Der Forschungsstelle Für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (FZH) 2019 (2020): 24.

Port Museum's leading object in 2015.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, the *Peking* once more crossed the Atlantic Ocean to be restored in a shipyard near Hamburg. After the substantial restoration was completed, it was towed to its temporary berth next to the Warehouse 50A in September 2020 and has since then been on display—although not yet accessible—to the public, while being equipped for its future use as a museum ship.

### 3. Perspectives, stakeholders and interpretations

#### 3.1 Museum professionals and contemporary discussions on globalization

The museum professionals engaged in the Port Museum's development emphasize that the ship will not be treated as an end in itself or as an artifact that provides a solely aesthetic experience of history. They explicitly reject the notion that the *Peking* will be staged as a conventional museum ship, which predominantly mediates a nostalgic image of a past era of seafaring. Instead, they express the aim of addressing the ship in the wider context of historic saltpeter trade. Hans-Jörg Czech, chair of the Historic Museums Foundation Hamburg, points out:

Of course, we could tell a lot about seafaring in those times [with the *Peking*]. [...] But the German Port Museum's task [...] is to move from the object to the next layer of questions. [...] We don't want to establish another shipping museum [...], we really want to make the port and the *Peking's* connection with the port the subject.<sup>15</sup>

Thomas Overdick, who is responsible for the Port Museum as a secretary at the Hamburg Ministry of Culture and Media, explicates what this next layer of questions could possibly be:

I think we should [look at] the networks in which the ship was involved. The ship does not live a life on its own, but is an object of utility which is related to many, many other objects. I find it quite interesting as a symbolic object, which connected Europe and South America on its numerous trips.<sup>16</sup>

Project head Ursula Richenberger explains the complexity of this enterprise. She reflects, how historic saltpeter shipping is suitable as a model for modern globalization:

In the saltpeter trade, we have a specific phase of globalization on the basis of a certain product, of a specific commodity

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<sup>14</sup> Matthias Gretschel, "Für 120 Millionen Euro: Hamburg Bekommt Neues Hafenumuseum," *Hamburger Abendblatt*, November 13, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Hans-Jörg Czech, interview and translation by author, Hamburg, Oct. 15, 2020

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Overdick, interview and translation by author, Hamburg, Feb. 13, 2020

chain. It is a closed chapter and therefore is already very well researched through various research projects. This is why we can make very clear: what does globalization mean? Not only economic exchange, but also social history, cultural history, urban history... these manifold perspectives can be illustrated in the example of the *Peking* and the saltpeter trade.<sup>17</sup>

This explicitly includes a critical view on economic interdependencies related to international division of labor and on (neo-)colonial power relations. Richenberger points out that the museum's understanding of colonialism is not temporarily limited to the era of formalized colonial rule, nor is it geographically restricted to the so-called former European overseas territories. Rather, it refers to a much broader understanding of "global asymmetries of power" that are historically rooted in the imperial expansion of European colonial powers.<sup>18</sup> Jasmin Alley, member of the Port Museum's curatorial team, further elaborates:

Today's globalization still functions under the aegis of colonialism. As far as customs restrictions are concerned, as far as visas are concerned, as far as flows of goods are concerned. [...] Raw materials are [extracted in the South and] sent to the global North, but the value chain always starts in the global North, not in the global South.<sup>19</sup>

Geopolitical patterns of economic imbalance are hence identified as a focal point of the museum, and are supposed to be elaborated starting from the *Peking* and the global interconnections of saltpeter trade. Therefor, Alley further emphasizes the importance of including Chilean points of view in this discussion and to establish a mode of exchange between the museum staff and Chilean academic and non-academic actors, considering the *Peking* as a mediator in a multivocal process:

The Chilean side of the story has to be told. Especially that of the *Officinas*, the saltpeter plants, that were mainly run by German and British companies, and of the working conditions in these *Officinas*. [...] Those are the narratives that are relevant for the *Peking* and that we want to make visible.<sup>20</sup>

All the museum professionals interviewed emphasize the importance of embedding the *Peking* into a broader discursive context. In looking at the ship as part of the social-material network of globalization, the economic, political and cultural interconnections related to this matter are approached, while making the *Peking* a didactic access point for a multi-perspective discussion. They aim to overcome a solely historic gaze

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17 Ursula Richenberger, interview and translation by author, Hamburg, Jan. 15, 2020

18 Field note Apr. 14 2021, informal conversation with Ursula Richenberger

19 Jasmin Alley, interview and translation by author, Jun. 5 2020

20 Jasmin Alley, interview and translation by author, Jun. 5 2020

and to establish a link between the historical subject of saltpeter trade and contemporary phenomena of globalization, paying attention to neo-colonial continuities in today's global economic links. Conceptual considerations on how to implement these complex and abstract matters in the overall museum concept and in a didactic approach to the *Peking* exist only in broad outlines so far and can therefore not be further elaborated at this point.

### 3.2. Sailing enthusiasts, amateur historians and nautical nostalgia

While this approach dominates conceptual papers and museological discussions in the Port Museum's professional core team, it is by far not the only perspective on the *Peking*. There are numerous other actors involved, for instance the "Stiftung Hamburg Maritim", a foundation dedicated to the preservation of Hamburg's material maritime heritage. Hamburg Maritim is one of the *Peking's* most important stakeholders, since they were in charge of its transfer from New York to Hamburg and its restoration, and were legally responsible for the ship until it was formally handed over to the Stiftung Historische Museen Hamburg in 2020. In contrast to the museum professionals, Hamburg Maritim is first and foremost concerned with the ship's preservation and presentation as a singular material artefact of nautical history.<sup>21</sup>

A similar agenda is pursued by the booster club "Freunde der Viermastbark *Peking* e.V." (Friends of the Four-Masted Barque *Peking*), which was founded in 2013 in order to lobby for the ship's preservation and its acquisition by the city of Hamburg. To this stakeholder group, as curator Jasmin Alley puts it, "the *Peking* is first and foremost a *ship*".<sup>22</sup> The "Freunde der *Peking*" aims to turn the *Peking* into a "vivid museum ship that displays life and working on ship as authentically as possible".<sup>23</sup>

Most of the publicly visible members of the "Freunde" are no trained historians, while many of them have an affiliation with sailing, e.g. as hobbyists, former professional seamen and marines, or lawyers, managers and other white collar-professionals in maritime businesses. Accordingly, the most detailed publications on the *Peking* and its sister ships have not been written by academic scholars, but by non-academic enthusiasts that engage as amateur historians. In their books, they gather meticulous records of the ships' journeys,<sup>24</sup> historical photographs, technical drawings and

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21 Stiftung Hamburg Maritim, "Ziele," accessed December 1, 2020, <https://stiftung-hamburg-maritim.de/ueber-uns/ziele.html>.

22 Jasmin Alley, interview and translation by author, Jun. 5 2020.

23 Freunde der Viermastbark *Peking* e.V., "Zukünftige Nutzung & Hafenumuseum," accessed November 30, 2020, <https://peking-freunde.de/index.php/die-peking/zukunft>, translation by author.

24 Gondesen, *Die letzten Flying P-Liner*.

photographic documentation of the *Peking's* restoration<sup>25</sup> or travel reports by former Flying P-Liner-captains that are framed as first-hand insights into a rugged, yet heroic past in seafaring.<sup>26</sup>

The book "*Peking – Fate and Rebirth of a Legendary Hamburg ship*"<sup>27</sup>, written in 2020 by the journalist Matthias Gretzschel on the occasion of the *Peking's* transfer to Hamburg, can be read as a journalistic condensate of the popular discourses around the *Peking*. In the final chapter "People aboard", numerous actors who took part in the *Peking's* preservation and its transfer to Hamburg explain what the ship means to them and how they got involved in the project.<sup>28</sup> A striking number of them refer to the documentary film "Around Cape Horn"<sup>29</sup> that was shot in 1929 by the American seafarer and filmmaker Irving Johnson, showing the *Peking* on a trip from Europe to Chile. Johnson's film seems to be an initial trigger for many stakeholder's dedication, prompting their imagination and admiration of heroic seafaring, as for instance Laura Lühenschloss, deputy head of the *Peking's* technical staff, is quoted:

To me, the seamanship performed by the boys in the film is absolutely magnificent and unparalleled. They were laughing together, as much as they had to overcome great hardships. And more than anything, they were proud of their ship.<sup>30</sup>

These examples illustrate in a cursory way, how a captivating image of the *Peking* as a superior technical object is created and connected to an adventurous imagination of historic seafaring, acknowledging the seamen's nautical mastery and their toughness and bravery. Unlike the didactic approach presented in the previous section, these discourses mainly focus on the ship itself as a product of engineering and on its immediate nautical context. This discursivization of the *Peking* as a symbol for nautical nostalgia and technological excellence hence mobilizes multiple actors as diverse as committed amateur historians, shipbuilding enthusiasts or well-connected and solvent sponsors.

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25 Peter Behr and Jörn Lütjens, *Viermastbark PEKING. Historische Konstruktionszeichnungen, Belegt Und Ergänzt Mit Aktuellen Fotografien Vor & Während Der Restaurationsphase 2019/2020*, 2020.

26 Peter Klingbeil and Hermann Piening, *Die Flying P-Liner: die Segelschiffe der Reederei F. Laeisz* (Bremerhaven: Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum, 1998).

27 Matthias Gretzschel, *PEKING – Schicksal und Wiedergeburt eines legendären Hamburger Segelschiffes*, 2020, translation by author.

28 Ibid., 127, translation by author.

29 Irving Johnson, *Around Cape Horn*, 1929.

30 Gretzschel, *PEKING – Schicksal und Wiedergeburt eines legendären Hamburger Segelschiffes*, 138.



### 3.3. Political decision-makers and maritime identity politics

Closely related to, yet analytically distinct from this perspective is the emphasis on the *Peking's* connection to Hamburg. The motif of “returning home” is strikingly dominant in media coverage, mainly promoted by the local newspaper *Hamburger Abendblatt* and the public broadcasting station NDR. This was already apparent when Hamburgian elites first discussed buying the ship from its British owner in the 1970s. At that time, the *Abendblatt* fueled the discussion for several weeks, always pointing out the *Peking's* importance for Hamburg's maritime history. “The *Peking* belongs at the Elbe”<sup>31</sup> wrote the *Abendblatt* in September 1974, and: “The city finally has the great opportunity [...] to return a piece of Hanseatic sailing tradition back to the port of Hamburg”.<sup>32</sup> This kind of folksy campaign journalism was taken up in 2012, when another attempt was made to transfer the *Peking* to Hamburg (“*Peking* close to coming home”<sup>33</sup>), in 2015, when the *Bundestag* granted the funding for the German Port Museum and the *Peking's* acquisition (“Hamburg Windjammer *Peking* comes home”<sup>34</sup>), and in 2020, when the ship reached its temporary berth in Hamburg (“Welcome Home!”<sup>35</sup>)

This specific expression of local patriotism, considering the *Peking's* location anywhere else but in Hamburg a mistake that has to be corrected, is crucial for the Port Museum as a whole since it persuaded key actors to initially push the project forward. Johannes Kahrs, often publicly portrayed as being responsible for the museum's funding as a member of the federal budget committee, states that his original concern was not to initiate a new museum, but to raise money for the *Peking's* transfer to Hamburg:

It was urgent, since the *Peking* was about to be scrapped. [...] But I knew, I wouldn't get 27 million for a scrap ship that is lying in New York. But I've financed plenty museums all over the country [...]. So I said: OK, let's do this. We'll build a [...] German port

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31 Peter Krukow, “Die ‘Peking’ Gehört an Die Elbe,” *Hamburger Abendblatt*, September 10, 1974, translation by author.

32 Angelika Kirchhecker, “Viele Hamburger Wollen Die ‘Peking’ Retten,” *Hamburger Abendblatt*, September 11, 1974, <https://www.abendblatt.de/archiv/1974/article205134969/Viele-Hamburger-wollen-die-Peking-retten.html>, translation by author.

33 Alex Tiedemann, “Viermastbark ‘Peking’ Vor Der Heimkehr Nach Hamburg,” December 20, 2012, <https://www.abendblatt.de/hamburg/article112138645/Viermaster-Peking-vor-der-Heimkehr-nach-Hamburg.html>, translation by author.

34 Bettina Mittelacher, “Hamburger Windjammer ‘Peking’ Kommt Nach Hause,” December 27, 2015, <https://www.abendblatt.de/hamburg/article206863305/Hamburger-Windjammer-Peking-kommt-nach-Hause.html>, translation by author.

35 Friederik Ulrich, Julian Schmelmer, and Lukas Homrich, “Willkommen Zu Hause! Die ‘Peking’ Hat in Hamburg Festgemacht,” *Hamburger Abendblatt* (blog), September 7, 2020, <https://www.abendblatt.de/hamburg/article230347454/Die-Peking-kehrt-heim-die-Ueberfahrt-im-Livestream.html>, translation by author.

museum with the *Peking* as its first exhibit, and I'll sell that as a package.<sup>36</sup>

To him, the *Peking*, as a ship that was built in a Hamburg shipyard and sailed for a Hamburg shipping company, in the context of the Port Museum is capable of strengthening the city's ties to its maritime past and to "raise the question of Hanseatic identity".<sup>37</sup> Although he acknowledges the contemporary demands for critical perspectives, he makes clear that he prefers them to play a marginal role and proposes a selective view on the ship and its history:

You will certainly also have to talk about all these other stories on the sidelines, about slavery and... I don't know. [...] But the basic idea was always: the port influences world trade, and world trade influences the port.<sup>38</sup>

This discursive connection between history, identity and materiality can be discussed in terms of heritage politics, meaning "the ways in which very selective material artefacts, mythologies, memories and traditions become resources for the present".<sup>39</sup> This does not necessarily go along with a centralized strategy, but can be understood as a tacit discursive praxis, unfolding on many interdependent layers like everyday speech, media discourse and official governance strategies.<sup>40</sup> It fosters a certain sense of belonging, a consciousness for an alleged local tradition, from which a collective identity is constructed.<sup>41</sup>

Over the past few decades, most western port cities have put increasing effort into the maintenance of their maritime heritage "not just in physical objects but also in the collective memory of citizens through maritime traditions and ceremonies of nautical culture".<sup>42</sup> Hamburg, in this regard, is no exception. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city kept strategically stressing its maritime character and cosmopolitanism, dubbing itself "the gateway to the world", regardless of the racist and classist power structures that are deeply intertwined with its economic strength as a port city.<sup>43</sup>

36 Johannes Kahrs, interview and translation by author, Hamburg, Aug. 5th 2020

37 Johannes Kahrs, "Bitte Kurs Halten! Warum Das Deutsche Hafenumuseum Eine Gewaltige Chance Ist. Eine Erwiderung," *Die Zeit* 8/2017 (2017), translation by author.

38 Johannes Kahrs, interview and translation by author, Hamburg, Aug. 5th 2020

39 G. J. Ashworth and B. J. Graham, *Senses of Place, Senses of Time and Heritage*, ed. G. J. Ashworth and B. J. Graham, Heritage, Culture, and Identity (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 4.

40 Zongjie Wu and Song Hou, "Heritage and Discourse," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, ed. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, 2015.

41 Laurajane Smith, "Uses of Heritage" (Abington/New York: Routledge, 2006), 29 ff.; McLean, "Museums and the Representation of Identity".

42 Azadeh Arjomand Kermani, Wout van der Toorn Vrijthoff, and Arash Salek, "The Impact of Planning Reform on Water-Related Heritage Values and on Recalling Collective Maritime Identity of Port Cities: The Case of Rotterdam," in *Adaptive Strategies for Water Heritage*, ed. Carola Hein (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 347, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00268-8\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00268-8_18).

43 Lars Amenda, "'Welthafenstadt' Und 'Tor Zur Welt': Selbstdarstellung Und Wahrnehmung Der Hafenstadt Hamburg 1900-1970," *Deutsches Schifffahrtsarchiv*, 29 (2006): 148

Numerous museum ships and other maritime memorial sites, alongside touristic spectacles like the annual “Port Anniversary”, constantly “perpetuate the equation of port and city”.<sup>44</sup>

In this light, the *Peking*, as the (literal) flagship of one of Hamburg’s biggest cultural enterprises and as a maritime artefact that is bound to the city through its biography, appears not only as an object of local patriotism and of (selective) pride in the city’s maritime tradition, but also as an important asset for Hamburg’s city marketing that strongly relies on “[celebrating] the city’s maritime past with nostalgic undertones and [producing] specific images and moods”.<sup>45</sup> The *Peking*’s potential as a destination for heritage tourism<sup>46</sup> thus represents another argument for its acquisition, as Monika Grütters, the Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media, is quoted in a press release: “With the *Peking* as its showpiece, the port museum will provide comprehensive and vivid information about Germany’s maritime history and attract people from all over the world”.<sup>47</sup>

Hence, the ship appears to be of particular interest for political decision-makers who aim to strengthen Hamburg’s identity as a port city either in terms of maritime local patriotism or following a more entrepreneurial, tourism-led agenda that focuses on commodification and city marketing and makes use of maritime images for this purpose. These two sides, however, must not be seen as distinct from each other, but as deeply interdependent facets of an overarching discourse of maritime identity- and heritage politics that leans on material artefacts like the *Peking*.<sup>48</sup>

#### 4. Conflicting port-related narratives and the *Peking* as a boundary object

This schematic overview neither claims to be analytically exhaustive nor categorically precise, since there are indisputable overlaps between and inconsistencies within the portrayed positions. Rather than providing a comprehensive analysis, the previous discussion of the three broad stakeholder groups and their perspectives aims to illustrate how multiple actors ascribe differing and sometimes contradictory symbolic meanings to the *Peking* and thus cluster around the ship as an epistemological and organizational object.

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44 Strupp, “Im Bann Des Authentischen? Historische Schiffe Und Maritime Museen in Hamburg,” 39, translation by author.

45 Ibid., translation by author.

46 Yaniv Poria, Richard Butler, and David Airey, “The Core of Heritage Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 30, no. 1 (January 2003): 238–54, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(02\)00064-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(02)00064-6).

47 Behörde für Kultur und Medien, “Die PEKING Kehrt Zurück Nach Hamburg!,” September 7, 2020, <https://www.hamburg.de/pressearchiv-fhh/14286622/historische-viermastbark-pekings-kehrt-nach-hamburg-zurueck/>, translation by author.

48 Mah, *Port Cities and Global Legacies*, 88 ff.

This situation thus resembles the concept of “boundary objects”<sup>49</sup> that has been widely adopted in numerous contexts since its introduction in 1989.<sup>50</sup> The original article by Star and Griesemer takes up the notion of translation—a core concept of Actor-Network-Theory—and combines it with approaches from symbolic interactionism. It is argued that, in order to produce and circulate new knowledge, scientific actors need to mobilize allies from different social worlds to participate in their cause. To reconcile these allies’ different perspectives and goals, certain objects are required—be they material, theoretical, methodological etc.—that are considered relevant by all actors involved in a scientific enterprise and thus allow them to interact and to exchange information through and on these objects. Pointing out that epistemic objects<sup>51</sup> inevitably inhabit different social worlds, and are ascribed different meanings in each world, Star and Griesemer pose their central question: “how can findings which incorporate radically different meanings become coherent?”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, they introduce the concept of boundary objects:

Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. [...] They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation.<sup>53</sup>

The concept hence refers to objects that are located in the “shared space” between social worlds and thus allow these worlds to interact.<sup>54</sup> Crucial to this is the idea to “not presuppose an epistemological primacy for one viewpoint,” but to follow the “flow of objects and concepts through the network of participating allies and social worlds”.<sup>55</sup>

Returning to the German Port Museum, it is the *Peking’s* “interpretive flexibility”<sup>56</sup> that allows different communities of practice to approach it from different points of view without substantial conflicts jeopardizing the project’s overall success. They can “abstract or simplify the object

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49 Star and Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology”.

50 Pascale Trompette and Dominique Vinck, “Revisiting the notion of Boundary Object,” *Revue d’anthropologie des connaissances* 3, 1, no. 1 (2009): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rac.006.0003>.

51 I prefer “epistemic objects” to the term “scientific objects” used by Star/Griesemer, since I want to include non-scientific forms of knowledge production as equally relevant. See David Turnbull, “Reframing Science and Other Local Knowledge Traditions,” *Futures* 29, no. 6 (August 1997): 551–62, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287\(97\)00030-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(97)00030-X).

52 Star and Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology,” 392.

53 Ibid., 393.

54 Susan Leigh Star, “This Is Not a Boundary Object: Reflections on the Origin of a Concept,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 35, no. 5 (September 2010): 602, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243910377624>.

55 Star and Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology,” 389.

56 Star, “This Is Not a Boundary Object,” 602.

to suit [their] demands”, so that “extraneous’ properties can be deleted or ignored,” while others are moved into the foreground.<sup>57</sup> This makes it possible for different actors to treat the *Peking* as a starting point for a critical discussion of globalization, as a representation of a long-gone era of nautical mastery and as a symbol for maritime identity at the same time. Hence, allies from different worlds are mobilized to contribute their resources to the project, either knowledge on technical or historical details, political influence or financial means. Although they do not have a shared vision for the ship, they are able to reconcile their differing points of view through the joint effort that leads to the *Peking’s* display as the Port Museum’s central object.

The existence of a mutual outcome, however, does not necessarily imply consensus between the cooperating allies. Rather, it is likely to “contain at every stage the traces of multiple viewpoints, translations and incomplete battles”.<sup>58</sup> For example, the subject of constructive alterations in the restoration process has already given rise to conflict: which degree of historic authenticity should be recreated to restore the *Peking* as a historic artefact, and which compromises are made to make it spatially and didactically accessible to a broad public? Another potential site of conflict is the prioritization of conflicting narratives. Will (neo-)colonial power relations be put at the center of the discussion, as the Port Museum’s core team would like? Or will they be treated as a marginal aspect of the master narrative of maritime trade, as other actors imply?

Of course, these fundamental narrative decisions are not carried out solely by a discrete museum object and its immediate stakeholders, but must be regarded in their broader context. The field of tension between critical and affirmative views on maritime heritage is in fact structured by manifold path dependencies that have been set by Hamburg’s political and cultural landscape over years. After decades of demands and interventions by activists, artists, and academics, the reappraisal of the city’s colonial past has finally been acknowledged as part of Hamburg’s official heritage policy in 2014.<sup>59</sup> This has led to recognizable effects such as the establishment of an interdisciplinary “Advisory Board for the Reappraisal of Hamburg’s Colonial History” in 2019 and the recent publication of a framework paper for a city-wide decolonial remembrance concept.<sup>60</sup> The paper points to the tight entanglement of Hamburg’s maritime history with colonial exploitation, and demands for the city’s museums and other cultural institutions to take an active part in the process of decolonization.<sup>61</sup> However, these

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57 Star and Griesemer, “Institutional Ecology,” 404.

58 Ibid., 413.

59 Melanie Boieck, “‘Heia Safari’ in Der Hafen-City - (Post-) Koloniales Erinnerungsbewusstsein in Hamburg” (Hamburg, Universität Hamburg, 2018).

60 Beirat zur Dekolonisierung Hamburgs, “Eckpunktepapier Für Ein Gesamtstädtisches Dekolonisierendes Erinnerungskonzept,” 2021.

61 Ibid., 4.

propositions that pick up on contemporary decolonial debates are rarely echoed in the discourse on and praxis of Hamburg's maritime heritage so far. With regard to the port and its history, revisionist narratives remain dominant through the primarily nostalgic staging of historic artefacts, leading to an aesthetic experience of a pre- or early industrial era that is almost entirely stripped of its colonial dimension.<sup>62</sup>

Accordingly, the future Port Museum has to situate itself between a critical, mostly academic discourse on decolonial reappraisal on the one side, and affirmative practices of material maritime heritage on the other. Through its narrative complexity and its relevance for multiple actors leaning towards either side of this divide, the *Peking* carries the potential to mediate between these hitherto separated trajectories. This must by no means be misunderstood as a process of seamless integration, leading to a homogenous and harmonic whole. Rather, conflicts and disputes are going to shape the museum that is about to emerge around the *Peking*, and it is far from clear how the contesting narratives will eventually relate to each other.

The suspense between decolonial critique and euphemistic port-related narratives is, however, not unique to the case of Hamburg and the German Port Museum. Phyllis Leffler states that "maritime museums on both sides of the Atlantic have been slow to embrace controversial topics of social and cultural history," since they have been "founded for the specific purposes of positive promotion of the sea" and to "relate histories of courage, power, conquest, and progress".<sup>63</sup> In the city of Liverpool for example, it is mainly for the ongoing demands by local black communities, that critical reflections on the city's role in transatlantic slave trade and colonialism have been given room in the museum landscape, and that the International Slavery Museum has been established as a permanent extension of the Merseyside Maritime Museum in 2007.<sup>64</sup> Alice Mah further reflects on the complex "spatial and narrative relationships"<sup>65</sup> between these two: Although the International Slavery Museum is located in the top floor above the Maritime Museum, Mah notes that critical positions are still "cut-off in terms of representation and narrative, but also spatially".<sup>66</sup> These observations illustrate that the mere existence of decolonial approaches in a museum project is not sufficient to alter the overall

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62 Strupp, "Im Bann Des Authentischen? Historische Schiffe Und Maritime Museen in Hamburg"; Amenda, "Welthafenstadt' Und 'Tor Zur Welt': Selbstdarstellung Und Wahrnehmung Der Hafencity Hamburg 1900-1970".

63 Phyllis K. Leffler, "Maritime Museums and Transatlantic Slavery: A Study in British and American Identity," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 4, no. 1 (March 2006): 57f, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794010608656840>.

64 Robin Ostow, "The Museum as a Model for a Human Rights-Based Future: The International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, UK," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 12, no. 3 (February 25, 2021): 620-41, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huaa051>.

65 Mah, *Port Cities and Global Legacies*, 97.

66 Ibid.

narrative. Rather, they have to be looked upon in the light of their spatial, organizational and discursive ecology.

The *Peking's* prospect mooring in close proximity to the newly built Grasbrook-location, that is supposed to host multi-perspective views on globalization, raises hope that critical and present-oriented narratives might also be foregrounded in the *Peking's* presentation. The public noticeability of critical discourse in the future Port Museum as a whole, as well as its wider impact on Hamburg's heritage policy, will, however, not be determined by the *Peking* alone. The ship is in fact entangled in a much larger assemblage, containing not only the above-mentioned actors and communities that are immediately connected to the *Peking*, but also the city-wide museum landscape, the Port Museum's spatial contexts, long-term political trajectories and many more.

## 5. Conclusion

It has been shown that the *Peking* is of significant importance for a wide range of stakeholders for various reasons. Serving as a boundary object at the intersection of museum professionals, amateur ship enthusiasts, and political decision-makers, it allows different social worlds with different and partly contradictory agendas to interact and to cooperate. As Bruno Latour points out, an organizational entity is resilient, as long as its agents keep "performing it".<sup>67</sup> The *Peking* as a boundary object correspondingly mobilizes its stakeholders to bundle their resources, in order to preserve the ship and to transfer it to Hamburg as the German Port Museum's central object. Hence, the *Peking* can be regarded as the Port Museum's ontological, material, and organizational focal point in a sense that Latour calls "organizing as a mode of existence."<sup>68</sup> not only is it the museum's first tangible representation, but also the center around which crucial driving forces of the project group, and thus bring the Port Museum into being as a suspenseful, yet stable entity. It is for the ship's strength as a symbolic object and its interpretative flexibility, that the stakeholders are able to focus their efforts despite their conflicting individual interests.

However, the negotiations between these diverging standpoints outreach the question of how to harmonize different stakeholder's plans for a prominent museum object. At stake are, in fact, fundamentally different conceptions of how the maritime is intertwined with histories of violence

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67 Bruno Latour, "What's the Story? Organizing as a Mode of Existence," in *Agency without Actors? New Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. Jan-Hendrik Passoth, Birgit Maria Peuker, and Michael W. J. Schillmeier, Routledge Advances in Sociology 58 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 167.

68 Ibid., 168.

and exploitation.<sup>69</sup> It remains to be seen, to what degrees the presented perspectives leave room for each other and if the museum's final conception will transcend what Stephen Small calls "token gestures to critical approaches".<sup>70</sup> Compared to other port cities, Hamburg is late in coming to terms with its colonial and imperial past. It might be instructive for further reflections to contextualize the Port Museum and its leading object within other museum projects that are based on a longer and denser history of dealing with port cities' past and present position within global power relations. The city of Liverpool, for example, is currently redesigning its dock area, giving the International Slavery Museum a more prominent spatial and programmatic position within the maritime museum ensemble and hence meeting some of the criticism referred to above.<sup>71</sup> Discussions on the intertwining of maritime heritage with colonialism and imperialism keep gaining momentum in the museum landscape, and it will be seen how the Port Museum as a newly founded institution lives up to this. At best, the *Peking* could serve as a vehicle to implement decolonial critique and multivocal reflections of global power relations in the midst of an exceptionally well financed museum project. At worst, critical disruptions will be smoothed out by the overwhelmingly present narratives of technological excellence, nautical adventures, and maritime pride.

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69 Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 78 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, "Capitalism and the Sea: Sovereignty, Territory and Appropriation in the Global Ocean," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36, no. 4 (August 2018): 776–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817737319>.

70 Stephen Small, "Slavery, Colonialism and Museums Representations in Great Britain: Old and New Circuits of Migration.," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 4, no. IX (2011): 123.

71 Maya Wolfe-Robinson, "Slavery Museum to Be Expanded in 10-Year Liverpool Waterfront Project," *The Guardian*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/28/slavery-museum-to-be-expanded-in-10-year-liverpool-waterfront-project>.



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