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***“With perfect regularity throughout”: more-than-human geographies of the Royal  
Mail Steam Packet Company***

**Introduction: more-than-human maritime geographies**

Steamship services connected imperial, colonial and extra-imperial sites during the nineteenth century, facilitating ‘the movement of capital, people and texts’ around the world (Lambert and Lester 2006: 10). Steamships can thus be understood as one of the nineteenth century’s key ‘technologies that enhance the mobility of some peoples and places even as they also heighten the immobility of others’ (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006: 3). A company that represents well such technology and corresponding mobility is the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSPC), which connected Britain with the Caribbean and South America. The RMSPC sought to privilege the circulation of imperial news and correspondents, and the movements of ‘imperial careerists’ (Lambert and Lester 2006: 2). At the same time, the RMSPC enabled various unintended trans- and circum-Atlantic mobilities. In this chapter, I use the case study of the RMSPC to examine the significance of more-than-human geographies in the maritime world.

To contextualise, the RMSPC was an imperial project envisaged by James MacQueen, who planned an ambitious steamship service that would link eastern and western parts of the British Empire (MacQueen 1838). MacQueen, who had worked as a manager of a sugar estate during the late eighteenth century, went on to become a vocal critic of abolitionists during the 1820s and 1830s (Lambert 2008). Having known and made a living out of the British Caribbean under slavery, MacQueen hoped that steamship communication between Britain and the region would mitigate post-emancipation instabilities, particularly by promoting commerce. In a letter addressed to Francis Baring, MP, MacQueen argued in favour of his scheme, and wrote that, ‘[s]tartling as the subject of connecting China and New South Wales with Great Britain, through the West Indies, may at first sight appear, both as regards time and expense, still few things are more practicable’ (MacQueen 1838: 5-6). Prior to the RMSPC’s service, mail was transported across the Atlantic under sail from the packet station at Falmouth. Larger West Indian islands received their mail from brigs converted to steam (Bushell 1939: 3-4). MacQueen explained that within his envisaged scheme, the West India station would be ‘one of the most important, and

extensive, and complicated of the whole, and one where steam-vessels [could] be employed with the most beneficial effects' (MacQueen 1838, 28). A scaled-down version of MacQueen's plan, initially only serving the West Indies, was funded by the British Government in the form of a mail contract subsidy, worth £240,000 a year. Similarly to P&O, another mail-contract holding line, the RMSPC sought to present itself 'as existing not merely for the good of its shareholders but for the good of the nation' (Harcourt 2006: 3).

Steamship lines such as the RMSPC secured public funding precisely because they promised predictable and timetabled, or 'regular' service, and thus regular communication with colonies and extra-imperial spaces. The concept of regularity was invested with great significance by RMSPC managers and directors. Yet, it should be noted that despite the introduction of steamship technology, the RMSPC's vessels in the 1840s were hybrid in so far as they relied on steam power but could also harness sail power when necessary. When the Company's complicated scheme of routes proved over-ambitious during the first few months of operations in 1842, the directors reported their 'regret' that 'the service at its commencement was not performed with the regularity that could have been wished' (UCL RMSP 13, 28 September 1842: 1). Two years later, by contrast, the Company wrote to the British Admiralty on the subject of its modified scheme of routes, which had been in operation for six months. The RMSPC reported with 'great satisfaction' that the ships had 'performed their voyages with perfect regularity throughout' (NMM RMS 7/1, 8 January 1844). The report of 1846 stated that '[t]he Company's Ships continue to arrive and depart at the various places, both abroad and at home, with the greatest regularity, and the manner in which the Service is conducted appears to afford general satisfaction' (UCL RMSP 13, 15 October 1846: 1). Crosbie Smith, Ian Higginson and Philip Wolstenholme's work has highlighted the strategies deployed by Alfred and Philip Holt in building credibility for the Liverpool-based Ocean Steamship Company. The Holts' relationships of trust within engineering networks were framed by 'a moral economy, minimizing true waste and maximizing useful, *qua* good, work' (Smith, Higginson and Wolstenholme 2003: 388). The RMSPC sought to build credibility partly by investing in a rhetoric of regularity when communicating with the British Government and the public. This concept of 'regularity' was tied to notions of order and efficiency, and the Company sought to order its ships socially and

materially, desiring them to be places of ‘order, cleanliness, and efficiency’ (NMM RMS 38/1: 172). The Company’s vessels were highly regulated spaces, with hierarchies, divisions and surveillance mechanisms working to order journeys, Company infrastructure and the timetable. As Frances Steel notes, steamship services ‘fostered a stronger, more confident articulation of industrial achievement with national strength and imperial influence’, and the notion of regularity was key to this expression (Steel 2011: 4). As I will suggest in the next two sections of this chapter, idealised notions of order were frequently challenged, and in this respect, more-than-human factors had a significant impact on maritime operations.

In his article, ‘Towards a politics of mobility’, Tim Cresswell (2010) outlines six constituent parts of mobility. He suggests that the first of these is motive force, which causes a person or thing to move. The second is velocity, rhythm is a third important factor in mobility, and route is a fourth element in the equation. The experience of mobility, or what it feels like, is a fifth aspect. Lastly friction, which slows down or causes movement to stop, is to be considered the final facet of mobility. Cresswell indicates that these different elements combine to create ‘constellations of mobility’ at particular times (Cresswell 2010: 17). In this chapter I draw on Cresswell’s disaggregation of mobility to explore how more-than-human geographies affected the velocity, rhythms, routes and experience of the RMSPC’s shipping service, and even, on extreme occasions of ‘friction’, disrupted the service altogether. I examine the ordinary and exceptional ways in which the (ir)regularity of the steamship service was co-produced by more-than-human geographies, in the light of which I argue that during this period, a strong dissonance existed between the rhetoric of regularity attached to steamship transport, and the significance of more-than-human geographies in shaping steamship journeys.

Hybrid, posthuman and more-than-human theoretical approaches have questioned definitions of the human subject, and have highlighted the ‘complexity and interconnection of life’ (Castree and Nash 2006, Coyle 2006, Panelli 2010: 80, Whatmore 2002). Sensitivity to more-than-human actants is particularly appropriate to maritime research since, as Leah Gibbs (2009: 361) suggests, ‘water places’ reveal the ‘complex interactions that comprise a more-than-human world’. This chapter approaches such interactions through the historical case study of the RMSPC’s

operations in the nineteenth-century Caribbean. As I will suggest, the Company's service comprised of a network of 'diverse objects, organisms, forces and materialities' (Lorimer 2010: 238). Thus the RMSPCs commitment to providing a regular and timetabled service strained against the messy "hydro" materiality of the sea' (Peters 2012: 2).

In the field of Caribbean studies, Bonham Richardson has critiqued the historiographical absence of work that pays attention to 'environmental considerations' (Richardson 1997:13). The focus of this chapter upon the Caribbean's historical maritime places addresses this concern to bring to the fore the significance of environmental and other more-than-human factors in the region's past. Indeed, an examination of more-than-human maritime historical geographies provides one important way to further challenge 'the longstanding separation of urban and environmental studies', since port towns as well as shipping services depend on more-than-human interactions in coastal and deep-sea spaces (Braun 2005: 635). Further, while the advent of steamship technology was lauded in the nineteenth century as a means to end reliance on sail power and to sever journeys from natural rhythms, the RMSPC's operations between the 1840s and the 1860s reveal that early steamship technology continued to be shaped by more-than-human 'entanglements of people, animals and technologies' (Castree and Nash 2006: 501-2).

In this chapter I argue that despite the Company's heavy investment in a discourse of regularity, efficiency and order, the RMSPC's service can be understood as a network 'of actants-in-relation that are at once local and global, natural and cultural, and always more than human' (Whatmore 1999: 33). Having highlighted the importance of notions of regularity and efficiency to nineteenth-century steamship services, in the next section, 'Mundane more-than-human geographies of the RMSPC', I examine the everyday ways in which the non-human world shaped steamship operations. In the final section of the chapter, 'Exceptional more-than-human impact', I explore extraordinary moments when the more-than-human world played a particularly prominent role in shaping the Company's service.

### **Mundane more-than-human geographies of the RMSPC**

It is notable that as well as Company aspirations for a predictable and regular service, the British Admiralty also expected ships to move in strict adherence to the scheme of routes. Thus in response to the Company's superintendent at Grenada altering the timing of route number two (Grenada – Trinidad – Grenada – Barbados – Grenada) in the Lesser Antilles, the Admiralty indicated in unequivocal terms that the scheme 'should not be deviated from or experimented upon' (NMM RMS 6/3, 13 January 1844). Yet despite Admiralty expectations, the scheme of routes proved to be dynamic. Thus between January and December 1844, the RMSPC deviated from the printed scheme on nine separate occasions. Ships were delayed, for example at Havana in April 1844, but vessels also left their destinations too early (without waiting for the connecting line), as occurred in the same month at Nassau. Thus the Admiralty's desire for calculable and perfectly regular travel failed to correspond with the working realities of an intricately interconnecting service (NMM RMS 7/2, 4 March 1845). Even those familiar with the West Indies were inexperienced in piloting large steamships through those waters. Imperfect knowledge of the Caribbean seascape resulted in the grounding of ships, and therefore delays. Thus the scheme of routes was under frequent negotiation between humans. In addition to this, the timetable also operated through an important kind of negotiation with the more-than-human world. In this way, the steamship service was significantly shaped by 'the temporal rhythms of human/non-human difference' (Whatmore 2002: 4-5).

Despite ordered ideals, human and more-than-human factors repeatedly undermined the regularity of the RMSPC's service. Firstly, human errors proved routine. For example, the RMS *Thames* became grounded and was delayed in April 1844 due to the unexpected absence of a local pilot (NMM RMS 7/2, 15 July 1844). On another occasion, the commander of the schooner *Liffey* fell ill and the chief mate of the *Tay* was redeployed to assist the *Liffey*, leaving the *Tay* short of officers (NMM RMS 7/2, 3 October 1844). Moreover, despite the existence of extensive rules designed to order the ship, experience brought to light officers' ignorance of Company regulations. Thus the RMSPC deemed it necessary to request from 1850 onwards that commanders examine officers on their knowledge of these (NMM RMS 38/1: 19). The Company's ordering strategies worked against the counter-current of human idiosyncrasies and irregularities. Simultaneously on board any given ship, the

directors' and managers' desire for order strained against individuals' tendencies to act irregularly, spontaneously, or in contradiction to the Company's regulations.

Essentially, the RMSPC's desire to run an ordered and regular service was belied by the tendency of the world to 'kick back' against the neat spatio-temporal mapping of the Company's scheme of routes (Barad 1998, Whatmore 2002: 4-5). As Steel (2011:5) has highlighted, steamship operations 'were always messy'. I suggest that part of this messiness derived from the more-than-human geographies that shaped these logistical operations. The more-than-human world affected the RMSPC's service in various everyday ways, and particularly influenced the timetable. On one occasion, when the RMS *Thames* was travelling through the Caribbean in 1844, extreme bad weather at Bermuda meant that the ship arrived at Havana two days behind schedule (NMM RMS 7/1, 15 July 1844). During another journey, the RMS *Tay* arrived off the Bar of Tampico on 17 January 1845, but a violent northerly wind forced the ship to take shelter. It was only when the weather calmed on 20 January that the *Tay* was able to land the mail at Tampico (NMM RMS 7/1, 3 April 1845). Similarly, when the RMS *Avon* left England with the mail in December 1848, the ship experienced such 'tempestuous weather' in the early part of its journey that the captain and Admiralty Agent decided to alter the normal course and to coal at Madeira before steaming straight to St Thomas (NMM RMS 7/2, 15 February 1849).<sup>1</sup> As a result, the delivery of the mail was severely delayed at multiple destinations in the Caribbean. Meteorological factors shaped RMSPC navigation, which in turn affected the rhythms of the service, presenting a challenge to the regularity that the Company sought to ensure. In this respect, the RMSPC's officers and crew were faced with frequent reminders that they were 'powerless to achieve their desired outcomes unless the non-human entities perform[ed] the roles ascribed to them' (Woods 2007: 498).

The RMSPC's attempts to secure the integrity of the mail on board equally indicates the significance of more-than-human considerations. Firstly, post had to be kept dry, and the mail room needed to be secured against leaks, as, for example, a leaky mail room threatened to destroy the post on the RMS *Trent* in 1844 (NMM RMS 6/3,

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<sup>1</sup> The Admiralty Agent was the British Admiralty's representative on board the RMSPC's steamers, and was responsible for overseeing the safe delivery of the mail.

1844-1845). During the first decade of service, the Company also found that rats had a tendency to destroy the mail bags and damage the post. In response, the Company hired a rat-catcher to reduce the effects of this animal geography when the vessels were in Southampton waiting to depart, and further ruled in 1851 that cats would be sent to sea on the ships (NMM RMS 38/1: 7). Whereas the RMSPC sought to regulate the rats' incursion into the space of the ship, cats became part of the regulatory infrastructure of the ship space. In this way, the RMSPC's service was shaped by a 'hybrid engagement of human and non-human entities at all scales' (Woods 2007: 487).

While animal geographies affected the integrity of the post, a starkly contrasting perspective on human/ animal interactions on board ship is provided through Charles Kingsley's account of a journey to the West Indies on board an RMSPC steamer. His writing indicates that passenger impulses to collect as they travelled meant that vessels were also at times deliberately internally constituted as more-than-human worlds for entertainment rather than functional reasons. Kingsley recalled that travelling on board the RMS *Neva*, under the command of Captain Woolward, the passengers and crew staged a 'wild-beast show' for their own entertainment. The doctor 'contributed an alligator' and the chief engineer exhibited a 'live Tarantula' (Kingsley 1869: 396). While Kingsley's claim of an alligator on board is startling, his narrative certainly suggests that animals and insects accompanying passengers sometimes served as part of the spectacle and entertainment of steamship travel, breaking up the monotony of oceanic journeys. Animal presence on board RMSPC steamers was thus shaped both by necessity and curiosity. The travelling steamers' interior spaces were constituted, intentionally and unwittingly, as more-than-human worlds.

Weather, water and animals were all co-constituents of the RMSPC's service - its integrity, its safety, its rhythms, and spaces. The RMSPC saw these as elements of its service to be ordered and regulated, while passengers occasionally sought to construct a more-than-human presence as a spectacle to be staged within the ship space. In these ways, more-than-human movements and interactions shaped the Company's operations on a weekly basis during the normal course of service. Yet, as I will

explore next, on rare occasions, the more-than-human world dramatically and dynamically altered the RMSPC's operations in the Caribbean.

To highlight, I argue that despite the Company's heavy investment in a discourse of regularity, efficiency and order, the RMSPC's service can be understood as a network 'of actants-in-relation that are at once local and global, natural and cultural, and always more than human' (Whatmore 1999: 33). Having introduced the RMSPC, and underscored the importance of notions of regularity and efficiency to nineteenth-century steamship services, in the next section, 'Mundane more-than-human geographies of the RMSPC', I examine the everyday ways in which the non-human world shaped steamship operations. Finally, in 'Exceptional more-than-human impact', I explore extraordinary moments of service when the more-than-human world played a particularly prominent role in shaping the Company's service.

### **Exceptional more-than-human impact**

The winter of 1866-1867 proved traumatic for the RMSPC on the occasion of a yellow fever outbreak, which blighted the steamship service with death and disease. The RMSPC's crew and shore-based employees suffered devastatingly high mortality at St Thomas in the Danish West Indies, the Caribbean hub of the transportation network. To understand the import of this health crisis for the RMSPC, it needs to be appreciated that twice a month, a steamer on the 'Atlantic route' departed from Southampton, carrying mail, passengers and low-bulk high-value cargo, and made a journey of fourteen days and nine hours to St Thomas. At St Thomas, this steamer connected with various RMSPC branch routes departing from St Thomas and travelling towards Jamaica and Colon, Havana and Puerto Rico, the Windward and Leeward Islands, Santa Martha, Cartagena and Grey Town. After a fortnight's pause at St Thomas, and having replenished its supply of coal for the homeward leg, the transatlantic steamer would set off towards Southampton with people and mail bound for British shores (NMM RMS 36/4). However in January 1867, the Company learned that one of its vessels, the RMS *La Plata*, had sailed from St Thomas harbour on 31 December 1866 with more than fifty of the crew sick, and that twenty-three of these were now deceased (NMM RMS 6/17, 7 January 1867 and 16 January 1867). Also in January, George Gibon, staff commander and naval agent, wrote to the

Company to report ‘a most poisonous malaria in the atmosphere’ of St Thomas. ‘Most of the native labourers and the crews of the collieries employed there in discharging coals, and coaling the Company’s mail packets’, he wrote, had died (NMM RMS 6/17, 16 January 1867).

The yellow fever virus, considered here as more-than-human, is spread by the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito when the insect ingests diseased blood and subsequently injects the virus into a healthy person. The mosquito is mostly found in urban areas, and prefers to breed in standing water (Hays 2005: 179). Doctors typically recognised patients from the jaundiced appearance of their eyes and skin, black vomit, and a high fever that could cause delirium (Hays 2005: 180). During the nineteenth century, medical opinion was divided on the cause of the illness, with some attributing yellow fever to atmospheric, miasmatic and meteorological influences, and others stressing sanitation and hygiene (De Paolo 2006: 122). Despite the different emphases in medical thought, as Philip Curtin indicates, the standard response to yellow fever in the West Indies had been a mobile one, namely flight from the outbreak (Curtin 1998: 64-5). Yet flight was not a viable solution for the RMSPC. As a British Government mail-contract holder, the Company had a commitment to maintain communication with the West Indies, and thus required its ships to continue to pass through either St Thomas or an equivalent site where the mail transfer could be made.

Once the impact of yellow fever on crew mortality became apparent, the RMSPC took an initial step towards managing the crisis by instructing its transatlantic steamers to transfer passengers, mail and cargo to the Company’s inter-colonial branch vessels just outside of St Thomas harbour (NMM RMS 54/2, 24 April 1867). The RMSPC’s managers also instructed vessels to coal at Jamaica rather than at St Thomas. Yet the deaths raged on. In light of the continuing mortality, a letter to *The Times* highlighted the Company’s decision, over the years, to retain St Thomas as the main Caribbean transfer station (*The Times*, 21 January 1866). The correspondent accused the Company of being ‘morally guilty of murder’. This debate about the location of the Company’s hub was politically charged, since some interest groups and individuals had long been invested in seeking to persuade the RMSPC to use a British colony for this purpose, rather than St Thomas. At the end of January 1867, the RMSPC took a second step towards managing the crisis and altered the routes of

its service. The Company changed its transfer point (for the exchange of post, cargo and passengers) to Peter Island, approximately twenty-five miles from St Thomas, with coaling to take place at other stations along the vessels' routes such as Grenada (NMM RMS 6/17, 31 January 1867).

As the RMSPC's yellow fever outbreak indicates, the steamship network facilitated intended mobilities, such as the circulation of people, Government despatches and news, but the service also enabled unwanted mobilities, some of which, as in the case of yellow fever, stemmed from more-than-human movements and concentrations. The *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito and the yellow fever virus shaped the RMSPC's operations in 1867, temporarily altering the routes of the service and slowing the ordinary rhythms of steamers as they paused in quarantine. When yellow fever or any other 'highly infectious distemper' was prevalent in America or the West Indies, the Privy Council could require every vessel that had called at an infected port to anchor at a specified place, where the vessel would be visited to ascertain the health of the crew before the ship was allowed to proceed to its port of destination (Booker 2007: 256). Thus quarantine regulations could force ships to pause for several days before being cleared to disembark passengers and cargo, and during the yellow fever outbreak, the RMSPC's ships were detained in quarantine at the Mother Bank on their arrival in Britain (NMM RMS 4/4, 25 October 1867: 6-7). As Tim Edensor points out, '[j]ourneys have a particular rhythmic shape' (Edensor 2010: 6). Following this line of thought, the outbreak of yellow fever altered the 'rhythmic shape' of steamship passages. The presence of yellow fever around the town and harbour of St Thomas not only brought death and illness to RMSPC employees, but also altered the transport network's routes and subjected the Company to critical public scrutiny and additional expense. Unsurprisingly, passengers were deterred from travelling through St Thomas on board the Company's steamers at this time (NMM RMS 4/4, 28 October 1868: 4). The impact of the more-than-human world on the Company's operations was interpreted by the RMSPC's directors as a 'visitation of providence' (NMM RMS 4/4, 25 October 1867: 3-5). Even so, while the crisis was articulated in religious terms, the Company's logistical response to yellow fever suggests that the RMSPC understood the health crisis as related to particular sites. Essentially, the Company responded to the outbreak by altering the routes and hub of its operations. Thus the Company changed the geographies of its steamship network in response to

this particular more-than-human concern. As the yellow fever outbreak of 1866-67 highlights, the RMSPC's operations both constituted and were constituted by more-than-human mobilities.

Just as the yellow fever crisis appeared to subside towards the end of 1867, another more-than-human geography powerfully affected the Company's operations. The RMS *Rhone* departed from Southampton on 2 October 1867 under the command of Captain T. Woolley with mail for the West Indies, and arrived at St Thomas on 14 October. Due to yellow fever concerns at St Thomas, the *Rhone* proceeded to Peter Island on 24 November. The vessel was due to begin its return journey to Britain with passengers and post on the 29th of the month ('The hurricane in the West Indies', *The Times*, 8 November 1867 and 13 November 1867). On the morning of 29 October, the weather was 'threatening' and the wind was blowing from northward (*The Times*, 22 November 1867). Just after midday, the wind calmed, and the *Rhone* began steaming towards the sea. However a hurricane gathered force, driving the *Rhone* onto a reef at Salt Island and wrecking the vessel. Passengers, who were lashed onto the deck, drowned (*The Times*, 23 November 1867). Officers and members of the crew also lost their lives in the tragedy. The *Rhone* had one hundred and forty-five people on board, of whom fewer than thirty survived ('The hurricane in the West Indies', *The Times*, 21 November 1867). The hurricane swept through the island of St Thomas, tearing roofs away from houses, destroying lives, shipping and infrastructure. Neighbouring Tortola was also struck. The RMS *Conway* was driven ashore at Tortola and dismantled, but fared better than the *Rhone* in so far as the *Conway* was later recovered. As the hurricane began, the RMS *Wye* attempted to get up steam and proceed to sea, but was wrecked on Buck Island. *The Times* reported of the *Wye*'s survivors that five of the thirteen amongst the crew were 'whites, including the captain, the chief officer, and the boiler maker', providing a rare glimpse into the social composition of the RMSPC's inter-colonial crew (*The Times*, 22 November 1867). The RMS *Derwent* was also thrown ashore at St Thomas during the hurricane (NMM RMS 4/4, 29 April 1868: 3-4).

**[insert Figure 1.1 here - landscape]**

**Figure 1.1 ‘Wreck of the Royal Mail “Rhone”’, by William Frederick Mitchell © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London**

The RMSPC was only one of several shipping companies with crew and vessels near to St Thomas and Peter Island that day, and other ‘vessels in the harbour were either sunk, smashed to pieces, or driven ashore dismasted’ (*The Times*, 22 November 1867). The RMS *Douro* was two hundred and fifty miles away from St Thomas during the hurricane, and an officer described the scene when the *Douro* arrived at St Thomas harbour on 30 October:

First impressions underwent a sad change when we got sufficiently near to see the harbour strewn with wrecks, the lighthouse gone, and many houses roofless. A confused mass, near the middle of the harbour, built up of crushed hulls, broken spars, and loose cordage, was formed by the ship *British Empire*, lately out of England with 3,800 tons of coal for the use of the steamers of the Royal Mail Company (*The Times*, 22 November, 1867).

By the afternoon of 30 October, two hundred and ninety-two bodies were reported to have been washed ashore and buried (*The Times*, 22 November 1867). The crisis deepened further when an earthquake struck St Thomas on 18 November. In addition to the human consequences of these non-human mobilities, the hurricane and earthquake had serious financial implications for the RMSPC, particularly as the Company insured its own vessels, and the share price fell as a result of the hurricane (*The Times*, 8 November 1867; RMS 4/4, 29 April 1868: 20-21). The RMSPC was forced to replace and repair vessels, and also spent almost five hundred pounds ‘in clearing away the Ruins in the Harbour of St Thomas and repairing Walls’ (RMS 4/4, 29 April 1868: 12-13). On 18 November, the *Times* reported the scene at Southampton in dramatic terms:

The docks and the Royal Mail Company’s offices have for some days past been hourly besieged by anxious inquirers, especially women, too many of whom are in the most lamentable state of uncertainty as to whether they are at this moment wives or widows; and the dejected countenances of most of those who are to be seen pacing rapidly to and from the docks, despite the bitterly cold cast wind, proclaim them to be bound on the same melancholy errand. (*The Times*, 18 November 1867).

At Southampton, a public subscription fund was set up for widows, orphans and those who suffered loss as a result of the hurricane (RMS 4/4, 29 April 1868: 12-13). The

effects of the hurricane elicited responses at multiple sites of the RMSPC's network in the Atlantic world.

I have written elsewhere of how labour in post-emancipation Caribbean port towns, as in inland post-emancipation spaces, was shaped by contests over mobility, and of the ways in which shore-based maritime labourers were accused of demanding unreasonable wages and avoiding work (Anim-Addo, 2011). In the aftermath of the hurricane, this discourse was seemingly heightened as James Lamb, H.M. Consul at St Thomas, condemned the black inhabitants of St Thomas, writing that they had 'behaved badly in the past few days', requesting what he termed 'exorbitant wages', and had failed to cooperate with 'the authorities'. Another report emanating from St Thomas on 5 November claimed that 1,600 dollars were offered to a gang of one hundred men for a day of work 'but not one could be obtained, as the blacks have struck work' (*The Times*, 23 November 1867). S.D. Smith writes of the 1831 hurricane in St Vincent and notes that 'the enslaved population did not take advantage of the disaster to mount a challenge to white authority', however the reports received in the aftermath of the St Thomas hurricane suggest that contests over labour could be exacerbated in exceptional moments of more-than-human impact (Smith 2012: 97). Irrespective of the truth of Lamb's claims of non-cooperation, the circulation of such reports indicates that these exceptional moments of more-than-human force brought to the fore pre-existing social divisions and conflicts in the post-emancipation Caribbean.

The extreme more-than-human impact of the hurricane and earthquake of 1867 on the RMSPC's service in the Caribbean and in Britain rendered the Company's service distinctly irregular for a period of time, as lives were lost, damaged ships and infrastructure had to be repaired and the schedule was thrown into disarray. The Company's experiences in 1867 serve as a powerful reminder of the contingent and messy more-than-human geographies that shaped the RMSPC's operations. The mobility of the 1867 hurricane altered steamers' velocity and produced friction in the Company's network. Thus the 'constellation of mobility' of the service was revealed as fragile and reliant on a particular coalescence of non-human conditions (Cresswell 2010: 17).

## **Conclusion**

At a meeting in October 1868 the RMSPC's chairman reflected upon the Company's service in the preceding years and stated:

Whilst the Harbour of St Thomas was in ruins by the Hurricane, coals blown down, and people all at their wits end, then the Earthquake came and completed the destruction of the place. A panic seemed to seize the people, and perhaps not unnaturally, under the circumstances you will say, but it was most unfortunate, for everybody avoided St Thomas and the Yellow Fever, so that I very almost say that we had nature herself conspiring against us. (NMM RMS 4/4, 28 October 1868: 19-20)

This suggestion that 'nature' was conspiring against the Company underlines the important ways in which the RMSPC's fortunes were shaped by more-than-human as well as human factors.

The RMSPC's maritime operations were 'precariously vulnerable to non-human interventions' by weather systems, animals or organisms (Woods 2007: 498). Despite the Company's desire to provide a service characterised by predictability, order, and regularity, the steamship service was a contingent network of material, human and more-than-human elements that had to coalesce in particular ways to produce 'regular' journeys that might progress in accordance with the Company's scheme of routes. Through a view on the more-than-human world, and particularly moments of exception for the steamship service, I have suggested that the RMSPC's operations in ordinary and extraordinary moments were characterised by a 'multiplicity of space-times generated in/by the movements and rhythms of heterogeneous association' (Whatmore 2002: 6). In the maritime world, more-than-human considerations were constant. These had to be negotiated through alterations, adaptations and responses in everyday and exceptional moments, in order to achieve an elusive but highly desirable regularity of service.

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