

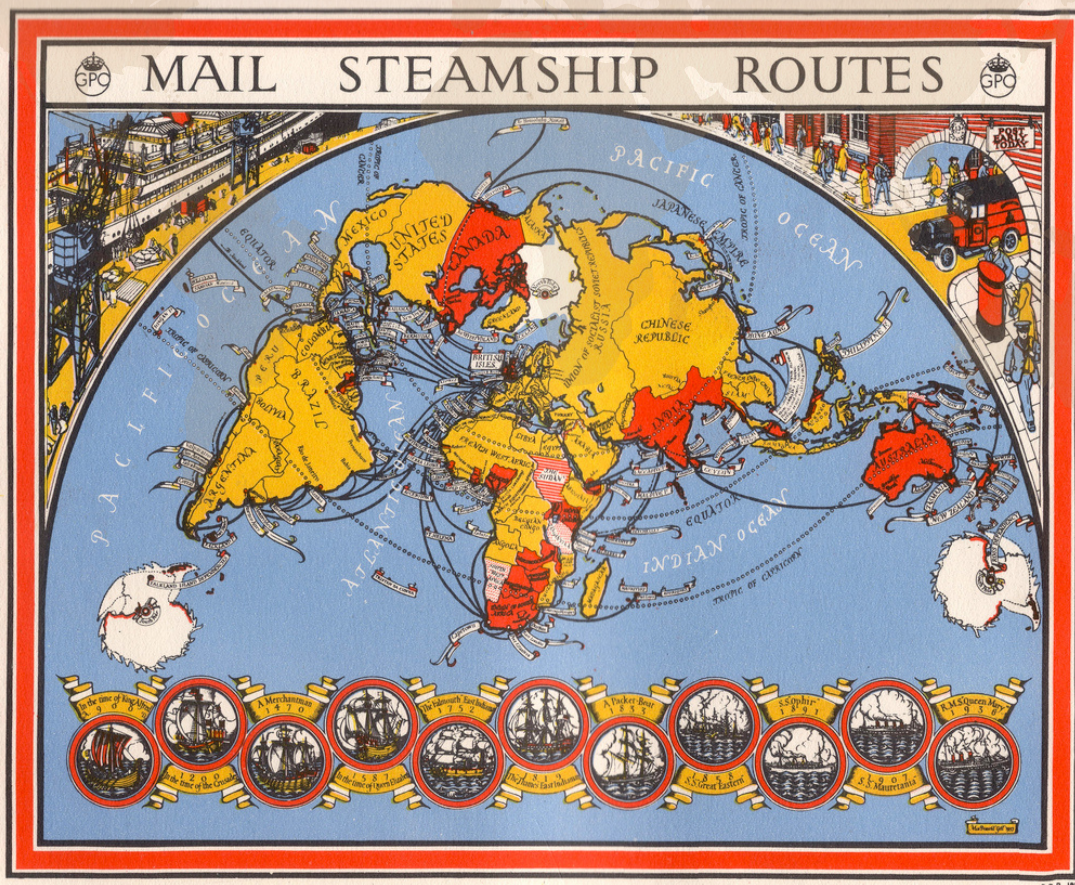
Tamar Rozett

In Technology We Trust: Why Colonizer Families Expected Too Much of the British Empire Mail

Tuesday, Feb. 20, 2024

12.15-1:45 pm

Students Building, Hall 101



Abstract

The sisters Eliza Hillier and Martha Powell, nee Medhurst, missed each other, literally: over the course of a decade, from 1846-1856, when one set out for Britain the other remained in East Asia, and vice versa. Like other itinerant colonizer families, the sisters depended on the British empire mail to stay connected. This talk untangles their expectations and experiences of the nineteenth-century mail, as a case study into the ways technological upheavals both impacted personal lives and were shaped by personal practices and perspectives. Through a joint analysis of family archives and postal system documents such as schedules, guidebooks, inner office memorandums, or parliamentary reports, it argues that colonizer families' frequent travels between empire and Britain led to a rearrangement of expectations, as evident in the emotional vocabulary they used to describe their experiences of the empire mail service. Correspondents were steeped in a belief in technological progress that supported colonial worldviews. Therefore, they expected innovations – from steam engines to postage stamps to government subsidies – to promote the same changes in the colonial setting as they did in Britain, thus ignoring their own experiences of colonial communications. Placed within the larger context of my research into empire mail technology, the case of the Hillier-Medhursts calls attention to the ways in which the reception of technology was, and still is, motivated by a volatile mix of emotional substructures and political worldviews. Echoing the recent quantum leaps from envelopes to emails to emojis, it explains the frustration with experiences of technology that are felt to this day.

Tamar Rozett is a historian of modern Britain and its empire, focusing on the personal and interpersonal repercussions of everyday experiences. Her first book project, of which this talk is a part, *Communication Issues: User Experiences of the Nineteenth Century British Empire Mail* (in preparation), investigates the ways colonizers' expectations of technology in empire marked a collision between imperial ideology and experience. Her second project, *Scrubbed: The Transformation in Soaping in the Age of Empire*, examines the shift in European definitions and practices of cleanliness within imperial encounters, and includes work on the unresearched letters of Hester Stanhope with Zoe Beenstock. Tamar completed her PhD dissertation at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2020). She was then a guest scholar and lecturer at Duke University (2019-2020), a postdoctoral fellow at the Tel Aviv University School of History (2021-2022), and a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Haifa (2023). She is now a Dan David fellow at Tel Aviv University.