

## Afterword: Reflections on the Motley Crew as Port City Proletariat

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay reflects on the workers in Atlantic and Indian Ocean port cities who made possible the rapidly expanding system of global capitalism between 1650 and 1850. In all of the ports treated in this volume, a mixture of multi-ethnic, male and female, unskilled, often unwaged laborers collectively served as the linchpins that connected local hinterlands (and seas) to bustling waterfronts, tall ships, and finally the world market. Although the precise combination of workers varied from one port to the next, all had an occupational structure in which half or more of the population worked in trade or the defense of trade, for example in shipbuilding/repair, the hauling of commodities to and from ships, and the building of colonial infrastructure, the docks and roads instrumental to commerce. This “motley crew” – a working combination of enslaved Africans, European/Indian/Chinese indentured servants, sailors, soldiers, convicts, domestic workers, and artisans – were essential to the production and worldwide circulation of commodities and profits.

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“They were a wild company; men of many climes – not at all precise in their toilet arrangements, but picturesque in their very tatters.” So wrote Herman Melville in his novel *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847) about the dirty, ragged, motley mutineers of the whale ship *Julia* as they were summoned to face a stern English consul in Tahiti. The sixteen sailors were indeed from “many climes”: the names affixed on their round robin, the seamen’s traditional instrument of protest, included “Black Dan”, Antone the Portuguese, Wymootoo the Marquesan islander, Van the Finn, Pat the Irishman, and “Beauty”, the ugly Englishman. Thirteen of them could not sign their names, each scrawling an “X” instead on the round robin. These workers of the world came together in a steadfast refusal to labor for their incompetent, contract-breaking captain.<sup>1</sup>

1. Herman Melville, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*. Ed. by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago, IL, 1968 [1847]), p. 78.

Neither the mutiny, nor the men were entirely fictional. Melville based the story in his novel on a defiant uprising that had actually taken place aboard the Australian whaler *Lucy Ann* in 1842. The writer knew whereof he spoke because he had participated in the mutiny. Like the literate narrator in *Omoo*, he may have drawn up a round robin. Melville the sailor also knew intimately the kind of men he wrote about: the motley crews that manned the ships and labored in port cities around the terraqueous globe, providing the labor that made possible a dynamic, throbbing, increasingly powerful system of global capitalism. Writing at the end of the period under study in this book, as steam ships brought the age of sail to an end, Melville penned what were probably the greatest portraits of the motley crew the world has ever known. He described precisely and vividly the social subject – and social force – at the heart of this volume.<sup>2</sup>

The mixture of peoples on board Melville's ship existed, on a larger scale, in port cities. Indeed, his shipmates had joined the whaler from places like New Bedford, Valparaíso, Honolulu, and Sydney. Brought together by global maritime capital and organized by their captain to labor in cooperative (and profitable) ways aboard the vessel, these workers had transformed their cooperation into something new, dangerous, and of their own choosing: they transcended their multi-ethnic origins, trusted each other, and developed a new kind of political cooperation as a band of mutineers. The workers' collective bonding and militant action bespoke a new kind of community based on class, on ship and ashore.

The essays in this volume treat motley crews in a far-flung collection of colonial and postcolonial port cities. In the Atlantic they range from Cape Town to Havana, Paramaribo, and Rio de Janeiro, while in the Indian Ocean they include Batavia, Hugli/Calcutta, and Manila. These ports had different origins, geographies, and chronologies, yet they rapidly developed common characteristics. All served as linchpins that connected local hinterlands (and seas) to the growing capitalist world market; all were essential to the production and worldwide circulation of commodities. Although the types and combination of workers varied from one city to the next, all had an occupational structure in which perhaps half or more of the population worked in trade or the defense of trade, for example in shipbuilding/repair, the hauling of commodities to and from ships, and the building of colonial infrastructure, the docks and roads instrumental to commerce.

2. Melville worked at sea, on merchant, whaling, and naval ships, from 1839 to 1844. On the mutiny of the *Lucy Ann*, see Wilson Hefflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*. Ed. by Mary K. Bercaw Edwards and Thomas Farel Heffernan (Nashville, TN, 2004), ch. 17. The notion of the "motley crew" as a social subject and concept appeared in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000).

Crucially, all had at their core a motley proletariat, composed of different kinds of workers of international origins.

This is not the working class we are accustomed to seeing in the pages of labor history books. Here, we have not white, male, skilled, waged, national industrial workers, but rather a mix of multi-ethnic, male and female, skilled and unskilled, waged and unwaged laborers who did not always produce commodities but definitely produced value and made possible the accumulation of capital on a global scale. The authors of the essays add breadth, depth, and texture to the portrait of this understudied group of worldwide workers. Matthias van Rossum finds that the “amphibious monster”, the Dutch East India Company, mobilized 57,000 workers in the middle of the eighteenth century; they were European, south Asian, and east Asian contract and casual laborers, sailors, soldiers, dockworkers, slaves, *corvée* workers, and artisans. Kevin Dawson shows how highly skilled deep-sea divers came from West Africa to plumb the deep blue waters of the Caribbean. Titas Chakraborty discovers that the domestic workers in the settlements of the Dutch East India Company and the English East India Company in Hugli/Calcutta originated in global trade networks: they were Portuguese and Asian, from Indonesia, Ceylon, and various places in India. Pepijn Brandon explains how the Dutch rulers of Paramaribo in Suriname used racialization to divide and control the mobile African slaves and multinational sailors and soldiers who did the city’s essential work. Some of the “British” soldiers who invaded and occupied Manila in 1762 were actually British, but many more, writes Megan C. Thomas, were Indian “sepoys”, Indo-Portuguese “Topasses”, African “Coffreys”, Chinese “coolies”, and French deserters. According to Evelyn P. Jennings, the road builders in and around the port city of Havana consisted of enslaved Africans, vagrants, recaptured run-aways, indentured servants from three continents (Europe, North America, and Asia), as well as *irlandeses*, *yucatecos*, and *isleños* – contract workers from, respectively, Ireland, Mexico, and the Canary Islands off the coast of West Africa. Martine Jean describes the workers who built Rio de Janeiro’s modern prison, the Casa de Correção: they were “a cosmopolitan working class that included African slaves, free people of color, and sailors of multinational origins, foreign immigrants, soldiers, and skilled artisans”. Clare Anderson depicts the workers in the “carceral circuits” of the Indian Ocean, the slaves, convicts, lascars, migrants, and local laborers who cleared land and built roads, docks, harbors, and lighthouses. Melina Teubner draws a rich portrait of Rio’s free and unfree multi-ethnic, mostly West African *quitandeiras*, who hollered, sang, and sold *angú* to hungry sailors, slaves, and other mobile workers within the city’s proletarian micro-economy. These essays help to create a new, broader, more inclusive, more democratic labor history.

Gary B. Nash taught us long ago that colonial cities have been crucibles of class formation and dynamic sites for the development of capitalism. The two

went hand in bloody hand as the rulers of Europe organized and disciplined workers to produce and transport commodities for the world market. Port cities were dynamic centers of “articulation” where producers in colonial hinterlands (slaves and farmers, for example) were linked to laborers in the port (porters and dockers), who were, in turn, connected to workers aboard ships and, after the voyage, to other port city workers and finally to consumers, in the metropolises, other parts of the empire, and beyond. Ports thus always faced two directions, inward toward productive hinterlands and outward toward the world market. Global capitalism, itself an “amphibious monster”, was a differentiated set of subsystems articulated into new and highly profitable regimes of labor and accumulation.<sup>3</sup>

Port cities were defined by movement, just like the ever-churning seas that bordered them. People, ships, commodities, and ideas – all moved to the rhythmic labor of the motley crew. When tall ships sailed into port and docked, many “hands” rushed to the vessel to disgorge their precious global cargoes, then after a time many more refilled them with valuable local commodities before they set sail again. The work of the motley crew was shaped by both a colonial context of labor scarcity and the seasonal nature of labor, which was based on the timing of annual production in the hinterland (sugar, coffee, spices) and the synchronized arrival and departure of ships. Merchants, manufacturers, and military officers who organized port city workers needed huge quantities of labor power at certain times of the year and at the same time required flexibility in its usage because of seasonality, disruptions caused by nature, and the unpredictable ups and downs of global business and political cycles. They also required an extensive division of labor, from the artisanal labor required to repair ships to the mass labor needed to move heavy hogsheads to and from ships. Moreover, many if not most port city workers had to be mobile in order to link, for example, plantation to port. The port city itself, as a social formation, was something of a social factory that required careful coordination of many kinds of work, productive and reproductive. Because the slave trade out of Africa flowed into both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, enslaved Africans could be found in practically all oceanic port cities between 1700 and 1850. They were joined by sailors, soldiers, indentured servants, convicts, domestic workers, *corvée* workers, and artisans. Rulers used the port cities as laboratories in which they experimented with various types and combinations of labor. As several of our essayists suggest, the flow of ruling-class experience in organizing labor systems is a critical theme in transoceanic history.

Controlling a mobile, many-headed urban proletariat was no easy matter. Port city ruling classes used the law as their greatest instrument of

3. Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979).

disciplinary power, creating police powers and prescribing for urban “crimes” a range of violent punishments from whippings to incarceration to execution. Many port city governments criminalized unauthorized cooperation among members of the motley crew, creating differential punishments for white workers and those of color who ran away together. Only Brandon makes racialization a major theme in his essay, but the efforts by authorities both to create and manipulate social divisions were more or less universal across the port cities of the globe.

Cities by the sea were full of transient people, most of whom came to work, some willingly, some not. Many were fugitives, strangers, people trying to escape something or find something, like money. Almost all of them had a profound oceanic experience behind them, which could be a source of shared identity. As Steve Higginson and Tony Wailey wrote in their book *Edgy Cities*, the very word “port” derives from the Latin *portus*, which in ancient Rome had the dual meaning of harbor and haven. The port was a place of commerce based on the arrival and departure of ships, but it was potentially a place of freedom compared to the slavery and serfdom of the countryside. Cities by the sea have been “places of comers and goers, dodgers and drifters, grafters and grifters and anyone who prefers the cool welcoming fugitive night”.<sup>4</sup>

The class structures of port cities reflected concentrated political, economic, and social power. Rulers were usually a combination of imperial and business authorities, the former representing the state, the latter the wealthiest men of the colony’s leading enterprises – the lords of commercial agriculture, trade, and manufacture. Imperial representatives and local leaders of the economy never had identical interests, and rifts frequently emerged, making governance of those down below even more challenging. The middling classes of the port city consisted of professionals – lawyers, doctors, ministers – as well as master craftsmen, for example shipbuilders. These groups usually allied with the business elite as their economic fortunes depended on them. The social power of the port city lay in its workers of many skills, ethnic backgrounds, and relationships to authority. Although the specific economic activities of each port varied by place, climate, and commodities produced, most ports had roughly similar social compositions and class relations. Indeed, the port cities of the world often had more in common with each other than they did with their own national hinterlands – a distinctive sense of time shaped by the tides and the seasonal nature of work, which, in turn, made the imposition of discipline from above more difficult than it was in landed society. Shifting shorelines, from Naples to New Orleans to New York, produced what Higginson and Wailey call “edgy cities and ‘edgy’ people”. The peoples of port cities

4. Steve Higginson and Tony Wailey, *Edgy Cities* (Liverpool, 2006).

“understand, better than most, change, flux and unpredictability” as these were central to their lives.<sup>5</sup>

Rulers implanted heavy architecture in port cities as bulwarks against the flux – and against their enemies, both imperial and indigenous. Many settlements featured massive, hulking European fortresses, and, of course, the motley crew had been the ones to set the stones. Havana had three: Castillo de la Real Fuerza (1555–1567), Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro (1589–1630), and Castillo de San Carlos de la Cabana (1763–1774). Cape Town featured the Kasteel de Goede Hoop, while Paramaribo rested behind Fort Zeelandia, both built by global Dutch traders in the late seventeenth century. Other physical manifestations of European maritime power dotted seascapes from West Africa to South Asia. The very architecture of port cities reflected their origins in trade, war, colonialism, and capitalism.

Historically, the motley crew is, by definition, a work group above all else – a diverse assemblage of mobile workers who occupied a strategic position in the port city and indeed in larger regional, transoceanic, and world economies. It is an informal gang with a job to do; it is task-oriented and temporary in its existence. A crew might, for example, unload a ship or build a wharf, after which it would be disbanded. Enmeshed in a wider set of work groups, its collective power animated the entire port city economy. As the atom of class organization, the motley crew might also combine with other groups in resistance, in mob actions, strikes, or collective escapes from exploitation. The heterogeneous motley crew unified itself through the accomplishment of its tasks – in other words, through common cooperative work.

Port cities have long been female-centered. Because many men disappeared from port for long periods of time to work at sea, women played independent roles they might not have been permitted in other locations within the same colony or empire. Women worked as sellers of food on the waterfront; they worked in brothels; they cooked, washed clothes, and cleaned houses; they scavenged; they nursed and minded children. Independent economic activity was a must for the sake of survival. Just as sailors were said to have “a wife in every port”, women might have multiple husbands who arrived in port at different times of the year. Because seafaring was dangerous and often resulted in premature death, port cities also had a larger than usual share of widows and female-headed households. As Titas Chakraborty makes clear, social and biological reproduction in port cities depended on unusual family formations – relationships that would often be denounced as sinful by middle-class moralizers and reformers.

5. *Ibid.* On the structure of port cities, see Jacob Price, “Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century”, *Perspectives in American History*, 8 (1974), pp. 121–186; and Franklin W. Knight and Peggy K. Liss (eds), *Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650–1850* (Knoxville, TN, 1991).

The motley crew was cosmopolitan and sophisticated. What Herman Melville said about sailors in the middle of the nineteenth century was to a large extent true of port city dwellers most anytime in the age of sail:

No custom is strange; no creed is absurd; no foe, but who will in the end prove a friend. [...] Long companionship with seamen of all tribes: Manilla-men, Anglo-Saxons, Cholos, Lascars, and Danes, wear away in good time all mother-tongue stammerings. You sink your clan; down goes your nation; you speak a world's language, jovially jabbering in the Lingua-Franca of the forecastle.

Port workers not only had the experience of the world within them, they lived in a place where news of the world arrived with each and every ship.<sup>6</sup>

The motley crew had its own “proletarian public sphere” – the lower decks of the ships, the docks, the streets, and workplaces where people from various continents came together to spin their yarns and share their experience. Information circulated through these “cultural contact zones”, about the pilfered goods of the shadow economy or the prospects of stowing away on a soon-to-depart vessel. During the 1790s, as Julius Scott has shown, the knowledge whispered on the “common wind” among Caribbean sailors, runaways, and market women concerned the abolition movement in Great Britain and revolution in France and Saint Domingue. Raucous waterfront taverns were an especially important setting for the motley crew: drink, music, dance, and sedition were born of desperation and extreme cultural variety. Ties of kinship – some real, some fictive – grew from such merry-making. Workers of all kinds called each other brother and sister, fostering the development of what Clare Anderson calls “transregional political solidarities”.<sup>7</sup>

Because the motley crew was an important component of a larger global proletariat, it shared many of the characteristics Peter Linebaugh and I identified for the Atlantic portion of the class in *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. The motley crew was *anonymous, nameless*. The port cities required the labor of millions of people to operate, but only a few of their names are now known to us: for example, the African deep-sea diver George Blacke and the runaway domestic worker Hanna of Calcutta. It was *expropriated*,

6. Herman Melville, *Mardi and A Voyage Thither*. Ed. by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago, IL, 1970 [1849]), p. 13. On the cultural sophistication of early African workers, see Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53:2 (1996), pp. 251–288.

7. Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London, 2018); Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, MN, 1993); Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston, MA, 2015), ch. 1. The quotation by Anderson appears in her essay in this volume.

*landless, and poor.* Born in Africa, the Americas, or Asia, most members of the motley crew had lost their connection to the commons (although some, as maroons, reclaimed it). It was *terrorized, subject to coercion.* The redeployment of workers around the global empires required massive amounts of violence in the slave trades and the harsh disciplinary regimes that governed the lives of dispossessed workers. It was *mobile, transoceanic, planetary.* Global commodity chains required mobile workers. It was *cooperative and laboring.* Its power was based in its collective work. It was *motley*, often dressed in the “very tatters” Herman Melville noted and multi-ethnic in appearance. It was *vulgar.* On ship and shore the motley crew spoke in new ways in order to communicate – in pidgin and Creole languages, gestures and pantomime, story and song. It was *self-active, creative.* It resisted by flight and fight: the multi-ethnic enslaved Africans ran to the Suriname bush where they joined the Upper Saramacca maroons throughout the eighteenth century, and convicts aboard the steam ship *Tenasserim* rose up in mutiny at the docks of Mapoon in Moulmein (now Mawlamyine) in Burma (Myanmar) in 1851.<sup>8</sup>

Let us conclude with Herman Melville, sailor and fabled chronicler of the motley crew, who wrote in *Moby Dick*:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou Just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind!

The “meanest”, most impoverished men and women, mournful and degraded by a violent system of global capitalism, survived and through the strength of their “tragic graces” helped to build not only the port cities but the entire modern world. They worked and resisted in many-sided, creative ways, fighting for their own autonomy and freedom against the subjection that was meant to be their fate. By raising the motley crew to the level of a knowing, acting, collective world historical subject, this collection of essays joins Melville in casting “ethereal light” on the history of common humanity.<sup>9</sup>

8. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, pp. 332–333.

9. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale*. Ed. by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago, IL, 1988 [1851]), p. 117.