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**Subaltern
Cosmopolitanism in the
Imperial Metropole:
Notes towards a
Prehistory of Racism and
Multiculturalism?**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to throw some light on the social and spiritual world of racially and culturally mixed communities of Britain's urban working poor in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The lives of these communities are only available to us through the prurient gaze of middle-class observers peering through lens darkly clouded by class, racial, gender, sexual, and political anxieties. To claim evidence for a cosmopolitan sociality in such apparently degraded lives and environments may appear to some as an outrage on cosmopolitan sensibilities. Be that as it may, this paper suggests there is enough evidence on the ground, of a precocious but embattled subaltern cosmopolitan sociality that lasted at least through the interwar years. Perhaps it even spilled over into the post-World War II period before more explicitly targeted and gendered social policies such as 'family unification' from the 1960s helped pave the ground for the more segregated 'multi-culturalist' policies and practices of the subsequent few decades.

SUBALTERN COSMOPOLITANISM IN THE IMPERIAL METROPOLE: NOTES TOWARDS A PREHISTORY OF RACISM AND MULTICULTURALISM?

This paper is about cosmopolitan subaltern sociality in the 19th and early-20th century world. 'Subaltern' here is convenient shorthand to describe the working poor, so understood even when we only become aware of them through criminalized transgressions. 'Sociality' refers to the social lives and relationships improvised by subaltern actors. 'Cosmopolitan' is used here in its conventional meaning of being 'at home in the world.' The subaltern sociality I speak of in this paper is 'cosmopolitan' for its often capacious accommodation of the working poor from all parts of the world irrespective, though not heedless, of race, faith, nation, or gender, and to translate and mediate habits, attitudes, and meanings to affirm and sustain such sociality. The latter did not, and here does not, preclude conflict. Neither did it hinge on negotiated contacts across a-contextual racial and cultural boundaries. In this world 'difference' was not absent. But it was only beginning to be mobilized as an instrument of governmentality. 'Difference' consequently had yet to be de-contextualized, codified, and generalized into a modality for allegiance, conditional entitlement, or denial.

The subaltern cosmopolitanism I address here was a feature of many parts of the 19th century world. It was particularly pronounced in port towns big and small on every continent, a port's relative size and importance influencing its cosmopolitan geographies more than its ethos. While recognizing and touching on this universality, my focus here is on the imperial metropole.

The people and relationships I explore in this paper are situated at the edges of our cosmopolitan imagination. Even the 'global spaces' we deal with here were often beyond the state, and populated by people and relationships stubbornly elusive, at least at first, to its disciplinary mechanisms. This paper also therefore narrates discursive projects to progressively cleanse or eliminate such spaces, and establish the authority of a racial and gendered state over these spaces, their inhabitants, and their relationships.

In conclusion I speculate about official multiculturalism as a possible modality for establishing such authority.

I

Here is a description of the cosmopolitan sociability of working people in the dock areas of 18th century London:

colour or country considered no obstacle ... everybody free and easy The group motley indeed – Lascars, blacks, jack tars, coal heavers, dustmen, women of colour, old and young, and a sprinkling of remnants of once fine girls ... all jiggling together.¹

In the mid-19th century too, London's docksides were the crossroads for seafarers from round the world whose descriptions, however, perhaps now hint at a local observer's disposition towards more regular tones of difference:

Up and down Ratcliffe-highway do the sailors of every country under heaven stroll – Greeks and Scythians, bond and free. Uncle Tom's numerous progeny are there – Lascars, Chinese, bold Britons, swarthy Italians, sharp Yankees, fair-haired Saxons, and adventurous Danes – men who worship a hundred gods, and men who worship none.²

By now Ratcliff highway was known as a 'haunt' of 'degraded Lascars',³ while London's east end hosted an 'Oriental quarter' containing mixed populations of many nationalities including substantial numbers of Indian seamen.⁴ And if the story of Sam Ram Samy offers any guide, even in 19th century London Asian seafarers were not confined to its East End.⁵

¹ Pierce Egan, *Life in London* (London: Sherwood, Heeley & Jones, 1821), 286, quoted in Rosina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 31-32.

² J. Ewing Ritchie, *The Night Side of London* (London: W. Tweedle, 1857), 66, quoted in John Seed, "Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900-1940," *History Workshop Journal* 62 (2006): 58-85.

³ Henry Wheatley, *London Past and Present: Its History, Associations, and Traditions* (London: John Murray, 1891). This was a revised edition of Peter Cunningham's *Handbook of London* published in 1849. *London Past and Present* is available online at

http://www.archive.org/stream/londonpastpresen01wheauoft/londonpastpresen01wheauoft_djvu.txt (last accessed 25 February 2009).

⁴ Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), Ch. 4, and pp. 383-92.

⁵ Westminster City Council Library and Archives, Black Presence exhibition, online at <http://www.westminster.gov.uk/archives/blackpresence/22.cfm> (last seen 12 September 2011).

London's dockside cosmopolitanism was more typical of major ports at this time than unique. At mid-century maritime social worlds were far more racially and culturally fluid than they would even be by the century's end. Until the 1880s crews engaged at Asian ports reflected the diversity of their populations. Besides Indian and Chinese seafarers, many Asian ports were home to substantial communities of African and Arab seafarers. Indian seafarers, for instance, were to be found living at various Asian ports. For many seafarers from India and south-east Asia, seafaring offered a means to perform the Haj and other pilgrimages in a 'leisurely' fashion. Seafarers from other parts of Asia were consequently familiar figures at Suez ports, and at ports in the Persian gulf and along the Arabian coast, where they frequently signed off their ships 'in order to enjoy ... a visit to Mecca and ... amusements on shore' at Jeddah and other Arab ports that were said by a local British consul to be 'peculiarly to ... [their] taste.' Ashore at these ports they worked in the docks 'discharging cargo in boats' or lived in the houses of *batiarahs* (translated in the records as crimps) who also doubled up as money-lenders and brokers for securing shore-based employment.⁶ The practice of using maritime employment as a path to pilgrimage (and recreation) led to the emergence of a thriving market for sub-continental seafarers at these ports, partly based on informal trafficking in engagements, identities, and documents.⁷ To the east on the sub-continent's other flank, according to a pre-World War II claim, Singapore already had a 3000-strong community of Bengali seamen by 1914 who went out to sea on British merchant vessels and between engagements sought employment ashore.⁸

Besides, at most times several hundred European seamen were to be found living

⁶ National Archives of India [hereafter, NAI], FC/SR, Oct. 1883, 1219-41A, letter from acting Consul, Jeddah, 8 Aug. 1882.

⁷ NAI, RAC/CT, April 1879, 1-3A, Hume's note, 9 March 1879; also see RAC/CT, Nov. 1879, 6-9A.

⁸ This figure was likely to have been an exaggeration since our informant Abdul Majid's best hopes for reviving his floundering ship broking business in Singapore lay in breaking the stranglehold of Chinese and Malay sailors with recognized 'traditional' claims to employment at the port. Yet it is unlikely to have been produced from nothing: British National Archives, Kew [hereafter, BNA], CO 273/639/9, Abdul Majid's petition to the Board of Trade, 2 Sept. 1938.

at Asian ports, including many of the smaller ones. Until the 1880s in the Bay of Bengal alone, European seamen were regularly discharged at ports such as Chittagong, Rangoon, Akyab, and Colombo where they might be picked up by ships plying coastal or Asian waters. Likewise for ports in the Malay peninsula, the East and Southern African coast, and for Gulf and Red Sea ports. As a result there was a regular flow of European seafarers through the major and minor ports of the Indian Ocean region in the 19th century.⁹ In the absence of a treaty between Britain and the US on apprehending each other's deserters, from mid-century through the 1880s British-Indian and other colonial ports were also havens of refuge for US seamen.¹⁰ For instance the multinational cast paraded in Calcutta's Court of Small Causes in a case involving the Temperance Boarding House for seamen in 1887, included an American from Delaware living in Calcutta since 1855, another American sailor, a Dutchman, a West Indian, and an Englishman.¹¹ Particularly when shipping was depressed, the larger ports could feel 'overcrowded' with European seamen, many living there since months in promiscuous contact with the local population. By one count, in the mid-1860s, there were 4000 European seamen in Calcutta alone. As racial hierarchies grew more rigid and entrenched in the second half of the 19th century, the colonial government began to fear that close and prolonged proximity between European seafarers and local working class communities might undermine projects to foster racial myths about European superiority as a foundation for colonial rule. Consequently discharges of fresh European crews were disallowed or made more difficult, and public funds freely used

⁹ NAI, GI, Home-Public, 18 Feb. 1859, 37A; Statistics and Commerce (SC), April and June 1896, 184-94A and 314-49A; Feb. and Oct. 1897, 95-114A and 1058-61B respectively.

¹⁰ West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata [hereafter, WBSA], Government of Bengal, Judicial Proceedings, 13 January 1859, No. 65, Commissioner of Police to Secretary, Government of Bengal, d. 30 December 1858 for the legal position.

¹¹ WBSA, Government of Bengal, Political Department, Police Branch, December 1887, B Proceedings, File no. 520, Serial 1/9.

to ship out European seafarers already at the port.¹²

Hence, barring brief interludes such as the 1880s when British ships discharged them at Asian, particularly British-Indian ports, to take on cheaper local crews, the influx of European seamen into Asia dwindled in the following decades. The flows now reversed direction, as the ascendancy of steam and emerging racial and spatial hierarchies of empire and sea-borne labour transformed the itineraries shaping the working lives of African and Asian seafarers. The latter now became an increasingly visible presence at many western ports.

As is well known, already in the 1880s, London and Cardiff, not to mention US cities such as New York and San Francisco, hosted substantial Chinese populations. The anxieties, scares, and panics associated with their presence are well documented in the contemporary and historical literature. John Seed's warning that East London's Chinatown was never a 'territorially distinct and ethnically homogenous' entity but an ideological construction projecting 'ideological antagonisms and fears' on to the 'real city-scape' is timely and relevant beyond London. Nevertheless even in London, though the permanently resident population may have been small, the East End of London was home to hundreds of transient workers whose channels of circulation, supply, and renewal were closely linked to seafaring and the sea. Their numbers were therefore prone to sudden surges, as for example in 1906-08, on the eve of the war, and during World War I.¹³

By the late 1890s or the 1900s the presence of communities of Asian and African sailors in dock neighbourhoods that also housed Britain's working poor brought the

¹² NAI, Government of India (GI), Revenue and Commerce(RC)-Merchant Shipping(MS), Mar. 1877, 1-9, Calcutta Shipping Master to Board of Trade, 23 June 1865; Home-Public, 17 Oct. 1868, 1-4A; Harold Fischer-Tiné, "Flotsam and Jetsam of the Empire?," 116-149, in Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné, eds, *The Limits of British Control in South Asia: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

¹³ On Chinatowns in London, which apparently dated back to the 1860s, and Cardiff, see Stan Hugill, *Sailortown* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 123-30. Also on London's Chinatown, Robert Sinclair, *East London: The East and North-east Boroughs of Lodnon and Greater London* (London: Robert Hale, 1950), 119-25; John Seed, "Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900-1940," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 62 (2006): 58-85. The quotes are on pp. 68 and 76 respectively.

latter into regular and sustained social contact with workers from other parts of the world.¹⁴ By the First World War there were also small floating populations of seafarers at French, Belgian, and Dutch ports, the relative freedom of movement available in pre-war Europe allowing the emergence of something like a continental labour market for seafarers of non-European origin.¹⁵

In the 1920s it became conventional wisdom that unsociable tastes and unchanging habits made Indian seafarers incapable of relating meaningfully to their host societies. A pompous official sneered that ‘they will create the nearest approach to the mud hut, and its surroundings, and its overcrowding’ wherever they went.¹⁶ Elite prejudices of this nature were by no means new. Joseph Salter’s 1890s description of the social and spiritual lives of the working poor in his ‘parish’ faithfully reflected such prejudices as also late-Victorian anxieties about British urban social decay and national decline. For this preacher at the London city mission, the black, Asian, and other poor in his ‘parish’ were of ‘animal development’ and a form of ‘savage life’ who had brought the frontier of racial contamination and moral degradation to the ‘very heart of a great Christian city’ and transformed it into ‘haunts of heathenism’ and depravity.¹⁷ In a chapter entitled ‘Plague Spots of Oriental Vice’ he ranted against the ‘commingling of the worst vices of east and west ... in the mixed population of half-castes’ that had begun to ‘spring up’ in the city’s port neighbourhoods, which as a consequence had become deeply estranged from Britain and Christian civilization. ‘Christian heroism was being so conspicuously exhibited in penetrating the jungles of India and the

¹⁴ Diane Frost, “Racism, Work, and Unemployment: West African Seamen in Liverpool, 1880s-1960s,” *Immigrants and Minorities* 13, nos. 2-3 (July/Nov. 1994): 24-27; Diane Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 190-91; David Byrne, “Class, Race, and Nation: The Politics of the “Arab Issue” in South Shields, 1919-39,” *Immigrants and Minorities* 13, nos. 2-3 (July/Nov. 1994): 93.

¹⁵ See for example the Report of the Colonial Office committee on distress among colonial and Indian subjects in the United Kingdom, paras. 24-30, in NAI, GI, Commerce and Industry(CI)-MS, May 1911, 1-15A.

¹⁶ British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections [hereafter, OIOC], L/E/7/1422, f. 6704 Note by J.W. Hose, Secretary, Political Department, 30 Nov. 1925.

¹⁷ Joseph Salter, *The East in the West or Work Among the Asiatics and Africans in London* (London: S.W. Partridge and Co., n.y but 1896), introduction.

darkest forests of Africa.' Yet at the very heart of London there existed a 'kind of republic, the people having all things in common' and living in 'holes and corners of the blind courts and alleys ... and recesses' that were as 'as unexplored as the depths of central Africa.'

In truth, such shrillness on the part of church officials, politicians, bureaucrats, social workers, and trade unionists traced deep fears and anxieties about the realities mocking them every day, viz. the close personal, sociable, life-sustaining relationships that the colonial working poor in Britain and the local working poor were capable of forming. Thus several decades before terms such as 'multicultural' and 'multiracial' were invented to re-stitch and discipline societies produced to some extent by their descendants, seafarers and other workers from the colonial world were bringing the empire home in ways that threatened to unstitch its hierarchies.

Nourished by the easy opportunities for mobility offered by seafaring, the cosmopolitan sociability of the working poor in Britain was disturbed to some extent by the emergence of seafarers' unions in Britain towards the end of the 19th century. At first the unions targeted all lower-paid Asian crews on British shipping, but from the early 1900s and until World War I, their ire was directed mainly at Chinese seafarers. Protests against Chinese employment on British ships provoked legal and political debates over the meanings of several administrative categories of regulation and presumed entitlement, such as 'lascar', 'colonial', 'British', etc. They also provoked attempts to narrow the meanings of these categories, nurtured official, and to some extent media-driven, anxieties about their boundaries, transgressions, and contamination, and produced new racialized imaginings of criminality and subversion.

During the war, as Laura Tabili notes, 'the convergence of wartime labour demands and British imperial ambitions expanded the definition of who was treated as

British and to what that entitled him.’¹⁸ Consequently by the end of World War I Britain found itself home to thousands of African, Arab, Caribbean, Chinese, Indian, Malay and other colonial seafarers and workers (including colonial auxiliaries mobilized to accompany British troops into battle), many of them in possession of wartime British identity documents. The war meanwhile lent a sharp jingoistic edge to the British National Seamen’s Firemen’s Union (or NSFU)’s opposition to foreign seafarers which also now attracted support from British coal-miners’ and railway unions.

After the war the NSFU became increasingly strident in demanding the ‘elimination of Asiatic labour’ and ‘their immediate repatriation.’¹⁹ Now, as claims on the post-World War I state multiplied and new conceptions of the rights and entitlements of the British working people developed, definitions of nationality and entitlement also began greatly to narrow. As discussed below, within months of World War I Asian and African seafarers were bundled off home, their presence a handy retort to ‘heroes’ who demanded a ‘home’ befitting the promises that had spurred them to battle, their persecution and eviction their tawdry fulfilment. For those determined to resist it, colonial workers’ growing assertion of equality with white British subjects and claims to imperial ‘citizenship’ even raised questions about their motives for going to war. Their services, which during the war had been elicited by appeals to patriotism and celebrated as proof of the empire being ‘one family’, were now dismissed as mercenary, the debts the survivors were owed by the empire in whose name they had fought considered settled by timely wage payments and sacrificial wartime offerings of white female flesh.²⁰

¹⁸ “*We ask for British Justice*”: *Workers and Imperial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 117

¹⁹ Modern Records Centre, Warwick [hereafter MRC], MSS 175/4/7, NSFU’s ‘Memorandum of scheme for maintenance and continuity of employment of merchant seamen’, d. 28 Feb. 1921.

²⁰ See for instance the tone and tenor of the India Office minute (16 June 1921) that declared colonial seamen could not claim maintenance because they had remitted their wartime earnings to their families back home: OIOC, L/E/7/1103, f. 8231; Lucy Bland, “White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War,” *Gender and History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 29-61.

Pressures from local seamen's unions put out of work many hundreds of seafarers from the Indian subcontinent, Aden, and British East Africa who could not prove British nationality often because their original discharge papers had gone down with their vessels and the British discharge books that had replaced them as proof of nationality during the war no longer sufficed to satisfy opponents of their employment.²¹

'Chinamen' once again became a particular target of animosity, particularly of national-level union organizers. So long as Britain faced a shortage of seafarers, the NSFU's campaign against foreign seafarers had had little effect, the British Prime Minister Lloyd George for instance regarding it with some mirth.²² But the 1919 racial riots (discussed below) so decisively 'problematized' colonial workers in the minds of politicians, administrators, and the press as to make repatriation appear a natural solution.²³ Repatriation in turn normalized the riots, while together they produced a racialized etiology of social conflict and a modality for resolution that would again be applied after World War II, and exert a profound influence on Britain's race, immigration, and cultural policies in the subsequent decades.

In the summer of 1919 British ports such as Glasgow, South Shields, North Shields, Liverpool, London, Barry, Newport, and Cardiff erupted in racial rioting.²⁴ The most serious riots occurred in June in Cardiff and Liverpool. The Cardiff riots were provoked by white American sailors from a local naval base baiting the city's Black and Asian population. According to the Cardiff chief constable, 'from the first time the American sailors, when they saw a coloured man in the streets, were very prone to go

²¹ OIOC, L/E/7/1103, f. 8231, minute by C.E. Baines, 1 April 1921. The following account is based on L/E/7/1102, f. 8227 and L/E/7/1103, f. 8230 and 8231.

²² BNA, BT, MT 9/1087 M5189/17, Lloyd George's remarks to a delegation of the 'Triple Alliance' (of Transport Workers, Miners, and Railwaymen) 31 Jan. 1917. Even the agreement between the Cardiff and Liverpool police on the movement of Chinese persons had to make an exception for 'bona-fide Chinese seamen'.

²³ Anne Dunlop and Robert Miles, "Recovering the History of Asian Migration to Scotland," *Immigrants and Minorities* 9, no. 2 (1991): 145-67; Neil Evans, "Across the Universe: Racial Violence and the Post-War Crisis in Imperial Britain, 1919-25," *Immigrants and Minorities* 13, nos. 2-3 (July/Nov. 1994): 75-78.

²⁴ On the 1919 riots see Evans, "Across the Universe," 59-88.

for him and this has spread to the soldiers and demobilized men in the neighbourhood.’²⁵ ‘The aggressors ... belong[ed] to the white race’, many of whom were ‘alarmed at the association of so many white women with the coloured races and imagine that they entice the white women to their houses.’ Housing difficulties also reportedly fed resentment among demobilized white soldiers, while ‘racial feeling’ was heightened by large-scale unemployment among coloured seafarers and their experience of racial discrimination in postwar Britain.²⁶

Such views were however in a minority. Most official and press reactions faithfully reflected white male middle-class anxieties about racial, gender, and imperial hierarchies. However, like the other official and inquiry committee reports summarized below, they also point indirectly to the existence of a parallel, poly-cultural, and possibly subversive universe of fluid and contextually negotiated moral, social, and cultural norms, and hierarchies of race, gender, and empire.

In the opinion of the Liverpool head constable, ‘animosity between the white and coloured population’ arose because of

the arrogant and overbearing conduct of the negro population towards the white men and by the white women who live or cohabit with the black men boasting to the other women of the superior qualities of the negroes as compared with those of the white men. In nearly all cases the negroes have been the aggressors...²⁷

The riots came as a jolt to colonial soldiers, seafarers, and other workers (mainly former wartime colonial auxiliaries) who having gone to war for king and empire now sought a share in the peace. In Laura Tabili’s words, they were an ‘episode in Black Britons’ struggle to maintain and assert their economic and political rights.’ However

²⁵ BNA, HO 45/11017/377969, Home Office transcript of telephone conversation with the chief constable, 14 June 1919.

²⁶ BNA, HO 45/11017/377969, chief constable’s letter to the Home Office, 13 June 1919.

²⁷ BNA, HO 45/11017/377969, report of the head constable–‘racial riots’–17 June 1919; Cardiff chief constable’s letter to the Home Office, 13 June 1919; undated minutes of meeting of officials of the Board of Trade, Home Office, colonial office, India Office, and the shipping and labour ministries; the *Manchester Guardian*, 14 June 1919. As Lucy Bland notes (p. 30) white middle class men were unreconciled to both ‘men of colour’ and ‘white British women’ having ‘gained a sense of entitlement to full and equal citizenship after the war’: “White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War,” *Gender and History* 17, no. 1 (April 2005): 29-61.

for civic and public officials the riots resulted from competition between white and black workers for the 'same jobs, housing, and women.'²⁸ Women featured prominently in reports of riots whose most common spark seems to have been the sight of mixed couples walking arm in arm or being conveyed from 'picnics' on brakes.²⁹ The riots also appear to have signified the concern of local state functionaries, including police officials, to reassert white masculine authority over (white) female mobility, sociality, and sexuality after the war. At any rate throughout the riots white female working class bodies became pruriently public sites on which to caricature, challenge, and confront black colonial men's demands as British subjects and their claims to a more inclusive citizenship.³⁰

Editorial columns muttered darkly about the perils of inter-racial coupling, while news headlines such as 'Women in Barry Negro Hunt' screamed the vengeful wrath of working class Britannia.³¹ A correspondent for the *Morning Post* was blunt where other newspaper editorialists and commentators were sly or indirect:

... you cannot give full privileges as 'a man and brother' to other racial types without accepting them also as brothers-in-law. The coloured seaman so soon as he is treated as an equal aspires to be the mate of the white woman. That is the real test of equality and it is a logical enough test. But all the instincts of our white race refuse that.³²

Describing the 'sex problem' as a challenge to family, community, and nation, a leader in the *Western Mail* emphasized the necessity for repatriation in the absence of southern-style US vigilantism to enforce racial purity in Britain:

²⁸ "We ask for British Justice," 137.

²⁹ BNA, HO 45/11017/377969 contains several such reports.

³⁰ Bland, "White Women and Men of Colour." For a wider argument about gendered racial discourses and anxieties over female sexuality in the context of increased urban mobility and claims to individual autonomy, see Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), Ch. 3, especially pp. 88, 99, 109, 116, and 121.

³¹ The headline is from the *Daily News*, 14 June 1919; also see the *Western Mail*, 13 June 1919. In 1925, a mob in Glasgow attacked an Indian seaman-turned pedlar, Nathoo Mohammed, who was living with his Indian wife and a local common law wife. The reported motive was 'economic and sexual jealousy'. Nathoo Mohammed's kinsman Noor Mohammed, a recently arrived seaman, was killed in the rioting: Bashir Maan, *The New Scots: The Story of Asians in Scotland* (Edinburgh: E.P. Donaldson, 1992): 111-14; Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 265.

³² 13 June 1919.

In the United States the force of public opinion, reinforced by unofficial public action of a ruthless kind, is sufficient to prevent the mischief. In our own country the tolerance which is exhibited towards the problem is due ... to slackness. If public opinion had been more active and earnest the evil would not have arisen. It is impossible to regard these unfortunate relationships as the affair only of the people immediately concerned; there is a collective aspect to which a self-respecting community is bound to have regard.³³

Even those, such as the leader writer of the *Sunday Express* who condemned white 'mob-law' believed it was 'naturally offensive to us that coloured men should consort with even the lowest of white women,' while another editorialist who believed it was an act of 'base ingratitude' to 'bundle our coloured fellow subjects without distinction ... out of the land' thought it nevertheless 'obvious' that 'repatriation of a large proportion of them ... [was] desirable ...'³⁴

Repatriation was attractive for two other reasons—as a decisive repudiation of the debt colonial subjects claimed for fighting Britain's war and manning its vessels, and as a project to redraw racial and imperial boundaries in the context of the state's expanding social role and post-war governmentality. Powerfully reaffirming Britain's white identity, elite media and public discourses on the 1919 riots and those advocating repatriation foregrounded race as a marker of British working class identity, and as a prior qualification for citizenship. So intently was this project of exclusion pursued that colonial practices and institutions such as 'internment' and 'concentration camps' were proposed to deal with coloured subjects awaiting repatriation in Britain.³⁵

Repatriation however did not prove easy. For one most Black and Asian workers

³³ 13 June 1919.

³⁴ *Sunday Express*, 15 June 1919; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 11 June 1919, quoted in Evans, "Across the Universe," 75-76. Likewise, despite being of the view that they did not start the riots, the Cardiff chief constable also proposed shipping the men home: Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 201.

³⁵ There is no evidence of such ideas actually being put into practice. However press reports spoke freely of the 'internment' of coloured colonial subjects: report of the conference of the labour ministry, mayor, and head constable of Liverpool in the *Western Mail*, 13 June 1919; *Morning Post*, 13 June 1919; also BNA, HO 45/11017/377969, undated minutes of meeting of officials of the Board of Trade, Home Office, colonial office, India Office, and shipping and labour ministries; letter from assistant head constable of Liverpool to the Home Office, 10 June 1919 who proposed interning black workers on board ships or in vacated military camps. The idea of putting Black and Asian seamen in 'concentration camps' resurfaced in the trade and shipping slump of 1921: BNA, HO 45/11897, Cardiff immigration officer's report no. 332087/24, undated, but June 1921.

in Britain were British subjects. Though Arab and Somali seafarers were willing to be repatriated, the British subjects among them 'prided themselves ... that as British citizens they have a right to stay where they please within the Empire.' Therefore they had to be induced with cash incentives to go 'of their own free will.'³⁶ But West Africans and West Indians workers who

comprised the more militant section of the coloured race, will not entertain the question of repatriation. They are insistent in their claim as British subjects to equality of treatment A few of them express their willingness to be repatriated, but openly state that it would be for the object of creating racial feeling against white people domiciled in their country.³⁷

Neither cash nor coercion proved sufficient. Official targets were regularly missed, the problem of what to do about those who had wives in Britain challenged the assumptions officials, missionaries, and national level trade union organizers used to determine who was British and who was not, repatriation ships sailed with many fewer passengers than they had been outfitted for, and mutinies broke out on board repatriation vessels.³⁸

Nor did repatriations ease anxieties about the presence and social lives of Asian and African workers in Britain, and fears of racial and cultural contamination. These fears and anxieties may in turn be read indirectly, despite the riots, the NSFU's campaigns, and efforts of the state and local officials, as evidence of the resilient and enduring sociality of the working poor in dockside and working class neighbourhoods in interwar Britain. Officials and middle class commentators found the presence of colonial workers most disturbing where they were most visible, in the cafés they ran, and in the streets and residential communities where they live or plied their trade. In 1929 Cardiff's chief constable lamented the employment of white girls in Arab, Indian, and Maltese cafés which he claimed offered 'an avenue for familiarity and ultimate

³⁶ BNA, HO 45/11017/377969, metropolitan police commissioner's letter to the Home Office, 13 Sept. 1919.

³⁷ BNA, HO 45/11017/377969, letter from the Cardiff chief constable, 18 June 1919.

³⁸ BNA, HO 45/11017/377969, shipping ministry letter, 26 Nov. 1919; extract from letter from Pacific steam navigation company, 24 Oct. 1919 about the mutiny aboard the *Orca*. There was also a mutiny on board another repatriation vessel, the *Mandala*. Returnees also added fuel to anti-British protests in the Caribbean: Evans, "Across the Universe," 79-81.

sexual license between them.’ So great was his concern that he advocated a law in Britain modelled on the South African immorality act (1927) to criminalize ‘carnal intercourse’ between coloured men and white women.³⁹

In 1934 the British government initiated an investigation of social conditions at British ports which it entrusted to a joint committee of the British Social Hygiene Council (BSHC, founded in 1914 as the National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases) and the British Council for the Welfare of the Mercantile Marine. The choice of the BSHC offers an apt illustration of how social welfare concerns at British ports were understood and expressed in ‘moral’ terms. The committee for its part did not disappoint. Aiming more to shock than to inform, its report described dock neighbourhoods in lurid terms as dangerous and sinful frontiers of imported disease, racial mixing and miscegenation. The report predictably led to parliamentary questions and demands for the appointment of a royal commission. Read by the prime minister no less, it declared with ringing certainty that 88% of venereal disease infections at Cardiff port came ‘from abroad,’ and that over half the cases of venereal disease in the mining villages and towns around Cardiff were contracted in the ‘so-called cafés in Bute Street.’

The committee claimed that ‘attracted by the possibility of an easy life of idleness and the comparative wealth’ that ‘unemployment benefit or public relief’ offered, black and colonial seafarers were now ‘so numerous’ particularly in London and increasing ‘so rapidly’—‘weekly’ and ‘by the hundreds’—that ‘the Police themselves are unable to estimate their numbers.’ Arguing the futility of expecting them to adopt a ‘standard of civilization’ and ‘moral codes’ they could not be ‘expected to understand,’ the report warned of indiscriminate ‘mating’ between black and Asian workers in Britain and ‘the type of women ... willing to accept them,’ i.e. women of ‘loose moral character’ who felt no inhibition about bringing ‘a half-caste population ... into the world.’ With its sense of indignation and outrage leaving little room for coherence or consistency, the committee

³⁹ University of Western Australia [hereafter, UWA], Erulkar collection, CO 2261, Cardiff Chief Constable’s letters to the Watch Committee, 8 January and 10 April 1929.

repeated contemporary stereotypes about 'Indian and Negro seamen' being 'more attractive to the prostitutes [sic!]' than 'aliens and British seamen.' 'Once a girl has been in company with a coloured man she seems to prefer them to other types of seamen.'

A vicious circle is therefore rapidly coming into being, and even if the coloured population were not still increasing there are now in each of the dock areas of London, Liverpool, and Cardiff sufficient of them [sic!] mated to the white women of the districts to produce hundreds more of this unfortunate half-caste population as each year passes.⁴⁰

Patriarchal and racial fears of rampant female sexuality and miscegenation continued to issue in proposals for re-segregation on the eve of World War II. A 1939 report on seamen's welfare at ports noted the decline of open prostitution in the streets around the docks, but deplored the less visible yet 'growing evil' that had replaced it, of 'young girls who would resent being regarded as "prostitutes"' loitering near seamen's boarding houses in search, among other things, of permanent "illicit relationships".⁴¹

The 1939 report also wrote alarmingly about the spread of settlements of coloured workers beyond the dock districts. This was particularly the case for former Indian seafarers, who also associated with the 'worst type of white women,' lived in 'sordid surroundings' and worked at wages that 'would be refused by a white man.' Although the issue was completely beyond its remit, more than once the report advocated 'drastic action ... to prohibit' new arrivals, and 'legislation prohibiting ... [seafarers and other colonial workers] from residing in this country without special permission.'⁴² In tone and substance, perhaps to some extent even in language, the 1939 report uncannily echoed the 1934 BSHC report on port welfare and a 1937 London metropolitan police note on the 'welfare of coloured persons' prepared at the instance of the Home Office.⁴³ The 1939 committee also lamented that coloured seamen in private boarding houses had 'greater freedom, particularly in their relations with white women' than those in boarding houses run by seamen's missions. It is moot how far the

⁴⁰ The report is in BNA, HO 213/308.

⁴¹ OIOC, L/E/9/457, 'port welfare enquiry', main report, para 73.

⁴² OIOC, L/E/9/457, 'port welfare enquiry', main report, para 121; London report, para 7.

⁴³ BNA, MEPO 2/7451, Commercial street police station's note, 4 June 1937.

wartime proliferation of boarding houses for colonial seafarers established by shipping companies, local authorities, and seamen's missions reflected such anxieties.

During the war the growing presence of Indian and Chinese workers, in particular, provoked further anxiety. Fears of racial mixing also deepened as the war wore on, with one of the several Home Office conferences convened on the subject declaring that 'for social reasons, the presence of these men in such large numbers was undesirable.'⁴⁴ Social anxieties were reinforced by fears of political subversion, especially by those hailing from Britain's crumbling Indian empire. While laws and defence regulations were tightened to facilitate timely deportations, in many instances local practices anticipated new, tighter regulations, and meanwhile illegal practices were freely adopted and justified on grounds that 'the result [was] ... certainly ... to the public benefit.'⁴⁵ In retrospect the sheer amount of time, energy, and attention that the higher echelons of the police and the bureaucracy expended on dealing with the presence of African and Asian workers in Britain during the war, in particular those from the subcontinent, appears quite out of proportion to their numbers. It also places in ironic relief the conventional view of wartime Britain as a society mobilized for total war against an overwhelming external enemy.⁴⁶

Similar anxieties led to the wartime emergence of neighbourhood 'social research'. However besides further helping historians recover the contexts and anxieties for which late-20th century multiculturalism appeared to offer resolutions, some of these 'investigative committees' also anticipate and precociously emblemize a modality for representing and managing racial and cultural difference in multicultural Britain, and thus help unearth buried genealogies of modern multiculturalism.

⁴⁴ BNA, HO 144/22134, minutes of meeting held on 15 Oct. 1943.

⁴⁵ BNA, HO 144/22134, letter from the chief constable of Staffordshire, 6 Sept. 1943.

⁴⁶ Apart from the above Home Office file also see OIOC, L/PJ/12/630 and L/PJ/12/645; and BNA, HO 213/2085, and HO 213/820. On Chinese deportations after the Second World War, see Maria Lin Wong, *Chinese Liverpoolians: History of the Chinese Community in Liverpool* (Birkenhead: Liver Press, 1989); and for some materials dealing with the problem of postwar 'control' of Chinese seamen, see BNA, HO 213/808.

The reports of the 1930s committees were overtly based on racially exclusionary premises and focussed on immigration controls and social segregation. By contrast a 1944 committee of sympathetic volunteers made up from among priests, members of church groups and local Muslim notables, to investigate the social conditions of the 'coloured population' in a 'small corner of Stepney' in East London, was motivated by concern for the 'needs of this real and permanent section in our social life.' Stepney's 'coloured population,' the committee acknowledged, 'constituted a real social group in Stepney before the war and will continue to do so after it.'

The committee's report was unstinting in its praise for 'negro and Indian workers.' They worked hard: 'every employer who has been approached has stated that the coloured men work really well.' They valued individual or communal self-reliance which in the case of the Indian population included a health insurance scheme promoted by the local Muslim association. Even when eligible, African and Asian workers 'disliked applying for official help' unless it became unavoidable due to prolonged illness, preferring instead to 'borrow from friends or to take [up] light work in connection with the cafés until they can take up full employment again.' They did not drink at all or only drank in moderation. Possessing 'charming manners and great gentleness, lacking in most white men of this standing,' they also made good husbands and fathers.

Yet the committee members were also venturing into unfamiliar cultural, political, and moral spaces. Identities might be a source of confusion. Its population count of 698 'coloured residents' may have excluded West African residents sporting 'English names.' 'Half-caste' children or children of 'half-caste' mothers were difficult to classify. During the war there were intelligence and media speculations about an Indian 'fifth column,' and the police and intelligence agencies made lists of prominent men to

detain in the event of a German invasion.⁴⁷ Stepney too might be home to a hostile or at any rate sullen colonial population: 'most of ... [the Indians] have a strong feeling that the British have not treated ... [them] fairly.' Once they arrived in England 'negroes and Indians' also tended to drift from their traditionally strong moral values and social mores. No longer feeling bound by any restrictions and attracted to them because of loneliness and sometimes even 'superstition' (on account of their fair skin), Asian and African men in Stepney 'freely enter[ed] into sexual relationships' with white women.

The committee nevertheless reserved its harshest judgement for such white female partners who, it repeatedly claimed, flocked from other 'ports and towns' in order to 'trade on the coloured men.' Cafés owned by coloured entrepreneurs, often in partnership with white women, served as venues for illicit encounters. The women themselves had 'very little moral sense.' Having 'failed to achieve real satisfaction in life' they sought it through 'sex and the easy acquisition of material things', and had thereby forfeited 'all moral sense in their desperate anxiety to achieve their object.' 'Outcasts from society,' they no longer had 'any use for its rules.' Thanks to these women, and despite the men's inherent decency, such mixed families inhabited a moral, cultural, and legal void. Of the 75 male residents living *en famille* with 136 children between them, more than half born during the war, only 27 residents had contracted legal marriages. Lacking any element of the companionship that characterized conventional marriages in Britain, few mixed marriages were happy. Children born from such marriages grew up in an unhappy and 'immoral atmosphere' and girl children were easily socialized into prostitution. This community thus represented a 'tragic corner' of Stepney.

The committee's report on this 'square mile of back-street slums' offers evidence suggestive of a slow but perceptible subversion of the racial and sexual geography of urban wartime Britain. Women flocked to Stepney from various parts of Britain,

⁴⁷ OIOC, L/PJ/12/645, memorandum, 2 April 1942.

sometimes even dividing their time between them. Cafés too developed 'links' with similar establishments in other parts of London as well as elsewhere in Britain. White female sex-workers were said to move between these cafés, the Stepney report for instance claiming that two cafés in the borough were 'directly connected' with a Coventry café 'between which and Stepney there has been a definite movement of white women.' Besides, café licences were transferable from one location to another. After former black and Asian café-owners became active participants in this business, transfers apparently became lucrative enough for some of them to engage solicitors to argue their pleas.

Cafés and lodging-houses owned by London's black and Asian entrepreneurs were also spaces where subaltern cosmopolitanisms flourished. As already noted many cafés were owned or run in partnership with local women. They also served a racially diverse clientele. A post-World War II report of a surprise midnight inspection, when the tables had been cleared and cleaning was in progress, of a Stepney café owned by one Mukhtar Miah reports the presence of the last customers of the evening, a young Jamaican man 'wearing a hat' and a 'West African negro who also appeared to be helping with the cleaning.' Miah's white wife was 'counting the day's takings,' while a male cook and Miah's assistant Abdul Hakim were 'swilling the kitchen floor.'⁴⁸

II

The forcible repatriation of colonial seafarers after World War I prefigured and exemplified the manipulation and racialization of boundaries between citizen, colonial subject, and foreign national in interwar Britain that, as Laura Tabili points out, has been a feature ever since of immigration politics in imperial and post-imperial Britain.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Tower Hamlets Local Authority Records, London, STE 1149, public health committee minutes, 1948-51, medical officer of health to Arnold James, town clerk, 24 Nov. 1948.

⁴⁹ "We ask for British Justice," 183.

The Aliens Order, 1920 and the Coloured Alien Seaman's Order, 1925 entrenched such racialization in law and routine government practice. Approvingly described by the British seamen's union leader Havelock Wilson as a 'sort of terror to the deserters', the Coloured Aliens Seaman's Order (CASO) was originally issued for 13 ports in 1925 and extended to all British ports in 1926.⁵⁰ The legal framework for the order was set by a succession of laws to restrict entry of aliens into Britain, viz. the 1905 Aliens Act to restrict entry of Russian and Polish Jews, the 1914 Aliens Restriction Act targeted at enemy aliens, and the 1919 Aliens Restriction Act (ARA) which put the 1914 act on a permanent footing besides extending it to alien seafarers on British ships. Already in conception the alien seaman's order sought to rearrange on a racial basis, practical meanings and boundaries of British, imperial, and 'alien.' It also encouraged police and immigration officials to treat as an 'alien,' any black or Asian seafarer not in possession of valid documents.⁵¹

The 1925 order did not directly target colonial seafarers in the UK. Nor did it formally interfere with their nominal rights of residence and employment. However it gave local officials wide latitude to reject nationality documents they believed to be unacceptable. For example many former colonial seafarers in Britain had got by since the war on the strength of wartime British discharge books. The alien seaman's order legitimized and routinized an informal prejudice against accepting these documents as evidence of British nationality. Moreover since the ARA placed the burden of proof on the suspect, colonial seafarers often found themselves in trouble at the hands of overzealous local officials.⁵²

Nor was registration under the 1925 order an unmixed blessing. As in the case of Galadine, a Pathan fireman married to Geraldine Bascon, something as simple as failing

⁵⁰ For Wilson's description see MRC, MSS175/5/26, report of the proceedings of a joint meeting between the international transport workers' federation (ITF) and the international seafarers' federation (ISF), London, 12-13 July 1925, p. 45.

⁵¹ On CASO and its effects, see Tony Lane, "The Political Imperatives of Bureaucracy and Empire: The Case of the Coloured Alien Seamen Order, 1925," *Immigrants and Minorities* 13, nos. 2-3 (1994): 104-29; Tabili, "We ask for British Justice," Ch. 6; and Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 205-18.

⁵² OIOC, L/E/7/1438, F. 395, C.D.C. Robinson (Home Office) to Robert Gloag (a Glasgow solicitor), 29 Jan. 1926.

to inform the police of a change of residence could become a cause for inquiries under the order. Seafarers were also liable to lose their registration if they were found to have taken up other occupations even temporarily, as many did in the late-1920s for want of engagements. Conversely, workers who had arrived as seamen but been forced into other occupations often found their path to registration blocked by bureaucratic obstacles.⁵³

In Tabili's words, the 'enduring result' of the CASO was the 'codification of a hierarchical definition of British nationality dependent on race, class, and occupation.'⁵⁴ In principle the order merely required the police to register as 'alien', seamen who could not provide satisfactory proof of British nationality. Local police officials often applied it indiscriminately to all colonial seamen, many of whom objected to being classified as 'aliens.' But for a large number of other seafarers of more doubtful status, registering as 'alien seamen' became a means to legitimize their stay and search for employment in Britain.⁵⁵ The alien seamen's order also encouraged seamen to obtain passports and other consular documents proving their British nationality. Since the early 1910s, the restricted issue of passports by colonial governments had become a key instrument of British imperial control over the movement of its subject populations.⁵⁶ Since passports could not be refused to colonial seamen demanding them to escape aliens' registration, the alien seaman's order threatened to loosen imperial passport controls. Whitehall therefore progressively scrapped passports for seamen, replacing them with certificates of nationality originally improvised to deal with the ambiguous status of British protected persons.

⁵³ BNA, HO 45/15774, note by sergeant Lawson, CID, d. 26 Feb. 1932; inspector Humphrey's note, d. 28 Aug. 1933, about Mere Ali or Amir Ali, a Mirpuri fireman who worked in Glasgow's herring factories for several years after his arrival in Britain in 1922 before turning to peddling; also sergeant Lawson's note d. 14 Sept. 1931 about Din who since his arrival in Britain in 1922 had been working as a cook at a Chinese 'Asiatic boarding house' on Liverpool's Duke street.

⁵⁴ Tabili, "*We ask for British Justice*," 122.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 126-27; this perverse outcome of aliens' registration may explain the greater frequency of port-level hiring conflicts from the late-1920s. However, as Tabili has argued (eg. pp. 1-5), local and Whitehall meanings of 'alien' were not identical, with the former often excluding black and Asian seamen of established residence at the port.

⁵⁶ Radhika Mongia, "Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport," *Public Culture* 11, no. 3 (1999): 527-556.

According to Tabili, certificates of nationality created a 'starker demarcation between Black and white British subjects.' While confirming the 'Britishness of its holders', these certificates marked a further stage in 'systematically depriving Black British subjects of the rights other subjects enjoyed.' It transformed racial difference from being a 'marker of presumptive alien status,' under the seaman's order, to marking 'a version of British nationality explicitly detached from the prerogatives of other British subjects.'⁵⁷ Thus no sooner they were adopted for British subjects, the Board of Trade and British seamen's unions trained their guns on certificates of nationality as an expedient for helping colonial seamen to 'remain in this country and obtain employment on European articles.'⁵⁸ Though there was little local anger against black and Asian seafarers living locally, NUS leaders with national-level ambitions demanded the repatriation of 'all unemployed coloured men who were in competition with British white seamen and firemen.'⁵⁹

Racial and other meanings of Britishness once again came to the fore with the introduction of tramp shipping subsidies in 1935. Though it was not made into an explicit condition in the British Shipping Assistance Act, the original intention of the bill had been to exclude ships employing non-British (i.e. non-white) crews from the subsidy scheme. Loud parliamentary demands to the same effect, ambivalent ministerial hints and replies, and the ambiguous wording of the legislative notification also persuaded many shipping and union officials that the act barred the employment of non-British (i.e. non-white) seafarers.⁶⁰ Given the confusion owners of tramp vessels predictably did not wish to risk the subsidy by employing Indian and other colonial

⁵⁷ Tabili, "*We ask for British Justice*," 129-31; quotes from p. 131.

⁵⁸ OIOC, L/E/9/962, Board of Trade to India Office, 15 April 1930.

⁵⁹ See George Reed's statement in the *Daily Herald*, 1 Aug. 1930. Reed was the Cardiff district secretary of the NUS and strongly opposed to the employment of Indian seafarers on British ships. Ironically he would be sent India in 1946 to 'reform' Indian seafarers' unions. On port unions distinguishing between local and imported coloured labour, see BNA, HO 45/14299, constable Thomas Cleminson's report to the chief superintendent, Salford city police, 4 June 1930; also Tabili, "*We ask for British Justice*," 1-5.

⁶⁰ NAI, Commerce, MM-II, Nov. 1935, 24 MM-II/35, 1C, Jamnadas Mehta's letter to George Lansbury, 1 April 1935; *Bombay Chronicle*, 23 May 1935; *Trade Union Record*, July-Aug. 1935; the President of the Board of Trade, Walter Runciman's replies to questions in the House of Commons, 2 April 1935; W. Carter (Board of Trade) to E.J. Turner (India Office), 9 May 1935 in OIOC, L/E/9/955; and note by E.J. Turner, 13 May 1935, in the same file.

crews.

The latter were bewildered by this development. Faroze Bhader from South Shields complained he and his compatriots were no longer finding ships. 'I don't know who is responsible', he wrote the India Office, but

each time a ship signs on we have been refused, the Union blames the owners and the owners blame the Union, I have tried every morning to see the Secretary of the Union but they will not listen to reason. If you would look into the matter for us and see what can be done as we have to make our living if we want to live. We have been on SS *Dagenham* for 5 years which paid off here last Sunday and it signed on taking a white crew and we were sacked (5 firemen) without explanation or reason and we can't get to know why.⁶¹

'Please can you give me an understanding about myself', another seafarer Abdul Qayum of 45 Cuthbert Street, South Shields, Durham, demanded, whilst informing the India Office that his fate, as one who held a 'true British Indian Seaman's Passport', was now no different from that of 'my less fortunate countrymen who have issued to them a British Indian Protected subjects Passport.' But not one to give up easily, Abdul Qayum declared that the SS *Llanberis* was 'due to sign on before Saturday (I am told),' and that he was 'going to the Newcastle Shipping Office tomorrow morning to ask for my rights.'⁶²

The new rules and bureaucratic procedures, in particular the alien seamen's order, also meant closer police and intelligence scrutiny, which quickly became one of the most direct ways in which colonial workers came face to face with the racialization of British subjecthood.

The legislation of new categories of colonial seafarers and restrictions on their travel, employment, and residence demanded better techniques of identification. Though they soon came to encompass notionally unique identity markers such as finger-prints, these techniques did not altogether eliminate spaces for identity negotiation. Earlier, such spaces arose where individual agency confronted loosely defined categories of colonial labour market governmentality (such as 'lascars', Chinese,

⁶¹ OIOC, L/E/9/955, 6 March 1935.

⁶² OIOC, L/E/9/955, Abdul Qayum to the India Office, 3 April 1935. The letter also bears an elaborate reference number G. 76499/186.1.1/41.

Adenese, etc.). Now with the introduction of new, relatively more rigid categories of control and techniques of individual identification, the spaces and processes of identity negotiation came to depend almost wholly on individual and networked subaltern agency, edging closer than before to the limits of legality.

At first identification involved only the use of photographs. But European officials quickly found them inadequate. This was only partly because photos could, and often were, substituted on identity documents. What really frustrated officials was ironically enough their own racial blindness: when confronted with photographs of Asian and African seafarers, in particular, they found themselves able only to detect racial similarities, not distinguish individual features and differences.⁶³ 'There is such a strong racial resemblance between many of these men that a photograph is not a complete means of identification, which can only be provided by fingerprints.'⁶⁴

Increasingly fingerprints were deployed to fix individual identities and make them legible.⁶⁵ But even fingerprints suffered from technical and cultural limitations. In general too, what Jane Caplan identifies as the 'critical tension at the heart of a culture of identification', viz. that alterity and identity never ceased 'intruding' on each other, made the world of the Asian and African workers a threateningly elusive and fluid one in Britain even during the interwar period.⁶⁶ Practically until the 1920s s nation-wide surveillance of Chinese seafarers proved impossible in Britain because local police

⁶³ On notions in early 20th century US that the Chinese were similarly 'simply physically indistinguishable', see Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), 188-90. This was forcefully highlighted in the US-wide manhunt for the alleged killers of the young New York lay missionary Elsie Segal whose body was found in the flat of a Chinese New Yorker in 1909, during which literally scores of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean men were detained on suspicion of being the killers. Elsie Segal's killers were never found.

⁶⁴ BNA, HO 45/11897, 'Registration of Coloured Seafarers', aliens' branch memorandum d. 3 Nov. 1924, pp. 4-5.

⁶⁵ On the colonial origins of finger-printing as an identification practice, see Radhika Singha, "Settle, Mobilize, Verify: Identification Practices in Colonial India," *Studies in History* 16, no. 2 (n.s. 2000): 174-80. For a recent discussion of the use of finger-printing as a means to penetrate urban anonymity in early-20th century London and specifically in policing prostitution, see Julia A. Laite, "Taking Nellie Johnson's Fingerprints: Prostitutes and Legal Identity in Early Twentieth-Century London," *History Workshop Journal* 65 (2008): 96-116.

⁶⁶ "'This or that Person': Protocols of Identification in 19th Century Europe," 51, in Jane Caplan and John Torpey (eds.), *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001): 49-66.

forces could not agree on how best to interpret Chinese personal names. There was confusion as to whether Chinese seafarers in Britain disclosed their names in the same order to which they were accustomed at home, that is with the family name preceding the given name, or whether they changed the order to accord with western usage. Or did they switch between the two modes, whether from innocent inconsistency, or deliberately in order to confuse the authorities? Did they also multiply the forms in which their names could be spelt to heighten confusion over their identity? 'It is well known that a Chinaman has many names. Sometimes ship's discharge are produced by one name in four different forms and he states that they are all the same', while any consular papers he possessed may yet bear a different name.⁶⁷

Indian and African seafarers had comparatively fewer opportunities to exploit the state's ignorance to explore new identities for themselves. Not only were British authorities much less estranged from Indian names and naming practices, they could also turn to the India Office or later the Indian high commission to verify identity claims and documents. Most Indian seafarers were also obliged to carry compulsory discharge certificates (CDCs) from the late-1880s. From shortly before World War I CDCs began to carry photographs. Yet many Indian seafarers managed to evade the state's efforts to fix their identities, whether by swapping CDCs, or by the simpler, if often more symbolic, expedient of modifying names and using aliases. For example, Nadra Rusmat Ali, a Mirpuri fireman who jumped ship at Boston in the early 1920s before returning to live in Britain, was known variously as Nadpa, Hassan Ali, and Rusmat Ali. It was as Rusmat Ali that he engaged at Cardiff on a vessel bound for Boston, where he again deserted in June 1931. Transformations, some partly playful, such as those of Abdullah Karim into Abdullah King; of Abdul into Charlie Abdul (who between 1905 and 1907 reportedly made extended stays ashore (usually after deserting his ship) at Takoma, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bahia, Alexandria, Port Said, and London where he

⁶⁷ BNA, MEPO 2/1692, Scotland Yard to Home Office, 10 July 1917.

‘outrageously’ insisted England was his home and refused to work his passage to India except at British wages); of Jalaluddin into Galaldine after his marriage to Geraldine Bascon; of Jan Mohammed of Mirpur into Jan Mohammed in Belgium and Jan Mohammed ‘John’ and John Mohammed Ali in the US; of Ghulam Rasool of Kinyal village also in Mirpur into Glamour Sole of South Shields in 1930s; and most intriguingly of the South Shields-based Allahabad-born seafarer Jiwan into Ji Wan, etc., suggest that seafarers, and no doubt others in similar marginal positions, not only absorbed, interpreted, and incorporated ever new experiences into their lives and persons and comported themselves in ever new ways, they also played with names and other available markers of identities in ways that attempted to throw states’ efforts to fix them.⁶⁸ The success that might still attend such efforts is illustrated by the inability of authorities in Britain, India, and the Caribbean to deal with an itinerant seafarer and shore worker, A.G. Straker who, like another seafarer John Hogan almost 150 years before, managed for nearly a decade to ‘trade alternately as it ... suit[ed] him, upon ... [his] non-native appearance’ and pass himself off as an Englishman, a Welshman, an Indian, and a Jamaican in order to claim residence, seek employment on ships, or demand state-assisted passages ‘home,’ because it proved impossible to tie him down to place, nation, and category.⁶⁹

III

The social and spiritual world of racially and culturally mixed communities of Britain’s urban working poor only become available to us through the prurient gaze of

⁶⁸ For Rusmat Ali, Galaldine, Ji Wan, and Glamour Sole, see BNA, HO 45/15774; for Glamour Sole also see OIOC, L/E/7/972, pp. 146-66; for Jan Mohammed Jan, see above. On Charlie Abdul, see NAI, MS-CI, March 1908, 17-24A; on Abdulla King, see HO 45/12804, Bombay acting shipping master’s letter, 8 March 1927.

⁶⁹ OIOC, L/E/7/1165 F. 3594; the quote is from Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai, MD, 1923, F. 733, George Dempster, British and Foreign Sailors’ Society to R.V. Montgomery, at the Indian high commissioner’s office, 19 Sept. 1923. Rather suggestively, the letter refers to Straker as ‘our cute young friend’ and reports that he had been ‘domiciled as requested’.

middle-class observers peering through lens clouded by class, racial, gender, sexual, and political anxieties. To claim evidence for a cosmopolitan sociality in such apparently degraded lives and environments so densely marked by ambivalence, liminality, transgression, and conflict may appear to some as an outrage on contemporary cosmopolitan (and multicultural, i.e. conditionally cosmopolitan) sensibilities. Nevertheless, in summarizing and concluding the argument of this paper, it may be useful to underline two points.

First I think it is possible to read the evidence offered in this paper for a precocious but embattled subaltern cosmopolitan sociality lasting at least through the interwar years. Perhaps it even spilled over into the post-World War II period before more explicitly targeted and gendered social policies such as ‘family unification’ from the 1960s helped pave the ground for the culturally more segregated policies and practices of the subsequent few decades.

Though connected, the second point is rather more speculative. In the last two decades historians have achieved notable successes in inscribing histories of colonial working peoples and resistance into contemporary narratives of Western multiculturalism. Irenic accounts depicting the latter as a triumph and testimony for liberal politics have increasingly yielded to narratives more realistically alert to the embattled aspects of contemporary multiculturalism and more likely to regard them as gains wrested following a prolonged and painful period of discrimination and conflict. However there is perhaps insufficient recognition yet of the extent to which multiculturalist projects were themselves premised upon a prior racial, cultural, and gendered re-ordering of Western societies to cleanse them of the subversive taint of empire, and regulate subaltern sociality and female sexuality, as well as upon their accompanying modality, viz. the production of the modern racial, cultural, and racialized social categories of governmentality that made possible and nourished the modular imaginings of contemporary multiculturalism as a conditional expression of

cosmopolitan society. The subversion of subaltern cosmopolitanism and the racialization of metropolitan society and its modalities for social and individual control might therefore represent the hidden pasts and prelude to the official multiculturalism of the 1980s and 1990s and its strategy of heavily mediated contact across negotiated but to some considerable extent ossified racial and cultural boundaries validated and entrenched by privileged minority elites and more conditionally by the host society and the state.

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