



# Maritime labour and subaltern geographies of internationalism: Black internationalist seafarers' organising in the interwar period



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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses a focus on the relations between maritime labour and internationalism to explore the subaltern geographies of internationalism. It uses a discussion of a number of such seafarers involved in organisations such as the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers Union and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers to develop an engagement with the production of forms of black internationalism 'from below'. The paper traces the following key 'agentic spatial practices' that were constituted through the political networks of black internationalist seafarers' organising. Firstly, I argue that subaltern maritime actors were able to use their, albeit marginal, position in relation to flows and trade networks creatively to bring diverse relations of power into contestation. Secondly, there are important ways in which such networks were used to generate connections between differently placed groups and to circulate, often in contexts of government repression of 'seditious' literature and ideas. Thirdly, following the political trajectories shaped by maritime workers and activists opens up important possibilities for moving beyond understandings of internationalism as the product of elite groups brokering between different left traditions in particular nations. Fourthly, it engages with the structuring effect of the racism of elements of the 'white left' on the practices of maritime internationalist politics, and recognizes forms of subaltern agency shaped through contesting such racism.

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## Introduction

Writing in *The Negro Worker* of June 1932, George Padmore gave a report on the congress of the [International of Seamen and Harbour Workers](#) (ISH) which had taken place in Altona, near Hamburg in May of that year. Padmore complained about the 'scant treatment given to the colonial question by the congress, due to lack of time afforded the official reporter as well as the colonial delegates'. He argued that this 'reflected the greatest shortcoming in the whole congress' and indicated the 'tremendous underestimation of this problem which still prevails in the ranks of the ISH and its sections.' He also noted that after the colonial report, which was given by Garan Kouyaté, a west African anti-colonial activist based in Paris who was involved in organising 'colonial seafarers' in France, 'only two colonial delegates had the opportunity of discussing the important questions raised at the congress' (Padmore, 1931: 24).

Padmore was one of the major figures who shaped articulations of black internationalism in the early to mid twentieth century. At the time of the conference he was a leading figure in the Comintern-sponsored International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) and edited its newspaper, *The Negro Worker*. He was later to break with the Comintern and become a key figure in Pan-African political organising. Through this role he collaborated with militants such as Kouyaté in shaping a transnational network of anti-imperial activists in diverse parts of Africa, the Caribbean and metropolitan cities such as London, Hamburg and Paris. The labour of black maritime workers was central to the production of this radical anti-colonial network. This paper uses a discussion of a number of such seafarers involved in organisations such as the ISH and ITUCNW to develop an engagement with the production of forms of black internationalism 'from below'. As Padmore's discussion of the ISH makes clear, the terms on which such organising was done were contested, but nonetheless maritime workers asserted and constructed diverse forms of subaltern agency through mobilising their unequal positions in maritime networks (see also [Anim-Addo, 2014](#); [Davies, 2013](#); [Kothari, 2012](#)).

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The first part of the paper engages with work in maritime 'history from below' which has shaped a powerful critique of 'terracentrism', arguing that a focus on subaltern maritime networks offers the potential to move beyond territorially limited framings of anti-colonial politics. The second section draws attention to the political trajectories of subaltern maritime actors in the 1930s, engaging with the ways in which they shaped the terms of anti-colonial internationalism. The third section explores the contested racial politics of organising among the Seamen's Minority Movement in Cardiff, particularly examining struggles over attempts to shape forms of black self-organisation. The final section explores the relations between forms of working class multiculturalism, the gendered politics of place and the contested articulation of internationalisms. The paper concludes by setting out key aspects of an approach to the subaltern geographies of internationalism.

### Subaltern maritime networks and the formation of black internationalisms

In *The Many Headed Hydra*, their account of the making of an Atlantic working class in the early modern period, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker describe the ship in the eighteenth century Atlantic world as a 'meeting place where various traditions were jammed together in an extraordinary forcing house of internationalism' (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2001: 151). They contend that 'European imperialism' created the conditions for the 'circulation of experience' and of radical forms of organising and ideas 'within the huge masses of labour that it had set in motion' (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2001: 152). Through focussing on shipboard revolts, mutinies and on the role of seafarers and their networks in forging and circulating radical ideas and practices, Linebaugh and Rediker's work offers a profound and significant challenge to existing cartographies of internationalism. They position internationalism as a practice crafted 'from below' and through exchanges, connections and circulations between diverse subaltern groups which refused to be confined within boundaries of nation-states.

This reimagining of traditions of left internationalism has in part come from a critique of what Marcus Rediker has defined as 'terracentrism'. Rediker uses this term in productive ways to challenge the 'unspoken proposition that the seas of the world are unreal spaces, voids between the real places, which are landed and national' (Rediker, 2014: 2–3). Questioning the enduring effects of terracentrism on spatial imaginations and ways of thinking about politics has the potential to destabilise some of the key categories of political geography. Thus Steinberg and Peters argue that 'attentiveness to the sea as a space of politics can upend received understandings of political possibilities and limitations' (Steinberg & Peters, 2015: 260). The questioning of the givenness of nation-centred articulations of internationalism has implications for other periods and contexts than the early modern Atlantic. It also offers important possibilities for reimagining some of the ways in which twentieth century anti-colonial politics has been envisioned.

The anti-imperial organising traditions shaped by black internationalist organising built on and, at times explicitly referenced (eg Smith, 1942), long standing traditions of black maritime resistance (Bolster, 1997). Thus Julius Scott argues that 'regional networks of communication' shaped geographies of unofficial knowledge and flows of information 'prior to, during, and following the Haitian Revolution' (Scott, 1986: 4). Scott locates such knowledge in the 'movements of runaway slaves, free people of colour, deserters from military service, and sailors' and claims that their 'traditions of mobile resistance' assumed 'an even wider significance when political currents swirling about the Atlantic world brought excitement and uncertainty to the shores of the American

colonies, as they did during the revolutionary 1790s' (Scott, 1986: 114). Scott's work emphasises that there are longstanding ways in which subaltern actors have shaped internationalist political practices, albeit in ways which have been frequently silenced or ignored. Despite a developing, if long overdue, engagement between subaltern studies and geography (eg Clayton, 2011; Jazeel, 2014), the relations between subalternity and the spaces of internationalist politics have rarely been explored in depth.

Thus Partha Chatterjee has recently argued in a discussion of the afterlives of the Subaltern Studies project that 'subaltern histories' have tended to prioritise engagements with 'the ethnographic, the practical, the everyday and the local' (Chatterjee, 2012: 49). He notes that Shahid Amin, a fellow member of the Subaltern Studies collective, has often complained that subaltern histories 'do not travel well' (Chatterjee, 2012: 49). These anxieties about the spatialities which have constituted the subaltern studies project speak to important debates about the relations between space, subalternity and the political. The geographical limits of the subaltern studies project have been probed directly by Brent Hayes Edwards who reflects on 'the characteristic reluctance among scholars associated with Subaltern Studies (partly responding to the peculiarities of British colonialism) to consider contexts outside of India' (Edwards, 2003a: 13). In consequence he considers 'whether it is possible to speak of a subaltern studies or a "colonial studies"—to use the phrase employed by the men themselves—that is elaborated among colonial intellectuals in the metropole'. By doing so he questions the centrality of the nation state to understandings of oppositional forms of internationalism and outlines an 'anti-imperial historiography' which can be pursued 'outside the locus of a particular nation-state and a particular colonial dynamic' (Edwards, 2003a: 13, emphasis in original).

While Edwards' account of 'black internationalism' is primarily focused on relatively well known writers and intellectuals like George Padmore, Paulette Nardal and Claude McKay, his account also begins to signal the importance of black maritime workers, both as objects of the writings of anti-imperialist intellectuals, and also as integral to the formation and operation of various forms of black internationalism. In drawing attention, for example, to Kouyaté's work among 'the African and Antillean dock workers and sailors in Marseilles, Bordeaux, and Le Havre' (Edwards, 2003b: 255), Edwards focuses on the co-eval, potentially conflictual, articulations produced through different versions of black internationalism and signals how the terms on which such political projects were constituted was a site of struggle and antagonism. This offers an important contribution to thinking the dynamic and contested spatial practices through which internationalist political projects are shaped and generated (see also Legg, 2014). Edwards' account permits a focus on the competing, contested universalities envisioned through different articulations of black internationalism.

This position can be used to recognise the diverse forms of labour through which internationalisms have been assembled from below, but to do so involves thinking about some of the limits of Edwards' project. Thus Erik McDuffie challenges Edwards' erasure of black women's involvement in the production of what he terms a "black women's international". He argues that although 'black women radicals never explicitly used this term', 'we can see how they practiced a radical internationalist feminist politics within the US and global Communist Left that was committed to building transnational political alliances with women of colour and politically progressive white women from around the world' (McDuffie, 2011: 17–18). Activists such as Amy Ashwood Gavey also challenged the terms of male-centred black internationalism, arguing in an intervention at the 5th Pan-African Congress in Manchester that 'much has been written

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