



Caribbean In/Securities: Creativity and Negotiation in the Caribbean (CARISCC)

Working Papers Series

Caribbean Maritime Labour and the Politicisation of In/security

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Introduction

In his essay 'The Politics of Power and Violence: Rethinking the political in the Caribbean' Anthony Bogues contends that thinking of 'power as a field of force' which 'exists in other ways than in conventional state forms' can be productive in understanding 'geographical spaces of violence and death' and 're-mapping sovereignty' (Bogues, 2007: 198-199). He argues that doing so forces the rethinking of 'the relationship between violence and power', cracks 'open homogeneous conceptions about subaltern counter-hegemonic practices' and allows us 'to interrogate the nation state in its postcolony iteration while thinking differently about the meaning of the political and sovereignty'.

This working paper contributes to these debates about the relations between the political and questions of in/security with a particular focus on the spaces through which subaltern counter-hegemonic practices have been shaped and articulated. It develops these problematics through discussion of struggles over the terms on which maritime labour organisers from the Caribbean contested the 'white labourism' of the National Union of Seamen in British ports in the 1930s. It draws out three particular aspects of this politicisation. Firstly, it discusses constructions of maritime labour as both oppressive and as offering possibilities for anti-colonial organising.

Secondly, it engages with the terms on which Caribbean seafarers' organisers contested attempts to exclude Caribbean and other seafarers of colour from labour market in the mid-1930s. Finally, it engages with the terms on which subaltern articulations of multi-culture were shaped through these struggles and the gendered and racialized constructions of place which they produced.

Caribbean Political Thought and the Politicisation of In/Security

In the late 1940s Claudia Jones, the Trinidadian Communist who at that point was working with the Communist Party of the USA, argued that 'One of the crassest manifestations of trade union neglect of the problems of the Negro woman worker has been the failure, not only to fight against relegation of the Negro woman to domestic and similar menial work, but to organize the domestic worker. It is merely lip-service for progressive unionists to speak of organizing the un-organized without turning their eyes to the serious plight of the domestic worker, who unprotected by union standards, is also the victim of exclusion from all social and labor legislation' (Jones, [1949] 1985: 111).

As this text indicates Jones was an important figure in articulating what Erik McDuffie has termed a 'black left feminism' which made significant 'interventions in black radicalism and black feminism [...] during the early and mid-twentieth century' (McDuffie, 2012: 17). She was, as McDuffie observes, part of a group of Black Communist women who 'collectively pursued a transnational political approach' (McDuffie, 2012: 17, see also Reddock, 1988, 1994).

This intervention speaks to important intellectual and political traditions in Caribbean thought and activism in terms of engaging with the practices through which questions of in/security are rendered political. As Jones's arguments suggest, this has often involved challenging what counts as political or organising in the terms of dominant left narratives and accounts of political activity. Her deportation from the US to Britain after being imprisoned under the Smith Acts in the early 1950s emphasises the relation between Caribbean mobilisation and theorisation around in/security and repressive geographies of mobility (Boyce Davies, 2008). David Austin has argued it is necessary to account for the ways in which various forms of securitisation have been deployed to close down 'forms of Black self-organisation' in different contexts (Austin, 2013: 177). In different periods and spaces this has had important consequences for the spaces of Caribbean intellectual production – whether this be the deportation/assassination of major left figures such as Walter Rodney, the banning of publications such as the *Negro World* and the *Negro Worker* and the marginalisation of concerns such as gendered violence.

The debates prompted by such interventions, have, nonetheless have important intellectual insights to bring to debates about politicisation and in/security. Thus in *Policing the Crisis* Stuart Hall and his co-authors engage with the work of the Race Today arguing that the work of collective was then shaping theoretical positions which were 'the most powerful political tendency within active black groups in Britain' (Hall et al, 1978: 370)¹. Their discussion of the writings of Race Today emphasise that the geographies through which Caribbean working class formation was produced are significant and, crucially, shape the dynamics through which in/security might be politicised. They draw particular attention to ways in which Race Today refused dominant discourses which pathologised 'wagelessness' to think about the terms on which wagelessness might be politicised and/ or understood as a particular strategy. Thus they contend that 'Race Today breaks with ascription of lumpen proletariat' in relation to such practices 'by redefining black labour in terms of two "histories"'.

In particular Hall et al. argue that Race Today positioned black labour first as 'a sector of Caribbean labour, and, as such, central to the history of struggle and the peculiar conditions of the Caribbean working class from which it originates'. Second they contend that 'it tends to be inserted into metropolitan capitalist relations as the deskilled super-exploited 'mass worker'.

¹ *Race Today* was a political collective based in Brixton in the mid-1970s to 1980s associated with the journal of that name. Strongly influenced by the work of CLR James, many of those active in the group had Caribbean backgrounds including Darcus Howe and John La Rose from Trinidad and Tobago and Linton Kwesi Johnson from Jamaica. For a powerful articulation of the movement's experience/ politics and context see Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Man Free (For Darcus Howe)' on his CD *Dread Beat an' Blood*.

Hall et al argue that by 'redrawing the historical boundaries of black labour in this way [...] the Race Today collective is able to redefine 'wagelessness' [...] as a positive rather than as a passive form of struggle' (Hall et al, 1978: 378, emphasis in original). This speaks to the ways in which 'move in the end back to [...] questions of politicization, of coming into one's own as a political being and a subject of the state' (Carr, 2002: 254). Following from this focus on politicisation the second part of the working paper draws attention to specific strategies/ spaces through which questions of in/security were politicised.

Maritime Labour, Spaces of Exclusion and the Politicisation of In/ Security

In the mid 1930s the National Union of Seamen (NUS) made concerted attempts to exclude seafarers of colour from the maritime labour market in British port cities. This took place in the context of economic depression and a slump in the shipping industry. Key figures in the union lobbied for provisions in the British Shipping Assistance Act of 1935 which would exclude seafarers of colour from the maritime labour market in British port cities. This was part of a broader culture of what Jon Hyslop (1999) has termed 'white labourism'. Thus the NUS leader William Spence reported to the 1935 AGM of the Union, for example, that the provisions in the Act would lead to the 'sacking' of 'all and sundry who have the slightest taint of alienage' (cited by Marsh and Ryan, 1988: 143). While the Act itself did not make direct strictures in terms of the composition of crews the way it was interpreted, particularly in key local contexts, was decidedly exclusionary. Thus there were allegations that the "Shipping Federation" issued a 'confidential circular which suggests that preference should be given in the order of 1) seamen of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; 2 Southern Irish, 3 British subjects from other parts of the Empire: (4) aliens'².

B. Faroze Bhader, an Indian seafarer resident in South Shields, wrote to the Office of the High Commission for India to raise concern about the implications of the Act on British Indians noting that 'I don't know who is responsible but each time a ship signs we have been refused, the Union blames the owners and the owners blame the Union'³. This strategy of the NUS built on a long-standing politics of exclusion shaped by the Union towards seafarers from racialized minorities. This took its most aggressive and violent form in relation to the role of officials, of what was then the National Seamen and Firemen's Union, in the seaport riots 1919 where such officials were directly involved in targeting and demonizing seafarers from racialized minorities (see Jenkinson, 2009). This was, however, something that was also integral to ongoing forms of trade union organisation.

The minutes of the Cardiff branch of the NUS record, for example, a meeting in October, 1929, that agreed that 'With reference to the Arab, Alien and Coloured Seamen problem it was very essential that some steps should be taken to bring about more stringent regulations to prevent British ships being over-run by this class of labour, as at present there were thousands of Arab and Somali seamen in British ships which prevented the Britisher having a fair opportunity of employment, and in many respects he felt sure that if it was not for the bribery and corruption that existed between this class of Seamen the Britisher would have a better opportunity in the open market'⁴.

² *British Library IOR/L/E/955, p. 425.*

³ *BL IOR/L/E/955,p. 441.*

⁴ *Report of meeting on 4th October, 1929, National Union of Seamen, Cardiff Branch, Minute Book, Glamorgan Record Office, GB/0214/DNUS.w*

The local labour control regimes shaped both by the Act, and more particularly by its implementation by particular placed actors, were to be vigorously contested by the formation of various committees and associations of 'colonial seafarers' (see Jonas, 1996: 325). These included the formation of the Colonial Seamen's Association in London in the mid-1930s and the Cardiff Coloured Colonial Seamen's Union, which it seems morphed into the Colonial Defence Association. Caribbean seafarers' organisers, notably Harry O'Connell from what was then British Guiana in Cardiff, and the London-based Chris Braithwaite aka Jones were central to both organisations. They also shaped a politicised understanding of maritime labour. Thus Chris Jones who was from Barbados, and had lived in Chicago before settling in Britain, argued in his column Seamen's Notes in the Pan-Africanist journal *International African Opinion* that 'It is up to us, therefore, as coloured seamen, to enlighten our fellow colonial workers during our travels that we underdogs have nothing to gain by fighting in the interests of the imperialist robbers'.⁵

The CSA brought together Communist activists with figures such as Chris Jones who had been involved in the Seamen's Minority Movement, but had broken with the Communist Party of Great Britain and had gravitated to autonomous pan-African organizing (Adi, 2014, Featherstone, 2015). Indeed, there is a suggestion that the CSA was formed by the British section of the League Against Imperialism. Indeed, there is a suggestion in official correspondence that the CSA was formed by the British section of the League Against Imperialism. The League's report of its work in 1934 noted that it had 'endeavoured to meet the constant changes in the situation as they arise, such for instance as the campaign now being waged by the British ship-owners to obtain a shipping subsidy from the British National Government, in return for which they will undertake to clear all coloured seamen'.⁶

The League saw 'Colonial Seamen' as strategically important actors in shaping left opposition in colonies, partly because of their utility for smuggling literature, but also because of the centrality of maritime circuits to colonial geographies of power (see Anim-Addo, 2014, Allen, 2011).⁷

Founded in mid-1935 the CSA was 'led by President Chris Jones (aka Chris Braithwaite) and Secretary Surat Alley, an Indian labor organizer, the association remained active in the late 1930s. Arnold Ward of the Negro Welfare Association (NWA) was also apparently associated with the organization' (Tabili, 1994: 158-9). A sense of the diverse composition of the Association can be given by reports of its first annual conference of the Colonial Seamen's Association (CSA) was attended by 51 workers- drawn from 'Negroes, Arabs, Somalis, Malays and Chinese'. It was 'addressed by Chris Braithwaite the chair of the CSA and the secretary, the 'lascar' leader Surat Alley, who had links to the Textile Workers' Union in Bombay and the All-India Seamen's Federation' (Visram, 2002: 219).

The conference passed a motion denouncing 'the pernicious colour discrimination which is deliberately fostered by the employers and the Government in order to divide and rule the seamen of all countries in the interests of the ship owners'.⁸

⁵ Chris Jones 'Seamen's Notes' *International African Opinion*, Vol 1 No. 4, October, 1938.

⁶ Hull History Centre, Bridgeman Papers, League Against Imperialism Papers- British Section, U DBN/25/1 Annual Report of British Section 1934.

⁷ Hull History Centre, Bridgeman Papers, League Against Imperialism Papers- British Section, U DBN/25/1 Annual Report of British Section 1934.

⁸ *Negro Worker* 7: 2, February 1937, p. 4. On Surat Alley, see Visram, 2002: 239-253.

Braithwaite, who was elected Chair of the CSA, 'stressed the need of organization as the one salvation of the colonial peoples'. His 'old comrade from the Negro Welfare Association, the West African seaman Roland Sawyer, also served on the executive' (Høgsbjerg, 2013: 51). As Christian Høgsbjerg notes 'the range of support for the organization was unprecedented and historic, as black, Indian, Arab and Chinese seamen were employed in British ships in a very strict hierarchy of wages and provisions. This was a testament in part to the respect for Braithwaite's tireless work and dedication (Høgsbjerg, 2013: 51).

Seafarers in organisations like the Cardiff Coloured Seamen's Union and the Colonial Seamen's Association produced agency, then, through contesting the exclusionary spaces of organising shaped by white labourist unions. They contested, and were partly successful in reworking, the forms of 'local labour control regimes' that such white labourist organising both colluded in and shaped. As Balachandran notes 'before long, the principle of white-only crews proved unworkable. Some shipowners especially from South Wales complained of not being able to find full crews of white British sailors, while fears of divisions in its ranks persuaded the NUS to back away from its earlier demand for excluding all foreign seamen'.⁹ The NUS, he notes, was forced to modify its opposition and 'in March 1936 it was agreed to treat British 'protected persons' and 'all classes of British subjects' alike, 'though this still caused problems for some seafarers who fell between these designations'.

In this respect as the anthropologist St Clair Drake argued based on his research in the Butetown area of Cardiff in the late 1940s, 'the Seamen's Minority Movement, the Colonial Defence Association and 'larry' [his pseudonym for O'Connell] have had an

influence over the years out of all proportion to the number of their numbers'.¹⁰ Figures such as O'Connell shaped a politics of in/security not just in relation to questions of the unequal and racialised construction of the maritime labour market. O'Connell's writings in the *Western Mail*, the main Welsh national newspaper to which he was a frequent correspondent, demonstrate a significant engagement with the terms on which subaltern articulations of multi-culture were shaped and the gendered and racialized constructions of place which they produced.

Thus O'Connell responded to a report of Capt FA Richardson RN, published in the *Western Mail* which pathologised multi-ethnic areas of Cardiff in viciously racist terms- but also pathologised family structures/ inter-racial relationships (see also Jordan, 2001). O'Connell argued that he 'would like, as a coloured seaman, to say that we believe we do understand the white standard of civilization and its conventions. We do not agree that the white women with whom we come into contact are of loose moral character, and believe that the moral standards of the coloured people compare favourably with those of the white'. He also contested the discourse of Richardson around 'half-caste' children arguing that 'We would inform Capt Richardson that the first half-caste children were brought into the world as a result of the colonization policy of white peoples' and that 'Capt Richardson would be well advised to spend some of his time in giving consideration to this aspect of the problem instead of worrying about the 300 half caste children resident in Cardiff'.¹¹

¹⁰ St Clair Drake, *Value Systems*, 497, see also Sherwood, 1991.

¹¹ *Western Mail*, 1935, this was reprinted as an article in the *Daily Worker* of July 13 1935, pp. 2 under the title 'Black Seaman Answers White Captain'.

⁹ Balachandran, *Globalising Labour*, 193.

O'Connell's intervention took place in relation to a particular context in the 1930s and 1940s where as Lara Putnam has argued, Caribbean parenting was articulated as a problem though the 'interaction of local, region-wide, trans-Atlantic and global processes' (Putnam, 2014: 492). Officials in the local state in Cardiff produced racialised discourses shaped by these broader flows of ideas/ prejudice. Thus key officials in Cardiff were part of circulations of white supremacist ideas about inter-racial sex. In 1929, the Chief Constable of Cardiff, James A. Wilson, who 'clearly saw himself as a tribune of the white race', advocated legislation like the Immorality Act of 1927 from the Union of South Africa which had banned interracial sex (Evans, 1985: 103). Segregationist policies continued to be promoted by fractions within the local state and there were attempts to introduce racially segregated housing into the city in 1945. O'Connell's intervention emphasizes that these place-based relations were not given through these struggles, but actively contested in ways which made the politicization of in/security central to debates about the terms on which place was defined and articulated.

Conclusions

This working paper has sought to engage with traditions of Caribbean political thought and activism to engage with some of the spatial practices through which questions of in/security become politicised. As Pat Noxolo has argued the 're-centring of in/security means that the Caribbean can be understood as an alternative prism through which wider questions of global in/security can be refocused' (Noxolo, 2016: 2). Though developing a focus on the spaces through which Caribbean seafarer's organisers shaped and articulated subaltern counter-hegemonic practices this working paper has sought to draw attention to some of the racialised, classed and gendered organising practices through which in/security can be rendered political. Through so doing it has

drawn attention to the way that organisations like the Colonial Seamen's Association demonstrated that white labourism was neither the only nor an uncontested way of articulating maritime organising. Further it has shown how translocal solidarities were constructed through multi-ethnic spaces and organising which shaped important intersections of anti-colonial politics and maritime labour. In this regard political activists from the Caribbean like Harry O'Connell and Chris Braithwaite played a key role in challenging the imperial articulations of labour organising and linked anti-colonial politics in labour struggles in important ways. These solidarities were integral to contestation of white labourism and contributed to the de-colonising of labour movements in diverse contexts. They also shaped important struggles over gendered and racialized constructions of place-making practices.

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