UNAUTHORIZED VOYAGERS ACROSS TWO OCEANS: AFRICANS, INDIANS, AND ABORIGINES IN AUSTRALIA

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I

Considering movements of people between South Asia, Africa and Australia offers an opportunity to rethink Empire and more broadly to question the way we have understood the meaning of land and landscapes. In Australia, until the mid-twentieth century, history focused on the distance between the colony of Australia and that of metropolitan Britain, tracing the impact that the enormity of that distance and the duration of travel had in shaping the colony.[1] More recently, historians have focused attention on the links between settler colonies and the movements of ideology, policy, popular culture and people between these colonies of America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and even South America.[2] This focal analysis

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1 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982).

2 Ibid.

on settler colonies and settler colonialism has often been intensely critical.[3] Some scholars have invoked Fanon's analysis of the role of settlers themselves in the deep conflicts of colonialism.[4] Nevertheless, the attention of such analysts, however critical, has continued to focus on settler ideologies and settler-to-settler connections. An important and complex example of the tensions involved can be seen in the range of the chapters in the edited volume *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*.[5] Only three of the chapters deal with non-European settlers, two of them in relation to South Asia, but their focus is limited to middle class or professional travellers in western imperial nations. Patrick Wolfe has identified the problems in his essay "Islam and Indian Nationalism in Europe" where he argues that these narrow sets of limits have continued despite the fact that "transnational history... has no necessary confinement to settler societies in the west."[6]

One reason is that the sources for such studies have been the traditional historians' sources of the documentary and visual archive, whether formal or informal, official or popular. The official records, the catalogues and the schedules of European colonial powers are actually the archives of imperial control. They demonstrate the ways in which metropolitan powers attempted to impose order onto "chaos" by directing the deployment of people and things around their newly acquired territories. The very existence of these records implies that such control was effective. Other records, such as those of popular culture, for example novels and images, which circulated between self-consciously defined 'settler' communities, display the achievement of "settler" goals. Such documents reflect hopes, desires or fantasies rather than accomplished facts.

Alternatives emerge, however, outside the European empire land-based focus from Melanesian and Pacific Islander viewpoints around Australasia, who understand the sea not as an empty space, but instead as a peopled and storied place, "a sea of islands"[7] that connects rather than separates seafaring people (Barclay 2008; D'Arcy 2006).[8] Such an interpretation conceives of the lines of communication across the seas and between colonies as flexible highways with infinitely variable branches rather than as sealed tubes of controlled passage. If we examine the source materials, the lists, the classifications and the catalogues against the grain, the claims of imperial control give way to the recognition of the vernacular technologies and philosophies that circulated via these pathways from colony to colony.

II

The settlement of Australia was a multi-racial process right from the beginning, at a time when race was a malleable construct, not conceptualized in terms of a binary black/white. Race was a flexible category and the signifiers of difference were uncertain. The early years of the colony involved the movement of various people of differing ethnicities circulating from colony to colony as well as between metropole and colony. Various mythologies about the Australian topography and icons such as the bushranger are not necessarily only Aboriginal or white. In her book, *Black Founders*, Cassandra Pybus writes about African-American slaves who fled from their masters to the British during the American war of independence. They were protected by the British military and sent to Canada, from where many made their way to Britain. The twelve men she writes about were subsequently convicted of various crimes in Britain and transported to the new penal colony of New South Wales. Yet Pybus admits that she gained in the end "only fleeting glimpses of how these people lived and died."[9] The result is that the book is in parts as much

3   Derek Gregory, *the Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)

4   Ann Curthoys, "Constructing National Histories," in *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, eds. Bain Attwood and Stephen Foster (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003); Lorenzo Veracini, "The Evolution of Historical Redescription in Australia and Israel and the Question of Founding Violence," *Australian Historical Studies* 122 (2003): 326-45.

5   Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2005).

6   Patrick Wolfe, "Islam, Europe and Indian Nationalism: Towards a Postcolonial Transnationalism," in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Pespective*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2005).

7   Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148-61.

8   Kate Barclay, "Ocean, Empire and Nation: Japanese Fisheries Politics," in *Fresh and Salt: Water, Borders and Sovereignty in Asia and Oceania*, eds. Devleena Ghosh, Heather Goodall and Stephanie Donald (London: Routledge, 2008); Paul D'Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

9   Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders* (UNSW Press: Sydney, 2006), 9.

landscape as figure, as much about the times and places in which these people lived as about their particular experiences and perceptions. What *Black Founders* does add is a reminder of the many connections between colonial Australian and colonial American history.

Pybus describes Black Caesar, the first Australian bushranger, probably a Creole man of the African diaspora who arrived in 1788 in New South Wales abroad one of the First Fleet transport ships, sentenced in the Kent assizes for stealing money. There is some indication that he may have been a native of Madagascar and his name indicates that he may have been a former slave. He was described as "a savage of a darker hue and full as far removed from civilization." The colony almost perished of famine in the first years of settlement and hunger drove Caesar into the bush where he had an armed confrontation with the Aboriginal warrior Pemelwuy. He is remembered as "an incorrigibly stubborn black" who could not be cowed by floggings or punishment.[10] At the end of 1795, Governor Hunter offered him a conditional pardon but Caesar answered that "he would neither come in or suffer himself to be taken alive."[11] He was eventually shot by a bounty hunter in 1796.

Another black 'founder' of the British colony in Australia is William Blue (c.1767-1834), convict, settler and ferryman, who may have been born in Jamaica, West Indies. It is also possible that he was a freed African-American slave from colonial New York as he later claimed to have served with the British army in the American War of Independence. In 1796, in England, Blue was convicted of theft and sentenced to seven years transportation. He was described in convict records as 'a Jamaican Negro sailor', aged 29 in 1796. Blue married a 30-year-old, English-born convict, Elizabeth Williams, and had six children. He worked as a waterman and collected and sold oysters and other items. He found favor with both government officials and the public, to whom he endeared himself with his whimsical style and banter (Pybus, 2006:153-54 and *passim*).

Blue was appointed harbour watchman and constable by Governor Macquarie in 1811. These titles enabled him to acquire a new home overlooking Sydney Harbor which became a local landmark known as "Billy Blue's Cottage." In 1817, Blue was granted a farm of eighty acres (32.4 ha) in Port Jackson, now known as Billy Blue's Point. He quickly

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10   Ibid., 127 ff.
11   Ibid., 134-135.

built up a "fleet of ferries" and was dubbed "The Old Commodore." The location and business offered opportunities to participate in smuggling and, in October 1818, he was arrested for smuggling two casks of rum (he claimed that he had found them floating and lashed them to his boat to return them to the shore). He lost his position as harbor watchman and constable and was imprisoned for a year.[12]

Blue was described as "an eccentric, loquacious character." He would board newly berthed vessels, dressed in a travesty of a naval uniform, with a top hat, as "commodore" to welcome the officers to Sydney. By 1833 he and his family were reported as keeping a ferryboat and cultivating vegetables and fruit for the Sydney market. Blue died on 7 May 1834 at his North Sydney home. Streets in North Sydney were named after him and the site of his northern ferry terminus remained known as Blues Point.[13]

A later arrival from across the Indian Ocean, from an island off the African coast, was Thomas Shadrach James (1859-1946). Thomas was born on September 1, 1859 at Moka, Mauritius, son of Samson Peersahib, an Indian interpreter, and his wife Miriam Esther, née Thomas (d.1876). Named Shadrach James Peersahib, he boarded a boat for Australia when his mother died and his father remarried. James worked as a volunteer teacher at the Maloga Aboriginal School, New South Wales and was appointed head teacher by the Department of Public Instruction in 1883. When the Maloga residents were shifted in 1888 to the government reserve, Cumeroogunga, James reopened his school there and educated a number of Aborigines who were to become active in the early political movement, including the founders of the Australian Aborigines' League in 1933. James also served as a Methodist lay preacher, conducted a dispensary on Cumeroogunga mission and assisted visiting doctors to perform minor operations. In 1919, when the policy of removal of Aboriginal children created conflicts and walkouts, the Protection Board, assuming that the disruption must be the work of individual "trouble makers," tried to transfer James on the grounds that his presence "would continue the friction and strife which had been prevalent."[14] This decision predictably led to

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12   Ibid., 183.
13   *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/AS10045b.htm. (accessed 31 Oct, 2007).
14   Aboriginal Protection Board Minutes, meetings of May 5, 1919 and June 25, 1919.

still further conflict and more disciplinary expulsions, but the Board was successful in terminating James' employment in August 1921. The Board tried to expel James' son, Shadrack, on the grounds that "the presence of [Shadrack] James on the Station is a menace to the good government thereof," but he continued the Cumeroogunga tradition and refused to comply with the order, seeking legal advice. The Board was finally forced to prosecute him for trespass.[15]

In addition to these movements of Africans, there was some nineteenth century regulated movement between South Asia and Australia as the work of Suzanne Rickard and Margaret Allen describes.[16] Rickard's 'Lifelines from Calcutta' is a detailed account of the entry and migration into Australia of South Asians who arrived in the early days of the British colony. Indians and Sri Lankans arrived in Australia as servants, perhaps as cooks, ayahs or nursemaids, attending British staff and settlers who frequently came directly from Indian residence. Another group of South Asians arrived in Australia as convicts who had been transported from India to Australia in the early days. There was also an inverse flow of British convicts who escaped, many disappearing into India and other British domains via legal and illegal means. There are, also, groups of Indian entrepreneurs, some of them Sikhs, who arrived as small traders. Allen's work is oriented towards a later time period, and compares individual travellers' experiences in India and Australia, seeking out those Indian-authored accounts to give an insight into the increasing hostility within Australia to "non-white" entry around Federation. By definition, Allen's subjects are middle class and articulate subjects, who may comment on traders or workers but whose experiences are those of relatively privileged and solitary travellers.

There were as well two groups of Indians who arrived as laborers. Indentured workers came to Australia in relatively small groups in the 1830s and the 1840s as agricultural or pastoral labourers who were sent into the Hunter River region and into the pastoral north west of the state. The other major group came from the North West Frontier Provinces of India, areas like Punjab and Afghanistan, some of whom were Sikhs while many others were Muslims.[17] They came to manage camels that were introduced to be the major transport mechanism in the intensely arid areas of central Australia. Few of these Indians who entered Australia within the imperial and colonial regulatory framework remained in readily identifiable cultural or racial communities. The Sikhs were one group who did form a concentrated community in locations like Woolgoolga on the NSW coast. Traces of information about such people are scattered through the British and settler archives, registers, lists and records of their entry and residence in Australia. Such records, premised on a land-based understanding of colonialism and imperial structures, assume that people's presence in a territory implies an earlier, unproblematic transit, formal residence and stable occupation.

This movement of people as workers, servants or convicts via the imperial networks did not take place along a seamless set of transit channels without leakage on the way. In fact, if we take the Melanesian Pacific approach of the ocean as a network of highways, it becomes clear that the sealed quality of the imperial transport mechanisms was less than perfect. The ships that travelled between Britain and its colonies did not have only British and European crews and passengers but were also crewed by large numbers of seamen, either African or South Asian, called *lascars*,[18] a term that shifted from being a job description to a generic racialized description, eventually in Australian meaning coloured and Indian seamen.[19] In the nineteenth century, as imperial controls over expanding territories were tightened and racial anxieties began to increase, the movement of people also became more regulated. Rozina Visram has demonstrated these shifts by comparing changing visual representations of *lascars* in English ports from the mid nineteenth century. Early paint-

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15   Ibid., Meetings of August 17, 1921, August 19, 1921, October 21, 1921 and December 7, 1921.

16   Suzanne Rickard, "Lifelines from Calcutta" in *India, China, Australia: Trade and Society, 1788-1850*, eds., James Broadbent, Suzanne Rickard and Margaret Steven (Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney, 2003); and Margaret Allen, "'Innocents Abroad' and 'Prohibited Immigrants': Australians in India and Indians in Australia 1890-1910," in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, eds., Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2005), 111-124.

17   Pamela Rajkowski, *in the Tracks of the Camelmen* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1987).

18   *Oxford English Dictionary*; Henry Yule and Arthur C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, ed. William Crooke (Asian Educational Services: New Delhi, 2006); and Janet Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, C. 1750-1914," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 1-42 (2000).

19   Gopalan Balachandran, "Cultures of Protest in Transnational Contexts: Indian Seamen Abroad, 1885-1945," in *"Cultural Currents of the Indian Ocean,"* eds. Devleena Ghosh and Lola Sharon Davidson, *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2008).

ings depicting exotic but respectful images of *lascars* on the London docks increasingly gave way to derogatory caricatures of "Orientals."[20]

Jane Ewald's work 'Crossers of the Sea', based on research in East Africa, traces the shift in Indian Ocean trade from sail to steam in the nineteenth century.[21] Ewald comments on the simultaneous economies in East Africa and West India and the developing capitalist colonial networks through merchant trading. She shows that seafarers came from a range of different locations, including East Africa, the West Indies and South Asia, and from different class backgrounds: slaves, freed men and free born sailors as well. The sailing ship structure allowed a much more fluid and flexible role for these seafarers, who could be both entrepreneurs in their own right at each port, as well as being much more flexibly allocated on the ship itself. With the development of steam transport from the 1850s onwards, the distinction between engine room staff, in the much more dangerous conditions below deck, and deckhands or ordinary seamen became increasingly stark. By the later nineteenth century, the racial divisions had been cemented on the western routes and East Africans or *Seedies* (a corruption of Sayeed), were relegated to the difficult and dangerous conditions below decks while the ordinary seamen or deckhands were predominantly South Asians. In contrast, on the eastern routes and in Dutch shipping lines the engine crews were largely South Asian and the deckhands Indonesian.

Ewald identifies three critical changes of colonial and corporate control in the shift from sail to steam. Firstly, tight control over time discipline became increasingly possible as the steam engines detached the schedule of the merchant ships from the regimes of wind and climate.[22] Secondly, job specialization was intensified as the steam engine room demanded special skills and special control under appalling conditions of noise, heat and danger. And finally the racialization of the job order intensified so that by the turn of the twentieth century, distinctions were being made between, for example, *seedies* [Africans] and *lascars* [South Asians] and the kind of work they were allowed to do.[23]

20   Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 148-149.

21   Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea."

22   Jim Masselos, "Changing Definitions of Bombay: City State to Capital City," in *Ports and Their Hinterlands, 1700-1950*, ed. Indu Banga (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992), 273-316.

23   Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea."

The advertising in the tourist literature and posters of the major merchant shipping lines like the P&O made explicit the racial order on the large steam ships. Posters for early twentieth century cruises on P&O, for example, show European tourist passengers with serving staff of mixed racial categories. We can see that the visible "saloon" and "deck" staff did not include Africans, but did include South Asians. The poster showed a hierarchy of privilege and power depicted in the visual flow from the fore-grounded reclining tourists through to the insignia of rank on the uniforms of the European crew and on to the humble stewards and deck cleaners standing at the end of the line. In 1886, Edwin Arnold, a tourist on one of the P&O lines traveling between England and India (significantly 'The Parramatta' which indicates its overall route to have included Australia), observed this shipping order to be one in which "that glorious British Empire of which we are here a small moving isolated fragment could be seen displayed."[24]

Another poster from the P&O line during the same period displays similar images of imperial technological power in the portrayal of two enormous new steamers, "The White Sisters," which dwarfed not only their small tug boats, but the frail indigenous vernacular Asian sailing craft, veering off ahead of their towering prows. The choice of the color white to badge the P&O liners in the nineteenth century, and reintroduced in the 1930s, was no accident, seeking as it did to stress the racial order of exotic travel, in which Europeans were pampered tourists while colonized and colored people either served them or looked on as amazed spectators.[25] This visual representation of massive European power and technological mastery which was passively observed by exotic, primitive and appreciative natives was reproduced precisely in the posters of the Dutch steam shipping line, which also plied Australian waters with both cargo and passengers, the Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij line, known universally as KPM.[26]

Yet these images of imperial order and power obscured the fact that all the established merchant-shipping lines by the turn of the twentieth century carried major populations of colonized people as their workforce. As the colonial transport system began to gather pace in the late

24   Ibid., 24. Citing Peter Padfield, *Beneath the House Flag of the P&O* (London, 1981), 70.

25   TravelOnLine, *P&O Cruise History* (2006), http://www.travelonline.co.nz/cruises/po-history.html.

26   http://www.posterpage.ch/exhib/ex108roy/ex108roy.htm

eighteenth century, the British government became concerned about the presence of large numbers of transient Asian and African seamen in the ports and they legislated for the insertion of what became known as the Asiatic Articles into the mercantile shipping acts.[27] These acts influenced, although they did not determine, the later Australian shipping legislation which limited the wages and conditions available to Asian and African seamen and controlled the movement of seamen in the ports of Britain and other settler colonies.[28]

Nevertheless, with the expansion of imperial trade in the nineteenth century, there was a major rise in the numbers of these seamen. In 1821 for example, *lascars* made up 84% of the crews of British sailing ships operating in the Eastern routes, including the Indian and Australian routes. By 1855, British merchant ships were employing 12,000 *lascars*, 60% of them from the sub-continent of India. By 1900, P&O employed 12,000 altogether: 59% were *lascars*, but they were defined in very clearly identified segments of the ships' workforce; 28% of the stewards were South Asian *lascars*, but 81.5% of the firemen were African *seedies*, while 95% of the deckhands and ordinary seamen were *lascars*. By 1928, 52,500 *lascars* were employed on all British trading vessels and 30% of all seamen were *lascars*.[29] That some of these African seafarers ended up staying in Australia is evident from this account:

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27   Gopalan Balachandran, "Searching for the Sardar: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions and Human Agency in the Maritime Labor Market, Calcutta, 1880-1935," in *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia*, eds., Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1996), 206-36; Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea"; Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (New York: Cornell, 1994).

28   Frank Broeze, *Island Nation: A History of Australians and the Sea* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998); Brian Fitzpatrick and Rowan J. Cahill, *the Seamen's Union of Australia: 1872-1972. A History* (Sydney: the Seamen's Union of Australia, 1981); and Michael Quinlan, "Industrial Relations before Unions: New South Wales Seamen 1810-1852," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 38, no. 2 (1996): 264-93.

29   Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*; J.P. Jones, "1931: 'Lascars in the Port of London," *P.L.A. Monthly February 1931*, Report to P&O Board of Directors (June 2, 1900): Report on employment of Indian Seamen, archived at http://www.lascars.co.uk; and Gopalan Balachandran, "Circulation through Seafaring: Indian Seamen 1890-1945," in *Society and Circulation: Mobile Peoples and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950*, eds., Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 89-130.

Travelling on foot across the continent in 1882, George Morrison met an old gentleman in the middle of Australia, by the name of John Smith. He described his new travelling companion as "a toothless darkie, a native of the Gold Coast of Africa, a cook by profession and one of the kindest, most considerate men it has been my lot to meet with." As a young man, John Smith of the Gold Coast had enlisted on a Dutch man-of-war that was taking Prince Hendrik of the Netherlands around the world. Thus John Smith became the first black man ever seen in Iceland, and after his maritime travels he ended up in Australia.[30]

Over this century and a half these African and Indian seamen were represented in Britain and Australia variously as threats or as victims. In the 1790s, the British government constructed colored sea fares (whether *lascars* or *seedies*) as a threat by the institution of the Asiatic Articles so as to limit seamen's access and permanent settlement in England. By the 1830s, however, British philanthropists and others were depicting colored seafarers as helpless, abandoned and pitiful victims of exploitation, who needed shelter and assistance to return home. These philanthropists agitated for better welfare for coloured seamen but also encouraged their effective removal from Britain's shores.[31] In Australia, a major issue in a series of strikes during the 1890s against grazier employers, shipping owners and shipping lines, was the control and eventual replacement of Asian colored labor by Australian and New Zealand settler labor. The agitation escalated in Britain in the 1930s as the depression affected the job opportunities of the British.[32] Thus, British and settler seamen endorsed their governments' attempts to stop all colored seafarers, and particularly South Asians, legally coming ashore.

III

Yet ultimately neither official surveillance nor union opposition stopped people from jumping ship.[33] Motives for such decisions may

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30   Cyril Pearl, *Morrison of Peking* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967), 30.

31   Gopalan Balachandran, "Conflicts in the International Maritime Labor Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890-1939," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, no. 1 (2002): 96-99.

32   Balachandran, "Cultures of Protest; and Fitzpatrick and Cahill, *the Seamen's Union*.

33   Tabili, *British Justice*.

have been mixed. Colonial Australians assumed that their colony was an irresistible attraction, but there were few good reasons for seafarers to consider abandoning their wages at the end of a voyage as well as their families and villages at home.[34] Even so, circumstances might change at home, with deaths and family differences, which might at times make a return more difficult. Not uncommonly, the financial collapse of small ship owners left many cargoes and seamen abandoned in distant ports. Such short-term stays might become extended indefinitely as relationships developed or opportunities arose. Thinking laterally and beyond the archives or the official records such as lists of employees, short-term entry permits or permanent residency status, allows us to look instead to the resources of memory and family history within the communities on the wharfs and in the slums and red light districts of the port cities with whom they interacted. In this way we can put faces to the statistics. For example, some long established Indian families in Australia trace their descent to seafarers who jumped ship in the 1860s and to circus performers who visited with a troupe in the 1890s and stayed on when the tour was over.[35]

While Aboriginal histories and memory are an important source for understanding the ways in which people from India and Africa came to Australia and the impact they had, it was not only those people who jumped ship or even those who formalized their residence, who shaped the past in Australia. Another story emerges through industrial union histories and the memories of working class activists and workers on the wharves. The interactions of shared work and struggle on the wharves opened up lines of personal communication between Indians, Africans, and Australians. Although most Australian unions characterized "colored labor, both on ships and on land, as a threat to working conditions and wages and, indeed, the dignity of "white" labor, there was one notable group of unionists who refused to endorse Australian labor racism. They were the Wobblies, the members of the International Workers of the World [IWW], an anarcho-syndicalist movement who challenged such racial divisiveness not only in theory but also in practical strategies and in the personnel who were involved in the union. Since many Wobblies

were seamen, the character of the seamen's union in Australia was more strongly international than many others.[36]

The IWW was one of the few unions which supported Singhalese seamen in 1915 when they attempted to establish a local chapter of the IWW, the One Big Union, in Darwin.[37] The IWW was destroyed by the conflicts around World War I, but the personal networks of relationships across ethnic lines on the wharves and on the boats continued.[38] The impact of the Depression and then World War II, while heightening fears of racial competition among maritime workers, also challenged those fears by forcing new alliances in the struggles against Fascism and for decolonization and national independence.[39] Some of the working class activists who were closest to the maritime unions, like the Australian Communist Party [CPA] in the later 1930s, began to make increasing contacts with Indonesian nationalists exiled in Australia and also with the transient Chinese and Indian seafarers who tried to use the fluid situation in wartime to challenge the racially discriminatory conditions of the international shipping trade as well as to support nationalist movements in the immediate region. These Australian activists – Sylvia Mullins, Jack Mullins, Phyllis Johnson – often but not always members of the CPA, are another rich source of personal memories. They offer important reflections about the camaraderie which developed across the lines of ethnicity and religion, and also give valuable insights into the strategies adopted by the seafarers in their interactions both with allies and with the shipping companies with whom they were in dispute.[40]

Charles Frederick Maynard (1879-1946), an Aboriginal activist, probably of African-French heritage, is an example of such radical influence and interaction. His grandfather, Jean Phillippe (the name

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34   Gopalan Balachandran, personal communication, 2007

35   Reg Persaud, personal communication, 2006, Devleena Ghosh.

36   Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

37   Ibid.

38   Robert Haworth, personal communication, 2007, Heather Goodall.

39   Gopalan Balachandran, "Coolie, Class, and Nation" (paper presented at the Culture and Commerce in the Indian Ocean Conference, Leiden, 2006); Blachandran, "Searching for the Sardar"; "Balachandran, "Cultures of Protest; and Rupert Lockwood, *Black Armada: Australia and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence 1942-49* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982).

40   Phyllis Johnson, informal interview May 4; formal recorded interview May 10, 2007

was Anglicized to Phillips in the next generation) was a Mauritian who arrived in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. Charles Frederic Maynard became a wharf laborer in Sydney and an active member of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia, spending much time at the Domain and other public-speaking venues. In the early 1920s he united with his countrymen from the Hunter to make a public protest against the assault on Aborigines' rights; they spoke at local meetings and lobbied the Sydney and regional press. In 1925 Maynard launched the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association. The group protested against the revocation of north-coast farming reserves; they also demanded that children no longer be separated from their families or indentured as domestics and menial laborers. The AAPA advocated that all Aboriginal families should receive inalienable grants of farming land within their traditional country, that their children should have free entry to public schools, and that Aborigines should control any administrative body affecting their lives.[41]

This new Aboriginal political movement was "fighting for the preservation of rights for [A]borigines for self determination." The AAPA demanded that the incompetent Aboriginal Protection Board should be scrapped and replaced with an all Aboriginal board of management.[42] Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association played a significant part in influencing this emerging Aboriginal political ideology.[43] Garvey had used black seamen around the globe as agents to spread the word of his movement. This influence was disseminated in Australia through African/American and West Indian seamen coming into contact with Aboriginal wharf laborers. John Maynard's path-breaking research shows how these contacts gave Aboriginal people access to international black literature and political newspapers, especially Garvey's *The Negro World* which had a weekly international circulation of more than 200,000 copies. For example, Garvey's paper would have introduced Gandhi to Aboriginal activists.

Many Aboriginal political leaders had been members of the Sydney chapter of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1920 prior to the formation of the AAPA. Thus the AAPA in Australia imitated the nationalistic platform of Gandhi and Garvey and displayed a Black nationalist agenda. The AAPA Treasurer, Tom Lacey, for example, assured Garvey and his movement the support of 10,000 Aboriginal people in NSW and 60,000 Aboriginal people nationally.[44]

Another war, some decades later, brought more Africans to Australian shores. By August 1942, 7,300 African-American troops were stationed in Australia, their largest overseas deployment. According to Cameron White, the wartime experience of African Americans in Australia was important in the development of new, assertive performances of African American politics, identity and style throughout this period as well as offering an important model for Indigenous Australians' demands for civil rights. "There is enough evidence of direct exchange between African Americans and Indigenous Australians *during* WWII to suggest that it formed the basis of new forms of Indigenous Australian political and self-expression in the 1950s and 1960s."[45]

The white civilian population welcomed these black soldiers warmly and there are numerous reports of Australians inviting African American soldiers into their homes.[46] Many incidents of fraternization between white Australian women and African American soldiers are recorded[47] and approximately 50 white Australian women travelled to the United States at the conclusion of the war as the wives of African American soldiers.[48] White argues, however, that this positive reception of African American soldiers took place in the context of a more general enthusiastic response to the presence of American soldiers in Australia so that their American-ness transcended their skin. "That is, African Americans benefited from the prestige associated with being a member of America's

41   Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW* 1770-1972 (Sydney: Allen & Unwin with Black Books, 1996), 149-172.

42   John Maynard, "'Be the change that you want to see': The awakening of cultural nationalism – Gandhi, Garvey and the AAPA," *Borderlands eJournal* vol. 4, no. 3 (2005a): 2.

43   John Maynard "'In the Interests of Our People': the Influence of Garveyism on the rise of Australian Aboriginal Political Activism," *Aboriginal History*, vol 29 (2005b).

44   "Maynard, "Be the Change."

45   Cameron White, "World War Two and Race Relations in Australia: A Comparative Study of the Experiences of Indigenous Australians and African Americans" (unpublished paper, 2008), 4.

46   Daniel E. Potts and Annette Potts, *Yanks Down Under, 1941-45: the American Impact on Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), 187-193.

47   White, "WWII and Race Relations," 5.

48   Annette Potts and Lucinda Strauss, *For the Love of a Soldier: Australian War-Brides and their GIs* (Crows Nest, NSW: ABC Enterprises for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1987), 63.

powerful army."[49] This prestige associated with American-ness has been documented in other studies on the position of African Americans within the African diaspora.[50]

White's research highlights the fact that this cordial response to the African American soldiers was frowned upon by the authorities. He cites cases of white American descriptions of Australia as a 'nigger heaven' and examples of descriptions of clubs where white (women) and black soldiers socialized as "disgusting" and "strange" (White, 2008:8).[51] A report from the US Deputy Director of Security in 1942 voiced concerns that "the American Negroes... appear to be becoming [sic] particularly self-confident and insubordinate which may ultimately cause them to become a serious problem."[52] A subsequent confidential instruction to Australian Army units warned that it was:

> Undesirable that Australian troops should fraternize or drink with American colored soldiers... Australian troops have in certain instances been associating with the colored troops to an extent which would not be permitted in the case of American white troops... Action taken [to discourage fraternization] should be as tactful as possible since it is of course not desired that any offence be caused to American colored troops.[53]

These attitudes finally led to the geographic segregation of African-American soldiers so that, in mid-May 1942, 3,500 African-Americans were sent to the arid region of northwest Queensland while those stationed in cities were confined to less wealthy suburbs.[54] Black clubs opened by Aboriginal people in cities such as Brisbane were patronized by African Americans, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and a small number of white women. One of the clubs, predominantly staffed by Aboriginal women, serviced up to 5,000 troops per day.[55]

Both indigenous Australians and African Americans resented the official policies that prevented Aboriginal Australians from serving in the Australian army and the institutionalized racism that prevailed within the American and Australian forces. Black American soldiers and indigenous Australians may have been drawn together through their common experience of racism. It is certainly true that African-American forms of political expression strongly influenced Indigenous Australian activism in the 1950s and 1960s. Examples are the 'Freedom Ride' of 1965 led by Charles Perkins, the envoys from the newly formed Aboriginal Tribal Council to the 1969 Black Power Congress in America, and the formation of the Australian Black Panther Party, also in 1969.[56]

IV

Finally, there are few opportunities to learn what any of these non-European newcomers thought themselves. Yet, occasionally, because of their union involvement, we have opportunities to learn how some of these people viewed such interactions on the waterfront. This occurred notably with the documentation created around the birth and early years of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia from its formation in 1945 to 1948.[57] The union was formed when Indian seamen refused to man Dutch ships taking arms to the former Dutch East Indies to fight against Indonesian nationalists who had just declared independence. While Australian maritime unions focused initially on Dutch military shipping and troop movements, the Indian crews of merchant ships identified the cargoes of guns and bullets leaving ports disguised as commercial goods. Despite facing threats of internment from an ambivalent Australian Federal Labor government and being hounded by Dutch security men, hundreds of Indian seamen walked off the ships and refused to either load or sail the ships towards Indo-

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49 White, "WWII and Race Relations," 5.

50 H. Neptune, "Manly Rivalries and Mopsies: Gender, Nationality and Sexuality in United States – Occupied Trinidad," *Radical History Review, Transnational Black Studies* 87 (2003), 78-95.

51 White, "WWII and Race Relations," 8.

52 Ibid.

53 HQ Queensland L of C Area to subordinate formations cited in Robert A. Hall, *the Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 76.

54 White, "WWII and Race Relations," 9.

55 Kay Saunders and Helen Taylor, "The Reception of Black American Servicemen in Australia during World War II: The Resilience of 'White Australia,'" *Journal of Black Studies* 25/ 3 (1995): 331-348.

56 White, "WWII and Race Relations," 9.

57 Indian Seamen's Union in Australia Archive Deposit number: E177, 1945-1949, Noel Butlin Archive of Business & Labour [NBBL], in Archives Library of the Australian National University.

nesia. They worked in concert with Australian maritime unions and received support from left-wing activists, including the CPA and the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council. They formed their own union, demanded back pay and decent conditions, and challenged the imperial shipping lines of the Dutch and the British with deputations and the Gandhian tactics of peaceful but tenacious sit-ins.[58]

In January 1946, these Indian seamen hosted a banquet for the Australians who had supported them and there is a rare instance of their voices describing their roles in the struggle and their relationship to their Australian comrades. Mohamed T. Hussain, a striking Indian crewman, opened the banquet thus:

> On behalf of my brother Indians and myself I extend to you all a warm welcome...We are Indian seamen without a ship and we have not been able to do all we would of (sic) liked for you...But what is missing we hope we will make up for with the warmth of our welcome...
>
> Those who have controlled our country for so many years, so that because we are Indians we must be slaves... There can be no new world while there are any people who are slaves of others... The winning of freedom in Indonesia will surely be followed by the freedom of India. For that reason we must do everything possible to see that the Dutch are driven out of Indonesia.[59]

We thus have alternative ways then to learn about the movement of Africans and South Asians to Australia. One is through the memory of Aboriginal people and non-Indian or African seamen, wharf laborers and activists that provide important insights into personal interactions and lasting impacts. They don't however give us the words or the perceptions of these informal travelers skirting the boundaries of various empires. But sometimes, in the scattered records of Aboriginal activism and in union archives, we find traces and echoes of these voices. We glimpse people who are neither threats nor victims, but rather an interacting, assertive and complex body of people, beyond

the control of the imperial supervision and regulation, and supposedly so well-established and effectively policed. The search for voices of such migrants is also occurring for other parts of the world to where Africans and Indians moved or were forcibly moved, as in the study of the Western IOW and the Ottoman Empire.[60]

This overview into the interaction between Africans, Indians and Australians suggests a number of questions that we can ask in terms of the study of contemporary diasporas. Africans came as convicts, seafarers and soldiers and the mode of their entry changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, they traversed the Indian Ocean from colonies and continents to disembark at Perth and Sydney while in the twentieth century they entered, mainly as soldiers but also as seafarers, via routes across the Pacific Ocean, mostly from the USA rather than from Africa. In contrast, in both centuries, informal Indian travellers entered at ports on Australia's eastern and western coastlines after journeys across the Indian Ocean. Both these categories of workers/travellers tended to be dispersed and isolated geographically and socially from other compatriots. Their potential for collective cultural, social or political assertiveness was greatly reduced and they often left little legacy or memory about their lives in their home countries or their relationships once they reached Australia.

But through the stories of radical politics, such as the Marcus Garvey inspired activism of the AAPA or the seamen glimpsed on the Sydney wharves in 1945, we can sense a strain of political independence and assertiveness which engaged with Aboriginal people's strategies and tactics in trying to defend families against oppressive state institutions. Were there also other processes at work, for example, in the pressure cooker environments of shipboard life, vulnerable to the power of ships' captains and masters and with increasing racialized job differentiation between *seedies* and *lascars* for example? Did relational identities develop in ports and cities where African American soldiers were stationed and seafarers disembarked so that bonds were established between working class groups and people of color that sustained an internationalism, rare

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58 Heather Goodall, "Port Politics, Race and Change: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-1947," *Labour History* no. 94 (May 2008): 43-68.

59 Indian Seamen's Union, E177/5, January 13, 1946.

60 Edward A Alpers, "Diversity of Experience and Legacies of African Slavery in the Western Indian Ocean," in this volume (2009); Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in Islamic Middle East* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

within settler colonies, which contributed to a developing sense of globalization among workers persisting into the 21st century?

These are the questions which might find some answers in the stories of Australians, both Aboriginal, maritime working class and others, and in the archival traces around them. Ultimately, the partial answers found in Australia, augmented by further research in the USA, Africa and South Asia, may contribute to a deeper understanding of the lives of these mobile and transient communities at home as well as away.

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