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STEAMING THE TRANS-SUEZ HIGHWAYS OF FRENCH IMPERIALISM (1830-1930)

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CHARLES BÉGUÉ FAWELL

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes mobility and power in an age of expansionary imperialism and accelerated globalization. Based on archives in France, the U.K., and Vietnam, *In-between Empires* reconstructs the social histories of steamship voyages along the Trans-Suez maritime highways connecting France to its Indo-Pacific empire between the 1830s and the 1930s. In so doing, the dissertation reinterprets the rise of steam-powered imperialism. In much historiography, steamships and maritime highways represent unproblematic pathways through which imperial sovereignty flowed as smoothly as information through an underwater cable. Reifying a meta-narrative in which space and time were swiftly and uniformly annihilated in the latter-19th century, such an interpretation can imply that European states, once equipped with coal-burning steamships, moved people and cargo across the thousands of kilometers separating empire and metropole reflexively and without resistance. This dissertation, by contrast, demonstrates that steamship highways across Suez were contested borderlands where empire was made and unmade.

Juxtaposing the everyday life of crowded steamships against the politics of a vast route, I argue that French imperial sovereignty took shape in the struggle to control mobile subjects and govern a trans-imperial highway. From the demands of a multi-racial maritime workforce to the networking of an interoceanic commuter class, a host of actors jockeyed for influence over the highways of imperialism. At the apex of European imperialism and a global age of steam, routine transit was fraught with conflict and filled with encounters, many of which called into question the stability of colonial racial hierarchies and the ideology of civilization itself. In-between empires, moreover, the dilemmas of daily life – establishing legal jurisdiction, for instance, or following rules for disease control – produced dramatic experiments in inter-imperial governance while enlivening the tensions between nation, empire, and capital.

Introduction

Over the course of two months in 1906, the steamship *Tonkin* traveled from Marseille, France to Yokohama, Japan and back again: voyage number 11 in the administrative schedule of the *Messageries Maritimes* shipping company. As the captain of the *Tonkin*, A. Charbonnel, related in his report, the voyage had seen troubles, but only its fair share.

En route, five of the *Tonkin*'s "Arab coalers" suffered burns "on various parts of their bodies," for instance, treatment of which was complicated by clouds of coal dust that settled on their makeshift infirmary.¹ The accident, Charbonnel conjectured, was probably related to variations in the coal that the *Tonkin* picked up along its layovers. For as they struggled to identify the ideal balance between British and Japanese supplies, the *Tonkin*'s coalers frequently found themselves tasked not only with feeding the engines, but also with dumping thousands of kilos of soot, bucket by bucket, into the sea – 80,640 kilos every 24 hours, to be exact. In any event, the ship was near one of its layovers at the time of the burning accident, so Charbonnel left the men in a hospital, replaced them, and carried on.

Then, flu ripped through his workers, typhoid made an appearance, and, along with a few European crewmembers, an Indochinese soldier onboard showed symptoms of tuberculosis adenitis. Charbonnel could not identify the source of the contagion, and while he worried that the outbreaks might "cause troubles" with health officials in the Suez Canal, they ultimately went undetected.² Health issues aside, Charbonnel found his crew tolerable enough. The officers were "good and disciplined," and he had a "core of men" in the crew on whom he could depend. The

¹ "Voyage Report of the Tonkin, n. 11, China Line," 15 May 1906. *Rapports de voyage*, 1997 0024337, Association French Lines, Le Havre, France. [*Le 13 avril les chauffeurs arabes ont reçu des brûlures sur diverses parties du corps par suite d'un accident de chaudière.*]

² *Ibid.* [*ces cas... sans cause apparente auraient pu nous créer des ennuis à Suez.*]

rest, he admitted, offered no “guarantees” and worked “without zeal.” The stewards had a better “spirit,” even if they were overworked and exhausted.³

The passengers, on the other hand, caused the captain no end of headaches. On the return trip, one of the company’s agencies doled out last-minute spots and special accommodations to some Very Important Passengers. To make room for them, several husbands and wives had to be separated, leading to interminable complaints. Other passengers griped that strange odors were emanating from the ship’s cargo holds. Still others demanded the reopening of the reading room’s curtains, which the ship’s officers had closed after electric light from the room made it impossible for them to distinguish the horizon. As usual, some European, 3rd-class passengers protested their being “mixed with colored passengers.” To top it all off, one passenger hanged himself in his cabin. “After the customary formalities,” Charbonnel’s report noted, “the body was disembarked.”⁴

Government officials, within and without the ship, provided little relief for a weary captain. When the *Tonkin* approached Saigon (French Indochina), for instance, the colony’s governor ordered Charbonnel to stop at a nearby island prison and pick up an important file for him. The detour, Charbonnel grumbled, took hours, and extended his path by 9 miles. Moreover, in a state-mandated “ledger of claims” kept by the ship, some middling French bureaucrats onboard had the nerve to complain that Chinese migrant workers lodged on the deck were smoking opium and rendering the ship uninhabitable with their odors.⁵ The accusation was demonstrably false, Charbonnel maintained, since he had placed the Chinese in a faraway corner of the ship that “no

³ Ibid. [*bon et discipliné*] [*un noyau d’hommes sur lesquels on peut compter*] [*ne présente pas de grandes garanties et fait son service sans zèle*] [*d’un bon esprit mais...*]

⁴ Ibid. [*les passagers III classe pendant le voyage de retour se sont plaints d’être mélangés à des passagers de couleur.*] [*après les formalités d’usage le corps a été débarqué à Suez*].

⁵ The ledger (*Cahier des réclamations* in French) was a fixture of passenger liners.

one could withstand due to the heat.”⁶ Another voyage; another litany of complaints; another report; Charbonnel was used to the routine, and upon returning to Marseille, he submitted his paperwork.

A few weeks later, the voyage report of the steamship “Tonkin” received an official stamp of approval from the directors of the *Messageries Maritimes*. The report had been read, reviewed, and even underlined here and there. A half dozen signatures and initials on the cover page supplied further proof that various strata of management had processed the report and were ready to move on to another. And why should they not? Their captain and his 220 workers had brought the company’s magnificent machine from its homeport to its terminus and back again in one piece, while delivering 1,500 passengers to their destinations, and hauling tons of silk and silk-derived products, tin, hides, pepper, tea, coffee, gum, letters, and packages across the seas. From the passengers alone, 371,482.58 francs poured into the company’s coffers.⁷ The directors were satisfied. Having harvested the relevant data for their investors in the public and their regulators in the state, they put away the report and closed the file.

This dissertation reopens the files of voyages like the *Tonkin*’s. In so doing, it retraces the steamship’s path through an “age of steam” in which transport was revolutionized, globalization reached a warp-speed pace, and European imperialism claimed global hegemony.

In the mid-19th century, the oceangoing steamship transformed from dream to reality. By 1853, no less a materialist than Karl Marx could prophesy that “the day is not far distant when steam vessels” would help cut the time of travel between England and India to “eight days,” at

⁶ Ibid. [*J’ai jugé que je ne les lésais en aucune façon en mettant ces chinois dans une partie ou personne ne se tient à cause de la chaleur.*]

⁷ Roughly 1.5 million euros in 2020, this figure almost certainly includes not only revenue from tickets, but also onboard spending. According to the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) online calculator. See: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/information/2417794> (last accessed 4/12/2021).

which point India, “that once fabulous country,” would be “annexed to the Western world.”⁸ In the early-1860s, shortly after the engineer Isambard Brunel designed the most colossal steamship to date, William Thackeray proclaimed that humanity had “stepped out of the old world on to ‘Brunel’s’ vast deck,” and cautioned his fellow old-timers that, like it or not, “we are of the age of steam.” More comfortable in historicism than speculation, Thackeray begged this “age of steam” for clues about what was coming: “Towards what new continent are we wending, to what new laws, new manners, new politics, vast new expanses of liberties unknown as yet, or only surmised?”⁹ The futurist Jules Verne rode on “Brunel’s vast deck,” too, and a few years after Thackeray’s remarks, his novel *Floating City* encouraged readers to come aboard the steamship of modernity and find out for themselves where it was heading.¹⁰

Soon enough, liberals, conservatives, and socialists alike began to accept the annihilation of space and time as a fact of life. By the 1870s and 80s, steamships had overcome longstanding engineering obstacles and were beginning to be built in steel. As interoceanic cables laced the globe and the Suez Canal began to flow, steamships finally surpassed sailing ships in terms of global tonnage. Regularly scheduled lines reached into the far corners of the earth and the “globetrotter” emerged as a cultural figure. Meanwhile, European powers began claiming larger and larger swathes of the world with unprecedented frenzy, in a process that reached its apex just after the First World War.

⁸ Karl Marx, “The Future Results of British Rule in India” (1853), in: Karl Marx, *Dispatches for the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx*, ed. James Ledbetter (London: Penguin, 2007), 219-224. The day was, in fact, still far off.

⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, “De Juventute” (early-1860s), in: Thackeray, *Roundabout Papers*, ed. John Wells (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1925), 75.

¹⁰ Jules Verne, *Une Ville flottante* (Paris: Hetzel, 1871). Verne’s novel was based on extremely detailed notes from a voyage in Brunel’s ship, *Great Eastern*, across the Atlantic during the late-1860s.

Historians have tended to portray oceangoing steamships in this period as marvels of engineering, showcases of décor, vectors of economic exchange, and tools of imperial power.¹¹ And indeed, steamships were all those things. But while a wide body of scholarship has understood the steamship as an instrument of power that transformed the world, far less work has sought to understand steamships as social, cultural, and political borderlands in which the world's transformations took place.¹² Existing scholarship thus implies that steamships in motion were unpeopled and untroubled passageways through which sovereignty and capital flowed like information through an underwater cable. Under that assumption, one can easily take for granted the satisfaction of company directors as they filed away the *Tonkin's* report, the French colonial

¹¹ Ewan Cortlett, *The Iron Ship: The Story of Brunel's SS Great Britain* (London: Conway Press, 1975); Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Denis Griffiths, *Steam at Sea: Two Centuries of Steam-powered Ships* (London: Conway Press, 1997); Bernard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Anne Massey, *Designing Liners: A History of Interior Design Afloat* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Freda Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism: The P&O Company and the Politics of Empire from its Origins to 1867* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); John Armstrong and David Williams, *The Impact of Technological Change: The Early Steamship in Britain* (St John's: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2011); Michael B. Miller, *Europe and the Maritime World: A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Steven Gray, *Steam Power and Sea Power: Coal, the Royal Navy and the British Empire, 1870-1914* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Crosbie Smith *Coal, Steam, and Ships. Engineering, Enterprise and Empire on the Nineteenth Century Seas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Daniel Finamore, Ghislaine Wood, *Ocean Liners: Speed and Style* (London: V&A Publishing, 2018); Laurie D. Ferreiro, *Bridging the Seas: The Rise of Naval Architecture in the Industrial Age, 1800-2000* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020). Steamships have most often been instrumental secondary characters in histories of globalization from William McNeill's classic book, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1976) to Vanessa Ogle's history of time standardization: *The Global Transformation of Time, 1870-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015). The disproportionate focus on technology, business, design, and décor is also reflected in the relevant journals: *Journal of Transport History*, *International Journal of Maritime History*, *Revue d'histoire maritime*, etc.

¹² A few models for peopling the steamship and problematizing its functionalist historiography have emerged since 2010: Frances Steele, *Oceania under Steam: Sea Transport and the Cultures of Colonialism, c. 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); Renisa Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Anne Reinhart, *Navigating Semi-colonialism: Shipping, Sovereignty, and Nation-Building in China, 1860-1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018); and Kris Alexander, *Subversive Seas: Anticolonial Networks across the Twentieth-Century Dutch Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Douglas R. Burgess Jr., *Engines of Empire: Steamships and the Victorian Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), while less concerned with socio-political transformation, problematizes aspects of the functionalism that defines most historiography dealing with steamships.

governor's nonchalance as he used an ocean liner as an errand boy, or the captain's gruff indifference to the fractious world of social contact and suffering within his ship.

In this dissertation, however, I argue for lingering in-between the lines of the voyage report, exploring the dark corners of the steamship, and reacquainting ourselves with the time and space of monthlong, interoceanic voyages between Europe and its trans-Suez empires. Far from being neat vectors of power, steamships and the routes they traveled were contested places where empire was made and unmade. As mobile borderlands where social worlds collided and cohabited, steamships in transit gave life and form to imperial sovereignty. This process unfolded according to the particular conditions of possibility of a moving environment in which social life, while liminal, carried on after departure and before arrival. To make sense of the steamship's role in shaping sovereignty, then, requires determining what kind of place an ocean liner was. For as it moved across and between empires, the trans-Suez steamship took different forms for different travelers. A paradisiacal city on the sea for some was a floating prison for others. In the interstitial space of maritime highways, moreover, drawing lines between national, imperial, international, and inter-imperial realms required constant negotiation.

With fresh eyes, the voyage report of the *Tonkin* begins to look stranger than the ship's owners and authorities let on – and, for that matter, less settled than historiography would suggest. In an age of empires built on explicit racial hierarchies, the *Tonkin* clearly struggled to separate the people that it categorized as Arabs, Indochinese, Chinese, European, and “Colored.” In a time known for technological mastery over transport, the endless buckets of soot, uninhabitable quarters, and blinding electrical lights paint an odd picture. And in a period of intensified globalization, it stands out that the ship slipped through the Suez Canal with its outbreaks of disease undeclared and undetected. Other questions emerge from this seemingly routine report. By

what right could a governor order the ship of a private company – with VIPs onboard, no less – to carry out an errand at a colonial prison fortress (this would hardly go over well on a jet flight today), and how “customary” were onboard suicides? What social relations and identities lurked behind categories like “Europeans,” “Colored,” or “Arab coalers,” and just what did it mean that most of the captain’s crew provided no “guarantees?” As an empire-builder, a globalizer, and an annihilator of space, this ship was a problematic agent. In that regard, the *Tonkin* was typical.

In the chapters that follow, I aim to structure and clarify the discordant details, lingering questions, and fractious picture of everyday life emerging from ships like the *Tonkin* as they traversed maritime highways across the Suez Canal between the 1870s and the 1930s. Throughout, my principal frame of analysis is France, the *Messageries Maritimes* shipping company, and a trans-Suez highway that ran across the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal, down the Red Sea, and around the Horn of Africa, before splitting in three directions: to East Asia, Australia and the South Pacific, or Southern Africa (See maps below). Of course, these routes were, by definition, reversible, and might be better understood as paths connecting the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, South China Sea, Sea of Japan, and the Pacific Ocean. Finally, such routes were, in another sense, constellations of port cities where layovers took place. Along the so-called “China Line,” for instance, ships like the *Tonkin* generally stopped at Naples, Port-Saïd, Aden or Djibouti, Bombay or Colombo, Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kobe, and Yokohama, before doing it all again in reverse.¹³

¹³ While it would be impossible to treat all these port cities in depth, this dissertation returns frequently to: Port-Saïd, the freewheeling Egyptian frontier town at the northern head of the Suez Canal; British-administered Aden and French Djibouti, which straddle both sides of the Red Sea where it joins the Indian Ocean; Colombo, a “model” colonial city in British Ceylon; Singapore, the chokepoint of Asian maritime traffic hovering over the Straits of Malacca; and Saigon, one of France’s few bastions of territorial sovereignty in Asia.

While “Trans-Suez” is a less familiar geographical frame than, for instance, Transatlantic, I propose that it is vital for charting the French Empire’s rise across multiple Ocean Worlds. Trans-Suez highways were global borderlands where imperial projects took shape and met their limits. Theaters of commerce, war, diplomacy, administration, migration, policing, and labor battles, these routes traversed an immense diversity of cultures and climates. To many travelers, they formed nothing less than a world system.

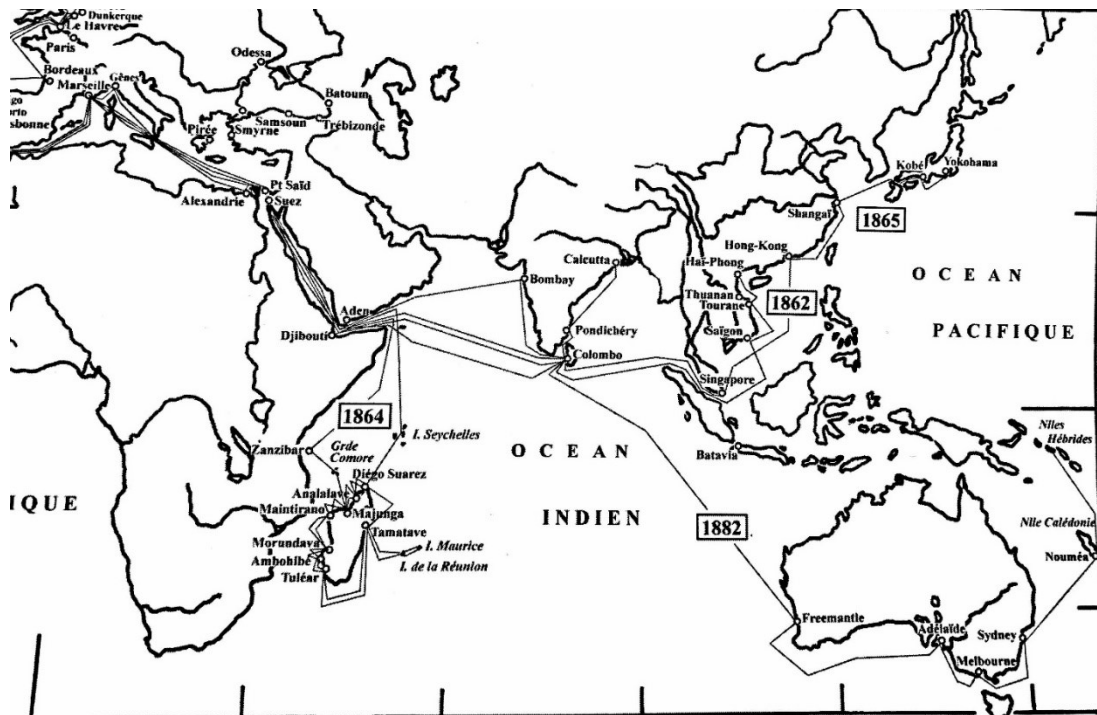


Figure 1. Trans-Suez routes of the *Messageries*. Dates indicate the year when service began on a given line. M.F. Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes. L’essor d’une grande compagnie de navigation française*, 656.

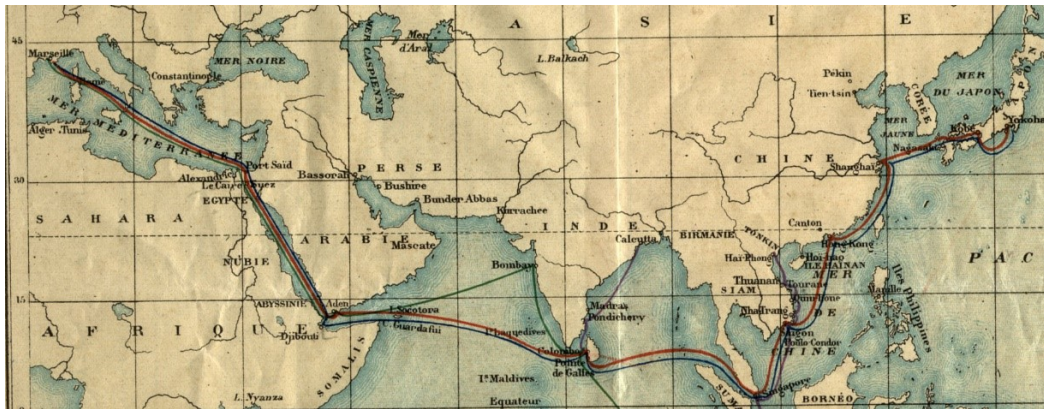


Figure 2. Route map of the “Far-East Line” in 1903, also known as the “China Line,” “China and Japan Line,” and “Indochina Line.” From: L’Encyclopédie des Messageries Maritimes, Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/extreme-orient.htm> (last accessed: 5/19/2021).

Along trans-Suez routes, the *Messageries* served as France’s main, and sometimes only, shipping line. Its ships, which were subsidized significantly by the French government, transported civilians and commercial cargo, but also government employees ranging from clerks and teachers to high-ranking administrators and officers, as well as state-ordered equipment and supplies. Ever since its founding in the early-1850s, the company played a vital part in connecting continental France to its growing array of colonies, protectorates, and concessions in Indochina, China, Madagascar, Réunion, Pondicherry, Djibouti, New Caledonia and the South Pacific.¹⁴ In times of war, as thousands of soldiers filled the decks of *Messageries* liners, the ties that bound the company to the French state were particularly evident.

¹⁴ The *Messageries* is virtually absent from Anglophone scholarship. The most extensively researched history of the *Messageries* is: Marie-Françoise Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries maritimes. L’essor d’une grande compagnie de navigation française, 1851-1894* (Paris: Presses de l’université de la Sorbonne, 2007). See also: Paul Bois, *Le Grand siècle des Messageries maritimes* (Marseille: Chambre de commerce et d’industrie de Marseille-Provence, 1992); Francis Drémeaux, *Les Messageries maritimes à Hong Kong, 1918-1941* (Göpe Éditions, 2014). Other histories of the company have come from outside the academy. See, for instance, the company director, Roger Carrou’s *Sur les routes de la mer avec les Messageries maritimes* (Paris: André Bonne, 1968); Philippe Ramona, *Paquebots vers l’Orient* (Joué les Tours: Sutton, 2001); and Pierre Patarin, *Messageries maritimes: paquebots et voyageurs du passé* (Ouest-France, 1997).

France, its empire, and the *Messageries* were deeply enmeshed, in competition and collaboration alike, with the immense British Empire and its primary shipping company “east of Suez,” the *Peninsular & Oriental (P&O)*.¹⁵ Indeed, the maritime highways to France’s empire all seemed to pass through Britain’s. As a result, the *Messageries* had no choice but to compete and cohabit with the *P&O*, which had dominated shipping lanes in Asia since the 1840s. In 1869, few could say who would prevail in that commercial competition. That year, the *Messageries* represented, by some measures, the largest shipping company in the world, and its steamships took pride of place in the procession that inaugurated the Suez Canal.¹⁶ In fact, the *Messageries* very nearly stole the *P&O*’s government subsidy out from under it during the 1860s. Ultimately, furious appeals to British patriotism repelled the *Messageries*’ bid to capture British imperial contracts.¹⁷ The upstart *Messageries* had greater success siphoning off wealthy British passengers from the *P&O*; a feat that it accomplished by selling a shipboard life of refined taste and fine cuisine. By the turn of the century, however, the *Messageries* was falling behind the *P&O*. Gradually, it resigned itself to being the junior partner in the relationship.

Pecking order aside, both companies were behemoths, which possessed shipbuilding facilities of their own, upwards of fifty agencies across the globe, and fleets larger than most

¹⁵ On the *P&O*, see: Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism*; David and Steven Howarth, *The Story of P&O: The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Company* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995); Sara Seawright, *Steaming East*; Peter Padfield, *Beneath the House Flag of the P&O* (Hutchinson, 1981). See also: Burgess, *Engines of Empire*; Smith, *Coal, Steam, and Empire*.

¹⁶ On the *Messageries*’ place in the Suez Canal inauguration, see: James R. Fichter, “Britain and France: Connected Empires” in Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1-16. The claim of largest shipping company in the world appears in: Laleh Khalilli, *Sinews of Trade and War: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020), 229; R.I. La wless, “Recruitment and Regulation: Migration for Employment of ‘Adenese’ Seamen in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries,” in *New Arabian Studies, Vol. 2*, eds: G. Smith, J. Smart, R. Bidwell (University of Exeter Press, 1994), 79; and 19th-century travel accounts, such as John MacGregor, *Through the Buffer State: A Record of Recent Travels Through Borneo, Siam, and Cambodia* (White and Co., 1896), 218.

¹⁷ Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism*, 204-219.

nations' navies. The two companies periodically engaged in steamship races across the Indian Ocean, inspiring high-stakes gambling and hysterical newspaper coverage, but the staged nature of such competition speaks volumes.¹⁸ Behind closed doors, the two companies collaborated frequently, whether sharing facilities and swapping workers, or touring each other's ships and alternating departures. Moreover, both companies were more than willing to join forces to lobby politicians and coordinate anti-labor measures. As German, Japanese, and American companies burst their way into trans-Suez shipping in the early-20th century, the *Messageries* and *P&O* recognized one another as survivors of an old order in which "gentlemen's agreements" had been enough to hold together commercial cartels.

The two companies provide a window into larger dynamics of inter-imperial collaboration and competition between France and Britain. Before diplomatic rapprochement in 1904-5, the two empires frequently threatened each other with obliteration, but they were intimately intertwined through commerce, fear of "new" imperial powers, and the shared highways of empire.¹⁹ Moreover, just as the *Messageries* compensated for its declining share of the global market by staking a claim to taste and refinement, so the French imperial state counterbalanced British hard power with a range of softer tools. France thus rallied opposition to Britain in international summits on critical questions like disease control.²⁰ It reinforced diplomatic offensives with the weight of French finance and promoted export markets so that British traders had no choice but to carry

¹⁸ An 1896 race between the *P&O* ship *Australian* and the *Messageries* ship, *Ernest Simons* is a good example. "Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons, n. 8/9, China Line" (1 May 1896), MM 194, CCIMP and "P&O Heritage Fact Sheet: Australia, 1892," at: <https://www.poheritage.com/Upload/Mimsy/Media/factsheet/92732AUSTRALIA-1892pdf.pdf> (last accessed 4/23/2021).

¹⁹ Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism*.

²⁰ Krista Maglen, *The English System: Quarantine, immigration and the making of a Port Sanitary zone* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

French products.²¹ The French Navy, meanwhile, faced with the reality of British superiority in heavy battleships, embraced an unorthodox strategy of building multitudes of small, light, and rapid torpedo boats.²² Much like the French and British Empires that subsidized them, in other words, the *Messageries* and *P&O* were two sides of the same coin. While historians have a detailed picture of the British face of that coin, the French one is often filled in by assumptions.

The deeply interdependent, if at times asymmetrical, relationships between the French and British Empires and their shipping surrogates constitute a critical part of this dissertation's response to the overarching questions it poses: namely, what kind of place did people enter when they boarded trans-Suez steamships, and how did steamships in motion give form to imperial sovereignty – or confirm its formlessness? In response to both questions, I propose that we linger at the threshold. The inhabitants of trans-Suez steamships were fundamentally in-between empires, and the encounters that occurred in those in-between spaces were negotiations of imperial sovereignty.

The in-betweenness evoked in this dissertation's title has multiple senses. First, many of the habitués of trans-Suez liners lived their lives between empires. Steamship workers, for instance, were often recruited across imperial lines, just as they frequently swapped affiliations in the pursuit of better wages, conditions, or a fresh start. Many elites in colonial societies and governments were no less apt to crisscross imperial lines, including, of course, the consuls and diplomats who were obliged to live between empires. Indeed, one of the ironies that this dissertation explores is that French steamships, despite being in many ways “trapped” inside the British Empire, captured the loyalty of upper-level British administrators and wealthy Anglo-

²¹ David Todd, *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 164-7.

²² Arne Roksund, *The Jeune École: The Strategy of the Weak* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

Indians cycling between empire and metropole. But these Francophile British were only one example of mobile populations of colonial administrators – civilian and military alike – who picked the trans-Suez liners in which they commuted with little regard for imperial affiliation.

On a six-hour jet flight, or even a six-day Atlantic crossing by steam, this willingness to look beyond the flagships of one's own nation or empire might be of little import. Trans-Suez voyages, however, lasted weeks, if not months, at a time. Passengers thus had ample time to eat and drink together at shared tables; to gossip, debate, and negotiate on decks and in smoking rooms; to make music and theater; to dance, fight, ignore one another, and fail to ignore one another. Moreover, trans-Suez ships stopped frequently along routes that were saturated with significance and suspense. In the Red Sea crossing, for instance, most steamship voyages of the late-19th and early-20th centuries saw fatalities related to heatstroke. Ships passed by evocative sites like the entry port to Mecca, the Holy Lands, and the Suez Canal. They eked their way through sanitary inspections and rushed headlong into layover ports teeming with people and possibility. In steamships, travelers from different empires lived through rites of passage together that were bound to spotlight similarity and diversity within their ranks. Beneath the national flags and amidst the national decor of trans-Suez liners, workers and travelers formed social worlds out of inter-imperial connections and trans-imperial trajectories.

Second, companies like the *Messageries* and *P&O* formed their own empires out of the in-between spaces in which they operated. For while they acted as handmaidens of the imperial states who sub-contracted them, each company also governed a commercial empire of agencies, facilities, and labor networks. The commercial geography of subsidized shipping lines never aligned neatly with the British pink or French blue that typically marked imperial boundaries on turn-of-the-century maps. In controlling their global labor force, moreover, each company claimed

a level of autonomy that called into question the power of imperial states over their subjects. As many a frustrated state administrator discovered, subsidized and contracted shipping companies often seemed to form worlds unto themselves, in which imperial sovereignty threatened to come apart at the seams.

This tension points to a third aspect of in-betweenness: the position, literally and symbolically, that ships and shipping companies occupied between empire and nation. As borderlands, ships risked or – depending on the context – promised to collapse the ideological and jurisdictional boundaries between European metropolises and overseas empires. Ships maintained a flow of supplies and people to the colonies, but of course this meant that they brought what was understood as the world of empire – intra-imperial migrants, colonial cultures, commodities, microbes, and more – to the metropole. For metropolitan publics, imports like silk, palm oil, and tropical fruits were one thing, but disputes over migrants, disease control, and colonial subject workers aboard French and British ships revealed the breadth of the two-way channel.

Global France

Arguably, compared to European counterparts, France had a particularly agonized relationship to the boundary between nation and empire. Queen Victoria, after all, adjusted fairly easily to being the Empress of India, just as English aristocrats never struggled to see how their skills of estate management could translate in Africa and ‘east of Suez.’²³ The triumphant Germany that formed out of 1870-71 required little time to become convinced that it deserved, in addition

²³ Miles Taylor, *Empress. Queen Victoria and India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). This claim is an important component of Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of imperialism as well: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, 1976 edition), 209. The debate over the continuity of English landed aristocracy and imperialism has its modern roots in Perry Anderson’s and E.P. Thompson’s work in the 1960s and 70s.

to a nation, a place under the tropical sun, and a new frontier for its military heroes.²⁴ Belgians, meanwhile, only questioned whether the Congo ought to belong to their King after a global pressure campaign forced the issue.²⁵ France, by comparison, emerged out of the 1870s with a regime that vaunted itself Republican, universal, and egalitarian, while being attached at the hip to a hierarchical, particular, and racially stratified empire. Admittedly, the new republicans traveled a great distance from some of their revolutionary ancestors; Robespierre's famous plea to "let the colonies perish" if it saved Revolutionary principles, for instance, rang hollow as the Third Republic (1870-1940) expanded France's empire into the world's second largest.²⁶ Nonetheless, attempts to actualize, institutionalize, and practice Republican principles periodically shook the empire, just as the fact of empire frequently called into question the theory of a Republic. The structural tensions of an "imperial nation-state" were bound to manifest themselves not only in parliament and port cities, but in the "floating cities" of ships themselves and the maritime highways they traveled.²⁷

This dissertation contends that to better understand the worldmaking divide between empire and nation, we must problematize the boundary between land and sea. Within such a

²⁴ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). See also: Michelle Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014). Erik Grimmer-Solem, meanwhile, embeds Wilhelmine German imperialism within a growing global consciousness among scholars that had roots stretching well before 1870. *Learning Empire: Globalization and the German Quest for World Status, 1875-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²⁵ Steven Press, *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 85-7, 116; Jeremy Adelman, "Towards a Global History of Humanitarianism," Lecture, Department of History, University of Chicago, May 4, 2016. The most popular account of that pressure campaign remains Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Mariner, 1998).

²⁶ The line is attributed to Robespierre during a May 13, 1791 debate on the fate of French colonies in the Caribbean. Jean-Daniel Piquet, "Nouvelles pièces sur Robespierre et les colonies en 1791," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 1, n. 371 (2013): 187-194.

²⁷ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

historiographic project, Britain is well represented, but France remains noticeably absent. There is still a reflex, it seems, to divide the world into “global thalassocracies” and “lesser” ones, as did Daniel Headrick in his influential book, *Tools of Empire* (1981).²⁸ Such distinctions can easily be maintained in metrics of ship construction, tonnage, and traffic. In those and many other aspects, Britannia indeed ruled the waves of the nineteenth century. From 1900-on, moreover, the growing power of American, German, and Japanese shipping forced France and smaller thalassocracies to fight for an ever-narrower slice of the global market in cargo and passenger traffic. However, as Alison Frank Jonson has shown for the 19th-century Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Kris Alexanderson for the 20th-century Dutch Empire, an excessive focus on the largest maritime powers can blind us to unexpected geographies of inter-regional exchange and patterns of inter-imperial collaboration.²⁹ Within a frame of “global” and “lesser” thalassocracies, it can be forgotten that every European empire was a thalassocracy nonetheless: each desperate to participate in the “playground of civilized peoples” that international shipping represented, and each dependent upon maritime highways to project and maintain power, as well as to feed, clothe, and amuse metropolitan populations.³⁰

French cultural tropes and grand narratives of the nation can naturalize the empire’s underrepresentation within what could be called a global maritime history of imperialism. Arguably, a meta-narrative of rootedness and land-boundedness runs through French history. In the multigenerational European culture war over the Ancients, for instance, French elites tended

²⁸ Headrick, *Tools of Empire*, 165-180.

²⁹ Alison Frank Johnson, “The Children of the Desert and the Laws of the Sea: Austria, Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and the Mediterranean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Historical Review* 117, n. 2 (April 2012), 410-444; Kris Alexanderson, *Subversive Seas*.

³⁰ The phrase comes from a Triestine merchant in 1863, quoted by Alison Frank Johnson in “The Children of the Desert...,” 415.

to identify with land-loving Rome over thalossacratic Greece.³¹ One can even start the story with geography, for the rough winds and currents of the Bay of Biscay plagued France's entry into the so-called Age of Discovery.³² Then, in the 18th century, French imperialists were cast out of South Asia and North America by British fleets, while the Revolution crippled the country's sea power – or so the first writers of maritime history in France insisted.³³ Finally, France famously bet it all on continental power during the Napoleonic Wars of the early-19th century, and lost.

In fact, the narrative trope of territorial fixation runs straight through to contemporary history. After the Napoleonic Wars, the story goes, instead of adopting Britain's nimble brand of gunboat diplomacy and informal imperialism, French imperialists launched themselves into a grinding, decades-long war of territorial conquest and settlement in Algeria.³⁴ When France was defeated by Prussia in 1870-71, the new French Republic prioritized rebuilding the army so much that, as one admiral put it, the country "sacrifice[d] the navy at the altar of the fatherland."³⁵ As Europe entered an age of mass-emigration, meanwhile, French populations refused to budge. During the half-century between 1860 and 1910, for example, the people of Norway emigrated at

³¹ From the 7th to the 16th century, French courtly literature frequently suggested that France was more Roman than Rome, thanks to a pervasive myth that France had been founded by Trojans fleeing Greek-conquered Troy. Long after the story was criticized out of circulation, Roman iconography prevailed, thriving on both sides of the Revolutionary Republican and Bonapartist divide. This was a marked contrast with British Hellenophiles of the 18th and 19th centuries. See: Thorsten Fogen and Richard Warren (eds.), *Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Idea of Nationalism in the 19th Century* (De Gruyter, 2016); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Krishan Kumar, "Greece and Rome in the British Empire: Contrasting Role Models," *Journal of British Studies* 51, n. 1 (Jan. 2012): pp. 76-101; Elizabeth Brown, "The Trojan Origins of the French: The Commencement of a Myth's Demise, 1450-1520," in Smyth (ed.), *Medieval Europeans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

³² Kenneth Banks, *Chasing Empire across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

³³ Léon Guérin, *Histoire maritime de France* (Paris: Dufour, 1851); E. Chevalier, *histoire de la marine française sous la première République* (Paris: Hachette, 1886); O. Havard, *Histoire de la Révolution dans les ports de guerre* (Paris: Nouvelle-Librairie Nationale, 1911).

³⁴ For an example of reductive grand narratives of French imperialism that rely on rigid Franco-British dichotomies, see: J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, 437-441. Nuancing this interpretation of French 19th-century imperialism is a key goal of Todd, *Velvet Empire*.

³⁵ Quoted by P. Masson, *Histoire militaire de la France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 119.

more than thirty times the rate of the French.³⁶ Among French travelogue writers and colonial propagandists in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, complaining that French people were reluctant to leave their homeland was so common as to become a cliché.³⁷

After the First World War, one of the most vocal groups to promote a notion of “Greater France” was the Colonial *and* Maritime League, which understood that the two were inseparable and insisted that French people needed to learn this.³⁸ Later, as Empire collapsed and Algeria was severed from the Republic, France began to be referred to as the Hexagon, sealing the story of rootedness into place. Six borders would henceforth form the image of the nation, all of them in Europe. The name began to be projected backwards into history.³⁹

Of course, these tropes never acted solely as self-negations. Evocations of land-boundedness produced something, too. They suggested that France was self-sufficient – divinely ordained with agricultural bounty and climatic diversity, in fact. They offered a contrast with the ostensibly rootless and money-driven British for whom home was so cheap a thing as to be moveable and reproducible. In times of colonization, they suggested that France, in contrast to rapacious Belgians or belligerent Germans, had a selfless “civilizing mission” that called it deep into the heart of the Sahara Desert. In times of Decolonization, they made clear that France had six, tidy borders and that overseas empire had merely been a phase.⁴⁰

³⁶ Leslie Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Indiana University Press, 2003), 149.

³⁷ For example: Brau de Saint-Pol Lias, *De France à Sumatra par Java, Singapour, et Pinang. Les Anthropophages* (Paris: Oudin, 1884), dedication; Paul Bonnetain and Louis Tillier, *Histoire d'un paquebot* (Paris: Quantin, 1887), preface; G. Verschuur, *Aux colonies d'Asie et dans l'Océan Indien* (Paris: Hachette, 1900), 2, 340-350; M. Rondet-Saint, *Les randonnées asiatiques* (Paris: Plon, 1919), 1-3; Albert Londres, *Marseille: Porte du Sud. Le Regard passionné d'un grand reporter* (ed. Henri Amouroux) (Marseille: Jean La ffitte, 2006).

³⁸ Raoul Girardet, “L’apothéose de la ‘plus grande France’: l’idée coloniale devant l’opinion française,” *Revue française de science politique* 18, n. 6 (1968), 1085-1114.

³⁹ Eugen Weber, “L’Hexagone,” in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2, *La Nation* (Paris: 1986), 97-116. See also: Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁴⁰ Krishan Kumar, English and French national identity: comparisons and contrasts,” *Nations and Nationalism* 12, n. 3 (2006): pp. 413-432; Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa*

Whatever tropes of land-boundedness *did* for actors in France at various times, the story they collectively told was deeply misleading. From the 17th century, French state-building went hand in hand with the struggle to systematize maritime transport, labor, and information channels.⁴¹ The Revolution and Napoleonic Wars played out in ships and across trans-oceanic networks of consuls, captains, sailors, and merchants.⁴² The territorial conquest of Algeria, moreover, was accompanied by decades of gunboat diplomacy, informal imperialism, and indirect rule.⁴³ And while colonial propagandists lamented that French people did not take to the seas and settle in colonies, they neglected to mention that the nation's survival in the First World War depended on a colossal feat of maritime logistics, as hundreds of thousands of troops and workers, from the Caribbean to Oceania, were packed into liners and hauled across oceans.

French people may not have emigrated massively and permanently, moreover, but they were mobile in different ways, despite the chastisement of travelogue writers. They moved about their own country constantly.⁴⁴ They traveled abroad and came back. They formed key parts of European expatriate communities and fashioned themselves into tastemakers and brokers of mobility.⁴⁵ And of course, they circulated frenetically as part of the effort to conquer and maintain

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Berny Sèbe, *Heroic imperialists in Africa: The promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

⁴¹ Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea*; Frykman, *Bloody Flag*.

⁴² See, for example: Junko Thérèse Takeda, *Iran and a French Empire of Trade, 1700-1808: The Other Persian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Niklas Frykman, *The Bloody Flag: Mutiny in the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020). See also, multiple essays in S. Desan, L. Hunt, W. Nelson (eds.), *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁴³ Todd, *Velvet Empire*; J.P. Daughton, "'When Argentina was French': Rethinking Cultural Politics and European Imperialism in Belle-Époque Buenos Aires," *Journal of Modern History* 80, n. 4 (Dec. 2008): pp. 831-864.

⁴⁴ Paul-André Rosental, *Les Sentiers invisibles. Espace, familles et migrations dans la France du 19^e siècle* (Paris: EHESS, 1999). Pilgrimage, too, put hundreds of thousands of French people into motion: Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular* (Penguin, 1999). Nor, as Daniel Roche makes clear, was intense mobility solely a feature of 19th and 20th century modernity: *Humeurs Vagabondes. De la circulation des hommes et de l'utilité des voyages* (Paris: Fayard, 2003). When we broaden our perspective enough to take in tourism, cycling, a automobile racing, and aviation, a French culture of mobilities becomes more perceptible.

⁴⁵ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 231-246.

a global empire. Maurice Barrès, an icon of fin-de-siècle conservatism, castigated “uprooted” French youth for leaving their hometowns and heading to the city, but that did not prevent him from heaping praise upon France’s soldiers of empire for trekking across the globe in the tradition of their crusader ancestors.⁴⁶

If the land empire conquered by those soldiers collapsed into a Hexagon, its oceanic legacy lingers on. In 2021, France claimed more maritime space than the U.S., China, or Russia. Indeed, with 10,911,823 square kilometers to its name, France enjoys sovereign jurisdiction over more maritime space today than any other nation in the world.⁴⁷ Likewise, while the *Messageries* went into terminal decline in the era of decolonization, its considerable assets were bundled into what became *CMA CGM*, today one of the world’s largest container shipping companies and still based in Marseille.⁴⁸

Following transoceanic ships across a French age of steam, then, has the advantage of making sense of this other side of France: an outward-looking, decentered, and highly mobile society, the fate and welfare of which has long depended on controlling oceanic spaces and the ships that move between them. Or, to put it in the terms that have sparked so much debate in France, this dissertation takes a global perspective on France. Recent debates over global history in France have focused relentlessly on national identity and the validity of national frames of historical research. At their most anxious, opponents of global history have claimed that if

⁴⁶ Maurice Barrès, *Les déracinés* (Paris: Charpentier, 1897); Alexandre Moll, *Une âme de colonial. Lettres du Lieutenant colonel Moll avec une préface de M. Maurice Barrès* (Paris: Editions Émile-Paul, 1912). The linguistic battle over the phrase “Français de souche” (French from the rootstock) – a familiar proxy for equating Frenchness with whiteness – carries on the dilemma of an identity of rootedness.

⁴⁷ French national portal of maritime limits, “Areas of France’s maritime spaces of sovereignty and jurisdiction”: <https://maritimelimits.gouv.fr/resources/areas-frances-maritime-spaces-sovereignty-and-jurisdiction> (last accessed 4/24/2021).

⁴⁸ With over 700 offices and agencies and more than 30 billion U.S. dollars in revenue in 2020, *CMA CGM* is a titan of the container industry. The company’s sailors are mostly Southeast Asians and Eastern Europeans.

Frenchness is to be understood as the product of a host of “outside” forces, then the very idea of France will lose meaning, and its citizens will shed their sense of common purpose, empathy, and solidarity.⁴⁹ A nation stripped of agency, in this view, ceases to be a nation at all. Of course, sometimes lost amidst the bluster is the fact that global history has multiple forms, all of them tied to older historiographies, and only one of which is dedicated to revealing distant influences upon the sacred confines of a national, regional, or local history. Some global historians have, for example, rallied around large-scale comparisons between regions that disrupt a core-periphery conception of power and progress, while others have sought to explain processes of standardization across space and time.⁵⁰

French historian Christophe Charle, meanwhile, defines another strand of global history, providing a refreshing reminder that global and national histories need not be mutually exclusive. Global history, Charle writes, is most effective when it follows “small groups of actors who maintain connections between spaces, who make decisions and take initiatives ... at strategic levels of interconnections” and whose influence enacts globalizing processes while unleashing “consequences” that they themselves never expected.⁵¹ By following the itineraries and ideologies of such actors and identifying the ironies and unexpected consequences of the connections they create, historians naturally reach the conclusion that, as he writes,

⁴⁹ The publication of Patrick Boucheron’s (ed.), *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Seuil, 2017) touched off a bitter polemic surrounding global history in France, most notably from the historian Pierre Nora, the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, and the journalist Eric Zemmour.

⁵⁰ For an attempt to categorize the myriad forms of history-writing that could be considered global in approach, see Richard Drayton and David Motadel, “Discussion: the futures of global history,” *Journal of Global History* 13, n. 1 (2018): pp. 1-21.

⁵¹ Christophe Charle, “Histoire globale, histoire nationale? Comment réconcilier recherche et pédagogie,” *Le Débat* 3, n. 175 (2013): pp. 60-68. [« des petits groupes d’acteurs qui assurent les connexions entre espaces, assument les décisions ou prennent les initiatives, parce qu’ils se trouvent à des niveaux stratégiques pour les interconnexions au point que les processus de globalisation qu’ils ont suscités peuvent avoir des effets considérables parfois insoupçonnés par les intéressés eux-mêmes. »]

A global approach and a national approach are neither radically incompatible universes, nor Russian dolls that nestle into one another simply and harmoniously, because each one helps to destabilize the other, while obliging the other to reinterpret its implicit assumptions, and thus to perpetually relaunch the question of how scales are articulated.⁵²

This dissertation echoes Charle's sentiment and aligns with the approach that he describes. Zeroing in on brokers of mobility and nodes of global interconnection, it poses the "perpetual" question of how scales are articulated, where they begin and end, and what to make of the connections between them. Transit through ships, ports, and routes called into question familiar scales, expanding and collapsing their boundaries.

But by tacking between cramped ships and the sprawling space of trans-Suez routes, this dissertation also responds to Anglophone debates over global history. In the U.S. and Britain, debates over global history have largely eschewed questions of national identity and social cohesion. Instead, critics of global history describe a genre that is fascinated by fluidity and connections, yet indifferent to friction and isolation.⁵³ Others bemoan a loss of focus on "small spaces" in which the tools of social history are perhaps most effective.⁵⁴ While such critics have been meticulously debated, this dissertation is mindful of their concerns.⁵⁵ It thus seeks to understand how power and transit intersected in the vast expanse of trans-Suez routes, but does so through a social history of small spaces – in this case, ships in motion. Avoiding the whiggish teleologies that sometimes animate global history, I emphasize that ships and shipping lanes were

⁵² Ibid. [« Approche globale et approche nationale ne sont ni des univers radicalement incompatibles, ni des poupées gigognes qui s'emboîtent simplement et harmonieusement puisque chacune contribue à déstabiliser l'autre tout en l'obligeant à revoir ses présupposés implicites et donc à relancer perpétuellement la question de l'articulation des échelles. »]

⁵³ Jeremy Adelman, "What is global history now?," *Aeon* (March 2nd, 2017).

⁵⁴ David Bell, "This is what happens when historians overuse the idea of the network," *New Republic* (October 26, 2013); David Bell, "Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 37, n. 1 (January 2014): pp. 1-24.

⁵⁵ Drayton and Motadel, "The futures of global history."

not merely sites of accelerated mobility, connectivity, and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, the steamship voyage was also necessarily an experience in friction, deceleration, immobility, and confinement. Within the spaces of ships and routes, moreover, connections and encounters were entirely capable of producing fragmentation, confusion, and conflict. Along the trans-Suez highways of empire, globalization was never inherently orderly or enlightening.

Empires

Placing the in-between spaces of empires at the center of its analytical frame, this dissertation ventures beyond well-studied port cities and into the “black boxes” of ships tracing trans-imperial routes.⁵⁶ However, in grappling with the nature of connections and circulations between European metropolises and empires in Africa and Asia, I build on decades of research reflecting the imperial “turns” in the historiography of modern Europe.

To the extent that the “New Imperialism” of the later-19th and early-20th centuries was once understood as a direct and unidirectional outgrowth of nationalism, capitalism, and state formation in Europe, the study of European imperialism has come a long way. Nearly a half century of research has powerfully demonstrated that Europe’s relation to Empire cannot be reduced to a metropole-colony binary in which orders flowed out from metropolises and in which “the colonies” sent back little more in return than raw materials. To the contrary, historians have analyzed countless ways in which Europe was shaped profoundly by overseas empire.⁵⁷ Much of this

⁵⁶ By black boxes, I refer both to the instruments that record the inner workings of airplanes in flight, and to the concept of blackboxing. In simplified terms, blackboxing can refer to the process by which increasing technological sophistication leads observers to look only to “inputs and outputs,” as opposed to “internal complexity.” They more smoothly a machine functions, in other words, the less we ask how and why it functions as it does. Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s hope: essays on the reality of science studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 304.

⁵⁷ The most influential attempt to systematize this change in scholarly priorities is: Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in Stoler and Cooper (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

research has focused on the migrations that brought imperial subjects to Europe in the flesh, especially from the First World War forward. Broadly, however, scholars have proven that European nations and empires were co-constructions in everything from food, fashion, music, and popular entertainment, to political ontologies, racial identities, urban space, and scientific knowledge.⁵⁸

Simultaneously, research on European imperialism has disaggregated monolithic conceptions of how political power operated in colonial contexts. If imperial governance was once imagined as being negotiated between metropolitan ministers, on the one hand, and pith-helmeted administrators, settlers, and soldiers in the colonies, on the other, historians have identified a multitude of local intermediaries to explain how colonial power actually unfolded on the ground. The European imperial state has thus been peopled, and its power put into proportion, thanks to studies of indigenous soldiers, clerks, translators, administrators, and all manner of brokers who claimed a piece of imperial sovereignty while translating imperial ideologies into their own idioms.⁵⁹ Between the poles of anticolonial resistance and pro-colonial collaboration, such

⁵⁸ Such literature is now far too vast to cite comprehensively, but examples from the past decade include, on the post-1945 and decolonization era: Jordanna Bailkin, *Afterlife of Empire* (University of California Press, 2012); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*; Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962-1979* (University of Chicago Press, 2017); Paul Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe after World War II* (Basic Books, 2020); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015); On interwar anticolonialism: Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*; on the New Imperialism: Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*; Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists*; P. Blanchard, S. Lemaire, and N. Bancel (eds.), *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution* (Indiana University Press, 2013); on food: Rachel Laudon, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (University of California Press, 2015); on science: Aro Velmut, *Pasteur's Empire: Bacteriology and Politics in France, Its Colonies, and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2020); on race and citizenship: Emmanuelle Saada, *Empire's Children: Race, Filiation and Citizenship in the French Colonies* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); on violence: Martin Thomas (ed.), *The French Colonial Mind, Vols I and 2* (University of Nebraska Press, 2011); Hull, *Absolute Destruction*; on clothing: Chitralekha Zutshi, "Designed for Eternity: Kashmiri Shawls, Empire, and Cultures of Production and Consumption in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 48, n. 2 (Apr. 2009): 420-440; on music: Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (Verso, 2015).

⁵⁹ Again, the literature is too broad to cite comprehensively. See, for example: Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*; E.L. Osborn, B. La wrance, R. Roberts (eds.), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Emily Lynn Osborn, "Circle of Iron: African Colonial

scholarship shows, a world of possibility existed. Increasingly, scholars are also recovering examples of “proxy” colonialism and “sub-colonialism,” in which colonized ethnic groups and polities carried out (or resumed) imperial projects of their own, under the umbrella of European imperial sovereignty.⁶⁰

Beyond highlighting the role of indigenous intermediaries, historiographical movements that reconceive of imperial sovereignty as processual and multidirectional have exposed a host of divisions and conflicts within the ranks of the colonizers. Europe brought its social struggles and culture wars into overseas empires, and those conflicts transformed in situ. Settlers, soldiers, missionaries, adventurers, bankers, and politicians had radically different ideas about how empire should work and who it should serve. As a result, the massive expansion of European imperialism from the mid-19th century to the Interwar now appears to have been more disjointed in nature and lurching in pace than previous understandings would have had it. Accordingly, European empires are increasingly described as “unfinished,” “divided,” and thoroughly opportunistic.⁶¹ Contemporary political cartoons portrayed high imperialists as playing a global game of chess, but today European empires look more like the products of mission creep, ideological incoherence,

Employees and the Interpretations of Colonial Rule in French West Africa, *The Journal of African History* 44, n. 1 (2003): pp. 29-50; Nwando Achebe, *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2011); David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Ohio University Press, 2000); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2006); Christopher Goscha, “Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections Inside French Indochina During the Interwar Period,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, n. 5 (Oct. 2008): 1189-1228; Brice Fossard, “The French colonial army and the sporting acculturation of members of the Indochinese elite (1897-1939),” *STAPS* 127, n. 1 (2020): pp. 9-27; Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (University of California Press, 2002).

⁶⁰ Christopher Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (NIAS Press, 2012); Moses E. Ochoonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2014); On Barak, *Powering Empire: How Coal Made the Middle East and Sparked Global Carbonization* (University of California Press, 2020).

⁶¹ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (Bloomsbury, 2013); J.P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

and political convenience. Scholars of Europe's empires now tend to work out from Jane Burbank's and Frederick Cooper's conception of an "imperial repertoire," which they describe as "habit"-forming practices that were improvised to meet "day to day challenges" and the constraints of "geography and history." Critically, this was a repertoire that imperial subjects could "resist, deflect, or twist," and which emerged from the gulf between imperial ideologies and practical limits on the power of European colonizers.⁶²

The messy layering of imperial sovereignty and improvised practices of colonial rule made an inviting context for con-men on the margins of respectable society, but also for bankers and speculators ensconced in the haute-bourgeoisie.⁶³ After all, despite the pious claims of the faithful, capitalism survives just fine in markets defined by backchannels of information, informal and black networks of exchange, legislative incoherence, low standards of regulation, low or in-existent democratic activity, and easy recourse to martial law. Colonial markets of the late-19th and early-20th century offered all the above. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, there is a growing effort among scholars to revisit colonial capitalism from a perspective that, without losing sight of the brutal processes of resource extraction, also takes account of speculation, capital flight, monetary policy, and privatized sovereignty in colonial contexts.⁶⁴

⁶² Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.

⁶³ Press, *Rogue Empires*; Vanessa Ogle, "'Funk Money': The End of Empire, the Expansion of Tax Havens, and Decolonization as an Economic and Financial Event," *Past & Present* 249, n. 1 (Nov. 2020): pp. 213-249;

⁶⁴ Onur Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Hubert Bonin and Nuno Valério (eds.), *Colonial and Imperial Banking History* (Routledge, 2016); Hubert Bonin, *French Banking and Entrepreneurialism in China and Hong Kong from the 1850s to 1980s* (Routledge, 2020); VK. Todzi, T. Oestermar, and D. Neill, eds. 2021, *Colonial Capitalism in Action: The New Social and Economic History of German Colonialism, May 5-7*. Virtual Conference; Sunanda Sen and Maria Marcuzzo (eds.), *The Changing Face of Imperialism: Colonialism to Contemporary Capitalism* (Routledge, 2018); Aaron G. Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

As historians disaggregate monolithic understandings of imperial sovereignty and disrupt core-periphery models for relating metropolises to colonies, some have also taken aim at analyses of imperial rule that rely on the explanatory power of Great Power rivalries. In place of such explanations, historians increasingly emphasize examples of inter-imperial transfers of knowledge, techniques, resources, and personnel. Beyond describing European empires as entangled or connected, some even go so far as to speak of “co-imperialism,” and there is growing research into the concessions and international cities that exemplified multi-imperial condominium.⁶⁵ In pointing to colonialism as a kind of parallel, or shadow, internationalism, this historiography seems destined to intersect with revisionist histories of post-1945 international orders.⁶⁶

In short, scholars have peered behind the vast swathes of British pink and French blue that marked the territory of the world’s two largest empires on fin-de-siècle maps. The practice of sovereignty and patterns of circulation within European empires have come to be mapped and imagined in terms of “strands,” “strings,” or “threads” that are arranged around “nodes” of power. As Tony Ballantyne proposes, we might also think of “webs of empire” in which ties between networks of colonies (and not merely between colonies and metropolises) give stability to the structure as a whole.⁶⁷ In this vision, empire is fragile enough that small tears in the web easily set

⁶⁵ Richard Toye and Martin Thomas, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956* (Oxford University Press, 2017); V. Barth and R. Cvetkovski (eds.), *Inter-Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930: Empires and Encounters* (Bloomsbury, 2015); James Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Todd, *A Velvet Empire*; David Harrington, *The Uses of Imperial Citizenship: The British and French Empires* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020); Pierre Singaravélou, *Tianjin Cosmopolis. Une autre histoire de la mondialisation* (Seuil, 2017).

⁶⁶ For example: Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Christy Thornton, *Revolution in Development: Mexico and the Governance of the Global Economy* (University of California Press, 2021); Ogle, “Funk Money...”

⁶⁷ Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past* (University of British Columbia Press, 2015). The emphasis on intra-imperial ties also marked 21st-century research on the French colonial empire. See, for example: Eric Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas* (Duke

off larger crises. Empire as such becomes a *process* of weaving, breaking, and re-weaving ties – a kind of world system unto itself. Over decades of imperial, transnational, and global “turns,” then, historians of European imperialism have nuanced our understanding of imperial sovereignty – as concept, practice, and process. Throughout it all, Europe’s empires have been understood as fragile networks coursing with intra-imperial and inter-imperial circulations of people, things, and ideas.

And yet, scholars of imperialism remain remarkably untroubled by the process of transit itself. Research into the social process of trans-imperial mobility remains scattered and incomplete. Much historiography seems therefore to assume that once imperial states moved by steam, they could seamlessly transport their subjects from one end of empire to the other. This, however, was not the case. After all, steamships were not jets; nor were passengers and ship-workers cargo. Empire, in all its fragility and brutality, extended into the in-between spaces of ships and routes, just as it filled the time of monthlong voyages at sea. There, too, repertoires were improvised and habits began to form structures. There, too, self-interested intermediaries from the ranks of the colonized negotiated the dilemmas of daily life with conflicted colonizers. There, too, European imperialists often put aside their rivalries and collaborated – perhaps even to the point of forming an international order out of their solidarity.

But while this dissertation enters relatively uncharted waters by following ships in transit, in other ways it picks up the threads of the historiography that I outline above. Throughout the dissertation, I emphasize, for instance, how trans-Suez steamships broke down the divides – fictional and material – between metropole and empire, just as I highlight how visions of, and experiences with, empire shaped and conditioned people in Europe. Regardless of whether they

University Press, 2006); Michael Finch, *A Progressive Occupation? The Gallieni-Lyautey Method and Colonial Pacification in Tonkin and Madagascar, 1885-1900* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Saada, *Empire’s Children*.

traveled, French publics were treated to virtual tours of trans-Suez steamships in Universal Expositions, postcards, nation-making bildungsroman, travelogues, and public lectures. Just like trans-Suez transit itself, these virtual trips provided a colonial education.

This dissertation also explores the social worlds of the colonial subjects who powered French and British steamships. While these workers have rarely been thought of as imperial intermediaries, they were nothing less. “Serangs,” in particular, kept the steamships of the French and British Empires running. Derived from Urdu and Persian, serang was the title given to the indigenous recruiters and leaders of engine room teams, regardless of their ethnicity (*Messageries* captains spoke of their “Arab serang” just as they did of their “Chinese serang”). Such figures were not always hidden away in coal rooms. Indeed, as shipboard and port authorities occasionally admitted, these men could possess remarkable leverage over the trans-Suez routes that sustained empire.

I also portray critical sources of internal division within the ranks of the rulers of the French and British Empires. Interoceanic transit exposed tensions between civilian administrators and military personnel, as well as between ideologies of secularism and religious actors. Intra-national resentment over ethnicity and class could also be awakened by decisions over lodging, status, and everyday life in transit. Among the many tensions of empire that transit revealed, one points to a critical aspect of the history of colonial capitalism. In sub-contracting sovereign responsibilities to private shipping companies, the French and British imperial states entrusted themselves to commercial entities that followed their own blueprints of imperial spaces. Buying the loyalty of consuls, repressing labor militancy at any cost, turning a blind eye to black markets, or forming

unsanctioned industrial pacts: shipping lines frequently veered away from the priorities of imperial states.⁶⁸

Much like the “webs of empire” approach, then, this dissertation sketches an imperial geography that replaces metropole-colony binaries with multilateral channels of power, exchange, and circulation. Shifting between the close quarters of ships in transit and the sprawling space of an interoceanic route, it shows how transit spun webs across and between empires, just as it analyzes the many ways in which those webs were broken and rewoven by passengers, workers, and rulers of routes.

Oceans

Of course, maritime historians might question the notion that ships and oceanic routes across empires represent unfamiliar topics of research. From the late-19th and early-20th century, when maritime history took on a recognizable form, to the mid-20th century, the field’s practitioners, professional and non-professional alike, tracked naval vessels across the globe, examined the oceanic circuits of empires, and chronicled the leading trade companies.⁶⁹ To this base of maritime historiography, social histories from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, added painstaking investigations into the daily lives, struggles, and aspirations of seamen and port workers.⁷⁰ More

⁶⁸ As such, they are especially capable of shedding interesting light on the practices of multinational corporations in the post-1980s era of deterritorialization.

⁶⁹ A comprehensive bibliography of early maritime history can be found in: Nathan Perl-Rosenthal and Lauren Benton, “Introduction: Making Maritime History Global,” in Rosenthal and Benton (eds.), *A World at Sea: Maritime Practices and Global History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

⁷⁰ Alain Cabantous, “Les populations maritimes du littoral français de la manche orientale de la mer du nord du milieu du XVII^{ème} siècle à 1793 : Essai d’histoire sociale comparative” (PhD Diss, Université de Lille III, 1987); T.J.A. Le Goff, « Les origines sociales des gens de mer français au XVIII^{ème} siècle » in *La France de l’Ancien Régime : Etudes réunies en l’honneur de Pierre Goubert*, t. 2 (Toulouse: Privat, 1984); Markus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Peter Linebaugh and Markus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

recently, ocean regionalism has provided a framework for a growing body of research inspired by texts like Fernand Braudel's two-volume, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (translated into English in the 1970s), K.N. Chaudhuri's *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (1985), and Sugata Bose's, *A Hundred Horizons* (2006).⁷¹ Ocean regionalist studies have broadened the social scope of maritime research to include, for instance, slaves and other coerced laborers, migrants, and women. The field has also nuanced reductive notions of capitalism's diffusion and demonstrated the persistence of Asian and African maritime worlds in the face of European imperialism.⁷²

At the same time, however, the dominance of ocean regionalism frameworks has encouraged scholars to work out from preestablished geographical arenas, instead of following the winding paths of ships and travelers to unexpected spatial frameworks, political conjunctures, and social worlds. Adopting the latter approach, this dissertation echoes Lauren Benton's and Nathan Perl-Rosenthal's recent agenda for placing maritime history at the center of global history. Looking beyond "familiar oceanic labels," Benton and Perl-Rosenthal argue, can lead to "surprising regional formations," and "overlooked but historically significant forms of geographic imagination, regulation, and capital accumulation." Historians, they suggest, will benefit from "moving beyond a view of ships or ports as vectors and points," and "focusing," instead, "on the

⁷¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁷² By "worlds" I mean types of ships, modes of seafaring, and patterns of exchange, but also expertise and practices of knowledge production, as well as geographies and ontologies of maritime space. There are far too many works to cite comprehensively, but see, for example: Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-1853* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000); Joshua Reid, *The Sea is my Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (Yale University Press, 2015); Alexia Wick, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* (University of California Press, 2016); M. Creighton, L. Norling (eds.), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

institutions and practices used to extend control over ocean spaces,” as well as the ways in which “seafaring itself ... stitched together regions, spanned the land-sea divide, and profoundly influenced terrestrial politics and societies.”⁷³ Benton and Perl-Rosenthal are by no means alone in calling for historians to get onboard the ship in order to construct a veritable social, political, and cultural history of oceanic mobility that problematizes the land-sea divide rather than reifying it.⁷⁴

In fact, such a historiography is relatively developed both for the period leading into the age of steam and the period leading out of it. The world of maritime navigation by sail, for example, has been tightly and brilliantly woven into the most salient questions of Early Modern history and the Age of Revolutions. Early-Modern Historians have argued that Europe’s Atlantic Empires were forged and broken from prolonged efforts to master maritime communications networks in which information mutated as it passed hands, climates, and idioms.⁷⁵ Others have studied oceans in the early-modern period as legal spaces and sailing ships as problematic “vectors of law,” in which experiments and adaptations in governance led to nothing less than a system of global order built on layered sovereignties and divided seas.⁷⁶ The slave ship and the Middle Passage, moreover, have been shown to be spaces in which processes of racialization, cultural hybridity, and collective memory-making first unfolded.⁷⁷ The Age of Revolutions, too, has been

⁷³ Benton and Perl-Rosenthal (eds.), *A World at Sea*, 6-8; 13-14.

⁷⁴ Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900* (University of California Press, 2012), 1-21; Martin Dusinberre and Roland Wenzlhuemer, “Editorial – being in transit: ships and global incompatibilities,” *Journal of Global History* 11, n. 2 (July 2016); 155-62. Even maritime historians have noted that research rarely extends beyond the port and docks. As the editors of the main journal of maritime history in France recently asked, “les navires des historiens quittent-ils le port ? »: O. Chaline, I. Kbab-Delumeau, and J-M. Kowalski (eds.), *Revue d’histoire maritime* 25 (June 2019). Editors and contributors to the journal *Mobilities*, too, have frequently called for historicizing mobilities studies.

⁷⁵ Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea*.

⁷⁶ Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷⁷ Markus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Viking Press, 2007); Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

followed in and out of oceans, with historians revealing that revolutionary claims and struggles unfolded precociously in ships, rippled through seafaring populations, and reached both their heights and limits at sea.⁷⁸

An equally impressive, if more recent, body of literature has placed maritime mobility at the heart of research in 20th-century history from the First World War forward. Ships have been shown, for instance, to have spread the standardization of time and space across the world after the First World War.⁷⁹ Marketing, leisure cultures, and the modern tourism industry, too, have all been analyzed through the evolving ship-scapes of the Interwar and the passengers within them.⁸⁰ Familiar sites of maritime contestation, such as the naval mutinies that erupted towards the end of the First World War, are also receiving fresh attention.⁸¹

Ships and shipping lines have been particularly effective as windows into the dialectical relationships between anticolonialism, communism, and the rise of security states. Such scholarship has made it clear that our picture of the Interwar “crisis of empire” is drastically incomplete if it relies only on the explanatory powers of territorial nationalisms and communist internationalism.⁸² Indeed, anti-colonialism took surprising shapes in motion, survived in ships,

⁷⁸ Rediker and Linebaugh, *Many Headed Hydra*; Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*; Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 14-17; Frykman, *The Bloody Flag*.

⁷⁹ Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*, 87-90, 100.

⁸⁰ Lorraine Coons and Alexander Varias, *Steamship Travel in the Interwar: Tourist Third Cabin* (Amberley, 2016); Finamore and Wood (eds.), *Ocean Liners: Speed and Style*; Graham Gladden, “Marketing ocean travel: Cunard and the White Star Line, 1910-1940,” *Journal of Transport History* 35, n. 1 (June 2014): 57-77; David Cashman, “Brass bands, icebergs and jazz: Music on passenger shipping 1880-1939,” *Journal of Tourism History* 6, n. 1 (2014): 1-15.

⁸¹ Matt Perry, *Mutinous Memories: A Subjective history of French military protest in 1919* (Manchester University Press, 2019).

⁸² Alexanderson, *Subversive Seas*; Michael Miller, *Shanghai on the Metro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French Between the Wars* (University of California Press, 1994), 115-119; 306-320; Minayo Nasiali, “Trouble on the Docks: Strikes, Scabs, and the Colonia Question in Marseille’s Port Neighborhoods,” *Journal of Urban History* 42, n. 5 (Sept. 2016): 900-918; Renisa Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Duke University Press, 2018). John Gallagher, “Nationalism and the Crisis of Empire, 1919-1922,” *Modern Asian Studies* 15, n. 3 (1981): 355-368.

and spread through the sea. Some scholars have even seen in the cultural connections between seafarers and “archipelagos of colonial ports” a form of Third-Worldism before the letter.⁸³ Other scholars have demonstrated how the possibilities of decolonization and the dilemmas of postcoloniality crystallized in the lives of merchant mariners, national shipping lines, and debates over the governance of oceanic space.⁸⁴

Finally, a parallel body of scholarship on the first half-century of air-travel has analyzed aerial spaces, vehicles, and perspectives with the same determination to problematize divides between air, land, and sea. I echo such work in arguing that social worlds and political orders are not only carried into maritime (or aerial) environments, but form and transform within those spaces, and in the act of passage between them.⁸⁵

There is a chasm, however, between these bodies of historiography. The literature on early-modern empires and the age of sail, for instance, tends to taper out in the mid-19th century, subsuming the history of steamships within overly broad processes and catchall conceptual labels. Viewed from the age of sail, in other words, the steamship comes across as the reflection of proletarianization, the internationalism of sovereign nation-states, the liberalism of Free Trade and Free Seas, and the conquests of new imperialism. The late-19th century thus stands in too easily as the moment when the seas were finally “civilized,” with abolitionist gunboats replacing slave ships, information blackouts and mutinies a fading memory, and piracy a thing of the past.⁸⁶ In

⁸³ Dennings, *Noise Uprising*.

⁸⁴ Lynn Schler, *Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea* (Ohio University Press, 2016); Reinhardt, *Navigating Semi-Colonialism*; Alexanderson, *Subversive Seas*; Khalili, *Sinews of Trade and War*; Mawani, *Oceans of Law*.

⁸⁵ Peter Adey, *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Chandra Bhimull, *Empire in the Air: Airline Travel and the African Diaspora* (New York University Press, 2017); Jennifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Harvard University Press, 2013); Vanessa Schwartz, *Jet Age Aesthetic: The Glamour of Media in Motion* (Yale University Press, 2020).

⁸⁶ David Abulafia conveys the framing in *The Boundless Sea*, where he labels the 1850-2000 period as “the oceans contained.” *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Ocean* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

this grand narrative, great powers and international summits learned to administer and regulate the sea at last. Literature that picks up from the First World War, meanwhile, can have a similar effect on our interpretations of the period preceding it, insofar as it implies that struggles over mobility, labor, anticolonialism, trafficking, and policing were either unarticulated, inchoate, or unproblematic before 1914.

In this dissertation, I hope to bring these two periods into conversation. Who represented the cutting edge of contestation after the pirates and mariners of the age of sail and revolutions, but before the mutinous sailors and anticolonial seafarers of the First World War and Interwar? Between the layered sovereignties of early-modern empires and the institutionalized internationalism of Interwar nations, what did sovereignty look like at sea? What were the racial politics of maritime mobility after the slave trade had been abolished, but before the establishment of a ‘global color line?’ While answering these vast questions might require another dissertation or two, I hope here to lay steppingstones that will make crossing the historiographical chasm easier in the future. To that end, I analyze, for example, the meaning of “mutiny” in an era of labor militancy, state attempts to regulate shipping lines, and the racial politics of steamships.

This dissertation is thus an exploration of the pervasiveness of maritime disorder in a time of industrial consolidation and imperial expansion, just as it is a study of new modes of governance and the exercise of power in liminal spaces. In this sense, it flows from the work of early theorists of liminality, who stressed that rites of passage deconstruct and warp social hierarchies as part of a process of reaffirming existing structures of power and subjecting people to new hierarchies.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). Turner is the most famous interpreter of the early-20th century anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, who lived in France, and originally developed the concept of liminality. Turner turned Van Gennep’s conception of the liminal stage in rites of passage into the crux of a broader commentary on structuralist thinking, in which he emphasized society as “a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas.”

Steamship voyages across Suez were indeed rites of passage, but there are few studies that question how the rite worked, the space in which it occurred, if it was contested, and what transformations it wrought.

This is not to say that the period from the mid-19th to the early-20th century – an age of steam – lacks a depth of research. The overwhelming weight of research for this latter age of steam, however, is concentrated in the North Atlantic and on topics relating to engineering, technology, business operations, décor, migration, and tourism. Of course, much of this is extremely valuable work. Recent research on the technology of steam engines and ocean liners, for instance, has deconstructed longstanding, “great man” histories of engineers, revised reductive diffusionist models, and highlighted the cultural values underlying ship construction. Other recent work explores the steamship as a generator of modern tourism culture, a consolidator of national consciousness, or as a novel lens into bourgeois civil societies and notions of modernity. And business histories have produced richly researched accounts of the vast, complex organizations of shipping companies.⁸⁸ But little work has grappled with the sociocultural complexity of vessels in motion, the practice of everyday life at sea, or the politics of mobility formed by people in transit. Much remains to discover, moreover, in what such lenses can reveal about sovereignty in the in-between spaces of empires, race and racialization at sea, or the mechanics of liminality among mobile societies of steamship travelers. Instead, prevailing patterns of historiography tend to

⁸⁸ Griffith, *Steam at Sea*; Searight, *Steaming East*; Keeling, *The Business of Transatlantic migration*; Smith, *Coal, Steam, and Ships*; D. Legett and R. Dunn (eds.), *Reinventing the Ship: Science, Technology, and the Maritime World, 1800-1918* (Routledge, 2012); Burgess, *Engines of Empire*; Mark Russell, *Steamship Nationalism: Ocean Liners and National Identity in Imperial Germany* (Routledge, 2020). Of course, the *Titanic* has its own body of scholarship.

privilege the perspective of *terra firma*, in which ships and routes appear in functionalist terms – connecting people and enabling history, but rarely containing it.⁸⁹

Outline

In-between Empires is divided into three parts. In the first part, chapter one, “Entering an Age of Steam,” I periodize the rise of the transoceanic steamship, while reflecting on the process by which coal – an expensive, heavy, and dirty energy source – spread across empires and oceans. The goal of this chapter is to problematize the framework of a “transport revolution” and to inscribe the coal-burning steamship within an age of steam marked by tensions between port and city, as well as circuitous, unfinished, and often counterintuitive paths of progress. Chapter two, “Gateway of the Orient,” carries on the work of situating the advent of steam, this time by orienting the

⁸⁹ Some exceptions have guided the research and writing of this dissertation. Renisa Mawani’s *Across Oceans of Law*, for instance, reinterprets the famous 1914 voyage of the *Komagata Maru*, in which Indian subjects of the British Empire took a Japanese ship across the Pacific to Canada, triggering a political panic and an empire-wide debate about law and race across oceanic space. Mawani artfully analyzes the many past lives of the ship to reveal how the infrastructure undergirding British imperialism provided pathways of contestation and spaces in which to reflect on the contradictions of imperial rule. Inspired by her use of “oceans as method,” this dissertation also emphasizes the center-less dynamics and ceaseless force of “currents,” along with the fluidity of oceans and seas across the boundaries that demarcate them. Similarly, as Valeska Huber demonstrated in *Channeled Mobilities*, trans-Suez highways were layered with regulations, filters, and chokepoints, just as they were subject to a constant, imperious demand to keep the channels flowing. This dissertation thus joins scholarship analyzing the tension between the fluidity of oceans and the friction of politics and society in transit. Regarding the social space of the ship itself, this dissertation has been informed by the work of Frances Steel and Anne Reinhardt. In *Oceania under Steam*, for example, Steel has analyzed the regional connections between New Zealand, Australia, and Oceania between 1870 and 1914, demonstrating that the steamships connecting this “corner” of the British Empire were sites of tense negotiations over race, gender, and class. Along with Reinhardt’s research into the “steamship as social space” in late-19th century China, it is one of precious few monographs that go beyond studies of individual travelers and specific professional strata, pointing the way instead to an analysis of ships as borderlands and contact zones. Along with these scholars, this dissertation deliberately eschews focus on a single type of traveler, occupational category, or itinerary, and rather examines social relations and encounters across the steamship’s divides of race, class, and gender. That said, there are a number of valuable works on specific types of travelers, workers, and individuals. See, for example: Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (Penguin Random House, 2018); Tamson Pietsch, “Bodies at sea: travelling to Australia in the age of sail,” *Journal of Global History* 11, n. 2 (2016): 209-228; G. Balachandran, *Globalized Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Andrew Hassam, *Sailing to Australia. Shipboard Diaries by Nineteenth-Century British Emigrants* (Manchester University Press, 1994); Anyaa Anim-Addo, “The Great Event of the Fortnight: Steamship Rhythms and Colonial Communication,” in Anim-Addo, Hasty, and Peters (Eds.), *The Mobilities of Ships* (Routledge, 2015).

Messageries in the rise of steam-powered production and long-distance trade in Marseille from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Like the ships it follows, this dissertation returns frequently to Marseille, which birthed the *Messageries* shipping company and hosted an important part of the *P&O*'s operations.

Chapter two also points to the dissertation's second section, "Space, Place, and the Steamship," by analyzing the paradoxical implications of Marseille's figuration as a threshold between France and the ill-defined, ever-shifting "Orient." Steamships and shipping companies, the chapter suggests, powerfully tied together city, nation, and empire, but their ability to do so relied on transnational partnerships and itineraries that called into question the boundaries of formal imperialism.

Chapter 3, "A Place in the Imperial Nation-State" focuses more squarely on the 1870s, when a new Republic gained and maintained power in France, enlivening the underlying tension of a state that was simultaneously committed to nation-making according to universal values, and empire-building through particularistic, hierarchical modes of rule. Reinterpreting a text so critical to republican nationalism that it was later nicknamed, "the Little Red Book of the Republic," this chapter zeroes in on the space of the steamship as the book's author imagined it. The steamship, this chapter argues, was the vehicle for introducing a French reading public to race and empire, as well as finding a place in the nation for Marseille, the "Gateway" city.

Chapter 4, "A City on the Sea" continues to probe the boundaries of France, Europe, and Empire, this time by analyzing the tension between the trans-Suez liner as it was imagined and experienced from the 1870s to the 1930s. Publicity presented the ocean liner as a model city where upper-class passengers could experience urbane pleasures without the inconvenience of urban cohabitation. On trans-Suez routes, this was complemented by the promise of a tour of exotic

cultures and a taste of colonial living. The everyday practices of life aboard trans-Suez liners, however, rarely adhered to the fantasy that travelers were buying. Instead, the drama of urban living played out inside trans-Suez ocean liners, where class boundaries came under siege, gendered anxieties proliferated, racial segregation broke down, and labor disrupted the spectacle. A perplexing heterotopia, the trans-Suez liner held up a strange mirror to metropolitan publics in Europe.

The next chapter connects Part Two's discussion of space and place to Part Three's analysis of power and social conflict along trans-Suez maritime highways. Chapter 5, "A Hundred Highways," immerses readers in the space of the route through nine biographical vignettes of travelers. Collectively, these perspectives fill in a map of where different travelers saw civilization beginning and ending; where they felt the magnetic poles of familiarity and foreignness; the boundaries and borderlands that they encountered while traveling; and the routes they made in their minds. They also sketch a broad trajectory from the consolidation of European imperial power in the 1870s to the imperial crises and anticolonialism of the Interwar.

The chapter points the way to the dissertation's final part, "The Corridors of Power," in which I analyze the main institutional actors and social struggles unfolding along the route. How, this section asks, did power operate along maritime highways and where did sovereignty begin and end in such spaces? Chapter 6, "Mobile Frontier," examines the moment of layovers and gauges the porosity of steamships in port. Going along the grain of colonial power, the steamship appeared like a floating fortress. In the complex interplay of flows and frictions unleashed by layovers, however, steamships functioned more like mobile frontiers. Decisions over who and what could pass through the steamship revealed looming uncertainties about law and lawlessness in the interstices of empire.

Chapter 7, “Working the China Line,” explores the struggle over labor conditions onboard trans-Suez liners across the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Moving beyond the lore-laden battles over the docks of major port cities that have conventionally filled labor history, the chapter investigates how strikes unfolded at sea, in motion, and between colonial ports. In identifying a range of tactics and “weapons of the weak” available to the multiracial crews of *Messageries* and *P&O* liners, the chapter nuances the widespread interpretation of steamships as fully proletarianized and de-skilled sites of labor. The chapter also suggests that shipping companies engaged in a form of cultivated ignorance regarding certain sections of crews in order to render them less than social persons and benefit from the vagaries of imperial sovereignty.

Chapter 8, “Rulers of the Route” explores another source of conflict and disorder along trans-Suez highways, this one lurking in plain sight: the authorities themselves. The French and British states and their shipping surrogates broadcasted an image of perfect unity and shared objectives. At the outbreak and conclusion of wars, for instance, ocean liners hosted elaborate rituals of patriotism as they picked up troops and returned veterans. However, these performances masked far more contentious relationships between subsidized companies and subsidizing states. This chapter highlights a host of mobile actors and brokers of mobility who tested the ability of shipping companies to act as surrogates of the state: from ship-jumping convicts and traveling soldiers, to consuls on the payroll of companies and state passengers demanding special treatment.

The final chapter, “Interoceanic Commuters,” studies the trans-Suez liner as a space of social networks, lobbying, and soft power. Before air travel, cyclically mobile populations of administrators, military officers, diplomats, and businesspeople found in the trans-Suez steamship a refreshingly familiar place, which at the same time could provide opportunity and connections. Within trans-Suez liners, distinctions among Europeans tended to melt away, revealing practices

of elite sociality and networking that strengthened intra-imperial communications and inter-imperial collaboration. With the help of consuls, captains and company directors encouraged this process both en route and during curated expositions of their liners in important port cities along the route.

Finally, in a conclusion, I emphasize that just as the elite interoceanic “commuters” could weave imperial power out of travel, so anticolonial dissidents could forge their own power along the highways of empire. In parallel, the conclusion echoes chapter 1 by reflecting on the murky boundaries of the age of steam. Diesel motors began replacing coal-burning engines by the 1910s, drastically reducing the amount of (colonial subject) labor needed by trans-Suez ships in the process and rendering the layover a far tidier affair than what coal-burning ships experienced. Along with the introduction of air travel beyond Suez, this was in many ways the end of an era.

Theory and Sources

In researching and writing this dissertation, I have been informed by what is sometimes referred to as the “new mobilities paradigm.”⁹⁰ Stripped of the emphasis on novelty and paradigmatic formulations, this interdisciplinary body of research is based on two solid premises. First, travel is a learned, or socially constructed, practice, rather than an intuitive one. Second, far from being reducible to dead time, empty space, or the mechanistic act of ‘getting from A to B,’ transit creates lively sites of social, cultural, and political contact. Transit, therefore, equips people in motion with particular perspectives on space and time, just as it creates unique forms of subjectivity.

Within mobilities scholarship, I have been particularly inspired by the geographer Tim Cresswell. Cresswell argues that mobility is to movement as place is to location. Mobility, then,

⁹⁰ Most closely associated with the launching of the journal *Mobilities* in 2006.

works as an analytical category only insofar as it conveys a fragile and contingent “entanglement” of three elements: movement as a physical fact, cultural representations of movement, and the social practices of moving people. These three facets of mobility are joined and interrelated by power and domination. In other words, how one represents, experiences, and practices movement necessarily depends on the position that one occupies within social and spatial hierarchies. Moreover, how one passenger understands, codes, and enacts transit will necessarily have effects on other passengers. “Mobility,” after all, “is a resource that is differentially accessed.”⁹¹

Michel Foucault was an important forerunner to 21st-century research into mobilities, as can be seen in his observation that a vessel in transit is as an “extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, ... something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and ... something that goes by.”⁹² His interpretation of ships as heterotopias – “the heterotopia par excellence,” in fact – guides this dissertation through several stages of its argumentation, for the concept captures the ontological paradoxes of a vessel in transit. Ships, after all, make people dream while carrying out the dirty work of society. They encourage people to describe the world around them, while disrupting the categories and vocabulary for doing so. They feel perfectly enclosed, while evoking and enfolding many disparate places by their being. A vessel in transit, then, is not only a piece to be placed in historical puzzles, but a theoretical proposition in itself.

In researching this dissertation, my method has been to work out from the recorded experiences of steamship employees and travelers, noting as carefully as possible where, why, and

⁹¹ Tim Cresswell, “Towards a politics of mobility,” *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 28 (2010): 17-31.

⁹² Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses : Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris : Gallimard, 1966). The most explicitly elaborated description of heterotopias comes from a 1967 lecture, posthumously published as, “Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies.” *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49.

how their mobility entailed friction, obstacles, and internal discord. From these observations, I have tried to reconstitute the social space of steamships and the human geography of the routes they traversed. In recreating the social space of steamship voyages, I have relied heavily on reports written by ship-captains, which frequently contained testimonies from passengers and workers within them. By the late-19th century, captains were required to mix the functions of navigators, socialites, lawmen, foremen, and accountants. As such, I have found they make for fascinating sources. Within shipping company archives, I have also made frequent use of circular books communicating orders from directors to employees, agency reports, and a wide range of “diverse” internal company communications.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the archives of the *P&O* and *Messageries* are scattered and many exist between archival jurisdictions. Very few voyage reports survive for the *P&O*, the general records of which are split between the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich and several private companies. The main records of the *Messageries*, meanwhile, are shared – according to a logic that never became clear to me – between the Chamber of Commerce in Marseille and an association in Le Havre. During my research in Le Havre, I was amazed to see that part of the work of ordering *Messageries* archives was left to volunteers from the public, many of whom were former employees of shipping lines. This was by no means negligence on the part of the association, nor do I mean to suggest that these amateur archivists were necessarily unqualified. On the contrary, the association was doing incredible work despite lacking the resources and personnel of state archives, and many of those volunteers had exceptional, firsthand knowledge of how the murky world of shipping operates. Still, it is a testament to the jurisdictional liminality of the merchant marine that the records of massive institutions like the *Messageries* and *P&O* should remain on the margins of archival practice.

To fill in the picture of ships and the space of maritime highways provided by company sources, I have relied on state archives. Military archives, for instance, offered a window into traveling soldiers, government transports, and the state of security along maritime routes. Departmental archives, meanwhile, provided precious insights into the worlds of sailors and the politics of port cities. The National Archives of Vietnam also contained rich sources for understanding the scope and limits of maritime regulation in Saigon.

Diplomatic archives were especially valuable, particularly those containing the files of consuls stationed along the route. Consuls, while representatives of the state, often saw their mission as facilitating commerce and they demonstrated remarkably little concern over conflicts of interest. Brokers of mobility, they were responsible for settling all manner of questions over the passage of people and goods. They were also intelligence-gathering agents with amply defined missions, meaning that their offices kept wide communications and varied records of how the world looked from their position. For these reasons, consular files make up a key part of the research behind this dissertation.

Finally, the ego-documents of individual travelers, from intimate diaries to published memoirs, form a third pillar of the research presented here. Once one has become alert to the idioms and tropes of such documents, they provide an unparalleled window into the experience of transoceanic transit. Critically, they reveal the embodied life of travel, as well as the minute details of time in transit that might otherwise go unrecorded.

The most critical pieces of infrastructure underlying this dissertation, however, were the American passport and the funding for research that concentrates in the North Atlantic. In a dissertation about mobility and power, it must be acknowledged that only a tiny minority of scholars can fly in and out of multiple countries to conduct research for extended periods of time.

The paths that take transnational, imperial, and global “turns” are open to precious few people and guarded by the power and solidarity of the world’s wealthiest nations. Every route has its roots.⁹³

⁹³ Chandra Bhimull, *Empire in the Air: Airline Travel and the African Diaspora* (New York University Press, 2017), 101.

Part One. Entering an Age of Steam

Chapter 1. Entering an Age of Steam

This chapter reflects on how France and Britain entered the era of steam-powered mobility and production. When, it asks, did world shipping transition from wind-powered sails to coal-powered steam engines? Why did maritime commerce move away from a renewable, free, and weightless source of power, and towards one that was expensive, heavy, and polluting? And, finally, what effects did this transition have upon workers, owners of capital, the built environments of major port cities, and the geopolitics of imperialism?

Since the mid-20th century, the rise of steam-powered mobility has often been described as unleashing a “transportation revolution” wherever it occurs, with people moving faster and further forever afterward.¹ The phrase makes it difficult to imagine that a society could renounce the results of such a revolution, or turn back from its revelations and inexorable logics.

From the vantage point of the early-2020s, however, the next revolution looks like a restoration. Only a few years ago, news media across the world dissected the decision of world-celebrity and climate activist, Greta Thunberg, to change her vehicle of choice. The teenager from one of the world’s most developed economies, whose very youth seemed to license her to speak of the future, would tack between her multiplying schedule of global gigs in the decidedly retro vehicle of the sailing ship. Thunberg’s transition to sail was rapidly processed into fodder for culture wars, but missing from the coverage was the fact that Thunberg was far from alone.

¹ The two most influential examples being: George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Reinhart and Co., 1951); and Philip Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution from 1770* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1974). The label is also enshrined in AP History courses. For an insightful commentary on the implicit assumptions about power and revolution within the phrase, see: Jacob Shell, *Transport and Revolt: Pigeons, Mules, Canals and the Vanishing Geographies of Subversive Mobility* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2015).

Across the world, many people continue to carry out their business by wind and sail. Between South Asia, the Gulf States, and Somalia, for instance, the anthropologist Jatin Dua has described “a world of trade abutting the container ships,” made up of windborne sailboats that “glide in and out” of ports daily, “bringing everything from daily staples to the somewhat odd assortment of dentist chairs, Land Rovers, and the occasional pink limousine.”² Many of the people who work these ships find themselves in and out of the complex, and widely misrepresented, world of Indian Ocean piracy. One such seafarer explained his situation to Dua in terms that might resonate with Thunberg herself. Pushed into piracy out of desperation, he and his crew ran out of fuel and food on a motorboat trip in the Red Sea. Abandoning oil, they switched to a wooden dhow. For the seafarer, the return to sail felt like a blessing: “As soon as I got on the [sail]boat I was better. It was bigger and there was no smell of diesel all the time. It was the best part of my time at sea.”³

In fact, Thunberg and the Somali seafarer are in line with an incipient industrial transition.⁴ Since Thunberg was bandied about the press, for instance, a Swedish venture to create a windborne cargo shipping line has gained momentum. By 2023, a privately owned Swedish company, backed by state research agencies, will launch a 200-meter long, windborne ship that can carry 7000 cars across the Atlantic in twelve days, as opposed to the eight required for carbon-powered crossings.⁵ Meanwhile, in France, a group of merchant marine captains are, at the time of writing, moving

² Jatin Dua, “Dhow Encounters,” *Transition* 119 (2016): p. 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴ Maxim Lott, “5 inconvenient truths about the ‘climate strike’” *Fox News*, September 20 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/science/5-inconvenient-truths-about-the-climate-strike>; Lucia Binding, “How green is Greta Thunberg’s transatlantic trip?”, *Sky News*, 14 August 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/greta-thunberg-is-her-transatlantic-trip-really-that-green-11784480/>; Emily Witt, “Greta Thunberg’s Slow Boat to New York,” *The New Yorker*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/09/greta-thunbergs-slow-boat-to-new-york/>; Somini Sengupta, “Greta Thunberg Sets Sail, Again, After Climate Talks Relocate,” *New York Times* Nov. 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/climate/greta-thunberg-return-europe.html/>

⁵ Alister Doyle, “Wallenius Bets on Wind-powered Cargo Ships,” *marinelink.com*, December 9, 2020

ahead with a company that will also build and operate a fleet of 21st-century wind-powered cargo ships. The well-capitalized project is being courted by some of the largest shipping lines in the world and already has the backing of the multinational automobile giant Renault. With its flagships trailing their fossil-fueled competitors by only a few knots of speed, the French company plans to put a trans-Atlantic line into service by 2023.⁶ These and other quests to make wind-powered shipping a 21st-century frontier may still amount to speculation, “greenwashing,” or idealistic exceptions to industrial norms.⁷ At the very least, however, such ventures call into question the linearity of the movement from wind-power to fossil fuel. In keeping with that spirit of questioning, this chapter addresses some of the received wisdom surrounding oceanic mobility in age of steam, emphasizing that the tools of steam-powered transport had to be crafted, wielded, championed, and defended by powerful actors within a transitory world order. The case of Marseille, with which this chapter concludes and which the next chapter picks up in greater depth, illustrates how port and city managed, and failed to manage, the consequences of these transformations.

No single moment marked the passing from sail to steam, but between the mid-1870s and the mid-1880s, the total amount of tonnage carried by steamships finally eclipsed that carried by sailing ships. To those in the know, the decline in the commercial prospects of long-haul,

⁶ “Cargo voilier: Renault propulse Neoline,” *Journal de la Marine Marchande*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.journalmarinemarchande.eu/actualite/shipping/renault-propulse-neoline>; Adeline Descamps, “Neoline, Towt, Alizés: voiliers cargos ou cargos à voile, où en sont-ils?”, October 19, 2020, *Journal de la Marine Marchande*. Along with the Swedish public-private venture and the three above-mentioned French ventures, there are many boutique operations moving their transportation to sail: see, for example: “Entre la Martinique et l’Hexagone, un cargo à voile importe le rhum bio et zero carbone », 11/02/2021, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/commerce/entre-la-martinique-et-lhexagone-un-cargo-a-voile-importe-du-rhum-bio-et-zero-carbone_4293269.html

⁷ Pressure is growing on large shipping companies to end the use of heavy fuels responsible for spewing as much nitrogen and sulphur oxide into the environment as the entire world’s automobiles. See, for example, “Light at the end of the Funnel. Green finance for dirty ships. New ways to foot the hefty bill for making old ships less polluting” *The Economist*, March 11, 2017.

windborne navigation was visible as early as the 1840s and 50s. The decline then accelerated in the 1860s and entered a free fall between the 1870s and mid-1880s. The canceling of the celebrated tea clipper races in 1873, which had long pitted the sailing ships of European merchant companies against one another on the return voyage from China, poignantly marked sail's decline.⁸ The palm oil trade between Britain and West Africa, while less laden in lore, obeyed a similar chronology: in 1870, steamships accounted for roughly half of palm oil tonnage between Britain and West Africa; by 1880, steam's contribution rose to 89%.⁹ Across the world at the same moment, commodity after commodity fell into the holds of high-capacity, oceangoing steamships. Yet, as this chapter argues, the smashing success of steamship navigation in the last quarter of the 19th century can easily obscure a history of hesitations, delays, and hybrid forms. There was nothing linear in the rise of steamship technology, nor was the transition intuitive or irreversible. The world had to be made ready for the steamship – politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Even then, the hegemony of steamships in transoceanic transit was arduous and inconclusive.

In fact, the very distinction between steamship and sailing ship was not as rigid as it might appear; nor was the transition by any means instantaneous. Well into the first decades of the 20th century, many steamships carried rigs and masts, which permitted them to take advantage of a good wind, conserve coal, and save themselves in the case of an engine breakdown. All told, moreover, roughly eighty years passed between the debut of a successful marine engine (Scotland, 1801) and the commercial dominance of oceangoing steamships.¹⁰ Perhaps more noteworthy, still,

⁸ Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (New York: Penguin, 2017), p. 96.

⁹ Martin Lynn, "The Impact of the Steamship Services on the British Palm Oil Trade with West Africa, 1850-1890," *The Journal of African History* 30, n. 2 (1989), p. 233.

¹⁰ In part, the lag reflects the predominantly oral transmission of knowledge about coal. English artisans tended to pass along knowledge about coal-intensive production methods orally, making diffusion a slow process. Workers had to be brought in person, as they were in the 1830s. Ken Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 66; Sarah Seawright, *Steaming*

is that half a century passed between the first transoceanic steamship voyages and the surpassing of sailing ships in terms of global tonnage. In 1825, the *Enterprize* undertook an experimental voyage from London to Calcutta, via Capetown. When the ship arrived, huffing and puffing, 113 days after setting out, it had spent weeks relying exclusively on its sails.¹¹ Around the same time, tentative steamship voyages occurred between India and Suez, India and China, Western Europe and West Africa, and Europe and North America.¹² In the 1830s, boosters of steam warned a wary public to brace themselves for a boom. Though the ships involved in these voyages made headlines aplenty, few would find long-term success as oceangoing vessels. In fact, many languished, becoming cautionary tales to investors and traveling publics. Marx and Thackeray may have been enchanted, but even in the late-1850s, many engineers agreed that nowhere had steam made less progress than in oceanic navigation.¹³

All of which raises the question: why did the world wait so long to embrace the steamship? A host of reasons explain the sluggish pace of progress, but their common thread is coal. Until the midcentury, steamships remained energy-inefficient and slow, making it an uphill struggle to supplant sailing ships on long-haul routes that could depend on regular wind – most of the established routes to China from Europe and North America, for instance. To give a sense of dimensions, the first steamship to travel between India and the Gulf of Suez (the *Hugh Lindsay* in 1830) required over 500 tons of coal, 380 tons of which were burnt in the Red Sea passage alone. Made of teak wood and weighing in at around 400 tons, the ship carried so much coal at various

East: The Hundred-Year Saga of the Struggle to Forge Rail and Steamship Links Between Europe and India (London: The Bodley Head, 1991): p. 6.

¹¹ Seawright, *Steaming East*, 23-29

¹² Hsien-Chun Wang, "Discovering Steam Power in China, 1840s-1860s," *Technology and Culture* 51, n. 1 (Jan. 2010), pp. 36-37; Seawright, *Steaming East*, 8; Lynn, "Impact of the Steamship," 228

¹³ Crosbie Smith, *Coal, steam and ships – engineering, enterprise and empire on the nineteenth-century seas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 326.

stages of its 33-day journey that instead of its normal draft of 11 feet, 6 inches, it routinely found itself submerged 14 feet into water. Even with sail-powered colliers tracking the ship to ease its burden, these metrics were unsustainable.¹⁴

In the absence of better fuel efficiency, ships would either have to be gigantic enough to carry their coal, or they would need access to a global network of coal depots where they could refuel in stages. However, the global infrastructure of coal depots needed for long-distance steamship travel was still far from complete in 1850, let alone in 1830.¹⁵ Thus, in celebrated, if ill-fated, bids like the *Great Britain* (launched in 1843) and the *Great Eastern* (launched in 1857), British shipbuilders chose size: they would build ships that could carry enough coal to cross an ocean. Their gargantuan creations captivated and inspired, but they also floundered commercially and encountered frequent technical issues.¹⁶ Most of the world's ports could not even accommodate such mega-ships, limiting commercial horizons further. The way forward for steam, then, pointed to greater fuel efficiency and a global network of coaling stations.

The obstacles in front of steamship navigation, however, were social and cultural as much as they were mechanical and logistical. Labor had to be reorganized for the needs of the industry, financing needed to be procured and sustained, and the doubts of passengers had to be assuaged. Labor aboard a steamship was grimmer, more repetitive, and not necessarily more remunerative than work on sailing ships. If steam were to triumph, it would need to fashion a maritime proletariat

¹⁴ Sea wright, *Steaming East*, 8; 36-9. To give a sense of how the quantities of coal needed to power a transoceanic voyage had evolved by the early-20th century, a Cunard advertisement from 1907 proudly depicted hundreds of coal-bearing trains chugging towards one of its ocean liners. Below, a caption read: "THE COAL THAT TAKES A GREAT SHIP ACROSS THE ATLANTIC – 22 TRAINS CARRYING 300 TONS EACH." To maintain the imposing speeds that were becoming standard on trans-Atlantic routes by the turn of the century, such a ship would burn around 800-to-1000 tons of coal every day.

¹⁵ On Barak, *Powering Empire: How Coal Made the Middle East and Sparked Global Carbonization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

¹⁶ Douglas R. Burgess Jr., *Engines of Empire: Steamships and the Victorian Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 21-91.

fit for the task. Port cities would have to reach into their hinterlands for new laborers, while bending or breaking the moral codes and social structures of existing maritime workers. Sailors would have to tolerate new divisions in their workforce, beginning with a cleavage between deck and engine crews, and be trained in the grueling labor of trimming and stoking the machines of the engine room. Any such process would, of course, necessitate new legal and regulatory frameworks for settling labor disputes.¹⁷

As for ownership and financing, any oceangoing steamship venture would require enormous capital to cover the expenses of building ships large enough to carry immense quantities of coal and cargo. Companies would have to be formed that could withstand the daunting, well-established risks of commercial failure. If the steamship were to take a hegemonic position in global commerce, in other words, it was through financial consolidation. This process came at the expense of the old figure of the merchant-trader who owned a single vessel, or who sponsored one venture at a time along with a few associates. Marseille in the 1830s offers an instructive snapshot of ownership patterns before the advent of steam. In 1836, at the very moment when local entrepreneurs were launching the city's first long-haul steamship, the port counted 286 registered sailing ships. Those 286 ships belonged to 192 ship-owners (*armateurs*), 141 of whom owned and operated only a single vessel.¹⁸ Similarly, in London in 1848, individual owners accounted for a full 89% of registered ships.¹⁹ In both ports, a significant number of owners captained their own

¹⁷ Marcus Rediker has argued that this process of proletarianization was incipient by the late-18th century. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (1987), and Rediker, Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000).

¹⁸ Around twenty owners captained their ships. Marcel Roncayolo, *L'imaginaire de Marseille. Port, ville, pole* (Lyon : ENS Editions, 2014), p. 91.

¹⁹ Martin Stopford, *Maritime Economics 3rd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2009), 271.

ships. Needless to say, the owners of the giant steam-shipping companies to come would not be found at the helms of their vessels.

Most port cities lacked a deep enough reservoir of homegrown investors to finance an oceangoing steamship company. As a result, the rise of the steamship depended on the ability of port-cities to tap into state subsidies and regional, national, and transnational financial networks. The immense costs of building and operating a commercially viable, oceangoing steamship line explain why 91% of ships registered with Lloyds were still sailing vessels as late as 1875.²⁰ Indeed, from 1850 to 1874, British steam tonnage jumped from 190,000 tons to 2 million, but this explosive growth should not overshadow the ongoing commercial utility of sailing ships. In the early-1870s, sailing ships still carried two-thirds of the British merchant marine's tonnage.²¹

Finally, passengers had a bevy of reasons to hesitate before becoming the guinea pigs of the new mode of transit, especially in the early days of the 1830s and 40s. Public skepticism and anxiety were driven by high-profile accidents, such as the unexplained disappearance of the British steamer, *President*, during an Atlantic crossing in 1841, or the explosion of the *Atlantic* in 1846.²² Cultural critique of steam-powered transport found voice in moralistic and theologically-informed arguments as well, with the steamship serving as a potent symbol of waste and hubris.²³ Cohabitation with heaps of combustible material, meanwhile, triggered anxieties over inescapable annihilation. Such fears were nourished by a common feeling of passivity and human fragility before the mighty engine.²⁴ After witnessing an accident aboard the largest steamship of the era, a

²⁰ Lynn, "Steamships and Palm Oil," 228-9.

²¹ Smith, *Coal, steam and ships*, 364-5.

²² Smith, *Coal, steam and ships*, 107-113; Burgess, *Engines of Empire*, 96-101

²³ Crosbie Smith, Ian Higginson and Phillip Wolstenholme, "Avoiding Equally Extravagance and Parsimony': The Moral Economy of the Ocean Steamship," *Technology and Culture* 44, n. 3 (July 2003): pp. 443-469.

²⁴ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014 edition), 15, 126, 134. See also: Burgess, *Engines of Empire*, ch. 4.

character in Jules Verne's best-seller of the early-1870s, *Floating City*, eloquently captures the feeling: "I thought until now, sir, that engines were made to help men, not men to help engines."²⁵

Then there were those who, after enduring clouds of coal dust on deck, or sleepless nights in cabins next to pulsating engine rooms, lamented the standards of comfort available to steamship passengers.²⁶ Comparing a transoceanic voyage by sail with his return voyage by steam, one English passenger of the late 19th century described steam travel in terms of a "continuous throbbing," a "vibrating motion," and a "feeling of soot and dustiness on all you touch."²⁷ Well into the period when oceanic steamship navigation cleared its primary engineering hurdles, shipping lines struggled to acclimate passengers to the strange sensations of a world of coal and steel. In 1881, for instance, the popular American travel writer Thomas Knox still felt the need to reassure readers that there was nothing unnatural, let alone demonic, about the engines that powered their transit. Though passengers would undoubtedly be roused from their slumber by the jarring motion caused when a steamship's propeller momentarily left the water, he insisted:

In rough weather or in smooth, the first thing to listen for on awaking is the engine, and when you hear its steady breathing and feel its great heart pulsating, as if were the vital force of an animate being, you may turn and sleep again, satisfied that the ship which carries you 'walks the water like a thing of life' and is bearing you safely onward to your destination.

²⁵ Jules Verne, *A Floating City and The Blockade Runners* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1904) p. 22.

²⁶ The process of normalizing conditions aboard steamships as an idiosyncratic "mobile domesticity" is described in Jonathan Stafford, "Home on the waves: domesticity and discomfort aboard the overland route steamship, 1842-1862," *Mobilitis* 14, n. 5 (2019), pp. 578-595.

²⁷ "Diary kept by Andrew Crawford as a passenger on board the PATRIARCH and CUZCO" 1869/1885, JOD/267, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, United Kingdom.

As for the disorienting “racing of the screw” propeller, Knox could only insist that inventors would figure out a fix – one day. Still, he chided his readers, “it is hardly reasonable to expect that a fast steamer will ever go over the water with the steadiness of a sailing-ship.”²⁸

Breaking the Barriers

Given the drawbacks to steam, the more appropriate question might be why the world embraced the steamship at all. In existing literature on this question, the most ubiquitous response points to critical technological breakthroughs in engine design and fuel efficiency. And indeed, between the 1840s and 1870s, steamships were made faster, more efficient, and more powerful thanks to a host of technical improvements. Screw propellers, introduced in the 1840s and commercially viable by the 1850s, registered gains in speed and began to replace the more cumbersome paddle systems in the decades that followed. Throughout the 1860s, moreover, the adoption of high-pressure compound engines led to dramatic gains in fuel efficiency. Triple expansion engines, pioneered in the 1870s, endowed steamships with previously unimaginable power.²⁹ The history of these technical breakthroughs is punctuated by the last names of legendary engineers, many of whom were celebrities of their day: Fulton, Burns, Napier, Kingdom Brunel, Stephenson, Ericsson, Holt – the list goes on. Behind the rivalries and revelations of lionized engineers, however, was a world of anonymous artisans and workers making tiny tweaks in unglamorous domains like cargo arrangement and tool design.³⁰

²⁸ Thomas Wallace Knox, *How to Travel: Hints, Advice, and Suggestions to Travelers by Land and Sea All Over the Globe* (C.T. Dillingham, 1881), 47.

²⁹ Dennis Griffiths, *Steam at Sea* (Conway Maritime Press, 1997); Smith, *Coal, steam and ships*, 323-30; Daniel Headrick, *The tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the 19th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 17-42; 129-149. Frances Steel offers an original interpretation of this literature on steamship technology in *Oceania under Steam: Sea Transport and the Cultures of Colonialism, c. 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), introduction and chapter two.

³⁰ Smith, Higginson, Wolstenolme, “Moral Economy,” 446; Griffiths, *Steam at Sea*, 54

None of the most vaunted technological breakthroughs in steamship engineering existed in a vacuum. To fully understand their contribution to the primacy of oceanic steamship navigation, each “breakthrough” must be placed in its context as one component of a complex system involving people, machines, and the environment. Take, for example, screw propellers. At first glance, the contemporary layperson will likely find that screw propellers look undeniably more “modern” – more worthy of a future – than the large paddle systems that they eventually replaced. But a screw propeller was unlikely to produce the effects conjured up by the phrase “technological breakthrough” unless a wide range of conditions were met. First, it would need to be installed in a ship that possessed the personnel to handle it. Second, it would have to be seamlessly integrated into an engineering system – engines, boilers, condensers, funnels, etc. – within which it was but one component. Third, the propeller would need to be put to work in a climate that approximated the one for which it had originally been designed and tested. Higher or lower salinity, for instance, could dramatically alter the piece’s functioning and longevity.³¹ Even if the screw propeller was functioning perfectly – having been installed and operated by seasoned workers, incorporated smoothly into the ship’s engine system, and put into action in a climate that suited it – it was likely to produce some pitching and rolling. Passengers, then, would need to be convinced that they could, and should, endure the disorienting movements caused by the new technology.

If any one of these conditions were not met, then the remarkable breakthrough of the screw propeller would likely remain suspended at the edge of history’s dustbin. After all, there was no singular screw propeller, but thousands of individual screw propellers. The ingenious devices to power and propel the steamship were not standalone, perfectly commoditized components that

³¹ Wang, “Discovering Steam in China”; Smith, *Coal, steam and ships*; Griffiths, *Steam at Sea*.

could simply be plugged in to a ship.³² Rather, they were customized creations that had to be constantly adjusted by artisans and amateurs. In other words, just as the universal singularity (“the” propeller, as opposed to “a” propeller, or a thousand different propellers) can obscure the use-history of technological innovations, so can the paradigmatic and progressivist language of “breakthroughs” and “setbacks.” Indeed, one breakthrough could easily set back another. The adoption of high-pressure compound engines, for instance, necessitated new designs of screw propellers and new accommodations for their installation, leading some ship designers to question whether the screw propeller was worth the trouble at all.³³

Readying the World

This endless process of trial and error, tweaking and tuning, and training and retraining, was maddeningly expensive. Given the already enormous expenses of securing and carrying coal, it would require uncommon patience and wherewithal to make steamship navigation profitable. New political economic arrangements and financing instruments were needed.

In the mid-19th century, governments in France and Britain began to practice what their most ardent liberals preached, selling off land for port expansions and shipyards, selectively slashing tariffs, and privatizing shipping services.³⁴ These policies built upon a robust assertion of

³² Smith, *Coal, steam and ships*.

³³ Griffith, *Steam at Sea*, 33-43.

³⁴ Matthew Taylor Raffety, “‘The Law is the Lord of the Sea’: Maritime Law as Global Maritime History,” in *A World at Sea: Maritime Practices and Global History*, eds. L. Benton, N. Perl-Rosenthal (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 63-66. For accounts of how liberalization of maritime sectors played out in France, see: Guy Durand and Jean-Francois Klein, “Une impossible liaison? Marseille et le commerce à la Chine, 1815-1860,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 57, n. 1 (Jan-Mar. 2010), 157-8; as well as Roncayolo, Marseille, 89-91; and William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), ch. 9. For Britain; Smith, *Coal, steam and ships*; Freda Harcourt, *Flagships of imperialism: The P&O company and the politics of empire from its origins to 1867* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

the principles of Free Seas, Free Labor, and Free Trade, which was itself driven, in part, by a revolt among British merchants demanding unfettered access to their own empire. In 1807, the British Navy began the campaign to abolish the slave trade at sea, and by 1834 slavery had been abolished formally in Britain. France, having abolished and reinstated slavery several times already, definitively abolished it in 1848. While abolition became real, the British East India Company watched its monopoly over trade with India and China collapse. Other once-sacred institutions of British commercial imperialism began to wobble and fall. While the reconfiguration of British trade policy is often reduced to the repeal of the Corn Laws, the repeal of the Navigation Acts in 1849 was equally decisive, ending a nearly two century-long period in which British trade was legally obliged to flow through British ships manned by British crews. The restructuring of British trade was only confirmed by the demise of the East India Company in the wake of the Indian Revolution of 1858, and a landmark trade agreement with France in 1860. Henceforward, competition over the world's most vital trade routes would become both more intense and more open to maritime companies outside Britain.³⁵

Critically, however, the resurgent ideology of laissez-faire liberalism and Free Trade internationalism managed to coexist with aggressive state subsidies and government contracts directed at the emerging shipping lines. Indeed, in the early days of steamship navigation, the state was the rare actor who could absorb risk and losses in the pursuit of public services like postal delivery. Moreover, by the 1840s, naval officials in France and Britain were clamoring for increased state orders of steamships and support for private steamship ventures. Even though their

³⁵ International agreements eradicating the legal foundations of piracy, signed during the Crimean War, also reasserted Free Seas and Free Trade doctrines. Raffety, ““The Law is the Lord of the Sea””, 63-66; John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 151-188. In terms of shipping, Britain survived the increased competition that followed, while France, in comparative terms, fared less well. In 1860, France carried more tonnage than any nation other than Britain and the U.S. By the early -20th century, it had fallen to sixth place.

ocean-going qualities remained dubious at best, steamships had provided pivotal service to French fleets in the invasion of Algeria (1830), and British fleets in the invasion of Burma (1824) and the First Opium War (1839-41). Perhaps more importantly than their ability to bring firepower to bear, steamships served in these conflicts as auxiliaries that could tow sailing ships, convey information between them, and run errands in inclement weather. Thanks to their service in pivotal wars of imperial conquest, steamships won over well-positioned boosters with access to state coffers.³⁶ As Britain privatized mail lines in the 1830s, and France followed suit in the 1840s and 50s, continued patronage in ship orders, contracts, and subsidies provided a lifeline to fledgling navigation companies.³⁷ There was no other option. As late as 1863, a parliamentary commission in France concluded that long-haul steamship services would only be feasible with substantial state subsidies.³⁸

Simultaneously, the joint stock company took on an unprecedentedly important role in financing steamship ventures.³⁹ In France especially, the triumph of the joint stock company was buoyed by an expanding financial press and the growing involvement of masses of investors from the middling classes. This midcentury golden age of finance was profoundly influenced by Saint-Simonian ideas that advocated mobilizing dispersed capital in the pursuit of social harmony and international cooperation. In the 1840s and 50s, joint stock finance and subsidy systems provided the momentum needed to transform state-developed postal lines into private companies. A slew of

³⁶ Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); J.H. Perry, "A Shared Sea: the Axes of French and British Imperialism in the Mediterranean, 1798-1914," in *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East*, ed. James Fichter (Springer International Publishing, 2019); Wang, "Discovering Steam in China."

³⁷ France was particularly willing to spend heavily on maintaining postal lines, in part as a vehicle for influence and "soft power." Marie-Francoise Berneron-Couvenhes, «French Mail Contracts with Private Steamship Companies, 1835-1914», *Business and Economic History On-Line 2* (2004), pp. 1-10.

³⁸ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 142-3.

³⁹ Stopford, *Maritime Economics*, 270-1.

companies formed that were, at last, sufficiently subsidized and capitalized to hurdle past the considerable barriers to entry that oceangoing steamships entailed. *Cunard, Peninsular & Oriental, Hamburg-American, Norddeutscher Lloyd, Messageries, Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*: once they were on their feet, steamship giants like these possessed levels of capital and political clout not seen since the heyday of the East India Companies.⁴⁰

Beyond financing and political support, the new shipping lines were increasingly vertically integrated, allowing them to redesign maritime labor according to the needs of steam-powered transport and production. In the middle third of the century, long-established labor brokers were replaced by the agents of powerful new companies, and guiding principles like the equal distribution of work ceded to a more cut-throat logic of supply and demand. In the outskirts and hinterlands of major port cities, economic shocks, industrialization, and new modes of transportation led to social dislocation and urbanization, stocking the ranks of the “reserve army of labor” and tilting the balance of power towards vertically integrated employers.⁴¹ Even in port cities where dockworkers were deeply embedded in political patronage systems and possessed of special privileges, they failed to resist the power of new companies to redefine labor categories, mobilize political power, and make the most of “spatial fixes” like new port construction.⁴²

By the midcentury, moreover, another solution to the problem of lugging around coal was coming into view. Already possessed of a vast, interoceanic empire at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain, by the 1850s, was accumulating the building blocks of a global network of coal depots. In the 19th century, a well-positioned warehouse stocked with coal possessed all the power

⁴⁰ Olivier Raveux, *Marseille, ville des métaux et de la vapeur au XIXe siècle* (Paris : CNRS Editions, 1998); Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 120; Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism*, 1-10; Sewell, *Logics of History*, ch. 9.

⁴¹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

⁴² Sewell, *Logics of History*, ch. 9; Raffety, “The Law is the Lord”

that an airport, or aircraft carrier, did in the 20th century. Especially when combined with boilers and water distillation machines, such installations expanded the space in which empires could project power; indeed, they provided the measuring sticks of power. In 1824, Malacca and Singapore fell under British control, followed by Aden (on the Red Sea, in Yemen) in 1838 and Hong Kong in 1841. Along with Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka, under British dominion by 1815), these seizures would form the primary ports of call for a route that spanned from France and Britain to China and Japan, allowing European steamships to extend their range dramatically.⁴³

France soon adapted to the rules of coal-powered imperial competition. In 1843, the Soult-Guizot administration put a name to the mode of imperial expansion that befitted the times: *la politique des points d'appui*, which, depending on the context, might be translated as “pressure point policy,” “fulcrum policy,” or “support station policy.” Eschewing the endless, bloody, and expensive process of conquest and settlement epitomized by the ongoing war in Algeria, French imperial expansion was to henceforward occur quietly and precisely along transoceanic trade routes. The goal, in Guizot's formulation, was “to possess dependable and strong maritime bases on the points of the globe that are destined to become great centers of commerce and navigation, which will serve as ...centers of operations for our fleets, loading points for our merchant ships, and warehouses for our commerce, all at the same time.”⁴⁴ To an extent, the policy merely revamped a centuries-old approach to empire defined by the establishment of enclaves and *comptoirs* (trading posts, or factories). Indeed, the handful of “pressure points” that already belonged to France when Guizot framed the policy – Saint-Louis in Senegal, Réunion in the Southwest Indian Ocean, or Pondicherry in India, for example – dated from long before coal. To

⁴³ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*; Barak, *Powering Empire*.

⁴⁴ *Moniteur universel*, supplement, 1 Avril 1843, p. 649, col. 3; translation partly adapted from Herbert Ingram Priestly, *France Overseas: A Study of Modern Imperialism* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938), 78.

these, however, new “pressure points” were soon added. In 1843 alone, three new bases were established in West Africa. As regimes changed, the project carried on. The seizure of New Caledonia in 1853, for instance, northeast of Australia, provided France with a portal to the South Pacific (and a holding pen for convicts), while an 1862 treaty in Obock planted the seed of French influence at the Horn of Africa, where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean.⁴⁵

In 1844, only a year after Guizot gave a name to the task of building an imperial infrastructure of coal, France reaped the benefits of Britain’s steam-powered victory in the First Opium War with China (1839-41), gaining access to five Chinese harbors, fixed tariffs, consular stations, and extraterritorial privileges for French nationals. To reach the Chinese coast, French shipping could tether itself to British coal depots in Aden, Galle (Ceylon), Singapore, and Hong Kong. However, from chambers of commerce to navy headquarters, there were growing demands for a French-controlled coal depot and maritime relay point between France and China. The seemingly limitless frontier of Chinese commerce was calling, and its hundreds of millions of potential consumers were already beginning to tantalize the imaginations of France’s industrialists.⁴⁶ In the context of the Second Opium War (1856-60), as a war and revolution-torn China lost the ability to defend the tributary states on its periphery, an opportunity opened up for aspiring French empire-builders. Backed up by Spanish ships and blaring a mission statement of protection for persecuted Catholics, the French navy invaded Vietnam. After many setbacks, French forces established a foothold in the far south of the region and began developing a port at

⁴⁵ Durand and Klein, “Une impossible liaison?” Obock is not far from the Chinese state’s first overseas naval base, which is currently under construction.

⁴⁶ None more so than the silk barons of Lyon. Jean-Francois Klein, *Soyeux en Mer de Chine : stratégies des réseaux lyonnais en Extrême-Orient (1843-1906)* (Lyon : Doctoral Thesis, Université Lumière Lyon, 2002).

Saigon. Whether it could ultimately break French dependency on British coal was unlikely, but for the admirals who would make Indochina their fief, Saigon was somewhere to begin.⁴⁷

For those admirals, the late-1850s marked the onset of “coal-lonialism,” as one recent book describes imperial expansion in the period. It was in 1858, after all, that the powerful French admiral Edmond de La Gravière claimed the French Navy officially decided to abandon sail-powered navigation.⁴⁸ That year, as he stated in his memoirs, “it was decided that a sailing ship, no matter how many canons it had, would cease to be considered a war ship. So ended a Navy that had lasted two hundred years.”⁴⁹ As the French and British Navies transitioned fully to coal, and as imperial policy-makers embraced iterations of a low-cost, “pressure point” policy, powerful incentives arose to create the infrastructure of transoceanic transit. This infrastructure was not limited to coal depots, but included systems for procuring water, livestock, communications and more. Indeed, already endowed with subsidies and contracts, the new giants of maritime commerce could, by 1860, thank European imperial states for equipping them with a global network of coaling stations, boilers, water condensers, warehouses, and port facilities.

In the evolving priorities and practices of maritime empire-building, sites like Aden, Singapore, or Hong Kong were the highest prizes. Chokepoints of maritime traffic, they seemed to provide both the key to unlocking maritime commerce and the lock to close it shut. However, much as the 20th century rush to claim landing strips for airplanes focused the attention of imperial strategists on remote places, so the steam vision of *points d’appui* sometimes inspired claims to

⁴⁷ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina. An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 21-34.

⁴⁸ Barak, *Powering Empire*.

⁴⁹ Edmond Jurien de la Gravière, *Souvenirs de la Navigation à Voiles. La Marine d’autrefois*. (Paris : Plon, 1882), 138. [il fut decide qu’a dater du 1^{er} janvier 1858 un navire a voiles, quel que put être le nombre de ses canons, cesserait d’être considere comme un navire de guerre. Ainsi finit une marine qui avait dure deux cent ans.]

places that were previously considered off the map.⁵⁰ Take, for example, the tiny island of Saint Paul's, smack in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Claimed by France in 1843, some no doubt hoped that the island would one day reveal itself as a hidden gem in a necklace of maritime outposts. When a British postal ship crossing the Indian Ocean in 1871 broke down, it pulled into Saint Paul's, offering a picture of how the possession had fared. There, they found two "volunteers from the French government" who were paid thirty francs a month to live on the island for periods of eight to thirteen years. The two men helped the grateful British crew fix their ship. In exchange, the crew left some provisions and briefed the men on world affairs. The French volunteers were heartbroken to hear of their distant nation's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1. They had no idea that war had broken out in the first place. The volunteers remained, though Saint Paul's never became a secret weapon of French thalassocracy.⁵¹

But from Singapore to Saint Paul's, formal concessions and claims were just the tip of the iceberg, to repeat the metaphor used by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson when they described the "imperialism of Free Trade" in the British Empire.⁵² The French and British navies were also forcing "freedom" upon the wary sovereigns of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, opening the way to markets that could sustain long-haul steamship lines. British "gunboat diplomacy" is so well-studied that it often obscures the navy-backed "imperialism of free trade" conducted by France during the same period. In fact, one grows dizzy trying to track the French Navy around the world in the period between the definitive defeat of Napoleon I in 1815 and his nephew's downfall in 1870, when blockades, bombardments, and menaces struck Haiti, Algeria, Mexico, Argentina,

⁵⁰ The U.S. base in Thule, Greenland is a prime example of the geography of airpower.

⁵¹ « Diary of William Mason, HMS Megara (1871) », JOD/261/1, Caird Library, Greenwich Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, United Kingdom.

⁵² John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 6 (1953): 1.

Lebanon, Siam, and China, along with a host of states in West Africa and beyond.⁵³ The markets that emerged for long-haul steamship traffic cannot be separated from these and “softer” interventions of the period before 1870.

The coal-powered steamship, as a discombobulated set of technological propositions, nearly withered on the vine. It flourished as it became rooted in the fertile soil of joint stock companies, supportive and interested states, the “imperialism of free trade,” and sustained research and development. In the mid-19th century, enthusiasts of wind-powered clippers and packet ships were still giddily announcing the perfection of sailing ship engineering; and, in many ways, they were right. Engineers of sailing ships improved speeds to the point that many sailing vessels could keep pace at sea with coal-powered leviathans.⁵⁴ Bit by bit, however, moneyed passengers, transoceanic trade networks, and imperial states were beginning to abandon the sail. By 1882, 22,000 steamships roamed the earth along increasingly regular routes, slashing the price of freight as they filled their hungry holds.⁵⁵ The future, it seemed, belonged to them.

Sail and Steam

Of course, sail and steam are concepts and not actors, but the allegorical struggle between sail and steam became part of cultural and historical memory. It was in such terms that sail’s demise was mourned and memorialized by those who lived through the transition. In a vast, messy maritime genre of folklore, memoir, and cultural critique, steam was generally portrayed as marching forward through history inexorably. In such rhetoric, the coal-powered means of crossing oceans conjugated with nationalism, capitalism, and imperialism. It marched to the meter of industrial

⁵³ Todd, *Velvet Empire*.

⁵⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books ed., 1996), 57-8.

⁵⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books ed., 1989), 27-8.

time and epitomized the capabilities of a rational civilization. Sail, on the other hand, sunk under the weight of its poetry, craft, and commitment to “old” values. From literary giants like Joseph Conrad to forgotten folklorists, the supplanting of sail by steam represented an irresistible proxy for all manner of commentary on the problems and promises of modernity.⁵⁶

But the drama of this dichotomous personification of an age of sail and an age of steam should not blind us to a far more complicated cohabitation between old and new forms of mobility. As mentioned, steamships carried masts and sails well into the 20th century. Indeed, nearly half a century would pass between the eclipsing of sailing ships by steamships in tonnage (1870s-80s) and the moment that commercial sailing ships disappeared from the largest commercial shipyards altogether (1920s-30s). Remarkably, in the Interwar, the very period when large shipyards definitively stopped producing cargo-carrying sailing ships, European navies began commissioning new sailing ships in which they could train their top officers in the arts of social coordination, astronomical navigation, and survival. Apparently, some skills simply could not be learned on a steamship.⁵⁷

The sail-steam dichotomy conceals a complex cohabitation of modes and values of transit, as does the parallel dichotomy of wood and metal – wood for the world of sail, metal for that of steam. Slave ships of the late-18th century Atlantic, for instance, would have been immediately recognizable to a well-trained eye because of the smooth copper sheathe that covered their hulls; an adaptation that allowed such ships to resist the burrowing sea worms that populated West

⁵⁶ Jasanoff, *Dawn Watch*, 115-132; Linebaugh, Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*; Smith, *Coal, Steam and ships*, 151; Burgess, *Engines of Empire*. A good example of this vast literature is: E. de la Gravière, *Souvenirs de la Navigation à Voiles* (Paris: Plon, 1882).

⁵⁷ See, for instance, the “Amerigo Vespucci” launched by the Italian navy in 1931. Joseph Ferrell Colton, *Last of the Square-rigged Ships* (G.P. Putnam’s sons, 1937), 85. Thanks to Alexander Shura for signaling this miniature renaissance of the sailing ship to me.

African waters.⁵⁸ Before the 1880s, moreover, steamships were often at least partly built with wood, while early steamships relied on wood for combustible material. As late as the 1870s, meanwhile, the White Star Line operated iron sailing ships between England and Australia.⁵⁹ As soon as it was technically possible, moreover, upper-class spaces in steamships were equipped with ornate wood interiors. Much like the wood-paneling and upholstery of train interiors, these designs promised to reassure passengers that they were in a warm, dignified, and familiar environment.⁶⁰ In brief, while the “wooden world” of the 18th-century sailing ship certainly looked a world apart from steel behemoths like the *Titanic*, the material transformation was not so straightforward as is often imagined.⁶¹

By the late-19th century, the regularity and precision with which giant, coal-powered ocean liners repeated the same lines, over and over, inspired comparisons with railways. Each mode of transport, it seemed, had funneled the messy paths of feet, hooves, and wagon wheels into a permanent infrastructure powered by steam and built in steel, minimizing human involvement along the way. But steamship lines were never fully self-sufficient. Rather, their supply, loading, maintenance, and navigation depended on a complex ecosystem of mobilities, much of which remained obstreperously primitive in appearance. Today, the most automated factories can seem to be the finished products of a process of human-eliminating automation, when, in fact, they are elements of supply chains that include sweatshops and cottage industries, *maquiladoras*, truckers, recruiters, and social reproduction of all types. Much the same could be said of late-19th century steamships and steam-powered production more broadly. The coal-powered steamship required

⁵⁸ Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking Press, 2007), 71.

⁵⁹ “Diary Kept by Andrew Crawford as a passenger on board the PATRIARCH and CUZCO” (1869/1885), JOD/267, Greenwich Maritime Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁶⁰ Richard Davis, *Ocean Liners: Speed and Style* (London: V&A Publishing, 2018); Schivelbusch, *Railway Journey*

⁶¹ Steel construction in ocean liners became widespread in the 1880s. The phrase hearkens to N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: an Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Collins, 1986).

animal and wind power. “Rather than doing away with animal power, in total terms,” the energy historian, On Barak, notes, “steam engines in fact stimulated it.”⁶² Likewise, the global coal network that enabled the rise of the steamship was built and stocked by sailing ships of all types and traditions, camels, horses, and mules, and human labor both coerced and free.⁶³ The owners of fleets of small, cheap sailing ships made huge fortunes by stocking Britain’s global coal network. Many of the profits from this booming industry were later invested in steamships.⁶⁴

In fact, steamships, while they may have surpassed sailing ships in terms of global tonnage, did not replace them. Rather, steamships stimulated expansion in the total number of sailing ships operating, for example, in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.⁶⁵ This is clear from the voyage reports of major steamship lines later in the 19th century, which brim with reports of collisions with every manner of sailing ship (dhows especially) and the legal imbroglios that followed.⁶⁶ A portion of what was bundled into large steamships at busy ports would inevitably have passed through chains of windborne cabotage, or coastal trade. Indeed, such systems connected areas of the world that were not worth the establishment of a line for the steamship companies, but which had plenty to export.⁶⁷ Across the world, the steamship was one piece of a larger puzzle. It connected deep-water ports and carried out long routes, but in doing so it sustained or spawned systems of feeder routes and local economies.

⁶² Barak, *Powering Empire* p. 29. With colonial conquest came increased demand for horses and mules. Until permanent animal transport systems were developed, that meant that animals would be transported through maritime highways. James Hevia, *Animal Labor and Colonial Warfare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 86-105. Many steamship passengers also marveled at the onboard livestock, which remained a fixture until refrigeration.

⁶³ Valeska Huber, *Channeling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 150-4

⁶⁴ Smith, *Coal, steam and ships*, 134, 174

⁶⁵ Barak, *Powering Empire*, p. 33, footnotes 26 and 27. The port of Istanbul, for example, had more sailing ships in 1900 than it did three decades earlier.

⁶⁶ For example, the *Messageries* archives of the Association French Lines (Le Havre). On Barak makes a similar claim for British and Ottoman archives. Barak, *Powering Empire*, 34-5.

⁶⁷ Durand, Klein, “*Une impossible liaison?* »», 161.

For people who needed to move small-scale or illicit cargo, as well as for passengers on a budget, the sailing ship long remained the most viable option. Regarding the latter group, Sugata Bose offers a useful example of price differences. In 1900, to travel across the Indian Ocean from Bombay to Majunga (in Madagascar) by steam would have cost 115 rupees (thirty-five for a Bombay-Zanzibar trip, and 80 for Zanzibar-Majunga). By contrast, a wind-powered voyage by dhow would cost only ten rupees in total. The path may have been winding and the voyage long, but few travelers could afford to argue with such price differences.⁶⁸

In short, as 21st-century dhows and corporate flirtation with windborne shipping remind us, there was no single, definitive transition from sail to steam. In a transportation revolution full of hesitations and hybrid forms, the path leading from the appearance of steam-engine technology to the hegemony of its industrial application was more a labyrinth than a line.

Port and City: Marseille in an Age of Steam

And yet, in the decades between the first tests of ocean-going steamships (1820s and 30s) and the great acceleration of steamship-borne commerce (1870s and 80s), maritime workers, movers of capital, and political authorities in port cities did not have the luxury of reflecting on the circuitous paths of technological diffusion. Rather, they had to bet on success or failure, ready themselves for either outcome, and react to the real effects that the rise of steamship navigation was having on social and economic life.

As coal-powered steamships became hegemonic in global maritime commerce, ports were expected to receive ever-larger ships, to load heavier, bulkier cargo, to channel intensifying flows of people, and to do it all in less time than ever before. Unlike a sailing ship, steamships had to

⁶⁸ Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, 97-100.

carry the means of their own propulsion and pay for it, offering a structural incentive to maximize carrying capacity. In the 1840s, when the *Great Britain* shocked and enthralled spectators with its size, it did so with dimensions of 91 by 16 meters; on the eve of the First World War, meanwhile, the reigning ship of the moment measured 290 by 30 meters.⁶⁹ Accordingly, ports were expected to have the capacity to load and unload extremely heavy, bulky cargo: steel and building materials, military materiel, and machine-building machines. Between 1830 and 1870, the average carrying capacity of ships visiting the major ports of Europe more than quadrupled.⁷⁰ As the total number of passengers grew throughout the second half of the 19th century, layover times decreased. Indeed, in the emerging time regime, layovers had to be reduced to the absolute minimum duration possible and delays were measured in minutes, not days.⁷¹

To respond to these intensifying pressures, the major port cities of Europe took many paths. Nonetheless, some generalizations as to the guiding principles of port renovations stand.⁷² First, port renovations for the age of steam were animated by a complex and open-ended sense of futurity. Port cities undertook immense and expensive infrastructure projects with the expectation that their works would be rendered, if not obsolete, at least insufficient within a few decades. The port renovations that readied the path for the advent of steam, in other words, had the in-built capacity to be expanded. They were also built to be ready for future developments in engineering, even if these were still technically impossible at the time of construction. When Le Havre expanded its port in the late 19th century, for instance, it planned to accommodate ships that were 300 meters

⁶⁹ Bruno Marnot, *Les Villes portuaires maritimes en France, XIXe-XXIe siècle* (Paris : Armand Colin, 2015), 45, 50.

⁷⁰ Sewell, *Logics of History*, 289.

⁷¹ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 33-44; Sewell, *Logics of History*, ch. 9; E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, n. 38 (Dec. 1967), 59-61, 75; Barak, *Powering Empire*, p. 27; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton and Co., 1991), 74-80.

⁷² My approach here is informed by Marnot, *Les villes portuaires maritimes*, 66, and Vanessa Schwartz, *Jet Age Aesthetic: The Glamour of Media in Motion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

in length, decades before engineers could build a ship of such dimensions.⁷³ Second, the port of the age of steam was intermodal, weaving together canal systems, railroads, cart roads, and the sea, while relying on tools that could cross from one medium to another. Third, it aspired to frictionless fluidity and lightness at the expense of solidity and unity. These three principles pointed to a common conclusion: humans would have to be separated from the industrial operations going on around them, both on the micro-scale of passengers and cargo, and on the macro-scale of port and city.

Marseille, France's second-largest city, largest port, and self-proclaimed "Gateway to the Orient," would practice all three principles. Forced to bet on the advent of steam-powered production and transportation, the city went all in. Before a railway system even reached Marseille's waterfront, the city's authorities designed a new port capable of intertwining rail and canal systems. Part of this renovation plan entailed France's first major port construction using concrete embankments, recently pioneered in English ports. Marseille's redesign thus served as a model of what was possible for other French ports. The design included an extremely long protection dike that ran parallel to the coast and which could be dissected and subdivided according to the port's future needs. Built between 1844 and 1853, this port complex, known as La Joliette, had room for row after row of future basins. Indeed, no sooner had the first new basin come into use, in 1847-8, than engineers decided another basin would be necessary. By 1856, construction was underway for three more port basins. That year, Second Empire officials announced that Marseille would be granted a vast new church, built in a dramatic Byzantine revival style. Whereas the city's old church was perched high upon a hill overlooking the entire city and the open sea, the new church would be built on the water's edge, looking out on the basins to come. Forward-looking

⁷³ Marnot, *Villes Portuaires*, 44-72; Burgess, *Engines of Empire*.

as the port's renovation was, it failed to anticipate the future movement of port cities into the sea through landfill. Instead, Marseille would sprawl North and South along its coastline, hemmed in by the waterfront embankments that protected it.⁷⁴

In the half-century after La Joliette took form, Marseille's port underwent major transformations, all of which pushed the port towards a frictionless, intermodal ideal in which people and goods did not impede each other's paths. While the French state handled the heavy work of building the jetty and breakwater, the task of building docks, rail connections, offices and warehouses fell to two joint-stock companies, led by systems-engineers, bankers, and magnates of the financial press. Run through the *Compagnie des Docks et Entrepôts de Marseille* and the *Société des Ports de Marseille*, the new facilities became command centers for an evolving port complex. In a process familiar to global entrepôts from Singapore to Chicago, Marseille mastered categorizing, packaging, labeling, and expediting; all tasks that were made much easier by concentrating transshipment in four vast warehouses, instead of across the city.⁷⁵ Company engineers in Marseille devised a semi-automated system to unload bulk goods, weigh, dry, and label them. The construction of open-air warehouses of reinforced concrete, begun in the late-19th century, accelerated this project of fluid categorization. The updated warehouses allowed the port to pull tons of cargo out of clogged wharves and to process it in a facility designed for the task. Soon enough the warehouses' multiple stories were separated according to function, with outgoing cargo and incoming cargo being channeled through different stories.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Marnot, *Les Villes portuaires*, 59-75; Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 44-49; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 299-306.

⁷⁵ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton and Co., 1991), 104-147. The mastery of packaging and expedition is one of many parallels between the "second cities" of France and the U.S. Each was the primary national portal to a vast process of land seizure and settlement (the American West and North Africa); each is notorious in its country for clientelist politics and political corruption; and each has been defined by debates over dependency relative to the capitalists of the first city (Paris and New York).

⁷⁶ Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 106-156; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 299-306; Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 46-54.

Marseille also became a crucial testing ground for iron cranes. While iron cranes began to replace wooden cranes in the 1850s, their utility for ports depended in large part on whether they could be mounted on floating pontoons or set on rails. Having already led the way in equipping its port with steam-powered cranes and lifts in the 1860s and 70s, Marseille became one of the first ports in Europe to successfully install iron cranes on rails in 1884. Saving time for port authorities and granting them leverage against dockworkers, these cranes bound together the diverse elements of the emerging port complex.⁷⁷

By the opening of the 20th century, Marseille's port had evolved into a gigantic, integrated processing line in which people and industry were separated more than ever before. Rail-connected cranes positioned on the edges of wharfs reached into the jetties that took in arriving ships, as multiple railways connected the cranes to vast warehouse complexes. Trams delivered people to the large roadway that formed the central axis of the port, allowing ample room for human and animal-powered carts to come and go fluidly. From the 1870s-on, a maritime station (*gare maritime*) sheltered passengers and channeled them through the port's controlled chaos. Unlike Marseille's central railway station, an utterly monumental structure of stone and steel that is inseparable from the city's image, the *gare maritime* would be packed up and relocated multiple times according to the port's evolving needs.⁷⁸

Hazardous materials, meanwhile, were being separated and pushed away from passengers and port inhabitants. As early as the 1860s, Marseille had observed issues relating to petroleum products and harbor fires. From 1873 to 1874, new regulations set limits on where and how much flammable material could be unloaded. By the time that the first oil tankers appeared in the port,

⁷⁷ Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 49-57; Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 106-156; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 299-306.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

in the early 20th century, the path toward cleaving their movement off into separate facilities was well underway.⁷⁹ As chemical and oil imports grew in importance in the last quarter of the 19th century, much of the chemical industry was pushed out of the city altogether. An enormous refinery, La Phocéenne, was built in 1889, and a new industrial corridor (Fos-sur-Mer) came to serve as a northern annex to the port, absorbing oil and chemical flows. These “spatial fixes” proved especially valuable when oil boomed in the 1920s, heralding the end of a century of steam-powered production and transport.⁸⁰

A new dilemma emerged from the incredible expansion of the port, its endless construction projects, and the determination of company engineers, port authorities, and passengers to measure time in seconds: by the late-19th century, passengers were growing angry at having to traverse the old harbor along the circuitous path that traced the water’s edge. After decades of debate, a solution finally materialized in 1905, with Marseille’s *Pont transbordeur* (Transfer bridge). This giant, mobile bridge was high enough for incoming ships and allowed passengers and goods to cross the old harbor directly, thus avoiding the circuitous trek along the water’s edge. Before Marseille’s *pont transbordeur* was demolished during WWII, this imposing mass of steel – an Eiffel Tower turned sideways – became an object of fascination for modernist photographers, who saw something preposterous and grandiose in its metallic functionality.⁸¹ A tourist in Marseille’s picturesque harbor today could doubt that the structure ever existed. A port of the age of steam, however, required fluid circulation at any cost.

⁷⁹ Marnot, *Les Villes portuaires*, 51.

⁸⁰ Marnot, *Les Villes portuaires*, 54-7. David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 284-311; Roncayolo, *Marseille*.

⁸¹ Marnot, *Les Villes portuaires*, 135-6; Musée Cantini, *Le pont transbordeur et la vision moderniste : 6 décembre 1991/2 février 1992* (Marseille : Musées de Marseille, 1991).

A mere 2.7 kilometers from Marseille's harbor stood a stark contrast to the world of fluidity and futurity being built in Marseille's booming port complex. Marseille's quarantine station, located in the tiny Frioul Archipelago, struck most visitors for its austerity and ancient appearance. Barren and windswept, its craggy coastline was (and still is) interrupted by few structures: a small jail, famous as the setting of the *Count of Monte Cristo*; a tiny Christian church, built in the style of a Greek temple. In 1850, the Frioul archipelago became the holding cell for the period's growing ranks of contaminated travelers and those suspected of contamination. The old lazaret, or infirmary, had been closer to Marseille, but the city's unfolding array of wharves consumed and displaced the site.⁸² Much like the flammable oil and chemicals that menaced Marseille, flows of contaminated passengers needed to be channeled away from the city. A world apart from the port's whirring cranes and tramways, clattering carts, chattering travelers, and bellowing dockworkers, the quarantine station of Frioul became synonymous with a crushing sense of immobility, anxious waiting, and silent endurance of the elements (see figs. 3-5).

⁸²The 17th-c. lazaret was one of five on the French Mediterranean coast (the Atlantic coast had another five). Marmot, *Villes portuaires*, p. 125. Firsthand accounts and photography of the islands' quarantine facilities are discussed in: Jacques Chevalier, "Une quarantaine de peste au lazaret du Frioul en 1901 », *Histoire des sciences médicales* 49, n. 2 (2015), pp. 179-188 ; Pierre Carrey, « Marseille, 1901 : le paquebot de la peste, la quarantaine et les caprices de riches », *Libération*, April 25, 2020.

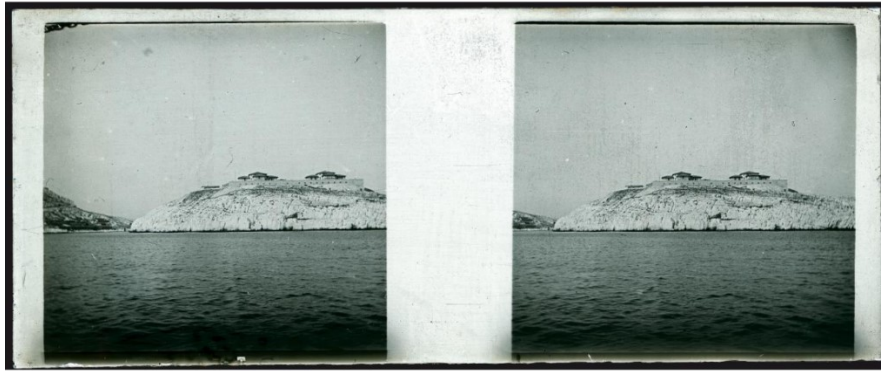


Figure 3. Marseille's barren quarantine station. Source: "Vue sur le Frioul depuis la mer" (1901). 157 Fi 9, Archives du Département Bouches du Rhône.



Figure 4. The decor of a quarantine. "Le Sénégal en rade de Frioul" (1901). 157 Fi 15, Archives du département Bouches du Rhône.



Figure 5. "Settling in. First contact with the Lazaret," 1901 ("L'installation. Premier contact avec le Lazaret"). 157 Fi 21, Archives du Département Bouches du Rhône.

As increasing global interconnectedness provided new pathways for pandemics throughout the 19th century, the site took on greater importance. Travelers and industrialists may have hoped that the archaic tool of the quarantine could be replaced by something more sophisticated, but no such tool presented itself until the end of the century, when machines like the Clayton, which pumped disinfecting gas into closed spaces, began to become commercially available.⁸³ Until then, escaping quarantine required a clean patent of health delivered by a consul. In case of suspicion (for which there were always grounds), a sanitary force would send the ship, passengers, and cargo into the in-between spaces of sanitary stations.⁸⁴

⁸³ Lukas Engelmann and Christos Lynteris, *Sulphuric Utopias: A History of Maritime Fumigation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020); Krista Maglen, *The English System: Quarantine, immigration and the making of a Port Sanitary zone* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

⁸⁴ Coming on the heels of the influential Paris Conference on sanitary procedures, the Third Republic's Decree of February 2, 1876 formalized these procedures. Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 125-6.

Marseille's old port had been transformed into a complex assemblage of wharves, dikes, warehouses, cranes, pontoons, hangars, rail-lines, tramways, cart-roads, bridges, steam engines, hydraulic systems, dredges, and quarantine stations. However, when the financiers and engineers of the port tried to transform Marseille in its image, urban planning did not go according to plan.

In the mid-19th century, dense, working-class housing surrounded Marseille's new waterfront. A key figure in the building of a new port, the banker and titan of the Parisian stock exchange, Jules Mirès, held a gigantic stake in port-side real estate, but with this wall of housing separating his holdings from the city center, he struggled to find buyers. Mirès therefore led the charge to demolish the neighborhoods around the new port and relocate their inhabitants. Seemingly, a better figure could not have been picked to lead the effort. Mirès incarnated France's booming financial sector of the 1850s. Having formed the largest organs of the new financial press, he was capable of mobilizing millions of francs and legions of small investors.⁸⁵ As he prepared his pitch, Mirès could claim to be interested in more than his own profits. After all, compared to the rest of France, Marseille had higher levels of overcrowding and rates of mortality during 19th century pandemics.⁸⁶ Moreover, many people wished to join Mirès in speculating on Marseille's future, especially as its port of reinforced concrete promised basin after basin of new space for shipping, and as its elites – intimately involved in the planning of the Suez Canal – claimed the city was becoming nothing less than the world's entrepot. In good company and in good conscience, Mirès assembled an army of planners to raze the city, push its working-class residents outward, and pull the city's bourgeoisie inward toward the nucleus of the expanding port. To entice the "honest" classes from their traditional turf on the city's southside, Mirès and his team promised

⁸⁵ Bertrand Gille, « État de la presse financière et économique en France, » *Histoire des entreprises* 4 (1959): 60-67.

⁸⁶ Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 124-5. Marseille reported 49% of its "foyers surpeuplés" in 1911; higher than Paris.

clean, wide boulevards lined with state-of-the-art buildings to house bourgeois apartment-dwellers, company headquarters, diplomatic offices, and elegant shops.

Mirès, however, failed to rally the business and political elites of Marseille. Shortly after the full plans were unveiled in 1858, his project to remake Marseille began to unravel. Mirès became dangerously overstretched in the stock market, in part because of his huge investment in a piece of Marseille that he simply could not sell. By 1860, the company he had founded for the project approached bankruptcy. Construction did not halt immediately. Indeed, in a testament to Marseille's speculative value, another Parisian magnate, Émile Pereire, stepped into Mirès's place. Eventually, a central artery was hacked out of the old city, penetrating straight into the city's Old Port and displaying monuments and important municipal sites. There, however, the plan again stalled, and another Parisian fortune began to wobble under the weight of its investment.⁸⁷

As Mires's, and then Pereire's, real estate machine sputtered, the city's bourgeoisie abstained from pushing it forward. Unpersuaded by the monotonous monumentality of the new apartment buildings, they largely refused to leave their southern neighborhoods.⁸⁸ Even in the new apartment buildings of the central Hausmannian artery, residents were not the shipping tycoons, insurance agents, or bankers imagined in earlier plans. Rather, Marseille's grand boulevard would become home to working-class and petit bourgeois households. The plan had intended to unify the city around a renovated center, with the speculative frontier of portside real estate driving concentric urbanization. Instead, the northern neighborhoods of the expanding port would be separated from the southern strongholds of the bourgeoisie. As far as the latter were concerned, the port was no place for decent homes. Marseille's working classes, meanwhile, remained inside

⁸⁷ Sewell, *Structure and Mobility*, 36-38.

⁸⁸ Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 122.

the city proper and close to the port, tracking its northward expansion over the coming decades.⁸⁹ As bitter negotiations over the fallout of the plan's failure proceeded, Marseille's leaders resolved never again to attempt to expand the city in one fell swoop, but rather to adapt the city in stages, with renovation lurching forward according to particular needs at particular times.⁹⁰

Marseille's leaders had reason to hesitate before evicting a quarter of their city's population, just as they were understandably wary of the Parisian financial magnates for whom dockyards and neighborhoods were equally manipulable. Those financiers, however, saw a clear moral in Marseille's urban mis-planning: Paris had offered the city its capital and savvy, and Marseille had proven itself too ungovernable – too provincial – to capitalize. As if by divine punishment, Marseille found itself more burdened by debt from the project, in relative terms, than did Paris. Moreover, in refusing to become a Paris on the Mediterranean, Marseille had bound itself to a future of sprawling urbanization, eventually occupying a municipal surface area three times larger than the capital's and five times that of Lyon.⁹¹

In an age of fluidity, the inhabitants nearest Marseille's port had refused to budge. Port and city, it turned out, were different beasts. But the port continued to exert its pull. In 1870, over 200,000 passengers passed through it. Forty years later, the figure was closer to 600,000.⁹² A host of institutions sprung up to manage the human flux. By the end of the 19th century, for instance, Marseille had a dozen hotels that specialized in sheltering and/or shaking down emigrants moving

⁸⁹ On the long-term consequences of this spatial distribution of population in Marseille, see: Minayo Nasiali, *Native to the Republic: Empire, Social Citizenship, and Everyday Life in Marseille since 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), introduction.

⁹⁰ Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 129-131; Sewell, *Structure and Mobility*, 38.

⁹¹ Kitson, *Police and Politics*, 5. Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 118-26; 136-8. Marseille's most marginalized populations in the *quartiers du nord* were still jurisdictionally part of the city proper, as opposed to their Parisian counterparts in the *banlieux*. This physical inclusion has, at times, allowed Marseille's working classes to participate in city politics.

⁹² Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 105; 109.

through the city.⁹³ Sailors with ever-shorter layovers faced similar problems, from debt traps and coerced labor to alcoholism and petty crime. To mitigate these social plagues, Marseille created a Sailor's Home in 1880, over a decade before French law made such institutions mandatory.⁹⁴

The port was attracting longer-term residents, too. Marseille had hosted immigrant merchant communities for centuries, but around the 1850s, an era of mass immigration began. Much of the city's growing immigrant population would end up working in the docks and ships of a remade port. By the Interwar, roughly one out of three of the city's residents were foreign-born.⁹⁵ In iconic Interwar works like Claude McKay's *Banjo*, or the reporting of Albert Londres, the melting pot of Marseille seemed to have been consumed by its port, making the city less a place than a portal.⁹⁶ Londres declared that the city's "steamships were more beautiful than chateaux" [*plus beaux que des chateaux*], while McKay labelled it "Europe's best backdoor."⁹⁷

As Marseille wound its way through a transport revolution, the city provided both a model of innovation in the age of steam and a cautionary tale about its limits and consequences. Throughout it all, one institution led the way: the *Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes*. The

⁹³ Ibid., 107. In 1885, scandal erupted when it was discovered that the city's Emigration Agent had been turning a blind eye to the most aggressive hotels for nearly a decade. Emile Temime, « Immigration et police portuaire à la fin du XIXe siècle. Le cas de Marseille » in Marie-Claude Blanc Chaléard, Caroline Douki and Nicole Dyonet et. Al (editors), *Police et migrants en France, 1667-1939* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2001), 251-62.

⁹⁴ As with the Sailor's Home movement, Marseille served as a "model" of the French approach to managing sex work, which was channeled throughout the mid-19th century into a red-light district. Fixing prostitution in place Marseille would become a key link in a sex trafficking network stretching from Cairo to Buenos Aires – a position within lucrative global black markets that foreshadowed the port's emerging role as a relay point for movements of Asian-produced opium across the Atlantic. Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 97-98 ; 116-119.

⁹⁵ If not more, since state figures probably excluded various undocumented immigrants. Mary Dewhurst Lewis, "The Strangeness of Foreigners: Policing Migration and Nation in Interwar Marseille," *French Politics, Culture, & Society* 20, n. 3 (Fall 2002): p. 70.

⁹⁶ Claude McKay's *Banjo* was published in 1929. Albert Londres's reports from Marseille were collected in the book, *Marseille. Porte du sud* and first published in 1927.

⁹⁷ The "backdoor" took on a new meaning in 1940 and 1941, as Vichy and Nazi authorities began slamming shut the doors of France's ports. Marching, as usual, to its own rhythm, Marseille served as Europe's last maritime escape hatch. Thanks to friendly consuls, fudged paperwork, and bureaucratic anomalies, a route emerged from Marseille to Martinique, allowing thousands to flee, including luminaries like Claude Levy-Strauss, Andre Breton, Victor Serge, and Anna Seghers. See: Eric Jennings, *Escape from Vichy: The Refugee Exodus to the French Caribbean* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

next chapter explores why this giant of global steam-shipping would emerge out of Marseille, how it came to be, and the ways in which the *Messageries* built on the city's local and global histories while making a history of its own.

Chapter 2. Gateway to the Orient: Marseille and the *Messageries*

For much of the 20th century, while Paris, the “capital of modernity,” attracted mountains of granular studies that combed through its every arrondissement, Marseille remained the subject of popular culture and national prejudice. Over the years, Marseille has accumulated so many trans-historical reputations that they often contradict one another. Its inhabitants, for instance, are said to be locally minded and, beneath a loquacious exterior, deeply wary of outsiders. Yet this inward city is just as famous for being a capital of drifters, migrants, and transnational traffic. Marseille, moreover, was long portrayed as perennially lagging behind more industrious cities in France, such as Paris and Lyon, but explanations for this are as likely to point to the city’s ungovernability, criminality, and insularity as they are to posit that the city’s problem is its passive dependence on outsiders. Finally, Marseille has often been imagined as France’s least French city; an exceptional town where people felt they had already left France for a foreign land. By the same token, however, it is France’s “oldest city,” the first and last French place that millions of foreigners saw, and a gateway into France, not merely out of it. The city of dubious Frenchness is inseparable in the national imaginary from distinctly French products, pass-times, and people.¹

¹ Of course, reputation is not a straightforward category of historical analysis, and what I am describing could also be called tropes, discourses, or imaginaries. These emerge from 19th-century historians and contemporary historians; from Marseille’s inhabitants and visitors; from scholarly texts and anecdotal evidence. Examples and analysis of these tropes includes: Marcel Roncayolo, *L’imaginaire de Marseille. Port, ville, pole* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2014), preface; Richard Cobb, *Paris and Elsewhere. Selected Writings* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004), p. 246-53; Nicholas Hewitt, *Wicked City: The Many Cultures of Marseille* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), p. 9; Louis Pierrein, *Marseille et sa region* (Braun: Mulhouse, 1965); Simon Kitson, *Police and Politics in Marseille* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 4-8; Georgia Hesse, *The Penguin Guide to France, 1989* (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 416. An excellent summary of the city’s dual reputations can be found in Fleur Beauvieux and Julien Puget, *Marseille. L’apprentissage d’une ville*. Introduction. 2014 halshs 01756131. See also: Céline Regnard-Drouot, *Marseille la violente. Criminalité, industrialisation et société (1851-1914)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), introduction; Laurence Montel, *Marseille, capitale du crime : histoire croisée de l’imaginaire de Marseille et de la criminalité organisée* (Université Paris Nanterre, Unpublished doctoral thesis, 2008); Olivier Boura, *Marseille ou la mauvaise réputation* (Paris: Arléa, 2001).

But so long as the center of gravity for French urban history lay further north, there was little effort to excavate Marseille underneath its reputations. Thus, while much of 20th century historiography treated Paris as a site of momentous foment, passionate debates, and ingenious solutions to the problems of modern history, Marseille was understood mostly as a messy tangle of cultural contradictions and failed projects. In urbanization and industrialization, historiography long implied that the city did not measure up to the standards set by its northern neighbors.²

This chapter does not aim to refute these characterizations of Marseille. The city's reputations often emanated from Marseille itself, where they continue to constitute important parts of its self-image. Rather, this chapter employs the manifold tensions in the discourses used to describe Marseille as a means of charting the city's course through the 19th century, and especially the period between 1815 and 1870.³ Specifically, this chapter analyzes Marseille's process of industrialization, to then explore how Marseille's merchants re-entered Mediterranean markets and transoceanic trade after being cut off during the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. The city's particular path to industrialization and its role in overseas commerce frame the final section of the chapter, in which I examine the rise of the *Messageries Impériales*, the most powerful shipping line to call Marseille home.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that Marseille and the *Messageries* occupied a unique place in the global history of modern France, but that this only becomes clear when the city's dichotomous tropes (ungovernable yet dependent; localist yet cosmopolitan; exceptional yet typical) are understood as a dialectic. In terms of investment, for instance, it was Marseille's very

² Standards most clearly articulated in the realm of economics. See: Louis Girard, *Marseille sous le Second Empire* (Paris : Plon, 1961), p. 76; Louis Pierrein, *Industries traditionnelles du port de Marseille : le cycle des sucres et des oléagineux, 1870-1968* (Marseille : Institut historique de Provence), p. 32 ; Roncayolo, *Marseille*.

³ Between the definitive downfall of Napoleon I and that of his nephew, Napoleon III, the French state shifted its shape from revolutionary empire, to restored Catholic neo-absolutist monarchy, to constitutional liberal monarchy, to republic, to liberal-authoritarian empire, and back to republic again.

self-dependence that made it attractive to outsiders. Marseille's merchants, meanwhile, were at once tightknit, local dynasties and utterly cosmopolitan agents; a combination that helped position them and their city at the forefront of French power in the Mediterranean and beyond. Nineteenth-century France is known as a nation of slow growth, developed through a gradual industrialization defined by skill, taste, and demand-side economics, and led by land-loving industrial and political elites who became increasingly committed to imperial expansion.⁴ Between 1815 and 1870, Marseille became an indispensable component of French industrial and imperial power, but it did so by rapid, labor-intensive industrialization, and led by a caste of trans-imperial traders who were as loyal to French interests as they were economically opportunistic. In short, the city's reputations appear to be mutually exclusive dualities, but they reveal how Marseille's very exceptionality allowed it to fit into France and its Empire, while making it the launching pad for the *Messageries*.

City of Steam

For most of the 20th century, historians argued that Marseille had industrialized belatedly and only partially in the 1860s – an “extraordinary era” coming on the heels of “centuries of immobility” – and that the city had missed out on the sustained benefits of industrialization because of its peripheral position and cultural stubbornness.⁵ For those alleging the city's belated and incomplete industrialization, the absence until 1855 of the hallmarks of Anglo-Saxon industrialization – blast furnaces and an iron industry – provided all the necessary proof.

⁴ On the deep roots of taste-making and demand-side economics in France, see: Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). On this economic model's 19th-century evolution, see, Todd, *Velvet Empire*.

⁵ Cited in Xavier Daumalin and Olivier Raveux, « Marseille (1831-1865). Une Révolution industrielle entre Europe du nord et Méditerranée », *Annales* 56, n. 1 (2001) : pp. 153-76. Girard, *Marseille sous le second empire*, 76.

In fact, Marseille's path to industrialization was special, relative to the rest of France and England, and typical, relative to Mediterranean counterparts like Barcelona or Naples. Marseille industrialized quickly, before and during the Second Empire, in a process that revolved almost exclusively around steam power, and in which not one but three leading industries drove its growth: shipbuilding and maritime transport, oil and soap production, and sugar refinery, each branch promoting a host of secondary industries. The city's path to industrialization made sense when envisioned at the heart of a western Mediterranean world where the transition to coal-powered production often occurred rapidly within new commercial institutions, as opposed to taking place after decades of experimentation and accumulation within old enterprises.⁶ A wider perspective on the multiple paths to industrialization allowed researchers to uncover a powerful economic takeoff in Marseille from the 1830s.

The economic boom in Marseille between 1830 and 1860 was fundamentally steam-powered and revealed a sharp contrast to the seemingly typically model of gradual and hybrid French industrialization.⁷ Economic historians have at times downplayed the centrality of steam-powered production to industrial revolution in Britain, but industrialization and steam power were inseparable for the case of Marseille.⁸ In the 19th century, Marseille lacked natural sources of hydraulic power that were available year-round. Indeed, when a canal and aqueduct system finally solved the city's water problem in the middle of the 19th century, a lavishly monumental park and palace were built to commemorate it, replete with artificial grottos, gigantic bulls and nymphs, and

⁶ Gérard Chastagnaret, "La Méditerranée ou l'industrialisation masquée » *Alliages* 24-25 (1995), pp. 295-306.

⁷ This view could be summarized in the following terms. Relatively deprived of coal, iron, and demographic growth, early-19th century French industrialization revolved around labor-intensive production, high-quality goods, fashion, and luxury. Its merchant bankers resisted consolidation, but supported industry, and French industrialists managed to innovate by creating new demand. Its largest enterprise remained family-oriented, but this did not hamper its competitiveness. Crouzet, *Historiography of French Industry*, 2002.

⁸ Nick von Tunzelmann, *Steam Power and British Industrialization to 1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

ostentatious symbols of the fertility that water would bring.⁹ However lacking in water, Marseille's hinterland possessed a significant deposit of lignite, or brown coal. While insufficient on its own, this could be mixed with higher-grade coal to cheaply power much of the city's production without massive recourse to imports.¹⁰

In a remarkably short period of time, Marseille transformed itself into a city of steam engines and industrial workers. Steam-powered production sites in the city went from employing 18,000 workers in 1830 to 40,000 in 1850. The number of machines exploded at similar rates: from 80 steam-powered machines operating in the city in 1843 to 200 in 1855.¹¹ The city's investors became steam enthusiasts: steam-powered production sites jumped from receiving 3% of all investment in 1829 to a remarkable 50% by the early-1840s.¹² The progress of steam power in Marseille did not produce violent backlashes among workers in the industries where it was applied. Instead, whether in sugar refinery, welding, or chemical processing, total employment figures rose alongside steam. The innovation of steam-power, then, was fortuitously untainted by association with unemployment.¹³

Where did the investments behind this steam-powered boom originate? From the 1830s until the 1850s, Marseille proved surprisingly self-sufficient at financing its enterprise, making the city an attractive place for investment from further afield thereafter. Until the mid-century, relatively low barriers to entry in key industries meant that financing could often be sought and found without recourse to large Parisian banks. Even when extraordinary sums were needed, as in

⁹ The Longchamp Palace was officially inaugurated in 1869, although the canal that it vaunted, was completed earlier in the 1850s.

¹⁰ Xavier Daumalin, "Rareté de l'eau et développement industriel : l'exemple de Marseille », *Cahiers de l'ASPPIV* 29 (1999), pp. 25-33.

¹¹ Daumalin and Raveux, "Une révolution industrielle," 154.

¹² The modes of financing were diverse and opportunistic. *Ibid.* 172-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 156-60.

the case of launching steamship companies, Marseille's entrepreneurs tended towards flexible juridical formations known as *commandites*, which allowed them to rely on hometown sponsors. Between 1830 and 1844, for instance, 18% of Marseille's navigation companies were direct sponsorships (*commandites simples*) and 82% were limited shareholder companies (*commandites par actions*). Coupled with the newly founded Bank of Marseille, these mechanisms proved resilient enough to maintain the city's boom. By the 1850s, as French finance entered a golden age, large national banks could find plenty to work with in the nation's second city. When liberal legislation in the early-1860s opened the way to British banking, Marseille's investment pool became even more mixed. Even the city's real estate fiasco could not hamper this inundation of capital from beyond the region.¹⁴

Marseille's rapid industrialization from 1830 to 1860 required looking beyond its walls to attract foreigners and outsiders. While Marseille did not lack skilled artisans, engineering the most sophisticated engines for ships and trains required the active participation of foreign experts.¹⁵ Between 1835 and 1845, dozens of top British engineers settled in Marseille. Their paths were multiple. Some were recruited directly by the city's entrepreneurs. Others arrived in a process more akin to contemporary "headhunting," being traded in transnational arrangements between financial powers like the Talabot group and James Rothschild, who arranged for George Stephenson to send technicians to Marseille from Newcastle. Still others came as uninvited individuals, hoping to take advantage of Marseille's dynamism.¹⁶

¹⁴ Daumalin and Raveux, « Une Révolution industrielle », 173-4. Sewell, *Structure and Mobility*, 40-41.

¹⁵ In part because such experts were still unable to transmit key pieces of steam technology in written form. Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 40-50.

¹⁶ Olivier Raveux, *Marseille, ville des métaux et de la vapeur au XIXe siècle* (Paris : CNRS-Editions, 1998).

Their work did not lead to a relationship of dependency, as is sometimes assumed. Indeed, by the late-1840s, many of these British technicians, employees, and entrepreneurs were already moving on to other Mediterranean destinations, yet Marseille's industry did not decline in their absence. Instead, a booming and diverse metallurgy sector persisted, alongside sugar refinery, oil production, transport, and a host of smaller industries. Rather than dependency, in other words, Marseille found in its migrant technicians a chance for cross-pollination.¹⁷

The career of Louis Benet, one of the most prominent figures in Marseille's industrial boom, offers a useful illustration of this cross-pollination. Benet was the son of a wealthy family of shipbuilders and shipowners in the town of La Ciotat, a short distance southeast of Marseille's old port. In 1833, Benet leapt into the emerging sector of steam-powered metallurgy and began to experiment with applying the new production methods to steamships. For the time being, plans and machines were imported directly from England. Financing, meanwhile, came from gathering five local sponsors to pitch in 60,000 francs each. The finished product of Benet's shipyard, the steamship *Phocéan*, launched in 1836 and embarked on a tour of the Mediterranean. In strikingly Saint-Simonian terms, local and national press celebrated a pan-Mediterranean union accomplished through scientific discovery, industrial organization, and international cooperation. The voyage succeeded and orders poured in for more ships.¹⁸

Benet subsequently deepened his partnership with British machinists, especially John Barnes, whose longstanding ties to French engineers, such as Augustin Normand and Frédéric Sauvage, made for an easy relationship. The two set to work in Marseille's hinterland, turning the expanding shipyard of La Ciotat into one of Europe's most sophisticated sites of nautical

¹⁷ Daumalin and Raveux, « Une Révolution industrielle », 172-3.

¹⁸ Xavier Daumalin and Olivier Raveux, « La marine marchande marseillaise en transition énergétique (1831-1851). Origines et enjeux d'un choix socio-écologique », *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 97, n. 1 (2018) : 223-239.

engineering. In 1843, when France built its first screw propeller-equipped steamship, the *Napoléon*, the ship was immediately sent from its home port, Le Havre, to La Ciotat, where it was to be studied and improved. Four years later, the first screw propeller-equipped ship with an iron hull to be built in continental Europe, the *Bonaparte*, chugged out of La Ciotat itself.¹⁹ The shipyard's reputation, along with the names of Louis Benet and John Barnes, became unimpeachable. Commissions from the navy poured in, and their every improvement was studied by outside experts. In the 15 years after the *Phocéen* launched, the yards produced 37 steamships for the French state, merchants in Marseille, and buyers across the western Mediterranean.²⁰ From the devastation of the Napoleonic Wars to the triumphs of the *Napoléon* and *Bonaparte*, Marseille and its hinterland were resurrected thanks largely to Franco-British collaboration. The partnership of Barnes and Benet was anything but unique. Indeed, as soon as they went out of business in the early 1850s, a new shipbuilding company emerged in the nearby facilities at Toulon, the *Société des forges et chantiers de la Méditerranée*; itself the product of another set of Franco-British entrepreneurs, Philip Taylor and Amedée Armand.²¹ Barnes, moreover, continued working in the yards of La Ciotat.

In this sense, the steamship *Phocéen* is an eloquent symbol of Marseille's dialectical tropes. The ship's name evokes one of Marseille's sobriquets, *la ville Phocéenne* (Phocaeen City), a nod to the Greek settlers who departed Phocaea, in Western Turkey, and settled in the city around 600 BCE. A Franco-British collaboration funded by the merchant industrialists of Marseille, the ship's successful Mediterranean voyage attracted waves of capital from beyond the city. It also animated

¹⁹ Raveux, *Ville des métaux*, 274-5. Barnes had worked on the *Napoléon* with Normand. He settled definitively in La Ciotat in 1844.

²⁰ Daumalin and Raveux, "La marine marchande marseillaise », 230-39. Nine were purchased by the state; fourteen by Marseille's merchants; and fourteen by merchants in Corsica, Lyon, and Italy.

²¹ Raveux, *Ville des métaux*, 113, 115, 222-3.

French dreams of transforming the Mediterranean into a “French Lake,” whether in the name of international cooperation, outright imperium, or some combination of the two.²² The pioneering steamship, in other words, reflects a city as outward-looking as it was tightknit; as uniquely independent as it was representative of vast political formations.

Gateway to the Orient

Marseille’s economic development was also rooted in commercial interests that spread beyond the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Indeed, after the Treaty of Vienna ended the long freeze of overseas trade that had accompanied the Napoleonic Wars, Marseille’s merchants cobbled together increasingly global pathways to the emerging markets of the 19th century. Understanding their success in reestablishing old connections, as well as forming new ones, requires threading together Marseille’s dichotomous reputations. Leading the charge were tightknit and thoroughly Marseillais merchant families, but their success was in large part due to a cosmopolitan ability to weave networks of relations across imperial boundaries. The city’s merchants, moreover, were as likely to be found in service of state projects as they were in direct opposition to state policies. Resolutely opportunistic, Marseille’s merchants followed imperial conquest, peaceful trade, and a combination of the two – the “imperialism of free trade.” Through their social, political, and commercial practices, their city became a world entrepot.

Today, arriving in Marseille by train, one’s first steps out of the Saint-Charles railway station and into the city will take one down a massive stone staircase lined by statuary. Two immense statues guard the threshold between the railway station’s staircase and the city’s bustling

²² See: John Perry, “A Shared Sea: The Axes of French and British Imperialism in the Mediterranean, 1798-1914” in James Fichter (ed.), *British and French Colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Connected Empires across the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 113-130.

sidewalk below. To the left lies “Africa,” a woman in stone, conspicuously nude apart from opulent necklaces, bracelets, and a head-dress. At her feet, cornucopias are strewn, and children laze about. To the right reclines another stone odalisque, “Asia,” only slightly more clothed, equally bedecked in jewelry, and also surrounded by children and bounty (see figs. 6 and 7). The statues, *Les colonies d’Afrique* and *Les colonies d’Asie*, are positioned a few steps beneath the bows of ships, each occupied by female figures. These two, ship-wielding women of stone contrast with the recumbent and naked figures of “Asia” and “Africa” beneath them. Fully clad in tunics, they inhabit their ships with the stiff majesty of active sovereigns. Upright in posture, they stare stoically out over the city and above the continents, in the direction of the open sea. They too brandish allegorical names: on the right, the more austere of the two is labelled, “Marseille, Greek Colony,” while on the left, “Marseille, Gateway to the Orient” holds a trident in hand and wears a crown on her head (see fig. 8). First conceived of in the 1910s, but completed in 1922, the statues arrived just in time for one of several colonial expositions held in Marseille.²³ Though their meanings are multiple, one message requires little deciphering: the ships of Marseille – once a Greek colony, now a portal to the East – bring an imperial nation the bounty of two subjugated continents. To the city and through the city, the eroticized colonies of Asia and Africa lay prostrate, offering no resistance and the promise of endless bounty.²⁴

²³ For analyses of these monuments, see: Catherine Marand-Fouquet, « Le genre des colonies. Sur les escaliers de la gare Saint-Charles à Marseille » *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 12 (2000); and Philippe Joutard, “Marseille porte de l’orient », *L’Histoire* 68-73 (1984). The positioning of the monuments near the railway station is no coincidence. See: Orvar Lofgren, “Motion and Emotion: Learning to be a Railway Traveler,” *Mobilities* 3, n. 3 (2008): 331-351.

²⁴ The heavyhanded implication of rape and sexual domination was not lost on a group of protesters, who, in early July of 2020, scrawled new messages over the engraved “colonies d’Asie” and “colonies d’Afrique.” In bright red paint, the group wrote: *Les colonisés d’Afrique niquent la France* (“the colonized [people] of Africa fuck France”); *les colonisés d’Asie nikent la France* (“the colonized [people] of Asia fuck France”). See: Camille Payan, “Des statues commémoratives des anciennes colonies françaises dégradées à Marseille » *France Bleu* (July 1, 2020): <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/des-statu-es-commemoratives-des-anciennes-colonies-francaises-degradees-a-marseille-1593591973> [accessed 3/9/2021].



Figure 6. Louis Botinelly, “Les colonies d’Afrique” (1922). Source: Author’s photo.



Figure 7. Louis Botinelly, “Les colonies d’Asie” (1922). Source: Author’s photo.



Figure 8. Hovering over “Asia” and “Africa” is Auguste Carli’s “Marseille. Colonie Greque” (1911-1925). Source: Author’s photo.

A few kilometers away from “Asia” and “Africa,” a massive, waterfront arch forms a portal to the sea that is visible to any ship approaching the city. A literal “Gateway to the Orient,” as it is commonly referred to in Marseille, this arch was constructed throughout the 1920s to commemorate the fallen “heroes of the Army of the Orient and far-off lands”; or the imperial subjects who had fought in the French Army during the First World War (see fig. 9). Some of these soldiers are represented in stone, saluted by a female Victory figure, in a scene that takes place

underneath a crescent and star.²⁵ Bearing arms and depicted in mid-stride, the upright war heroes contrast starkly with the supine women of “Asia” and “Africa,” yet together the two monuments form a powerful couplet: ships set out of Marseille for conquest and commerce, and they return to it with bounty and protection.

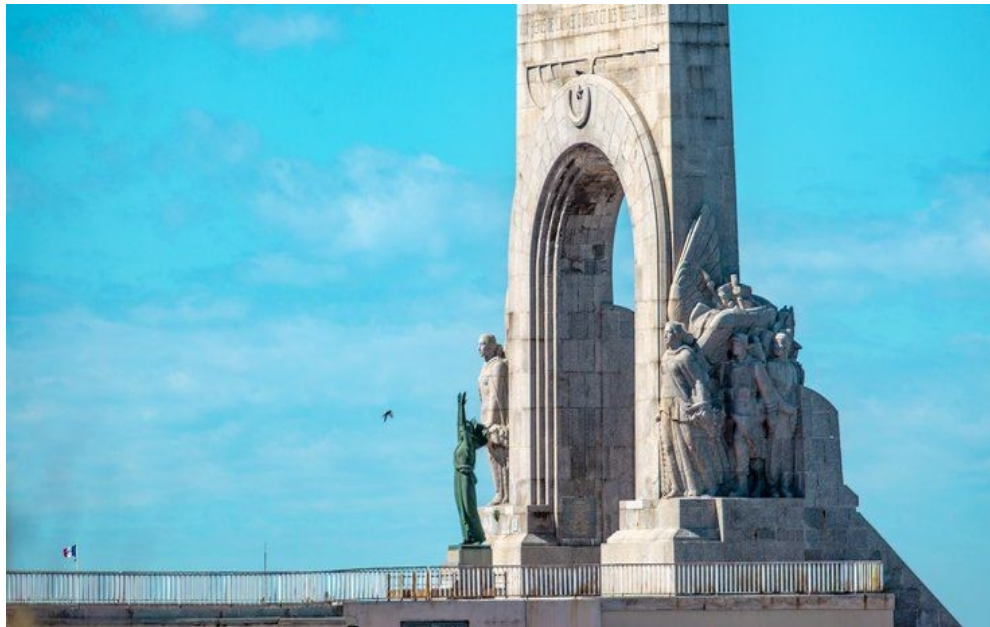


Figure 9. “Monument aux Morts de l’Armée de l’Orient” (1924), colloquially known as the “Gateway to the East,” or “Porte de l’Orient.” Source: author’s photo.

The staircase statues of the railway station and the Gateway to the Orient communicate with one another, but they also loudly evoke earlier monumental narratives of the city contained in the Museum of Fine Arts and the Chamber of Commerce. When the celebrated 19th-century symbolist painter, Puvis de Chavannes, completed two giant paintings, “Marseille, Greek Colony”

²⁵ As the crescent and star, and full embodiment of foreign bodies suggests, the statue was from a very particular moment when the French state “reached out” to Muslim subjects of its empire. In this sense, it could be compared to the Left Bank Paris Mosque. Interestingly, whereas a parallel monument honoring Algerian war dead in Lyon has been abandoned and become distant from city life, the “Gateway” monument in Marseille remains prominent and widely celebrated. See: Joseph Downing, *French Muslims in Perspective. Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 99-100.

and “Marseille, gateway to the Orient,” they took pride of place in Marseille’s Museum of Fine Arts. The paintings arrived just in time for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and in keeping with the spirit of the moment, they regale visitors with images of pan-Mediterranean harmony. Ironically, in “Greek Colony,” the era’s premier painter of leisure, dreamy idleness, and play, tasked himself with portraying an industrious colony in the making (see fig. 10). In a cloud of pastel robes and languorous limbs, colonists examine and haggle over luxury textiles; pluck and bundle produce; and chisel and carry stone. Deep in the background, wispy ships form an umbilical cord as a colony is born – or perhaps, a colony bears itself. In “Gateway to the Orient,” meanwhile, viewers look out on a more modern Marseille from the deck of a Turkish ship sailing into the harbor. Within vessel and harbor, a Symbolist parade of ships, people, and products from across the Mediterranean mingle gracefully (see fig. 11). While the painting is not explicitly situated in time, it evokes the 16th-century heyday of the historic alliance between France and the Ottoman Empire.²⁶

²⁶ Personal observation. See also : Marand-Fouquet, « Le genre des colonies » and Joutard, “Marseille porte de l’Orient ».



Figure 10. Puvis de Chavannes, “Marseille. Colonie Greque” (1869).
Musée des beaux-arts de Marseille.



Figure 11. Puvis de Chavannes, “Marseille. Porte de l’Orient” (1869).
Musée des beaux-arts de Marseille

Only a few years before Puvis de Chavanne began his allegorical paintings, a new home for Marseille's Chamber of Commerce was formally opened. Inside the *Palais de la Bourse*, as the building was called, a symphony of friezes, reliefs, and sculptures depicted the city's foundation as a Greek colony, its conversion to Christianity and participation in the Crusades, its union with the French monarchy, the acquisition of privileges in the Levant, and its role in launching diplomatic and scientific missions. Engraved along the vaulted ceiling were the names of Marseille's many trading partners, but also images of colonial conquest.²⁷

To the beau monde that frequented the Museum, the businessmen of the Chamber, or the masses passing by the monuments of the railway station and lounging on the boardwalk beneath the "Gateway," these images and structures told a complicated tale of origin and destiny. Marseille, they suggested, was as much an icon of peaceful commerce and Mediterranean cosmopolitanism as it was an agent of French national grandeur and colonial conquest. Once a colony, now a colonizer, the city seemed to claim a timeless title to the Mediterranean, licensing it to act as the gateway to an ill-defined "Orient."

In fact, in the decades after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Marseille's merchants struggled to reclaim a place in the Mediterranean. When they clawed their way back, and as they expanded across Asia and Africa, it was not by redeeming a timeless title to the "French Lake," or by merely riding out the waves of imperial conquest. Rather, the approach of Marseille's merchants was stubbornly opportunistic. At times, as in Algeria, they moved behind French gunboats and armies. More often, however, at least before the 1880s, they acted as go-betweens and brokers weaving relationships across imperial boundaries. The world did not simply flow into

²⁷ The building is familiar to most researchers in Marseille, since the Palais currently holds the archives of the Chamber of Commerce. Among its many collections is a significant portion of the *Messageries Maritimes'* records.

Marseille's port through ancient ties, nor did Marseille come to the world on the back of the French Empire alone. Instead, the city was pulled back into Mediterranean trade, and then to the ends of oceans, by a motley mix of characters from within and beyond France: silk barons in Lyon and financiers of Paris; shippers in London and diasporic Greek merchants; and ambitious leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Zanzibar.

The period of the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (1789-1815) had not been kind to Marseille's merchant class. In the Revolution, the city had lost its monarchically bestowed monopoly on trade with the Levant. During the decades of war and naval blockade that followed, Marseille's immigrant merchant communities abandoned it, and the Ottoman Empire imposed new trade agreements on the city that were extremely constraining.²⁸ As Marseille's influence declined, competitor ports (Livonia, Smyrna, Trieste, etc.) consolidated their place in regional markets. When the Treaty of Vienna announced the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the city was far behind competitors and bereft of its ancient privileges. To make matters worse, throughout the Restoration (1815-30) and much of the July Monarchy (1830-1848), steep tariffs protected French textiles and sugar, cutting Marseille's merchants off from markets that were vital for its commercial recovery.²⁹

Despite the obstacles, Marseille's merchants worked their way back into Mediterranean trade circuits. With sugar and textiles out of reach, wheat filled the holds of its ships, and within four years of the lifting of the blockade, the city was importing more of it than at any point in the 18th century.³⁰ Moreover, the city's productive ties to British technicians helped hinterland satellites like La Ciotat and Toulon become shipbuilding powerhouses in the Western

²⁸ Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 88-9.

²⁹ Klein and Durand, « Une impossible liaison ».

³⁰ Xavier Daumalin, « Les négociants marseillais et l'Afrique au XIX^e siècle » in Chaillou-Atrus, Klein, and Resche (directors), *Les négociants européens et le monde. Histoire d'une mise en connexion* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016), 93.

Mediterranean. In 1836, the city's commercial elites gained access to a loophole in the protective tariff regime that had previously limited their range of imports. As the volume of trade skyrocketed, merchants from Greece to Spain swept back into the city, setting up trading branches and, according to one of the city's most prominent 19th-century historians, "becoming French."³¹ There was some truth to this harmonious replay of Puvis de Chavanne's Marseille: the Greek and French city of Trade and Commerce. But recent events, and not ancient history, made the difference. After all, the struggle for Greek Independence (1821-32) was spurring a pan-Mediterranean diaspora. The family connections and shared interests of these Greek-French merchants placed Marseille in a privileged position within a mercantile network stretching as far east as the Black Sea.

In contrast to this East-West network of transnational exchange and commercial cosmopolitanism, Marseille's rebuilding of north-south networks of trade relied on imperial conquest. The city's merchants were intimately entangled in escalating Franco-Algerian conflicts over debt, diplomatic decorum, and maritime security. In 1827, the French navy blockaded Algiers as Marseille's merchants formally protested that their ships were being harassed by corsairs from Algeria. Dozens of Marseille's merchants demanded stronger retaliation and the establishment of fortified trading posts on the North African coast. Over the 1830s and 40s, the ostensibly punitive attacks on Algeria's ports morphed into a full-fledged invasion, leading to the massive and murderous displacement of local populations and French-administered land seizures across the Algerian interior. Gradually, Marseille's merchants became go-to carriers not only of wheat, but also of oils, minerals, troops, and war supplies. Already in 1830, the city's merchants had been

³¹ Jules Juliány, *Essai sur le commerce de Marseille, tome deux* (Marseille-Paris, three volumes, 1842), 289-90. Cited in Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 89.

lobbying the French state for a direct, subsidized line between Marseille and Algeria. By the early-1840s, the line was in place. Bolstered by land concessions and military protection, Marseille's merchants were ensconced on both ends of it.³²

In Egypt and Tunisia, unlike in Algeria, Marseille's merchants made themselves crucial intermediaries and assistants in the development projects and imperial ambitions of foreign sovereigns. The efforts of Marseille's merchants would pave the way to both informal and formal imperialism by the 1870s and 80s. Until then, however, their approach was more velvet glove than iron fist. Already observable within a decade of the 1815 Treaty of Vienna, the efforts of Marseille's merchants in Egypt would eventually place the city at the very center of Mediterranean commerce and politics, in a process that culminated with the construction of the Suez Canal. Along the way, no one was more instrumental than Marseille's Pastré family, which opened a trading post in Alexandria in 1825.

The Pastré entered an Egypt at a crossroads. Mehmet Ali, the future-minded Ottoman governor of Egypt, was embarking on an ambitious, and expensive, (re)conquest of the east coast of the Red Sea, an area that included Suez and which stretched all the way south to the region's first coal depot, in Mocha. Wary of the centralizing ambitions of Istanbul in the era of the Tanzimat Reforms, and troubled by Egypt's declining supplies of wood and animal power, Mehmet Ali led a dramatic overhaul of Egypt's infrastructure to power production with coal and irrigate cotton, sugar, and tobacco cash crops.³³ Doing so would drive exports to the booming urban markets of Europe and fund his regime's delicate bid for regional autonomy and economic development. The

³² Daumalin, "Les négociants marseillais," 95-6. For a comprehensive overview of the first decades of invasion and settlement in Algeria, see: Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and by Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

³³ Barak, *Powering Empire*, 40; 138-54.

Pastré family, especially brothers Jean-Baptiste and Jules, formed close relationships with both the Francophile Mehmet Ali and his son who succeeded him. The Pastré and the governors of Egypt would embark on a decades-long potlatch of credit, cotton, ships, and contracts for infrastructure projects that lucratively interrelated them.³⁴

The Pastré family's prominent position in Egypt made them essential contacts for other French visitors. When the future-engineer of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps, first visited Egypt in 1829, the Pastré brothers were among his principal guides. Decades later, in 1854, when De Lesseps obtained the concession (*firman*) that would set the canal project in motion, financial backing came from the Pastré family, members of which would also sit on the first board of the Suez Company once it formed a few years later.³⁵ By the 1860s, the family was implicated not only in the Canal, but in almost every major project of infrastructure and industrial expansion being undertaken by an Egyptian state determined to harness European credit, consumers, and coal-powered machines to its own imperial ambitions along the Red Sea and in Sudan.

The Pastré family played a similar role in Tunisia starting in the 1840s. After being introduced to the Bey of Tunis by Ferdinand de Lessep's younger brother (a merchant in the city since 1827), members of the family stitched together a tight relationship of mutual utility. As the Bey attempted to claim more and more autonomy vis-à-vis the Ottoman government in Istanbul, the Pastré family offered financial backing and alternative channels of diplomatic support and commercial connections. The Pastrés also provided continuity, assuring the Bey that the support of Marseille's moguls was constant, even if French regimes came and went. By the end of the

³⁴ Daumalin, "Les négociants marseillais," 95. Of course, this potlatch made the Pastré a crucial part of France's "informal empire" of commerce, finance, and culture in Egypt, which came crashing down amidst the debt crisis and British takeover of the mid-1870s. When that reckoning came, the Pastré went down with the ship.

³⁵ Ibid. 95-6

1840s, the Pastré were managing the Bey's financial transactions with a host of European centers (and taking a 2% cut). When the Bey established his own currency house, the Pastré advanced a third of the funds, ordered machines, and produced the currency from French coins; all shipped from Marseille. All that remained to do was stamp the coins in the Bey's image. In return, the Pastré were assured of a near-monopoly on olive oil, in addition to keeping their role as financial brokers of the runaway Ottoman province.³⁶

The city's prominent role in Egypt and Tunisia, in conjunction with the conquest and occupation of Algeria, the reconstitution of pan-Mediterranean mercantile networks, and the leading French role in a Suez Canal, stimulated many in Marseille to imagine the Mediterranean as a "French Lake." But this imperious fantasy hearkened to a Roman conception of the Mediterranean in which entry and exit were choked and passage beyond Gibraltar was forbidden.³⁷ Of course, the human networks conjured up by the idea of a "Mediterranean World" have rarely been so tidily contained. As Braudel argued in *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, by the 16th century, a "global Mediterranean ... reached as far as the Azores and the New World, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Baltic and the loop of the Niger."³⁸ Within a decade of the Treaty of Vienna, Marseille's merchants set out to remake and reinhabit this global Mediterranean, returning to the East and West coasts of Africa, where they pursued a policy of flexible

³⁶ Ibid., 96. On the complicated sovereignty of 19th-century Tunisia, see: Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans. North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Mary D. Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

³⁷ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Volume I* (translated by Sian Reynolds) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 168-170.

³⁸ Ironically, a more recent corpus of bounded "ocean world" studies can occasionally obscure the fluid boundaries between oceans and seas. Ibid. 168. Of course, the same could be said of the 18th century. During the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, Egypt was imagined not as the endpoint, but rather as the launching pad for operations in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. See: Junko Therese Takeda, *Iran and a French Empire of Trade, 1700-1808. The Other Persian Letters* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

opportunism and relationship-building that mobilized French state power in some contexts while eschewing it in others.

In West Africa, the merchant families of Marseille expanded their operation by weaving in and out of the French imperial state. In Senegal, France maintained a colonial presence long before the Revolution and had recuperated its posts there within two years of the Treaty of Vienna. Efforts of the Restoration Monarchy to transform those posts into a full-fledged agricultural colony were slow-going. Instead of transforming Senegal into a cash-crop haven like the Haitian colony that France had recently lost, Senegal remained essentially a trading post in which French merchants swapped Indian-made textiles for acacia gum.³⁹ As Marseille's merchants returned to the region, they decided to strike further afield, launching commercial sailing expeditions towards Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Niger Delta, Angola and the Cape. Though these expeditions returned upcoast with cocoa, gold and silver powder, and ivory, business was hampered by being confined to the ship and little came of the southward push. As things stood in 1830, Marseille's merchants in West Africa were mainly sought out for cheap textiles, metal hardware, wine, and old guns; items for which they were paid in currency largely gleaned from the already-illicit slave trade.⁴⁰

By 1840, however, revenue from the slave trade began to collapse under the pressure of increased maritime policing, giving Marseille's merchants in West Africa a chance to reset the terms of the trade. In particular, the Régis brothers and their partner, Jérôme Borelli, saw a path forward in the young and booming British-African palm oil industry. A double diplomatic offensive followed: first in West Africa to convince sovereigns to cultivate groundnuts and harvest oil; next in Marseille where the merchants persuaded the leading figures of the city's growing soap

³⁹ Klein and Durand, "Une Impossible liaison," 142.

⁴⁰ Daumalin, « Les négociants marseillais », 97-100.

and oil refinery industry to produce soap that mixed olive oil with groundnut oil. An “oilseed cycle” was born, and over the next four decades, the trade exploded.⁴¹

Bit by bit, the commercial operations of merchants like the Régis brothers moved from ship to shore. As they did, these merchants of Marseille tried to have the best of both worlds. Where they could secure advantageous agreements, such as in Dahomey (present-day Benin) with King Guézo, they renounced formal colonization. Victor Régis explained the rationale plainly in 1847: “wherever officers have stepped foot, commerce has suffered for it.”⁴² In present-day Cote d’Ivoire, by contrast, when the Régis family’s agents circumvented established middlemen in the palm oil trade, they promptly faced reprisals from the region’s sovereign, King Peter. In the conflicts that followed, the Régis did not hesitate to petition the Navy and Colonial Ministries as vigorously as possible for military intervention. When the French state preferred to launch its “punitive” invasions via Senegal instead of Cote d’Ivoire, however, the merchants had no choice but to evacuate the region for the time being. Despite their best efforts, even the wily and well-connected merchants of Marseille often struggled to get on the right side of imperial policy.⁴³

On the other side of the African continent, Marseille’s merchants were returning to Indian Ocean routes that their predecessors had navigated in the 18th century and expanding into less familiar territory, like Zanzibar, Mozambique, and Madagascar. There, as in Tunisia and Egypt, Marseille’s merchants looked beyond the geography and resources of formal French imperialism, harnessing themselves to the commercial networks and political ambitions of regional sovereigns and straddling the boundaries of French imperial policy. In this sense, Marseille’s merchants were

⁴¹ Especially after the early-1850s when a technique was crafted and commercialized to strip groundnut oils of their color. On the oilseed cycle, see: Louis Pierrein, *Industries traditionnelles du port de Marseille : le cycle des sucres et des oléagineux, 1870-1958* (Marseille : Institut historique de Provence, 1975).

⁴² Cited by Daumalin, « Les négociants marseillais », 99.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 95-100. Expansion in West Africa during this period was also motivated, and/or justified by, anti-piracy campaigns and dreams of crossing the continent to connect with the Nile.

carrying on a tradition. When the French *Compagnie des Indes* lost its privileges in India between 1765 and 1785, for instance, Marseille's merchants filled the ranks of those rushing in to take the company's place. When the company's privileges were restored, Marseille's merchants carried on, resettling in Bengal, away from the company's posts, and flying Italian flags in order to circumvent restrictions on their activities.⁴⁴ By the 1840s, however, as Marseille's fortunes picked up, its merchants were gravitating to the Southwest Indian Ocean. In that region, France had once held Mauritius, now in British hands, and still held Réunion, along with a smattering of smaller islands. Yet, Marseille's merchants set to work not in the sovereign territory of the French Empire, but in the Sultanate of Zanzibar, the Portuguese-claimed colony of Mozambique, and the still-independent kingdom of Madagascar.

Zanzibar, by the 1830s, had become a key base for the once-powerful Omani Sultanate. Since the 18th century, the Omani Sultanate had been a critical player in Indian Ocean politics and trade, and was aggressively courted by French and British alike until the destruction of the French fleet in the Indian Ocean (1810) left it alone to face the full force of British pressure. Over time, the once far-flung trading empire of the Omani Sultanate fell back upon Zanzibar. Though much diminished, the Sultanate in Zanzibar still held influence over important centers of commerce including Mombasa and Dar-es-Salaam, and it proved adept at brokering British-Indian regional expansion while profiting from the latter days of the slave trade. In the 1840s, in an effort to adapt to the changing tides of Indian Ocean power, Zanzibar began shifting away from ivory and slaves, and transformed itself into a clove export economy.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 84-88.

⁴⁵ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons. The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 72; 99-102.

This economic transition was still incipient in 1849, when a sailing ship chartered by the Sultan of Zanzibar, Imam of Muscat, arrived in Marseille loaded with cloves. Marseille's merchants knew more about their visitor than might be expected, since over two decades earlier, another son of Marseille, the Orientalist linguist, Fortuné Albrand, had established warm relations with the Imam's agents in the South Indian Ocean. These relations had allowed Albrand to construct a corpus of scientific reports and dictionaries in the region.⁴⁶ Realizing the chance to forge a lucrative connection, the president of Marseille's Chamber of Commerce, David Rabaud, took charge of the ship's reception. Organizing a festive public auction, he and the Chamber raised over 410,000 francs for the cargo. A few years later, Rabaud's son traveled to Zanzibar where he was welcomed warmly. For three decades, this relationship provided a springboard for Marseille's merchants as they expanded in Zanzibar, Mozambique, Mauritius, and Madagascar.⁴⁷

Some of these merchants bore familiar names. Along the Mozambique channel, for instance, the ubiquitous Régis family set up a series of posts in the 1850s, adding yet another source of groundnut oils to fuel the soap and oil industry of Marseille. In Madagascar, meanwhile, an 1862 diplomatic accord between Napoleon III and Radama II opened up the conditions for a well-capitalized company with wide latitude to expand operations on the Great Island. Top positions in the company fell to the Pastré, as well as the Rabaud. Scarcely had the company collapsed in the wake of a regime change in Madagascar, then another Marseille-based family with immense connections across the Mediterranean, the Roux, swooped in to take their place. The new

⁴⁶ Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 99-100.

⁴⁷ Daumalin, "Les négociants marseillais," 101.

company allied itself with the Rabaud and together they built a booming export channel for rare woods, sugar, rum, rice, hides, and wax.⁴⁸

The success of this company was predominantly due to their cultivation of relationships with the Merina, the highland people who ruled over much of Madagascar from the capital city of Tananarivo. This strategy, however, placed Marseille's merchants directly at odds with their own state, which for decades had preferred to undermine Merina authority by supporting and provoking the non-Merina peoples of the coast. For decades, Marseille's merchants tried in vain to defuse this time-bomb of conflicting interests, but, when the French Navy bombarded a major port in Madagascar in the 1880s, the city's merchants could only evacuate and regroup.⁴⁹

Gradually, the economic networks of Marseille's maritime merchants overflowed the generous bounds of the "global Mediterranean," reaching into South, Southeast, and East Asia. An obvious place for French merchants to begin recuperating a trading empire after the Treaty of Vienna was Pondicherry, the trading post and enclave that France had been allowed to retain after losing the rest of its bases in the subcontinent years earlier. And, indeed, between 1825 and 1838, Marseille's textile imports from Pondicherry increased by over 500%, much of it destined for West Africa.⁵⁰ This trade, in addition to the growing flow of "coolie" labor across the Indian Ocean, helped Marseille's merchants to forge circuits that connected Pondicherry, the Southwest Indian Ocean, and West Africa. Marseille's merchants were virtually absent, however, east of India, along the vital maritime highway connecting the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea via the Straits of Malacca. Steep tariffs on luxury textiles and foreign sugar had lasted into the 1830s, depriving

⁴⁸ Laurence Américi and Xavier Daumalin, *Les Dynasties marseillaises de la Révolution à nos jours* (Paris : Perrin, 2010), 59-61.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Durand and Klein, « Une impossible liaison », 142.

Marseille's merchants of the only return freight that could make trade with China profitable. In their absence, any China-bound expedition would need to engage in piecemeal coastal trade to pay its way back home. When one of Marseille's merchants attempted this approach in the late-1810s, the ensuing voyage took no less than 16 months to complete.⁵¹ If a path to China and back was to reveal itself, tariffs on silk and sugar would have to fall. In the 1830s, Marseille was increasingly referred to by Romantics as the "Gateway to the Orient," but this orient stopped at India.

Marseille's path to China, as it turned out, passed through Lyon and London. In Lyon, silk production had driven massive industrialization, with the number of looms more than tripling in the three decades after 1815. To feed the expanding industry, large tracts of land across the Rhone valley were dedicated to growing the mulberry trees in which silkworms reproduce. This domestic production supplied about half of Lyon's silk needs through 1850, with the rest of the booming city's supply coming from Italy (40%) and the Levant (10%). But instability in the silk industry would push Lyon's agents to look further afield, in a desperate bid to lower costs and diversify their supply chain and business operations. Beginning in the 1830s, repeated labor uprisings among silk workers rocked the industry. Then, in the 1840s and 50s, disease ravaged the silkworms of France and Italy.⁵² To compensate for the shortfalls and interruptions, Lyon's silk barons began importing huge quantities of Chinese silk through the merchants and bankers of London.⁵³ For the time being, this system satisfied Lyon's silk barons. While they were undeniably dependent on the brokers of the British Empire, they could nonetheless resell supplies, on commission, throughout continental Europe.⁵⁴ This oligopolistic division of the silk industry had a simple logic: to Britain

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Pébrine, or « pepper disease » was the culprit.

⁵³ Between 1847-1851, Chinese raw silk made up almost 34% of the French supply. Durand and Klein, « Une impossible liaison », 163.

⁵⁴ David Todd, *A Velvet Empire. French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 153; 164-6. Durand and Klein, « Une impossible liaison », 146. See: Jean-Francois Klein,

went Asia; to France went Europe. Marseille would increasingly mark the spot where the two systems met.

The city of steam-powered industry was rapidly becoming an intercontinental entrepot, in which both French and British actors jostled for control over the silk industry. Already by the 1830s, the British government had chosen Marseille as the head of its mail lines to India and China (going overland across France had real advantages over crossing the Bay of Biscay and Straits of Gibraltar). In 1851, as silk flowed into Marseille, the giant, subsidized British company for India and China lines, *P&O*, set up shop in the city, too.⁵⁵ The company's steamships were just one lucrative link in a British chain of insurers, bankers, clippers, and brokers. Under the weight of multiplying British intermediaries, Lyon's silk barons soon began to feel suffocated. To make matters worse for them, British banks began cutting into the city's role as continental Europe's silk supplier. In the early-1850s, after searching for a way to elude London's grasp, the agents of Lyonnais firms finally established direct imports of silk from Shanghai to Marseille. It would take years before they effectively broke the British monopoly. After all, escaping British chains meant more than finding a supplier in China or Japan. Tariffs had to be revised, shipping procured, and insurance arranged. Whether it was a cog in a British monopoly or the launching pad for a French alternative, Marseille had become an indispensable relay in the global silk trade.⁵⁶

Marseille's role should not be taken for granted. Had the barons and brokers of the silk industry come calling only a decade or two earlier, they would have been disappointed to find a city of small-scale shipowners and operators, where a privileged caste of dockworkers (*portefaix*)

Soyeux en Mer de Chine: stratégies des réseaux lyonnais en Extrême-Orient (1843-1906) (Lyon: Université Lyon 2, 2002).

⁵⁵ In 1837, France and Britain renegotiated their postal accords, in a process that saw Marseille become the official port of the Indian Mail, a position that only deepened and became more advantageous for Marseille in 1843 when it was renegotiated. Durand and Klein, "Une impossible liaison," 147-8.

⁵⁶ Todd, *Velvet Empire*, 160-5. Bailleux de Marisy, *La Revue des deux mondes* (1 août 1866), 620-1.

dictated the terms of their labor, and local capitalists moved money through tight-knit, family-based networks. By the 1850s, however, Marseille's port was transformed. The renovated port had evolved into a consolidated hub and transshipment center linking together the industrial basins of France and continental Europe with markets across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean littorals. Instead of myriad smalltime merchants, financial giants like the Talabot group were increasingly at the helm of what had become the world's fourth largest port in terms of tonnage. The dockworkers of Marseille, long an aristocracy of labor, were being swiftly sidelined, ensuring that shippers would keep a lid on handling costs and a strong position in future labor negotiations.⁵⁷ Moreover, the city's family dynasties had become enmeshed in France's informal and formal imperialism, tied to the project to build the Suez Canal, and possessed of connections from Argentina to Zanzibar.

In 1852, when Lyon's agents in Marseille cracked open the first cases containing 85 silk balls directly imported from China, they opened nothing short of a Pandora's Box. Over the coming decades, the port became the entrepot of a new maritime silk road that pulled France deeper and deeper into Southeast and East Asia.⁵⁸ Spurred on by the increasingly liberal leaders of Lyon and Marseille, French gunboats blasted a path eastward. In 1856, with the French navy hovering over Bangkok, Siam signed an agreement granting extraterritorial protections to French nationals and capping customs duties at 3 percent of value.⁵⁹ The same year, France entered into war against China and alongside British forces as the massive Taiping Rebellion shook the Chinese Empire, threatening the supply of raw silk materials and loosening China's grip on the tributary states to its south.⁶⁰ Two years later, French ships pummeled the Vietnamese port of Da Nang before

⁵⁷ Sewell, *Logics of History*, chapter 8.

⁵⁸ Not to be confused with *the* "new maritime silk road," as the Chinese state describes its plans for a global network of container ports, naval bases, and shipping lanes between the Chinese coast and the central Mediterranean.

⁵⁹ Todd, *Velvet Empire*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 167

moving south to seize Saigon, initiating an escalating cycle of conquest, resistance, and reprisals extending deep into Indochina.

Along with the nearly simultaneous, French-led intervention into Ottoman-controlled Lebanon, these operations spanned the divide between informal and formal imperialism. All were justified to French publics as campaigns to protect persecuted Christians. Each, however, had a more understated utility in securing the immediate supply of raw silk materials for an industry that by the 1860s made up a quarter of the total value of French exports.⁶¹ In the short and medium terms, these campaigns constructed a silk pipeline strong enough to break the British monopoly on silk imports. In the long term, they propped up key pillars in a French approach to industrial development and informal imperialism defined by the demand-side economics of taste-making, a skill-intensive system of production, and a liberal use of financial pressure and naval intimidation on the international stage.⁶² This “Velvet Empire” of luxury exports depended on Marseille – a steam-powered city where immigrant workers labored to process raw materials.

The “Orient” for which Marseille acted as “Gateway” now extended well beyond the Levant, where early-19th century Romantics first placed it, or even India, where it stood in the 1840s. Marseille had become the gateway of a maritime highway extending to China and Japan.

The Making of the Messageries

In 1851, as Marseille seemed poised to inherit the earth, the *Messageries* shipping company steamed into existence. Discussions of the company’s origins and early days have at times been framed with dualities that echo Marseille’s many reputations: private initiative and public

⁶¹ Ibid., 14; 167. See also: Klein, *Soyeux en Mer de Chine*.

⁶² Todd, *Velvet Empire*.

intervention; Parisian agency and Marseillais passivity; British invention and French imitation.⁶³ Again, though, such dichotomies must be understood as dialectics. Within fifteen years of its formation, the *Messageries* had built a veritable commercial empire – an empire between the French and British empires – and possessed one of the world’s largest fleets. It succeeded in doing so because the company tied together the many threads of Marseille’s economic development; threads that were as French as they were British; as Marseillais as they were Parisian, or Lyonnais; and as state-backed as they were products of an era of free trade. Specifically, the *Messageries* emerged from the fortuitous collision of four actors: a state that was determined to privatize its Mediterranean maritime services; an upstart Marseille shipper in need of a huge capital infusion; a French ground transport company trying to launch itself into oceanic commerce; and a bankrupt business empire of metalworks and shipbuilding in Marseille’s hinterland.

In 1835, the French state had established a regular Mediterranean steamship postal service connecting Marseille to Italy, Greece, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt. After a decade in service, the state line’s balance sheet was mixed. On the one hand, the line had silenced naysayers who claimed that a perfectly regular steamship line was impossible. Moreover, the line had functioned as an instrument of informal imperialism, allowing the state, in the words of an inter-ministerial commission tasked with reviewing the line, to “counterbalance...the numerous and diverse influences that had, since the end of the last century, successively weakened France’s ancient hegemony in the Levant.”⁶⁴ On the other hand, beyond delivering mail and promoting French

⁶³ Roger Carour, *Sur les routes de la Mer avec les Messageries maritimes* (Paris : André Bonne 1968) ; Paul Bois, *Le grand siècle des Messageries maritimes* (Marseille : Chambre de commerce et de l’industrie de Marseille-Provence, 1992) ; M.F. Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes. L’essor d’une grande compagnie de navigation française, 1851-1894* (Paris: Presses universitaires de l’université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007); Michael Miller, *Europe and the Maritime World : A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 58.

⁶⁴ *Le Moniteur universel* 168, 2 (June 17, 1851), p. V-X. Cited by Bois, *Le Grand siècle*, 15. [*contrebalancer ... l’influence des causes nombreuses et diverses qui, depuis la fin du siècle dernier, ont successivement affaibli l’antique prépondérance de la France dans le Levant.*]

power, its commercial prospects were dim. Its ships, designed in state yards and with military priorities in mind, were poorly adapted to commercial cargo.

The Marseille-born businessman, Albert Rostand, seized the opportunity and launched a competitor line between Marseille and Constantinople in 1846. Over the next five years, Rostand and the French government fought to a grueling draw in the Mediterranean, all while foreign state-subsidized lines like the Austrian *Lloyd* and the British *P&O* gained ground around them. By 1850, the government officials in charge of the postal line were tired of hemorrhaging money, less anxious about France's position in the Mediterranean, and eager to privatize the service. When the government announced it would privatize the line, Rostand began bidding. If his company was to stand a chance, however, he would need to court the largest owners of capital in the country and assemble a management team worthy of succeeding the French state.⁶⁵

A suitor was not long in coming. In 1850, the *Messageries Nationales*, a ground-transport company, began inquiring. Formed in the late-1790s, the *Messageries* had consolidated coach and ferry operations to provide the French government with a nationwide carriage service. The service survived Revolution, Empire, Restoration, and Republic, and in the 1830s and 40s, the *Messageries (Royales, or Nationales* depending on the moment) was among the first companies to steam-power their operations with coal and wood-burning riverboats. As competition grew, and with the railroad hot on their tracks, the company's leadership sought to take over a new sector. This terrestrial *Messageries* looked to the sea – and therefore to Marseille.⁶⁶

In Marseille, Rostand provided an able and experienced partner with deep ties to the city's chamber of commerce, while the state promised an annual subsidy of 300,000 francs for ten years,

⁶⁵ Bois, *Le Grand siècle*, 12-13.

⁶⁶ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 37-71.

plus another 100,000 francs per year after that. If this were not enough to seal the deal, another powerful lure existed in the shipbuilding facilities made famous by Louis Benet and John Bames. The hometown hero behind the *Phocéén*, Benet's finances had not survived the economic fallout of 1848, and his shipyards and engineers were on the market. The next company to set up shop in Marseille would have a remarkable opportunity for longevity and vertical integration. After rounds of negotiations, the *Messageries* cleared its final administrative hurdles and officially formed on December 31, 1851.⁶⁷

The name would change several more times: *Messageries nationales* and *Rostand et Compagnie* became *Services maritimes des Messageries nationales*, before jumping to *Compagnie des services maritimes des Messageries impériales* in 1853. That last change was a nod to the company's warm relations with Napoléon III, and was meant, as directors told the audience of a general assembly, "to remind the public of our official nature."⁶⁸ If names changed, however, the plan of action remained remarkably steady: grow the capital, vertically integrate, secure skilled workers with low turnover, and make the most of French imperial hard power without becoming dependent upon it. As the company set up headquarters in Paris and offices in Marseille, it was capitalized with 24 million francs and divided into 4800 shares, of which the Marseillais Rostand received only 180. The company quickly splashed half of its total shares onto the stock market, while promising its investors and state officials that the rest would only be released, 400 at a time, according to company's future needs.⁶⁹

Given its distribution of shares and Parisian headquarters, the *Messageries* is sometimes described as a Parisian takeover of Marseille, or an essentially Parisian initiative. Indeed, the

⁶⁷ Bois, *Le Grand siècle*, 3-20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁹ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 113.

importance of Parisian interests in the company is undeniable, and augured a transition away from local sponsorship funding and toward large banks.⁷⁰ It is worth noting, however, that if Parisians held more shares than their Marseillais counterparts on the board of the company, the majority stockholder of the company was neither Parisian, nor Marseillais, but Lyonnais.⁷¹ Moreover, the company was far more than its headquarters, board members, and stock values. While the *Messageries*' lucre was indeed tilted toward Paris, its valuation was tethered to the physical facilities and workforce of Marseille, its hinterland, and maritime networks, the productive capacities of which had developed for decades. The company's splashy public offering on the stock exchange, for instance, hinged on its acquisition of the shipbuilding facilities and metalworks of La Ciotat.⁷² Shortly after, the company boosted its capital by 2.5 million francs by recuperating shipyards and foundries in nearby Toulon, now grouped under the umbrella of the *Société nouvelle des forges et chantiers de la Méditerranée*. As these facilities began pumping, the company's production value skyrocketed, tripling from 8 million francs in 1855 to 25 million a decade later.⁷³ From 2,500 workers in 1856, the company's ranks grew to 4,000 within five years. Needless to say, the workers – many of whom were Corsican, Italian, and Provençal – were not shipped in from Paris headquarters.

⁷⁰ Sewell, *Structure and Mobility*, 41-3.

⁷¹ Durand and Klein, « Une impossible liaison », 164.

⁷² Raveux, *Ville des métaux*, 113, 115, 222-3; 215-223. The *Messageries* fought to retain British metallurgists, engineers, and technicians in their new company (John Barnes especially). When they decided that the navigation company and La Ciotat were not enough, they bought the *Société des forges et chantiers de la Méditerranée*, itself the product of Franco-British entrepreneurs Philip Taylor and Amedée Armand.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 223; 278-9; 331. With the *Messageries* pushing it, La Ciotat led the movement away from Watts' earlier designs and toward power-hammer "appareils à pilon" and "cylindres oscillants," which powered the propeller directly. La Ciotat was likewise at the forefront of the compound engines (double and triple) after the 1860s. When, triple expansion machines came out of Britain in the 1880s, they were almost instantly produced at La Ciotat, starting with the ship, *Portugal*.

In addition to their powerful regional complex of production and transport, the *Messageries* took an active role in developing the *École des arts et métiers* in nearby Aix, which, by the 1860s was producing top-level engineers. If, by the 1850s, earlier generations of British engineers and entrepreneurs in Marseille were fading in relevance and prestige, it was partly the result of this increasingly well-lubricated training circuit supplying French navigation companies with qualified technicians. The company also served as a revolving door for navy men.⁷⁴

Soon after its founding, the *Messageries* had a well-integrated system. The company had combined the particular assets of Marseille's industrial base with the explosive power of Parisian high finance, gluing the two together with the generous subsidies of the French state and the global ambitions of Lyon's silk barons. It had secured elite administrators and skilled workers within a system that grew more vertically integrated every year. The company's progress could be measured in a profusion of new ships. When the (maritime) *Messageries* began in 1851, it did so with a fleet of 16 aging ships, 13 of them made of wood.⁷⁵ Nine years later, the company possessed 54 ships, most of them made of metal.⁷⁶ In total, the *Messageries* equipped 53 steamships between 1852 and 1865, many built in its backyard. Between 1865 and 1890, it would launch another 60 steamships.⁷⁷

As the fleet multiplied, so did the routes put into service. The global pathways of the *Messageries* would bear a striking resemblance to the channels of French imperial power and the itineraries of Marseille's merchant dynasties. In 1854, lines with Algeria and Tunisia were established, along with a line to the Black Sea. That year alone, as the Crimean War raged and the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁷⁵ Carour, *Sur les routes de la Mer*, 34.

⁷⁶ Raveux, *Ville des métaux*, 268-9.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 334. Some estimates suggest that between 1890 and 1914, Britain built two thirds of the world's new ships. La Ciotat would be a rare outpost of non-British shipbuilding. Headrick, *Tools of Empire*, 175.

invasion of Algeria dragged on, the company moved 80,000 soldiers and 12,500 tons of materiel to Crimea and Algeria, setting up a pattern that would be repeated over and over in the “small wars,” “pacifications,” and interventions of the coming decades.⁷⁸ By 1862, three weekly lines tied Marseille to the Levant, while three more connected France and North Africa.

At the same moment, the company launched into the Atlantic. Blocked from the North Atlantic by the U.S. Civil War and the competition of its sibling, the *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*, the *Messageries* looked further south. For four decades, French gunboats had done their part in granting French companies wide latitude across Latin America and the Caribbean: shaking an indemnity out of Haiti in the 1820s; blockading Mexican ports and the Argentinian De la Plata River in the late-1830s; then again attempting to blockade Argentina in the late-1840s and intervening in Mexico in the 1860s. Coursing into these channels of formal and informal imperialism, the *Messageries* set up a South Atlantic line connecting France to Argentina and Brazil, all via Senegal. To this Mediterranean and Atlantic hydra, the company added still more heads. In 1861, as the French navy expanded its conquest of Southern Vietnam, the company established a regular line to Indochina and Shanghai, extending service to other Chinese ports and Japan throughout the decade.⁷⁹ Before the century was over, additional lines would tether the company to Madagascar, Réunion, and Mauritius, as well as Australia and New Caledonia.

A simple arrangement undergirded these lines: alongside its private commerce of passengers and freight, the *Messageries* carried the mail, state passengers, and state cargo. In exchange, the state kept the subsidy tap flowing.⁸⁰ Thus, where the empire went, the *Messageries*

⁷⁸ Carour, *Sur les routes de la Mer*, 37.

⁷⁹ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 136.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 136-145. Subsidies quintupled from 1851 to 1871, propelled by the Crimean War and the Indochina Line in particular, which accounted for 44% of total subsidies. However “simple” the basic arrangement was, each postal concession produced mountains of paperwork, along with parliamentary inquiries and reviews. This process was repeated every time that a concession had to be renewed or renegotiated.

went too. But which empire the company followed was not always clear. On the one hand, the company frequently acted as a substitute sovereign for the French government, placing its agents as consuls, arming its employees, and working as a parallel bureaucracy within French imperial outposts. For example, when the company's office in Saigon was robbed in 1862, the directors did not simply ask the state for increased protection. Rather, they swiftly shipped a small arsenal to their employees. As the directors wrote, "we have given the necessary orders to expedite to you from Marseille four revolvers, three carbines, and three sabers, transported by the steamship carrying the present letter. The extra arms that you request will be expedited by sailing ship."⁸¹

In many other ways, though, the *Messageries* was remarkably untethered to French territory. In 1868, for instance, the company moved the terminus of its Indochina line from Saigon to (British) Hong Kong. The outraged chamber of commerce in Saigon protested, but the *Messageries* did not budge.⁸² Moreover, to outfit itself with buildings for its agencies, warehouses, and coal depots, the company eagerly collaborated with other empires. In Aden, Calcutta, and Hong Kong, for example, the company worked out of the facilities of the British *P&O* Company.⁸³ Likewise, in Alexandria, the company coordinated its agency with Austrian, British, and Russian counterparts, sharing facilities and reducing costs. The inter-imperial imbrication of the company dismayed some French actors, but the phenomenon was not limited to the *Messageries*. Well into the late-19th century, even the French navy had to depend on British facilities in Singapore and Hong Kong for its repairs and coaling.⁸⁴

⁸¹ "Direction des Messageries Impériales à son représentant à Saigon » (24 March 1862) ["*nous avons donné les ordres nécessaires pour qu'on vous expédie de Marseille par le paquebot porteur de la présente lettre, quatre revolvers, trois carabines et trois sabres. Le surplus des armes que vous demandez vous sera expédié par navire à voiles.* »]. Cited by Carour, *Sur les routes de la Mer*, 231.

⁸² Fichter, « Imperial Interdependence », 152.

⁸³ Ibid. By contrast, in Suez, Saigon, and Shanghai, the company would build some of these facilities from the ground up, allowing it to plan long-term.

⁸⁴ Ibid., imperial interdependence, 151-60.

The *Messageries* also manned its ships through trans-imperial channels of recruitment. On ships that operated east of Suez, roughly half of the workers were categorized as “European.” These were French citizens, especially from Corsica and Provence, but also Italians, Spaniards, Maltese, and others. The other half, however, tended to be made up of Arab, Somali, Indochinese, and Chinese workers, predominantly recruited in British-controlled Aden and Hong Kong.

Apart from the 1860s, the *Messageries* had an asymmetrical relationship with its closest British rival, the *P&O*. But unilateral dependency does not capture their connection. From the 1850s-on, the two companies held a “Gentleman’s Agreement” in which each alternated their schedules for trans-Suez voyages. As a later chapter argues, from the perspective of a late-19th century public administrator in Aden, the *P&O* and *Messageries* were more akin to a cartel than competitors. The *Messageries* also benefitted from ties to the *P&O*, and Britain more broadly, by picking up technicians, occasional postal contracts, and surplus cargo and passengers. Moreover, a significant contingent of British travelers shuttling between Asia and Britain, especially the most elite, developed a pronounced and persistent preference for French ships. What it lacked in coal depots and *points d’appui*, then, the *Messageries* could at least partially make up for in the taste-making power and demand-side savvy of the “velvet empire” that it served.⁸⁵

By 1869, the *Messageries* presided over a commercial empire built through and between empires. With 67 ships, the company possessed a fleet larger than most of the world’s navies. No less than 37% of France’s tonnage passed through the increasingly giant holds of its ships.⁸⁶ The company’s operations were assured by a global network of agencies, thousands of workers from across the world, and shipyards that represented rare outposts in a world dominated by British

⁸⁵ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 406-8. On the early competition between the two, see also: Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism* and Seawright, *Steaming East*.

⁸⁶ Sewell, *Structure and Mobility*, 40.

shipbuilding. The *Messageries* had established itself as the handmaiden of French imperialism, both informal and formal. It had risen with, and driven, the fortunes of the city that hosted it (even if Paris held the official headquarters). That year, Marseille and the *Messageries* occupied center stage during the extravagant opening ceremonies of the Suez Canal, a project that bore the fingerprints of Marseille's most powerful families. Some of Marseille's business elite were in attendance and could watch the French Empress Eugénie's imperial yacht inaugurate the canal. Just behind her followed a *Messageries* steamer – one of many of the company's vessels taking part in the procession. Back in Marseille, liberal imperialists forecasted even greater things to come. Against the marble walls of the *Palais de la Bourse* echoed prophecies of what Marseille was becoming: the “relay port to London”; “the next Liverpool”; the “capital of the Mediterranean”; and the world's “foremost entrepot.”⁸⁷ Indeed, as Puvis de Chavanne's paintings of Marseille were mounted on the walls of the city's museum, 1869 seemed to confirm the city's triple triumph: master of the French Lake; Gateway to the Orient; and proud port of call of the *Messageries impériales*.

⁸⁷ Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 84, 85, 91, annex 3, annex 4.

Part Two. Space, Place, and the Steamship

Chapter 3. A Place in the Imperial Nation-State

If 1869 marked the pinnacle of prestige for the rulers of Marseille and the *Messageries*, the next year provided a dizzying fall from grace. Defeated on the battlefields of northeast France by the Prussian-led armies of an incipient German Empire, Napoléon III's regime came crashing down. Political crisis and violence engulfed the nation as conventional war gave way to occupation, insurgency to counterinsurgency, and civil war to reprisals. Even beyond continental Europe, the conflict had severe ramifications. Across a wide swathe of Algeria, for instance, French occupiers and settlers faced a fierce uprising, known as the Mokrani Revolt. In the aftermath of the many insurrections of 1870-71, the maritime highways of the French Empire would course with deportees and exiles.

With the downfall of Napoleon III's Second Empire, the economic and political elites of Marseille lost an ally at the head of state. The emperor had visited the city in immense pomp only a year after taking power in the Coup of 1851, just as he declared the establishment of the Second Empire. There, he had laid the first stone of the *Palais de la Bourse* and inaugurated the new, neo-Byzantine cathedral built at the foot of the expanding port complex. Later, he would have a palace constructed for the empress nearby and inaugurate the city's *Musée des beaux arts* containing Puvis de Chavannes' epic paintings of Marseille. Laudatory contemporary accounts of the 1852 trip described a city convulsed with cries of "long live the Emperor," a port thronging with ships and spectators, and a booming artillery salute from the pride of French nautical engineering, the aptly-named *Napoléon* (which the emperor subsequently rode along the Mediterranean shore as

he visited neighboring towns like Toulon).¹ In fact, from 1848 to 1870, Marseille's working classes were steadily tacking from royalism to republicanism, so one can doubt the depth of enthusiasm among the crowds for the latest Bonaparte.² The city's growing radicalism was on full display during its short-lived Commune – one of the few to take place outside Paris. For Marseille's moguls, however, there were plenty of reasons to venerate the emperor, starting with the fact that his coup d'état appeared to be ushering in a robust recovery from the economic crisis of 1848. In subsequent visits to Marseille throughout his regime, the emperor made sure to dole out *Légions d'honneur* liberally to the city's oligarchs.³

Beyond pomp and parades, the regime's policies and priorities were well-tailored to the interests of Marseille's elites. The regime's expansion of a French version of gunboat diplomacy, for instance, had given wide latitude to the merchant dynasties of Marseille. But gunboat diplomacy was only one piece of a wide repertoire of informal imperialism that the regime had mobilized, and which ultimately played to Marseille's benefit.⁴ The regime's aggrandizement of financial markets, for instance, offered Marseille's families an excellent path into the treasuries of foreign powers. The regime also encouraged various forms of soft power, from launching trading companies to treating foreign sovereigns and their entourages to lavish, state-funded trips in France and naturalizing foreign clients.⁵ Such practices empowered Marseille's merchants to cultivate

¹ Adrien Pascal, *Histoire de Napoléon III, Empereur des Français* (Paris: Barbier, 1853), 296-305.

² Sewell, *Structure and Mobility*, 314. The growing militancy of the working classes of Marseille was visible by 1848, but political activism was largely suppressed in the early-1850s. Opposition newspapers sprouted up in the city in the late-1860s, along with Freemason lodges and socialist campaigners. Gambetta, born and raised in the Midi, emerged from this resurgence of open opposition to the Second Empire. See: Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 355-6.

³ Americi and Daumalin, *Les dynasties marseillaises*, 150, 152, 166.

⁴ On the concept of imperial repertoires, see: Cooper and Burbank, *Empires in World History*. See also: Todd, *Velvet Empire*.

⁵ Americi and Daumalin, *Les dynasties marseillaises*, 50, 59.

relationships abroad and with foreign sovereigns.⁶ In Napoléon III's informal empire, Marseille's merchants had a home.

Symbolically, the regime's self-image and propaganda conjugated with Marseille's monuments, paintings, and iconography. In its nearly two decades in power, Napoléon III's regime fashioned itself at various times as the enlightened leader of Latin races, the bellicose defender of Catholics, and the evangel of liberalism and Saint-Simonianism.⁷ Profoundly opportunistic and heterogenous in its self-presentation, the regime was at once utterly cosmopolitanism and chest-thumpingly imperialist. For Marseille, a Mediterranean medley dominated by opportunistic merchant dynasties, these were values that smoothed over awkwardness in the city's past integration into France, and which, on the contrary, suggested that the "Phocaeen City" was especially suited to leading the nation to its rightful place in the world to come.

The harmony between the economic hegemons of the city and the political rulers of the nation found a full-bodied expression in the *Palais de la Bourse*, the opening of which Napoléon III and Eugénie inaugurated during an 1860 tour celebrating the recent annexation of Nice and Savoy. Inside the *palais*, a large, marble statue of the emperor looked out over images celebrating the city's Greek founding and its conversion to Christianity, its oath of fealty to the French monarchy, its support of diplomatic and scientific expeditions, and its hundreds of trading relationships. Side by side with these were images glorifying the city's role in the Crimean War, Italian War, and the conquest Algeria. All in all, it was a fittingly heterogenous municipal

⁶ See, for example: Mohamed Lazhar Gharbi, "Mahmoud Ben Ayyed. Le parcours transméditerranéen d'un homme d'affaires tunisien." » *Méditerranée* 124 (2015) : 21-27. The attempts at creating an "Arab Kingdom" also speak to the Second Empire's rather fluid conception of citizenship and nationalism. The formation of the Madagascar Company by Napoléon III is a classic example of the regime's willingness to put Marseille's dynasties in charge of overseas affairs.

⁷ Price, *The French Second Empire*; Todd, *Velvet Empire*; Eric Anceau, *Napoléon III. Un Saint-Simon à cheval* (Paris : Taillandier, 2008) ; Michel Levallois, *Ismayl Urbain (1812-1884) : une autre conquête de l'Algérie* (Paris : Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001); Louis Girard, *Napoléon III* (Paris : Fayard, 1986).

autobiography for a heterogenous regime.⁸ Nine years later, as Napoléon inaugurated the *Musée des Beaux Arts* with Puvis de Chavannes' paintings, and his wife, the empress Eugénie, led a Marseille-heavy procession of ships through the Suez Canal, it was clear that the second city had a special role to play in the future of France.

For the *Messageries*, the ties to Napoleon III's Second Empire were equally strong. The company, after all, had come into being at exactly the same time as the regime. Its ships had been graced in the 1852 visit of the emperor triumphant, just as they had trailed the empress through the Suez Canal in 1869. The decisive turn to joint stock finance and state subsidies, so vital to the company's rise, reflected the priorities of a regime that was as statist as it was liberal, depending on the needs of big business and imperial prestige.⁹ Most importantly, though, the regime made it easier for those in charge of the *Messageries* to carry out their operations on a day-to-day level. On the docks, the regime abandoned the *portefaix*, the caste of dockworkers who maintained a remarkably privileged position in Marseille's maritime economy for the first half of the 19th century. As the *portefaix* were being made dependent on consolidated companies like the *Messageries*, representatives of the workers twice established contact with Napoléon III – first in 1859, then in 1864. Each time, they received vague encouragement, but never a state intervention on their behalf.¹⁰ At sea, the Second Empire also armed the owners of the *Messageries* with a legal arsenal to keep workers in line. *Messageries'* captains enjoyed remarkable authority over their

⁸ Today, the *Palais de la Bourse* holds some of the region's most important archives, meaning that researchers have plenty of occasions to consider the building's details. See: Marie-Agnès Gilot, "De la critique du projet architectural à sa réalisation : le palais de la bourse de Marseille et le conseil des bâtiments civils, » *Livraisons de l'histoire de l'architecture* 15 (2008), 39-52.

⁹ See: Eric Anceau, *Napoléon III. Un Saint-Simon à cheval* (Paris : Taillandier, 2008).

¹⁰ Sewell, *Logics of History*, 303-5.

crews thanks to the disciplinary code for the merchant marine put in place by Napoléon III's regime from 1852-on.¹¹

But, as the Second Empire ceded to a Third Republic, Marseille's moguls and the owners of the *Messageries* would have to adapt themselves to new circumstances. For a variety of reasons, Marseille and the *Messageries* would occupy an uncertain place within the ruling ideologies, juridical frameworks, and political culture of the Third Republic. For one, as the committed Republicans within the Third Republic consolidated their grip over the new regime throughout the 1870s, some of the stiffest opposition they faced came from the Navy, long a bastion of royalism (underlined by the institution's nickname, "La Royale"). This opposition cast an uncomfortable light on the *Messageries*' cozy relationship with navy personnel, and the prominent place of navy bases and shipyards near Marseille. Moreover, the new Republicans were generally suspicious of privileges and monopolies, which the state-subsidized *Messageries* had arguably recreated, albeit in the guise of liberal enterprise. Committed Republicans were equally wary of what they saw as the anachronistic despotism of ship-captains enabled by the authoritarian disciplinary code of the Second Empire.¹² Inside the flag-waving ships of the *Messageries*, it was feared, the rights of citizens might evaporate, opening the door to outdated practices like corporal punishment.

Then again, who could say if the workers powering *Messageries* steamships were citizens at all? In the 1790s, the revolutionary ancestors of the Third Republic had attempted – seemingly in vain – to mandate that three quarters of the crew on any French ship be citizens.¹³ As the

¹¹ M.H. Renaut, "L'histoire par les lois : Trois siècles d'évolution dans la répression des fautes disciplinaires de la marine marchande," *Revue historique du droit français et étranger* 80, n. 1 (2002) : 23-56. From the early-1890s, the Republic would chip away at this authoritarian code, but it was only replaced in full in 1926.

¹² Revolutionary legal codes did not, however, attempt to abolish corporal punishment or many other exceptional legal aspects of maritime labor. Miranda Spieler, *Empire and Underground*, ___ [index : special maritime tribunal].

¹³ In its determination to regulate the merchant marine in this way, the French system contrasted dramatically with British and Dutch counterparts. See: Niklas Frykman, *The Bloody Flag: Mutiny in the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 19-22. This continues to be a source of controversy in the 21st

Messageries expanded in the 1850s and 60s, such restrictions were no longer in effect. Thus, the company's Suez-crossing ships were full of Arab, Somali, Chinese, and Vietnamese workers. In parallel, under the catchall category, "European," plenty of Italian, Spanish, and Maltese sailors found employment in the company's ships. Some republicans were bound to critique these divisive hiring practice as if they were outsourcing *avant la lettre*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, throughout the 1870s, the top administrators of the *Messageries* rarely relished their visits to the Assembly. In 1870-1, amidst drastic budgetary cuts, the company's postal operations were curtailed and its subsidies called into question. Despite having dedicated its factories at La Ciotat to producing artillery for the national defense, the company effectively received no indemnity in the negotiations that followed the end of the war. To make matters worse, in 1874, the *Messageries* entered a grueling legal battle with the company in charge of the Suez Canal, the *Compagnie universelle du canal maritime*, over tariff and traffic policies. In a time of shattered national prestige, in other words, the company appeared to be at public loggerheads with a shining symbol of French grandeur. The next year, a deputy in the Assembly began vigorously campaigning to slash the *Messageries* subsidies. It just so happened that the deputy was the father of the Canal Company's top administrator. Ultimately, the *Messageries* would survive this fight for its life. By 1881, it had been reinstated as the private arm of the state along the world's interoceanic highways. In the decades to come, however, republican wariness did not disappear. Rather, old antagonism continuously resurfaced and new recriminations emerged.¹⁴

century. See: Cédric Mathiot, "L'équipée étrangère de la marine marchande française. Retour en grâce d'un texte bouleversant la composition des équipages." » *Libération* (November 25, 2004).

¹⁴ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 340-44.

Just as the foundational events of the new Republic – the Franco-Prussian War and the Communes – provided an inauspicious opening ceremony to the relationship between the *Messageries* and the new regime, so the events of the war complicated Marseille’s place in the imagined national community of the new regime. In the aftermath of the conflict, the Third Republic has been described as constructing nothing less than a “culture of defeat” as its reason for being.¹⁵ At the very least, the leadership of the new regime was fundamentally marked by the debacle of 1870-71, driven by a quest to understand what had gone wrong, and dedicated to ensuring that it never happened again. This is not surprising. The war had exposed deep rifts within France, suggesting that cultural cohesion and national survival were inseparable. Accusations cut across French society. For bourgeois publics across France, multiple insurrectionary communes confirmed suspicions that the urban working classes could easily be whipped into a fit of murderous frenzy and communistic redistribution.¹⁶ Many bourgeois citizens, however, appeared to have been all too willing to work with the occupiers.¹⁷ In the army, ostensibly the institution of national unity par excellence, signs of division and incompetence abounded. Soldiers, it was widely alleged, could not communicate with one another across regional dialects. Even in their home regions, soldiers proved ignorant of geography and topography, calling into question the thickness of their ties to the homeland and the quality of their education.¹⁸

¹⁵ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat. On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (Stuttgart: Picador, 2013). This should not be conflated with the somewhat reductive label of “revanchisme,” which has been exaggerated at times. In fact, national reconciliation was its own priority, and was capable both of sublimating desires for military revenge, and of existing independently of those desires.

¹⁶ Gay Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Roger Gould, *Insurgent Identities. Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹⁷ The letters of Gustave Flaubert are particularly eloquent on this point. Peter Brooks, *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris: The Story of a Friendship, a Novel, and a Terrible Year* (Basic Books, 2017). Bourgeois complicity was powerfully captured in Guy de Maupassant’s allegorical story, « Boule de Suif » (published in 1880), among others.

¹⁸ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 99-109; 333-6.

Within a geographical hierarchy of wartime virtue, the south of France sat rather low.¹⁹ On the one hand, the region had given new life to the war effort: canons were pumped out of the metalworks of La Ciotat; supplies poured into and out of Marseille, along with charismatic allies like Garibaldi; and republicans in the city were among the first to declare their determination to carry on the fight.²⁰ Ironically, however, wherever the soldiers of southern France went, they exposed their otherness, starting with their thick patois. Moreover, the political tumult in Marseille could easily be construed as distracting from national needs. To add to this, the region was spared the most brutal aspects of occupation, siege, and counterinsurgency, leaving it open to bitter recriminations from those in Paris, the north, and the northeast. Shortly after the war, in 1875, according to Eugen Weber, army officers could be found warning their superiors against forming units with too many Provencaux inside them. Whether for cowardice or disloyalty, such units, it was claimed, would never prove dependable in the field.²¹ The attitude was not limited to the military. In the coming decades, many Republicans may have preached revenge against Germany, but in practice, they increasingly emulated Germany. To a certain extent, mainstream republicans also reinforced the idea that northern France was the heart of the nation, leaving open celebrations of France's Latinness to the far-right fringes of republican discourse.²² While some prominent

¹⁹ Weber provides a literal illustration of this geographical hierarchy, based on military records, in *Peasants into Frenchmen*, maps 7 and 8, p. 107.

²⁰ Bemeron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 340-44. Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871* (London: Routledge, 2005), 187, 202, 226-236.

²¹ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 99.

²² Kevin Passmore, *The Right in France from the Third Republic to Vichy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 184-98; 209. See also: Samuel Llano, *Whose Spain? Negotiating Spanish Music in Paris, 1908-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 9-15. Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* notes that French authorities were confident about the ability of "Latin" immigrants to assimilate into France, but that there was a consistent anxiety with the "less evolved" nature of other Latin peoples.

early Republicans hailed from the Marseille area, a common sense soon emerged that no Marseillais would be taken seriously in the halls of power.²³

There was remarkable longevity in the stigma against southern French people and the inter-regional resentment born of the war. In 1914, just as another war with Germany broke out, its traces were still visible. On a *Messageries* ship sailing near Yokohama, Japan, for example, news of the war's outbreak led to physical disputes between crewmembers hailing from different regions of France. The incident began when the ship's head-mechanic, a native of northern France, blamed southerners for delaying France's mobilization for war. The dithering southerners, he was to have said, had not learned the hard lessons of war and occupation four decades earlier. Now, he claimed, they were repeating the same mistakes, engaging in cheap politics instead of preparing for war. The mechanic was promptly attacked by furious crewmembers from southern France who accused him of calling them "cowards" and insisted they were "just as French" as him. As the horrified captain explained to directors in Marseille, to stop the spread of violence and regional factionalism aboard his ship, "I appealed to their patriotism" and "tried to explain that the country's current predicament demanded, more than ever, order, discipline and devotion."²⁴

Some Republicans of the 1870s would have preferred the trio of liberty, equality, and fraternity over "order, discipline, and devotion," but they shared with the ship-captain a similar

²³ Richard Cobb, *Marseille* (Paris : Editions Allian, 1980), 11, 65. Gambetta, it is worth noting, was buried in Paris.

²⁴ Voyage Report of September 5, 1914, China and Japan Line, Captain Mages, *Messageries Maritimes* (MM) 152, Dossier Voyage Reports of the Cordillère (1912-1920), Chambre de commerce et de l'industrie de Marseille-Provence (CCIMP), Marseille, France. [C'est vous qui dites que les gens du Midi sont lâches] [L'air a aussi furieux que le premier, il me dit qu'il était aussi français que moi...] [Je compte sur leur patriotisme auquel j'ai fait appel J'ai essayé de leur faire comprendre que la situation actuelle du pays demandait plus que jamais de l'ordre, de la discipline et du dévouement] Part of the stigma was based on the idea that southerners were gullible and unguarded in their manner of speaking. In 1885, another ship-captain can be found complaining that his passengers were terrified of the dangers of the sea, which he explained as: "cette impressionnabilité excessive provenant en grande partie de l'origine Méridionale de notre personnel" [this excessive impressionability originated in large part from the southern origins of our personnel.]. Voyage Report 8, Marseille-Noumea, July 28 1885, Captain Rolland, MM 549, Dossier Voyage Reports of the Yarra (1884-1892), CCIMP.

preoccupation. In their ship of state, lack of national cohesion had become an existential threat. As soon as republicans held the keys to the constitution, they embarked on the most transformative period of nation-making in French history.²⁵ And French history suggested that the Republicans needed to act fast. After all, as David Todd reminds us, in the seventy-five years between Napoleon's consulate (1799) and the beginning of republicans' parliamentary takeover (1875), devoted, or radical, republicans had only ruled France for ten months in 1848 and five months in 1870-1.²⁶ With a coup around every corner and another "man on horseback" surely lurking about, the Republic, it was believed, would survive only by building depersonalized institutions that could enact massive social, political, and moral reeducation.

Inside Marseille's *palais de la bourse*, the marble statue of Napoléon III was torn down and replaced by a large barometer (see figs. 12 and 13).²⁷ It was a fitting symbol for a regime that sought to ensconce itself not through charisma, but rather through a set of repetitive, scientifically informed practices. Some of these practices, such as education, elections, and military service could be contained within reformed institutions. Others, such as athletics, tourism, reading and discussion, overflowed into civil society's proliferating associations and the nation's unshackled press. By virtue of new behaviors, citizens would at last understand the nation that they constituted, better serving the nation as they bettered themselves, and loving that nation as they loved themselves. Only then could the Third Republic carry out the paradoxical project of

²⁵ While Weber's famous thesis has been corrected and nuanced in many key aspects (modernization theory, integration and assimilation, the parallel colonization, etc.), this basic claim stands up to research. The Third Republic built the ideological and material infrastructure of a *national* state and society.

²⁶ Todd, *Velvet Empire*, 11. It would take most of the 1870s for the motley mix of committed Republicans (positivists, jacobins, radicals, technocrats) to banish Bonapartists, Monarchists, and anti-Republicans of various persuasions to the opposition, and to seize full legislative and constitutional power.

²⁷ *Séances de la Société française de physique. Année 1873* (Paris : Gauthier-Villars, 1874), 33.

institutionalizing the revolution. If it did, then, like a barometer, this institutionalized revolution would be both self-regulating and enlightening.²⁸



Figure 12. Statue of Napoleon III torn down in 1870, Palais de la Bourse, Marseille (1860s). Source: André Conquet, “Napoléon III et les chambres de commerce (1^{ère} partie).” *Revue du Souvenir Napoléonien* 359 (Jul.-Aug. 1988): 31-35. Available online at: <https://www.napoleon.org/histoire-des-2-empires/articles/napoleon-iii-et-les-chambres-de-commerce-1ere-partie/#notes> (last accessed: 7/1/2021).

²⁸ The Third Republic’s effort to institutionalize the Revolution has at times been reduced to a process of coercion in pursuit of political conformity. Historians have shown, however, that the role of sentiment and uplift was considerable, and that the revolution they sought to institutionalize was as much an unfinished cultural revolution as a political one. See: Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 149-63; Jean-Francois Chanut, *L’Ecole républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris: Aubier, 1996); Chanut, *Vers l’armée nouvelle: République conservatrice et réforme militaire* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales: Europe, XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2014); Stéphane Gerson, *Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).



Figure 13. Barometer replacing Napoleon III's statue under Third Republic.
Source: author's photo.

That said, Republicans did not need to invent brand-new practices for inculcating feelings of national belonging. They could build on preexisting patterns of attachment. The old artisanal

tradition of *compagnonnage*, for example, though it was declining by the 1870s, had long permitted participants to valorize their home country (*petit pays*) in relation to a national collectivity. In other words, by discovering France in its vast diversity, one footstep at a time, artisans-to-be would deepen their love of their hometown and *métier*.²⁹ Likewise, in the wake of the Revolution, amateur historical societies, largely composed of middle-class people, had multiplied across France. Through organized outings and lectures, such associations allowed for celebrations of local and regional patrimony, geography, history, and identity; celebrations that, often enough, hinged on the locality or region's contribution *to* the nation.³⁰ Even as their influence and respectability waxed and waned, these associations and the cultural entrepreneurs behind them repeatedly secured state funding, surviving across multiple regimes.³¹

Under the Third Republic, many of the ideals of these associations were elevated and expanded. For a host of reasons, republicans embraced the idea that love of the locality and region would become the bridge to love of the nation. In a time of growing anxiety over the nation's demography, it was especially crucial that children cross that bridge. Thus, under the Republic, education became accessible and expanded dramatically. Curriculum emphasized local geography and schoolchildren were organized into "student battalions" that conducted exercises outdoors.³² In these and many other ways, children learned to embody and feel their belonging to a universal nation through the particular attachment to a *petit pays* and its *terroir*.

Early republicans thus expanded the construction of a dialectical system of belonging in which locality and nation co-constituted one another. In this scheme, the nation was abstract, but

²⁹ Agricol Perdiguier, "Memoires of a Compagnon" in Mark Traugott (ed.), *The French Worker: Autobiographies from the Early Industrial Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

³⁰ In a broader sense, celebrations of the *pays* had been ongoing since the French Revolution.

³¹ (Stephane Gerson; Caroline Ford; Lieux de l'histoire, Pascal Ory, Peasants into Frenchmen).

³² Jean-Francois Chanet, "Pour la Patrie, par l'École ou par l'Épée ? L'école face au tournant nationaliste » *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 19, n. 1 (2001): pp.127-144.

meaningful, while the locality was concrete, but meaningless on its own. As Ernest Renan explained most famously, the nation was the result of a “daily plebiscite” carried out among rational individuals.³³ The nation thus held people together through reason, self-love, and collective will, as opposed to superstition, tradition, fear, religion, race, and ethnicity. Locality, by comparison, was organic and undeniably concrete, but inherently meaningless until it was actualized by membership within the nation. In a sense, then, locality was imagined as flesh and blood, and nation as a mind or soul. Within a *pays*, each locality brought something special to the nation: from chateaux that spoke of great figures in its history to typical agricultural products reflecting the characteristics of a *terroir* and artisanal traditions that testified to the deep roots of inhabitants.³⁴

In many ways, Marseille fit awkwardly into the emerging criteria for a nation-making locality. Its leading families, for instance, were poorly rooted in the land. After all, the city’s elites were commercial, with disparate Mediterranean origins that complicated any facile integration into a myth of national unity. In the 1860s, for example, 40% of the city’s major employers (*grand patronat*) were trader-merchants, many of them Greek and Armenian in origin. Such elites generally did not have ties to great landed families. Instead, they and counterparts in the soap and oil industries were new money capitalists who crisscrossed established socio-economic categories.³⁵ Moreover, Marseille’s masses were the products of rapid industrialization and immigration, and as such, could only distort the image of premodern roots and cultural homogeneity through which localities were imagined as organic building blocks of a modern,

³³ Ernest Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation ?” (1882).

³⁴ Gerson, *Pride of Place*, 135-41. See also : Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales* and Chanut, *L’Ecole républicaine et les petites patries*.

³⁵ Marnot, *Villes portuaires*, 68-70.

universal nation. With craggy coastlines and canyons in its immediate hinterland, the city was less a cultivator of organic bounty than a processing plant for raw materials imported from across the world. Marseille may have become a center of republican politics, but the city's physical, historical, and social profile, along with its ambivalent role in the War of 1870-71, presented a puzzle for would-be integrators of the incipient republican nation.

The "Little Red Book of the Republic"

In 1877, however, one, extraordinary book blazed a discursive path through which Marseille could be led into the nation-making project of the Third Republic. Interestingly enough, this path led through the steamships of the *Messageries*. The *Tour de la France par Deux Enfants* was written by the female author, Augustine Fouillée, under her pseudonym G. Bruno.³⁶ To describe the *Tour de la France* as a best-seller seems an understatement. A decade after its publication, three million copies circulated throughout France.³⁷ By the early-20th century, the book was past its 100th printing and had sold, by some estimates, over eight million copies.³⁸ The book was also the most frequently borrowed from French school libraries, and among the most commonly assigned texts in classrooms. But it was more than astronomical sales and readership that led French historians to label the tale "the Little Red Book of the Republic."³⁹

Indeed, the book offered a nearly perfect allegory for its times. In the story, two orphaned brothers are forced to flee their native Lorraine after German invasion and annexation severs the

³⁶ G. Bruno, *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants. Devoir et Patrie* (Paris : Librairie Classique d'Eugène Belin, 1877).

³⁷ Jaques Ozouf and Mona Ozouf, "Le Tour de la France par deux enfants : The Little Red Book of the Republic » in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory* vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 125-6.

³⁸ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 335.

³⁹ Jaques Ozouf and Mona Ozouf, "Le Tour de la France par deux enfants : Le petit livre rouge de la République » in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire* vol. 2 (Paris : Gallimard, 1997), pp. 291-321.

region from France. Cast out of their *pays* and deprived of their parents, the children hit the road in search of their last remaining family member. Along the way, they find an eternal “mother fatherland” (*mère patrie*) in the many *pays* of France. Visiting region after region, the children absorb the particular histories, sites, patois, climates, gastronomies, products, and customs of each destination. Each region (*pays*), the story taught readers, was like a fine wine that reflected the particular merits of its terroir, while highlighting the common ground of all Frenchmen and Frenchwomen.

The book eschewed divisive topics like industrial labor militancy, war, religious doctrine, and class struggle. Generally, regional dialects were treated as sources of amusement, soon to be gently wiped away by a generation of school-going children versed in the national tongue. Overall, the story pointed to a bright future in which children, through hard work, patriotism, and education, would weave anew the fabric of France; a labor of love that would transform the knots and loose ends of the old fabric into pretty patterns within a tightly-knit whole. Incomprehensible dialects, for example, would turn into charming accents. A heartfelt paean to national reconciliation and regeneration, and a manual of patriotic solidarity, the book became a fixture of classrooms, libraries, and home collections alike. Teachers in the multiplying schools of the new regime were given manuals for guiding students through the story, which, like a national textbook, was updated every few years.

In the story, the young protagonists of the story must reach Marseille to find what remains of their family. As they approach Marseille, there are discomfiting signs of otherness within the nation. Passing through the Dauphiné, just north of Marseille, the boys try to book a room in a “little inn [*auberge*]” that is “half farm, half hotel,” but are disheartened when the old inn-keeper

cannot understand them.⁴⁰ As visitors come and go, the boys find themselves surrounded by the “patois of the south” in what is described as a “foreign farm.”⁴¹ The boys find hope in the observation that, “In some years’ time, it will no longer be like this and all across France we will know how to speak the language of the fatherland [*patrie*].”⁴² Then, the prophecy revealed, some schoolchildren enter: “André, cried out Julien, these children must know French, because they go to school. How grand! We will be able to talk with each other.”⁴³ The otherness of the south is not yet off display, however. As the boys close in on Marseille, they pass through the dramatic landscape of the Camargue, “which resembles an African desert transported into our France.”⁴⁴ Wild horses stream past the boys; “descendants, it is said, of the Arab horses brought into the country by the Sarasin invasions of yore.”⁴⁵ In short, for the boys, the road to Marseille leads through “foreign farms” with unintelligible idioms and “African deserts” with ghosts of an Arab past.

When the children finally reach Marseille, they hope to find an estranged uncle, Frantz. In the relationship with the uncle, there are strong echoes of the contrasting wartime experiences of the north and south. Frantz has not responded to any of their letters, so as the brothers approach Marseille, they ask a sailor what he knows of their uncle’s whereabouts. Without realizing that he is speaking to the man’s nephews, the sailor tells the children about uncle Frantz’s life in Marseille:

[he] had an older brother in Alsace-Lorraine to whom he had once done wrong, so that they no longer wrote to one another. Ever since the war, he has often been dreaming of the region [*pays*]. Every day he would tell himself, ‘my older brother must be so

⁴⁰ G. Bruno, *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants. Devoir et Patrie* (Paris : Belin, 1884 edition), 165.

⁴¹ Ibid. [*cette ferme étrangère*]

⁴² Ibid. [*Mais dans un certain nombre d’années il n’en sera plus ainsi, et par toute la France on saura parler la langue de la patrie.*]

⁴³ Ibid., 166. [*André, s’écria Julien, ces enfants doivent savoir le français, puisqu’ils vont à l’école. Quel bonheur ! nous pourrions causer ensemble.*]

⁴⁴ Ibid., 179. [*...qui ressemblent à un désert de l’Afrique transporté dans notre France.*]

⁴⁵ Ibid., 181. [*Ces derniers descendent, dit-on, des chevaux arabes amenés autrefois dans le pays par les invasions des Sarrasins.*]

unhappy over there, he's suffered the miseries of war and sieges; but me, I have some savings, and I'll tell him, 'forget my mistakes, Michel. Come on back to France with me, we will buy a little chunk of land and we will make it worth something, the two of us.'⁴⁶

In other words, while the good brother of Alsace-Lorraine endured war and died honorably, the other brother was in Marseille, putting money away, feeling guilty, and hoping to be forgiven for past trespasses. Reading the allegory along the grain, one could question whether it was Alsace-Lorraine or Marseille that needed to be reattached to France.⁴⁷

In any event, the sailor learns that he is speaking to Frantz's nephews and lets them know that Frantz is actually away from Marseille settling outstanding business. The next day, the helpful sailor promises, they will sail to intercept the uncle. Before the brothers set out once more, however, they see the sites of Marseille and learn of its achievements. Once again, the book applies its soothing balm of national unity to a diverse, war-torn land: the children eat Provencal fish soup; make themselves into useful workers onboard ships; playfully navigate linguistic breakdowns; and even help settle a dispute among sailors over which part of France is most beautiful. Industry is admired, but industrial workers are docile, entering and exiting the narrative frame like wind-up toys. Notable churches and infrastructure projects are celebrated, while the flesh-and-blood

⁴⁶ Ibid., 182. [« Ce pauvre Volden avait en Alsace-Lorraine un frère aîné à l'égard duquel il a eu des torts jadis, ce qui fait qu'ils ne s'écrivaient point. Depuis la dernière guerre, Frantz songeait souvent au pays. Il se disait tous les jours : 'Mon aîné doit être bien malheureux là-bas, car il a subi les misères de la guerre et des sièges ; mais moi, j'ai quelques économies et je lui dirai : - Oublie mes torts, Michel. Viens-t'en en France avec moi, nous achèterons un petit bout de terre, et nous ferons valoir cela à nous deux. »]

⁴⁷ The two brothers are deeply moved to hear of the rift between their father and uncle, and of the uncle's desire to mend it. "I love him already, our uncle Frantz" says the elder brother. The younger brother replies, "I do too... What a beautiful idea he has to want to buy a piece of land! That's exactly what I'm after. It would be so great to have a field to cultivate, some cows to look after: Oh! André, I would cross all the seas in the world just for that alone." Ibid., 185-6.

inhabitants of the city maintain a low profile.⁴⁸ Marseille even notches a great man profile, thanks to the sculptor Pierre Puget.

But one destination in Marseille stands out from the others by providing the author with an unparalleled pedagogical platform. Hopeful of an imminent reunion with their Marseillais uncle, now acquitted of any ill intentions, the older brother arranges a celebratory tour of the *Sindh*, a state-of-the-art steamship of the *Messageries Maritimes* (as the Third Republic took power, the “Impériales” in the company’s name disappeared). The boys are deeply moved after learning of the rift between their uncle and father, and relieved to know that their uncle wished to repair it. The visit to the ship, planned by the older brother to lighten the load of his injured younger brother, thus becomes a ritual affirmation of fraternal love, reconciliation, and generational renewal.⁴⁹

Throughout the tour, Fouillée goes to great pains to emphasize the self-sufficiency and totality of the ship, described as “a building carried by the water” and “like floating houses of multiple floors.”⁵⁰ The boys are continuously amazed to find that the ship pumps its own water, contains its own livestock, uses customized plates and glassware, and possesses its own little fleet of rescue boats. A hidden world revealed to him, the younger of the two brothers shouts, “How everything is planned! [...] This ship is a real city that moves on the water.”⁵¹

There, in the parallel, floating city of the *Sindh*, the children encounter a set of “locals” and “mores” through the ship’s sailors and passengers. As the boys explore every corner of the ship,

⁴⁸ Churches are viewed and celebrated, but as Ozouf notes, never are masses depicted in any detail, nor are any religious ceremonies for that matter. In religion, as elsewhere, the genius of the *Tour de la France* is in reconciliation. Ozouf and Ozouf “The little red book of the Republic.”

⁴⁹ At the end of the *Sindh* tour, the brothers share a robust hug, and an ecstatic Julien tells his brother: “How you are kind to go to so much pain for me, my brother! ... It must be tiring to support me all the time.” The elder brother responds: “No, my Julien, ... I am never so happy as when we can share a pleasure together.” Bruno, *Tour de la France*, 191.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 187-191.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 190. [« Comme tout est prévu ! disait Julien ; ce navire est une vraie ville qui promène sur l’eau. »]

they even enter into the sleeping quarters of the sailors, where they are delighted to learn about the hammocks in which workers sleep. Helpful illustrations show the curious, but beautifully ordered, dwellings and clothing of the sailors, much as the book illustrates those of rural peoples throughout the rest of France.

At the end of the *Sindh* tour, the brothers share a robust hug, and an ecstatic Julien tells his brother: “How you are kind to go to so much pain for me, my brother! ... It must be tiring to support me all the time.” Closing this rite of fraternal love, the elder brother responds: “No, my Julien... do not fear tiring me out. It is for the stronger to help out the weaker, and I am never so happy as when we can share a pleasure together.”⁵² The ship, then, becomes the real highlight of the trip to Marseille, allowing Fouillée to quietly substitute the tidy microcosm of the floating world for the messy city around it.

Race, Empire, and the Steamship

But the *Sindh* is a pedagogical platform for Fouillée in other senses, too. Inside the space of the ship, the children and readers also get the book’s only glimpse into race, racial hierarchy, and empire. Until they reach Marseille, the boys have encountered *intra*-national diversity one *pays* at a time. Generally, they are able to make sense of that diversity by relativizing it, seeing the Frenchness surrounding it, or simply by prophesying its eventual disappearance.⁵³ Compared to that process, the ship is a veritable kaleidoscope of human diversity. As the boys explore the ship, they encounter a workforce in which there are, “sailors of every country [*pays*] and almost all the

⁵² Ibid., 191. [*Que tu es bon de te donner tant de peine pour moi mon frère ! dit Julien, pendant qu’André l’emportait dans ses bras. Cela doit bien te fatiguer de me soutenir toujours. – Non, mon Julien, dit André ; j’ai une bonne santé et je suis fort ; ne crains pas de me fatiguer. C’est à ceux qui sont plus forts d’aider les plus faibles, et je ne suis jamais si heureux que quand nous partageons un plaisir ensemble*].

⁵³ Much as the Francophone schoolchildren of the Dauphiné region rescue the boys from their alienation in a “foreign farm” in the preceding chapter.

racés of man, some yellow, others black.”⁵⁴ To make the most of this opportunity for racial education, the book includes an illustrated diagram with representative figures of “the four races of men” – “white race,” “red race,” “yellow race,” and “black race.”⁵⁵ Fashion and physiognomy mediate the boys’ perception of this world of many races. “As they made their way,” the book explains, the boys “encountered Chinese in wide yellow pants,” of “olive complexion, their heads decorated in a long ponytail, barefoot in pointy sandals,” and “Arabs with bright, wild eyes.”⁵⁶

Left here, the encounter with racialized diversity might not seem to have anything explicitly imperial in it. But the book goes further to place this diversity in a particular context and pedagogy of racial hierarchy and imperial domination. Beneath the diagram of the four races of men, the first line makes this clear: “the white race [is] the most perfect of human races.”⁵⁷ When the boys are puzzled by a large cloth hanging on the ceiling of the *Sindh*’s dining room, moreover, a French sailor hastens to explain that, “when the passengers are dining and the heat is too strong, for example in the Red Sea or under the Equator, a Chinese placed by the door pulls upon the cloth with a cord: ... giving air the to the passengers.”⁵⁸ Lest we wonder about the identity of the passengers who receive this cooling breeze, an illustration shows white, European, and bourgeois passengers at home in their cabin, with father reading the newspaper and mother tending to the child.⁵⁹ In fact, none of the illustrations in this section show the “Chinese” “Arab” or “black” sailors dwelling in the ship. Evoked as passing bodies in exotic clothing, as busy hands and toiling

⁵⁴ Ibid., 188. [*Il y en avait de tous les pays et presque de toutes les races d’hommes, les uns jaunes, les autres noirs.*]

⁵⁵ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 191. [*chemin faisant on rencontra des Chinois aux larges pantalons jaunes, ou des Arabes aux yeux brillants et sauvages*][... *Chinois au teint olive, la tête ornée d’une longue queue, les pieds nus dans des sandales pointues...*]

⁵⁷ Ibid., 188 [*La race blanche, la plus parfaite des races humaines...*]

⁵⁸ Ibid., 190 [*quand les passagers dînent et la chaleur est trop forte, par exemple sur la mer Rouge ou sous l’Équateur, un Chinois placé près de la porte agite cette toile avec une corde... et donne l’air aux passagers...*]

⁵⁹ note

arms, they are thoroughly erased as inhabitants of this seemingly perfect floating city. French sailors, or whoever might be referred to by the phrase “sailors of all countries [*pays*],” on the other hand, are exhaustively depicted in their mobile domesticity, mounting hammocks and arranging their snug quarters.

Still, for all that it evokes of racial hierarchy, the 1877 edition of the text is in some ways remarkably subtle in its stance towards formal empire. In real life, the steamship *Sindh* operated along the “China Line,” where it was heavily subsidized by the French government precisely because it served the needs of the empire’s growing assemblage of colonies and protectorates in Indochina. Even if the *Messageries* had shifted some of its management from Saigon to Hong Kong around the time of the tale, the line remained eminently colonial in nature and function, and was frequented by colonial administrators, soldiers, and subjects. Voyage reports from the era suggest that the ship very likely employed young men recruited in Saigon in addition to the Chinese workers who figure so prominently in the narrative.⁶⁰ But if Fouillée avoids the opportunity to mark the ship as a portal to formal French imperium in Southeast Asia, she takes the opposite path for the “Arab” sailors onboard. First labeled “Arabs,” these men are later marked more specifically as Algerians: “for a part of the hard laborers [*hommes de peines*] in the ship is composed of Chinese and Algerians.”⁶¹ It is the first and only appearance of Algerian people in the entire book.

⁶⁰ Of course, one can question the distinction between colonized Indochinese and uncolonized Chinese. France, after all, had attended the First Opium War as a spectator, only to redeem some of the rewards of British victory in it. France had then actively participated in a Second Opium War, all while gnawing at the tributary periphery of the Qing dynasty’s empire. Within 25 years of the book’s publication, moreover, France had attacked the Chinese navy, invaded Chinese cities, and claimed further concessions along the coast. Some historians speak of China as existing in a “semi-colonial” state during this period. See, for instance: Anne Reinhardt, *Navigating Semi-colonialism: Shipping, sovereignty, and Nation Building in China, 1860-1937* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2018).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 191. [*car une partie des hommes de peine du navire est composé de Chinois et d’Algériens*]

In future editions of the *Tour de la France*, though, the empire that one glimpses on the horizon in the 1877 edition came closer.⁶² In the late-1870s, a republican committed to national reconciliation had ample reasons to hesitate before championing imperial conquest. At that point, the main theaters of French colonial activity – West Africa, the Maghreb, and Southeast Asia – were understood by many republicans as glorified fiefs of the army (especially Algeria) and navy (especially Indochina).⁶³ Before the 1880s, little consensus existed within parliament over the course of imperial policy. Many deputies were understandably suspicious of being pulled into expensive conflicts by adventurers inside and outside the military establishment, including common and radical conservatives. A few were determined to integrate the existing empire into the political fabric of the nation.⁶⁴ Others saw in imperial expansion a chance to regain national grandeur, to spread a French idea of civilization, to secure imports of raw materials, to release pressure from French society, or simply to have a seat at the growing table of imperial powers. For Fouillée in 1877, it was sufficient, without risking controversy, to package empire into a ship, cloaking it in a broader affirmation of racial superiority.

In the 1906 edition of the book, however, a new epilogue was tacked on celebrating the colonies and specifically naming those in Indochina.⁶⁵ In the new epilogue, the children have

⁶² The many editions of the book eventually became explicitly re-politicized by the early-20th century. Having become a kind of national textbook, the *Tour de la France* was shaped by the changing priorities of the republic. Thus, by the 1906 edition, religious iconography of any sort is scrubbed. See Ozouf and Ozouf, “Little red book of the Republic,” 137.

⁶³ Brocheux and Hemery, *Indochina*, 15-70. On Indochina, see also: J. Kim Munholland, “The Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” *The Historical Journal* 24, n. 3 (Sep. 1981): pp. 629-650.

⁶⁴ Two examples of this tendency in the 1870s are the Cremieux Decree, granting citizenship to the Jewish population of Algeria, and the establishment of Dakar as a commune.

⁶⁵ Ozouf and Ozouf, “Little red book of the Republic,” 137. Post-1906 editions also reflect the hardline secularism then unfolding. Churches disappear, for instance, and the children no longer speak of “God” at any point. A smaller change, unnoticed by scholars, can be found in the trip to Marseille: the book no longer mentions the ship by name. As a result, the *Messageries* loses its named reference. The scrubbing is almost certainly a reflection of the tensions between the company and key sections of the Republican parliament, which continued to dog the state-company relationship.

grown up and how have children of their own. One day, they receive a knock on the door from a kindly figure of their past, M. Gertal, and his son, “Victor, a great traveler, not only in France like you, but in the colonies.” Julien and André’s families are delighted: “what a delight!,’ cry out the entire family. We, who no longer travel, will listen as he recounts his voyages: it will be as if we have gone there with him.”⁶⁶ Victor has been in Annam (central Vietnam), and a celebration of the Pasteur Institutes of the colonies ensues. The highest praise goes to Pasteur’s most famous pupil, Alexandre Yersin, who hopped from the Parisian laboratory to a position as a doctor onboard the steamships of the *Messageries*, before dedicating himself to a life of scientific research in Indochina and beyond. A heading in this new epilogue offers a justification for the inclusion of empire in the story of national unity: “France, always generous, gives to all, without counting, its benevolence and aid.”⁶⁷

This turn-of-the-century alteration of the “Little red book of the Republic” was perhaps unavoidable. The empire had expanded enormously since 1877. As enclaves transformed into sprawling territorial claims, the empire became too big to ignore. By 1900, moreover, the “civilizing mission” of French imperialism had acquired new adherents, interest groups, and propagandists. The colonial project had created mass celebrities. These, along with a multiplying roster of expositions and other entertaining spectacles, allowed overseas empire to make deep inroads into popular culture.⁶⁸ Committed republicans had also penetrated (with varying levels of

⁶⁶ G. Bruno, *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants: devoir et patrie*, 386^e édition (Paris : Belin, 1922), 300. [*Victor, un grand voyageur, non seulement en France comme vous, mais aux colonies. Quel bonheur ! s’écrie toute la famille. Nous qui ne voyageons plus, nous l’écouterons raconter ses voyages : ce sera comme si nous étions allés là-bas avec lui*].

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 305. See also: Aro Velmut, *Pasteur’s Empire: Bacteriology and Politics in France, Its Colonies, and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 1.

⁶⁸ Berny Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Sandrine Lemaire and Pascal Blanchard (eds.), *Culture colonial, 1871-1931* (Paris: Autrement, 2003);

success) most of the once-opaque worlds of colonial society.⁶⁹ Once again, in other words, empire was becoming a unifying force in French politics, culture, and society.

Long before the 20th-century epilogue, however, the millions of readers of the 1877 edition could already discern the profile of empire in the republic. Critically, this image of empire came into focus inside a ship in Marseille – indeed, a ship that in many ways stood in for Marseille. In the *Sindh*, an outpouring of fraternal love overflows into a carefully choreographed spectacle of racial supremacy. Within the space of the ship and the little diagram of the four races that it inspires, the boys – and all the pupils who read the book – realize themselves white. In the sailors they encounter, meanwhile, the boys glimpse another, parallel set of *pays* – those of the Algerian, Chinese workers, and “black” workers, who are conspicuously visible in motion, yet invisible in inhabitation. Whether foreign, colonial, or “semi-colonial,” these workers thus exist in a suspended state.⁷⁰ Clearly, they serve the white Frenchmen, but where and to whom do they belong? Do they speak French? *Should* they? Answers to these implicit questions would depend on how readers were to define the space of the ship. Was this floating French land, an imperial space, international zone, or something in-between? Whatever this space *was* exactly, readers could be sure of one thing: one found it in Marseille and the eastbound ocean liners of the *Messageries*.

A Place in the Imperial Nation-State

To fit into the new Republic, Marseille and the *Messageries* were taking the shape of a portal to an ill-defined empire.⁷¹ This was a path that would lead from the complex symbolic place-making

⁶⁹ Brocheux et Hémery, *Indochina*, 31-34; 300; Munholland, « Collaboration Strategy ».

⁷⁰ Reinhardt, *Navigating Semi-colonialism*.

⁷¹ New institutions attest to the transition: in 1877, a Geographical Society was founded in Marseille by some of the most prominent shipowners (Raubaud, Fabre, Paquet, Fraissinet, Touache, Rouvier); in 1893, a colonial museum; in 1899, a medical school focused on tropical diseases; in 1906 a Colonial Institute accompanied the Colonial Exposition held in the city that year.

of the monuments of the 1850s and 60s to the liminal odes to empire of the 1910s and 20s.⁷² In the *Palais de la Bourse* and the *Musée des beaux-arts*, built in the 1850s and 60s, monumental accounts of Marseille's origins and destinies had adorned institutions meant to endure for centuries. They told complicated stories that highlighted trade and diplomacy, while rooting the city in a cosmopolitan Mediterranean world. By contrast, the epic statues guarding Marseille's railway station and the huge archway on the shoreline, both built in the 1910s and 20s, were literal gateways that told a tale of perfect imperium. In this tale, the colonies, gendered female, offered their bodies and bounty to the French ship of state, while the colonies, gendered male, provided their bodies and valor to protect France from its enemies.

As the "gateway to the orient" became the portal to empire, it was bound to be enveloped by the powerful paradox at the heart of republican nationhood in a time of empire.⁷³ Namely, how could a universal nation of sovereign (male) citizens also be a sprawling empire of layered sovereignties, stratified subjecthood, and martial law? How, moreover, could the revolution become institutionalized in the halls of power and the hearts of citizens without exposing a glaring contrast with all that lay beyond France? In turn, what would happen if the nation's imperial reflection revealed the excluded peoples within the nation itself? And if, as the *Tour de la France* taught, "France is a garden [and] the provinces are the flowers in it," then what on earth was this

⁷² Regarding imperial policy, Marseille's elites had reason to fear the rise of a new Republic. In broad terms, Republican debates over imperial policy presaged both a penchant for territorial annexation and a all-or-nothing approach to empire. That is, the political philosophy of the new republicans pointed to either embracing a civilizing mission of territorial colonization, or distancing the regime from imperial adventurism altogether. Marseille's merchant dynasties had certainly not suffered from the territorial conquest of Algeria, but on the whole they preferred the suppleness of informal empire. The *Messageries*, while not reducible to those merchant dynasties, had a similar outlook. As their swift and unceremonious move from French Saigon to Shanghai made clear, the company was happy to carry the empire's mail and cargo, but it never intended to bound itself within the limits of French sovereignty.

⁷³ Marseille's iconography and boosters exaggerated the place of Far-East trade in the city. The Mediterranean and Europe continued to supply the bulk of the city's traffic, with Africa just behind. Roncayolo, *Marseille*, 88; Daumalin, "Les négociants Marseillais," 93.

strange assemblage of colonies, protectorates, concessions, overseas communes, and international cities that empire had wrought?⁷⁴

Of course, in a sense, these are merely questions of political philosophy. In practice, republican statesmen, partisans of imperial expansion, and cultural entrepreneurs all invented the justifications they needed. They proposed a scheme of evolution in which, over time, colonized peoples would move from the particular and hierarchical to the universal and egalitarian. They concocted notions of a uniquely *French* approach to empire based on “civilizing missions,” and “pacific” and “moral conquest,” all of which they contrasted as vigorously as possible with iron-fisted Germans, money-grubbing Brits, and barbarous empire-builders of the past. Empire also became entertainment. Thus, stories about the pitiful state of the less-evolved peoples of Africa and Asia allowed the working classes of metropolitan France to feel better about their own plight. Spectacles of imperial exoticism, meanwhile, told French audiences to be grateful for the beauty and bounty that empire brought them. Legal and bureaucratic barriers, meanwhile, were erected to block immigration from the colonies, thereby ensuring that the fiction of an unproblematic divide between empire and nation could be maintained. All the while, a tiny trickle of exemplary colonial subjects gained something approaching equal status, thus giving life to the eternally-deferred promise that, one day, the empire would either be welcomed into the French homeland, or freed to form homelands of its own.⁷⁵

But none of these practical workarounds and post-facto ideological justifications could fully release the tension at the heart of the “French imperial nation-state,” and this tension would

⁷⁴ On the ambiguous sovereignties of high imperialism, see: Pierre Singara vélou, *Tianjin Cosmopolis. Une autre histoire de la mondialisation* (Paris : Seuil, 2017)

⁷⁵ Laure Blévis, « La Citoyenneté Française au miroir de la colonisation. Étude des demandes de naturalisation des ‘sujets français’ en Algérie coloniale », *Genèses* 53 (Dec. 2003) : pp. 25-47; Wilder, *French Imperial Nation-State* ; Cooper and Burbank, *Empires in World History*.

necessarily be felt most acutely at the gateways between empire and nation. Perhaps the most influential interpretation of this tension comes from the historical anthropologist Gary Wilder. In his 2005 book, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, Wilder argues for a holistic and dialectical understanding of French nationhood and imperium.⁷⁶ Since French historiography's "imperial turn," he points out, historians had, in some sense, traded turns identifying imperial influences in the republic and republican influences in the empire.⁷⁷ In the process, however, historiography was reifying the existence and heuristic utility of a dividing line between nation and empire. In reality, he argues, the French imperial nation-state was a "doubled political formation" that necessarily "generated recurrent structural impasses."⁷⁸ Wilder defined this political formation as an "internally contradictory artifact of colonial modernity that was simultaneously imaginary and real, abstract and concrete, universalizing and particularizing, effective and defective, modern and illiberal, republican and racist...", and insisted that the "antinomy between universality and particularity" needed to be "work[ed] through," and not "act[ed] out."⁷⁹

Wilder situates his work in the conjuncture of the Interwar, when for the first time in French history, subjects from the colonies came to the metropole in vast numbers, many in the hope of settling there. By their very existence on national soil, these interwar immigrants – some of whom had defended France in the war – triggered something of an ontological crisis of nationhood. At the same time, networks of French officials attempted to root an appreciation of the empire firmly

⁷⁶ Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Wilder built on decades of research into the co-constitution of the French nation-state and empire, regarding everything from state centralization in the 17th century to revolutionary ideals in the 18th and industrialization in the 19th.

⁷⁷ On the "turn," see also: Emmanuelle Saada, "More than a Turn? The 'Colonial' in French Studies," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 32, n. 2 (Summer, 2014): pp. 34-39.

⁷⁸ Wilder, *French Imperial Nation-State*, 20.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 20, 21-2.

in the metropole, in the hopes that the notion of Greater France could become a veritable identity.⁸⁰ This latter effort culminated in the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931, an event on which Wilder understandably places great emphasis.⁸¹ Live entertainers were imported from the colonies, and entire palaces and villages were “recreated” for the pleasure of perhaps some 30 million visitors.

Among the structures built for the occasion was the *Palais de la Porte Dorée*, the façade of which was laced with a vast bas relief. In the bas relief, every colony in the empire is personified as men, women, and children, dressed in “typical” garb and with racialized physiognomies. The dramatic, Art Deco figures work tirelessly to harvest the particular bounty of their land, which they lift up towards ships and planes leading to France. As Wilder notes, historians have understandably emphasized the simulated and fantastic aspects of the exposition, but the real work of imagination may have been taking place elsewhere. After all, the organizers of the exposition were, in their own way, eminently realistic in their belief that ordinary French people needed to realize how interconnected they already were with their empire. Suggesting that every colony was a *petit pays* with something particular to offer to a universal *mère patrie*, the exposition recognized what others refused to see: namely, that the divide between empire and nation was an artifice of French culture and the ideology of the Republic. The organizers, in this sense, were attempting to defuse the ticking time-bomb of the French imperial nation-state.

⁸⁰ The Interwar marked the highwater mark of economic ties with the colonies. Moreover, millions of colonial subjects had worked or actively served on behalf of the war effort. The campaign for Greater France was, in this sense, an effort to consolidate and enshrine the realities between European France and overseas France. At the same time, the campaign was rooted in fear and anxiety; designed to head off nationalist and communist movements, secure steady funding from the government, and prevent French citizens from ignoring their empire altogether.

⁸¹ Arguably, the early-1870s was a similar conjuncture, in the sense that the definition of citizenship was thrown open just as a regime staked its claim to power on its unwavering commitment to a nation of sovereign citizens. The nation-making project of the regime, which it saw as a question of survival, necessarily called back into question where the world of empire began and ended. After all, if, intellectually the republic was built on the fantasy of two separate worlds, the physical connections between empire and nation were both undeniable and in need of explanation – nowhere more so than in Marseille. p. 37-8: colonial exposition was a utopia and a heterotopia advertised to those who did not want to take oceanic voyages to see the empire; designed to make people feel like citizens of Greater France.

Conclusion.

Arguably, the visit to the steamship *Sindh* in *Tour de la France* should be read as an early, hesitant step towards the same objective. Fouillée needed to find race and empire a place in the republican nation. Lacking a perfect container, she stuck race and empire in the steamship. However deliberately, this educator of generations of French children had chosen the only venue available. The floating city, after all, was uniquely capable of choreographing the troublesome connections between nation and empire, of putting race in its place, and transporting, literally or vicariously, French people to the colonies and back. That said, the steamship raised as many questions as it answered. To understand why requires briefly revisiting the concept of heterotopia, as Michel Foucault conceived of it.⁸²

Foucault conveyed the concept of a heterotopia in opposition to utopia. Utopias, as he put it, “are fundamentally unreal spaces”; that is, “sites with no real place ... that ... present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down....”⁸³ As such, utopias “afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold...”⁸⁴ Heterotopias, on the other hand, are “real places ... which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”⁸⁵ Foucault offered many examples of heterotopias – everything from

⁸² Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses : Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris : Gallimard, 1966). The most explicitly elaborated description of heterotopias, however, comes from a 1967 lecture, posthumously published as, “Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies.” *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49.

⁸³ Michel Foucault (translation by Jay Miscowiec), “Of Other Spaces : Utopias and Heterotopias.” 3. Available online at: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2021).

⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An archeology of the human sciences* Preface (London: Routledge, 2005), Preface, XIX.

⁸⁵ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 3-4.

gardens and cemeteries to barracks and brothels – but one example stood out above the others: “the ship,” he wrote, “is the heterotopia par excellence.”⁸⁶

True to form, the steamship *Sindh* of the *Tour de la France* fits all the conceptual hallmarks of a heterotopia. Heterotopias, Foucault explains, juxtapose “in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”⁸⁷ So it is in the *Sindh*, just back from China, which evokes the many destinations of its itinerary, as well as the ill-defined homelands of the sailors and hard laborers [*hommes de peine*] aboard. These many places can be visited, in a sense, by the boys in a single space, all without the inconvenience of explaining the intertwining paths of France and the many races that power its eastbound ocean liners. Entry into heterotopias, Foucault elaborates, is either “compulsory . . . or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications.”⁸⁸ Again, the trip to the *Sindh* takes on a ritual format, following the repentance and absolution of Uncle Frantz and the declarations of fraternal love between the orphaned brothers of Alsace-Lorraine. Throughout the tour, moreover, the boys repeatedly note that certain chambers of the ship can only be accessed with explicit permission, or by specific people at certain times, thus enhancing both the mystery and meaning of the space. Heterotopias, Foucault later claims, either “create a space of illusion that exposes every real space” or “their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.”⁸⁹ The *Sindh* is decidedly the latter. Inside it, all is planned, self-sufficient, and customized. The result is a neat opposition – perhaps even a substitution – to the strange landscapes leading to Marseille and the oddities within it.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

It is worth emphasizing once more, however, that the *Sindh* is not a utopia. For while the ship arranges the messy, overlapping realities of the French imperial nation-state into a tidy, self-contained unit, the space is not meant to provide escapism or fantasy. Rather, according to the logic of the *Tour de la France*, it is a real space; as real as the prairies of Auvergne, the cattle of Normandy, or the fish soup of Provence. Yet this real space is the vehicle for the contradictions of a republican empire, and this inescapable fact leads even the unparalleled rhetorical craftswoman, Fouillée, to fail to find a satisfactory language for what the boys experience in the *Sindh*. After all, in contrast to the consolation afforded by utopias, heterotopias “are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names [and] stop words in their tracks...”⁹⁰ Thus, the *Sindh* is a “city,” a “building,” and a “house.” It is occupied by a cacophony of categories: people “from all the *pays* and almost all the races of man”; “yellow” races and “black” races; “olive”-skinned Chinese people, “wild-eyed Arabs,” and “Algerians”; “sailors” and “hard laborers.” It remains remarkably unclear, however, where these categories overlap, where these people come from; and where they are going. And that is precisely the point. The floating city of the French imperial nation-state was useful, necessary, *and* inherently problematic. Fouillée was weaving together the infant Third Republic’s most influential expression of national solidarity. Inside the heterotopia of the *Sindh*, readers encountered the frayed outer edges of the imperial nation-state’s fabric.

⁹⁰ Foucault, *Order of Things*, XIX.

Chapter 4. A City on the Sea: Society, Urbanity, and the Trans-Suez Ocean Liner

Fouillée's *Tour de la France* was not the only French bestseller to take readers inside a "floating city" in the 1870s. Six years before its publication, Jules Verne placed the metaphor in the title of his novel, *Floating City (Une Ville flottante)*, which he based on an earlier transatlantic crossing aboard the colossal British steamship, the *Great Eastern*.¹ Neither authors' choice of metaphor was terribly novel. Since the biblical Noah's Ark, or the Platonic Ship of State, humans have looked at the world and likened it to a ship. In the late-19th century, however, people increasingly looked at the ship and imagined it as a world – or, at the very least, as a city.

Unlike Fouillée's nation-making portrayal of the steamship, Verne had little reason to render his novel's floating city a paragon of tidiness and order. After all, Fouillée, as discussed in the last chapter, had powerful motives for attempting to substitute a model ship for the messier realities of Marseille and the French Empire. By contrast, Verne's meticulously detailed novel labors under no patriotic burden. Thus, while it marvels at the proportions, machinery, and self-sufficiency of the ship, the book also depicts workers dying in onboard accidents and passengers fighting amongst themselves, all while carrying on a robust debate about whether humanity surrendered its agency by unleashing such titanic creations of industry. In the end, the novel sides, somewhat softly, with the optimists over the Cassandras, suggesting that readers ought to give in to the enchantment of engineering and go wherever it is that the strange new ship of modernity is taking them.

But while Verne painted an ambivalent portrait of the *Floating City* of the 1870s, he grew fascinated by a more pessimistic vision of the ocean liner over the 1880s and 90s.² In his 1895

¹ Jules Verne, *Une Ville flottante* (Paris: Hetzel, 1871).

² Verne's changing perspective is touched upon in Burgess, *Engines of Empire*, 225; 277.

novel, *Propeller Island (L'Ile à hélice)*, he reimagined a ship-city on an even more immense scale, this time having been commandeered by society's super-rich, who are determined to escape the chaos and filth of *terra firma*. In one of Verne's many prescient visions, *Propeller Island* depicts an artificial island inhabited exclusively by (mostly American) millionaires and billionaires who seal themselves off from class inferiors.³ Inside their propeller-powered island, these idle rich wander the Pacific Ocean in a state of constant and total comfort, their every desire satisfied by electrical engineering and imports. Eventually, their floating city, "Standard Island," descends into civil war and the parent company behind the venture goes bust. In a catastrophic conclusion of shredded metal, cyclones, and all-penetrating darkness, the novel reveals the consequences of their hubristic effort to force human society into the ship-like shape of a billionaire's utopia: "Of the marvellous Standard Island there now remained only a few scattered pieces, like the sporadic fragments of a shattered comet, floating not in space but on the surface of the vast Pacific."⁴

In this chapter, I explore the extent to which Verne's nightmarish picture of social segregation was unfolding in the actual "floating cities" of the age of steam. What, I ask, did society look like in, and from, a trans-Suez ocean liner? To begin to answer that question requires opening the "black box" of transoceanic and trans-imperial steamships and treating the metaphor of a city not merely as a fanciful aside, but as a proposition.⁵

³ Jules Verne, *L'Ile à hélice* (Paris: Hetzel, 1895).

⁴ Jules Verne, *Propeller Island* (Rockville: Wildside Press, 2008), 184. The imagery of the comet is striking in its evocation of another of Verne's sci-fi commentaries on capitalism, *La Chasse au météore* (Paris: Hetzel, 1908). In that story, a meteor racing towards earth turns out to be made of gold, leading to massive economic speculation and a battle between nations over the coming gold rush.

⁵ Much as one might analyze the model cities of an airport today, or a universal exposition in the 19th century (the rather significant difference being that a ship moves through space). By "Black box," I refer both to the famous 'black boxes' of airplanes today, which keep a hidden record of the flight, and to Bruno Latour's use of the concept, for example in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) to denote the process of increasing opacity accompanying technical success and evolution.

For many, the ocean liner certainly represented a tempting substitute for the crowded and chaotic cities of Europe and its Empires. Over the 19th century, cities had become identified by upper-class publics with clamoring poor and shape-shifting conmen, gender bending urbanites and frenetic crowds, disease, filth, and pollution. In the second half of the century, city officials and planners of all stripes stepped up the counterattack against these urban iterations of the “social question,” in an attempt to pacify the city and place its laboring masses.⁶ In a vision that veered in and out of practice, noxious inner-city cemeteries would be replaced by grassy parks. Packed marketplaces of rickety stalls would make way for airy arcades and gigantic department stores built of glass and steel.⁷ Damp, dark, and winding alleys would cede to linear networks of boulevards and paved streets that were patrolled by policemen, illuminated by electric streetlamps, and a bit too wide for a barricade.⁸ Working-class masses would be housed formally, either in apartment buildings or snug, single-family homes.⁹ In place of bawdy taverns and brothels, the lower classes would fill their leisure time with popular museums and rotating expositions, window-shopping promenades, and weekend getaways to peri-urban sites of “pastoral” relaxation.¹⁰

Of course, remaking the city by separating its inhabitants in their proper place would entail urban expansion, but metros and trams promised to collapse growing distances. Increasingly, the grinding work of extraction and production would be relegated to the outskirts of cities, while the

⁶ Holly Case, *The Age of Questions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle* (1958).

⁷ Michael Miller *The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain (eds.), *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁸ Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); David Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

⁹ Alexia Yates, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-Siecle Capital* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁰ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

task of transport was buried underground or elevated above it. The modern metropolis promised to be a temple to circulation, consumption, and perhaps even class harmony.¹¹ In a premature declaration of victory, by the 1880s, bored upper-class residents of mega-cities like London and Chicago began venturing out in search of untamed urban life (often with a policeman in tow, just in case). “Slumming,” as the practice came to be known, suggested that the Belle Epoque city had been largely pacified. After all, the parents of the “slummers” sought not to locate the city’s underbelly, but to escape it.¹² In colonized, and “semi-colonized” metropolises, as western enclaves enjoyed the fin-de-siecle apex of colonial power, tours of the “native quarters” offered elites similar entertainment.¹³

At the same time, however, an emerging set of cultural anxieties pointed to new problems within urban mass society. For as urban inhabitants were pried out of illegible spaces and swept into planned spaces like boulevards, rail stations, and department stores, they increasingly resembled coursing crowds of mindless bodies. In the late-19th century, social theorists and medical experts thus began to reconceive the problems of urban living. Perhaps, they argued, the problem was no longer that urban masses were stubbornly, willfully attached to primitive habits that impeded good governance. Rather, perhaps the urban masses – increasingly unmoored from “traditional” social distinctions – no longer knew what to do with themselves at all. Gawking onlookers on the boulevard; panicked commuters in the railway station; newspaper addicts;

¹¹ Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna : Politics and Culture* (New York : Knopf, 1980); David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹² Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹³ On urban planning in the French Empire, see: Michael G. Vann, “Of Rats, Rice, and Race: The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History,” *French Colonial History* 4 (2003): pp. 191-203; and, Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). On slumming in the native quarter, see: Clare Clarke, *Late-Victorian Crime Fiction in the Shadows of Sherlock* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

nervous kleptomaniacs in the department store: such figures seemed to be passive bundles of nerves waiting to be agitated by outside forces.¹⁴ In the thought of Gustave Le Bon, or more nuanced theorists like Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel, a passionate, generative, and ongoing debate surged forward, which hinged on the constitution and desires of the individual relative to the crowd and collectivity.¹⁵ In a sense, the urban problem was flipped on its head: what the masses were doing to the city now became reconfigured as what the city was doing to the masses. As the city became a spectacle in itself, some despaired, but others breathed a sigh of relief, for at least a spectacular metropolis would keep people occupied during their off-hours and together in one way or another.

In the 1870s and 80s, as coal-powered ocean liners broke down longstanding engineering barriers and began to be built in steel, a parallel drama of “urban” life began unfolding at sea. An engineerable environment, the late-19th century steamship inspired its owners and elite inhabitants to enact a floating city that could take the good of the modern metropolis and leave behind the bad. In this utopian vision, the steamship would function as a space of perfect social legibility, with passengers and workers explicitly identified and neatly arranged by class, gender, and race. Unlike the promiscuous “wooden worlds” of sailing ships that preceded them, ocean liners would ensure that each group had – and kept to – its own spaces, amenities, and restrictions. In addition to this project of social segregation, the ocean liner increasingly promised constant comfort, amusement,

¹⁴ Forces that included a range of pathologically willful holdouts, from socialists and anarchists to “apache” street gangs and serial killers. Émile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Paris: Charpentier 1883); Orvar Lofgren, “Motion and Emotion: Learning to be a Railway Traveller,” *Mobilities* 3 (Oct. 2008): pp. 331-351; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Gregory Shaya, “The *Flaneur*, the *Badaud*, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, c. 1860-1910,” *American Historical Review* 109 (Feb. 2004): 41-77.

¹⁵ For example: Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (1895); Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903); Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912).

and opportunities for consumption, especially as it became equipped with electricity, refrigeration, and ventilation from the 1880s-forward. On the trans-Suez Canal routes of the *Messageries* and *P&O*, which promised mobile tours of empire in Africa and Asia, white suits and pith helmets once past Suez, whiteness itself was one of those objects of consumption – available to any westerner, at least in theory.¹⁶

But while the ‘floating city’ of an ocean liner was tailor-made to animate elite desires for segregation, comfort, and entertainment, it was also structurally bound to frustrate those desires. In the practice of everyday life, the pursuit of segregation, comfort, and entertainment often became mutually exclusive. In part, these contradictions stemmed from the fact that different mobile elites – company employees, upper-class passengers, and traveling government officials – emphasized and enforced different ideals. Moreover, while bodies could be separated from one another, sensory impressions flowed across physical boundaries. When the right kind of passenger heard, smelled, or glimpsed the wrong kind, it often exposed the steamship voyage “east of Suez” as a mere performance of bourgeois pride and colonial pomp.¹⁷ The utopia of a model city that steamships inspired, in other words, was constantly coming undone. For the ship was not a utopia, but a heterotopia, and once set in motion, the worlds that it juxtaposed would never nestle into one another like Russian dolls.¹⁸ Switching the metaphor, if, from a distance, the liner mirrored urban society and urbane pleasures, viewed up close the reflection was often powerfully disconcerting.

¹⁶ Structurally, the *Messageries* and *P&O* were extremely similar companies. They competed with one another, but only within the protected zone of the Conference System of European shipping to and from Asia, established in 1879. Before then, the two maintained a gentleman’s agreement alternating departures.

¹⁷ “East of Suez” was a ubiquitous geographical referent both among British imperial administrators and in popular culture. Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “Mandalay” (1890), exemplifies the latter (“Ship me somewhere east of Suez where the best is like the worst, Where there aren’t no Ten Commandments and a man can raise a thirst...”). The French equivalent translates to “beyond Suez” (*au-delà de Suez*).

¹⁸ Foucault, *Des espaces autres*; Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

The Trans-Suez Liner

Steamships of the French *Messageries Maritimes* and the British *P&O* intertwined the paths and aspirations of military men and bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and entertainers, tourists, servants, and migrants, men, women, and children, animals and cargo, convicts, and the mentally and physically ill – not to mention the maritime laborers who kept the entire operation running. In designing and defending the intricate social orders that structured transit, shipboard and company authorities had a complex job cut out for them. To varying degrees, passengers were divided by class, gender, age, race, profession, rank, and health.¹⁹ These groups might have different food regimes, cabins, and levels of access to parts of the deck. Every time that a ship began a layover, moreover, the question of who could disembark meant that these hierarchies had to be rearranged. Finally, the collection of beating hearts aboard the ship included animals kept onboard for dairy, meat, and labor (or as cargo), which had to be maintained in their own pens, well away from some human dwellings, though all too close to others. Compounding this immense labor of categorizing passengers and keeping them within their boundaries, liners were sites of postal service, coaling, and the vast Rubik’s cube of cargo shipping before containerization (passenger liners often earned half their revenue from cargo). Indeed, on the return trip alone of a busy Marseille-Shanghai voyage in 1880, no fewer than 52,657 packages entered and exited the ship – and that was excluding commercial cargo.²⁰ To approximate the composition of such ships today, imagine combining a container ship, makeshift migrant boats, a touristic cruise-liner, a military transport, a coal plant, and a barn; then packing them all into one vessel and sending it out to sea for a month or two.

¹⁹ Professional, labor, health, and civil/military distinctions will all be explored in more depth in later chapters.

²⁰ “Voyage Report of the Anadyr, n. 12, Marseille-Shanghai (14 June 1880),” 1997 002 3943, Association French Lines (AFL), Le Havre, France. On the same voyage, the King of Siam’s ambassador and his suite were onboard. They were so delighted with their treatment that they asked to charter the ship for the King. One of their conditions, however, was that the *Messageries* would promise not to carry cargo during the King’s cruise.

Generally, *Messageries* and *P&O* ships left Marseille with their highest numbers of passengers during the Winter and their lowest in the Summer.²¹ On routes where nearly every voyage witnessed deaths onboard from heatstroke in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, slightly cooler temperatures were no mere luxury. Other seasonal factors came into play as the companies' ships wound their way across the Mediterranean and through the Suez Canal, down the Red Sea and through the Bab-el-Mandeb straits, across the Indian Ocean either to Southern Africa, Australia and Oceania, or through the straits of Malacca and into the Seas of China and Japan – before doing it all again in reverse.²² The lunar calendar of Islamic pilgrimage, for instance, could pull in large contingents of pilgrims, especially Indonesians riding the route westward between Singapore and the Red Sea.²³ When the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean died down in one direction, to take another example, passengers who might otherwise opt for affordable dhows were funneled into steamship traffic. The contracts of indentured and seasonal laborers from India and China also sent influxes of passengers into the ships of the *Messageries* and *P&O*. Tourist season in popular destinations like Egypt, meanwhile, sent wealthier passengers flowing into the route. Finally, the rhythms of military deployment determined when and whether hundreds of troops would join the temporary residents of the floating city.

While the number of passengers fluctuated with seasons and the rhythms of global mobility, it is possible to get a sense of dimensions and their evolution over time. Along what was often referred to as the “China Line,” ships grew in capacity, until maxing out around 2,500 people – roughly what the *Titanic* carried when it sank in 1912, and where the race to fit ever more people

²¹ To save time and avoid the infamously choppy waters of the Western Mediterranean, Straits of Gibraltar, and the Bay of Biscay, the *P&O* funneled much of its traffic through Marseille.

²² For the “China and Japan Line,” layovers generally took place in Naples, Port-Saïd, Aden or Djibouti, Bombay or Colombo, Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kobe and Yokohama.

²³ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Messageries Maritimes*, 432.

into steamships ended.²⁴ At the end of the 1870s, it was typical for a *Messageries* ship to transport 400 passengers round trip between France and East Asia.²⁵ In the late-1880s, that number was closer to between 600 and 800.²⁶ By 1910, it was not unusual to find *Messageries* steamships carrying 1,200 passengers at a time, and in extreme cases, such as troop and worker transportation during the First World War, China Line ships carried upwards of 2,500 passengers.²⁷

To these figures must be added the ship's workers. In 1880, *Messageries* crew sizes averaged around 100 workers.²⁸ By the turn of the century, the average size was closer to 200 on the new ocean liners, which included officers, commissaries, head mechanics and mechanics, doctors and nurses, carpenters, sailors, coalers, service workers for the decks, and chambermaids.²⁹ Less than half of those workers were likely to be registered in the formal roles of the merchant marine. To complicate matters even further, employees were often hired and fired en route. In *Messageries* crews from this period, roughly half tended to be labeled "European," within which French citizens – especially Corsicans, Provencaux, and Bretons – were the largest contingent. The other half, alternately labeled "Indigenous" or "Non-European," were mostly Somali and Arab inhabitants of the Red Sea littoral, and Chinese, Vietnamese, and Malaysians recruited in Hong Kong, Saigon, and Singapore. Another substantial contingent of so-called "Indigenous" shipworkers hailed from Madagascar and the Mascarenes.

²⁴ For the time being, at least, since today's largest cruise ships can carry over 6,000 passengers.

²⁵ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Messageries Maritimes*, 432.

²⁶ Eugène Beauclerc, *Voyages pittoresques à travers le monde. De Marseille aux frontières de Chine* (Paris: Taillandier, 1900), 2.

²⁷ « Voyage Report of the Pei-Ho, Marseille-Saigon, 2 July 1916." 197 002 4254, AFL; "Voyage Report 19, Athos, Marseille-Yokohama, 5 October 1916." MM 46, CCIMP.

²⁸ "Etat de la navigation française pour le 1^{er} Semestre 1880, Aden." Bombay Consulate, 104PO/1, Centre d'archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Nantes, France.

²⁹ Bonnetain and Tillier, *Histoire d'un paquebot*, 60 ; Joseph Tremble, "Correspondance de Joseph Tremble," Letter of 12 Sept. 1901. Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://dtriaud.free.fr/1901-09-12.htm> (Last accessed: 4/5/2021).

Who were the passengers these workers served? Again, generalizations should be taken with a grain of salt. That said, an underoccupied ship-captain in 1886 offers a useful snapshot of clientele. As the *Messageries* slowly emerged from the economic downturn of the mid-1880s, the captain of the steamship *Oxus* took advantage of a relatively quiet series of “China Line” voyages by quantifying all his passengers by nationality or ethnicity. As could be expected, the results painted a picture of a wildly diverse floating city. Over the course of three round-trip voyages between Marseille and Shanghai, the *Oxus* had transported 517 French; 290 Chinese; 152 English; 51 Dutch; 45 “Arabs”; 40 Indians; 37 Italians; 35 Germans; 31 Japanese; 30 Spanish; 20 Siamese; 15 Cambodians and “Annamites”; 13 Malays; 12 Portuguese; 12 Swiss; 7 Belgians; 6 Americans; and a smattering of Egyptians, Russians, Hungarians, Austrians, Greeks, and Javanese. As for their breakdown by class, one of the voyages revealed that 17.7% were in first; 22.6% in second; 14.7% in third; with the remaining 45% in 4th class (i.e., the deck).³⁰

Those proportions, which are consistent with voyage reports two decades later, reflect a longstanding *Messageries* strategy of cultivating wealthier clientele through an appeal to refined aesthetics, superior cuisine, and dignified service. The *P&O*’s pitch, by comparison, tended to hinge on extravagant, orientalist decor and onboard sports, and most competitor lines tended to have larger portions of passengers who dwelt not in cabins, but in dormitories and on half-sheltered decks.³¹ As one *Messageries* captain explained after interviewing passengers on his late-19th century ship, France’s chance to survive the brutal competition of international shipping depended on ensuring that, “after a few days, a passenger becomes somebody on our ships, whereas on

³⁰ « Voyage Report n. 26, *Oxus*, Marseille-Shanghai and return (16 Dec. 1886) »; “Voyage Report of the *Oxus*, 17, Marseille-Shanghai and return (10 August 1886),” 1997 002 4239, AFL.

³¹ “Voyage report of the *Tonkin*, n. 10, filed 8 May 1908.” 1997 002 4337, AFL.

English ships he is only a cabin number...”³² Again, though, attempts to quantify and categorize passengers must be situated in the contingent realities of movement along a sprawling route, as the ‘floating city’ hurdled across oceans. When the travelogue author Eugène Beauclerc set out on a *Messageries* ship going from Marseille to Shanghai in 1899, for instance, he had almost 800 co-travelers, many of them soldiers. By the time he left the ship at Saigon, however, only a dozen of the original travelers remained.³³ As the ship completed the last leg of its outgoing voyage and prepared for the homebound trip, other populations – everyone from migrant workers to diplomats and tourists – would board, composing a new mobile community with few traces of the older one.

Compared to packed liners of Transatlantic counterparts like the *Hamburg-America*, *White Star*, *Cunard* or *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique* (CGT) – those celebrated icons of “metropolitan modernity” –, the trans-Suez steamships of the *Messageries* and the *P&O* might appear like manageable operations.³⁴ After all, with their stark seasonal rhythm and complex, contingent patterns of expansion and contraction, ships “east of Suez” often found themselves with only a few hundred passengers at a time. However, as one *Messageries* captain griped in 1885, “when 400 people are put together in first and second class on a ship they are necessarily unwell and what is tolerable for a six-day crossing between England and America is no longer so when one must remain at sea for thirty days, half of which are in hot climes.”³⁵ The captain mentioned only his 1st and 2nd- class passengers, begging the question of what would be “tolerable” when

³² “Voyage report of the Armand Behic, Marseille-Noumea and return, 30 April 1892.” 1997 002 3943, AFL.

³³ Beauclerc, *Voyages pittoresques*, 2, 84.

³⁴ Trans-Suez liners lie between what has been described as the “metropolitan modernity” of Atlantic liners and the “peripheral modernity” of tramps: Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Music Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 41; Josef Konvitz, “The Crisis of Atlantic Port Cities, 1880-1920,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, n. 2 (1994), 297-303. On transatlantic passenger traffic, see: Drew Keeling, *The Business of Transatlantic Migration between Europe and the United States, 1900-1914* (Zurich: Chronos, 2012).

³⁵ “Voyage Report of the Yarra, Marseille-Noumea and return, n. 13 (15 Dec. 1885).” MM 549, CCIMP.

those four hundred were thrust into contact not only with one another, but with troops, workers, migrants, animals, and cargo.

Planning the Floating City, 1870-1930s

To plan the ‘floating city’ in a way that satisfied the desires of elite passengers, the owners and operators of companies like the *Messageries Maritimes* and the *P&O* embarked on a frenzied process of boundary-making and amenity-adding, all of which necessitated elaborate acts of on-board concealment. Unleashed in the 1870s and 80s, this process culminated in the 1920s and 30s. As the surface area and capacity of ocean liners expanded, shipping lines divided and subdivided classes of traveler. Adding amenity after amenity to the traveler’s experience, company directors ensured that with each new perk offered, a new process of distinction and exclusion unfolded – a first-class piano, for instance, existed to be touched by first-class hands, but also to be preserved from the touch of second-class hands. And there were multiplying pianos to play and protect. In the 1880s, in response to popular demand, the instruments proliferated across *Messageries* and *P&O* ships.³⁶ By the 1920s, “popular demand” demanded nothing less than onboard orchestras.³⁷ Likewise, growing cries in the 1880s for more reading material led sparse onboard bookshelves of useful reference materials to transform, by 1900, into sumptuous reading rooms filled with novels, publishinghouse stalls, and literary subscription services.³⁸ Libraries and reading lounges, printing presses and music halls, ice machines and bars, smoking rooms, and childcare: these and many

³⁶ “Voyage Report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Shanghai (18 August 1884),” MM 264, CCIMP; “Voyage Report of the Iraouaddy, China and Japan Line (8 January 1888),” MM 264, CCIMP; Gaston Bonnefont, *Le tour de nos colonies en 365 jours* (Paris: Delhomme et Briguet, 1894), 111.

³⁷ “Voyage report 6 of the Andre Lebon, Marseille-Yokohama (30 May 1920),” MM 20, CCIMP; “Voyage report of the Andre Lebon, n. 1, , Marseille-Yokohama (January 1922),” MM 20, CCIMP.

³⁸ “Voyage Report of the Melbourne, Marseille-Yokohama (22 May 1891),” 1997 002 4228, AFL. Verne offers a sense of the evolution of onboard libraries, pianos, and printing presses in *Floating City* (London: Son Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1876), 59-62; 91-2.

other amenities became critical to pleasing certain passengers and were, therefore, to be zealously protected from others.

On ships combining travelers from vastly different walks of life, the task of social sorting was formidable. Soldiers were to be separated from civilians, with levels of success and consequences that will be explored in greater depth in later chapters. Registered prostitutes were given separate quarters, with passengers and crew forbidden from visiting whichever part of the ship they inhabited.³⁹ “Non-European,” “indigenous,” or “native” workers, as they were categorized by the companies, had to be lodged separately from European co-workers, according to formal and informal labor regulations. The result was a ship that mirrored multi-ethnic colonial cities, with a “European quarter,” “Arab quarter,” “Chinese quarter,” and so on. A detailed guide to *Messageries* steamships from the late-1880s painted a rosy picture of these separate living arrangements: “Over here... in a recess with stacked bunk-beds [*lits de camp*] are piled in the nineteen Chinese boys [of the crew], entirely comfortable where ten Europeans could not live.”⁴⁰ Nearly identical dynamics reigned on *P&O* ships, which relied massively on “lascars” – a catchall category for South Asians and other ship-workers recruited across the Indian Ocean world.⁴¹

While this multiracial workforce was sorted into hierarchies of race and status, most workers, regardless of race, were to be hidden from view as best as possible. Accordingly, their lodgings were meticulously designed and re-arranged to avoid contact with paying passengers, and even with workers of different races and ethnicities.⁴² Thus, trans-Suez ships had at the very least

³⁹ “Correspondance Diverse de l’Iraouaddy : bord au directeur (11 Nov. 1892),” MM265, CCIMP.

⁴⁰ Bonnetain and Tillier, *Histoire d’un Paquebot*, 79. [“A côté... dans un réduit à lits de camp superposés, s’entaient les dix-neuf boys chinois, fort à l’aise là où dix Européens ne pourraient vivre...”].

⁴¹ Occasionally, even sailors from outside the wider Indian Ocean world were categorized under Lascar articles. On lascars, see: G. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and Worldshipping, c. 1870-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴² “Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, n. 23, Marseille-Shanghai and return (23 Nov. 1878),” MM46, CCIMP; “Voyage Report of the Yarra, n. 11, Marseille-Yokohama and return, (24 May, 1902),” MM559, CCIMP; “Rapport

a “European kitchen” and a “native kitchen.” The latter rotated on an ethnic basis: when occupied by “Arab” workers, it appeared in company reports as the “Arab kitchen”; when occupied by Chinese, Vietnamese, or Malagasy workers, it was the “Chinese kitchen,” etc. Ethnic difference, or its perception, would decide how the post was equipped.⁴³

Shipping lines made one prominent exception, however, to their general policy of rendering workers invisible to passengers. For certain colonial subject workers, labor doubled as colonial pageantry. East and Southeast Asian “boys” as they were called in both French and English, became part of the voyage experience; not just visible, but on display. If toiling coalers and deckhands were positioned and maneuvered to be concealed from the passenger’s view at all times, the exact opposite held for the “pankah”-fan operators and service “boys” employed aboard trans-Suez liners. Costumed for the pleasure of the passenger, such workers were to be visible at all times. Their role in the ship allowed for a rehearsal of colonial power relations that was tailor-made both for uninitiated passengers aspiring to colonial trappings and returning colonials keen to maintain the feeling of white superiority.⁴⁴ Along with chambermaids and stewards, of course, all service workers were supposed to be on call at a moment’s notice.

While trans-Suez ships of the late-19th and early-20th centuries typically had only a few chambermaids aboard, they transported significant numbers of female and male domestic servants. Often, these servants were connected to European women, who began traveling east of Suez in growing numbers toward the turn of the century, both because of a perception of increased safety

sur la situation morale et matérielle des T.I. embarqués à Saigon le 18 Décembre 1939 sur le S/S SI KIANG des Messageries Maritimes à destination de MARSEILLE,” Fonds Ministériels DT 94, Archives nationales d’outre mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France.

⁴³ “Dossier: Chinois, Athos, rapport de 15 Mars 1917.” MM46, CCIMP. On ships of the *Messageries* and *P&O*, company orders were often translated and posted in the languages of the workers in those quarters.

⁴⁴ See: Julia Martínez, Claire Lowrie, Frances Steel, and Victoria Haskins, *Colonialism and Male Domestic Service across the Asia Pacific* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 137-67.

and comfort, and because of state policies designed to unite white families in the colonies.⁴⁵ Increasingly, passengers insisted that a *modern* ocean liner should separate its passengers beyond different classes of men by providing special spaces and amenities for women, children, and domestic employees.⁴⁶ By the early-1900s it had become de rigueur for ships to have women's lounges and bathroom facilities, and rules forbid women from being placed in the roughest sections of the deck.⁴⁷ By the 1920s, meanwhile, ships were increasingly outfitted with "game rooms" for children.⁴⁸ As for the domestic workers who tacked between familial groupings, company handbooks laid out rules limiting how and when they could move between classes to the strict minimum. Like ship-workers, these rules depended on race, subsumed within a divide between "Europeans" and "Natives," or "non-Europeans."⁴⁹

Even deck-space, the obvious space where social distinction might unravel, fell under the all-dividing hand of those who ran the *Messageries* and *P&O*. Well into the 1870s, deck-space on most steamships was cluttered with rigging and machinery, but as the (back-up) sails came down and innovations in ship design found less in-the-way places for these obstacles, decks began to open up as never before. To prevent the expanding deck from becoming an unruly commons, late-

⁴⁵ Women had traveled trans-Suez long before the turn of the century, but a key actor in attempting to expand the number of women travelers was the *Société française d'émigration des femmes*, formed in 1897. See: Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20; 39-48.

⁴⁶ Late additions to the liner, women's facilities and children's rooms were often the first to be sacrificed for urgent needs ranging from VIP accommodations to jail-cells for convicts. For growing demands, see: "Voyage Report of the Sa ghalien, n. 4, Marseille-Noumea (14 June, 1883)." MM 458, CCIMP. For VIP accommodations, see: "Voyage Report of the Australien, Marseille-Yokohama (20 Feb. 1905)." MM 58, CCIMP. For use as prisons, see: "Voyage Report of the Chili, Marseille-Yokohama (3 Nov., 1915)." MM 128, CCIMP.

⁴⁷ One writer described women aboard a state-of-the-art liner in 1914 as "blushing with pleasure" as they slipped behind new doors "whose polished window bore one simple word: *Dames*." Eugène Brioux, *Au Japon par Java, la Chine, la Corée: Nouvelles notes d'un touriste* (Paris: C. Delgrave, 1917), 2.

⁴⁸ Jeanne Marie Méchin (née Saillard-Manou), "Un voyage de Marseille à Saïgon en 1923 à bord du Paul Lecat. 1923," Letter of Nov. 4, 1923. Available online at: <http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/paulecat2.htm> (Last accessed: 4/4/2021).

⁴⁹ "Livret d'itinéraires et de tarifs des Lignes de l'Océan Indien (15 Feb. 1884)." MM 591, CCIMP.

19th and early-20th century employees of the *Messageries* and *P&O* laced the space with ropes, curtains, barriers of wood and metal, and menacing signs.

But if asked what kind of floating city they were building, ocean liner operators would likely highlight a cutting-edge technological infrastructure over their penchant for social sorting. In addition to possessing electric lighting before many towns in France or Great Britain, the floating cities of the *Messageries* and *P&O* were early showcases of refrigeration, industrial ventilation, and communication systems.⁵⁰ New material possibilities licensed shipping lines to embrace ambitious goals: “The problem can be summarized like this,” wrote a captain of the trans-Suez lines in 1885: “to make the passengers perceive as little as possible that they are aboard a ship...”⁵¹ To attempt such a sleight of hand would no doubt have seemed farcical to earlier generations of seafarers, but as the ship became equipped with the infrastructure of the Second Industrial Revolution, anything seemed possible.⁵²

The *Messageries* and *P&O* began installing electrical lighting on their ships by the late-1870s. Still relatively scarce and unreliable, this early electrification was dedicated to special events like onboard balls and galas held for the upper classes.⁵³ By the mid-1880s, after many small fires and fights, leading trans-Suez lines like the *Messageries* and *P&O* were mastering

⁵⁰ Refrigeration did not lead to the removal of animals from ocean liners, as passengers continued to demand living animals and fresh dairy, and ships continued to be called upon to transport livestock. “Voyage Report of the Yarra, n. 6 (June 1884).” MM 549, CCIMP; “Voyage Report of the Yarra, Madagascar Line, n. 19 (14 Sept., 1909).” MM 551, CCIMP.

⁵¹ “Voyage Report of the Yarra, n. 8, Marseille-Noumea (28 July 1885).” MM 549, CCIMP. [« Le problème peut se résumer en ceci : faire que les passagers s’a perçoivent le moins possible qu’ils sont à bord d’un navire et, qu’ils trouvent autour d’eux toutes les commodités, le confortable et luxe (un peu voyant sans doute) que l’on rencontre dans les hôtels de premier ordre. »]

⁵² A popular American travel guide of the 1880s captured the expansive futurity of the moment: “While sitting on deck some afternoon, you may be at a loss for a subject to think about. Busy yourself with imagining what will be the style, model, speed, and propelling force of the transatlantic ship of twenty, fifty, a hundred, and five hundred years hence! Here is enough to occupy you for many hours, and perhaps you may devise something that will benefit the human race, and, also, not the least consideration, put money in your pocket.” Knox, *How to Travel*, 47.

⁵³ “Diary of a voyage in the REWA 10 July – 9 August, 1883,” MS83/085, JOD/179, Caird, NMM; Madame Laure Durand-Fardel, *De Marseille à Shanghai et Yedo. Récits d’une Parisienne* (Paris: Hachette, 1881).

electrical lighting and expanding its use in their steamships. Thus, a captain on the exhausting trans-Suez route between Marseille and Nouméa (in the South Pacific), could report in 1885 that, at last, his electrical lighting “functioned without discontinuity, with a perfect regularity.”⁵⁴ While his ship’s generators occasionally showed signs of being overworked and overheated by the effort, the captain confidently predicted that the imminent installation of “artificial ventilation” would ensure that it “will be less exhausting in warm regions” (within two decades, those “artificial ventilators” were no longer just for cooling down central generators, but were becoming fixtures of upper-class cabins).⁵⁵ In his report, the captain also called for more electrical lighting, especially in the form of high-power projectors.

It was a timely request. That year, the Suez Company authorized nighttime navigation, meaning that any company with electricity-enabled ships could steal precious hours of travel time and race ahead of their competitors. Just as the shipping industry ventured deeper into the night, so did passengers in search of a good time. As a *P&O* circular informed its employees in 1907, “in light of the exigencies of modern travel” crews were to keep the lights on in “Saloons, Music and Smoking Rooms” until at least 11:30 p.m., hours later than had previously been the rule.⁵⁶ Passengers glimpsing the electrified liners from the vantage point of humbler vessels described the powerful “illumination” as “a festival on the sea.”⁵⁷ Soon, the electrical lights became so bright that captains complained they could no longer distinguish the horizon,⁵⁸ and ships began to blind

⁵⁴ “Voyage Report of the Yarra, 13, Marseille-Noumea (15 Dec 1885).” MM 549, CCIMP.

⁵⁵ “Commissary Report of the Tonkin, Marseille-Noumea (24 Feb. 1902.” 1997 002 4254, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Djemnah, Madagascar Line, 2 (26 Dec. 1909.” MM 165, CCIMP.

⁵⁶ “Circular 22nd July 1907 (41),” PO/69/1, Caird Library and Archive, National Maritime Museum (NMM), Greenwich, United Kingdom. Earlier regulations set closing time around 9 p.m.: “Circular of 1st January 1871,” PO/69/1, Caird, NMM.

⁵⁷ Xavier Brau de Saint-Pol Lias, *De France à Sumatra par Java, Singapour et Pinang. Les Anthropophages* (Paris: H. Oudin, 1884), 107.

⁵⁸ “Voyage Report of the Tonkin, n. 11 (15 May 1906).” 1997 002 4337, AFL.

each other in the Suez Canal with ever-more powerful projectors.⁵⁹ This invasion of the night was interrupted only during the First World War, when liners cut their lights to avoid the German submarines that preyed on traffic in and out of the Suez Canal.⁶⁰

While the new material infrastructure of the ocean liner gave travelers air and light to interact, other prized improvements in the ship-scape gave them the possibility of avoiding one another. By the turn of the century, trans-Suez liners were increasingly integrated by wired and wireless communication devices controlled by switchboards. As one captain raved in the 1880s, thanks to his new communications system, known as the “Chadburn machine,” he could direct his workers without speaking to them. Now, he simply telegraphed orders to his crewmembers, each tucked away in their various corners of the ship. As he put it to his directors,

the Chadburn apparatus functioned marvelously and I completely abandoned the use of a loudspeaker. Beyond the advantage that one has with this instrument in conserving a given order, one has another advantage, no less precious, of cutting out the use of words. The less one speaks during maneuvers, the better it goes, and all sailors know the danger presented by the exchange of useless words with hot and nervous tempers.⁶¹

The Chadburn machine drastically reduced the difficulty of coordinating labor at sea. As with other communication devices then being installed, the result pointed to a diminution of physical interaction on-board. Inside passengers’ cabins, for instance, a parallel system of “electrical bells” and “ringers” increasingly permitted passengers to simply press a button and receive the service they needed, all without ever bothering their neighbors or venturing into crowded spaces.

⁵⁹.”Circular n. 186 (5 September 1893).” PO/92/2, Caird, NMM.

⁶⁰ “Voyage Report of the Polynésien, Marseille-Yokohama and return (22 Nov. 1904),” 1997002 4254, AFL.

⁶¹ “General Report of the Yarra, Marseille-Sydney, n. 6 (June 1884),” MM 549, CCIMP. [“L’appareil Chadburn a merveilleusement fonctionné et j’ai complètement abandonné l’usage du porte-voix. Outre l’avantage que l’on a avec cet instrument de conserver l’ordre donné, on a celui non moins précieux de supprimer l’usage de la parole. Moins on parle dans les manœuvres, mieux cela vaut, et tous les marins savent le danger que présente l’échange de paroles inutiles avec des natures inflammables et nerveuses...”]

Thanks in part to the marketing of shipping companies, a humbler invention was doing something similar for passengers: the deckchair, or chaise-longue. Sold at company offices, the deckchair went from being proof of one's travel savvy to becoming a basic necessity in a remarkably short period of time. By the 1890s, one captain could dryly write, "today, being a passenger, whether 1st class or 4th class, military man or native [*indigène*], consists of having a chaise longue."⁶² Seasoned maritime observers lamented the rise of the deckchair in ways that would seem all too familiar to a 21st-century *flâneur*, weaving between smartphone-wielding pedestrians.⁶³ For, like the smartphone, the deckchair allowed passengers to be in public while effectively disappearing into their own worlds. As a result, it literally inhibited circulation on the deck. A French travelogue-writer described the scene with comic relish as his ship powered through the Red Sea in 1900:

despite the pitching, everyone sets up on the steamship deck, and it's a curious thing this agglomeration of *chaises longues* adorned with sleeping men and women, the abundant and bulky chairs lined up in two or three rows, all along the rail. From time to time, one hears the monotone of snorers taking a siesta, cradled by the sea, sweat on their foreheads... A few courageous walkers struggle to circulate through this mess [*capharneum*] of wicker, canvas, and bamboo...⁶⁴

The image is almost reminiscent of Seurat's iconic painting *Un dimanche après midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte*, in which residents of the belle époque metropolis spend their leisure time together,

⁶² "Voyage Report of the Melbourne, n. 9/10, China Line (4 June 1898)," 19970024228, AFL. [aujourd'hui, être passager, soit I^{er} c., soit IV^e cl, soit militaire, soit indigène, cela consiste à avoir une chaise longue.]

⁶³ One captain even prophesied growing conflicts over the blocked decks: "Je pourrais citer maints passagers qui apportent gratuitement et disposent sur le pont une chaise longue, un fauteuil de dimension exagérée et une chaise ou pliant ordinaire. J'en ai fait la remarque à divers agents et j'estime qu'un remède sérieux devrait être apporté en l'espèce car la promenade si goûtée par beaucoup de passagers, devient impossible; la circulation gênée, même pour une seule personne, et je ne serai pas étonné de voir un jour des conflits s'élever entre des passagers de goûts et nations différents." "Voyage Report of the Yarra, 22/23 (13 Nov. 1897)." MM 559, CCIMP.

⁶⁴ Beauclerc, *Voyages pittoresques*, 15. ["malgré le tangage, tout le monde s'est installé sur le pont du paquebot, et c'est une chose curieuse cette agglomération de chaises longues garnies de dormeurs et de dormeuses, de fauteuils nombreux et encombrants alignés sur deux ou trois rangs, le long du bastingage. De temps en temps, on perçoit la note monocorde des ronfleurs qui font la sieste, bercés par la mer, la sueur au front [...] Quelques promeneurs courageux s'efforcent de circuler à travers de capharnaïm d'osier, de toile et de bambou...].

while studiously ignoring one another.⁶⁵ Indeed, one can picture the passengers staring out over the water, together in blissful isolation; spectators in a city on the sea.

The objectives that animated the planning of the ocean liner – comprehensive social separation, constant comfort, and ample opportunities for consumption and entertainment – took wing in the 1870s and 80s and reached their apogee in the 1920s and 30s. For consumer publics, postcards, model ships, publicity pamphlets, and posters invited them to the show. The use of postcards exploded in the late-19th century, and lines like the *Messageries* and the *P&O* made sure to have abundant cards available to passengers.⁶⁶ Given that the ship functioned as a temporary address for senders and receivers of mail, and that postcards often bore the image of the ship in which a passenger was traveling, correspondence reinforced the impression of liners as places where one lived, however temporarily.⁶⁷ But postcards of the trans-Suez liner offered something more than a reassuring sense of place. With images of the populations of port-towns along the route and simulated tours of “native quarters,” they promised a taste of empire in transit. Here, such postcards communicated, was a trans-imperial tour fit for any European: the faint of heart could remain on the high deck and amuse themselves by tossing coins into the water below, where the diving boys of Aden, Zanzibar, or Colombo would plunge deep into the water in pursuit of them; while more courageous travelers could “slum” it in the native quarters or ride out their layover in rickshaws.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 259-67.

⁶⁶ On the globalization of the postcard, see: Marie-Eve Bouillon, “La cartepostale,” in Pierre Singara vélou and Sylvain Venayre (eds.), *Le magasin du Monde, la mondialisation par les objets du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 2020), 232-236.

⁶⁷ Beyond postcards, connections between the steamship cabin and a permanent home could be reinforced by scrapbooks, photography, passenger newspapers, and onboard mementos.

⁶⁸ Henri Gervès’s “croquis d’escale” postcards, which covered each layover of the *Messageries* from Djibouti to Japan and sold over 132,000 copies between 1924 and 1929, typify the genre. Jacques Schirmann, *Gervès: peintre et marin* (Gerfaut, 2006), 101. Images of the coin-tossing ritual also appeared in popular magazines like *The*

Other steamship publicity images preferred to emphasize instead the ocean liner's ability to contain and arrange multitudes. In popular, cross-section images, ships were portrayed transparently, as if undergoing an x-ray. Within such images, the floating city appears in its entirety, in one of two ways. In one style of cross-section, the ship is diagrammed without inhabitants at all, its compartments and machinery labeled for perfect clarity. But in the other, more fanciful, style of cross-section, compartments are portrayed with inhabitants, who are seen enjoying their quarters, leisure spaces, and dining rooms, or toiling away in their workspaces (see figs. 14-16).⁶⁹ Such images were the maritime corollary of cross-section illustrations of apartment buildings and department stores, which littered 19th-century French newspapers and magazines (see figs. 17 and 18).⁷⁰ Among other things, these images celebrated boundaries, teaching viewers to imagine each segment of the ship's population placed perfectly within its assigned space.

Graphic (Nov. 27, 1875). For a discussion of colonial tourism and shipping lines in the Dutch Empire, see: Alexander, *Subversive Seas*.

⁶⁹ Illustrations of the ship, *La Champagne* (*L'Exposition de Paris, 1889* V. 3 & 4), are viewable online at: <https://www.ndl.go.jp/exposition/e/data/L/5061.html> (last accessed: 4/4/2021). Albert Seville, "Normandie – Cross Section – CGT – French Line" (1935); and Albert Seville, "Cross Sectional view of 'Paris' Liner" (1922) can be viewed online as well, at: <https://www.omnibusgallery.com> (last accessed 4/4/2021). A very early example can be found in the "cross section of the Susquehanna," viewable at: https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/black_ships_and_samurai/index.html; a particularly ubiquitous example is in the poster: 'Cunard Line – to all parts of the world,' poster, printed by Thos. Forman & Sons, Nottingham, U.K., 1914, Chromolithograph, in Finamore and Wood, *Ocean Liners*, 15. Viewable, and explorable, online at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/shop/cunard-line-cross-section-print-153217.html> (last accessed: 4/4/2021).

⁷⁰ Marcus, *Apartment Stories*, 20-41.

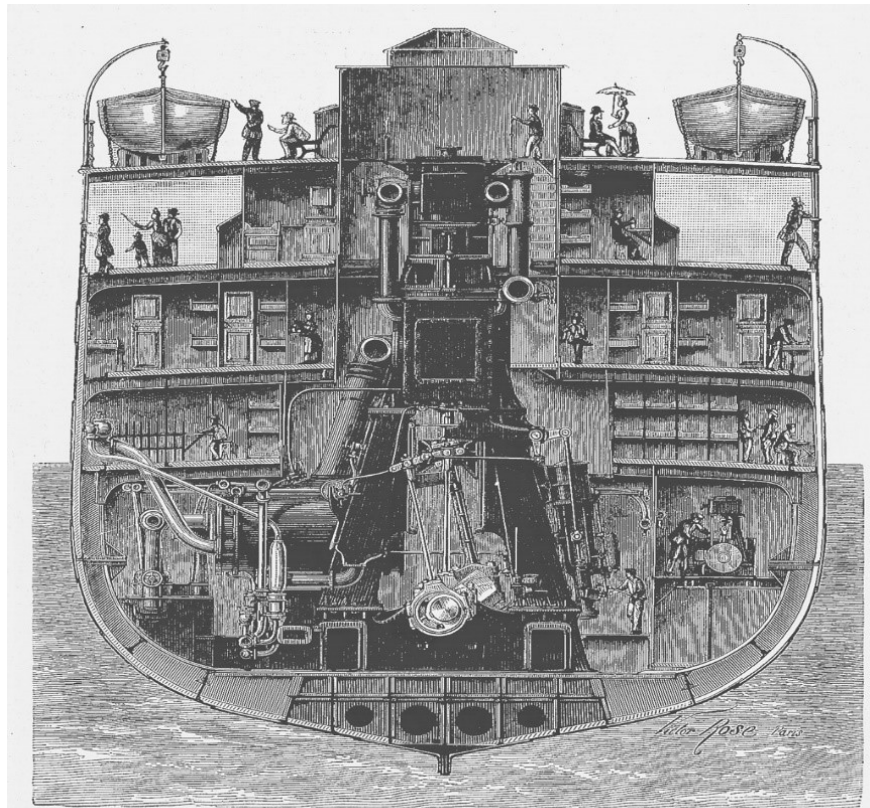


Fig. 5. — COUPE TRANSVERSALE DE « LA CHAMPAGNE » PAR LA CHAMBRE DES MACHINES.

Figure 14. Cross-section image of the “Champagne” with inhabitants (1889-91): Louis Figuier, “Coupe transversale de ‘La Champagne’ par la chambre des machines.” *Les Merveilles de la Science, 1867-1891, Tome 5* (Paris: Jouvett, fig. 180, p. 194.

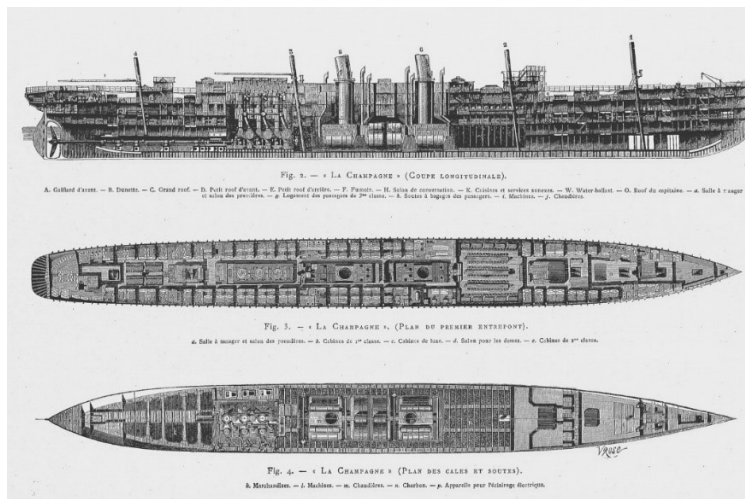


Figure 15. Cross-section image of steamship without inhabitants. Louis Figuier, “Coupe longitudinale de *La Champagne*” (1889-1891) in: *Les Merveilles de la science, 1867-1891, Tome 5* (Paris: Jouvett, 1891), p. 193.



Figure 16. Cross-section image of the Cunard steamship “Aquitania” commissioned by Cunard Lines. Note that the ship has made the transition from coal to oil. Ulrich Guttersohn, “Cunard – To all parts of the world.” Color lithograph printed by Thomas Forman & Sons Ltd. in Nottingham, c. 1914. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 1829-2004).

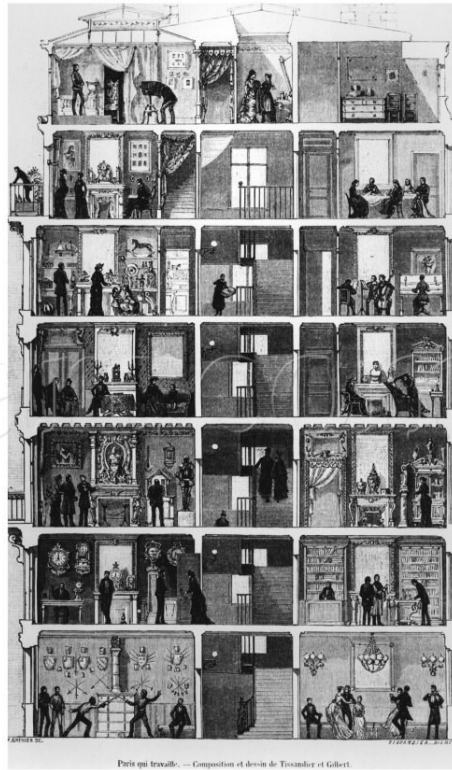


Figure 17. Cross-section of an apartment building. Engraving by Grenier, based on a composition of Tissandier et Colbert, entitled “Paris qui travaille” and appearing in *Le Magasin pittoresque* (Dec. 1883), p. 384.

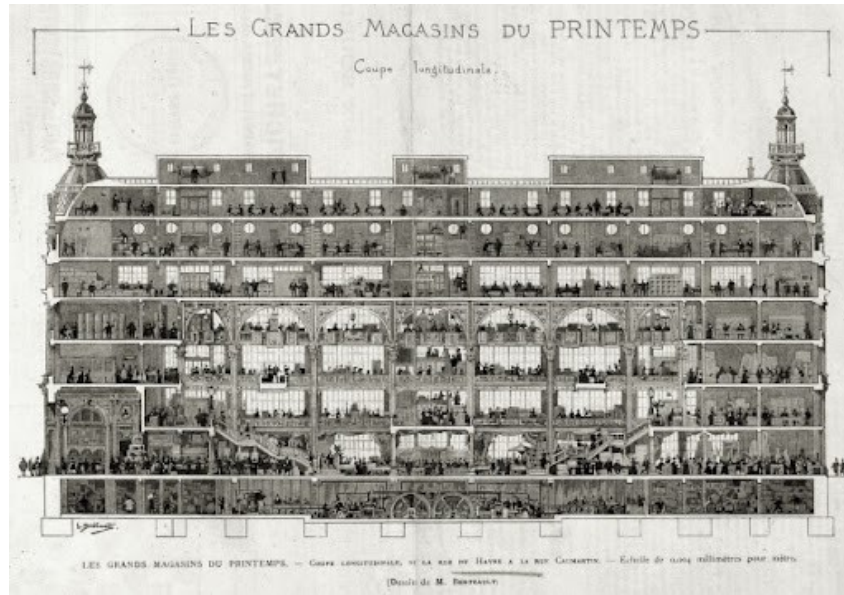


Figure 18. L. Berteault, “Les grands magasins du Printemps, coupe longitudinale de la rue du Havre à la rue Caumartin” (1889). Bibliothèque nationale de France, Estampes et Photographie.

Alongside cross-section images, the production and display of model steamships expanded dramatically from the mid-19th century to the Interwar. Models offered urban and reading publics a view of the ocean liner as the ultimate planned space, while conveying a shared urbanity between ship and city. Produced with incredible skill and expense, model steamships first appeared at international exhibitions in the mid-19th century as showcases of design and engineering. Soon, however, shipping companies realized their potential as permanent publicity, and by the turn of the century, model ships began to be installed and displayed in the metropolitan booking offices of major lines. Thus, in the 1890s, passers-by peering into the impressive storefront windows of the *Norddeutscher Lloyd* (NDL) office in Berlin could admire a massive model of the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*. All around the *Kaiser*, smaller models of NDL ships traced routes across a world map,

their locations updated by office workers every morning.⁷¹ As urban viewers stared into these polished microcosms, they could track the evolution of the ship-scape and its expanding amenities. Many even lit up to reveal the electrical lighting of ships. By the Interwar, models expanded into regional shipping offices, banks, and department stores, and the French C.G.T. even launched a global contest to design a model of its latest ships.⁷² In response, thousands of painstakingly crafted models poured into the French capital.

Parisians themselves, however, had access to a bigger breed of “model ship.” In the 1900 Universal Exposition held in the city, for instance, two of the most successful exhibits took landlocked visitors on steamship voyages: first, in a huge ship that shook and vibrated, made noises and expelled fog; then, in a massive, mobile panorama that simulated a voyage ‘East of Suez’ with the aid of hundreds of live actors who had been recruited by the panorama-painter during a state-sponsored voyage with the *Messageries*.⁷³ While the exposition had to pack up, the virtual steamship voyage became a permanent fixture of a fairground in Paris, *Magic-City*, which survived until the late-1930s (the remains of the grounds were later commandeered by German occupation forces, who eventually destroyed it).⁷⁴

Cross-section images and model ships captured and broadcasted the ideal of a planned, compartmentalized, and yet unfailingly entertaining, steamship society. Meanwhile, publicity

⁷¹ George Schwartz, “A Close up Picture of a mighty project: promotional exhibition models”, in Daniel Finamore and Ghislaine Wood (eds.), *Ocean Liners: Speed and Style* (London: V&A Publishing, 2018), 44.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷³ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 169-70. The popular newspaper, *Le XIXe Siècle*, reported on the preparations for the exhibition in its September 21, 1897 issue: «*M. Louis Dumoulin, débarqué hier à Marseille, de ERNEST SIMONS courrier d'Extrême-Orient, fait un tableau destiné à un panorama ... et dont l'originalité consiste à être animé, c'est-à-dire à avoir tous les premiers plans occupés par des sujets vivants: artistes, artisans, comédiens, etc. du monde entier.*»

⁷⁴ The grounds are mentioned in *Je Sais tout* 1 (May 1914), “*Curiosités*,” 722. *Magic-City* was also famous for being a hub of queer life in Paris. For a project of a amateur historians to retrace its history as a site of queer sociality, see: <http://thisdancerie.blogspot.com/2014/10/magic-city-1900-1937.html> (Last accessed 4/4/2021).

posters and pamphlets hammered home the promise of comfort, excitement, and bliss. Mid-19th century posters and pamphlets tended to present rather dry and informative images of steamships, accompanied by assurances of a line's record of safety, sound nautical engineering, and respectable speeds. By the late-19th century, color lithography and the rise of the mass press changed the game. For a line like the *Messageries*, long accustomed to winning cabin passengers through a reputation for elegance and restraint, the transition was not easy. In conversation with directors in Marseille, one captain of the 1880s admitted as much, as he strategized about breaking into the market of middle-class travelers in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Unless the company placed "huge placards showing a steamship painted in brilliant colors" and surrounded by fat-lettered slogans in "railway stations" and other high-traffic areas, he declared, they would fail to "capture the public mind." While this "recourse to boisterous publicity" was "contrary to our habits," he insisted, it was the only way to win over a middle-brow public in search of "visible luxury" and "fantasy." This public, he warned his bosses, was driven by "absolute necessity of not appearing poor," and for them, "what looks simple is poor."⁷⁵

Such lessons were not lost on the manufacturers and purveyors of ocean liner publicity, which reached its rhetorical climax in the Interwar with the invention of the "Tourist Third Cabin," rising cruise line tourism, and an acceleration in the arms race of conspicuous consumption among first-class passengers.⁷⁶ Increasingly, publicity conjured up a space in which the individual traveler, freed of the burdens of everyday life (including, to some extent, other people), could do and become anything they wanted. Such material tended to portray the modern steamship as a

⁷⁵ "Voyage Report of the Yarra, n. 8, Marseille-Noumea (28 Jul. 1885)," MM 549, CCIMP.

⁷⁶ *Messageries* posters of the 1890s did indeed become bright and "boisterous." On interwar steamship travel, see: Lorra ine Coons, Alexander Varias, *Steamship Travel in the Interwar Years: Tourist Third Cabin* (London: Amberley Press, 2016).

fantasy space where everyone was royalty. A 1931 brochure for the *C.G.T.* ship, *Atlantique*, captures the spirit behind this triumphant escapism:

Who among us has not dreamt of a wondrous voyage, where, in the enchantment of luminous days and the calm of serene nights, we could penetrate the ocean...? Aboard, all would be parties and joys, pleasure for the eyes, easy living [*douceur du vivre*], peace and Happiness. Elegance, luxury, comfort, all would be assembled there to compose the most harmonious setting for our desire to meet satisfaction in every way.⁷⁷

A 1929 booklet for *Cunard*, meanwhile, conveys similar sentiments, but with a more earthly, approach:

Life aboard ship is a little world between two worlds.... A week of existence suddenly cast adrift – suddenly freed from every burden, every aggravation of life ashore... From work, from dull dinner-parties, from telephone calls, from duties, obligations, prohibitions. It is... it *should* be...an enchanted week... with everything in it you like, and nothing in it you don't like... For once, you can do exactly as you like – be gay, or be sleepy; meet the dawn, half way, every morning, or sleep the clock dizzy... Be lazy without reproach, or 'athletic' beyond belief. What kind of week will you choose for yourself? *What kind of ship will give you the materials to make of this week-between-worlds all that it can be, at its superlative best?*⁷⁸

Wild-eyed as such publicity may seem, it found expression in physical features of ocean liners.

By the 1910s, for instance, it had become obligatory for a state-of-the-art liner to possess what was known as the *grande descente*, an ornate, imposing staircase leading into first-class dining salons, the only real purpose of which was to provide wealthy passengers – above all,

⁷⁷ Marcel-Jaques Hemjib, Léon Benigni, “Brochure showing the shopping street *La rue principale*, ‘*l’Atlantique*’ (about 1931),” Collection Saint-Nazaire Agglomération Tourisme-Ecomusée, Victoria & Albert Museum Exposition, “Ocean Liners: Speed and Style” (Feb. 3, 2018-June 17, 2018). My translation. [Qui de nous n’a rêvé d’un voyage merveilleux, où dans l’enchantement des jours lumineux et le calme des nuits sereines on franchirait l’Océan...? A bord, tout serait fêtes et joies, Plaisir des yeux, douceur de vivre, paix et Bonheur. L’élégance, le luxe, le confort, y seraient assemblés pour composer le cadre le plus harmonieux où notre désir rencontrerait toutes les satisfactions]

⁷⁸ “Booklet for Cunard, ‘The New Art of Going Abroad,’” (1929), 6. Victoria & Albert Museum Exposition, “Ocean Liners: Speed and Style” (object code: 38041986015030) (Feb. 3, 2018-June 17, 2018).

women – a catwalk for displaying their finest outfits.⁷⁹ Throughout the 1910s, elevators gave such passengers another option for moving between levels. Passengers on new liners could buy their jewelry, perfume, and fashionable accoutrements without even going ashore, as vast, onboard shopping centers were erected within the ship itself.⁸⁰ By the 1920s and 30s, swimming pools and tennis courts even began to find their way onto the space of upper-class decks. For the captain of the 1880s, who dreamt of making passengers forget they were on a ship at all, the words of one delighted passenger in 1919 would have signaled a mission accomplished:

on our return, in Singapore, we crossed the *Paul Lecat*, the new and truly superb unit of the Messageries Maritimes. The ship is making a sensation, even in Singapore, where, after all, one is used to seeing ships. There are numerous Chinese ladies [attending] in their finest attire. A crowd packs into the grand staircase [and] into the elevator, which proves a great success. For a while, one believes that one is in an exotic store of the latest trends, an exposition day, and not on a ship.⁸¹

Thus, in the Interwar, ocean liner design and its publicity placed an exclamation mark on half a century of ship-scape planning. From the floating cities of the 1870s to the Interwar liner's shopping malls, pools, and courts, the ship sometimes appeared to no longer be a place at all, but rather a dreamworld unto itself. There, individuals were free and unfettered thanks to a social infrastructure of distinctions and a material one of amenities and comfort. In this vision, the floating city enclosed inhabitants within a protected zone of elite consumption, women and workers had their place, and cross-class contact had been planned out of existence. This was a city where arms were forbidden, but where deckchairs were encouraged – and available for sale at

⁷⁹ See: Michelle Tolini Finamore, "Floating in a Dreamland: Fashion and Spectacle on Board," in Finamore and Wood, *Ocean Liners*, 210-227.

⁸⁰ Coons and Varias, *Tourist Third Cabin*. On the 1930s ship, *Atlantique*, the shopping center extended 137 meters and imitated a Parisian boulevard. V&A, "Ocean Liners."

⁸¹ Maurice Rondet-Saint, *Les Randonnées Asiatiques* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1919), 100-1. [...*croisé, a notre retour a Singapore, le Paul Lecat, la nouvelle et vraiment superbe unité des Messageries Maritimes. Le navire fait sensation, même a Singapore, où l'on a pourtant l'habitude de voir des bateaux... Nombre de dames chinoises, en grande toilette. La foule se presse dans le grand escalier, dans l'ascenseur qui remporte le gros succès. Pour un peu, on se croirait dans un magasin exotique de nouveautés, un jour d'exposition, et non sur un navire.*]

company offices. Marked by mechanical reliability, intricate social distinctions, increasingly lavish consumption, and an atmosphere of social tranquility, the ship appeared a planned city, stripped of the menacing or spontaneous dimensions of urban life.

While scholarship has been overwhelmingly concerned with this glossy layer of Interwar publicity and with the century-long *planning* of the steamship, the neglected practices of everyday life at sea reveal a far more fraught, fractious, and chaotic social order. Neither the “defiant race of overseas passengers” as Verne once called them, nor the maritime worker, ever became fully subject to the social norms of elite passengers or the physical constraints imposed by company employees.⁸² Rather, over the course of monthlong, trans-Suez voyages, social and physical boundaries inevitably came under siege. In fact, the ocean liner’s evolving boundaries created new opportunities for spontaneous sociality and transgression.

Class Boundaries

In 1872, the leading French Republican, Léon Gambetta, gave a speech that resonated for decades. Eager to sweep away both the recent memory of working-class uprising and the very present threat of aristocratic and haut-bourgeois anti-republicanism, he prophesied the coming of “a new social stratum” of middling sorts. The rise of this group, Gambetta seemed to suggest, could free France from ruinous class conflict.⁸³ To varying degrees, his hopes echoed in ocean liners: the *P&O*, for instance, experimented with replacing the word “class” with “Saloon,” even if it maintained the logic of intricate distinctions. Other lines, like the *Orient*, even experimented with abolishing class

⁸² Jules Verne, *Une Ville flottante* (Paris : Hetzel, 1871), 10. [“race défiante des passagers d’outre-mer”].

⁸³ Léon Gambetta, “Discours prononcé le 26 septembre 1872 à Grenoble,” in Joseph Reinach (ed.), *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de M. Gambetta* (Paris : Charpentier, 1880-1885, v. 3), 101. For an analysis of the political context in which the speech occurred, and reactions to it, see: Chloé Gaboriaux, “Fonder la République sur les ‘nouvelles couches sociales’ (Gambetta): description du monde social et préférences institutionnelles dans la France des années 1870.” *Histoire & Politique* 1, n. 25 (2015): 12-23.

altogether, selling cabins instead on a fluid price spectrum. Inside the fin-de-siècle liners of the *Messageries*, however, captains proposed a different vision: the time had come, they insisted, for the “radical separation of the classes.”⁸⁴

To some extent, the demand for this “radical separation” was coming from their passengers. Unlike foreign lines, the *Messageries* stubbornly maintained that its 1st and 2nd-classes were essentially two tiers of the same group. Unsurprisingly, this policy did not go down well with many 1st-class passengers. In a scathing newspaper review of *Messageries* service, for instance, a British traveler in 1913 noted in horror that, “Second and first-class passengers all dine together in one saloon at the same tables, at the same time, from the same menu.”⁸⁵ As another elite traveler, G. Verschuur, noted, “neither on the English lines, nor on the German, Dutch or others, is this mixing tolerated.” “In what way,” he wondered, should a boat differ from a railway train?”⁸⁶ Thank god, he concluded, that the newest ships of the *Messageries* would have a “a marked separation for the two classes.” Like electricity or refrigeration, Verschurr, seemed to suggest, comprehensive class separation at sea was a modern necessity.

With surprising results, the *Messageries* tried at different times and along certain routes to install the first-second divisions that its most elite clientele desired. One of these laboratories was the *Messageries*’ newly-opened Australia and New Caledonia Line in the 1880s. In the

⁸⁴ “Diverse Correspondance of the Australien: Letter to the Director (18 March 1890),” MM57, CCIMP.

⁸⁵ “Letter to the editor: Alexandria-Marseilles. An Old Traveller’s Experiences [originally in *Egyptian Gazette*, 1913]” Le Caire, Navigation, 278, Centre d’archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Nantes, France.

⁸⁶ G. Verschuur, *Aux Colonies d’Asie et dans l’Océan Indien* (Paris : Hachette, 1900), 15-16. When the author reached the coast of China, however, he switched to smaller vessels, where he had to begrudgingly accept the necessity of not just allowing 2nd-class people into 1st-class spaces, but 3rd-class people too. The pretext was the fear of Chinese piracy, which he claimed had been rampant in the preceding decades, requiring ongoing vigilance, armed guards, and class mixing (pp. 207-9). [“Ni sur les lignes anglaises, ni sur les lignes allemandes, hollandaises ou autres, ce mélange n’est toléré. En quoi un bateau diffère-t-il d’un train de chemin de fer... ? ».]

Messageries' ideal, passengers would enforce the new class separation autonomously.⁸⁷ One captain bragged that he had accomplished exactly that:

the ban imposed on [2nd class passengers] from using the smoking room and music hall produced an excellent effect. The proof of it is that we did not have to intervene to make the measures respected, the passengers of 1st class having made themselves the police of these reserved spaces. Soon enough, the passengers of 2nd class will have learned the habit of this separation.⁸⁸

For the captain, the self-discipline of passengers would increase in stages. "It will then be possible," he went on, "to accentuate it more without too much harshness, by imposing on them a limit on the deck."⁸⁹ But passengers frequently fought against the creeping class divide – literally, in some cases. In 1883, for instance, 2nd and 3rd class passengers on the line "invaded the smoking room" and blocked anyone from entering,⁹⁰ while in 1887 the two classes clashed physically over their respective boundaries on the deck.⁹¹ Cyclical conflicts continued as late as 1908, when one ship's reports related that 2nd-class passengers simply "invaded the smoking room and refused to leave"; the result was yet another inter-class brawl, along with more bruised and angry 1st-class passengers denouncing the "non-separation of the classes."⁹²

⁸⁷ This may sound familiar to anyone who has ever anticipated the reproachful gaze of a flight attendant, or questioned their ability to speak or act in particular ways on an airplane. The act of transit is an exercise in self-repression. In sites of transit, people have to learn how to move and hold on, what to carry, what to show and not show, how to dress and how not to, what to talk about and what not to (who to talk to and who not), what to consume, how to entertain one's self, etc. On learning processes and self-discipline in transit, see: Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey*; Lofgren, "Motion and Emotion"; Kathy Burrell, "Materialising the Border: Spaces of Mobility and Material Culture in Migration from Post-Socialist Poland," *Mobilities* 3, n. 3 (Nov. 2008): 353-373.

⁸⁸ « Voyage Report of the Yarra, Marseille-Sydney, n. 6 (June 1884) », MM 549, CCIMP. [l'interdiction qui leur [2nd-class passagers] a été faite de faire usage du fumoir et du salon de musique a produit un excellent effet. La preuve en est, que nous n'avons pas eu besoin d'intervenir pour faire respecter cette mesure, les passagers de 1^{ere} classe ayant eux-mêmes fait la police des endroits réservés. Après quelques temps encore, les passagers de 2^e classe auront pris l'habitude de cette séparation. »].

⁸⁹ Ibid. [« Il sera alors possible, » « de l'accentuer un peu plus sans trop de brusquerie, en leur imposant une limite sur le pont. »]

⁹⁰ "Voyage Report of the Caledonien, Marseille-Noumea, n. 2 (filed: 3 Apr. 1884)," 1997 002 3943, AFL.

⁹¹ "Voyage Report of the Caledonien, Marseille-Noumea, n. 8 (filed 18 Aug. 1887)," 1997 002 3943, AFL.

⁹² "Voyage Report of the Caledonien, Australia Line (2 May 1908)," MM 86, CCIMP. [« envahi le fumoir et refusant de sortir. » "non-séparation des classes"].

Where self-discipline failed, perhaps physical boundaries could succeed. In 1896, the *Messageries* experimented with extending the new class separations to their China and Japan Line, including on the decks. As his weapon of choice, the first “China Line” captain to enforce the rule chose “a simple rope hung up across the deck.” But “this measure,” he anxiously reported to his bosses in Marseille and Paris, “offended the sensitivity of a great many 2nd-class passengers who criticized above all the nature of the delimitation.”⁹³ Rallying around a ringleader, the passengers shouted a simple slogan, “What are we, livestock!” and hacked down the rope.⁹⁴ Other 2nd-class passengers took to the “register of claims.” More than a mere suggestions box, the register had to be shared with the state and could serve as official evidence in regulatory and legal proceedings (along with passenger-produced, onboard newspapers and bulletin boards, it was a key element in the written world of passenger society).⁹⁵ The introduction of this socio-cultural black box had been bitterly resented by captains who saw it as surveillance by both the regulatory state and their bosses. In their claim, the passengers demanded limitations on 1st-class mobility, asking why, if 2nd-class passengers could not access 1st-class space, should 1st-class passengers be able to wander wherever they pleased. Grasping for solutions, the captain borrowed a technique from a colleague on the class conflict-ridden Australia Line, who had “hoisted iron frames on the deck, allowing

⁹³ « Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons, China Line, Yokohama-Marseille and return, n. 8/9 (1 May 1896), » MM 194, CCIMP. [*« Pour la première fois sur la ligne de Chine et à bord de l'ERNEST SIMONS, on a établi la séparation des 1^{ere} et 2^{eme} classes sur le pont et le spardeck. Cette mesure, nécessaire à mon avis [...] a froissé la susceptibilité de beaucoup de passagers de 2^{eme} classe qui critiquaient surtout la nature de cette délimitation établie par une simple corde tendue au travers du pont.*]

⁹⁴ « Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons, China and Japan Line, n. 26/1 (10 Jan. 1897).” MM 194, CCIMP. [*« ‘Sommes-nous donc du bétail!’ disaient-ils.* »].

⁹⁵ On passenger newspapers printed onboard steamships, see: Roland Wenzlhuemer and Michael Offermann, “Ship Newspapers and Passenger Life Aboard Transoceanic Steamships in the Late Nineteenth Century.” *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 3, n. 1 (2012): 77-121.

him to constitute a less precarious-looking barrier.” After installing a “mobile barrier of wood,” the captain declared victory: “this separation no longer shocks.”⁹⁶

Workers of the City

While walls of wood and steel might temporarily subdue cabin passengers, workers could not be penned in so easily. As a matter of planning, ship-workers were ever-more aggressively relegated to invisibility in the ocean liner – again, excepting the service side. For service workers who *were* to be seen, a thickening barrage of rules and regulations shaped how they should appear. Throughout the 1870s and 80s, for instance, the *P&O* began demanding perfectly standardized uniforms for all sections of their service workers.⁹⁷ By the Interwar, armies of well-heeled stewards in matching, starched uniforms had become key selling points in publicity materials – such servants could be summoned by pressing a button and dismissed without so much as a tip.⁹⁸ In fact, throughout the period, service workers never ceased socializing, gambling, and partying with passengers (nor for that matter seducing them and shaking them down), as is clear from countless voyage reports and company circulars insisting they stop.⁹⁹

⁹⁶« Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons, China Line, Yokohama-Marseille and return, n. 8/9 (1 May 1896), » MM 194, CCIMP [« des montants en fer hissés sur le pont, permettant de constituer une barrière d'apparence moins précaire. »]. [« barrière en bois mobile ».] [« cette séparation ne choque plus. »]. It was a premature declaration of victory. Later reports from the same line report that 2nd-class passengers adapted: rather than hacking down barriers or organizing protests, they hung about the weak spots in barriers, slipping into first-class quarters one by one.

⁹⁷ “Circular n. 126 (1 Mar. 1882)”; “Circular n. 152 (20th Aug., 1886)”; “Circular n. 153 (2 Sept., 1886).” Circulars, PO 92/2, Caird, NMM.

⁹⁸ The P&O repeatedly ordered service workers not to solicit tips. For example: “Circular n. 152 (17 May 1898),” Circulars, PO 92/2, Caird, NMM.

⁹⁹ “Circular, n. 153 (Aug. 1898)”; “Circular n. 52, ‘Amusements’ (24 June 1909)”; “Circular n. 51 ‘thefts in passengers cabins’ (1 Jan. 1909); PO 92/2, Caird, NMM. In the Messageries, captains continued to complain of “continual infiltration of the crew among the passengers,” and despairing that “everything is a pretext. Music, dances... parties...”: “Commandant Cousin au Chef du service maritime (June 1920),” “Correspondance Diverse de l’Andre Lebon, MM 20 CCIMP.

For coalers and deckhands, though, the effort to conceal the labor behind the steamship's operation and upkeep was increasingly pushed to the point of absurdity. An 1882 company-wide circular of the P&O, for instance, actually chided its workers for working too much. The circular cited the changing needs of their passengers, explaining that "the number of [passengers] on board our Ships who have no objection to be roused up at daylight is, comparatively, very limited indeed," and that "the majority of the Passengers whom we now carry differs very much from what it formerly was...". As a result, the company begged its workers to counter the "unenviable reputation" that "our Ships" have "of being the noisiest Vessels in the world..." For the *new*, modern passenger, directors explained:

a good night's rest means... that they should not be disturbed before 7 o'clock in the morning, and in our judgment the work of the Ship might be so arranged as to diminish the disturbance which now goes on, if not exactly to the level of tranquility of a house on shore, at all events to a point at which no one would have just reason to complain.¹⁰⁰

Striking a sheepish tone, the circular seemed to anticipate the outrage of the workers their directives would reach, upon being asked to work hard, but work quietly; to work long hours, but to work off-hours; to make a ship move, in short, without being seen or heard. In both the *Messageries* and the *P&O*, decades of directives reminded employees to keep to themselves, and to facilitate passenger entertainment without joining it.

But the imperative of concealing labor from passengers provided workers with a new arm in their fight for better working conditions. The owners of steamships had set the bar for resistance rather low, and by simply breaking the fourth wall and revealing themselves to passengers, workers could send their bosses into a panic. In 1884, one *Messageries* captain of the trans-Suez routes identified what he described to superiors in Marseille and Paris as a deeply alarming trend among

¹⁰⁰ "Circular n. 123 (1 Feb. 1882)"; "Circular n. 134 (20 June 1882)," Circulars, PO 92/2, Caird, NMM.

his workers. In his voyage report, the captain explained, “it was only with immense struggle that we brought our voyage to term without apparent difficulties” (his underline).¹⁰¹ “But in this regard,” he elaborated, “there is the sign of a situation that is becoming more and more dangerous and which we must face up to.”¹⁰² The danger, the captain made clear, was by no means “mutiny,” as shipping lines increasingly described the actions of striking sailors. Indeed, as he specified, “they did not frontally attack the authority given to us by law,” so much as the workers, “hacked at it with a series of small acts of indiscipline that approached a refusal to work, without, however, fully arriving at it, so as not to expose themselves.”¹⁰³ Critically, this guerilla strategy relied on public exposure: “these crafty [workers] carefully seek out spectators among the passengers for their little scenes, in such a way as to provoke small scandals and cast a shadow over discipline on the ship.”¹⁰⁴ Here, the Captain declared, was the workers’ new “course of action” and the direct “consequence of orders” issued by militant organizers. Concluding direly, the captain reminded his superiors, “in this there is a dangerous situation for passenger ships” of such “gravity as to compromise the good reputation of our service.”¹⁰⁵ Given the cut-throat competition for international passengers underway among government-subsidized lines like the *Messageries*, any

¹⁰¹ « Voyage Report of the Yarra, Australia Line, Marseille-Sydney, n. 6 (June 1884),” MM 549, CCIMP. [« je suis obligé de dire avec regrette que j’ai eu beaucoup à me plaindre de l’équipage et ce n’est qu’avec beaucoup de peine que nous sommes arrivés au terme du voyage sans difficultés apparentes]

¹⁰² Ibid. [« mais il y a là l’indice d’une situation qui devient de plus en plus dangereux et qu’il est nécessaire de regarder en face. »]

¹⁰³ Ibid. [« On n’a pas attaqué en face l’autorité que nous donne la loi », so much as they « [l’a] parcellé par une série de petits actes d’indiscipline qui, présentent presque le refus de service, sans y arriver cependant, de manière à ne pas trop s’exposer. »]

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. The rebellious crew’s strategy also entailed humiliating subaltern officers, then acting with extreme deference when superior officers arrived on the scene of the conflict; their goal being, as the captain surmised, to completely demoralize subaltern officers while sowing discord within the officers’ ranks. [« Ces habiles cherchent avec soin des spectateurs pour ces petites scènes, parmi les passagers, de manière à provoquer un peu de scandale et jeter un mauvais jour sur la discipline du navire. »]

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. [« ligne de conduite, conséquence d’un mot d’ordre donné. »] [« il y a là une situation dangereuse pour le navire de passagers où, les actes d’indiscipline et de conduite de la part de l’équipage ont une gravité qui pourrait compromettre la bonne réputation de notre service. »].

wound to the company's "reputation" could prove fatal. Over the next three decades, countless other voyage reports from the trans-Suez lines of the *Messageries* attested to the captain's claims, as the workers' guerilla strategy of public exposure and cross-class contact became a crucial complement to conventional acts of mobilization among workers in the maritime sector.¹⁰⁶

In moments when labor tensions reached a boil, moreover, guerilla actions overflowed into veritable occupations of the floating city. And there was no shortage of such moments: in Marseille, the hub of both the *Messageries* and the *P&O*, a new era of syndicalist organization was already underway by the 1870s, but massive strikes broke out in 1900, 1902, 1907, 1912, and in the aftermath of the First World War. When these conflicts rippled out to sea, ship-board officials often found themselves reliant on scabs, unscreened recruits, and agitated workers. In such moments, authorities abandoned the pretense that their workers were silent cogs or pacified props, identifying them instead as men from the city – and the wrong part of the city at that. "Apaches" (infamous Belle Époque street gangs of violent, flashy youth); "vagabonds picked up in the docks," and "hard cases" "drawn from the slums of the port": these labels suggested that a piece of the slums was being set loose in the floating city.¹⁰⁷

In 1920, as shipping lines were perfecting the publicity of a utopian floating city, a *Messageries* ship on a Marseille-to-Yokohama voyage revealed just how thoroughly workers could scramble the logic of social segregation on the steamship. That year, with postwar labor battles at a fever pitch and the French maritime sector gripped by debates over the implementation of an eight-hour workday, workers on the steamship *Amazone* took over their ship simply by living

¹⁰⁶ For example: "Voyage Report of the Caledonien, Marseille-Yokohama ad return, (1 Sept. 1909)," and "Voyage Report of the Caledonien, n. 22, Marseille-Yokohama and return (25 Oct. 1912)," MM 86, CCIMP; "Secretariat à M. le Directeur de l'Exploitation (3 Jun. 1920)," Correspondance Diverse de l'Amazone, MM 6, CCIMP.

¹⁰⁷ "Voyage Report of the Caledonien, n. 22, Marseille-Yokohama and return (25 Oct. 1912)," MM 86, CCIMP; "Commandant Joseph à M. le Directeur (18 Aug. 1914)," Correspondance diverse du Djemnah, MM 165, CCIMP; J.C.H. Beaumont, *Ships – and People* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1926), 111-12.

in it. After protesting their conditions and threatening to stop working, the *Amazone*'s workers were menaced by their captain with replacement by Somali workers recruited at the ship's next layover, Djibouti, on the horn of Africa. In the short term, the threat worked, and a formal strike was called off. But averting a strike had come at a cost, and between Djibouti and Yokohama, the crew took their fight public.¹⁰⁸

First, several sailors crashed a party being thrown by the ship's first-class passengers and barged into the first-class smoking room (*fumoir*) – perhaps the most zealously protected space in the ship and something akin to the private luxury lounges of airports today. As the voyage report related, the sailors “sat themselves down at a table and demanded beers from the waiter,” shouting that “their money was as good as other passengers’ and that they had the right to be served like them.”¹⁰⁹ Turned down, the sailors disappeared, briefly, only to be spotted a moment later stealing sorbets and biscuits from upper-class kitchens. Ejected once again, they were heard ridiculing passengers on their way out the door. The captain repeated his threat: he would respond to any more instances of indiscipline by replacing rebellious European crewmembers with colonial subjects. Again, the threat fulfilled its limited objective and the ship carried on.

Soon, however, the crew's creeping occupation of the ship resumed. Thefts of passengers' belongings spiked dramatically, with workers darting in and out of cabins before they could be identified. The captain, lamenting that, “the investigations I launched did not turn up anything” had to resort to the embarrassing measure of posting signs that read, “Beware of thieves onboard!”¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, the crew continued to parade throughout the hallowed playgrounds of

¹⁰⁸ « Commandant Cochery, Bord de l'Amazone (25 Sept. 1920), » Correspondance diverse de l'Amazone, MM 6, CCIMP.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. [*“s'étant assis à une table ils demandèrent des bocks au garçon qui refusa de servir, ils dirent au garçon que leur argent valait bien celui des passagers et qu'ils avaient droit comme eux à être servi. »*].

¹¹⁰ Ibid. [*“les enquêtes que j'ai fait faire n'ont donné aucun résultat »*] [*« Méfiez-vous des voleurs à bord ! »*].

upper-class passengers. The crew, the captain wrote, “strut about all day from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the forward and rear decks [...] congesting the decks and blocking the passengers.”¹¹¹ The closer the *Amazon* came to reaching its terminus in Yokohama, the more brazenly visible the crew made itself, and the more the captain despaired. “It is very regrettable,” he wrote, “to see the sailors and coalers walking from front to back and on the promenade decks, unke mpt, barefooted, showing off their tattooed chests and arms and mixing themselves in the lives of passengers. At night, they take over the armchairs of the passengers, leading to daily protests.”¹¹² Gone were the crisp uniforms of glossy publicity material; in their place, naked chests, bare feet, and exposed tattoos.

As the social ramparts of his floating city crumbled around him, the captain attempted to physically enclose the intruders:

To keep them from going into the spaces of the upper classes, I had to seal off the communicating doors... for, in doing my daily rounds, I encountered members of the deck and engine crews in the offices of the upper classes every day. I also had closed and blockaded the communicating door situated near the upper class facilities in order to keep out as much as possible the sailors and coalers, who, every meal, would come up to the windows of the *grand salon* [and] make themselves into voyeurs, which was an irritation for the passengers and above all the ladies and young ladies.¹¹³

Sitting on their chairs, eating their food, stealing their items, even peering through the windows and into their sanctuaries: the crew was steadily eroding the barriers that protected upper-class passengers’ power and privilege. The outcomes of this labor struggle and others like it will be

¹¹¹ Ibid. [« les deux tiers de l’équipage, pour ne pas dire les trois quarts, se baladent toute la journée de 8 heures à 16 heures sur les ponts de l’avant à l’arrière [...], encombrement les ponts et ennuient les passagers. »].

¹¹² Ibid. [« Il est très regrettable de voir en cours de voyage ... les matelots et les chauffeurs se promener de l’avant à l’arrière et sur les ponts de promenade, débraillés, nu pieds, exhiber leurs poitrines et leurs bras tatoués se mêler à la vie des passagers. La nuit, ils s’emparent des fauteuils des passagers cause de réclamations journalières. »].

¹¹³ Ibid. [« J’ai dû pour les empêcher de descendre dans la batterie des premières classes, faire fermer et condamner la porte de communication [...], qui conduit dans la batterie, car, en faisant mes rondes journalières, je rencontrais journallement des membres de l’équipage du pont et de la machine dans les cabinets des premières classes. J’ai fait également fermer et condamner la porte de communication située près de l’office des 1eres classes pour empêcher autant que possible les matelots et les chauffeurs qui à chaque repas venaient aux fenêtres du grand salon, faisant l’office de voyeurs, ce qui était une gêne pour les passagers et principalement les dames et les demoiselles.]

discussed in a coming chapter, but for now, I wish to highlight what the episode reveals about the social space of the steamship. For as they moved through passageways that opened and closed, watching through windows, marching through crowded decks, and seizing the abundant amenities all around them, the workers exposed the many boundaries of the ocean liner for what they were in practice: shifting, fragile, and frequently under siege.

“Every Hole in this Immense Anthill”

Militant workers were not alone in undoing the world of social compartmentalization so powerfully conjured up by the ocean liner. Out of curiosity, boredom, or a thirst for entertainment, passengers also crisscrossed the boundaries separating them from the ship’s laborers. Indeed, Jules Verne spoke for many passengers when, before setting off “as a tourist would have done in some unknown city,” he declared that he was “resolved to explore every hole in this immense anthill.”¹¹⁴ When passengers followed his example, however, they often discovered that their ship, like a city, had its own underworlds, *bas-fonds*, and baffling others, leading them both to strange reflections and violent assertions.

For instance, while shipping lines tried valiantly to prevent the practice, curious passengers insisted on visiting the engine rooms of their ships. In the 1860s and 70s, when such underworlds were less tucked away, passengers would literally fall into them.¹¹⁵ As they were removed from passengers, however, the ship’s secret compartments became tempting spaces to explore. In 1895, a medic on his way to Madagascar recounted how a fit of insomnia sent him on a meandering trip that ultimately led to the engine room:

¹¹⁴ Verne *Ville Flottante*, 13; 27 [*résolus alors de visiter tous les trous de cette immense fourmilière*] [*comme eût fait un touriste dans quelque ville inconnue*].

¹¹⁵ “Circular, n. 6 (9 Sept. 1869),” Circulars, PO 92/2, Caird, NMM.

at 2 a.m., not being able to sleep, I get up, I go tour the ship alone...I pass through the different classes. What luxury in the first and second classes, all the cabins are of rare wood with carpets... I head to the rear... I climb down into the engine room, it is forbidden to go in there, the coalers are almost all negros from around Aden, the bosses are Marseillais. It is so very hot in there that I don't stay very long.¹¹⁶

When a junior navy officer on a trans-Suez liner attempted the tour with two friends in a 1901, he too discovered why the shipping lines prohibited it. Two minutes after working their way into the blistering engine rooms, one friend ran back up for air. Minutes later, a second friend “could take no more,” and he too fled to the deck. When the navy officer finished his tour (“last year’s campaign [in the colonies] made me immune to heat,” he insisted), he found his friend “stricken by migraines with splitting pain in his head.”¹¹⁷

As the medic had before him, the navy man decided to learn more about the inhabitants of this sooty underworld, whose labor literally powered his ship. In letters to his parents the day after the tour, he recounted their wages, dietary provisions, and social organization in minute detail. “Two years ago,” he explained:

the coaler union in Marseille wanted to make the Messageries Maritimes Company take on Frenchmen instead of Arabs. The company said they would agree to a trial run – with the Red Sea just as hot as this voyage, so much so that half of the French coalers fell ill, some of them died, and the steamship had to return to Marseille cruising at only six knots.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Raphael Dumand, « Voyage de Marseille à Madagascar, à bord du Polynésien et de l’Ava en septembre 1895 », « lettre du 2 septembre 1895 », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/polynesien3.htm> (last accessed: 4/4/2021) [*“à 2 heures, ne pouvant bien dormir, je me lève, je vais visiter seul le navire... Je passe dans les classes différentes. Quel luxe dans les premières et les secondes. Toutes les cabines sont en bois des îles avec des tapis... Je vais à l’arrière... Je descends dans la chambre des machines, il est interdit d’y aller, les chauffeurs sont presque tous des nègres des environs d’Aden, les chefs sont des marseillais. Il y fait tellement chaud que je n’y reste pas longtemps.”*]

¹¹⁷ Joseph Tremble, « Correspondance de Joseph Tremble », « Lettre du 19 septembre 1901 », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://dtriaud.free.fr/1901-09-20.htm> (last accessed: 4/4/2021) [*“n’en pouvait plus”*] [*je l’ai trouvé atteint d’une migraine avec un mal de tête fou*] [*la campagne de l’année dernière m’a aguerri contre la chaleur*].

¹¹⁸ Ibid., « Lettre du 20 septembre 1901 » [*Il y a deux ans, le syndicat des chauffeurs de Marseille avait voulu obliger la Cie des Messageries Maritimes à prendre des français au lieu d’Arabes. La Cie a dit qu’elle acceptait de faire un voyage d’essai, la Mer Rouge a été chaude justement pendant ce voyage, si bien que plus de la moitié des chauffeurs français sont tombés malades, quelques uns sont morts et le paquebot a du rentrer à Marseille en filant 6*]

Indeed, over the late-19th and early-20th centuries, both the *Messageries* and the *P&O* reached agreements with representatives of the labor movements and their respective governments over the hiring of coalers from outside Europe. The result was a kind of grand bargain in which, unlike their counterparts in the North Atlantic, the *P&O* and *Messageries* retained access to a vital workforce paid cheaply in foreign currencies, provided those workers never passed north of certain latitudes. Restricted from northern latitudes, they were also forced to spend inordinate amounts of their time in the blistering engine rooms below deck.¹¹⁹

Despite the best efforts of shipping lines to keep these men tucked away in the underworld of the ship and hidden within their ethnic “quarters,” coalers occasionally surfaced and collided into the passengers they propelled. During prayer times, for instance, groups of Muslim coalers gained access to parts of the deck that were accessible to paying passengers. At times, these encounters resulted in inter-ethnic conflict and violent assertions of racial, regional, or national pride. The aforementioned medic on his way to Madagascar in 1895, for instance, recounted that soldiers aboard his ship amused themselves by hurling chunks of pork at Muslim coalers who had the misfortune of praying near them: “they are furious,” he observed, “and interrupt their litanies until they can come back later.” Having chased out the Arab coalers, he went on, sailors and soldiers gathered together on the deck “to converse and sing the songs of France,” deep into the night.¹²⁰

nœuds seulement]. For perspective, that estimate of 6 knots would amount to less than half the expected cruising speed of such a liner.

¹¹⁹ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Messageries Maritimes* ; Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*.

¹²⁰ Dumand, « Lettre du Mardi 10 Septembre, 1895 » [... *des soldats mauvais plaisants jettent à cet endroit, des morceaux de lard pour les taquiner ; ils sont furieux et interrompent leurs litanies pour revenir plus tard. Quand le jour tombe, quand la lune monte à l'horizon, les matelots groupés sur le pont avec nous, devisent ou fredonnent des chansons de France.* »].

Other passengers found their encounters with the workers of the ship's underworld more troubling. The French novelist, *Figaro* correspondent, and soldier of empire, Paul Bonnetain (1858-1899), for instance, went into rhetorical paroxysms describing his encounter with Arab and Somali coalers praying aboard the ship that carried him to Indochina in the mid-1880s. During a winding "promenade," flickering impressions "like Chinese shadows" pulled him to the back of the ship. There, a tent meant to conceal the area slouched a little, revealing what he called, in the same breath, a "strange and beautiful" spectacle of "miserable, ugly, and dirty" coalers emerging from the bowels of the ship. Struck by the black coal dust that made the men "appear as blacks," he noted they were "dressed as our European workers in overalls and blue jackets." Mesmerized, he crossed the flimsy barrier of the tent, following the workers as their prayers ended and they slipped beneath the ship, "descending ladders after ladders, slipping one by one between windsocks and pipes." Hovering over the portal through which the men appeared, Bonnetain stared into "the very bottom of the interminable wells" where "a red reflection was dancing: the flame of the coal room." "There it was that they were heading," he concluded, "six meters below the sea, into the hell of the engine room."¹²¹

Bonnetain's long account drips with empathy, despair, and confusion as he describes how a soulless world of coal, sheet metal and "greasy, scorching, and unbreathable air" "was murdering" these martyred workers, who seem to shift races before his eyes.¹²² Many passengers,

¹²¹ Paul Bonnetain, *Au Tonkin* (Paris : Charpentier, 1887), 16-19 [*Ce soir, durant ma promenade sur le pont... C'était étrange et très beau, la prière de ces misérables, laids et sales, vêtus comme nos ouvriers européens de cottes et de bourgeois bleus et qui, juchés très haut, entre la cheminée et les mats, découpaient sur la splendeur du soir leurs silhouettes rapetissées pareilles à des ombres chinoises ! ... Ils saisissaient des échelles après des échelles, tour à tour glissant entre les manches à vent et les tuyaux démesurément grossis aux falottes lu eurs des fanaux. Tout au fond de l'interminable puits un reflet rouge dansait : la flamme de la chaufferie. C'est là qu'ils se rendaient, à six mètres au-dessous de la mer, dans l'enfer de la machine.*].

¹²² Ibid. [*Ces hommes dont les barreaux de fer meurtrissaient les membres ... une odeur de graisse montait, avec des bouffées d'air gras, brulant, irrespirable.*] The coalers are, after all, dressed as "our Europeans"; projecting

after all, only glimpsed coalers when they turned up on the decks in body bags for funerals at sea.¹²³ And yet, before leaving, Bonnetain places a lid on his identification and snaps out of his racial hallucinations. For as a “second shift of coalers” climb out of the inferno, he describes them as “demonic,” as if these inhabitants of the ship’s underworld *belonged* there.¹²⁴ Beginning in the 1920s and 30s, new ocean liners began the transition to oil engines, reducing machine-room crews by roughly three quarters, transforming them into clean and reputable “attendants,” and rendering this half-hidden world of grime and grief a memory.¹²⁵ Before it did, however, countless encounters between the *flâneurs* of the deck and the coalers beneath it revealed something essential about the liner, the underbelly of which was never far, even if it flickered in and out of perception like a magic lantern: while the floating city reflected the urbane desires of metropolitan society, that reflection was disconcertingly warped.

Women and the Place of Race

In her encounter with Lascar sailors on a *P&O* liner heading to Australia, the legendary American journalist, Nellie Bly (Elizabeth Cochrane), was not so different from Bonnetain. As she raced “Around the world in 72 Days” in 1890, Bly’s journalistic dispatches seemed to inaugurate a new era for female travelers. A single, unaccompanied woman, Bly not only beat Jules Verne’s 80-day meter for global circumnavigation (as well as another female journalist attempting the same stunt); she did so without suffering violence, severe stigma, or even particular discomfort. In fact, on

“Chinese” shadows; and so covered in coal that they “appear black,” without being so. The association of coal dust with racial transformation is remarkably widespread.

¹²³ During nighttime burials at sea: Verschuur, *Aux colonies d’Asie*, 24-6.

¹²⁴ Bonnetain, *Au Tonkin*, 19-20 [“la seconde bordée de chauffeurs... Presque entièrement nus, ruisselants, démoniaques, ils se hissaient, avides d’oxygène et de repos...”].

¹²⁵ Beaumont, *Ships – and People*, 110-117, claims that on the “Majestic” engine room teams went from 365 to 81 with the transition. See also, the cross-section poster image of Cunard’s liner cited above, with its sparsely populated engine room manned only by a few technicians.

some legs of her voyage, boredom was often her fiercest adversary. On a *P&O* liner crossing the Indian Ocean, for instance, Bly's search for amusement led her from dry 1st-class singalongs to folksier, and more charming, 2nd-class concerts, until, finally, she began visiting "a dark corner on deck, above where the [Lascars] had their food." There, in rapture, she would "listen to the ... musical chanting that always accompanied their evening meal."¹²⁶ For Bly, the ritual of listening in on the ship's workers was sublime, "better than all" the social offerings of the ship. Soon after that admission, however, Bly, like Bonnetain, snapped back: "doubtless, if I could have seen as well as heard them at their evening meal, it would have lost its charm for me." Perhaps embarrassed at her desire to fully cross this boundary of class and race, Bly insisted that her pleasure was purely sonic, and that she could not countenance the sight of "bare-footed," "surly looking," and "untidy" lascars, "climbing about the ship like a pack of monkeys."¹²⁷

The confident, strident, American woman, alone at sea, wandering the decks and spying on South Asian seamen was publicized as a new breed of female traveler. Whereas guidebooks of the 1880s carefully circumscribed women's onboard mobility and appearance, by the Interwar, the liner had become a central stage for showcasing an ostensibly new woman; who tanned on deck and smoked cigarettes in the day, wore pants to lunch and designer gowns to dinner.¹²⁸ On this arc, Bly came across as a pioneer blazing a path through which women found their place on the ocean liner – increasingly equipped with special facilities for ladies only. But this story misses

¹²⁶ Nellie Bly, *Nellie Bly's Book: Around the World in Seventy-Two Days* (London: Bretano's; New York: Pictorial Weeklies, 1890), chapter 6.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Knox's *How to Travel*, for instance, has a "Special Advice for Ladies" section written by a female friend, which demands a specialized set of clothing and medications for women travelers, covers them head to toe, limits their time on deck, and assumes they will only be traveling Transatlantic: *How to Travel*, 55-64. On new ideals: Michelle Tolini Finamore, "Floating in a Dreamland: Fashion and Spectacle on Board," in Finamore and Wood, *Ocean Liners*, 210-227. For a popular history of the ocean liner as a site of shifting gender norms, see: Sian Evans, *Maiden Voyages* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020).

both the grimmer realities of everyday cohabitation for less privileged women travelers as well as the immense anxieties generated by mobile female elites. In many ways, ships were poorly policed places, and voyage reports and other internal records of shipping lines are defiantly reticent about sexual scandals. Even these tightlipped sources, however, make it clear that women of the floating city received plenty of uninvited attention and harassment. Across the late-19th and early-20th century, for instance, women appear in the records of trans-Suez liners as victims of uninvited “nocturnal visits” by employees; they return to their cabins and find pornography slipped into their beds by passengers; soldiers expose themselves in front of them; occasionally they are even killed in their cabins.¹²⁹ This dynamic was echoed in a growing panic over female passengers on transatlantic liners, increasingly described in the early-20th century as sitting ducks for aggressors and pimps.¹³⁰ Still, in the ideal, events in which women kept to their place, only to be aggressed by male interlopers, could be minimized by separating the genders and monitoring men.

The opposite problem – women out of place – appears more prominently in the records of trans-Suez liners and their inhabitants, and presented no obvious solution.¹³¹ In a retirement memoire from 1926, J.C.H. Beaumont, a career ship doctor on trans-Suez and transatlantic liners,

¹²⁹ « Nocturnal visits »: “Voyage Report of the Djemnah, n. ½, Indian Ocean Line (dep. 25 Oct. 1917),” MM 165, CCIMP; Pornography: “Commandant de l’Australien à M. le Directeur (28 Jul. 1891),” Correspondance Diverse de l’Australien, MM 57, CCIMP; Exposure: “Commandant de l’El Kantara à M. le Directeur (3 Jul. 1906),” Correspondance diverses de l’El Kantara, MM 181, CCIMP; murder: « Meurtre de Madame Salib Bey Claudius, » Affaires Diverses, carton 81, dossier 3 Messageries Maritimes 1909, Le Caire 278, CADN.

¹³⁰ The famous “Cotterill Report,” which ricocheted across the Atlantic Anglophone press in 1913-14, focused extensively on the vulnerability of female travelers, citing the spatial non-separation of the sexes as conditions for pimping and recruiting. Edward Marshall, “MAKES SIX OCEAN TRIPS TO STUDY STEERAGE REFORM; Ernest C. Cotterill Reports on the Bad State of Affairs Among the Immigrants on Some Ships and Offers Recommendations for the Improvement of Conditions,” *New York Times* (Nov. 30, 1913). The piece echoed in the *Sunday Times*; in fact it built on years of similar muckraking coverage, much of which is viewable at the online database: <https://www.gjenvick.com/index.html> (last accessed: 4/5/2021). These concerns even made it to the cinema with Charlie Chaplin’s film, *The Immigrant* (1917), in which the Tramp ends up defending an innocent and vulnerable female traveler from all manner of onboard depredation (while engaging in a fair bit, himself).

¹³¹ As Kris Alexander demonstrates through her analysis of the sexual assault of a Chinese female passenger on a Dutch Interwar liner, “out of place” could apply to race as well. The assault, which touched off a diplomatic crisis, was initially brushed away with accusations that the woman in question, by appearing too western, had invited the attention: *Subversive Seas*, 194-6.

offered both a cringeworthy explanation and a telling map of this oceanic scourge of wandering women travelers. As opposed to “short, cold-weather voyages,” where “climatic conditions are less exacting, and there is less time for romances to mature,” he wrote, women on trans-Suez voyages routinely fell “under the spell of hot weather and starlit nights at sea in the tropics,” losing “control of themselves and yield[ing] to temptations which on shore they would have spumed.”¹³² Matrons tried valiantly “to keep an eagle eye on the unprotected females onboard,” he elaborated, but their power evaporated as one climbed the class ladder. As he explained, “the vigilance extended to the second and even first saloons, but the women there were independent and did not come under ... supervision.”¹³³ Putting a figure to this meandering female specter, Beaumont evoked a wealthy daughter, armed with a “packet of ‘Lucky Strike’” which she “will smoke all over the ship regardless of what anyone thinks about it.”¹³⁴

Beaumont’s view was echoed by countless male passengers who understood – in delight, despair, or disdain – their trans-Suez ocean liners as spaces where women were set loose. Such feelings tended to become particularly acute when searing temperatures in the Red Sea sent scantily-clad cabin passengers to the decks en masse, transforming the floating city’s boulevards into exhibitionist spaces.¹³⁵ But female boundary-crossing was not limited to upper-class, European women. On paper, for instance, female domestic servants had to be placed in 2nd or 3rd class and could only visit their upper-class employers for the time strictly necessary to perform a

¹³² Beaumont, *Ships – and People*, 214.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 214-5.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹³⁵ Gaston Pageot, *A travers les pays jaunes; suivi d’un itinéraire de croisière autour du monde* (Paris : Bibliothèque des Auteurs Modernes, 1909), 15 ; Paul Bonnetain, *Le tour du monde d’un troupier* (Paris : Librairie illustrée, 1882), 132-48 ; Paul Bonnetain, *En mer* (Paris : Marpon et Flammarion, 1888), 17-19 ; Jacobus X., *L’amour aux colonies. Singularités, physiologiques et passionnelles* (Paris, 1893) ; J.W. Darien, *Lettres de voyage : Ceylan, Aden, Egypte* (publisher unknown, 1890), 25-27; 42; 52; Beauclerc, *Voyages pittoresques*, 30-31; 47 ; Edgar Boulanger, *Un hiver a Cambodge* (Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, 1887), 14.

given task.¹³⁶ In reality, though, domestic workers, called in to work or doubling as mistresses, were compelled by their employers to spend time in 1st-class spaces. The result was often scandalized neighbors and indignant onboard authorities. But, for all the outrage, the wealthiest passengers refused to accept that they should be deprived of *their* servants by invisible barriers of race and class.¹³⁷

Because women could not legally be placed on the 4th-class deck, the limited 3rd-class berths available to them regularly became mixed-race spaces that punctured the trans-Suez ocean liner's aspiration to racial segregation. For instance, when a certain Madame Mercier and her daughter traveled from Marseille to Saigon in 1891 to join her husband, a civil servant in Indochina's colonial government, she was shocked to find her 3rd-class room shared by a host of women she considered to be utterly beneath her. Indian women, chewing betel and, to her nose, smelling strongly, packed into the room, followed by the Chinese domestic servants of other passengers. To irritate Madame Mercier further, her only European neighbor, she believed, was a prostitute working for the ship's crew.

The allegation may seem farfetched, but that very year, an Englishwoman named Fanny Epstein was making headlines after she boarded a *Messageries* liner under the alias 'Madame Kahn,' reached Bombay, and set up a brothel. Believed at first to have been abducted by a South Asian man, the revelation of her willful voyage, followed by her equally willful refusal to come

¹³⁶ « Livret d'itinéraires et de tarifs des Lignes de l'Océan Indien (15 février 1884) » Livret divers, Renseignements et documents sur la Marine marchande 591, CCIMP; « Circular n. 121 'Messing of 1st-class passengers' children' (28 Dec. 1881), » Circulaires, PO 92/2, Caird, NMM.

¹³⁷ Bellessort, *En escale*, 219; « circulaire n. 15 (22/7/1919) », Circulaires Bords, MM 567, CCIMP; « réclamation d'un passager réquisitionné de Saigon (28 Sept. 1919), » Correspondance diverse de l'André Lebon, MM 20, CCIMP; Unknown, "diary of a voyage in the REWA, 10 July – 9 August, 1883," JOD/179, Caird, NMM; see also: Alexanderson, *Subversive Seas*, ch. 5; and: Martínez, Lowrie, Steel, and Haskins, *Colonialism and Male Domestic Service*, 137-67.

back to England, nourished fears that shape-shifting female travelers were making ample use of liners.¹³⁸

Whether or not her European roommate was a Fanny Epstein in the making, for Mme. Mercier and her daughter, traveling under a French flag to form a family in the French colonies, the onboard collapse of racial segregation was a thorough humiliation. The horrified Mme. Mercier, like many passengers before and after her, made a loud protest and took to the register of claims.¹³⁹ A more frequent traveler, however, would have known better. For while the trans-Suez shipping lines sold racial segregation and a feeling of white supremacy, these were limited goods, the distribution of which required careful discrimination.

Over and over, voyage reports of the *Messageries* note that “third-class passengers complained of being mixed with passengers of color,” but by their very frequency they reveal the ambivalent position of the shipping lines regarding everyday decisions over segregation.¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, of course, profits were capital, and a *P&O* circular from 1915 spoke for most passenger lines “East of Suez,” when it instructed employees to both discriminate and “go out of [their] way to look after ... the most humble passengers,” explaining:

There is a growing native passenger traffic, and this in the near future may develop even more than the European traffic, and we should do all we can to popularise the P&O with this native travelling public. Discrimination in berthing and seating will, of

¹³⁸ “Fanny Epstein sailed for Marseille, 1891,” File 1766, L/PJ/6/307, British Library (BL), London, United Kingdom. Epstein eventually moved to Marseille where the press and concerned civil society organizations seemed to have lost track of her. See also: David Gilmour, *The British in India: A Social History of the Raj*, 71, 245.

¹³⁹ “Lettre de Madame Mercier, passagère à bord du Djemnah, à la direction de l’exploitation, Saigon le 26 Sept. 1891, » Voyage Reports of the Djemnah, MM 164, CCIMP.

¹⁴⁰ “Voyage report of the Natal, Marseille-Shanghai and return, n. 22 (4 Dec. 1886),” 19970024228, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Oxus, Marseille-Yokohama and return, n. 11/12 (28 May 1888),” 19970024239, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Armand Behic, n. 8, Australia Line (filed 7 Aug. 1902),” 19970023943, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 2 (18 Feb. 1905),” 19970024337, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Tonkin, Marseille-Yokohama and return, n. 2 (24 Dec. 1906),” 19970024337, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 6 (20 Mar. 1909),” 19970024337, AFL.

VR, Armand Behic, Australia Line, 1909

course, be required, and these are matters necessitating care and discretion, so as to avoid the susceptibilities of both races.¹⁴¹

How, then, to “discriminate” while avoiding the “susceptibilities of both races”?

Resolution of onboard conflicts over race and ethnicity depended on contingent interpretations of class and status. Thus, when a Black traveler, M. Butler, complained about his treatment during a China-France voyage in 1889, the ship’s captain brushed it off with a frank admission. “M. Butler being black” (directors underlined the word), on a ship with Americans and English, he wrote, “was from this fact alone disagreeable” to his passengers and “inconvenient” to the crew. “It is no surprise that he should have found life onboard disagreeable.”¹⁴² On a 1902 voyage between Marseille and Saigon, to take another case, a 2nd-class passenger attempted to march “a 3rd-class troupe of Gypsies into the second-class lounge in order to make music.” Here, the ship’s commissary took it upon himself to physically repel the inter-class, inter-ethnic incursion. The angry passenger proceeded to organize sympathizers in protests and to lodge formal complaints throughout the rest of his voyage, but to no avail, for the crew knew they would never have to answer for discrimination against “3rd-class Gypsies.”¹⁴³

When, however, “2nd-class English passengers” protested their exposure to “Indians and Parsis of the same class,” a few years later, the captain “did everything possible to attenuate the issue.”¹⁴⁴ And when a powerful Chinese official traveling 1st-class grew weary of being gawked

¹⁴¹ “Circular n. 60 (23 Sept. 1915),” Circulars, P&O/69/1. Two months later, they began posting onboard information in Hindusthani and other Asian languages. This was part of a larger shift in shipping practices that I will discuss later. Parallel discussions over the evolving class base of the liners occurred around the *Messageries* liner, Armand Behic, whose captain, Croispellier, reflected in 1902 on “the social evolution of our times.”

¹⁴² “Paris, le 29 mai 1889,” in “Voyage Report of the Iraouaddy, China Line, (Winter/Spring 1889),” MM264, CCIMP.

¹⁴³ « Voyage report of the Yarra, n. 19R, Indochina Line (13 Sept., 1902), » MM 559, CCIMP [« de faire descendre à 8h30 du soir, dans le salon des secondes classes une troupe de Tziganes passagers de 3^{ème} classes pour faire de la musique... »].

¹⁴⁴ « Voyage Report of the Armand Behic, n. 6, China Line (28 May 1909),” 1997 002 3943, AFL.

at by curious white co-passengers, he was swiftly granted access to a private lounge where he and his suite could travel in peace.¹⁴⁵ The unwanted attention may have been related to opium, which the captain had allowed the Chinese official to smoke onboard, for it “would not have been very politic to prevent him.” By contrast, a French NCO on the line a few years later found his request to smoke opium onboard promptly and definitively denied.¹⁴⁶

Indeed, as those curious onlookers suggest, if race-mixing within 3rd-class was a humiliation to aspirational Europeans, its occurrence within 1st-class was often entertainment. A French traveler on the trans-Suez routes illustrates the latter dynamic well. In letters to his family that he later published, the passenger recounted that “among the passengers,” he had encountered on-deck after Suez, “is a young couple, a bit worrying at first view, but in fact quite proper, which piques my attention. The woman is European, a Belgian, we’re told, who is married to a rich Annamite [the colonial-era term for Vietnamese].” Scanning their attractive clothing and urbane comportment, the French traveler found himself startled by a newfound tolerance, declaring, “I would have never believed that this cross of a European woman and a man of the yellow race could be so un-shocking.”¹⁴⁷ As for countless others, the boulevards of his liner provided strange encounters and surprising reflections.

Shantytowns of the Floating City

Even for a company built in large part on taste, like the *Messageries*, there would never be enough wealthy white passengers, Asian and African elites, or middle-class aspirants to fill the floating city. Like the *P&O*, the company depended on the masses of migrants who swept through the

¹⁴⁵ “Voyage Report of the Caledonien, n. 17A/18R, China Line (19 Sept. 1899),” 1997 002 4228, AFL.

¹⁴⁶ « Voyage Report of the Nera, Marseille-Noumea, n. 9 A/R (21 Aug. 1903),” 1997 002 4229, AFL.

¹⁴⁷ Pageot, *Au pays jaune*, 1909, 14.

decks of its trans-Suez liners. Shantytown dwellers of the floating city, the treatment of migrants – Levantine people crossing the Mediterranean, Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, diasporic Indian subjects of the British Empire, Chinese labor migrants, and many more – received far less international scrutiny than their white (or “white on arrival”) counterparts on Transatlantic routes.¹⁴⁸ Their presence, however, continuously prompted fears of contagion and stoked tensions with third-class neighbors.

Despite their best efforts, ocean liner captains frequently found their shantytowns closing in on them and the lower-class passengers abutting migrant quarters. An 1882 voyage on the “China Line” laid out a remarkably recurrent dynamic: 72 “pilgrims headed to Mecca” were picked up and packed into a remote corner of the deck where they were “soaked to the bone by water from the sky and sea,” only to touch off a revolt by “European” 3rd-class passengers who resented the “encumbrance of the deck by their persons and a mass of cases and utensils.”¹⁴⁹ Indeed, often enough, the precarious place of migrants in the ship only surfaced in voyage reports when class superiors complained about their wafting odors and unseemly appearances. In a 1906 China Line voyage report, for instance, the captain dismissed 1st-class complaints about the odors and opium-smoking of Chinese migrants on his ship by insisting to his bosses that such inter-class contact was impossible, the migrants having been placed “in a part of the ship that no one can withstand because of the heat.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁹ « Voyage Report of the Oxus, Marseille-Shanghai, n. 13 (24 June 1882), » 1997 002 4239, AFL. [*72 passagers de pont, pèlerins à destination de la Mecque*] [*ils encombrant le pont de leurs personnes et d'une foule de caisses et d'ustensiles – l'avant n'est plus habitable pour les passagers de 3eme classe – Ces malheureux pèlerins en cette saison de mousson de SO ont été trempés jusqu'aux os par l'eau du ciel et la mer ...* »].

¹⁵⁰ « Voyage Report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 11 (filed 15 May 1906), » 1997 002 4337, AFL.

Pressed in by automobiles, infiltrated and bitten by animals, traversed by crewmembers of all races, and crushed by the baggage of others: the suffering of those who inhabited the decks of liners was sometimes enough even to elicit sympathy from captains.¹⁵¹ After all, as far as captains were concerned, it was not them who relegated emigrants to the decks, but rather the shipping agencies. As one captain sarcastically explained in 1905,

native [*indigene*] passengers are very loved by the agencies, which, through insistence, or all too often, through surprise, sign them up. When the count comes due, the real number is always bigger than the announced number. No matter, in effect, the agency's accounts are increased and if, after departure, there are complaints, incidents, protests, it's the crew that will suffer the consequences, so all is well.¹⁵²

Surveying the deck of his early-20th century trans-Suez liner, the captain lamented that, strewn about “the migrant rabble [*migraille*] with children, baggage, women, home equipment,” there were, “stables, rabbits, cages, cows, sheep, pigs, dogs, chickens, pigeons, geese, monkeys, turkeys, crews, Arab coalers.”¹⁵³ Reflecting on the “absolutely shameful” “treatment” of the 3rd-class passengers forced to live near this shantytown, he concluded, “it's Noah's Arc, all is there, including the dove, the only thing missing is the olive branch. Alas!”¹⁵⁴ Indeed, from the 1880s through the 1920s, voyage reports periodically reveal captains rigging extra coverings, bathrooms, and barriers around the deck's inhabitants, both to protect the poor from the elements and the rest from the poor.

¹⁵¹ “Voyage report of the Yarra, Indochina and Japan Line, n. 10/11 (31 May 1896),” MM 559, CCIMP; “Voyage Report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 6 (20 Mar. 1909),” 1997 002 4337, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Caledonien, Marseille-Noumea, n. 2 (3 Apr. 1884),” 1997 002 3943, AFL; “Voyage Report of the Pei Ho, Indian Ocean Line, n. 15 (10 Nov. 1897),” 1997 002 4254, AFL.

¹⁵² « Voyage Report of the Tonkin, n. 2, China Line (18 Feb. 1905), » 1997 002 4337, AFL [*les passagers indigènes sont très aimés des agences qui, soit par insistance, soit trop souvent par surprise avant l'arrivée du navire, en engagent. Et compte fait, le nombre réel est toujours plus grand que le nombre annoncé. Peu importe, en effet, le chiffre d'affaires de l'agence est augmenté, et si après le départ, il survient des plaintes, histoires, réclamations, c'est le bord qui en subira les conséquences ; donc tout est bien*].

¹⁵³ Ibid. [*de la migraille avec enfants, bagages, femmes, ustensils de ménage*] there was a sea of “*Les étables, les lieux, les cages, les boeufs, moutons, cochons, chiens, poulets, pigeons, oies, singes, dindons, Equipage, chauffeurs arabes*].

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. [*c'est l'arche de Noé, tout y est, y compris la colombe, sauf pourtant le Rameau d'olivier. Hélas.* »]

But for all their preoccupations, the floating shantytown was not going anywhere. Over the first decades of the 20th century, as competition over the frustratingly finite number of wealthy Europeans in Asia grew more intense than ever before, the *Messageries*, like the *P&O*, clutched on to migrant traffic for support. The result was another revelation over the shifting demographics of the floating city, and a new round in the endless battle over space, privilege, and sociality. A purser, or account manager, on one *Messageries* liner in 1913, offered an explanation for the process that was far more succinct than the diplomatic circular of the *P&O*: “each immigrant,” he supposedly explained to a passenger, “paid 4 pounds [to cross the Mediterranean] and cost nothing as they fed themselves and paid far better than first class passengers; in fact, they were all profit.”¹⁵⁵

The purser was being quoted by an “Old Traveller” who had penned a letter to a newspaper of the European enclave in Cairo, warning “any others who may be thinking of returning by [*Messageries*] steamers.” In his letter, the “Old Traveller” typified the upper-class desire not just to segregate poor migrants spatially, but also to be rid of their odor, sounds, food; even the very sight of them. On his trip back to Europe, he had encountered “700 emigrants on board, mostly if not all Syrians.... crowded on to the fore-decks.” While these emigrants were “packed into the fore-hold like sardines in a box,” the “Old traveller” insisted it was really the 1st-class who was caged in, for they were “prevented” from moving about the ship by “the concentrated odour arising from such a congested mass of humanity, men, women and children.” But as he and his class peers hid from this menacing miasma, the emigrants crept ever closer: “Whilst I now write,” he declared from his bunker, “third-class passengers are using the promenade deck and native Syrian women

¹⁵⁵ “Letter to the editor: Alexandria-Marseilles. An Old Traveller’s Experiences [originally in the *Egyptian Gazette*, 1913],” Consular Files, Le Ca ire, Na vigation, 278, CADN.

occupy the music saloon and Syrian men the small first-class smoking- room.” As he recorded in horror, “the emigrants” were even “allowed to parade before the windows of one of the ‘luxé’ cabins on the upper deck.”¹⁵⁶ Trans-Suez liners, for which the France-Egypt leg constituted a vital component of the route, had advertised an up-close, yet safe, tour of exotic peoples and colonial power. This was too close for comfort.

Nor, in the eyes of nervous upper-class travelers, was it safe. For as a concerned French consul in Cairo wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the “passenger of means does not like to travel aboard a boat that transports great numbers of emigrants... [he] fears proximity to them... There is, he thinks, a very good chance that for every 500 emigrants that certain ships of the *Messageries* transport, several cases of plague or cholera will be produced.” “These are two species of clientele,” he warned, “of which one makes the other flee.”¹⁵⁷ The spark of disease could, of course, quickly turn into a fire from which no one would be spared. As a ship-doctor put it in 1904, “the pathological story of one is the story of all.”¹⁵⁸ Of course, efforts to isolate the people perceived as vectors of viruses frequently faltered after it was realized that upper-class passengers carried viruses, too. Nonetheless, the specter of ravaging disease puts into perspective the “Old traveller”’s insistence that the “concentrated odour arising from [...] a congested mass of men, women, and children” had prevented his class from moving about the ship.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ « Direction des affaires politiques et commerciales sous-direction du Levant. Confidentielle. Le Consul de Fr. à Alexandrie à M. Poincaré, Min. des aff. Etrangères (5 juin 1912) », Consular Files, Le Ca ire, Navigation, 278, CADN [“Ce sont deux espèces de clientèle dont l’une fait fuir l’autre...] [« le passager aisé n’aime pas voyager à bord d’un bateau qui transporte un grand nombre d’émigrants. Il en craint la proximité [...] Il y a, pense-t-il, plus de chance que, sur 500 émigrants que pourront transporter certains navires des Messageries, il se produise des cas de peste ou de choléra]. From representatives of the *Messageries*, however, the Minister of Foreign Affairs was being told that Germany’s incredible rise was due largely to their near monopoly on Central European emigrant traffic (the lesson being that capturing emigrant flows was the key to surviving a new era of competition.

¹⁵⁸ “Adour, 1904: Marseille-Madagascar (Aug. 8),” Adour, 1898-1907, 200 E 1356, Archives départementales Bouches-du-Rhône (ADBR), Marseille, France [« l’histoire pathologique de l’un, c’est l’histoire de tous. »].

The world of traveling migrants and the lower-class passengers more broadly, is of course, narrated far more often by “Old travellers” than by migrants themselves. One exception can be found in the memoirs of the famous violinist Yvry Gitlis, who migrated to France as a young boy in the 1930s on the *Messageries* liner, *Sphinx*, between Palestine, Egypt, and Marseille. Gitlis felt the sting of stigmatization before he even reached the ship. On a taxi boat that led his family to the *Sphinx*, Gitlis shared space with an English couple, “certainly on their way to carrying out a tour of the Holy land” who looked at them with “the look that one reserves for the ‘natives’ [*indigènes*].”¹⁵⁹ What followed was, in Gitlis’s recounting, “an apprenticeship” and “a little crossing full of teachings” – “and yet,” he had to note, “no one addressed a word to us.”¹⁶⁰ For Gitlis, boarding the ship was a rite of exclusion. Marveling at the army of stewards in crisp white uniforms as they carried the trunks of other passengers, he blushed at the sight of his own family’s “cardboard suitcases.”¹⁶¹ The stewards, strangely, did not help his family at all. Instead, “At the sight of our tickets,” he explains, “they just about kicked us to other end of the ship!”¹⁶²

Gitlis’s journey *into* the floating city only became more disenchanting from there. Crossing what “seemed to us to be kilometers of hallways,” he passed by cabins that “appeared lacquered,” eventually arriving at their quarters: “a hole. A kind of spiral out from which was climbing an abominable odor.” Much like his class superiors, the young Gitlis became fixated on the smell: “And the odor! Even I, who likes the smell of manure, I must say that, there, it was the odor of

¹⁵⁹ Yvry Gitlis, *L’Ame et la Corde* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980). [“*Certainement en train d’achever un tour des Lieux saints*” who looked at the poor migrants “*du regard que l’on réserve aux ‘indigènes.’*”]

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. [“*un apprentissage*” and “*une petite traversée pleine d’enseignements. Et pourtant, personne ne nous a adressée la parole.*”].

¹⁶¹ Ibid. [“*valises en carton*”].

¹⁶² Ibid. [“*A la vue de nos billets, c’est tout juste s’ils ne nous ont pas donné un coup de pied pour nous renvoyer à l’autre bout du bateau!*”].

class. Of shit. It marked me for life. I hope that I will never forget it until my last breath. If I become rich one day, I will not forget it.”¹⁶³

Intriguingly, in 4th-class quarters, Gitlis described feeling both the loneliness of exile and the pain of extreme proximity. On the one hand, better-off passengers and stewards avert their gaze or look at him and his family in scorn, their dwelling is only reached after “kilometers,” and entering it is compared to diving into a “hole.” Throughout, moreover, “no one addressed a word to us” and he became convinced that “the people of other classes had to ignore the very existence of such destitute beings.” On the other hand, Gitlis’s quarters, he recalls, were “near everything, far from nothing.”¹⁶⁴ Inside, they harbored a world: “There were entire families, collapsing under babies, old women from where no one knew... the odor of leaking kitchens and latrines.”¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

Occurring at the Interwar height of ocean liner publicity, Gitlis described a liner which juxtaposed dreamworlds and nightmares, uprooted and resettled identities, and warped space. In the mirror of the ship and his co-passengers, the young traveler recognized himself poor, uncultured, and racialized; just as, presumably, his class superiors saw themselves wealthy, urbane, and belonging to a race apart. The dynamic returns us to the conception of utopian and heterotopian spaces in the work of Foucault, for whom a mirror, “is a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over

¹⁶³ Ibid. [*“des cabines qui paraissaient laquées” and “Des gens qui sortaient des vêtements fantastiques et de valises merveilleuses” “ce qui nous a semblé des kilomètres de couloirs,” “un trou. Une espèce de spirale, d’où montait une odeur abominable.” “Et l’odeur! Moi qui aime l’odeur du fumier, je dois dire que, là, c’était une odeur de classe. De la merde. Ça m’a marqué pour la vie. J’espère que je ne l’oublierai jamais jusqu’à mon dernier souffle. Si je deviens riche un jour, je ne l’oublierai pas.”*].

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. [*“près de tout, loin de rien.”*]

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. [*“Il y avait des familles entières, affalées, des bébés, des vieilles dames venues d’on ne sait où... L’odeur des cuisines et de latrines mal plombées.”*]

there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent.” Likewise, in the ocean liner, a parallel space of shadows and light opened up, allowing inhabitants to place themselves in a mental map of society itself – a city on the sea. Not unlike a universal exposition or airports today, then, liners provided a fantastic canvas upon which to project an idea of urban space and urbane pleasures. This was particularly true from the 1870s to the Interwar, as the word “travel” flew far away from its etymological roots in “travail” and as the “globetrotter” emerged as a cultural figure, “trotting” across oceans as if he were out for a walk in a park.

And yet, just as mirrors are part utopia, part heterotopia, the ocean liner in motion eventually forced its inhabitants’ gaze away from this world-between-worlds and into the stubbornly material realities around them.¹⁶⁶ As passengers found their bearings in the floating city of a trans-Suez liner, they encountered a strange reflection of the evolving cityscapes of the Second Industrial Revolution and High Colonialism. The ocean liner necessarily pulled at the seams of the fantasies that it inspired in the first place.

At times, the trans-Suez ocean liners of shipping companies like the *Messageries* and the *P&O* took on the appearance of laboratories. Passengers, for instance, were treated like guinea pigs as liners shifted class boundaries around them. Publicity, moreover, conveyed the impression that passengers might learn to be colonial, urbane, and much more as they voyaged. Mostly, though, the trans-Suez liner was a place where once-familiar categories broke down and had to be

¹⁶⁶ “But... the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror... makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.” Foucault, “Des espaces autres,” (March 1967).

glued together again in haste. There, race, gender, and class obeyed a confusing alchemy, just as the boundaries between empires and nations, capital and sovereignty, spectacle and reality, became difficult to discern.

Chapter 5. A Hundred Highways: Routes, Space, and Civilization

Braudel famously described a Mediterranean civilization whose boundaries undulated with the movements of people, plants, commodities, and cultures. To define the beginning and end of such a world, he argued, required, “not one,” but “a hundred frontiers...some political, some economic, and some cultural.”¹ In the 2000s, as Braudel’s approach took root in an expanding body of global history, those “hundred frontiers” inspired *A Hundred Horizons*, Sugata Bose’s influential history of the “interregional arena” often referred to as the Indian Ocean World.² Within each of these complex, almost monumental, works of history is a refreshingly simple observation: geography is a science practiced by geographers, but laypeople make their own maps, structuring them in their minds, experiencing them in motion, and marking them with ritual practices, memories, impressions, and experiences.

The maritime highways that emerged with the opening of the Suez Canal did not amount to a “civilization,” or perhaps even a “world.” Nor, however, were the steamship highways across Suez merely vectors between ports. Routes traverse worlds and civilizations, and every “route has roots.”³ In this interlude, I present nine biographical vignettes as windows into the ways in which the space of trans-Suez routes was imagined, divided, ritualized, and experienced. In doing so, I seek to sketch a map of where different travelers saw civilization beginning and ending; where they felt the magnetic poles of familiarity and foreignness; the boundaries and borderlands that they encountered while traveling; and the routes they made in their minds.

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Volume I* (translated by Sian Reynolds) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 102.

² Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons. The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1-6.

³ Chandra D. Bhimull, *Empire in the Air: Airline Travel and the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 101-123.

In the remaining four chapters, I will analyze many kinds of frontiers and horizons that people experienced along the trans-Suez routes. These were frontiers and horizons of commerce, health, race, policing, jurisdiction, and sovereignty. Some existed in the fine print of shipping company terms of agreement, where, for instance, “native” servants could travel free of charge across the Indian Ocean, only to become paying passengers past Suez.⁴ Other borders arose from political debate and international diffusion, like the global “color line” revealed and analyzed by W.E.B. Dubois, the “globalization of borders” proposed by Adam Mckeown, or the latitudinal limits of racialized labor that were hammered out between shipping lines and the states that subsidized them.⁵ Still other boundaries emerged out of the struggle to control microbes and contraband, and to manage the transitions between everything from currencies to customs, fashion, and language. The following perspectives on trans-Suez routes thus serve as an introduction to the layered boundaries of maritime highways in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Rather than “a hundred” frontiers or horizons, the nine following examples begin to convey the multiplicity of spatial perspectives adopted by the growing legions of steamship travelers who tacked back and forth across Suez.

Twelve Letters

It took Madame Laure Durand-Fardel twelve letters to complete her voyage from Marseille to Shanghai in Autumn 1875. When those letters were transformed into a published book, Laure was

⁴ For example: « Article 33, Cahier des Charges relatif à l’exploitation d’un service maritime » (28 Feb. 1910), *Lignes de Navigation, Indochine*, 29, CADN.

⁵ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: McClurg & Co., 1908) and *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (Harcourt Brace, 1920); for 21st-century work on the global color line, see: Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Adam Mckeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

vaunted in the preface as the first “lettered bourgeois woman” to “penetrate into” China.⁶ Traveling 1st-class to Shanghai alongside her husband, a renowned doctor, Laure was visiting their daughter, then engaged to man in Shanghai, also a doctor. Laure’s voyage would not have been possible before the opening of the Suez Canal. Now, however, the six-year-old route ensured that with six months at their disposal, Laure and her husband had enough time to experience Shanghai at their leisure, and even to tack on a trip to Japan before heading back to France.⁷

To her audience back home, Laure’s path was structured by layovers and letters, the latter generally one step behind the former. Thus, impressions of Marseille mailed from Naples; visions of Naples shipped from Port-Said; a portrait of Port-Said was sent from the end of the Suez Canal; and so on, through the Red Sea and Aden, Point-de-Galles (in today’s Sri Lanka), Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong, Canton, and Shanghai. Each layover had its special flavor, which the “lettered *bourgeoise*” carefully recreated. Thus, after the narrow streets of Naples, dripping with dark history, Port-Said was announced by a boisterous billboard promising “The Fashions of Paris, Latest Trends,” beneath which lay a strange mix of conmen and photographers, casinos and café concerts, grinding poverty and – to her eye – desolation.⁸ Next came Aden, where young Somali men, forced to wear bathing suits by prudish British administrators, pursued coins tossed into the water by her fellow passengers, risking shark attacks as they dove (“but one negro more or less is of little affair,” she insisted, “and the others continue their exercises without seeming to worry of it”); where sunburnt European consuls planted tiny vegetable gardens in soil brought from Europe,

⁶ Mme Laure Durand-Fardel, *De Marseille à Shanghai et Yedo. Récits d’une Parisienne* (Paris : Hachette, 1881, 2nd Edition), preface, IX.

⁷ Ibid., VIII.

⁸ Ibid., 31 [*Modes de Paris, Nouveautés*].

and British military might was carved into the cliffs.⁹ In British Ceylon, by contrast, a utopia of luxury hotels, vigilant police, tropical fruits, and exotic plants graced her visit.

Singapore-Saigon-Hong Kong-Canton-Shanghai: the letters went on, never delayed by more than the two-week intervals of the French Mail. The itinerary had a neatness about it, almost like a train line. And like along a railway, the space between destinations, oceanic space in Laure's case, almost melted away. Distracted by a cascade of champagne and fine wines, cakes and conversation, dances and costumes, Laure often found travel "deliciously" smooth.¹⁰ Even getting on and off the ship was facilitated by "omnibuses" of the *Messageries* and special ferries sent by the company's agencies. The "lettered *bourgeoise*" seemed to glide across oceans. "One almost ends up forgetting that one is on the sea," she wrote, "and one cruises their 13 knots-an-hour as gayly as could be."¹¹ An ancestor of the Jet Set and a cousin of the globetrotter, Laure had joined the ranks of steam-powered travelers who annihilated space while metering mobility more mechanically than ever before.¹²

"Hell's Gates"

On June 21st, 1885, in their sixth year of marriage, Andrew and Jessie Crawford (née Loudoun) left Sydney and began the long voyage back to their home in Stoke Newington, London, following a happy trip "to the antipodes."¹³ An accountant, Andrew took to record-keeping. On the long Indian Ocean crossing, however, there was little to record beyond the ship, the sky, and the water. He thus turned his ledger on co-passengers and onboard life. In their "second saloon," there were

⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3, 17, 20, 26, 63, 85, 92, 93, 109, 112, 125, 145, 225, 234, 250, 338, 378, 389.

¹¹ Ibid., 50.

¹² On the "Jet Set," see: Schwartz, *Jet Age Aesthetics*, 99-116.

¹³ "Diary kept by Andrew Crawford as a passenger on board the PATRIARCH and CUZCO, 1885," JOD/267, Caird, NMM. The Crawford diary has no page numbers.

respectable types, but also more suspect figures: a longhaired preacher, for instance, who, having wound his way from Edinburgh to Chicago and Sydney, was determined to become a traveling actor; and women sporting wedding rings but with no husbands in sight. Pianos droned in the background and a death onboard led to a morbidly picturesque burial at sea. Religious services were sloppy and displayed an odd assortment of doctrinal tendencies. Though the ship had “a continuous throbbing,” “vibrating motion,” and a “feeling of soot and dustiness,” it provided “all sorts of delicacies,” many preserved in the vessel’s new refrigerator. Listing every “second saloon” passenger onboard, the accountant recorded their motivation for travel. Next to his family name, Crawford wrote only two words: “going home.”

As the steamship crossed the equator, Crawford recorded no ceremony. This was a stark contrast with the couple’s outgoing voyage earlier that year, on an “iron sailing ship” called the “Patriarch.” Indeed, when the southbound “Patriarch” crossed the Equator, the ship had exploded with ritual life. For hours, male passengers had been handled by the costumed henchmen of “Mr. and Mrs. Neptune,” lathered and “shaved” with wooden paddles, and dunked – that is, baptized – into pools of sea water; all while Neptune delivered speeches and administered call-and-response oaths affirming his sovereignty over the sea.¹⁴ Liquor, a sailors’ concert, and fireworks had finished off the show, marking the crossing of the Equator, and a new batch of initiates. Crawford recorded the event in detail, transcribing the oaths and speeches word for word, but he had not been pleased. “It might well be dispensed with,” his review stated. Luckily for Crawford, the

¹⁴ The origins of “Neptune’s Rites” are often attributed to French ships in the 16th-century Atlantic, but there appears to be some debate over it. See: Jaime Rodrigues, “A new world in the Atlantic: sailors and rites of passage crossing the Equator, from the 15th to the 20th century.” *Revista Brasileira de História* 33, n. 65 (2013). The practice appears to have declined significantly in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, but to have returned – albeit in a far tamer form – later. On ships of many navies, iterations of the ritual never disappeared. One of the ritual’s original roles, however, was intimately tied to sail, since it both filled time during Equatorial doldrums and functioned as a request for Neptune’s favor.

steamship that bore him home had its motion assured by coal-shoveling workers. Unconcerned by doldrums, it chugged across the equator without ceremony.

When the ship neared Cape Guardafui, on the Horn of Africa, Crawford found entertainment more to his liking. The first glimpse of land in weeks set off a volley of rumors. The “savage” inhabitants of this land that showed no signs of “cultivation” were said to be ruthless pillagers who preyed on troubled steamers. Not long ago, word circulated among the passengers, the locals had tried to board a steamer just like theirs, only to be repelled by firehoses attached to the boiler, which scalded the raiders: “the effect was magical,” Crawford claimed, “the blacks scurrying off holding their sides with pain, while the passengers held theirs with laughter.” That night, Crawford attended an onboard concert, “which turned out to be a species of Christy Minstrel entertainment.” A stage was mounted and “the performers were blackened & appeared in true n****r style,” he noted in delight. For the Crawfords, it was a refreshing distraction from the “frightful stories of deaths occurring onboard steamers entering the Red Sea,” and the ominous translation, then on every passenger’s lips, of the nearby “Babelmandebs” straits: “Hell’s Gates.”

But the Crawfords were almost home and the landscape began to prove it. Passing by Aden, a British fort loomed over them lovingly. With the Red Sea crossing nearly concluded, placenames evoked Sunday school. Soon, “great excitement” began to spread “among the Ladies” as posters announced that a “Fancy dress ball” would be held after the ship’s layover in Port-Said. As they shopped for exotic wares and costume materials in Port-Said, the Crawfords noted with a mix of disappointment and relief that many of the items “smelled of Birmingham.” After relishing the Mediterranean cruise that their outgoing voyage by sail had eschewed, the couple was at the entrance to the Thames. Unlike “a fortnight ago,” Crawford wrote, “when most of us looked as if we had been shipwrecked & had nothing to wear,” the passengers were now in their “Sunday

Clothes.” Landing in London, the couple noted, thus felt “like going to Church.” The Crawfords were home.

“Aphinar”

On the 9th of November, 1891, Arthur Rimbaud was sick, declining, and hours away from his death. After relinquishing his role as a pioneer of modernist poetry, Rimbaud’s life had led him from Europe to Southeast Asia, then to Aden, the fortified, British-administered port-town at the end of the Red Sea, and the highlands of Ethiopia, where he had eke d out a living as a trader and smuggler. For sixteen years, he had lived the highs and lows of the steamship highways that crisscrossed the Suez Canal. He had joined colonial militaries and deserted them, assumed fake identities to catch a ship out of town, toiled on decks and docks, and followed a peculiar sense of self wherever it took him.¹⁵ Having disappeared from the sight of metropolitan society, he had explored the world. Now, illness had forced him back to France. Increasingly delirious, Rimbaud dictated last words from his bed in Marseille as he dreamed of once again roaming the corridors and frontiers of empires. In a decision that has left many puzzled ever since, the poet-adventurer addressed his final remarks to the Director of the *Messageries Maritimes*. Mixing poetry and logistics, Rimbaud’s letter to the Director begins with a jumbled order for an ivory shipment, before mutating into a desperate request for a spot on a steamship from the invented city of “Aphinar” to Suez:

ITEM: ONE TUSK ONLY.

ITEM: TWO TUSKS.

ITEM: THREE TUSKS.

ITEM: FOUR TUSKS.

ITEM: TWO TUSKS.

¹⁵ For an excellent, English-language account of this period of Rimbaud’s life, see: Graham Robb, *Rimbaud: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 2001), 278-424.

*Monsieur the Director,
I come to enquire if I have anything left on account with you. I wish to change today
from this [shipping] line, the name of which I don't even know, but in any case it must
be to the Aphinar line. All these services are everywhere, and I, impotent, unhappy, I
can find nothing – the first dog in the street will tell you that.*

*Send me, then, the price of services from Aphinar to Suez. I am completely paralyzed:
thus, I wish to embark at an early hour. Tell me at what time I must be transported on
board...¹⁶*

Rimbaud's choice of audience can seem a mystery. Why did he not address a family member, a lover, or friend, instead? If he was retreating into fantasy, why address so mundane a figure as the director of a shipping company? However, the letter to the director has its sense. Rimbaud, for all his madness, was writing to the very incarnation of the in-between spaces into which he had fled sixteen years before. The poet-merchant needed relief and security, and he looked for it in his life's main source of regularity and structure: ship berths and decks, agents, company accounts, routes and timetables. Rimbaud clung to the world he knew, and this was a world with shipping "services going everywhere," in which a Frenchman could crisscross Suez with hardly a moment's notice, and where ports could be invented. As he drifted out of consciousness, he must have seen the director of the shipping line as something of a fairy-tale king; the one figure who could grant his wish, untangle the myriad shipping lines, and deliver him from "Aphinar," the imaginary city somewhere in the vast swathe of the world that his contemporaries then referred to as "beyond Suez" (*au-delà de Suez*).

¹⁶ Wallace Fowlie and Seth Whidden (eds., trans.), *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, a Bilingual Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 446-7. Revised translation. [UN LOT : UNE DENT SEULE. UN LOT : DEUX DENTS. / UN LOT : TROIS DENTS. / UN LOT. QUATRE DENTS. / UN LOT : DEUX DENTS. *Monsieur le Directeur, Je viens vous demander si je n'ai rien laissé à votre compte. Je désire changer aujourd'hui de ce service-ci, dont je ne connais même pas le nom, mais en tout cas que ce soit le service d'Aphinar. Tous ces services sont là partout, et moi, impotent, malheureux, je peux rien trouver, le premier chien dans la rue vous dira cela. Envoyez-moi donc le prix des services d'Aphinar à Suez. Je suis complètement paralysé : donc je désire me trouver de bonne heure à quelle heure je dois être transporté à bord...*].

“Ship me Somewheres East of Suez”

A year before Rimbaud’s deathbed vision, Rudyard Kipling, a different kind of poet, published two reflections on that same vast space; not ‘beyond,’ in his case, but ‘east,’ ‘of Suez.’ Of the two poems, “Mandalay,” and “The Exiles’ Line,” it was “Mandalay” that lived longer and rang louder in the minds of British people.¹⁷ In the poem, a Cockney veteran, tired of the drudgery of lower-class life in damp and dreary London, dreams of better days and a lost love from an earlier deployment in Burma.¹⁸ “Ship me somewheres east of Suez,” the poem’s narrator famously longed, “where the best is like the worst, / Where there aren’t no Ten Commandments an’ a man can raise a thirst.” Since, as the veteran acknowledges, “there ain’t no ‘buses runnin’ from the Bank to Mandalay,” he must content himself with dreaming of his ‘east of Suez’; a space of liberation and sexual adventure, where even London’s lumpenproletariat could dance on top of fallen monarchs and romance under the gaze of false idols – for a little while, that is, until they were called back home.¹⁹

And that voyage home, according to the second poem, “Exiles’ Line,” would not be easy. In a vivid description of *P&O* ships bringing British troops back to the metropole after long tours ‘east of Suez,’ Kipling evoked suicidal soldiers whose deaths were hardly noticed; “chain gangs

¹⁷ So loud, in fact, that in 2017, then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson had to be shushed and reminded by a diplomatic companion that it was “not appropriate” to recite the poem – which includes the verse, “Come you back, you British soldier” – during a State visit to Mandalay, Myanmar. Rudyard Kipling, “Mandalay” first appeared in *Scots Observer* (June 21, 1890), but was published in a collected volume in 1892. “Exile’s Line” was also dated 1890, but first appears in the *Civil and Military Gazette* (July 8, 1892). For discussions of how the poems fit into Kipling’s oeuvre and British colonial history, see: Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-16; and, Burgess, *Engines of Empire*, 247.

¹⁸ It is very much parallel in this sense to the famous French song, “La Petite Tonkinoise,” the Marseille-based inspiration for which was explicitly concerned with maritime mobility.

¹⁹ The poem is by no means an undiluted paean to imperial domination. That said, the emphasis on the lover’s name being that of Burmese royalty, a long with the insistence on kissing her in front of a statue of the Buddha (and taking her away from her prayers), clearly articulate a pleasure built in part on disregard for foreign monarchs and gods.

of” “our sad East,” shipped “homeward when their work is done.” The movements of these soldiers and servants of empire, the poet suggested, had no rational explanation.

Rather, it was simply a force of nature, like the one Kipling cites in the poem’s sole geographical referent, “the wild wind” “off [Cape] Guardafui,” on the Horn of Africa. Kipling, of course, had experience doing the imperial commute. He knew that the suicides of returning European colonials tended to occur in those waters, halfway home, and shortly before passage through the Bab-el-Mandeb.

“The Orient Begins”

In November 1900, Henri Pasquier, a high-ranking cleric (*protonotaire*) from Angers, set out to visit Catholic convents across the Far East. Frenchmen might not be famous travelers, admitted the cleric, but *he* was a son of Anger, whose fabled missionaries were “ancestors of the globetrotters of the 19th century.”²⁰ After a weekend in Paris, Pasquier took a train to Marseille and hopped aboard the *Messageries* ship, “Indus.” The Mediterranean crossing was calm, but drama pervaded his letters as he pulled into Port-Said, the freewheeling frontier town at the northern head of the Suez Canal. There, on a jetty, stood a large statue of Ferdinand De Lesseps, gesturing with his bronze hands towards the project that “a Pharaoh and an Emperor” had dreamed of, but which only “the Great Frenchman” had realized.²¹ As the ship pulled closer to the scruffy town of Port-Said itself, Pasquier looked out over dusty streets filled with bazaars and vendors: “The Orient begins,” he declared, “the lying, thieving Orient.”²²

²⁰ Monsignor Henri Pasquier, *Notes d’un voyage autour du monde : les Indes, Ceylan, l’Australie, la Nouvelle Calédonie, les États-Unis* (Angers : Lachèse, 1906), 2. [« ancêtres des globe-trotteurs du XIXe siècle »].

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² *Ibid.*, 23 [“C’est l’Orient qui commence, l’Orient menteur, voleur. »

Then, “in the blink of an eye,” vendors “invaded the deck.” “The passengers,” he noted, “close their porthole and their door against indiscreet visits.”²³ Pasquier pushed his way through the vendors and climbed off the ship. Unlike other passengers, Pasquier had no interest in using his layover in Port-Said to buy knickknacks or have photos taken; nor was he tempted to purchase pornography or hashish, to gamble in the city’s casinos or tour its ‘native quarter.’ For Pasquier was no aimless consumer. He knew exactly where he was heading: the Convent of the Good-Shepard. There, according to him, his visit delighted an international assortment of Sisters. In the Convent’s hospital, he blessed rows of sick and wounded French soldiers, deposited there on the way back from colonial campaigns.

Back aboard the “Indus,” Pasquier carried a piece of Port-Said and a portal to a faith without boundaries. “The sisters of Port-Said,” he wrote, “had supplied us with the necessary ornaments” to perform mass.²⁴ During a small gathering of the faithful inside a cabin-turned-church, he wrote that, “the presence of Our Lord on our boat moved me mightily.”²⁵ As the ship moved south, “biblical names sang” in his “memory” and visions of Moses filled both the Red Sea in front of him and the hills on the horizon.²⁶ The rapture was only interrupted when the ship passed by Jeddah, the port closest to Mecca, which snapped him out of his reverie and elicited a stern reflection on the colossal “error” of Muslims.²⁷ Looking out at the arid landscape, he suddenly felt grateful that God had blessed Angers with such fertile soil.

²³ Ibid., 23 [Aussi, les passagers ferment leur hublot et leur porte contre les visites indiscretes. »] [« En un clin d’œil le pont est envahi par des vendeurs et des commissionnaires de toute couleur, de toute langue et de tout commerce...]

²⁴ Ibid., 27 [“Les soeurs de Port-Said nous a vaient fourni les ornements nécessaires.”]

²⁵ Ibid., 27 [La présence de Notre Seigneur sur notre bateau m’a vivement ému. Je lui ai présenté tous ceux que j’a vais laissés au pays d’Angers, déjà si loin de moi. Cinq religieuses, un séminariste, et une dame composaient l’assistance.”]

²⁶ Ibid., 28 [“les noms bibliques vous chantent dans la mémoire »]

²⁷ Ibid., 32 [“nous somme passes devant Djedda, le chemin qui conduit à la Mecque... Pourquoi Mahomet? Pourquoi La Mecque? Quel charme fascine dans l’erreur du Coran une partie d’humanité ?] After days of reading,

After his return, Pasquier gave a conference to the Catholic Faculties in which he cited the layover in Port-Said as the beginning of a process that “causes a surprise that is difficult to analyze.”²⁸ When he “got off at Port-Said, at Aden, at Bombay, at Colombo,” he explained to his audience, he saw a type of man so “savage” that it “required evangelical charity to present him to you as a brother.”²⁹ When some of these “brothers” asked for communion, Pasquier, “could not suppress... surprise: these were my brothers and they were so black!”³⁰ But Pasquier had another family reunion in store for his crowd. Addressing those who had never left Europe and amused themselves with “studies” of the differences between the skin-tones and customs of Europeans, he relayed a traveler’s wisdom: what seemed like vast differences, he informed them, were “mere gradations of nuances in ... this great European family.” And *our* family, he went on, occupies “a very small canton in the world,” which “counts for very little to the majority of men.”³¹

mass, galas, and mingling with an excitingly diverse set of 1st-class passengers, Pasquier’s ship reached its next layover in Aden. Parking themselves a kilometer away from the port, they were swiftly surrounded by a little armada of boats full of young Somali men who called out to the passengers to throw coins into the water, which they would dive and retrieve. For Pasquier, the experience was life-affirming and after intricate physiognomic observations, he concluded: “To see these frizzy-haired black heads with such white teeth, so joyful and smiling, one must admit that very little is needed for man’s happiness. This whole rowdy people is happy to live: they live on so little!” – and this, he marveled, despite the fact that the divers sometimes lost limbs to sharks and constantly risked drowning. Distance collapsed momentarily: “they run in the water like the children of Paris on a boulevard.” Ibid., 38.

²⁸ Ibid., 434 [“ce passage brusque des peuples entiers, qui n’ont plus nos couleurs, vous cause une surprise difficile à analyser. »]

²⁹ Ibid., 434 [« Il faut la charité évangélique pour vous le présenter comme un frère. »]

³⁰ Ibid., 435 [“je ne pouvais me défendre d’une certaine surprise: c’étaient mes frères et ils étaient si noirs!”].

Making sense of his surprise, the globetrotting cleric declared: “the miserable appearance of their bodies exalted the bounty of the All-Powerful who was entering into them.” [“le misérable aspect de leur corps exaltait la bonté du Tout-Puissant qui venait les visiter. »].

³¹ Ibid., 433 [« ce n’est qu’une question de simple dégradation de nuances dans l’ensemble de cette grande famille européenne... »] [“Mais alors nous sommes donc un bien petit canton dans le monde, et notre canton compte donc pour bien peu en regard de la majorité des hommes... »]

“*How Quickly the Civilized World Ends*”

Freshly minted as a member of the *Académie Française*, the playwright Eugène Brieux had little left to accomplish. Before any late-career doldrums could set in, he took off from Paris and tried his hand at a new genre. Eugène’s account of his 1910 voyage from France to China began in a Suez Canal of dredging machines, industrial warehouses, and wandering camels: a place whose “existence was contrary to the laws of nature.”³² As his ship approached the Bab-el-Mandeb straits at the end of the Red Sea, Eugène wrote that, “with an effort to scare ourselves, we remind ourselves of [Bab-el-Mandeb’s] translation: *Gates of Death*.”³³ Staring out from the deck, Eugène could only marvel at “how quickly the civilized world ends.” Five days of travel from Marseille at the “constant” “gait of a bicycle,” plus another day or two crawling through the canal, and suddenly he found himself in a Red Sea where, he claimed, “life and human activity are manifested only by the wakes of large *steamers*.”³⁴

Then came a layover at Aden, which delivered a “blow” to Eugène’s “brain” and “nerves”: “the vision of another humanity” that he described as “a churning of men” whose strange, scarce clothing reminded him, among other things, of “our apaches” in Paris.³⁵ Packages flew about, passengers transferred from ship to ship, and coal was heaved onboard by hundreds of what he described as, “worker ants, giving off the impression that they are too many and that the death of

³² Eugène Brieux, *Voyage aux Indes et en Indo-Chine. Simples notes d’un touriste* (Paris : C. Delgrave, 1923, Third Edition), 7 [« dont l’existence est contraire aux lois de la nature. »].

³³ Ibid., 8 [“avec un effort pour avoir peur, nous nous sommes rappelé la traduction : *Portes de la Mort*. »]

³⁴ Ibid., 8 [“Mais comme le monde civilisé est vite fini ! Cinq jours de bateau depuis Marseille, à l’allure, constante, il est vrai, mais pas beaucoup plus rapide, d’une bicyclette ; un jour a pas dans le canal de Suez, et nous voici dans une mer où la vie et l’activité humaines ne se manifestent que par le sillage des grands steamers... »].

³⁵ Ibid., 9-10 [“comme un coup reçu dans les yeux, dans le cerveau, dans les nerfs, la vision d’une autre humanité... un grouillement d’hommes, un pullulement de nudités... sur les autres têtes... d’odieuses casquettes, comme celles de nos apaches. »].

one of them would be a matter of little importance.”³⁶ The layover finished, Eugène was relieved to escape the din of shouting people and clanking machinery. “Gliding without shudders” on a calm sea in the Indian Ocean, he surveyed the passengers on his moonlit deck, taking in the glow of “cigars, the whiteness of evening gowns, naked shoulders, and masculine breastplates...”³⁷

Eugène carried on, stopping in Sri Lanka, exploring India, and moving onto Indochina, but a void had opened in his voyage; one that neither the “Gates of Death,” nor “another humanity,” nor even “naked shoulders” under moonlight could fill. As he explained, “all the peoples that I have seen so far and whose skin was not the same color as mine, were people undergoing European domination: Kabyles of Algeria, Arabs, Tunisians, Singhalese [of Sri Lanka], and Hindus, none was at home and master of himself.”³⁸

Finally, as his ship pulled into Canton, on the southern coast of China, Eugène found what he sought: “this day,” he declared, “is a blessed day in my life.” “For the first time,” he wrote, “I fully experienced the sensation that I have been chasing... that of being truly *somewhere else*. For the first time, *I felt I was somewhere foreign*.” In Canton, away from the European concessions, Eugène raved that “the Chinese are totally at home,” and a wandering tourist on layover was “*in the other’s home*.” “With each step, at each glance,” he went on:

one feels that these people have no admiration for us, no sympathy at all. They tolerate our passage and do not hold back their mockery from us. They do not need us. They have a civilization that is enough for them, ideas about the world that are enough for them... If they adopt our arms, if they decide to construct railroads, it is to fight us or defend themselves. It is against us: it is not for them.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 10 [“les porteurs grimpent, par centants, s’occupant comme des fourmis laborieuses, donnant l’impression qu’ils sont trop et que la mort de l’un deux serait une chose de peu d’importance. »].

³⁷ Ibid., 11 [“le bateau glisse sans secousses... sur une mer toute calme, éclairée par la lune. Sur le pont, les points lumineux des cigares, la blancheur des robes de soirée... »]

³⁸ Ibid., 13 [“tous les peuples que j’ai vus jusqu’ici et dont la peau n’était pas de la même couleur que la mienne, étaient des peuples subissant la domination européenne : Kabyles d’Algérie, Arabes, Tunisiens, Cinghalais et Hindous, aucun n’était chez soi, et maître chez soi. »]

³⁹ Ibid., 13-15 [« Ce jour est, dans ma vie, un jour béni. Pour la première fois, j’ai éprouvé pleinement la sensation après laquelle je cours depuis que je voyage... celle d’être vraiment *autre part*. Pour la première fois, *je me suis*

Delightedly, Eugène recalled a conversation with a European inhabitant of Hong Kong, who, after being spat on by Chinese people in the street, felt himself powerless to respond: “This independence, this sensation of being far away, of being out of my home [*chez moi*], it is a penetrating charm with a point of worry that is delicious.”⁴⁰ On Eugène’s trans-Suez highway – across many empires, but between two civilizations – the “delicious” feeling of fear let travelers know when they had arrived.

“From Djibouti to Japan”

For André Jaquemart, a weary bureaucrat at the head of Saigon’s Maritime Registry (*l’Inscription maritime*) during the first two decades of the 20th century, there was nothing but trouble in the vastness of “beyond Suez.” Indeed, “beyond Suez” had become an impossible burden. As a leading representative of France’s centuries-old regulatory institution for all things maritime, Jaquemart took his position seriously, seeing himself as a rational arbiter between the rapacity of capital and the disorderliness of labor. In his administrative zone alone, he had his hands full with the ships and sailors that entered and exited Saigon’s harbor – not to mention the numerous riverboat companies operating along the Mekong, which all too frequently abused their crews and failed to obey safety standards. Among his many obligations, Jaquemart was also responsible for coordinating efforts to track down deserting sailors from larger shipping companies, both French and foreign, before they became “a charge to the colony.” When he succeeded in finding deserters,

senti à l'étranger. »] [« Ici les Chinois sont tellement chez eux... On est vraiment *chez les autres*, chez des gens dont on sent que, quoi qu'on fasse, on ne les comprendra pas... A chaque pas, à chaque regard, on sent que ces gens-là n'ont pour nous aucune admiration, aucune sympathie. Ils tolèrent notre passage et ne nous ménagent pas leurs moqueries. Ils n'ont pas besoin de nous. Ils ont une civilisation qui leur suffit, des idées sur ce monde et sur l'autre qui leur suffisent, des moyens de vivre dont ils sont satisfaits. S'ils adoptent nos armes, s'ils se décident à construire des chemins de fer, c'est pour nous combattre ou pour se défendre. C'est contre nous : ce n'est pas pour eux. »]

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15 [“cette indépendance, cette sensation d’être loin, d’être hors de chez moi, c’est un charme pénétrant, avec une pointe d’inquiétude qui est délicieuse. »]

his reward was the arduous task of organizing their deportations or repatriations and finding someone to bill for it. Part lawyer, part cop, part accountant, Jaquemart never lacked work; nor did he wish to.

Then, somewhere around 1910, Jaquemart began to have doubts about his ability to do his job. Events far beyond Saigon, beyond the Mekong Delta, and beyond even Indochina began sending a rising tide of paperwork coursing over him. Competition in Europe-Asia shipping was reaching an unprecedented level of ferocity, straining the pacts and limits of major European lines. Japanese shipping lines, as well-subsidized as their western counterparts, were surging westward into trans-Suez maritime highways, flipping ‘*east of Suez*,’ the unidirectional referent of British imperial geography, on its head. While it struggled to keep up with the competition, the French maritime sector was rocked by massive strikes that rippled out to sea, pitting officers and workers in bitter, mobile struggles that straddled the line between mutiny and militancy.

As the waters of international shipping began to boil, incidents and disputes from Colombo to Canton found their way to Jaquemart’s desk. Looking into the origins of these incidents, the bureaucrat realized that the people who should have been resolving them – French consuls stationed along the route – were either overwhelmed or indifferent. Increasingly, these consuls, in cahoots with captains, were choosing to push off their problems onto Saigon’s bureaucracy and courts, instead of attempting to solve them in situ. As steamships pulled into and out of Saigon, they thus left in their wake a growing body of claims, disputes, cases, accounts, and sailors accused of infractions. All of it flowed into Jaquemart’s desk in Saigon like water into the single drain of a vast tub. “I very much want to take on all the responsibilities that my function imposes on me,” Jaquemart wrote to superiors in the Governor’s office, “but it strikes me as exaggerated that I

should shoulder ... every maritime event that occurs on French ships from Djibouti to Japan.”⁴¹ His complaints elicited sympathy, but no solutions, and Jaquemart remained overworked and underappreciated on his island of French sovereignty in the greater Indo-Pacific.

The Itinerary of National Salvation

1 Nguyen Tat Thanh, Ward 12, District 4, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In front of a three-story colonial-era building with wraparound verandas and two dragons on its roof, a young man of bronze strides over a pedestal engraved with the date of June 5th, 1911 (see fig. 19). The man represented has many names. He is Nguyen Tat Thanh, also known as Nguyen Ai Quoc and Nguyen Sinh Cung, and will eventually be called Ho Chi Minh – “Uncle Ho” to his most ardent supporters. At the moment in time that the statue depicts, however, he is no longer Nguyen Tat Thanh or Nguyen Ai Quoc, and not yet Ho Chi Minh or “Uncle Ho.” Indeed, the man marching into a French steamship on June 5th, 1911 has adopted a new name: “Van Ba.”⁴² “Van Ba” just signed on as a cook’s assistant on a ship heading from Saigon to France.

“Van Ba” had good reason to try out a new name. Not long before June 1911, his father, a Confucian magistrate in a small town in central Vietnam, had been sacked from his post by French authorities after allegations that he had abused his power and supported one of the many revolts that metered the 96 years between “colonization” and “decolonization.” “Van Ba,” whose mother had died years ago, felt his father’s humiliation at French hands sharply. How could so many revolts have failed to send the French back to their homeland, or even to change them? How could

⁴¹ « Chef de Division, chef de l’inscription maritime... Jaquemart à Monsieur le Lt Gouv de la Cochinchine à Saigon (28 Juillet 1909) », Dossier Relatif à l’Inscription Maritime, années 1907-1913, N. 2909, National Archives II (NA II), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

⁴² the *Messageries*’ lower-cost, Dunkirk-based counterpart

a learned magistrate be dispensed with so lightly? Increasingly, he saw himself as an exile in his own land.

A few years earlier, “Van Ba” might have looked east, to Japan, a model country to which a man could travel on Asian-owned steamships and where he could learn the wiring of Western power. Many before him had made the trip, those without money working as chef’s assistants, stewards, deckhands, or whatever else would pay their way. But in recent years, Japan had closed its doors to people like “Van Ba” and ejected its exile population of would-be revolutionaries, many of whom transformed back into stewards, chefs’ assistants, and deckhands as they scattered across the sea.⁴³

So, instead of going east, “Van Ba” headed west, to start something new, and to figure out the French, the Westerners, and the Whites – which, as far as he understood, were one and the same.⁴⁴ On June 5th, 1911, “Van Ba” steamed away from the 250,000 inhabitants of Saigon, as well as the 7,000 French nationals who ruled over them. By the time “Van Ba” was in Marseille’s harbor, he had figured out a few different Frances. En route, two demobilized French soldiers lent him books and French lessons in exchange for extra coffees. To another Vietnamese chef onboard, he admitted, “Some Frenchmen are okay, eh brother?”⁴⁵ On Marseille’s boulevard, moreover, he was addressed as “Monsieur;” a small, but meaningful piece of evidence proving that the French of the colonies were not the same as the French of France.⁴⁶ The French of France were human and humans are flawed. When prostitutes boarded his ship in Marseille’s harbor, he asked himself, “Why don’t the French civilize their compatriots before doing it to us?”⁴⁷

⁴³ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 98-149.

⁴⁴ “At the time, I thought all white people were French...” Ho Chi Minh, quoted in: William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 45.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷ Quoted in William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 47.

After Marseille, the straight line that had led him from Vietnam to France transformed into a constellation so vast that his biographers struggle to chart a two-year swathe of it: Marseille to Dunkirk and Le Havre; then back to Saigon; onto “Bordeaux and Lisbon, Tunis, Dakar, the ports of East Africa, Réunion, and as far as the Congo”; somewhere in North America, “the Antilles, Mexico, and South America,” before “completing his journey” in England.⁴⁸ Just as Marseille revealed that France contained white hoodlums and prostitutes, England revealed to him colonized whites, and the struggles of Irish revolutionaries moved him to tears. Everywhere he went, “Van Ba” saw Vietnam.⁴⁹

After years of rejected appeals to Western governments, growing radicalization, and frenetic networking in a time of global revolutions, “Van Ba” began flashing on the radar of French intelligence agents. Like “Van Ba’s” future biographers, these intelligence agents tried desperately to identify him and pin him on the map. Who was “Van Ba,” Nguyen Tat Thanh, Nguyen Ai Quoc, Nguyen Sinh Cung, and Ho Chi Minh?⁵⁰ Where was he, or they, and where was he, or they, going next? It was a riddle they would never solve.

⁴⁸ This outline is from Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 9-13, but other biographies, such as Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* and Peter Neville, *Ho Chi Minh* (London: Routledge, 2018) all offer slightly different accounts from one another.

⁴⁹ Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 41-49.

⁵⁰ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 15-23.



Figure 19. Statue depicting Ho Chi Minh setting out to sea in 1911. Behind the statue is the Nha Rong building, once the power center of French shipping in Saigon and now the Ho Chi Minh Museum. Source: author's photograph.



Figure 20. A view of “Dragon Wharf” (*Nha Rong*) in the 1860s. Emile Gsell, “Vue de l’établissement des Messageries Impériales” (1866). Photographs, Gilman Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Behind the bronze statue of “Van Ba” is the veranda-wrapped building known as Dragon’s Wharf House. Once a custom’s house and administrative center for the *Messageries*, it is now a museum dedicated to the life of Ho Chi Minh. When it was first built in the early-1860s, the building’s roof had two dragons arranged in the style of Vietnamese temples (see fig. 20). Then, in 1870, the *Messageries* supposedly removed the dragons and replaced them with the emblem of the company: a unicorn head overlayed against a crown and anchor. In 1955, just after the military defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu, the unicorns came down and two new dragons were

mounted atop the building.⁵¹ That year, a British folk revivalist, fed up with the coverage of events in Vietnam, released “The Ballad of Ho Chi Minh.”

*...Now Ho Chi Minh was a deep sea sailor
He served his time out on the seven seas
Work and hardship were part of his early education
Exploitation his A.B.C.
Now Ho Chi Minh came back from sailing
And he looked out on his native land...⁵²*

Among the thousands of objects from his life displayed in the museum, visitors cross framed copies of paperwork from layovers that, together, form a route: Saigon – Singapore – Colombo – Port-Said – Marseille...⁵³ Nearby, swaying almost imperceptibly in a display case with water, floats a four-foot model of “Van Ba’s” first ship, the “Amiral Latouche Tréville.” Further on is a framed record of “Van Ba’s” humble wages; then a letter mailed from Colombo begging the colonial government to pass on some remittances to his father. After peering into so many display cases and framed documents, many rendered in grainy digital scans, a visitor will likely lift their eyes in search of lighter fare. Covering the wall above the cases and frames, a vast map of the world flashes electric lights in different colors, each marking disparate spots on the globe. It is one of several throughout the museum. Labels make sense of the glowing bulbs and zigzagging lines: “*Map itinerary of Nguyen Tat Thanh – Nguyen Ai Quoc – Ho Chi Minh to seek a way for national salvation.*”

In 1946 – after Japanese occupation, between French colonizations, before the American War, and before the Chinese invasion – Ho Chi Minh had a conversation with an American journalist. “Do we know what it means to be a man?” he asked the American. “Do we really know

⁵¹ Official website of the museum: <http://baotanghochiminh-nr.vn/gioi-thieu.html> (last accessed: 4/11/2021).

⁵² Ewan McColl, “Ballad of Ho Chi Minh” (1954).

⁵³ Personal photographs and notes from a visit.

ourselves? Our parents give us a name and tell us about where we come from. That doesn't matter. What really matters is where we are going."⁵⁴ The man in front of Dragon's Wharf House, whatever his name is, knows where he is going. His is the itinerary of national salvation and its first leg is Saigon – Marseille.

"Europe was the Other Side of Djibouti"

Ibrahim Ismaa'il was born into the Wrasangeli tribe of the Rerr-hadzi clan, in the British Somaliland Protectorate, during the year of the "Antelope Killer," sometime between 1896 and 1901.⁵⁵ Scarcely had he entered boyhood then poverty and rifle-fueled, inter-tribal violence sent him from his home in search of work and opportunity. On his early wanderings, he "heard of a place called Aden, a real Eldorado from whence dates and all other good things came." "There," he learned in amazement, "you could go into a market and help yourself to all these dainties as much as you liked; there also were many Somali children with whom you could play; and you could learn Arabic and acquire all kinds of knowledge."⁵⁶ Soon after this revelation, Ibrahim stumbled upon a clansmen loading a dhow for Aden with gum and incense. He convinced the man to let him onboard and a few days later he reached his Eldorado.

For a hungry boy with few scruples regarding how he ate, Aden was indeed a land of opportunity. He and his friends would reel in coins from café tables using rods that had a sticky date on the end. They convinced local Hindus that their food had been impurified in order to harvest the leftovers. And there was another reliable source of revenue that flowed into Aden:

⁵⁴ Quoted in Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 7.

⁵⁵ Ibrahim Ismaa'il and Richard Pankhurst, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa: Revista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 33, n. 2 (June 1977): pp. 159-176.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 170

“ships... with European passengers onboard,” who “would throw pennies into the sea – sometimes even shillings and halfcrowns.” Ibrahim became an amateur diver. Dodging sharks, cops, and sharp-elbowed competitors, he would dive deep underwater, locate the incoming coin, anticipate its trajectory, and snag it from underneath. Then, he would come “up to the surface,” show “the coin to the delighted passengers,” and store it in his cheek.⁵⁷

Soon enough, however, Ibrahim was chased out of his Eldorado in one of the periodic, if increasingly brutal, crackdowns of British authorities against paperless migrants in Aden. Crisscrossing the Red Sea when the monsoon winds “opened” it, working and scavenging when the monsoons “closed” it, he made new friends, found and lost family members, and came perilously close to starvation.⁵⁸ Then, a lucky break led to his employment on a dhow heading to Basra, in the Persian Gulf, sometime around 1915.

In Basra, a sea and two gulfs from his home, he “heard of a place called Europe, which was the other side of Djibouti, and where life was easier, wages being higher.”⁵⁹ He “decided to try [his] luck there.” Ibrahim made it to Djibouti, that threshold of Europe, easily enough. To try his luck, though, he would need cash. Eventually, Ibrahim found his way to “a few francs by working a ferry...bringing passengers from the ships to shore and vice versa.” Unfortunately, “passengers were not always forthcoming” and what little he earned seemed to evaporate as it was divvied up by coworkers and boat owners. Having spent three hard months in Djibouti, Ibrahim realized he would only reach Europe as a stowaway. When “a ship came from Shanghai, transporting Creole soldiers,” he took his chance: “I crept on board,” he recounted, “and managed to discover a small

⁵⁷ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 176.

⁵⁹ Ibrahim Ismai'il and Richard Pankhurst, “An Early Somali Autobiography (II), *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 33, n. 2 (June 1977): pp. 355-384; 368.

nook near the funnel, where it was so unbearably hot that it was seldom visited by the inspectors, and there I hid myself.”⁶⁰

The ship steamed north up the Red Sea, and Ibrahim soon had to abandon his sweltering hideout. When he did, he “found that there were no less than fifteen men who had stowed away like [him]self.” “How they all managed to hide was a puzzle to me,” he remembered; some must have packed in with the ship’s animals, but others, he deduced, had clearly been smuggled in with the complicity of the boatswain.⁶¹ Along with his secret platoon of stowaways, Ibrahim was discovered by ship’s captain, who beat the men and put them to work in the stoke hole. In brutal, eight-hour shifts in the engine room, Ibrahim picked up a *métier* to which he would return many times throughout a life that took him across the world. But it was a grim introduction to a grueling job, and few distractions followed his shifts, for while he “tried to make friends with the sailors...they would have nothing to do with” him.⁶² To make matters worse, he picked up another lifelong possession – searing backpain – after heavy rains sent him scurrying from his on-deck sleeping space, leading him to stumble on a ladder and fall onto the bottom deck.

What felt like an eternity was in fact only a Red Sea crossing, and the ship soon pulled into Port-Saïd. “We, Somali,” Ibrahim wrote, “decided to land, as we thought we were practically in Europe.”⁶³ Though his “three rupees” had mysteriously disappeared onboard, his comrades pooled their money together for a ferry ashore. A boatman informed the men that they would not be able to enter Port-Saïd without papers, but for a small surcharge he could deposit them in a quiet place where they could enter illicitly. The boatman was a conman, however, and when Ibrahim and his

⁶⁰ Ibid., 368

⁶¹ Ibid., 368.

⁶² Ibid., 369.

⁶³ Ibid., 369.

friends were unloaded onto a pier, they found themselves penned in by a fence, a custom house, and a locked door. They could do nothing but “gaze at the town through a fence of iron bars,” and the boatman did not return for them. Still, they managed to make it back to the ship, this time by telling a different boatman that if he wanted to be paid, he should go see his colleague.⁶⁴

The voyage carried on, and with “creole soldiers” dying around him, Ibrahim’s ship stopped at an Algerian port. There, wherever it was, Ibrahim saw torpedo-blasted ships under repair. Finally, the ship chugged across the Mediterranean to its terminus in Marseille. In the “Gateway to the Orient,” Ibrahim found a piece of home, for there were many Somalis living there, including some from his tribe. Secure in their generosity, Ibrahim enjoyed a few pleasures of urban life. Window-shopping on Marseille’s streets became a favorite pastime. There was a full-service haircut in the “European fashion” (which cost many times more than he estimated it would) and even a trip to the cinema.⁶⁵

Favors and pooled resources only went so far, however, and to earn some cash, he and some friends applied to work on an American military base near Sancerre. Photographed and fingerprinted by French and American authorities, the journey to Sancerre introduced Ibrahim to the train. “I naturally felt very nervous,” he recalled: “near objects dashing past the carriage window gave me a few bad shocks, especially another train which crossed us. After that, I kept myself well in the middle of the carriage, as far as possible from both windows.” A Senegalese passenger and fellow Muslim comforted him, but Ibrahim still felt better on the “slow train” back to Marseille, a few days later, after Armistice cut short his trench-digging gig.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 370-1.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 371-2.

On the slow train back to Marseille, Ibrahim spent a few hours in a village, somewhere. “The villagers,” he recalled, “had evidently never seen black people before: they came in numbers and surrounded us in a circle through which we could not make our way. Some rubbed their fingers on our skin to see whether the colour would come off!” Fearless, Ibrahim lingered too long, for he “was also very interested to see those country folks with their wooden shoes,” who “seemed so different from the people...in the towns.” The train called. Ibrahim and his fellow workers ran to the station, but their train was gone. They waited for a freight train, hopped on, and packed themselves in with its timber. After hours in the frigid darkness, they saw “in the distance a great many lights,” revealing “the presence of a big station.” In desperation, they jumped off and ran along “the rails, quite unconscious of the risk [they] were running in the very dark night.” In the station, under a “glass roof,” they found “a beautifully lighted and heated waiting room.” “We drew seats round the blazing fire,” he reminisced, “and for a time we felt comfortable and happy.” The night was young, though, and Ibrahim and his friends would ride the rails back and forth between Sancerre and Marseille several more times before, at last, they found the right train and made it back to the Phocaeen City.⁶⁷

Ibrahim was drained, but as soon as he had recuperated, he returned to his accidental métier, “looking for work as a fireman on a ship.” French wages would not do, so he and his friends sought out English ships. “Since it is by his papers that a man is judged,” Ibrahim later stated, “and I had lost mine in Djibouti, a Somali friend gave me his own.” Rumor spread that an English ship was looking for an improvised crew. After paying a commission to a recruiter, Ibrahim and his friends had work. Nine, sooty days later, they arrived in London. It was not the “Metropolis” that called

⁶⁷ Ibid., 371-3.

them, however, but rather Cardiff: a place that Ibrahim had heard of on the boat, “where are there many Somalis, and plenty of ships...”⁶⁸

Having mastered the train, Ibrahim and his friends reached Cardiff smoothly, where they were welcomed “by our countrymen” and assigned “by an Arab” to lodging houses that corresponded to their tribes. Food and lodging was supplied “on credit,” for “Somali housekeepers help their other kin in every way they possibly can and trust they will pay them when and if they can.” But it was a short-lived respite, as Cardiff’s docks soon exploded into racial warfare. Ibrahim could not make sense of it all, and amidst the daggers, pistols, sticks, and stones, he reflected that it “was absurd to fight a man without knowing why.” Street battle followed street battle, and eventually, most of Ibrahim’s “countrymen” ended up “in prison, on remand.” Released after the “magistrates” “recognized that they had acted in self defense,” Ibrahim took to the sea once again.⁶⁹

For the next five years, Ibrahim ricocheted across the globe. Piecing together the fragments of his itineraries makes for a rather abstract geographical poem:

“went to Casablanca and came back to Port Talbot”
“passed on to another ship,” “landed ... in Gibraltar”
“from there we went to Genoa and then to North America,”
“we stopped at Norfolk, in Virginia”
“then I joined a ship which went to Liverpool, then to Lisbon”
“my next ship took us to Galveston in the U.S.A. and back”
“I found work on a ship that went to Hamburg and back”
“I returned to Cardiff and then joined a ship at South shields... we visited Hamburg, Rotterdam, Aden, Karachi, Bombay, and Calcutta, and came back to Falmouth.”
“Another ship took me to Buenos Aires and back to Cardiff”
“I went on a voyage to South America”
“I took employment on a boat which took us twice from Scotland to Algeria and Tunisia”
“Then I joined another in Cardiff. This ship first took us to Aden,”

⁶⁸ Ibid., 373.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 373-4.

“from Aden the ship went to India, then back to England.”⁷⁰

At times, Ibrahim voyaged alongside his countrymen. Mostly, though, he worked with a motley mix of foreigners: Poles, “jolly Irishmen,” Guineans, West Indians, Indians – and “Moses,” the German, with whom he began a close friendship that was only briefly interrupted by their near-fatal fight in the engine room of a tramp steamer somewhere between Lisbon and Galveston.

Ibrahim’s itinerary offered little salvation and many hard revelations. Traveling to town in search of souvenirs during a layover in America, a conductor shoved him into the back of the tram.⁷¹ Once in a while, a British cop gave him a break, but mostly they tracked, harassed, and interrogated him. British shops, meanwhile, tended to shut their doors in his face. Flu hit his friends so hard that they became convinced that “the hospital was killing black people.” During a stop in Aden, he learned that his mother had died while he was away. On a return trip through his Somalian homeland, Ibrahim found that inter-tribal violence was soaring as trafficked arms proliferated and intermarriage among the tribes all but disappeared. A fatal lust for money seemed to him to have possessed his country.

One night, between ships, oceans, and continents, Ibrahim found himself in the English countryside. After a cherished visit to the cinema, Ibrahim missed his bus. In the cold, rainy night, he wondered who would give him, “an outcast,” shelter. Then, his “mind began to wander strangely.” “Black and White are brothers,” he reflected:

The White has awakened first, and how does he set about to arouse his darker brother? He puts his arms round him and then, like an octopus, he sucks his blood. And, as though this were not enough, he throws scorn and insult in his face... Fortunate is the European! Wherever he goes he finds friendly stations where he can feel at home; but woe to the poor African who wishes to see a little of the world: everywhere he goes he is despised and distrusted because of his colour.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid., 374-381.

⁷¹ America, he concluded, “America may keep its many dollars.”

⁷² Ibid., 380-81.

Ibrahim was not entirely without friends or shelter, however. After walking for miles, he eventually reached the house of a small Anarchist and Socialist settlement, where he had stayed on and off before.

There, he had a particularly close friend, a Belgian-British man, named “Gassie,” who, a few years back, had asked Ibrahim if he could teach him about Islam. Their relationship had not been intuitive, and Ibrahim wondered whether it was a trap. The first night he spent in Gassie’s house in Whitehall, Ibrahim kept a revolver under his pillow, just in case. Over time, however, they came to trust one another. Ibrahim participated intermittently in the life of the house, and Gassie even recorded Ibrahim’s autobiography, supposedly reducing his edits to an occasional correction of Ibrahim’s English. “Gassy,” Ibrahim relates at one point in his autobiography, “tried to interest me in geography”:

A vegetation map of the world drawn by him was hanging on the wall. I could see nothing in it but some magical diagram, and I felt some evil would befall me if I ever tried to learn anything from it, so I obstinately closed my mind to the subject. On the other hand, I showed myself quite willing to teach my friend anything he wanted to learn from me.⁷³

They finished the project, *Life and Adventures of a Somali*, in 1928, but Gassie determined there was not enough British interest in Somalia to merit publication.⁷⁴ Then, Ibrahim disappeared once more into the wide world of seafaring. His friends in England never heard from him again.

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Trans-Suez steamship highways belonged to no single empire. Traversing climates and civilizations, they formed a world out of many borderlands. In-between empires, travelers made sense of space by imagining, enacting, and ritualizing their passage according to the emotions of

⁷³ Ibid., 377-8.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 162.

motion. From 1st-class to the engine room, all nine travelers shared something in common. Each left maps of where “civilization” began and ended; where the familiar became foreign; and how power operated in the borderlands of a world order. As such, they provide a fitting transition to part three, which analyzes social conflict and the practice of power along Trans-Suez highways.

Part Three. The Corridors of Power

Chapter 6. Mobile Frontier: Layovers and Lawlessness ‘East of Suez’

Historians have characterized the rise of the steamship in the 19th century as the result of a concerted effort among states and employers to combat illicit maritime traffic.¹ Certainly, the proliferation of large liners and the growth of consolidated steam-shipping companies shifted the terrain of conflict over what passed in and out of ships.² That said, contact between steamships and ports never became calm, controlled, or perfectly legible to authorities. As this chapter demonstrates, laying over ‘east of Suez’ during the heyday of the age of steam was characterized by pervasive anxieties, physical contests, and confusion over what and who could legitimately enter or exit the ship.

The logistics of layovers thus highlight the seemingly paradoxical natures and roles of turn-of-the-century ocean liners. On the one hand, the steamship served as the ultimate “civilizing” machine and an icon of industrialized, expansionary European empires (all of which, accordingly, did everything in their power to keep steam-shipping out of non-European hands). Yet, steamships, from cheaply made tramps to large ocean liners, were also mobile borderlands defined by impressive degrees of porosity and insecurity. In an era of hegemonic European imperialism and accelerated globalization, trans-Suez steamships were contested spaces, the governance of which relied on fundamentally incoherent categories. The terms of that contestation became brutally clear in the moment of contact between ship, land, and sea.

¹ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 331-3. A related interpretation appears in Joyce Chaplin, *Round About the Earth: Circumnavigation from Magellan to Orbit* (Simon & Schuster, 2013).

² Eklof Amirell, *Pirates of Empire: Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Barak, *Powering Empire*, 33-52; Tagliacozzo, *the Longest Journey*; and Tagliacozzo, *Porous Borders*.

While the routes of shipping lines could be described in many geographical patterns, a focus on layovers reveals constellations of port cities. This chapter returns frequently to the so-called “China Lines” of the *Messageries* and *P&O*, which revolved around the following itinerary for a century: Marseille – Naples – Port-Saïd and Suez – Aden or Djibouti – Bombay or Colombo – Singapore – Saigon – Hong Kong – Shanghai – Kobe or Nagasaki – Yokohama. I also discuss episodes from two routes that, while sharing part of the trans-Suez vertebrae of the China Line, split off at the southern end of the Red Sea; heading either in the direction of Madagascar and the southern Indian Ocean or Australia and the South Pacific. Of course, these routes formed their own networks of port cities. For the *Messageries*’ southern “Indian Ocean Line,” for instance, layovers occurred in: Port-Saïd and Suez, Obock, Djibouti or Aden, Zanzibar, the Comoros, Majunga, Tamatava, Réunion, Mauritius, Diego-Suarez, and the Seychelles. For the company’s “Australia Line,” meanwhile (opened in 1882), the familiar layovers in Port-Saïd, Suez, and Aden or Djibouti were followed by stops in Colombo, Freemantle, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Nouméa, and the New Hebrides.³ Rather than attempt to cover these multitudes of port cities in depth, this chapter analyzes layovers thematically.

Today, long after ocean liners have been rendered relics of a bygone era, one might imagine that a typical layover entailed a ship pulling into harbor and mooring on a dock, at which point large mobile staircases or bridges (like those employed in airports today) would be attached, and passengers would descend with care, before being processed by some form of border control. However, even when reduced to a purely physical process, laying over in the latter age of steam was rarely this straightforward, including in many large, developed port-cities. Simply moving

³ For close analysis of the distinctions between these lines and their annexes, see: Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 100, 128, 131, 365, 375.

from ship to land was a journey in itself, since many port facilities on the China Line struggled to keep up with the huge advances in scale and speed that ships underwent in the late-19th century. Indeed, the layover process often began onboard and well outside of harbor, when groups of peddlers, launderers, money-changers, and entertainers boarded the steamship to ply their wares and services, in a process that travelers again and again described as an invasion.

The chaos and complexity of layovers stemmed from more than physical obstacles to disembarkation. For one, different rules and rights applied to different passengers – some being unable to leave at all, while others were ushered into lavish forms of tourism. Regulations on health and commerce, meanwhile, were constantly evolving based on the proclamations of port authorities, international accords, and the hard politics of imperial competition. Behind the scene of every layover, the personnel of shipping companies like the *Messageries* and *P&O* snapped into action, with local agents and shipboard authorities scrambling not only to complete paperwork and repairs, but also to discipline workers; disembarking some, and recruiting others.⁴ Deserters had to be reported or tracked down. Smuggling had to be investigated and repressed. Health quarantines and sanitary regulations had to be dodged or endured. Tourism had to be encouraged, yet channeled, controlled, and synchronized to the increasingly rigid timetables of maritime traffic. The seemingly simple act of laying over, in other words, entailed a broad mobilization of commercial, diplomatic, police, and health actors. As a result of these many actors and agendas, layovers were characterized by simultaneous, parallel processes of confinement and release, friction and fluidity, and deceleration and acceleration.

⁴ On shipping agents, see: Drémeaux, *Les Messageries Maritimes à Hong Kong, 1918-1941*; Marie-Francoise Berneron-Couvenhes, « Le rôle de l'agent des Messageries Maritimes à Alexandrie de 1882 à 1914 : coordination, information, innovation » *Histoire, économie et société* 19, n. 2 (2000): 267-290; Michael B. Miller, "The Business Trip: Maritime Networks in the Twentieth Century," *The Business History Review* 77, n. 1 (Spring, 2003): 1-32.

This maze of operations took shape differently from port to port, but every layover shared a basic preoccupation with defining and controlling what could legitimately enter or exit the ship. In the in-between spaces of empire, however, it proved difficult to discern, let alone police, what constituted legitimate traffic. Who and what could legitimately leave or enter the steamship laying over east of Suez in the late-19th and early-20th centuries? This chapter answers that question through an analysis of disputes over health screening and quarantines, coaling and contraband, and the exit and entry of people. Tracking microbes, commodities, and people during layovers highlights structural inequalities, legal limbos, and conflicting ideas about who had the right to steamship space, as well as who bore the obligation of governing it. Negotiating contact between ship, land, and sea entailed an intricate dance among port authorities, captains, sanitary officials, travelers, and workers. Every steamship layover delivered the cue to start the music.

The steamship layover revealed the grey zones of governance, not only in terms of who was ruled steamship space, but also of who was responsible along the sprawling trans-Suez routes through which so much of the world's people, goods, and ideas flowed during the late-19th and early 20th centuries. As such, struggles over layovers at the turn of the century help reveal the roots of post-1914 mobility controls and the 20th-century "globalization of borders."⁵

Disinfecting the Layover

From the 1870s-forward, expanding steamship networks provided pathways for disease.⁶ The global ricocheting of pandemics that accompanied the age of steam left millions of casualties in

⁵ Mckeown, *Melancholy Order*.

⁶ William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor: New York City, 1976), 156-7. "In the days of sail, the oceans had been too wide for the disease to survive on shipboard long enough to make a lodgement in the seaports... But when steamships began to travel faster and, being bigger, perhaps also carried larger populations of rats... the oceans suddenly became permeable as never before... the steamship network that arose in the 1870s was the vehicle that

its wake, and inspired seismic changes in public health, not least among them, the rise of the Pasteurians. Animated by the real possibility of destroying diseases that had afflicted humans for millennia, such figures naturally appeared to represent the cutting-edge of modernity.⁷ At sea, however, the struggle against disease relied on a stubbornly archaic form, even into the 20th century: the quarantine.⁸

Indeed, in the great debate between advocates of sanitation techniques and defenders of quarantine procedures, the quarantine system held its own alongside seemingly modern methods, such as mobile disinfecting tools and engineered sanitation zones. As a result, a hybrid approach, sometimes known as the “English System” served as the main reference point for much of the fight against maritime contagion.⁹ Realizing the anti-epidemic goals of this system required joining quarantine stations with complex sanitary zones in ports. These were sites that allowed for sanitation and disinfection to unfold rapidly, but in relative isolation and at a distance from ports – “in-between places,” as a recent study of the system terms them.¹⁰

Some have understood this “English System” as being consistent with “British liberal principles” in its ability to provide a means of containing the worst of epidemic spread without strangling commerce.¹¹ Such an interpretation is most convincing when it focuses on large European and North American port cities. East of Suez, however, the English System’s basis in international compromise and technocratic neutrality appears suspect. In practice, commercial

dispersed the [plague] infection around the globe, and did so... with a speed that was limited only by the speed with which a ship could carry its colony of infected rats and fleas to a new port.”

⁷ On Pasteurian networks outside Europe, see: Velmut, *Pasteur’s Empire*; Mauricio Tenorio, *I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 6, 313-320.

⁸ Krista Maglen, *The English System: Quarantine, Immigration and the Making of a Port Sanitary Zone* (Manchester UP, 2014).

⁹ *Ibid.* The “system” emerged out of the British Public Health Act of 1872 and evolved in response to numerous cholera epidemics, especially that of 1892.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See, for example: J.N. Hays reviewing Maglen, *The English System* in *Isis* 106, n. 4 (Dec. 2015): 940-941.

favoritism, imperial competition, and racist suspicions remained rampant. Regardless of how much efficacy and neutrality one attributes to the hybrid quarantine and sanitation system, its heaviest burdens clearly fell on the poorest and most marginalized passengers.

As mentioned earlier, rather than mooring directly, most ports on trans-Suez routes forced ships to cease motion a significant distance from the port proper.¹² In part, the distance reflected the intense quarantine procedures that metered maritime traffic in the age of cholera and the plague. Indeed, each port had its quarantine station, the names of which tended to echo with infamy to anyone who had come into contact with them. The meeting point of steamships and quarantine stations was in many ways the front line of the fight to save the world from the infectious consequences of its own interconnection.

Decisions over whether to let a ship pass into freedom of movement (*libre circulation*) or to send it to quarantine involved byzantine networks of actors – medical experts attached to colonial governments, quarantine committees, municipal boards of health, ship doctors and company agents, clerks and officers. Often, the decision to hold or release a ship would have to be approved by colonial governors themselves. Closer to the ground, teams of fumigators had to be found, as well as enough chemicals, like sulphureous acid, to spray ship-space and passengers' belongings for hours at a time.¹³

¹² The labor and capital needed to directly accommodate deep-water ships was out of reach for many colonial ports. The French ports in Obock and Djibouti, for instance, struggled immensely to take advantage of their strategically valuable position along the route. For a contemporary account of that struggle, see: Gaston Poydenot, *Obock, station de ravitaillement pour la marine française (guerre et commerce), notes et photographies prises au cours d'un voyage d'études à Obock, Djibouti et Aden* (Paris: Charles Blot, 1889).

¹³ To get a sense of how many actors were in play, take the *Yarra* in 1885, for example. In Mauritius, freedom of movement was granted to the ship with a letter from the “quarantine committee,” “approved by his excellency the governor” and the “Medical Department” that read: “Decision of the Quarantine Committee of the General Board of Health, taken at its meeting held on the 18.9.1885 that the MM SS *Yarra* be admitted to pratique after 3 hours fumigation by means of Sulphurous Acid Gas of the passengers' effects and the Cargo under the immediate supervision of the Health officer. Signed, W Lamport, Acting Chief Clerk.” In: « Voyage Report of the *Yarra*, Marseille-Noumea, n. 13 » (filed : 15 Dec. 1885), MM 549, CCIMP.

Unsurprisingly, the late-19th century witnessed a sharp rise in the power of medical and sanitary port authorities, which in turn entailed fierce resistance from the preexisting sovereigns of the route: captains. One *Messageries* captain gave a sense of the relationship between these competing authorities in a report from his 1881 return voyage, from Shanghai to Marseille, during a layover in Naples:

A scene of pure comedy following which the disembarkation of passengers was refused. The sanitary doctor had declared that he could not grant freedom of movement until having conducted an inspection of the passengers and personnel of the ship. It was pitch black when he showed up; he remained in his dinghy alongside the ship, and everyone had to parade in front of him on the platform, responding to a call of names... after this ridiculous formality, he wrote [to us] that he had carefully examined all the passengers, but as it was nighttime, and he could not see the physiognomies distinctly, he could not issue a decision... [time] to recommence this sick joke.¹⁴

And it was not only foreign sanitary authorities who made life miserable for *Messageries* captains. In 1884, for instance, one told his bosses that a recent dip in foreign passengers aboard *Messageries* ships could only be the result of “the persistent system of quarantines followed for years in Marseille.” “What better way to alienate” foreign clients, he elaborated, “than this useless vexation, which awaits them at the entry of the port and which often represents a real terror.” After recalling a sick French admiral who had died at Marseille’s quarantine station in Frioul, the captain pulled at his bosses’ heartstrings with another example: “I watched a young English woman weep,” he lamented, “returning from Peking with a wee infant whom she was breastfeeding herself, at the moment we were entering the quarantine station. It was in December or January and there was

¹⁴ « Voyage Report of the *Imouaddy*, Marseille-Shanghai, n. 6” (Filed 19 March 1881), in MM 264, CCIMP. [«une scène de haute comédie à la suite de laquelle le débarquement des passagers a été refusé. Le médecin sanitaire avait déclaré qu’il ne pouvait m’accorder la libre pratique qu’après avoir passé l’inspection des passagers et du personnel du paquebot. Il était nuit close quand il se présenta; il resta dans son canot le long du bord, et il fallait que tout le monde défilât devant lui sur la plate-forme de l’échelle en répondant à un appel nominal... après cette ridicule formalité, écrivit qu’il avait examiné avec soin tous les passagers mais que comme il faisait nuit, et qu’il ne pouvait voir distinctement les physionomies, il ne pouvait se prononcer... pour recommencer cette mauvaise plaisanterie. »].

every reason to fear for the mother and child, already very tired from the voyage...”¹⁵ But as the captain’s desperation made clear, there was no avoiding sanitary officials and the quarantine stations over which they ruled. Saviors of a diseased planet or tyrants of the port and sea, health officials were too powerful to ignore.

While captains lamented a system of quarantine, passengers found plenty to complain about in approaches that combined quarantine and disinfection. Take, for example, the description of such procedures from a self-proclaimed “globe-trotter” of the late-1880s whose “wanderings in the Far East” led him to Japan during a cholera outbreak: “Everyone who came on board babbled of cholera. Everywhere we stopped there were exasperating regulations as to quarantine. Officials were constantly coming on board, who, after much bowing and salaaming, hunted us on shore, parboiled us in baths, and baked our clothing.” Hunted, parboiled, and baked, it was no wonder that the traveler titled this chapter of his travelogue, “Disillusion.”¹⁶

Disillusioned globetrotters aside, the burden of the war against disease fell disproportionately on marginalized travelers.¹⁷ Permission to disembark and touch land was not a common right, meaning that for many on the ship, a layover was merely a pause in motion during which they remained confined. In many ports, specific categories of worker and races of passengers were systematically denied the right to disembark by maritime authorities. Non-

¹⁵ « Voyage Report of the Yang-Tsé, Marseille-Shanghai, n. 21 » (filed 7 October 1884), in: MM 546, CCIMP. [« Une raison bien plus sérieuse de l'éloignement des étrangers pour nos paquebots est le système persistant de quarantaines suivi depuis plus d'un an à Marseille. Quoi de plus propre à les éloigner que cette vexation inutile, qui les attend à l'entrée du port et qui a été souvent une crainte réelle. On ne saurait oublier la mort de l'amiral Pierre au Lazaret de Frioul. J'ai vu pleurer une jeune dame anglaise, qui revenait de Pékin avec un enfant en bas-âge qu'elle nourrissait elle-même, au moment où nous entrions au lazaret. C'était en décembre ou janvier et il y avait tout à craindre pour la mère et l'enfant, déjà très fatigués du voyage.]

¹⁶ This was the Irish aristocrat, dilapidated actor, journalist, and painter, Lewis Strange Wingfield, *The Wanderings of a Globetrotter*, vol 2. (London, 1889), 5.

¹⁷ Indeed, quarantine and sanitary zones easily transformed into sites of anti-immigrant politics. See Mckeown, *Melancholy Order*, 121-25, 326; Maglen, *The English System*, 157-195.

European workers and passengers, soldiers, and women were frequently confined to the ship during layovers.¹⁸ Quarantines brought such distinctions to the fore and aggravated inequalities. Since lower-class and deck passengers generally had to pay for their own food, for instance, long quarantine periods forced those who ran out of supplies to beg, borrow, or starve.¹⁹

Most ships employed a fairly explicit code for disease control during layovers: keep non-European passengers and crewmembers from disembarking anywhere besides their final destination and prevent non-European port-dwellers from boarding the ship. As the doctor of a *Messageries* liner dutifully recorded in reports to superiors throughout the 1890s, for instance, “only the European passengers may descend to land.”²⁰ The doctor’s colleague on another ship, meanwhile, attested to his ship’s good sanitary behavior by continuously noting in reports that “no native [*indigène*] climbed aboard.”²¹ In fact, such statements were very often aspirations, as opposed to factual records.

Quarantine rules came cloaked in complex details, but captains, ship-doctors, and sanitary officials made the factor of ethnicity transparent, especially when they felt themselves to be under scrutiny from foreign governments. During a layover in Colombo in 1897, for instance, one *Messageries* captain on his way to Australia and the South Pacific was asked to receive a team of Arab coalers who were being transferred between the company’s ships. The captain resisted, “not wanting to take on the Arabs,” as he explained, “in order to avoid a quarantine in Australia.”²² A

¹⁸ For an example of gendered restrictions on layover mobility, see: Unknown, “Diary of a voyage in the REWA 10 July – 9 August 1883,” in: JOD 179 (MS83/085), Caird, NMM.

¹⁹ « Livret d’itinéraires et de tarifs des Lignes de l’Océan Indien, 15 Février 1884 » in « Livrets divers », « circulaires, 1860-1900 », MM 565, CCIMP.

²⁰ « Journal de bord du Médecin Sanitaire », « Océanien 1898-1905, in 200 E 1355, Archives Départementales Bouches-du-Rhône (ADBR), Marseille, France. [« seuls les passagers européens peuvent descendre à terre. »].

²¹ « Journal de Bord du Médecin Sanitaire » « Australien, 1899 – 1905 » and « Yarra », in 200 E 1355, ADBR. [« aucun indigène est monté à bord. »].

²² « Voyage Report of the Australien, Marseille-Nouméa, n. 1 (11 Oct. – 30 Dec.) » (filed 9 Jan. 1897), in: MM 57, CCIMP. [« n’y ayant pas voulu prendre les arabes ... a fin d’éviter une quarantaine en Australie. »].

few years later, another captain summarized the situation similarly, writing, “relative to the Arab coalers, I will add that it’s generally among them that are found the germs of diseases such as the plague, syphilis, so dreaded in Australia, because they have too often been the cause of very painful quarantines, [which are] above all extremely onerous for the company.”²³

Onerous as quarantines were, there was no way the company would go without the coalers it recruited from around the Red Sea Region and Somali coast. They were the low-wage, durable manpower that kept trans-Suez ships chugging along their hemispheric itineraries. The answer, then, for most captains, was to stock up on chemical sprays and to construct fumigation and disinfection rooms on board. This became increasingly possible after the 1903 International Sanitary Conference in Paris, which encouraged fumigation as a mode of disinfection and identified the most preferred chemicals for doing so. Before then, however, poor passengers and non-European workers were the most likely recipients for low-quality disinfectants, such as “phenic acid” (*l’Acide phénique*), which, as one captain complained in 1884, “has an extremely unpleasant odor... is somewhat toxic, [and] has a rather mediocre value as a disinfectant.”²⁴

Many passengers, too, understood quarantines and sanitation efforts in explicitly ethnic terms. And why should they not? As the *Messageries* agent in Colombo (Ceylon) reported in 1905, the “sanitary service” in that port was “functioning perfectly.” Elaborating on what it meant for a sanitary service to function perfectly, the agent stated, “the greatest facilities are granted to

caused a crisis, as the Arab coalers walked offboard against the rules. The workers, the captain reported, « malgré la défense du chef mécanicien, [ont] quitté le navire pour aller réclamer au *Marine Board*. Vous trouverez ci-inclus la lettre adressée par le Collecteur des Douanes au Consul de France me mettant en demeure d’avoir à payer ces hommes et les renvoyer à Aden. »].

²³ « Voyage Report of the Australien, commandant Verron, Marseille-Nouméa » (filed 25 Feb. 1899), MM 57, CCIMP [« relativement aux chauffeurs arabes, j’ajouterais que c’est généralement parmi eux qui se trouvent les germes de maladies telles que la peste, véroles, si redoutées du Australiens, puisqu’elles ont été trop souvent le cause de quarantaines très ennuyeuses et surtout fort onéreuses pour la compagnie »].

²⁴ « Voyage Report of the Yarra, Marseille-Nouméa, n. 11 » (filed 23 Oct. 1884). MM 549, CCIMP. [« qui a une odeur extrêmement désagréable et qui est quelque peu toxique, a une valeur désinfectante assez médiocre. »].

European passengers who find themselves on ships in quarantine, while the greatest severity is demonstrated regarding passengers of color who cannot set foot on land.”²⁵

When the code of racialized enforcement was violated, scandal resulted. On its way from Yokohama to Marseille in 1898, for instance, a *Messageries* liner stopped in Bombay, where health officials subjected the ship’s passengers to screening and scrutiny regardless of their race or ethnicity. The captain’s voyage report relayed the passengers’ outrage: “The first-class passengers,” he noted, “who are coming from Saigon and further afield, who had not gone to land in Bombay, protested against this inspection, and above all against these vexing measures in which they were required to answer to summons and questions, absolutely like the Arabs or the Chinese.” The sanitary officials, the captain observed in horror, had treated European ladies and distinguished colonial administrators – “tired from their long service” – as if they were “natives.” The captain was justifying the fact that some of the upper-class European passengers resisted the inspection, leading the company directors reviewing the report to issue a stern reminder: the captain, they observed, “seems not to realize that this medical visit is done in the greater interest of the ship and in order to avoid quarantine difficulties in subsequent ports; passengers thus ought to facilitate this formality instead of hampering it.”²⁶ Like the disillusioned globe-trotter who had been hunted, parboiled, and baked by Japanese health officials, however, these passengers were shocked to be perceived as vectors of a color-blind disease.

While sanitation and quarantine procedures grew more rigorous in the late-19th century, the health screening system remained riddled with holes, exceptions, and corruption. The *SS Guy Mannering*, a ship carrying pilgrims from Jeddah (the port-city outside Mecca) to Bombay in 1878,

²⁵ “General Report on Services, Colombo Agency, 1905/1906, ch. 1” *Rapports d’agence*, Colombo (1882-3; 1886-1890; 1892-96; 1902-1907, AFL.

²⁶ “Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons n. 1, Marseille-Yokohama” (filed 4 Apr. 1898), MM 194, CCIMP.

offers a window into both the growing regulations and their contradictions.²⁷ Booked by a British consul in Jeddah who doubled as shipping agent of the *British India Steam Navigation Company*, the *Guy Mannering* left Jeddah and headed south packed with 1 164 people and 14 horses – more than the British Native Passenger’s Act allowed. Hardly had the ship set out for its next layover in Aden than authorities demanded that it be held in quarantine. Apparently, smallpox had been detected onboard and cholera had been reported in Jeddah, where the ship had just been. The authorities were right to take precautions: mortality rates for Hajj pilgrims from South and Southeast Asia reached upwards of 30% between the 1870s and 1890s.²⁸ Yet, in a petition to British authorities, the weary passengers provided a window into the consequences of quarantine aboard the immobilized ship:

We, the undersigned passengers of the SS *Guy Mannering*, from Jeddah to Bombay, hereby declare that in consequence of the steamer’s long detention... our food has run short, and some of us are actually starving. On paying our passage by this steamer, the agent promised to us that we would be in Bombay in fifteen days; most of us have now been on board nine days... we consequently protest against this detention and compel the master to proceed or hold him responsible for the result, in consequence of a want of food.²⁹

As British authorities debated over the incident, they committed themselves to more rigorous regulation.

They then began doling out exemptions from those regulations to state-subsidized lines like the *Messageries* and *Austrian Lloyds*. Indeed, at the same time as the *Guy Mannering* was languishing near Aden, a *Messageries* ship that had been quarantined in Aden also protested. However, with far more success than the overbooked ship full of Muslim pilgrims, the aggrieved

²⁷ “Native Passenger Ships 59,” in: “India. Home Proceedings. Sanitary. 1878(V 1106, I. 941),” IOR 4/20/A/1118, British Library (BL), London, United Kingdom.

²⁸ Taglia cozzo, *the Longest Journey*, 145.

²⁹ “Native Passenger Ships,” 466-7.

representatives of the *Messageries* simply appealed to the nearest French consular official. The consular official then sent his complaints to the British Resident in Aden, who promptly transmitted them down the line: from chief secretary to the government of India in Bombay, to officiating secretary, to Advocate General. Soon enough, *Messageries* ships were exempted from the harshest regulations since, as officials put it: “they being vessels subsidized by the State, are accorded the same privileges and placed in the same position as ships-of-war.”³⁰ State-subsidized ships of the *Messageries* and *Austrian Lloyds* would need only an endorsement from the French consul in Jeddah – who also represented the Austro-Hungarian Empire there – and they could sail by without fear of being ensnared by the recently-tightened health screenings. An order issued by the British government in India made the stance official.

The reliability of such a system can be glimpsed by the defense of the British consul in Jeddah who had booked the *Guy Mannering*. The consul insisted that he was perfectly “permitted to trade” if he liked, and blamed a jealous rival, the Dutch consul in Jeddah, for casting suspicion on him. The Dutch consul was, he underlined, “not wanting for friends in Singapore” – that is, the main relay port for pilgrim traffic coming from Indonesia – and clearly meant to sabotage his British competitor.³¹ Here was the outline of an inter-imperial racket stretching from Indonesia to Mecca via Singapore and Aden, and implicated in which were consuls who represented the Dutch, British, French, and Austro-Hungarian Empires. How could such men – diplomatic officials and maritime entrepreneurs – be counted on to enforce limits on the number of passengers and to rigorously screen health patents and other documents vouching for the cleanliness of ships? In the global battle against contagion, these deal-making merchant-consuls were rather mercenary.

³⁰ Ibid., 467.

³¹ Ibid., 276-277.

Moreover, when it came time to decide who should be quarantined and for how long, politics of national-imperial preference were never far from the surface – at least, so French captains in British ports insisted. In 1890, for instance, after the *Messageries* had spent eight frustrating years trying to break into the Australian market for passengers and cargo, one captain of a brand-new *Messageries* liner told his directors that he had been delayed, “following ridiculous quarantine measures, [which are] always in favor of this country, and which refused us freedom of movement for a couple cases of measles.”³² This would become a motif. In order to launch its Australian Line without losing government subsidies, the *Messageries* had to service French and formerly French territories in the Indian Ocean (the Seychelles, Réunion, Mauritius), where many passengers were mixed-race. This fact, French captains alleged, offered British authorities an excuse to impose discriminatory quarantine rules based on the supposed sanitary conditions of the islands and their natives. One captain put it simply: “These useless quarantines, or which appear so in the eyes of passengers, have the most irritating influence on the Company’s prospects in Australia. It is they which, repeated, often without motive, either in the Seychelles, or Bourbon, or Maurice, have impeded the Company from gaining ground.”³³

The captain in question understood the rules of the game and decided to play. Aware of the less-than-neutral nature of maritime health politics, he boasted to his bosses about cultivating the favor of health officials. “We have been placed in quarantine in Réunion, which was, moreover, expected,” he explained to directors, “and if we weren’t quarantined in Mauritius [the next layover

³² « Voyage Report of the Australien, n. 6, Marseille-Sydney » (filed 4 Feb. 1890), MM 57, CCIMP [“Par suite de mesures ridicules de quarantaine, toujours en faveur de ce pays, et qui nous ont fait refuser la libre pratique pour 2 cas de rougeole. »]. Bonnetain and Tillier, *Histoire d’un paquebot* repeated the claims.

³³ « Voyage Report of the Yarra, Marseille-Nouméa, n. 11 » (filed 23 Oct. 1884), MM 549, CCIMP [« Ces quarantaines inutiles, ou qui le paraissent aux yeux des passagers, ont l’influence la plus fâcheuse sur l’avenir de la Compagnie en Australie. Ce sont elles qui répétées, souvent sans motifs, soit aux Seychelles, soit à Bourbon, soit à Maurice, ont empêché la Compagnie de gagner du terrain... »].

and a British colony], it's because I had the good fortune of finding in Réunion two important personages of Port-Louis [the capital of Mauritius] and members of the Sanitary Council of this city, personages whom I rushed to take as passengers.”³⁴ Company directors reviewing the report had underlined that section vigorously.

Years later, interpersonal relations continued to shape health policy. “In Mauritius,” wrote a captain in 1896, “M. Newton, lawyer and influential member of the colony, who had been our passenger [before]... intervened to have the duration of sanitary formalities reduced.”³⁵ Of course, in the battle against microbes, cultivation of sanitary officials and Very Important Passengers was not supposed to play a role. Then again, given the patchy patterns of sanitary enforcement, who could be surprised that old-fashioned hobnobbing prevailed.

Captains who ignored that reality stood to suffer the consequences. On layover in Yokohama in 1902, for example, the *Messageries* steamship *Tonkin* encountered long delays, tense negotiations, and a multitude of small scandals. The ship's captain blamed rowdy passengers, but also stubborn Japanese health officials, and did not refrain from telling them as much. In response, the nearest French consul broke a remarkably durable code by which company and state officials kept their conflicts in private, and publicly reprimanded the captain. “You would have left” long ago, he declared, “if the ship had been more polite towards the Japanese doctors.”³⁶ Miniature disputes like these were the building blocks of bigger crises. In the late-19th century, French

³⁴ « Voyage Report of the Yarra, Marseille – Nouméa, n. 11. » (filed 23 Oct. 1884), MM 549, CCIMP [« Nous avons été mis en quarantaine à la Réunion, ce qui était, d'a ailleurs prévu, et si nous ne l'avons pas été à Maurice, c'est que j'ai eu la bonne fortune de trouver à la Réunion deux personages importants de Port-Louis et membres du conseil sanitaire de cette ville, personages que je me suis empressé d'accepter comme passagers. »].

³⁵ « Voyage Report of the Iraouaddy, n. 4, Marseille-Mauritius » (filed 11 Mar. 1896), MM 265, CCIMP [« A Maurice, M. Newton, a vocat et membre influent de la colonie, qui a vait été notre passager du « Sindh », s'est entremis pour faire réduire la durée des formalités sanitaires »].

³⁶ “Capitaine du ‘Tonkin’ à M. le Consul de France » (31 Oct. 1901), Tokyo, Ambassade 697PO/A, 32, Centre d'archives diplomatiques à Nantes (CDAN), Nantes, France.

travelogue-writers peddled the English phrase, “time is money” to describe the evolving terms of transit. For captains ensnared in seemingly banal conflicts, time was indeed money, and as such, power. Health officials from Marseille to Yokohama held that power in their hands.

Coal and Contraband

The threat of microbial contagion inspired sharp conflicts and systematic targeting of certain mobile populations, while leading to the reorganization of ports and maritime authority. Given their relative invisibility and potentially lethal consequences, the forces of contagion were perhaps bound to stoke suspicions and tensions. Yet even the most ubiquitous and banal commodities triggered disputes. For ships carrying mail, packages, bulk cargo, animals, and all manner of provisions, comprehensively detailing the controversies surrounding loading and unloading goods would require a dissertation to itself. For brevity, I will focus on the movement of coal and opium.

The process of re-coaling evoked surprising reactions from travelers and highlighted ambivalent – even foreboding – feelings in voyagers stopping along the routes that traversed Suez. These feelings naturally tended to occur most in Port-Saïd and Aden, the largest coaling centers of the early-20th century world.³⁷ Passengers who remained onboard during these layovers quickly learned that the ship transformed its face drastically in the act of re-coaling. As the globetrotting journalist Nellie Bly described it during an 1890 layover in Port-Saïd, “A more urgent reason still, for our going to land, was the fact that this was a coaling port . . . and I never knew of anything that would make one more quickly feel that there are things in life much worse than death, if I may use the expression, than to have to stay on board a ship during the coaling operation.”³⁸ In letters to

³⁷ Huber, *Channelling Mobilities*, 116-7.

³⁸ Nellie Bly, *Around the World in 72 Days* (London: Bretano’s; New York: Pictorial Weeklies, 1890), chapter 7. Had Bly, or the many passengers whose sentiments she echoed, spent their nights on deck instead of in cabins, the

his mother, a medic on a *Messageries* ship heading to Madagascar in 1895 described the same dilemma more prosaically: “when we’ve loaded coal, the ship is full of dust from the agitation of the combustible and the preparations for layover... During this agitation, one sleeps poorly.”³⁹ Such passengers were discovering what thousands of travelers were forced to learn as well: there was no clean way to coal a ship. Rather, for the many who could not, or would not, leave the ship, the consequence was being enveloped by a suffocating cloud of black dust.

In fact, the clouds that coaling kicked up during layovers were often a reality of navigation at sea, too. In the early-20th century, the most highly capitalized shipping companies began installing engines that mitigated the worst of coal emissions. Then, starting in the 1910s, companies began a long, slow transition to oil-fueled engines. Before these improvements, however, there was little remedy for the scourge of sootiness other than leaving the ship or wearing goggles. Some guidebooks pointed travelers to the latter option. After the colonial administrator Charles Lemire suffered from “thick, black flakes...penetrating into the eyes” during a trans-Suez voyage in the 1870s, for instance, he wrote a guidebook for future travelers that included a detailed list of objects to procure. In addition to parasols, military-style neck-guards, and a sturdy cane for beating away dogs and thieves, Lemire recommended: “glasses ... to preserve oneself from the

omnipresence of coal dust would have been less surprising. Alexandre Yersin, the Pasteurian who would attain world fame for his research into the bubonic plague, learned this lesson firsthand. On his first voyage “beyond” Suez,” the much-anticipated approach of a romanticized Orient lulled him into sleeping on deck the night before his first layover. As he wrote to his mother, “I finish my night on the deck, and naturally, come morning, I wake up black from coal dust.” “Alexandre Yersin à sa mère, en mer» (6 Oct. 1890), Collections de l’Institut Pasteur de Paris [« J’a chève ma nuit sur mon banc, et naturellement, le ma tin, je me réveille noir de poussière de charbon. »].

³⁹Raphael Dumand, “Dimanche 8 septembre 1895” in : « Voyage de Marseille à Madagascar, à bord le POLYNÉSIEN et de l’AVA en septembre 1895 », Philippe Ramona Collection, available at: <http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/polynesien3.htm> (last accessed 5/1/2021).

grit.” Sold in all major “sea ports,” he highlighted a model that “surround[s] the eyes with a tightly-woven, fine metal network, attached by means of an elastic cord.”⁴⁰

Such devices were not available to everyone, however. In an 1898 voyage report, for instance, one Trans-Suez captain noted that many of his “Arab coalers” were stricken with eye injuries and even blindness from “handling the briquettes with which we were provisioned in Marseille.” When he looked into the issue, the captain was surprised to learn from his head mechanic that “these eye illnesses are frequent,” in large part because “we have not had a sufficient number of glasses to give out to all these men.”⁴¹

Even for passengers who had no contact with coal and who were equipped with glasses, sootiness was only one element of the coaling experience that exposed the porosity of the steamship. A French travelogue writer traveling around 1900 described re-coaling not only as an invasion of black clouds, but also as a sonic assault on the passengers:

during the six hours of layover, all the passengers desert the [ship], the holds of which fill up with a coal that seems to dissolve in the air and envelop the ship in clouds of black dust. The winches make a deafening racket, the coolies shout, the whistles directing workers hurl their strident note into this cacophony, and it is in plugging one’s ears that we flee the ship.⁴²

In a travelogue entitled *Picturesque travels across the world*, the layover presented a rather discordant note.

⁴⁰ Charles Lemire, *Cochinchine française et royaume de Cambodge: avec l’itinéraire de Paris à Saigon, une carte de la Cochinchine française, un plan du canal de Suez et des villes de Suez, de Port-Saïd et d’Ismailia* (Paris: Challamel, Ainé, 1877), 23.

⁴¹ « Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Indian Ocean Line, n. 22 » (filed: 24 Nov. 1898), MM 547, CCIMP.

⁴² Eugène La grillière-Beauclerc, *Voyages pittoresques à travers le monde: De Marseille aux frontières de Chine* (Paris: Tallandier, 1900), 77. [pendant les six heures d’escale, tous les passagers désertent le ‘Calédonien,’ dont les soutes s’emplissent d’un charbon semblant se désagréger à l’air et enveloppant le navire d’un nuage de poussière noire. Les treuils font un vacarme assourdissant, les coolies crient, les sifflets de manœuvre jettent leur note stridente dans cette cacophonie, et c’est en nous bouchant les oreilles que nous quittons le navire.”].

As the shouting “coolies” suggest, well into the 20th century, the vast majority of the labor of coaling was done by hand, with workers stuffing coal into sacks, loading it into barges, then unloading those barges and emptying the sacks into ship storage facilities – a process that was anything but clean, quiet, and efficient.⁴³ In the necessity of refilling the ship’s stock of coal during layover, many passengers observed the grim realities of the labor behind the spectacular machine of the steamship. Travelers watching the grueling labor reacted in different ways, but many expressed a cocktail of disgust, resignation, and delight: disgust in the appearance and/or conditions of the laborers loading coal into their ships; resignation to the idea that such people necessarily tolerated lives of toil, and had done so for centuries; and delight in the scale, intensity, and exoticism of the spectacle in front of them.

The response to coaling of a French colonial magistrate traveling from Marseille to New Caledonia in 1895 was typical. During his layover in Port-Saïd, the magistrate made sure to buy a helmet and white clothing (“it is here that one makes the purchase” he noted), but the crowded streets, vendors, and cacophony of the city soon tired him. Stunned to see women from the Salvation Army pumping “fanfares” into the din, he wondered “what success can their evangelical propaganda have in this city of chaos [*Capharnaëum*]?”⁴⁴ The magistrate headed back to his ship early, only to find that “the supplying of coal” was still underway. In his account of what he saw before him, the magistrate peddled familiar colonial tropes about civilization and progress, merging delight and disgust with a hefty dose of resignation:

⁴³ In the least-developed ports along trans-Suez routes, coal was put in sacks and loaded onto light boats, then transported onto barges in deeper water. Those barges were then tugged alongside ships to begin loading. J.E. Swayne, “French Possessions in the Gulf of Aden” (SIMLA, 1895), in: L/P&S/20/60, BL.

⁴⁴ Charles Rémond, « Vendredi, 7 juin 1895 », in « Voyage de Marseille à Nouméa, à bord de l’ARMAND BEHIC du 3 juin au 12 juillet 1895 », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/armand-behic2.html> (last accessed 5/1/2021) [« Quel succès peut bien avoir leur propagande évangélique dans un pareil Capharnaüm ? »].

There are hundreds of black men practically nude who transport it from barges into the hold with the help of straw baskets on their heads. They follow one another like ants, in an Indian line, singing a somber chant without end, to the rhythm of their movements. They continue into the night, lit up by the smoky, red-flamed torches, which give them silhouettes of disciplined demons, beasts of burden. For the poor *fellahs*, nothing has changed in Egypt since the pharaohs.⁴⁵

Along with the helmet and white suit, Port-Saïd and its coalers had given the magistrate a reassuring sense of certainty: whatever his ship was doing to Port-Saïd was no better and no worse than what had happened “since the Pharaohs.”

Alexandre Yersin, the Pasteurian prodigy and future conqueror of the Bubonic Plague, placed more emphasis on delight when he witnessed the coaling of his ship. Not yet a scientific hero, Yersin had taken on a position as a ship-doctor for the *Messageries*. On his first voyage “beyond Suez,” he wrote to his mother about the experience of landing in Aden. The usually placid doctor saw only marvels in front of him:

One sees huge dark masses separate, lit up by many red-flamed torches. From the rafts, which approach the *Oxus* [his ship], tugged by a little steamer, a short of rhythmic chant rises, formed of only a few notes which are constantly repeated. These are the coalers coming to fill up the holds of the *Oxus*. Nothing can give you an idea of this phantasmagoric scene. How far from Europe one already feels!⁴⁶

For a man who dedicated his life to putting humanity’s invisible demons under a microscope, the simple act of coaling was nothing less than phantasmagoric. The Crawfords, meanwhile, who we met in the last chapter on their way home from Australia, were far less delighted, and far more

⁴⁵ Ibid. [“quand nous remontons à bord, la provision de charbon s’achève. Ce sont des centaines d’hommes noirs à peu près nus qui le transportent des chalands aux soutes à l’aide de couffins sur la tête. Ils se suivent comme des fourmis, à la file indienne, en chantant une mélodie sans fin, au rythme de leurs mouvements. Ils continuent dans la nuit, éclairés par des torches aux feux rouges et fumeux qui leur donnent des silhouettes de démons disciplinés en bêtes de somme. Pour les pauvres fellahs, rien n’est changé en Egypte depuis les pharaons. »]

⁴⁶ « Yersin à sa mère 6 oct. 1890, en mer », Correspondance d’Alexandre Yersin, Archives de l’Institut Pasteur de Paris [« on voit se détacher . . . de grandes masses sombres vaguement éclairées par de nombreux flambeaux aux flammes rouges. De ces radeaux, qui s’approchent de l’*Oxus*, remorqués par un petit vapeur, s’élève une sorte de chant rythmé, formé de quelques notes seulement qui se répètent toujours. Ce sont les charbonniers qui viennent remplir les soutes de l’*Oxus*. Rien ne peut te donner une idée de cette scène fantasmagorique. Comme on se sent déjà éloigné de l’Europe! »].

disgusted by their coaling experience in Aden: “Barges came alongside & swarms of Arab coal heavers – dark as Satan & as ugly as sin – clambered over the side like monkeys, ready to begin operations.”⁴⁷

These impressions of coaling highlighted an uncomfortable contrast between ideals of civilizational and technological progress, typified by both the steamship and the Suez Canal through which it traveled, and a stubborn impression of backwardness, embodied by the suffering of impoverished workers. The ambivalence of travelers’ reactions hearkened to controversies surrounding the construction of the Suez Canal. For architects and champions, the Suez Canal was the coronation of global liberalism and Saint-Simonian cults of technological progress: a worldmaking union of Free Labor, Free Trade, and Free Seas at the very moment that slavery was being abolished in the U.S., serfdom in Russia, and the slave trade at sea. But for all that it was supposed to contribute to such causes, the canal had been accompanied by searing reports of coerced and slave labor.⁴⁸ It had also taken almost a decade to begin functioning properly. Arguably, in turn-of-the-century travelogues, the chanting, coal-bearing workers of the Red Sea littoral echoed this recent history of disillusionment. In its movement into the ship during layover and its emission during navigation, coal inspired troubling and titillating reflections from travelers, evoking the feeling of stagnation and deceleration at the center of the world.

Much the same could be said about another commodity fueling European imperial expansion, and like coal, it also took the form of little black lumps: opium. British and French imperial projects in Asia were largely financed by opium sales, just as their surrogate shipping

⁴⁷ “Diary kept by Andrew Crawford as a passenger on board the PATRIARCH and CUZCO, 1885,” JOD/267, Caird, NMM. The Crawford diary has no page numbers.

⁴⁸ Zachary Karabell, *Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal* (Penguin Random House, 2004), chapter 11 and 12; Huber, *Chanelling Mobilities*, 28-29; 179-182; Joyce Chaplin, *Round About the Earth*, 206-7.

lines grew on the traffic. In 1900, the age of opium-financed imperialism was still underway. Even after an international mobilization of anti-narcotic interests moved the British government to attack the mass-cultivation of opium by spectacularly burning Indian poppy crops in 1918, little effort was made to interrupt the considerable flow of “non-certified” opium through ports like Singapore and Hong Kong.⁴⁹ In French Indochina, meanwhile, legal opium sales survived in one form or another until the late-1940s.⁵⁰

On the China Line, layovers were very often host to movements of opium, both state-sanctioned and illicitly trafficked. The efforts of captains and port authorities to intercept opium traffic during layovers could appear like a cat-and-mouse game, in which forces of order pursued the opium-trafficking agents of chaos. The more apt metaphor was a tug-of-war, in which multiple actors spanning the formal-informal divide struggled to hold on to the lucrative privilege of supplying opium to hungry markets along the route. In 1880, for example, the captain of the *Messageries* liner, *Anadyr*, was preparing to leave Hong Kong on his return voyage to Marseille when armed men representing the British colony’s opium board stopped him in his tracks. Insisting that his ship carried a “fraudulent” cargo of opium that would eventually end up in British imperial ports, the men presented an order justifying a sweep of the ship and a seizure of its opium. The captain swiftly called on the French consul in Hong Kong, who, in turn, managed to convince Hong Kong’s governor to rescind the order at the last minute. Still, the attempted seizure, “manu militari” as the captain put it, rattled *Messageries* authorities. While the captain chalked up the incident to a corrupt British plan to destroy French competition, he warned directors in Marseille

⁴⁹ On opium, see: Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium* (Routledge, 1999);

⁵⁰ Diana S. Kim, *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 153-4.

that if the “pretention of Hong Kong’s opium board [*ferme*]” had been supported by the “magistrature of this colony,” it might have resulted in a fine of “25,000 dollars.” The directors shared his fears and ordered a special investigation.⁵¹

A few years later, however, troubling questions remained about the legitimacy of opium’s guardians. Running the same line, the *Anadyr* left Hong Kong in Summer of 1884 and pulled into its next layover in Saigon (the ship had quit the Chinese coast in a hurry after Franco-Chinese conflict broke out in the South China Sea). As the *Anadyr*’s captain reported to superiors in Marseille, a day after mooring in Saigon, “employees from the Opium board [*régie*]” raided the ship, heading “directly, right away and without the slightest hesitation, to the *boys* quarters, and there, without looking around, and with a perfect knowledge of the place in which the fraud was to be found, they seized thirty bars of opium.” Afterward, the captain reflected on the “extraordinary” precision of the operation. Authorities, he deduced, had been “warned” in advance “by Hong Kong,” yet they had waited to carry out the raid until the day after the *Anadyr* arrived in Saigon. The delay could only mean that the agents knew exactly where the opium was headed and that it would not be unloaded in Saigon. As the captain cryptically claimed to directors in Marseille, there was “connivance between the opium board and a certain affiliate.” But why had the company been thoroughly sidelined throughout? Bright red underlines signaled the directors’ desire to answer that question, but whatever investigation they pursued took place through more discrete channels of communication.⁵²

Perhaps the Opium board simply preferred to cut out the company as a middleman so that they could keep the full value of the catch to themselves. Indeed, in a vivid illustration of the

⁵¹ “Voyage report of the Anadyr, Marseille-Shanghai, n. 12/3” (14 June 1880), 19970023943, AFL.

⁵² “Voyage report of the Anadyr, n. 22, Marseille-Hong Kong and return” (filed 20/8/1884), 19970023943, AFL.

vagaries around opium traffic, when captains confiscated a haul, they had every right to immediately sell it to authorities in French ports. Customs agencies would then cut them a check, and the company would decide how to handle the proceeds. The sin, in other words, was not in selling the opium itself, but rather in how it had been sold. When some of this opium flow found its way into captain's hands during layovers, they were transformed into legal dealers. If successful in confiscating black market opium in their ships, captains had to weigh their catch, evaluate its quality, sell it, and decide how to divvy up the profits. Thus, a *Messageries* captain in 1910 could write to his bosses without reservation:

I have the honor of reporting to you that I acquired a sum of 665.25 [piasters, presumably] produced from the sale to the Saigon customs, through the mediator of our General Agency, of a quantity of opium seized in the *boys'* post of the *Australien* [his ship], while departing from Shanghai on the return voyage. I would be grateful to you if you can indicate how to distribute it.⁵³

The captain then proposed his own scheme for distributing the proceeds: 726 francs would go to a charity supporting widows of mariners; 300 francs for the captain himself; 250 for the second captain; 200 for the coxswain, and 50 each for the two sailors who helped him in his “search” (*fouille*, which could also be translated as “raid”). The captain's proposal was not as presumptuous as it may seem; after all, the customs agency in Saigon had written out the check in his name.

The seizure was the result of surveillance of the loading of foodstuffs, which struck one of the ship's officers as being “abnormal.” And, to a great extent, it was through such unsystematic means, usually dressed up after the fact as “investigation” in voyage reports, that captains apprehended smugglers. On an 1894 layover in Beirut, for instance, *Messageries* officers

⁵³ « Commandant Riquier à M. le Directeur de l'Exploitation, 11 Juin 1910. », Correspondance diverse de l'Australien, MM 58, CCIMP. The *banque de l'Indochine* check, written out to the captain, reads: 1,575,65 [“J'ai l'honneur de vous rendre compte que j'ai touché une somme de 665,25 produit de la vente à la douane de Saigon, par l'entremise du notre Agence Générale, d'une quantité d'opium saisie dans le poste des boys de l'Australien, au départ de Shanghai, retour. Je vous sera is reconnaissant si vous voulez bien m'indiquer comment la répartir...]. The opium had been hidden in various corners of the ship.

uncovered “166 kilograms of hashish (gross weight) ... ten bags of revolver cartridges, together 270 kilos, then a straw sack containing 30 kilograms of dynamite cartridges with conductor strings and capsules.”⁵⁴ Their method for sniffing out the conspiracy involved nothing more than observing two passengers, “named Houssan and Houssein,” who “were lifting [their bags] with difficulty.”⁵⁵ After rushing in for a search and confiscating the contraband, the ship’s captain reported that the arms were quickly surrendered to French authorities. As for the hashish, however, “I kept it, at the disposition of the Company, given that it did not pose any real danger and that it was of great value. It seems that this quality is worth 140 francs-a-kilo. That would represent 23,000 francs in round figures.”⁵⁶ In marginal notes on the voyage report, company directors could not help but object. The captain, they noted snidely, “seems, moreover, to significantly exaggerate the value.”⁵⁷ In reports to directors, it was not unknown for captains to brag about the prices they fetched. Whether a captain at sea or a company director in Marseille and Paris, the owners of the means of mobility had to know the quality and value of intoxicants.

Seizures were rarely as straightforward as the one described above. The experience of one *Messageries* captain, named Bretel, reveals the obstacles that even a determined, well-informed captain could encounter in the quest to yank drugs from the hands of unauthorized purveyors. As he prepared to leave a layover in Hong Kong in 1890, Bretel received a tip from the French consul there that his “Chinese *boys*” had picked up a shipment of opium in the port. He immediately ordered rigorous searches of their quarters and belongings, but these turned up nothing.

⁵⁴ “Voyage Report of the Djemnah, Syria Line, n. 39, commandant Bretel” (27 Sept. 1894), MM 164, CCIMP. [166 kilogrammes of hachich (poids brut) [...] 10 sacs de cartouches de revolver ensemble 270 kilos, puis une couffé à paille contenant 30 kilogrammes de cartouches de dynamite avec fils conducteur et capsules. »].

⁵⁵ Ibid. [« nommé Houssan et Houssein » « soulevaient avec peine »].

⁵⁶ Ibid. [« je l’ai gardé, à la disposition de la Compagnie, étant donné qu’il n’offre aucun danger et qu’il a une grande valeur. Il paraît que cette qualité vaut 140 francs le kilo. Cela représenterait 23,000 francs en chiffres ronds. »].

⁵⁷ Ibid. [« paraît du reste d’exagérer beaucoup la valeur. »].

Heading towards the next layover in Saigon, he telegraphed authorities there to be ready, and even had the foresight to pull up the buoys, “to prevent the fraudsters from soaking the opium in the upper-deck buoys.”⁵⁸ To break up the racket, he went after the workers who he imagined were the ringleaders, taking advantage, for example, “of a little larceny of fruits committed by the corporal of the *boys* to lock him up in irons and thus prevent him from being able to collude with whoever it was in Saigon.” The next day he undid the employee’s chains and kicked him off the ship altogether – “This man who I disembarked the next day inspired no confidence in me.” Nonetheless, he had to admit, “Still I could not prove for what it’s worth that he’s implicated in the affair.”⁵⁹

Just before reaching Saigon, in the middle of the night, the captain got a tip from one of his coalers and immediately relaunched searches, which, this time turned up “2 sacks and a suitcase full of opium boxes (3,300 pounds taëls) [275 lbs].” The captain “immediately had the Opium put under lock and key and the *boys* in irons.” Then, as usual, he sold it to French customs. Once again, the sale to the French imperial state generated enough proceeds for charity, self-awarded bonuses, and bribes to future informants. Rarely did amateur police work pay for itself so handsomely.⁶⁰

As Bretel’s example suggests, shipping companies periodically attempted to employ more rigorous means of seizing opium than intermittent surveillance by ship officers. Company agencies, for instance, despite being spread out across oceans and empires, shared tips and

⁵⁸ « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Yokohama » (filed 20 Jul. 1890), MM265, CCIMP [« pour empêcher les fraudeurs de mouiller l’Opium avec des bouées dessus. »].

⁵⁹ Ibid. [« d’un petit larcin de fruits commis par le Caporal des Boys pour mettre ce dernier aux fers et l’empêcher ainsi de pouvoir s’entendre avec qui que ce fut à Saigon. »] [« Cet homme que j’ai débarqué le lendemain ne m’inspira aucune confiance »; « Pourtant je ne puis prouvé qu’il soit pour quelque chose dans l’affaire. »].

⁶⁰ Ibid. [« 2 sacs et une malle remplie de boites d’Opium (3,300 taëls) »] [« Prévenu immédiatement de la chose je fais mettre l’Opium sous clef et les boys aux fers. »] The crew received a bonus of “\$1,650.” The *Messageries* Directors noted in the margins that this excellent haul might have the added benefit of proving to the government that the company was pulling its weight in the war against contraband.

information. Consuls in layover ports where traffic was rampant would occasionally pay informants for tips, as would captains with their crews. Ship-captains also baited and blackmailed employees whom they suspected of trafficking. Ultimately, though, these were tactics of desperation. Most company officials were too disconnected from their workforce and not sufficiently invested in the project of policing to crack down on drug traffic with all their might. At least, representatives of the French imperial state certainly felt that way, and in company communications, *Messageries* employees confessed that government officials considered them poor partners in the suppression of illegal traffic (similar dynamics were at play between the *P&O* and the British government).⁶¹

The authorities were further limited in their ability to crack down on trafficking by the risk of irritating passengers and driving crews to mutiny. Crewmembers, as discussed in a later chapter, had the right to carry a certain amount of merchandise that they picked up and sold along the route. This centuries-old practice, known as *pacotillage*, was a vital component of the moral economy of maritime workers. Its benefits were not only in offering sailors another source of income, but also in giving them autonomy, and rewarding their intelligence and ability to play distant markets off one another. However, throughout the late-19th and early 20th-century, *pacotillage* came under attack from shipping companies, in part because limiting it seemed to represent an effective means of suppressing illicit traffic in things like opium, which attracted unwanted attention from government authorities.⁶²

As one captain from the 1890s learned, however, thoroughly policing *pacotille* required an unpleasant spectacle, and could call into question the sovereignty of European states over their

⁶¹ This dynamic is described in depth in a later chapter.

⁶² “Circulaire n. 33, pa cotilles » (16/9/1920), *Circulaires Bords*, 1919-1921, MM 567, CCIMP.

liners. In letters to company headquarters in France, the captain wrote that shortly after pulling into Port-Saïd, he smothered his ship in police and spies in order to suppress any traffic, but this produced its own problems: “deploying the Police in a circle around the ship and surveilling it with Agency employees produced a bad effect on the passengers as well as the crew, while the presence onboard of Egyptian police agents in a protectorate country [*pays de capitulation*] struck me as being a very regrettable thing.”⁶³ Even if, as he confessed, “It is certain that contraband of *pacotille* is practiced at far too considerable levels on the China Line,” there had to be a way to avoid, “the inconveniences that seem to me to result from the current system and which strike me as highly prejudicial to the Company.”⁶⁴

The effort to police opium traffic during layovers was further complicated by the existence of an enormous legal traffic in the substance. Indeed, the problem was not just smuggling of illicit opium, but also theft of state-sanctioned opium traffic. A 1911 book of circulars for the British *P&O* Line’s Hong Kong Agency, for instance, gave special instructions for safeguarding opium cases informed by past losses. An excess of caution was necessary, the orders reminded employees, “Owing to the value of this cargo and the fact that expert thieves are always on the lookout for an opportunity to steal the opium.” Employees of the Hong Kong branch had detailed guidelines: “the Company’s detectives (an Indian and a Chinese)” were “to be present in the Hold during the time that the Opium is being taken out and landed.” Opium was only to be “discharged during daylight.” If emergency blockages forced captains to unload opium at night, then a special strongroom was

⁶³ « Voyage Report of the Saghalién, Marseille – Yokohama, n. 24A/25R » (filed 30 Nov. 1893), MM 458, CCIMP [“en outre que le déploiement de la Police faisant cercle autour du bâtiment et surveillée par les employés de l’Agence produisait mauvais effet sur les passagers aussi bien que sur l’équipage, enfin que la présence à bord d’Agents de police Égyptiens en pays de capitulations me paraissait chose grave. »].

⁶⁴ Ibid. [« Il est certain que la contrebande de la *pacotille* se pratique d’une façon trop considérable sur la ligne de Chine » ; « les inconvénients qui me semblent résulter du système actuel et qui m’ont paru être préjudiciable aux intérêts de la Compagnie. »]. The captain also worried that instructions were not clear, that surveillance remained too irregular, and that the company risked taking on liability that ought to belong to the state.

to be used, and the Cargo Officer “must satisfy himself that no coolie is left... when it is locked up.” The list of precautions went on.⁶⁵

Officers of the *Messageries* liner, *Armand Behic*, would have heartily endorsed such precautions. In 1904, during a layover in Hong Kong, the ship began unloading cases of legal opium when employees noticed that a few were more unwieldy than others. Prying open the case, which “presented no sign of burglary,” officers discovered that “all of the opium balls had been replaced with little bags of coal.” Another layover, this time in Shanghai, revealed more opium that had been swapped out with coal. After an investigation in collaboration with “English agents,” the ship’s captain assured his bosses that the *Messageries* would not be liable for the losses. After all, he noted, “apparently this event happens often with the other companies.”⁶⁶

Beyond being a prime venue for the tug-of-war over intoxicants, layovers also introduced passengers to consumption. People learned about intoxicants before they reached colonial destinations, thanks to port peddlers who catered to passengers with time to kill and money to spend. For example, shortly after French writer and poet Paul-Jean Toulet finished a voyage from Marseille to Mauritius in the early-1880s, he went looking for somewhere to buy “gandia (drug made from dried hemp: the *indica cannabis*.”⁶⁷ Winding his way to the native quarter, Toulet found a “monopolizing dealer,” who, he claimed, was “surprised to see the Whiteman in his shanty.” As Toulet explained, however, he was no debutant, and had been educated during his layover in Aden, where, as he put it, “They had already sold me ... little bags of an earthy powder to mix with

⁶⁵ “Circular: Opium,” Hong Kong Agency Circular book (1911). P&O 7/16, Caird, NMM.

⁶⁶ “Voyage report of the *Armand Behic*, cmdt. Flandin, China Line, n. 3” (11/2/1904), 1997 002 3943, AFL. [*il paraîtrait que le cas se présente souvent pour les autres compagnies*].

⁶⁷ Paul-Jean Toulet, *Journal et Voyages* (Paris: Le Divan, 1955), 11-12 [“gandia (drogue faite avec du chanvre séché: le *cannabis indica*).”].

tobacco, which smelled of ganja and rose.”⁶⁸ At the other end of the China Line around 1901, a traveling navy man, Joseph Tremble, empathized with a drug-addicted female co-passenger, “who shoots up morphine and drinks ether,” writing, “It is true that we can still at all the layovers in China, at Hong Kong or at Shanghai, bring aboard some Chinese mandarin.” Far from moralizing, Tremble looked around his ship, which had just dropped off most of its passengers, and added: “and I wish we would since distraction may be lacking...in this big boat.”⁶⁹ Passengers, in his account, did not even need to leave their ship – the intoxicants would come to them.

No doubt most captains would have agreed with this portrait of easy access to intoxicants. As a *Messageries* captain wrote in an 1886 report assessing his crew, for instance, “One is obliged to exercise a constant vigilance to keep them from smoking opium in their posts.” Then, lest his audience imagine that consumption was purely personal, he immediately added, “clandestine Commerce is the great default of all the service personnel.”⁷⁰

People

Of course, from coal to cannabis, nothing entered or exited a ship without human hands playing a role. Behind every aspect of the layover process was the question of *who* had the right to move into and out of steamship space. Which people could pass through the floating frontier of a steamship on layover?

⁶⁸ Ibid. [“9 mai 1886... “le débitant monopoliste est surprise de voir le Blanc dans sa baraque,”] [“On m’avait vendu à Aden de petits sacs d’une poudre terreuse à mêler au tabac, et qui a vait un peu l’odeur du gandia et de la rose. »].

⁶⁹ Joseph Tremble, « Vendredi 27 Septembre – Dimanche 29 septembre, 1901 », « Correspondance de Joseph Tremble », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://dtriaud.free.fr/index.htm> (last accessed: 5/1/2021) [“dame espagnole qui se pique à la morphine et boit de l’éther »]; [« Il est vrai que nous pouvons encore aux escales de Chine, à Hong-Kong ou à Shanghai embarquer quelque mandarin chinois et je le souhaite car la distraction manquera peut être... »].

⁷⁰ « Voyage Report of the Djemnah, Marseille – Shanghai, n. 7 » (25 Mars 1886), MM 164, CCIMP [“On est obligé d’exercer une vigilance continuelle pour les empêcher de fumer l’opium dans le poste. »] [« Le Commerce clandestin est le grand défaut de tout le personnel servant. »].

Could prostitutes, for instance, move into and out of the ship? After all, every layover represented a transitory market in sex work and pornography. My research turned up little evidence for the phenomenon of on-board prostitution, either because no one – whether journalist, travelogue, employee, or other – wanted to own up to it, or because the abundant opportunities for sexual tourism outside the ship simply meant there was little incentive to take sex work to the ship. Indeed, between the luxury European hotels and the “native quarters” (*villes indigènes*) of layover ports, travelers would have found no shortage of sex for sale. Prostitution unfolded in nearly all the layover ports along the route, but it was particularly noticeable in Port-Saïd, presumably in part because of its nodal role in migratory flows of all kinds.⁷¹ Historian of the Suez region, Valeska Huber writes that, by 1880, “Port-Saïd became an important stop in the global networks of prostitution, where pimps transferred women and where prostitutes stayed periodically before moving on.”⁷²

The industry also existed in a grey zone of tolerated consumption and partial regulation. Like opium, prostitution was partly a state-sanctioned industry. The model of military brothels (*bordels militaires*), in which state-certified prostitutes were made available to military units, had

⁷¹ A French travelogue of the 1880s described the vague boundaries of prostitution in Port-Saïd, warning travelers: “Méfiez-vous de la roulette, mais encore plus de ces vingt Autrichiennes, - de Vienne naturellement, - qui raclent du violon ou battent de la grosse caisse, de sept heures du soir à minuit, avec un sérieux imperturbable. Vous trouverez par reil orchestre à Pointe-de-Galles, à Singapour, à Hong Kong. A lui seul ce spectacle vaut le voyage. Toutes ces malheureuses filles obéissent à un impresario qui est le gardien de leur vertu. Plus leur exil est lointain, plus grandes sont leurs chances de mariage ; au fond de l’Océanie, peu de frères de la côte [read: adventurers] échappent à leurs filets. Après dix ans d’exil, l’Allemand a fait fortune ; on s’épouse, on paye l’impresario et on revient au pays. » Edgar Boulangier, *Un Hiver au Cambodge* (Tours: Mame, 1888), 14. See also: Xavier Brau de Saint-Pol Lias, *De France à Sumatra par Java, Singapour et Pinang. Les Anthropophages* (Paris: Oudin, 1884), 36. Brau de Saint-Pol Lias highlighted not the European “dancers” of Port-Saïd’s famed hotel, *El Dorado*, but the sex workers of the “village indigène,” where “cavalcades” of Europeans were taken by local entrepreneurs. Once in the “village indigène,” he encountered a structure, which he describes in detail: “J’y ai noté la façade d’une maison dont les planches sont jointes par des carrés de zinc, débris de vieilles boites de conserves. Le haut de ce grand baraquement, qui affiche la consommation d’une si prodigieuse quantité de saussages et de sardines est occupé par des dames de toutes couleurs et de tous costumes, à grandes gandouras jaunes ou rouges, bariolées, qui se sont débarrassées du long voile noir des femmes fellahs, et qui, avec le plus gracieux sourire, viennent, dans la rue, vous inviter à recevoir chez elles la plus cordiale hospitalité.”

⁷² Huber, *Channeling Mobilities*, p. 300

been exported to most of the Empire, arriving in Indochina, for example, by the mid-1880s.⁷³ Ships, of course, carried this legal “sex traffic.” A *Messageries* voyage report from 1892, for instance, describes having “a space occupied by three Public Women... space which, for this reason, had been reserved and which it was forbidden to stay in.”⁷⁴

Whether the women could come and go during layovers went undisclosed, but there is reason to assume limits on their layover mobility. For one, even women in less stigmatized social positions faced restrictions. Women could not, for instance, remain overnight on the decks of ships, or even, in some cases, walk around unaccompanied on decks at all. If the state forced the shipping companies to take, for instance, an indigent woman, legally she had to occupy a cabin or dormitory. For 3rd-class female passengers, meanwhile, access to bathing areas was often limited to one or two hours a day. Some female diarists and letter-writers of the late-19th century also described staying aboard when layovers required strenuous processes of disembarkation and ferrying to shore.⁷⁵

Of course, women were not alone in highlighting the steamship’s shifting modalities of confinement and release. Convicts (discussed in a later chapter), attempters of suicide, non-European passengers, and military deserters all raised similar questions about who could leave, who must remain, and the extent to which shipboard authorities would go to keep travelers within

⁷³ Isabelle Tracol-Huynh, *Entre ordre colonial et santé publique: la prostitution au Tonkin de 1885 à 1954*, Thesis, Université Lyon 2, 2013. See also: M. R. Garcia, L. H. Van Voss, E. N. Meerkirk (eds), *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution* (Brill, 2017).

⁷⁴ « Bord le 11 Novembre 1892. », Correspondance diverse de l’Iraouaddy (1890-1906), MM 265, CCIMP. This information only surfaced in the report because it was necessary to explain a violent altercation in which an outraged Arab passenger supposedly harassed the women, only to be violently subdued and incarcerated, leading to vehement complaints on all sides [“un endroit occupé par trois femmes publiques [...] endroit qui, pour cette raison, avait été réservée et qu’il était défendu d’occuper »].

⁷⁵ Unknown, “Diary of a voyage in the REWA 10 July – 9 August 1883,” in: JOD 179 (MS83/085), Caird, NMM; « Livret d’itinéraires et de tarifs des Lignes de l’Océan Indien, 15 Février 1884 » in « Livrets divers », « circulaires, 1860-1900 », MM 565, CCIMP.

the ship. Military deserters, in particular, required complex coordination between captains, consuls, and police. Further complicating matters, however, was the fact that workers for private shipping companies could “desert,” too. In 1900, over 100,000 French sailors of the merchant marine belonged to a centuries-old system known as the Maritime Registry (*Inscription Maritime*), which inscribed them in a regulatory status that mirrored that of the military. On the bright side, this status entitled sailors to small pensions and a degree of leverage in labor negotiation. However, it also meant that simply leaving their worksite for too long could be considered an act of “desertion,” with all the legal consequences that this entailed.⁷⁶ Keeping merchant mariners in sight was vital for national security, and France and Britain signed at least three conventions coordinating their efforts to do so in the second half of the 19th century.⁷⁷

As accounts of coaling make clear, every layover also witnessed a considerable movement of workers and port city inhabitants onto the ship and around it. They ranged from salesmen of souvenirs, jewels, pets, (and more quietly, of intoxicants and pornography), to purveyors of services like laundry, currency exchange, and guided tours. In addition, many ships laying over along the China Line were met by small fleets of locals who would taxi passengers into the harbor. Finally, ships were often surrounded by groups of boys and young men who, like Ibrahim from the last chapter, would dive into the water for coins tossed by passengers.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Not all military deserters chose layover ports to escape. Passage through the Suez Canal, for instance, was constantly accompanied by attempts at jumping ship (ships had to slow down during the passage, and the coast was never out of sight). See: Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (Skyhorse, 2010), chapter 11. Some layover ports had agencies set up to track down deserters, but my sources cast doubt on the reliability of these offices.

⁷⁷ “Déclaration échangée à Londres, le 23 juin 1854, entre la France et la Grande-Bretagne, relativement à l’extradition réciproque des matelots déserteurs » ; « Déclaration signée à Londres le 5 novembre 1879, pour régler l’assistance à donner aux marins français et anglais délaissés » ; « Convention signée à Londres le 30 août 1890, entre la France et la Grande-Bretagne en vue de déterminer la régime à appliquer aux paquebots-poste respectifs », Colombo (1906-1948) : Déclarations, Conventions franco-anglaises, INT-IIID, Colombo – Ambassade 159 PO/1, CADN.

⁷⁸ As evident in the last chapter, their immense and near-universal appeal was based not only on athleticism, but also on the violence and danger of their dives. Not only did boys in places like Aden and Colombo swim in shark-

These seemingly innocuous interactions were described by European passengers as “invasions.” Arriving in Aden in 1895, for instance, one traveler described the scene in typical terms: “hardly had the anchor been thrown than the deck is invaded by natives offering different things at exorbitant prices, all around the boat swarms a mob of little black devils ... in pirogues (canoes).”⁷⁹ Arriving in Colombo in 1902, meanwhile, another traveler painted a similar picture: “all around us there was already a crowd of canoes steered by primitives...and also these raft-like embarkations... we were invaded....”⁸⁰

European travelers sometimes recounted horror stories about the souvenir-peddling and service-providing “invaders” of the floating city. These stories and rumors underline the desire for a sense of what could be called safe danger, and which animated many European travelers heading east of Suez. European travelers amused themselves by debating whether the port-city inhabitants who boarded their ships were harmless social inferiors or menacing interlopers. Like the Crawfords of the last chapter, travelers of the late-19th and early-20th centuries relayed horror stories about the pillaging of stranded European ships by inhabitants of the Red Sea littoral and the Horn of Africa – the same inhabitants who appeared around and onboard steamships during

inhabited waters, but they also fought one another to the delight of many passengers. Travelers encountered coin-divers on a small scale in Naples, and in much greater numbers in Aden, Colombo, and Zanzibar. These layover entertainers appear constantly in travelogues, journals, and letters. A late-19th century missionary travelogue gives a sense of the muted violence defining interactions between passengers and divers: « Un jour (c’était à mon premier voyage), un riche Anglais voulut rire ; il s’en va trouver le maître d’hôtel du bord, achète de lui deux douzaines d’œufs et les lance, l’un après l’autre, sur les petits Comalis qui nageaient là. La séance fut intéressante : c’était des cris et des gambades comme on n’en avait point vu depuis longtemps. Beaucoup d’œufs furent cassés ; beaucoup ne le furent point. Or, un instant après, le noble gentleman, ayant fini de s’amuser, regardait le paysage. Tout à coup des œufs lancés d’en bas pleuvent sur lui comme une grêle, et a vant qu’il a eu le temps de se retourner une épouvantable omelette lui a été appliquée sur son chapeau, sur sa barbe, sur son superbe gilet de soie blanche. C’était une émotion, mais l’honorable lord n’avait point compté sur celle-là. » Monseigneur Le Roy, *D’Aden à Zanzibar : un coin de l’Arabie heureuse le long des côtes* (Tours: Mame et fils, 1894), 103-108.

⁷⁹ Raphael Dumand, « Dimanche 15 septembre 1895 », in « Voyage de Marseille à Madagascar, à bord du Polynésien et de l’Ava en septembre 1895 », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <https://www.messageries-maritimes.org/polynesien3.htm> (last accessed: 5/1/2021).

⁸⁰ Joseph Tremble, « Vendredi 27 septembre 1901 », « Correspondance de Joseph Tremble », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://dtriaud.free.fr/> (last accessed: 5/1/2021).

layovers and who, as more inquisitive passengers deduced, were most likely to work in steamship engine rooms.⁸¹

Even when travelers did not have the intuition of fear, they were instructed by habitués of the in-between spaces of empire. Travelogue-writer, J.W. Darien, for instance, was delighted when he first shared ship-space with Somali layover peddlers during a turn-of-the-century layover in Aden as he steamed between Marseille and Ceylon on a *Messageries* liner. Having already chatted with Somali coalers working on his ship, he learned that many of the Somalis – peddlers and coalers alike – were not so much “natives” (*indigènes*) as they were migrant laborers, and he compared them to Savoyards working in Paris. In Darien’s account of his Aden layover, he noted:

Boats came over to us, all bearing Somalians who were almost naked. Some of them climbed aboard to offer us roupies in exchange of our French money. You cannot imagine the impression that they make at first sight... I was so entertained by their exclamations of joy when they saw their friends among the coalers. There were endless chants, shouts, and contortions. They’re very expressive, these darkies [*moricauts*].⁸²

Condescending and racist as it was, Darien did not fear them or suspect them of ill will. In fact, there were undeniable elements of recognition and affection. Soon enough, however, Darien was disabused of any sympathies by an agent of the *Messageries*, who, as he put it, “stripped me of my illusions regarding the Somalis of Aden who had enchanted me.” “They are,” the agent told Darien,

⁸¹ The same dynamic played out in the East and Southeast Asian legs of the route, where Europeans feared that the same locals who supplied their ships (or, often enough, worked in their ships or passed through them as passengers) would turn into pirates at night. For example: G. Verschuur, *Aux colonies d’Asie et dans l’Océan Indien* (Paris: Hachette, 1900), 207-9; Beaumont, *Ships – and People*; Paul Brière, *Le ‘Volta’ en Chine et au Tonkin (1883-1885)* (Librarie militaire de L. Baoudoin, 1895).

⁸²J.W. Darien, *Lettres de voyage. Ceylan, Aden, l’Egypte* (1890), 40-50 [“Des barques sont venues à nous, toutes montées par des Somalis Presque nus. Quelques-uns sont montés à bord pour nous offrir des roupies en échange de notre argent français. Tu ne peux t’imaginer l’impression qu’ils font à première vue... Je me suis diverti de leurs exclamations de joie en revoyant leurs amis nos chauffeurs. C’étaient des appels, des cris, des contorsions sans fin. Ils sont très démonstratifs, ces moricauds!”].

“the worst species, real children, but insolent, thieving, and lazy. They only want to be taximen and coachmen... When they go back to their countries they pillage caravans.”⁸³

Depictions of Arab and Somali port peddlers as secret pillagers took a life of their own, but to the extent that they reflected historical events, the 1877 shipwreck of the *Messageries* ship *Mei Kong* loomed large. According to a firsthand account published in the popular weekly, *L'Illustration*, that year, the ship had stranded off the Somali coast, when:

The Somali arabs, gathered in large numbers on the beach, swam out with their weapons past the breakwater to go and pillage the bow of the ship which it was impossible to defend, because we did not have weapons... The number of these pillagers became so considerable, their attitude so menacing, and the wildness of the sea so furious, that it became necessary to give up on saving what remained onboard.⁸⁴

A few years after this event occurred, a writer named Edgar Boulangier repeated the story in an account of his steamship voyage from Marseille to Cambodia. In a warning to other travelers, Boulangier put his own flourish on the episode: “the cruelty of the primitive people augmented the horror of shipwreck: The Somalis are real savages.” Then, he connected the dots for his readers: “In Aden, you will see some repulsive examples.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid., 99-100 [“m’a oté mes illusions sur les Somalis d’Aden qui m’avaient enchanté. C’est, dit-il, la pire espèce, de vrais enfants, mais effrontés, faux, voleurs et paresseux. Ils ne veulent être que bateliers ou cochers, et [...] De retour dans leurs pays ils assassinent et pillent les caravanes. S’ils font venir leurs familles, elles ne peuvent pas résider à Aden, car les Anglais ne les veulent pas. Elles doivent demeurer hors du territoire anglais, dans un village arabe. »].

⁸⁴ *L'Illustration*, 1877, July-December, 38. In 1995 the ship was tracked down by maritime archaeologists and much of its cargo was recovered, including a rare collection of Cham artifacts being taken from Vietnam to France: Jean-François Hubert, *The Art of Champa* (Parkstone International, 2012), 13-14 [« les arabes Somalis, accourus en grande nombre sur la plage, se jetaient avec leurs armes à la nage dans les brisants pour aller piller l’avant du navire qu’il était impossible de défendre, car nous n’avions pas d’armes... Le nombre de ces pillards était devenu si considérable, leur attitude si menaçante, et le déchainement de la mer si furieux, qu’il fallut renoncer à sauver ce qui restait à bord »].

⁸⁵ Edgar Boulangier, *Un Hiver au Cambodge: Chasse au tigre à l’éléphant et au buffle sauvage. Souvenirs d’une mission officielle remplie en 1880-1881* (Tours: Mame et Fils, 1888), 19-20, including footnote [“cruauté des naturels augmente l’horreur du naufrage; les Somalis sont des vrais sauvages. Vous verrez à Aden quelques types repoussants”] [“Il faut descendre, mais prenez garde! Les Arabes qui fondent sur vous ne rendent pas l’opération facile... C’est une avalanche de hurlements. Des nuées de moricauds, grands et petits, vous harcèlent. Il en sera de même à toutes les escales. Martin Bâton, s’il vous plaît; pour eux, ça leur est égal.”].

Like the *Messageries* agent, Boulangier prepared travelers for racialized antagonism during the layover.⁸⁶ Critically, this antagonism crystallized in seemingly banal interactions during layovers in which European travelers encountered port-city inhabitants. The act of ferrying from steamship to port was especially fractious. Indeed, Boulangier had more advice for travelers when they reached layover ports like Aden. “You must get off, but beware! The Arabs who fall upon you do not make the operation easy... It is an avalanche of shrieks. Swarms of darkies [*moricauds*], large and small, harass you. It will be the same in all the layovers. Club away, if you like, for them, it makes no difference [*Martin Bâton, s’il vous plait, ça leur est égal.*]”⁸⁷ Boulangier was only one of many fin-de-siècle travel writers who prepared passengers for violence during layovers.

Around 1900, Nellie Bly, who was more inclined to dabble in inter-ethnic empathy than most of her fellow travelogue writers, provided readers with a vivid account of the struggles surrounding disembarkation. As her *P&O* liner approached Port-Saïd, Bly wrote that “the men armed themselves with canes, to keep off the beggars they said; and the women carried parasols

⁸⁶ Travelers told this story as if it were a permanent feature of the route, involving networks of actors across the Red Sea. Take, for instance, the missionary Le Roy, *D’Aden à Zanzibar* (1894): “sur tous ces points dangereux de la côte [Somali], les Comalis [sic] font parfois de bonnes aubaines. En passant près de là, on les voit souvent sur leurs rochers, veillant comme des vautours qui attendent leur proie. Cette proie ne leur fait point toujours défaut, et il n’y a pas d’année que des navires ne viennent se perdre sous leurs yeux. Alors un grand cri s’élève, un cri triomphant de convoitise satisfaite. Il y a peu de temps encore, en pareil cas, ces terribles sauvages tuaient tout pour tout avoir.” In Le Roy’s telling, the most colonial authorities could do in the face of the pillagers was to safeguard the lives of passengers at the expense of their property: “Depuis un contrat a été passé avec eux, d’après lequel la cargaison leur est abandonnée pourvu qu’ils liassent aux hommes la vie sauve. Jusqu’à présent, la convention a été strictement exécutée: les naufragés sont respectés... mais par ailleurs les soieries, les glaces, l’argenterie, le fer, le cuivre, les provisions, tout est pillé, tout est pris. Plus tard les juifs accourent et échangent avec eux, contre quelques verroteries, le riche butin que les terribles caprices de la mer leur ont apporté.” Impressively, these stories continued into the 1920s. A diarist in 1923, for instance, wrote, “Nous sommes passés tout près des côtes du Cap Guardafui, pays habité par des sauvages qui se sont approchés du bateau montés sur leurs pirogues qu’ils manœuvraient à la pagaie. Il ne fait pas bon faire naufrage sur cette cote désolée, qui est d’ailleurs très mauvaise, car ces bons nègres c’est tout juste s’ils ne sont pas anthropophages! Il y a 4 ans à peine, un bateau s’est perdu sur la côte... ils ont juste laissé aux passagers leur casque pour tout costume! Les Anglais n’ont jamais pu arriver à y construire un phare.” Jeanne Marie Méchin (née Saillard-Manou), « 14 novembre 1923 », in, « Un voyage de Marseille à Saïgon en 1923 à bord du Paul Lecat », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://www.messageries-maritimes.org/paulecat2.htm> (last accessed: 5/1/2021).

⁸⁷ Boulangier, *Hiver au Cambodge*, 12.

for the same purpose.”⁸⁸ Bly, on the other hand, refused cane and parasol alike, “having an idea,” as she put it, “probably the wrong one, that a stick beats more ugliness into a person than it ever beats out.” No sooner had the anchor dropped than the liner was “surrounded with a fleet of small boats,” and Bly watched in horror as desperate taximen fought for a commission. “When the ladder was lowered,” she noted, “numbers of them caught it and clung to it as if it meant life or death to them, and here they clung until the captain was compelled to order some sailors to beat the Arabs off...with long poles.” Once she descended the ladder, Bly claimed she and her fellow passengers were seized and dragged from one boat to another, leading the men in her party to retaliate by using “their sticks quite vigorously.” “Although I thought the conduct of the Arabs justified this harsh course of treatment,” she reflected, “still I felt sorry to see it administered so freely and lavishly to those black, half-clad wretches, and marveled at their stubborn persistence even while cringing under the blows.”⁸⁹

Finally settled within a taxi-boat heading to harbor, Bly was amazed to feel the vessel cease motion after a few minutes. “We were completely at their mercy,” she admitted, “as they would not land us either way until we paid what they asked.” Halfway between ship and port, Bly heard the testimony of one of her conductors: “One of the Arabs told me that they had many years' experience in dealing with the English and their sticks, and had learned by bitter lessons that if they landed an Englishman before he paid they would receive a stinging blow for their labor.”⁹⁰ The taximen got their payment, and Bly eventually marched onto the beach, a survivor of the battle to reach land.

⁸⁸ Bly, *Around the World*, chapter 7.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Like the sailors of Bly's liner, armed with long poles, steamship authorities vigorously attempted to remove unwanted visitors. They were limited, however, by what they could see. Even within the workforces of large ships, people boarded unbeknownst to authorities and existed in the shadows. In May 1914, for instance, one captain on the trans-Suez route between Marseille and Southern Africa, shined a light on these hidden workers. Having been placed in quarantine at Réunion, no one except 1st and 2nd-class passengers was to leave the ship. When the Captain received news that "a boy of the crew" had gone to shore during the night without returning, he was furious – even if, luckily, the "boy" had escaped the "the sanitary guards."⁹¹ Still, the risks of this clandestine movement were too great to tolerate, and the captain launched an investigation to learn more about the troublesome "boy." The inquiry revealed not only that there was no record whatsoever of the worker, but also that he was anything but atypical. As the captain wrote to directors,

From the inquiry, it turns out that this *boy* had been brought aboard by the service personnel as a dormitory servant [*boy de poste*] and did not figure on the Crew Roll. Having made it clear how irregular this was, and in what a delicate, liable position we would find ourselves in case of injury, death, or disappearance of such an individual, it was responded to me that this was a tradition and certain ships had 2 or 3 men embarked in the same way for one reason or another. In fact, I learned that the Arabs of the Engine-Room had also among them a little young man embarked by the *surang* [crew leader], who, by my order, I sent packing in Djibouti by the way. At this moment, the crew has thus been brought back to its official numbers, but these measures of disembarking [the undocumented servants] have given rise to a painful shock in the quarters where they took effect.⁹²

⁹¹ « Bord, le 4 Mai 1914. Commandant à M. le Directeur », Correspondance diverse du Yarra, 1908-1917, MM 551, CCIMP. [« Un incident qui aurait pu avoir de graves conséquences pour le bord est venu attirer mon attention sur un fait que je crois mon devoir de vous signaler... »].

⁹² Ibid. [« de l'enquête ... il résulte que ce boy a été embarqué par-dessus bord par le personnel de service comme boy de poste et ne figurait pas sur le Rôle d'équipage. Ayant fait observer combien cela était irrégulier et dans quelle situation très fausses et très délicates nous pourrions nous trouver en cas de blessure, mort, ou disparition d'un tel individu, il me fut répondu que c'était une tradition et que certains navires avaient 2 ou 3 hommes embarqués de la sorte pour un motif ou pour un autre. De fait, j'ai appris que les Arabes de la Machine avaient également parmi eux un petit jeune homme embarqué par-dessus bord par le Surang, qui, sur mon ordre, débarque d'ailleurs cet irrégulier à Djibouti. En ce moment, le bord a donc ramené à son effectif régulier du Rôle d'Equipage, mais ces mesures de débarquement ayant paru susciter un étonnement pénible dans les milieux où elles auront leur effet... »].

Even within his own ship, the Captain had been completely ignorant of a “tradition” by which various sections of the crew hired their own, completely undocumented, workers. The elaborate systems by which workers were registered and tracked, in short, were not enough to prevent undocumented laborers from boarding and disembarking as they pleased during layovers.

The captain had good reason to fear such movements. Had a similarly illicit exit from his ship occurred in another port, he would have risked quarantine, sanctions, and expensive fines. The late-19th century witnessed a vicious backlash from migrant-receiving, “White men’s countries” like Australia, South Africa, Canada, and the United States, and much of the growing wrath focused on steamship companies. With their platoons of lobbyists and sophisticated legal claims to sovereign exceptionalism, large shipping companies were able to absorb the outrage without assuming serious regulatory burdens – but only for so long. By the 1910s, politicians in Australia, South Africa, Canada, and the U.S. began to bow to popular demands and insist upon the basic responsibility of steamship companies for unwanted migrants who made it off the ship.⁹³

For the *Messageries*, this process of populist xenophobia and anti-corporate suspicion presented serious risks. As noted earlier, the *Messageries* invested huge sums in an effort to break into the Australian market from the 1880s-on; investments that would prove pointless if migration restrictions and fines continued to increase, cutting profits every step of the way. Since, like the *P&O* and other major lines, the *Messageries* depended on African and Asian labor to power its ships, as well as Asian and African migrants to fill them, they were perennially at risk of being on the wrong side of the world’s multiplying color lines.

⁹³ Ethan Blue, “Finding Margins on Borders: Shipping Firms and Immigration Control across Settler Space,” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 5 (March 2013): 1-20; Marilyn Lake, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*.

Conclusion

International politics and bottom-line economics, however, were only enlivening a question that had long plagued steamship lines, and which would plague them long after color lines were drawn and borders became globalized. As with stowaways, deserters, and undocumented workers – or for that matter, microbes, opiates, and arms – the question posed was whether the steamship could simultaneously be governed as a fortress and a frontier. To the extent that it was the latter, as the record certainly suggested, then who should assume responsibility for the consequences of unwanted or illicit mobilities – was it to be companies, individuals, imperial states, or some other organ? Under that looming uncertainty, makeshift solutions were constructed by port authorities, captains, sanitary officials, travelers, and workers.

Over time, however, makeshift solutions were replaced with aggressive policies, as policing intensified and states began to demand greater legibility. The First World War accelerated this movement to fortify and seal the floating city. However, writing to British customs officials just before the war's outbreak, a *Messageries* agent in Shanghai gave a sense of the limits that any anti-smuggling project would meet. Asked by Shanghai's Customs to crack down on smuggling of arms and other contraband through *Messageries* ships, the agent brushed off the suggestion:

It is quite needless for me to draw your attention to the fact that our present boats being of such an enormous size and provided with a large staff, renders it most difficult for us to prevent such cases...occurring. The crew on board consist of a number of nationalities, mostly French, Arab and Chinese; the easy means of access on board especially when lying alongside the Wharf at the various ports such as Singapore, Saigon and Hong Kong and the numerous places onboard where these contraband goods can be concealed (the discovery of such concealment might be affected without incriminating any member of the crew), are great hindrances to the police and renders it very difficult for us to maintain the strict supervision required.

As consolation for Shanghai's customs, the company agent offered only a vague promise that captains would continue to fight against smuggling and that "notices will be posted up onboard warning the crew" of punishment for involvement in illicit traffic.⁹⁴

As the First World War ripped through trans-Suez highways, such blasé attitudes became impossible to maintain. Take, for example, another controversy around arms smuggling, also in Shanghai and involving the Messageries, in 1917. The company's ships were revealed to be loading corned beef cans within which were hidden improvised explosive devices (*machines infernales*). Before 1914, it was extremely difficult to decipher where arms traffic was heading and who – including state actors – was behind it, but by 1917, there could only be one culprit: "German agents." Accordingly, instead of a world-weary shipping agent, the director of the *Messageries* himself issued a response to the traffic in explosives that was passing through his company's ships in Shanghai. To his employees and diplomatic officials in China, the Director demanded thorough investigations, heightened policing, and reduced access to ships.⁹⁵

Across trans-Suez routes of the First World War, similar efforts at sealing off the floating city were underway. Restrictions on *pacotille* and informal economies proliferated.⁹⁶ Peddlers and service providers were banned from climbing aboard steamships or approaching them without permission. French consuls, police, and shipping line employees in Port-Saïd, for instance, began investigating men who snuck onboard to sell monkeys and fruit, women (suspected of being prostitutes) who made only verbal contact with ships on layover, and workers who had the

⁹⁴ "Agent general to the Commissioner of Customs, 26th December 1913," Ministère des affaires étrangères-Shanghai, Rose, 635PO/B 42bis, CADN.

⁹⁵ "M. Brodbeck, Directeur de la Ce. Des Messageries Maritimes à Consulat Général de France à Shanghai, 16 Nov. 1917 », Ministère des affaires étrangères-Shanghai, Rose, 635PO/B, 42bis, CADN.

⁹⁶ Stripped of their right to sell goods along the route after the outbreak of war in 1914, one team of Chinese shipworkers simply abandoned their *Messageries* liner altogether. "Voyage Report of Amazone, n. 21, Marseille-Kobe, commandant Costa" (29 Sept. 1914), MM 6, CCIMP.

misfortune of uttering a word or two of German while they supplied drinking water to liners.⁹⁷ A state of paranoia, in short, possessed the layover, transforming logistics and fleeting encounters into threats to national security and the integrity of the merchant marine.

Paranoia, in turn, birthed new paperwork and identification regimes, intelligence sharing arrangements, anti-contraband policing, and revised legal codes for prosecuting deserters and clandestine passengers. But First World War paranoia did not emerge out of the chaos of war alone. Rather, it had roots in the glancing encounters, suspicions, ambiguities, and cultivated fears that I have described in the three decades preceding the War, all of which crystallized in the routine layovers of ocean liners.

⁹⁷ «achat illicite de singes par deux matelots (4 mars 1915)»; «provocation de femmes envers l'équipage (18 fev. 1916)»; «surprise d'un militaire parlant allemand avec un civil (15 jan. 1917)»; Port-Saïd, Consulat, 542PO/1 123, CADN.

Chapter 7. Working the Line: Militancy and Anti-labor Repression in Transit

In the lore of labor history, strikes in ports were won or lost depending on whether the ships departed. If the ships stayed in port, the workers had succeeded; if the ships set out, the bosses had prevailed. But this narrative of labor contests lacks in nuance what it possesses in drama. After all, even when the most massive strikes broke out, many ships were already at sea. On ships at sea, moreover, outbursts of labor militancy could occur without instructions from home. While the historiography of late-19th and early-20th century labor movements in France includes comprehensive accounts of battles over the docks of major port cities like Marseille or Le Havre, far less is known about how Belle Époque struggles over labor unfolded outside the dockyards of metropolitan ports; that is, at sea, in motion, and beyond the oversight of metropolitan port authorities.¹

Syndicalism in France's maritime industries began in the 1870s but culminated in the opening decades of the 20th century. In Marseille, the new century ushered in a wave of massive strikes; first in 1900, then again in 1902, 1907 and 1912, after which tensions were partly contained during the First World War, only to explode with renewed intensity as the war concluded.² None of these labor conflicts was put on hold when the worksite was mobile and far from home. How,

¹ M. R. Loew, *Les Dockers de Marseille* (L'Arbresle: Économie et Humanisme, 1946); W. Sewell, "Uneven Development, the Autonomy of Politics and the Dockworkers of Nineteenth-century Marseille," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (June 1988): 604–37; Pacini and Pons, *Dockers à Marseille* (Paris: Payot, 1996); B. Marnot, *Les Villes portuaires maritimes en France, XIXe-XXI siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2015); J. Barzman, "Dock Labour in Le Havre 1790–1970," in *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790–1970*, ed. S. Davies, C. Davis, D. de Vries, L. Heerma van Voss, L. Hesselink, and K. Weinbauer (New York: Routledge, 2017). Maritime historians have been urged to look beyond the docks more recently in M. Dusinberre and R. Wenzlhuemer, "Editorial—Being in Transit: Ships and Global Incompatibilities," *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 2 (2016): 155–62; and Chaline, Knab-Delumeau, and Kowalski, "Le navire à la mer," *Revue d'histoire maritime* 25 (2019).

² Ronan Viaud, *Le syndicalisme maritime français. Les organisations, les hommes, les luttes (1890–1950)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015); J. Charles-Roux, "Les grèves et l'inscription maritime," *Revue des deux mondes*. Tome 54 (November–December 1909): 124–46.

then, did shipping companies combat labor militancy in transit, far from European ports, along trans-Suez maritime highways?

The scarcity of responses to that question reflects, in part, scholarly assumptions regarding transit and the spaces in which it occurs. Though repeated “global turns” and “mobilities” paradigms have emphasized the importance of connectedness and the mobile subject, scholarship continues to address the transoceanic routes connecting imperial metropolises to far-off colonies in functionalist terms, with the infrastructure of maritime routes appearing as a conveyor belt that neutrally connects port to port, as if node to node.³ By implication, maritime highways come across as depoliticized and un-peopled – spaces, as opposed to places.⁴

Regarding labor, in particular, the complex trajectories of steamship workers have sometimes been subsumed within a reductive narrative of proletarianization that encompasses the sail-steam transition.⁵ By implication, when compared to seafarers of the age of sail, steamship workers stand out for what they lacked and lost: autonomy, multifaceted skills of navigation, and thick cultures of their own. Steamship workers, in this light, had been thoroughly subjugated; their hopes and demands locked up inside the engine rooms in which they toiled underwater.⁶ While the explosive assertion of those hopes and demands from the end of the First World War-on is well

³ Dusinger and Wenzhuemer, “Editorial – Being in Transit”; J. W. Konvitz, “The Crises of Atlantic Port Cities, 1880–1920,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 2 (1994): 293–318; A. Vigarie, *Ports de commerce et vie littorale* (Paris, Hachette, 1979).

⁴ As opposed to “extraordinary bundles of relations.” Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres,” *Empan* 54, no. 2 (2004): 12–19.

⁵ Benton and Perlman-Rosenthal, “Introduction: Making Maritime History Global,” in *A World at Sea*, 5; Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra*.

⁶ On the industrialization of navigation and the moral economy of coalers, see: Ulrich Welke, “Vapeur et travail industriel dans la navigation maritime commerciale au XIXe siècle,” *Revue d’histoire maritime* 18 (2014): 25–45.

studied, our understanding of the decades prior remains patchy and weighed down by an assumption that steamships were powered by passive, laboring bodies.⁷

And yet, as this chapter suggests, maritime routes were far more crowded and contested than residual assumptions suggest. Critical arenas for the struggle over labor militancy that gripped Europe in its Belle Époque, shipping corridors were neither neutral infrastructure nor homogenous expanses. Rather, these in-between spaces of empires were shaped by competing legal regimes, shifting borders and the complex interplay of people, ship, sea and port.⁸ Workers brought labor grievances into these spaces, just as they invented new forms of militancy within them.

In the early twentieth century, the *Messageries* experimented with a range of tactics to prevent labor militancy from spreading across bustling trans-Suez highways, and to quash strikes when they arose en route. The company systematically labelled strikes as “mutinies,” manned ships with scab crews, and mobilized consuls and police forces in foreign layover ports. Simultaneously the *Messageries* tacked between the French agencies historically tasked with regulating the merchant marine, and the Navy, which offered ship captains and company agents the tantalizing possibility of meeting labor unrest with martial law.

The efficacy of those tactics depended on whether *Messageries* bosses in Marseille, ship captains at sea, and company agents stationed along the route could outmaneuver workers in the interstices of imperial sovereignty and the politics of transoceanic, trans-imperial transit. In such contests, I argue, workers proved surprisingly capable of foiling company plans. The mutinous mariners of the Belle Époque took advantage of the fact that their worksite was a bundle of often-

⁷ See, for example: Christopher Bell, Bruce Elleman (eds.), *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century: An International Perspective* (Routledge, 2004); Matt Perry, *Mutinous Memories: A Subjective History of French Military Protest in 1919* (Manchester University Press, 2019).

⁸ See R. Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); William Walters, “Migration, Vehicles, and Politics: Three theses on Viapolitics,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 18, no. 4 (2015): 469–88.

contradictory roles. After all, every steamship was a mobile coal plant for some and a floating luxury hotel for others; a profit-generating machine and an instrument of state power; a world unto itself and an emissary hopping from port to port with little regard for imperial boundaries. In such a setting, the conditions of possibility for workers were set by the politics of mobility and the peculiar nature of governance in the in-between spaces of empires.

The *Messageries*' ensemble of tactics for combating labor militancy thus amounted to little more than a strategy of opportunism – with one important exception. In developing a global system for the recruitment, rotation, and precarization of African and Asian workers, the *Messageries* found a structural, as opposed to opportunistic, approach to containing labor militancy within its mobile workforce. Decried by European citizen workers as if it were a form of outsourcing *avant la lettre*, the hiring of imperial subjects provided shipping lines with a semi-formal workforce that could be leveraged against citizen workers.⁹ Deploying, maneuvering, and repressing that semi-formal workforce, however, depended on a project of categorization, racialization, and cultivated ignorance on the part of company leaders and shipboard authorities. While the company kept a critical part of its workforce conveniently in the shadows, this also meant that subject-workers could weaponize their inscrutability.

Future research may uncover a second domain of strategic (as opposed to opportunistic) anti-labor practices in the *Messageries*' ties to the British Shipping Federation. As Alessandro Saluppo discovered, the *Messageries* reacted to a massive seamen's strike in 1902 by writing to the recently-created federation. The founding of the *Comité Central des Armateurs Français* (Central Committee of French Shippers) the next year suggests that the *Messageries* was, at the

⁹ See: Viaud, *Le Syndicalisme*; Alessandro Saluppo, "Strikebreaking and Anti-Unionism on the Waterfront: The Shipping Federation, 1890–1914," *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2019): 570–96.

very least, seriously considering pooling resources with foreign firms, sharing blacklists, and forming a transnational body of professional strikebreakers. In many ways, this would have represented the logical next step after the “Gentleman’s Agreements” of the 19th century in which the *Messageries* and the *P&O* alternated departures and cooperated on pricing.¹⁰ While this institutional level of anti-labor politics in the shipping industry merits attention and research, the current chapter focuses on ships in transit and deck-level dynamics of labor conflict.

Mutiny and Makeshift Crews

What could a company like the *Messageries* do when floating cities became labor battlegrounds? Nomenclature was the first arena in which navigation companies responded to surging labor militancy at sea. To label the intensifying contestation of maritime workers, ship captains and company officials returned to an ancient concept: mutiny. Unlike the legendary “Mutiny on the *Bounty*” and well-known precedents from the age of sail, though, mutinous labor militancy on steam-powered ocean liners did not entail commandeering a ship or attacking a captain. Nor were these mutinies equivalent to the naval uprisings of the First World War and its aftermath, when state-paid sailors seized their ships and contested their governments en masse.

Rather, aboard the large liners of the turn-of-the-century, militancy became mutinous when it stopped traffic, throwing a wrench into the giant conveyor belt of global trade that had developed in the wake of steam navigation and the opening of the Suez Canal. In the eyes of pro-business diplomats and jurists, a mutiny was merely a strike in motion, and to take the ship captains of the latter-age of steam at their word, the period abounded with mutinies. Indeed, maritime authorities proposed a remarkably low legal threshold for such a qualification, alleging that as soon as multiple

¹⁰ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries maritimes*, 406–7.

crewmembers refused a direct order from their captain, they were engaging in mutinous activity.¹¹ In attempting not to differentiate between violent and non-violent acts of resistance, captains, company agents, and their sympathizers used the mutiny accusation (“revolt” was also a common label) to suggest that insubordination *was* violence. As will be seen, however, the myriad actors who were pulled into labor negotiations en route – consuls, port police, and foreign jurists – were not always so quick to conflate protest and mutiny.¹²

Beyond rhetorical framing the *Messageries* developed a range of concrete practices of intervention. Perhaps the most obvious tool for mitigating militancy along the route was to recruit a “makeshift” (i.e. scab) crew.¹³ Normally, crews had to be drawn mostly from the *Inscription maritime*, or Maritime registry, a centuries-old institution that served as a state registry of professional sailors. During severe strikes, though, the *Messageries* sometimes received permission from the government to forgo the *Inscription*, instead manning its ships with unscreened applicants from Marseille’s streets, or even navy men (when available). This tactic offered shipping companies a means of sidestepping strikes, but it had glaring defects. For while

¹¹ For a discussion of this distinction, see Naina Manjrekar, “‘Violent and Not Quite Modern?’: Lascars and Everyday Resistance Across the Sail-Steam Divide,” *Labour History: A Journal of Labour and Social History* 116 (2019): 29–55; see also M. H. Renaut, “L’Histoire par les Lois: Trois siècles d’évolution dans la repression des fautes disciplinaires de la marine marchande,” *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 80, n. 1 (2002): 23–56.

¹² While the mutiny *la belle* had an instrumental intention (leveraging the harshest codes of maritime law), *Messageries* authorities used language to defuse labor militancy in a more diffuse manner. They painted steamship workers in declinist terms as fallen men who were inferior to sailors of the past. As a captain of the *Tonkin* wrote in 1899: “bref il n’y a plus ni zèle, ni vraie discipline, et je suis convaincu que chez des chinois ou des annamites on trouverait plus de conscience et même plus de dévouement, à moins que quelque circonstance critique ne parvienne à réveiller chez des hommes égarés par les sophistes qui les exploitent le vieux fond d’honnêteté et de générosité incarné dans l’âme française, et qui, naguère encore se révélait particulièrement chez l’homme de mer...” (Voyage Report of the Tonkin, n. 26, Indochina Line, Commandant Vaquier (3 Jan. 1901), 1997 002 4337, AFL). As the same captain put it a couple years earlier, “c’est que la grande école de la Marine à voiles qui formait nos matelots a presque disparu, mais en revanche la multiplicité effroyable des bars dans les ports augmente chaque jour, dans les Equipages, le nombre des orateurs, qui n’y pêchent pas la cause de la discipline.” (Voyage Report of the Tonkin, Indochina and Japan Line, n. 6/7, Commandant Vaquier (12 April 1899), 1997 002 4337, AFL). The discourse was typical.

¹³ “Makeshift” conveys the French phrase: *équipage de fortune*.

the *Messageries* could slip a makeshift crew across the picket line and onto a ship, all bets were off once that ship was en route.

A 1909 voyage of the *Messageries* ship, *Calédonien*, running the line from Marseille to Yokohama, illustrates the potential volatility of makeshift crews. In voyage reports, the captain of the *Calédonien* noted that his makeshift crew had performed well until laying over at Port-Saïd, the chokepoint of maritime traffic at the head of the Suez Canal, where they encountered another *Messageries* ship, this one carrying a full crew of *inscrits maritimes*, or registered (i.e. professional) sailors. In front of a crowd of foreign ships, the *Calédonien* endured an extended barrage of insults and menaces from its sister ship.¹⁴ In a vacuum, the bloodless clash might have been of little consequence, but the route and its ports were not vacuums, so much as they were international stages.¹⁵ By 1909, the *Messageries* was locked in intense and increasingly mediatized competition with new state-subsidized lines (not to mention a near-constant public relations campaign within France to maintain government subsidies). Public humiliation, therefore, had real consequences. Calling the incident “a demonstration of savages attended by foreign ships,” the captain and his directors declared it a significant setback in their struggle with labor; not, of course, because of the injured pride of their makeshift crew, but rather because the militant sailors encountered by the *Calédonien* had used the most crowded section of the route to castigate the company, exposing its internal divisions and reliance on underqualified sailors.¹⁶ The spectacle rendered the company vulnerable to reports that could rattle around the press, compromise the

¹⁴ Voyage Report of Commandant Cassanova, China Line, 1 September 1909, *Messageries Maritimes* (MM) 86, Dossier Voyage Reports of the *Calédonien* (1908–17), Chambre de Commerce & de l’industrie Marseille-Provence (CCIMP), Marseille, France.

¹⁵ Nowhere did this apply more than in the Suez Canal. See Valeska Huber, *Channeling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ [“devant les navires étrangers qui assistaient à cette manifestation de sauvages.”]

line's appeal to wealthy passengers, and shake the resolve of critical allies within the French government.

In 1912, against the backdrop of Marseille's most intense strike to date, a subsequent captain of the *Calédonien* discovered that hiring makeshift crews could backfire even without an external shock. Once again exempted from the *Inscription*, the *Messageries* had manned its ship with a makeshift crew, sending it out for the roughly 80-day journey to Yokohama and back. The voyage witnessed the suicide of a 2nd-class passenger, the discovery of a stowaway mid-route, the embarkation of two convicts, the deaths of a high-ranking functionary and a four-month-old child, and the onboard arrest through Franco-British collaboration of a 3rd-class passenger. None of these occurrences was particularly rare for the China Line, and none threatened the basic objective of the *Calédonien*.¹⁷ Rather, the real threat to onboard order came from a crew that had been hired to ensure stability.

After the southbound crossing of the Suez Canal, labor relations broke down. By the time the ship reached its layover in Singapore, knife-fights had occurred, thefts had become rampant, and the crew was refusing to carry out their regular service. If this were not enough, the *Calédonien*'s officers realized in Singapore that members of the crew were deliberately sabotaging the ship. To his directors, the captain complained that his makeshift crew were "veritable apaches," evoking the infamous street gangs of Belle Époque Paris.¹⁸ And yet, faced with what he termed a "revolt" and a "mutiny" from the very men who were supposed to be quashing revolts and mutinies, he found himself powerless to react. "I waited by as long as I could," he insisted:

¹⁷ Voyage Report 22, China Line, Commandant Tivolle, 25 October 1912, MM 86, Dossier Calédonien Voyage Reports (1908–1917), CCIMP.

¹⁸ Ibid. The term apache almost certainly derived from the North American Apache Indians; see Michelle Perrot, "Dans la France de la Belle Époque, les 'Apaches,' premières bandes de jeunes," *La Lettre de l'enfance et de l'adolescence* 67, no. 1 (2007): 71–78.

and I even ceded in Singapore when they refused to serve in front of the Consul, so that the passengers could have no doubt that we were dealing with a crew of apaches, and because we were in foreign land, and it would have had a very poor effect to show that we were working with an undisciplined crew, recognizing no authority at all, and, on the contrary, in a state of revolt.¹⁹

In short, the company could wrangle its way into recruiting a makeshift crew to keep the China Line moving, but once in motion, there was no guarantee that the crew would obey orders. The reproachful gaze of passengers and foreign commentators, meanwhile, constrained the company's ability to punish rebellious workers.

Cops and Consuls

... it is an infernally lonely state for a ship to be going about the China seas with no proper consuls, not even a gunboat of her own anywhere, nor a body to go to in case of some trouble.
"Typhoon," Joseph Conrad²⁰

To the *Messageries*, makeshift crews were an infuriatingly unreliable means of clearing labor militancy from the route, but other resources were available to captains and company agents. Every layover port on the China Line had a French consul, for instance, whose pro-company sympathies and direct lines to port police made them compelling allies in anti-labor operations. Again, though, voyage reports of the *Messageries* reveal the limits of calling in consuls and cops to crack down on mutinous workers.²¹ Often enough, campaigns to mobilize consular networks and port police

¹⁹ Voyage Report 22, China Line, Commandant Tivolle, 25 October 1912, MM 86, Dossier Calédonien Voyage Reports (1908–1917), CCIMP [*J'ai patienté le plus que l'ai pu, et j'ai même ... cédé à Singapore quand ils ont refusé le service devant le Consul, pour que les passagers ne puissent pas se douter que nous avions un équipage d'apaches et parce que nous étions en pays étranger, et que cela aurait fait très mauvais effet de montrer que nous avions un équipage indiscipliné, ne reconnaissant aucune autorité, et contrairement en état de révolte ...*].

²⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Typhoon* (New York: Putnam, 1902).

²¹ The official police presence onboard *Messageries* ships was limited to officers (the company occasionally hired private detectives to investigate trafficking, and probably militancy as well, though I have found no record of the latter). Officers, especially the *capitaine d'armes* were entrusted with surveillance and police work, as was, to a lesser extent, the *maître d'équipage*, or boatswain. Even when acting in a police capacity, officers' power to repress rebellious workers was limited by a determination not to attract unwanted attention from paying passengers and the fact that they rarely outnumbered the workers who they would be repressing (neither limit applied to port police).

became mired in uncertainty over the jurisdictional boundaries between localities and foreign ships. Likewise, determining when a strike, or mutiny, had become disruptive enough to threaten security proved thorny.

For one of many examples in which anti-labor crackdowns idled in the interstices of imperial sovereignty, I will return to the *Calédonien*, which set out for East Asia again in 1913 with a professional crew and a new captain, only to endure another mutiny. Despite the total sympathy of a French consul and the proximity of port police, the punitive response collapsed. As the ship steamed into the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, it seemed like the acrimony had been left behind in Marseille. However, a seemingly mundane request launched a cycle of events that derailed expectations. On deck one day, as 1st-class passengers looked on, an officer ordered the ship's boatswain (*maître d'équipage*) – the key intermediary between crew and officers – to perform a small task of electrical work. The boatswain shot back, "I'm not an electrician," and, as the captain explained in letters to company directors, "a violent altercation ensued."²² Once it was over, the captain demanded a formal apology of the boatswain, which he received. Unfortunately, the officer implicated in the incident refused the apology. The captain reluctantly announced that this left him no choice but to disembark the boatswain at the next layover, Colombo (British Ceylon), and all parties agreed to keep the affair a secret from the crew as long as possible.

The crew quickly deduced what was happening, however, and after a brief deliberation they announced that if the boatswain left at Colombo, they would leave with him. The captain was

The thin police presence onboard such passenger steamships was reflected in remarkably frequent evasions of traveling convicts and soldiers, discussed in the next chapter.

²² "Inquiry by Commandant Froment," 19 June 1913, MM 86, Dossier Calédonien (1908–17), "Incident à Colombo," CCIMP. Placed in context, the presence of the 1st-class female onlookers and the specific request for electrical work were clearly aggravating factors. The comfort of upper-class women was seen as a test of the success and honor of a ship. Electrical work, meanwhile, had caused contention between management and workers since its introduction, with workers demanding that technicians be hired to handle the new electrical infrastructure, and managers insisting that the existing workforce could handle it on their own.

trapped, for as directors would later observe, he “could not revisit his decision without compromising his authority, and the men, against whom we could not exert any disciplinary measure while in the course of the voyage, were able to execute their threat without fear.”²³ As the *Calédonien* inched closer to its layover in Colombo, the consequences of this tiff began to multiply. In protest over the treatment of their boatswain, the crew halted work.

At that moment, a crewmember succumbed to typhoid fever. With his body rapidly decomposing, it was time for a burial at sea. Failure to do so would result in a nauseating ordeal, of course, but also in a port-ordered quarantine of the ship that could entail long, costly delays. This made the rotting corpse a time bomb, and, for the crew, a prime opportunity to turn the tables on their officers. Refusing to handle the corpse, the crew left the gory work to their superiors. As the captain described it,

at the hour of immersion set by the doctor, the entire crew refused to immerge him; questioned individually, some responded that the regulation time had not arrived yet, others that they feared touching a cadaver, and it was the Doctor assisted by a second and an officer that, leaving the deck at midnight, had to carry out the burial in the presence of the entire crew, whom no reason could pull from their inertia.²⁴

The workers were offering patent excuses. Almost every voyage of the era saw the death(s) of crewmembers and passengers. As a rule, burials were swift, uncomplicated, and performed by crewmembers. This time, though, the crew sat and stared as their superiors were forced to dirty their hands with the morbid labor. The affront demanded a response.

²³ “Inquiry by Commandant Froment,” 19 June 1913, MM 86, Dossier Calédonien (1908–17), “Incident à Colombo,” CCIMP. [*L'affaire prenait alors une très grave tournure car le Commandant ne pouvait revenir sur sa décision sans porter atteinte à son autorité ; et les hommes contre lesquels on ne pouvait prendre aucune mesure disciplinaire en cours de route, pouvaient sans crainte, mettre leur menace à exécution*]

²⁴ Ibid. « Commandant à l'inscription maritime » [*toute la bordée ... refusa de l'immerger ; questionnés individuellement les uns répondent que l'heure réglementaire n'étant pas écoulée ils refusaient de le faire, les autres qu'ils craignaient de toucher un cadavre, et ce fut le Docteur aidé du Second et de l'officier quittant le quart à minuit qui durent faire l'immersion en présence de toute ... qu'aucun raisonnement ne put tirer de son inertie*].

When the ship finally steamed into Colombo's port, officers called on the French consul to avenge the insult and injury. Consular support was beyond doubt, since it turned out that France's official representative held two roles at once: consul, and general agent of the *Messageries* in Ceylon. Disgusted by the collapse of discipline aboard the ship, this consul and company man summoned the port police, only to find that they refused to board the ship out of fear of legal complications. The police, he learned, would limit themselves to returning "deserting" sailors to the ship. Ironically, by ensuring that no one abandoned the action, this measure appears to have reinforced the strikers' cohesion. The *Calédonien*'s captain diagnosed the situation: "in English country, the consul could not crack down, and found himself powerless against this rebellion."²⁵ News of the "rebellion" soon reached the *Messageries* headquarters in Marseille and Paris, and company directors called for a negotiation to end the ordeal.

As authorities searched for a silver bullet, Colombo's press began to criticize the company over its idling ship. Hot under the gaze of the press and ships of foreign competitors, and lacking means of repression, one officer summarized the situation simply: "We were completely disarmed." In what the consul would describe as a total "abdication of the principle of authority," the officers conceded to crew demands. By legitimating the crew's actions, these concessions crippled the legal case that shipboard authorities could subsequently bring against the sailors. The ship carried on until the next layover, in the French colonial port of Saigon, where an inquiry was conducted. Having tightened ranks during the week's journey between Colombo and Saigon, however, the crew refused to identify ringleaders who might still be prosecuted.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid. [*Le Consul m'ayant prévenu qu'en pays anglais il ne pouvait sévir et se trouvait impuissant contre cette rébellion.*]

²⁶ "Letter from the General Consul," 26 Feb. 1913, MM86, Dossier Calédonien (1908–17), "Incident à Colombo," CCIMP.

Inside the ship, peace was hard to rebuild. As it turned out, the boatswain was no eager militant, and the dispute had taken such a toll on his nerves that he soon showed “signs of mental alienation.” Confined by the officers, he “demolished two passenger cabins where” they “had placed him.”²⁷ Understandably alarmed, the captain issued orders to place the boatswain in a straitjacket. The crew, however, not only refused to place him in a straitjacket, but once more broke into “full revolt.” Rather than carry on fighting, the captain put away the straitjacket, leaving supervision of the boatswain to the crew. Though numerous investigations were led upon the *Calédonien*’s return to Marseille, the crew’s silent solidarity prevented any disciplinary action from being successfully exerted.

Mobility and immobility alike had played to the workers’ favor as they successfully navigated maritime borderlands. While the *Messageries* and its sympathizers may have been disheartened by the lack of support from British authorities along the route, it should have come as no surprise. Trans-Suez routes were full of layovers at British ports, and this geopolitical predicament placed the *Messageries* at the mercy of a government which repeatedly refused to clarify its policy regarding intervention on-board foreign vessels. Seven years before the *Calédonien*’s officers were forced into their humiliating “abdication of the principle of authority” in Colombo, for instance, a Russian ship laying over in the same port met a similar fate, sparking a legal debate among British authorities that exposed the ambiguities of mutiny in the age of labor militancy and sovereignty in the in-between spaces of empires.

In spring of 1906 the *Grigory Moersch* pulled into Colombo’s harbor with a cargo of petroleum for what appeared to be a routine layover on the ship’s long voyage to Vladivostok. A

²⁷ Ibid. “Commandant à l’inscription maritime” [ayant donnée des signes d’aliénation mentale et ayant déjà démoli deux cabines de passagers où on l’avait enfermé, se trouvant agité, je donnais l’ordre au docteur et au second de lui mettre la camisole].

desperate cable to the Russian consul shattered the illusion of tranquillity. The crew, it warned, “was mutinous and the Captain’s life was in danger.”²⁸ As it turned out, the Russian consul was not Russian at all, for the position had been recently delegated to the French Consul. (A French consul negotiating with British colonial officials over the fate of a Russian ship may sound exceptionally complicated, but it was not even the only international knot tying up the China Line at that exact moment: as the *Grigory Moerch* languished outside Colombo, a few layovers westward, in Naples, intense negotiations were underway among British, Italian and Chinese state officials over the fate of a British ship and its mutinous Chinese crew.²⁹) In Colombo, the French-turned-Russian consul promptly requested that police board the ship, “strictly,” he insisted, “to protect the Captain from violence.”

The crew, however, wisely refrained from provoking the police guard, and when the consul and captain sought a mass arrest of the crew, they were denied by Ceylon’s attorney general. Faced with a peaceful mutiny the police guard withdrew. As the attorney general explained to superiors in London, he would not authorize a raid unless the harbor’s security was threatened or violence occurred on board, and while he suspected there had been threats of violence, he had to admit, “But here we have no threat, only a strike, and with that we cannot interfere on a Foreign ship.”³⁰ A colleague was less circumspect: “The Consul is anxious to force the crew . . . ashore, but this is no business of ours.”³¹

Floating in Colombo’s harbor, the *Grigory Moerch*’s engine remained silent and the sailors refused to budge. Inside Colombo, meanwhile, the ship’s officers and consul paced the halls of

²⁸ “Legality of Action by Colonial Govt in case of mutiny tc. Arising on Foreign Ship lying in Colonial Port,” March 1906, Foreign Office (FO) 372/28/59, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), London, UK.

²⁹ “Mutiny of Chinese crew of SS Epsom at Naples and their Repatriation,” March 1906, FO 369/25/32, TNA, London, UK.

³⁰ “Attorney General to Lt. Governor,” 3 March 1906, FO 372/28/59, TNA, London, UK.

³¹ “Ashmore to Daniels,” 23 March 1906, FO 372/28/59, TNA, London, UK.

power as they lobbied for repression and investigated the possibility of replacing their rebellious countrymen with a “native crew.” Eventually, they procured a warrant to arrest the entire crew, only to watch the attorney general revoke it at the last moment. With internal divisions growing and the local press speculating on the standoff, port authorities hatched a plan to tow the petroleum ship outside of Colombo’s harbor and abandon its crew to their fate. At last, just before the operation launched, an offer of back pay and safe passage to Russia reached the crew, who accepted, coming ashore and ending the strike.

If the facts of the episode were straightforward enough its legal implications were practically indecipherable. Embarrassed by the confusion that had reigned throughout the standoff, British authorities in Ceylon wrote to London requesting legal precedents to answer two seemingly simple questions: did a colonial government have “legal power to interfere by coercive action in the event of a difficulty, not involving a breach of the peace, arising between the Master and crew of a foreign ship lying in harbour,” and if so, how far would they be “authorized in arresting mutineers on board a foreign ship when requested to do so by a Captain of the ship and the Consul of the State to which the ship belongs?”³² Unfortunately for them, historical precedent merely multiplied the questions. The last Russian ship to run into labor disputes in British waters, for instance, was thought to have been boarded forcibly by the police, yet there existed no administrative record of the invasion whatsoever, raising the troubling specter of extra-legal operations.³³ As the legal debate climbed to the Foreign Office, moreover, it became tangled in a web of complicating factors. Binational treaties seemed to clash with municipal codes, while scholars of international law disagreed over whether local law and ship law were concurrent or

³² “Minute by Davidson,” 9 March 1905, FO 372/28/59, TNA, London, UK.

³³ “Lt. Governor – AMS,” 27 March 1906, FO 372/28/59, p. 19, TNA, London, UK.

mutually exclusive. Commentators contradicted each other over whether crimes committed by crewmembers at sea became null once in harbor, while others cautioned that cases against crewmembers would crumble if crimes were tried on land after having already been tried at sea. Different rules applied to a merchant vessel and a “man-of-war,” yet few could say with clarity what to do when a merchant vessel was carrying military materiel or had been contracted by a foreign state. Having “searched in vain for a decided case,” Ceylon’s attorney general threw up his hands.³⁴

Amidst a cacophony of interpretations and precedents, British authorities settled on a policy of ambiguity. Physical crackdowns would be authorized only when the British port in question was threatened, or violence was occurring onboard a foreign ship. Shrewdly, though, no one supplied a basic definition of what constituted a threat to port security, or when violence “breached the peace.” China Line shippers, then, faced a dilemma: the worker “mutinies” occurring along the route were sufficiently severe to force a state-backed company to the table, yet insufficiently bloody to trigger intervention by foreign port police. On the China Line, “foreign” almost invariably meant British, and the British government was far from confident that intervening in labor disputes aboard foreign ships was lawful, or in its interest. Asked to choose between their right to monopolize violence on British territory and their responsibility to act as the unpaid muscle for any foreign ship that steamed into port with a mutinous crew, British authorities declined to choose at all.

³⁴ “Re. the Warrant to arrest the crew of the Russian S.S. ‘Grigory Moerch’,” 2 April 1906, FO 372/28/59, TNA, London, UK.

Navigating the State

Faced with the reality that even the most sympathetic French consul could rarely guarantee a police response to labor militancy along the route, *Messageries* bosses might simply have steered ship captains to French ports, where police were unburdened by fears of sovereign violations. While the British were hegemon east of Suez, French captains belonged to an empire with a host of territories around the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, many possessing ports that could serve as bases for coordinating anti-labor reprisals: Djibouti; Madagascar, Réunion and a constellation of smaller Indian Ocean islands; coastal enclaves in India and China; and most importantly, Indochina, whose ports were becoming critical nodes of the empire's Indian and Pacific Ocean traffic.³⁵ Yet, from the company's perspective, even French territory provided a shaky foundation for exerting authority over militant labor. After all, while company agents could call French police, their workers could appeal to the aged and complex institution of the *Inscription maritime* (Maritime registry).

Founded in the late-17th century, the *Inscription* emerged to replace press gangs with a registered maritime workforce that could sustain trade routes and fill the ranks of the Royal Navy in periods of war. Over time, the *Inscription* came to act as a giant database for identifying and locating maritime workers, a distributing mechanism for humble pensions awarded to career sailors, and an administrative center for handling complaints and matters of discipline.³⁶ Despite

³⁵ As an entry to Northern Vietnam and Southern China, and an outlet for tin, coal, and silk, the port of Haiphong became particularly important to French interests. Development of the port took off in the early-20th century but had been a driving factor in French colonization efforts since the 1880s. See: Jean-Francois Klein, "Une histoire impériale connectée? Hai Phong: jalon d'une stratégie lyonnaise en Asie orientale (1881-1886)," *Vietnam: Histoire et perspectives contemporaines* 13-14 (2009): 55-93.

³⁶ For Anglophone research into the *Inscription maritime*, see: Alessandro Stanziani, *Sailors, Slaves, and Immigrants: Bondage in the Indian Ocean World, 1750-1914* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 33-55; Frykman, *The Bloody Flag*; Terry Crowdy, *French Warship Crews, 1789-1805: From the French Revolution to Trafalgar* (Bloomsbury, 2005). In French, see: Viaud, *Le Syndicalisme maritime français*, 13-20.

its royal pedigree, the institution survived the French Revolution, but its reaffirmation in revolutionary law came with a crucial caveat. Under revolutionary law, the power to punish sailors would be transferred from captains and admiralty courts to common law tribunals. Whatever the extent of its enforcement, this principle of equality under the law was undermined in the mid-19th century. In a series of reforms under the Second Empire (1852–70), a special legal regime was re-imposed on sailors of the *Inscription*, while captains were again empowered to act as judge and jury. The legal odyssey of French sailors was far from over. In 1896, captains were again stripped of some of these coercive powers, and the disciplinary code for sailors was re-opened to debate and interpretation.³⁷

Among the 100,000-plus workers who populated France's *Inscription* in 1900, few could say with certainty where the institution would place its weight in the coming struggles over labor rights. On the one hand, the *Inscription* tied sailors to a special penal code in which they might be hurled in prison for work infractions or accused of desertion if they abandoned their worksite at the wrong moment. On the other hand, the *Inscription* existed to ensure that France would always have a body of professional sailors available in times of crisis, meaning that it was less concerned with the profits and pride of shipping magnates than with preventing sailors from fleeing their line of work. Whether merchant mariners could count on an institutional champion in the state, at the very least they would have an arbiter.

By 1900, as Marseille's era of massive strikes began, this specter of state arbitration horrified ship captains, who believed that their authority was under siege and that only new allies in the French state could save them. As one captain put it in 1900, "The situation has become all

³⁷ It would take another three decades, however, for the draconian disciplinary code to be fully overhauled. See: Renaud, "L'Histoire par les Lois: Trois siècles d'évolution dans la répression des fautes disciplinaires de la marine marchande," 23–56.

too clear. 1) They have made sure to disarm the Captains totally. 2) Punishment by disembarkment is illusory today. 3) By order, the Consuls are disarmed.”³⁸ The captain’s despair had roots in the recent past. In a weeks-long struggle with a rebellious crew, he had failed to deliver substantial punishments. In the terminus of his route, the Japanese port of Yokohama, an attempt to dissuade striking sailors with a combination of consular orders and police interventions had totally missed the mark. Like their British counterparts, it seems Japanese authorities preferred to send labor disputes down the line rather than clog their courts with the problems of foreigners.

Then, during a westbound layover in French Saigon, the captain appealed to the *Inscription*, only to watch its magistrate grant the accused sailors the right to a trial on metropolitan soil in their homeport of Marseille, a month’s journey away. As a result, the sailors who had contested this captain’s sovereignty were able to, as he put it, “rejoice in the most perfect impunity for six weeks” – ample time to craft a legal defense, jump ship, or foment anger among fellow workers.³⁹ To company directors the captain named the last weapon in his arsenal, writing, “What remains are the warships – in the future, when punishments are called for, and there will be no shortage of that, I am going to address myself solely to the warships and that will do it.”⁴⁰

Nearly a decade later, after multiple strikes had rocked the maritime sector, captains from the China Line increasingly gravitated to the same conclusion. Some, however, went further, calling not only for the *Messageries* to rely on Navy justice, but to *deploy* the Navy in an institutional attack against the *Inscription*. As one captain explained in correspondence with

³⁸ Voyage Report 21, Commandant Schmidt, China Line, 14 October 1900, MM 559, Dossier Yarra Voyage Reports (1893–1907), CCIMP. [*La situation est donc devenue bien nette. 1) On a pris soin de désarmer totalement les Capitaines. 2) La Punition de débarquement est illusoire aujourd’hui. 3) Par ordre, les Consuls sont désarmés. Restent les navires de guerre...*].

³⁹ Ibid. [*J’arrive donc avec ... hommes qui jouissent de la plus parfaite impunité depuis six semaines*].

⁴⁰ Ibid. [*À l’avenir, quand les punitions seront nécessaires, et cela ne vapas manquer, je ne m’adresserai qu’aux navires de guerre et ça marchera*].

company headquarters in 1909, thanks to the pervasive influence of “strike-spreaders [gréviculteurs], saboteurs and others,” who had entered the ranks:

we are henceforth dealing with personnel who, while they don't have very well-formulated ideas about their duties, are on the other hand extremely up to date on their rights. On voyages where the layovers are numerous, we can hardly shift a straw. . . . To remediate this disaster, it will be necessary for anyone having anything to do with the Navy to ceaselessly battle the long-outdated regime of the *Inscription maritime*.⁴¹

And indeed, faced with militancy in motion, many *Messageries* captains adopted this strategy. Taking advantage of the statutory liminality of sailors and the gaping loophole available to any captain who could claim a threat to the security of navigation, they simply avoided ports altogether, pouncing instead on French warships along the route, and preventing the *Inscription* from, as they saw it, fanning the fire of labor militancy.⁴² In a fleet with its fair share of former navy officers, contacts in *La Royale*, as the institution was often called, were not lacking.⁴³

As China Line captains reacted to labor unrest by blocking the *Inscription* from acting in its capacity as an arbiter, they simultaneously leaned more heavily than ever on that very same *Inscription* to handle a host of other cases occurring outside French ports. Indeed, the company may have been attacking the institution on two fronts: starving it of influence over labor conflicts, while flooding it with petty administrative burdens. This, at least, was the fear of A. Jaquemart,

⁴¹ Voyage Report 19, Commandant Bruno, Madagascar Line, 14 September 1909, MM 551, Dossier Voyage Reports Yarra (1908–17), CCIMP.

⁴² Voyage Report 8, Australia Line, Commandant Melber, April 1911, MM 86, Dossier Voyage Reports Caledonien (1908–17), CCIMP, Marseille, France; Voyage Report 22, China Line, Commandant Tivolle, 25 October 1912, MM 6, Dossier Voyage Reports Amazone (1919–20), CCIMP, Marseille, France; “Commandant Lapousse, China Line,” 17 April 1920, MM 20, Dossier Andre Lebon (1919–21), CCIMP, Marseille, France; Voyage Report 11, China Line, Commandant Cousin, 19 October 1920, MM 20, Dossier Andre Lebon (1919–21), CCIMP, Marseille, France.

⁴³ For example, the Norman-born Raoul Nicolas Sylvain Schmitz (1853–1918) captained *Messageries* ships after decades of serving on navy cruisers in the Seas of China and Japan. Unsurprisingly, Schmitz had a particularly pugnacious attitude regarding labor relations, as can be seen in a voyage report from 1903: “Or, il est évident qu'on peut toujours avoir la paix provisoire en mollissant, mais mollir est aujourd'hui plus que jamais un danger mortel, c'est la marche à la fin.” (Voyage Report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 3 [11/2/1903], 1997 002 4337, AFL). Schmitz's genealogy is available at: http://ecole.nav.traditions.free.fr/officiers_schmitz_sylvain.htm (last accessed 5/1/2021).

the man who headed the *Inscription* in Saigon for much of the early twentieth century, and who I introduced in chapter 5. In correspondence with Indochina's governor-general, Jacquemart accused the consular network "beyond Suez" of being in the pocket of the *Messageries*. As he explained to the governor-general, the unholy alliance between company agents and French consuls along the China Line may not have been enough to guarantee mass arrests of mutinous crews, but consuls were compensating captains by empowering them to disembark individual troublemakers in Saigon. Conveniently for the company, the *Inscription* all too often footed the bill of legal proceedings, imprisonment, and repatriation.

What they could not solve in foreign ports and navy courts, in other words, *Messageries* captains brought to the French government in Saigon. As a result Saigon's *Inscription* was ballooning into what Jacquemart described as the unmanageable "headquarters of a maritime arrondissement stretching from Djibouti to Japan."⁴⁴ Offloading dissident individuals and petty offenders onto the *Inscription* when large-scale crackdowns were made impossible by foreign law codes, *Messageries* captains and agents continued exploiting the benefits of access to navy ships – and navy justice – whenever they could claim a "threat to security of navigation." Here was an anti-labor recipe composed of opportunism, expert navigation of state agencies, and a cynical appraisal of the vagaries of maritime law.

Earlier, I discussed a 1912 voyage of the *Messageries* ship, *Calédonien*, when a makeshift (scab) crew led a chaotic revolt against their officers and captain, despite having been brought in as a means of suppressing labor militancy. The audacity of those "apaches," as their captain labeled them, spiked in Singapore, where shipboard authorities had felt compelled to refrain from

⁴⁴ "Jaquemart (Chef du service maritime) au Gouverneur-général à Hanoi," 23 February 1910, IA/Dossier 2909, Saigon *Inscription Maritime* (1907–1913), National Archives of Vietnam Center 2, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

meaningful repression. Events during the last leg of that same voyage, however, illustrated the grab-bag of tactics employed by *Messageries* captains on trans-Suez routes as they navigated state institutions. For when the *Calédonien* steamed out of Singapore and into its next layover in Saigon, the disorder did not abate. Instead, the rebellious crew, perhaps empowered by impunity, marched into the ship's hold and began looting its "liquid" holdings. Some of the men were hauled before the *Inscription*. To handle the remaining rebels, the horrified officers might have turned at this point to the boatswain. He, however, was "at the head" of a procession of mutinous sailors marching to Saigon's *Inscription* to demand the release of their detained colleagues. The chaos was finally brought to a halt calling in the Navy, which sentenced 17 men to various combinations of detention, sanction, and repatriation.⁴⁵

These measures might have resulted in a crippling loss of manpower in another industry, but not so in the precociously globalized labor market of shipping. "I replaced them with twelve Chinese," the captain reported in relief, "and we left Saigon at the fixed date and time." Three accused sailors remained on-board, after surviving thanks to a non-verdict in Saigon's maritime court. But, after carrying them onward to Yokohama, the ship captain found a more obliging judicial power: "[they] were disembarked and imprisoned on the cruiser *Dupleix*" – that is, a navy vessel. Completing the saga, he noted, "we replaced them with Japanese."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The boatswain had already been found drunk after the looting of the hold, and in the captain's estimation, "lacked any authority at all" ("*n'avait aucune autorité*"). Voyage Report 22, China Line, Commandant Tivolle, 25 October 1912, MM 86, Dossier Calédonien Voyage Reports (1908–1917), CCIMP.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The “Indigenous” of the In-between

Was the *Messageries*' approach to combatting labor militancy systematic, merely opportunistic, or, in a sense, a strategy built around maximizing opportunism? After all, navy vessels were not always available, since their locations were contingent upon international relations and shrouded in secrecy. Using the *Inscription* as a dumping ground for lesser offenders (or sailors who had wisely offended outside of French ports), meanwhile, risked opening the door to arbitration and worker's demands. Moreover, eventually an angry administrator like Jaquemart could push back against the company (indeed, for two decades, Jaquemart dedicated himself to exposing the company's abuse of state resources and legal loopholes).⁴⁷ As the troubled voyage of the *Calédonien* suggests, for companies like the *Messageries*, perhaps the one truly systemic approach to combatting labor militancy arose from a system of hiring and rotating Asian and African workers, most of them subjects of the French and British Empires.

Ships sailing between Europe and Asia had been manned by Asian and African crews since the early days of the Spice Trade. Indeed, the very incident that inspired Grotius to theorize the “Free Sea” in the 17th century involved two European ships manned largely by inhabitants of the Indian Ocean littoral.⁴⁸ From the revolutionary turmoil of the late-18th century until the mid-19th century, however, the practice had been disputed, and in key areas, rolled back. In France, for instance, the right to hire foreign seafarers was contested in the 1790s, when revolutionary law mandated that any flag-bearing ship have a crew of which 75 percent were French nationals – for officers, the requirement rose to 100 per cent. Likewise, before the repeal of Britain's Navigation

⁴⁷ Jaquemart's files from the Saigon Inscription Maritime span IA/Dossiers 2909, 2808, and 27202 of the National Archives of Vietnam Center 2, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

⁴⁸ Peter Borschberg, “The Seizure of the Sta. Catarina Revisited: The Portuguese Empire in Asia, VOC Politics and the Origins of the Dutch-Johor Alliance (1602–1616),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2002): 42.

Acts in the mid-19th century, seamen native to the British Isles enjoyed protected access to employment.

As the steam-shipping industry grew and consolidated in the mid-19th century, its powerful political lobbies chipped away at such requirements. Desirous to take advantage of the Suez Canal and the forced opening of the Chinese coast, companies like the *Messageries* and *P&O* built a logistical and legal system for recruiting workers in the Red Sea region and Chinese coast.⁴⁹ By 1900, French citizens on flag-bearing ships operating “beyond Suez” could legally constitute as little as 50 percent of a crew, while British shippers east of Suez enjoyed even laxer mandates. Like their British counterparts in Cardiff or Liverpool, the French citizen workforce in Marseille detested the hiring of colonial subjects, and protests against the practice, often framed in viscerally racist terms, were central planks of syndicalism from its origins.⁵⁰

Along with its British partner and competitor, the *P&O*, the *Messageries* handled these criticisms adeptly. On *its* lines, directors made clear, the flow of traffic beyond Suez could be guaranteed only with contingents of African and Asian workers. Specifically, *Messageries* negotiators insisted that if Europeans worked in scorching-hot engine rooms during the Red Sea passage, they would die in droves.⁵¹ While maritime unions and their allies argued that employing “indigenous” sailors was unpatriotic and unsafe (their imputed cowardice and inability to communicate being posited as hazards during shipwrecks), even unionists accepted the claim that

⁴⁹ The *Messageries* pioneered the hiring of Adenese seamen. Khalili, *Sinews of Trade and War*, 229-230.

⁵⁰ On the eve of the First World War, the *Messageries* reported that 44% of its workforce were “subjects” and “foreigners.” Viaud, *Le Syndicalisme maritime français*, 32–40.

⁵¹ Joseph Tremble, « Correspondance de Joseph Tremble », « Lettre du 19 septembre 1901 », Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <http://dtriaud.free.fr/1901-09-20.htm> (last accessed: 4/4/2021).

certain occupational hazards of maritime labor could only be resolved by hiring non-European workers.⁵²

Steamship companies started from the premise that only certain racialized bodies could endure an engine room east of Suez, but they did not stop there. Indeed, Asians and Africans became overrepresented not only in brutally hot boiler rooms, but also among deckhands and service “boys.” Simultaneously, the *Messageries* and *P&O* backed legislation restricting non-European sailors from working above certain latitudes. The stance was less counterintuitive than it appears, since by selectively ratifying the critique of non-European workers as untrustworthy safety hazards, these shipping giants of the Indian and Pacific Oceans effectively cut off competitors in the Atlantic and Mediterranean from the gold mine of low-wage workers recruited under precarious contracts in colonial territories.⁵³

The commercial advantages of hiring imperial subjects cannot be overestimated. Compared to Europeans they were paid less and drew fewer benefits. Onboard, they were lodged in smaller spaces and ate in kitchens with less equipment. Perhaps most importantly, they had no unions and limited recourse to consuls and colonial offices of the *Inscription*. Thanks to the ease with which subject-workers could be recruited at layover ports along the route, moreover, captains frequently menaced mutinous sailors with replacement. Citizen sailors, who, in the case of the *Messageries*, came largely from Corsica and Provence, might enter the *Inscription*'s database as early as 15 years old, and would contribute to a pension fund when they began work a few years later. By contrast “indigenous” sailors were recruited in a far more informal manner, through

⁵² Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 122–30. A typical example of the discourse can be found in J. Beaumont, *Ships – and People* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1921), 20–21.

⁵³ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Messageries maritimes*, 165–67, 490–92; Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, 126–28.

“Sarangs” (also spelled “serang” and “surang”). Brokers, translators, and team leaders, Sarangs coordinated relations between “indigenous” workers and the ship’s officers.⁵⁴

Without these multifaceted intermediaries, the global labor networks of trans-Suez shippers would have come apart at the seams. Aware of their dependency, *Messageries* authorities cast a constantly suspicious eye over Sarangs. Some Sarangs also tested the limits of their power over liners and the routes they traversed. Take, for instance, a Marseille-Yokohama voyage of the steamship *Tonkin* in 1899. No sooner had the ship pulled into Port-Saïd then, reports claimed, than “a beginning of mutiny occurred... among the African personnel of the engine-room, composed almost exclusively of Somalis.”⁵⁵ The incipient mutiny, reports insisted, had been ordered by the Somali Sarang, “Hégal-Awad.” As it turned out, Hégal-Awad had received a letter from a friend in Aden warning that his French bosses planned to disembark him in Djibouti and have him replaced. This naturally upset the Sarang, who, as the ship’s captain noted without comment and in passing, “had been grievously burned in the explosion of the *Saghalién* [another *Messageries* ship].” Apparently, though, the news also upset the Sarang’s team, which joined him when:

to avenge himself, he fomented a little riot that broke out two hours later under the dishonest pretext that [the head-mechanic] had hit a coaler. Around 10h30 in effect the Surang at the head of thirty or so of his men, emitting savage cries rushed from the post towards the AR, proffering words of menace against their leader... the gang wanted to reach my quarters to protest.

Luckily for the captain, his European mechanics and officers counter-attacked successfully, so that “the invasion of the gangway was repelled, and the effervescence was relieved bit by bit.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ On Sarangs in the British merchant marine, see: Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, 59-118.

⁵⁵ Voyage Report of the *Tonkin*, Indochina and Japan Line, n. 6/7, Commandant Vaquier (12 April 1899), 1997002 4337, AFL.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Considering what punishment to dole out, the captain observed that his mechanics had “had many occasions to observe the persistence of discontent and an insubordinate mentality among the Somalis and notably in their Surang.” Nonetheless, he waited until the ship had crossed the Red Sea. Then, arriving in French Djibouti, he confirmed the Sarang’s suspicions: “In Djibouti, I had the satisfaction of learning that there were at the agency a considerable number of Arabs applying to be embarked as coalers and, the most precious and unexpected thing, an excellent surang.” Rapidly ridding himself of his “effervescent” Somalis, the captain swapped them for the “Arabs.” The move, he gloated to company superiors, “was for our undisciplined Somalis a just punishment and humiliation all at once. I reckon that this little *coup d’état* contributed in a non-negligible way to the success of our voyage.”⁵⁷

The erasures and admissions of the captain’s account are telling. The thirty-or-so Somali workers disappear behind a single man whose motives, if we cobble together the clues, come down to a baseless letter and a desire for vengeance (and perhaps, if we read between the captain’s lines, anger over an earlier injury). Their mobilization goes from being characterized as a “little riot,” to an “invasion,” only to be summarized simply as “effervescence.” Perhaps the greatest irony, though, is that while there is no effort to tie all the strings together – the history of grievances, the fact that the Sarang’s fear ended up being entirely founded, etc. – and while the mobilization is reduced to irrational “effervescence,” the captain nonetheless rhetorically inverts the roles in his final line, as if it is he who has rebelled, and not his Sarang: his rapid replacement of the Somalis with Arabs, after all, is a “*coup d’état*.”

Generally, Sarangs tested their power in less overt manners than Hégel-Awad’s “riot.” On the trans-Suez liner *Australien* in 1900, for instance, the ship’s Sarang was revealed to have led a

⁵⁷ Ibid.

vast pacotille racket spanning “Suez, Port-Saïd, and Colombo,” in which he not only traded in cheap, bulk goods like rice, but also expensive materials, including mechanical lubricants from the ship’s supplies. The Sarang took the blame, and while he left the ship, his team of coalers remained onboard. Suddenly, the *Australien*’s authorities found themselves dealing directly with the coalers – who, it turned out, had plenty to say for themselves. In a letter written to the company in sometimes-phonetic French and signed, “all the Arabs of the *Australien*,” they declared, “I com to you to tell you that we were not satisfied with the money that we got for the coaling. We worked 13 days and only got 12 francs we want to know if this com from you or if it’s the fault of the ship [bord] which kept the surplus of our work... we count on being paid but not a paye like that.”⁵⁸

Derived from Urdu and Persian, the title of Sarang was applied to engine-team leaders from across the route. On the East Asian end of the China Line, Chinese Sarangs also asserted themselves as indispensable brokers, often by weaponizing the informal and precarious terms of their employment. An incident aboard the *Messageries* ship, *Manche*, in 1910 conveys the influence that Chinese Sarangs could have over maritime authorities. Docked in Saigon’s harbor, the *Manche*, like many *Messageries* ships, contained a sizeable team of Chinese coalers led by a Sarang, identified as “Along” (of course, the ubiquity of Chinese coalers might have called into question the logic of climate and race that justified hiring coalers from the Red Sea region, but that is another story). A minute after midnight at the end of the month, “Along” and his coalers silently packed up their belongings, tiptoeing out of the ship, and disappearing into the night. In the morning, the furious ship’s officers sought out a familiar figure, Jacquemart, to see if he could retrieve and punish their workers.

⁵⁸ « Chef Mécanicien à Commandant » (4 June 1900) and « La Ciotat le 29 mai 1900 », in *Correspondance diverse, Australien (1890-1903)*; MM 57, CCIMP.

For Jacquemart, the stakes were fairly high. Writing to no less a figure than the governor-general of Indochina, he explained:

I will permit myself to attract, in an entirely special fashion, your attention to the events... which have already produced themselves several times... events which, if they remain without sanction, will have the result of rendering Commercial shipping completely dependent on the Chinese personnel that they embark.⁵⁹

Indeed, as Jacquemart lamented to the governor-general, “Along” had outmaneuvered them and “operated with the utmost skill.” All of the government’s usual means of retrieving and punishing the team were useless. They could not charge him for breaking a contract, because Chinese personnel were hired on a month-to-month basis, and Indochina had no laws demanding advanced notice. They could not punish him using laws for “unblocking” maritime traffic, since the case would be too weak for the courts to embrace. Most importantly, they could not punish him for disobeying orders, because in their silent desertion, no one had even seen them, let alone ordered them to stop.

In his letter to the governor-general, Jacquemart could only despair: “I find myself disarmed. There was in no way a disciplinary fault, no refusal to obey, no attempted rebellion. The Chinese left in the night without a sound, taking no ship material, with no person of authority able to oppose them, and as a consequence, without them resisting this authority.”⁶⁰ Jacquemart, as we will see, made a career out of chasing away foreign sailors who lingered too long in Indochina, so there is a special irony to his solution for moving along the ship that “Along” had left stranded in Saigon:

⁵⁹ « Jacquemart (chef du service de l’inscription maritime) à monsieur le Gouverneur General de l’Indochine à Hanoi » (SAIGON le 5 Mars 1910), N. 2909, « Dossier Relatif aux Chauffeurs, Capitaines, Mécaniciens des Vapeurs... à l’Inscription Maritime, années 1907-1913, » Archives II: Ho Chi Minh City. [*Je me permettrai d’attirer d’une façon toute spéciale votre attention sur les faits de ce genre, qui se sont déjà produits plusieurs fois ... faits qui, s’ils restaient sans sanctions, auraient pour résultats de rendre les navires de Commerce complètement dépendants du personnel Chinois qu’ils embarquent.*]

⁶⁰ Ibid. [*Je me trouve désarmé. Il n’y a pas eu en l’espèce de faute disciplinaire, aucun refus d’obéir, aucune tentative de rébellion. Les Chinois sont partis la nuit sans bruit, n’enlevant rien du matériel du bord sans que personne d’autorité ait pu s’y opposer, et par conséquent sans qu’il y ait en résistance à cette autorité.*]

“I was able to guarantee the departure of the *Manche* by embarking some Arabs [and] Malays,” the administrator reported, “who are fortunately fairly numerous on the ground in Saigon...”⁶¹

Notably absent from Jacquemart’s report to the governor-general is any reflection on what caused the silent rebellion of the Chinese workers, what these workers sought out of their action, or whether there were warning signs. This is not surprising, since authorities of the *Messageries* and French state cultivated their ignorance of Asian and African workers. Luckily, the dossier with Jacquemart’s report contains three letters: one from the captain; one from the European head mechanics; and one from the Chinese workers. These letters patch together an episode that was concerning enough to reach the desk of the most powerful man in Indochina. As it turns out, the Chinese workers had plainly declared their intention to resign at the end of the month in a letter to the captain. In their letter, the workers compared their Sarang’s twenty years of faultless service to their European head mechanic, who they accused of ineptitude, physical abuse, and “mistreating us like animals.”⁶²

In the letters of the Head Mechanic and captain, however, “Along” is painted as a kind of oppressor. The Head Mechanic, for instance, described “Along, surang of the Chinese coalers,” as having “become so arrogant that it is absolutely impossible to make myself obeyed, without being menaced at each instant with a general walk-out by the engine-room personnel.”⁶³ In a letter asking Jacquemart for support, meanwhile, the captain offered precise details: “for the Tet Holiday, I only wanted to give the men three piasters of advance, he asked me for six or a general walkout. I had

⁶¹ Ibid. [*J’ai pu assurer le départ de la MANCHE en embarquant des arabes, malais, qui sont heureusement en assez grand nombre sur la place de Saigon.*]

⁶² Ibid. “À m. le commandant du paquebot *Manche* des Messageries Maritimes. Saigon. » (25 Feb. 1910) [*il nous maltraite comme des animaux.*]

⁶³ « Diméy, chef-mécanicien au commandant (Saigon le 3 mars 1910) » [*le nommé ALONG surang des chauffeurs Chinois est devenu d’une arrogance telle qu’il m’est absolument impossible de me faire obéir, sans être menacé à chaque instant d’un débarquement général du personnel chauffeur.*]

to give in [*s'incliner*] to guarantee the ship's departure." Asked to explain the walk-out, he could only muster the following:

What happened on the night of February 28th to March 1st? I know nothing of it, but March 1st in the morning, the engine-room worker's post was empty, all had left taking away their things. The above-named Along is no beginner, and many times the Captains and Head-Mechanics have been at odds with him, and always had to bow down before the dominion [*l'empire*] that he had over the Chinese coalers.⁶⁴

Trans-Suez companies blamed supposedly tyrannical Sarang as a tactic to give themselves more leverage over labor recruitment (although, of course, it sometimes reflected actual abusive practices, the campaign against the "dominion" of Sarangs accelerated at the turn of the century⁶⁵). In the case of "Along," the blame also exemplified cultivated ignorance. The sweeping allegations of the Head Mechanic and captain collapsed the remarkable social cohesion of the group of Chinese workers into the mysterious effect of one man's influence. How this individual's actions apparently had structural implications – dire enough, moreover, to risk "rendering Commercial shipping completely dependent upon the Chinese personnel they embark" – was a riddle that went unsolved.

Subject-workers could be recruited at essentially any port of layover on the China Line, but for the *Messageries*, Aden and Hong Kong were particularly prominent hubs for recruiting Somali engine-room teams and Cantonese service workers.⁶⁶ Though the latter group were diminutively categorized as "boys" (French sources used the English "boy," although sometimes the French *garçon* was applied to European service workers) and assigned the most servile roles

⁶⁴ « Capitaine Gary à l'inscription maritime » (3/3/1910). [*Que se passa-t-il dans la nuit du 28 Février au 13 Mars ? Je n'en sais rien, mais le 1^{er} Mars au matin, le poste des chauffeurs était vide, tous étaient partis emportant leurs effets. Le dénommés ALONG, n'en est pas à son début, et maintes fois des Capitaines et Chef-Mécaniciens ont eu maille à partir avec lui, et toujours il a fallu s'incliner devant l'empire qu'il avait pris sur les chauffeurs Chinois*]

⁶⁵ Ba la chandran, *Globalizing Labour*, 78.

⁶⁶ Solène Granier, *Domestiques indochinois* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2014), 71-100; Paul Bonnetain and Louis Tillier, *Histoire d'un paquebot* (Paris: Quantin, 1894), 70–81.

onboard, they were hardly submissive. Take, for example, the *Tonkin* in 1910. On that ship, the “boys” of the crew demanded the right to caged songbirds, which they kept as pets and traded as merchandise. When a *Messageries* captain grew weary of complaints from American and English passengers onboard his ship who were “shocked” by the odors of this flock, he threatened to remove the birds. In response, the crew staged a walkout in their next layover, Singapore. As the captain noted to directors, the boys were “becoming more and more demanding.” The company, he warned, was in a bind: either they could sacrifice passengers, or “watch our *boys* desert without us being able to replace them at the moment of departure from Singapore.”⁶⁷ In the *Messageries*’ labor system, “boys” may have been replaceable, but only with time, planning, and coordination.

As the “boys” of the *Tonkin* suggest, desertion was the tactic of choice for imperial subjects. Laboring under conditions of constrained agency and precarious contracts, walkouts and disappearances were used to elude the grasp of their bosses or jockey for better pay and status. In the vast majority of cases, desertion was part of a cat-and-mouse game in which workers deserted only to resume work either on a different ship, or even with the same company, after a period of time often spent visiting their families. In this sense, desertions were the natural outgrowth of a maritime labor system that relied on fake papers, shoddy surveillance, and the occasional granting of general amnesties. Across trans-Suez routes, though, desertion frequently went beyond these tacitly expected patterns, with runaway sailors setting up shop in unexpected places, or using their feet to force superiors into negotiations.

Such processes were especially ubiquitous among “Arab” engine-room workers. A fixture of the French and British steamships, “Arab” laborers, recruited from across the Red Sea littoral, hailed from many different ethnicities, tribes, and clans. Some were not Arab at all. The

⁶⁷ « Voyage report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 11, cmdt. Charbonnel » (18 mai 1910), 19970024337, AFL.

movements of these workers became parts of a semi-choreographed dance around the Red Sea world; between family and ship, between different shipping lines, and even between different empires. As French and British colonial governments on both ends of the Red Sea attempted to impose ever-more aggressive regimes of paperwork in the early-20th century, mobility control became more frenetic and hostile. But runaway sailors hailing from the region were not permanently in motion. They also appear in colonial records establishing fledgling colonies of their own in places as far removed from the Red Sea as Saigon (Vietnam) and Nouméa (New Caledonia). In Nouméa, a public “desertion agency” existed, but it was notoriously ineffective. As one captain informed directors in 1912, “Every voyage numerous desertions occur in Nouméa among the Arab personnel. A desertion agency, of which the head is apparently known, functions in this port. Despite my complaints none of the... deserters has been arrested.”⁶⁸

In Saigon, officials were both more alarmed by the accumulation of runaway sailors and more active in pursuing them. In his office at the *Inscription*, Jacquemart had been relieved to have “Arabs and Malays” available as replacements for rebellious Chinese workers in 1910, but when such sailors escaped the agency’s surveillance, his attitude changed drastically. As he noted in 1912, “given that these Arab coalers always have themselves taken down on the register under a fake name, it is very difficult to stop them once they’re on land.”⁶⁹ Runaway Arab sailors, the administrator noted, posed a security risk by forcing ships to sail out undermanned. But that was only the beginning of his concerns. Chain migration, and the toll he feared it would take on state budgets, worried Jacquemart most. “As soon as they’re on land,” he elaborated, “they’re recruited

⁶⁸ « Voyage report of the Calédonien, Australia Line, cmdt. Melber, Marseille – Nouméa » (22 Juin 1912), Voyage reports of the Calédonien (1908-1917), MM 86, CCIMP.

⁶⁹ « Jacquemart au gouverneur Cochinchine, Saigon, re : désertion des chauffeurs arabes » (31 juillet 1912), in Dossier 2909, *Inscription maritime 1910-1913*, National Archives II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

into one of the two groups of Arabs found in Saigon.” For months, Jacquemart rallied state agencies until he had convinced immigration officials to partner with his agency (for the first time, he claimed). Unleashing the immigration service’s “special agents” on the handful of legally registered Arab inhabitants of Saigon, he set out to block the flow of deserting sailors once and for all.

Racialized Rotation and Contagion

Jacquemart had little tolerance for the fog of fake papers and the whirl of mobile subjects, but his private-sector partners in the *Messageries* were less assiduous. As captains occasionally admitted, recruiting workers in transit with dubious papers and only the fuzziest of official identities gave the *Messageries* wide latitude in disembarking subject-workers, as well as how and, critically, *where* to handle their complaints. Captains could, for example, choose to disembark or punish a Somali sailor of the Red Sea in French Djibouti or British Aden, depending on what suited them best, by turning a blind eye to shoddy papers or casting doubt on legitimate ones.⁷⁰ When the captain of the *Messageries* ship *Cordillère* became frustrated with his Indian engine-room team, meanwhile, he needed only a quick missive to contacts in the British government, and with a signature and a stamp, Indian subjects of the British Empire were transformed into temporary subjects – for legal and punitive purposes at least – of a floating parcel of French land.⁷¹

Through the trans-Suez ships of the *Messageries* and *P&O* flowed a pan-imperial procession of subject-workers, leaving behind a shadowy presence in company records. Usually

⁷⁰ The incoherence of Red Sea paperwork regimes is on vivid display in the CADN foreign consul files for Aden and Port-Saïd. See also R.I. Lawless, “Recruitment and Regulation: Migration for Employment of ‘Adenese’ Seamen in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *New Arabian Studies*, ed. R. L. Bidwell, G. Rex Smith, and J. R. Smart (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), 75–95.

⁷¹ “Note of 7 Feb. 1918.” 7 February 1918, MM 152, Dossier Diverse Correspondence *Cordillère* (1912–20), CCIMP, Marseille, France.

recorded with catchall categories (Arab, Malay, Chinese, Indian/Lascar, black, etc.) individuals' names generally went undisclosed in voyage reports and administrative reviews, unless they had died, deserted or been implicated in a controversy. These temporary spotlights sometimes illuminated entire families working on *Messageries* ships. When, for instance, an Arab coaler based in Aden, "Salhé-Obeid," died from an accident aboard the *Australien* in 1898, investigations revealed that the deceased worker had two brothers, each of whom were currently working on *Messageries* ships.⁷² As the *Messageries* officer tasked with learning more about Salhé-Obeid made clear, he had obtained "this information" not from company records, but rather "from the ship's Sarang." This shadowy record-keeping stood in sharp contrast to European colleagues, whose names, basic biographies, and employment history figured regularly in the voyage reports and administrative reviews that captains and agents submitted to company headquarters in Europe. But company superiors reading those reviews never scolded their subalterns for careless bookkeeping. Indeed, relegating subject-workers to the administrative shadows was unspoken company policy.

The sketchiness of subject-workers' administrative status was reflected in the racial tropes with which they were evaluated. Racial tropes played important roles in justifying decisions over whom to hire, fire or transfer, but these tropes, steeped in "colonial common sense," were utterly manipulable.⁷³ Often enough groups of workers who had been lauded for their race's ostensible docility and adaptability were fired for their race's alleged impudence and stubbornness, only to be replaced by a new group of racialized workers, now deemed more docile and adaptable.

⁷² « La Ciotat le 17 Janvier 1898 » and « Marseille, 7 janvier 1898 », in *Correspondance diverse, Australien (1890-1903)*, MM 57, CCIMP.

⁷³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3-9, 38.

Running the China Line in 1901, for instance, the captain of the *Tonkin* informed directors that his Arab personnel was “susceptible to mutiny as occurred at Port-Saïd during the first voyage of the *Tonkin*” and lamented “an act of savagery...on the part of a coaler picked up in Djibouti.” In fact, the mutiny to which he referred was led by Somalis, whom the captain had replaced with ostensibly more docile Arabs. Ignoring this categorical confusion, the captain’s recommendation was simple and echoed the thinking of his colleagues and directors: replace the “Arabs” with “Chinese.” After all, he claimed, “there would only be advantages in embarking Chinese,” who were, he insisted, “more intelligent, more robust, more resistant, and more faithful.”⁷⁴

The faithfulness imputed to Chinese ship-workers was presented as common sense. Yet the characterization cuts against the grain of a persistent discourse of anti-Chinese suspicion. Indeed, just as the inhabitants of the Red Sea littoral were, as shown in the last chapter, suspected of being secret pillagers, Chinese passengers and workers were consistently suspected by European maritime authorities of being in cahoots with networks of pirates in southeast Asia. Take, for example, *P&O* policy regarding trans-Suez ships transporting Chinese passengers. In the 1880s, circulars went out to captains offering guidelines for keeping small arms onboard, in which it was specified that, “In Ships carrying Chinese passengers the Arms must be kept under lock and key, where they are inaccessible to the Chinamen, but handy for use at a moment’s notice by the Officers; they should be loaded.” As if the point were not clear enough, the circular specified, “In other ships it will not be necessary to keep the Arms loaded.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ « Voyage report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 8 et retour. Cmdt. Vaquier » (29/4/1901), 19970024337, AFL.

⁷⁵ “Circular 106: Directions for preservation of sea service small arms” (Sept. 2nd, 1880), P&O 92/2, Caird, NMM. See also: Joseph Conrad’s *Typhoon*, in which a trans-Suez steamer’s British crew views its Chinese passengers as an enemy force within the ship. Messageries authorities continuously accused Chinese workers of moving contraband.

As the *Messageries* rode the wave of French imperial expansion, the contortions of common sense allowed what began as a legal loophole for hiring “indigenous” coalers to transform into a sprawling network of labor recruitment, defined by a multiplicity of positions and paperwork regimes. To maintain their right to recruit imperial subjects, the *Messageries* and its counterparts needed to argue that only “indigenous” workers were sturdy and reliable enough for the grueling labor of the steamship. To *expand* outsourced recruitment to a scale beyond any government’s regulatory powers, however, “indigenous” workers had to be portrayed as incompatible with stable, centralized recruitment systems. One group of subject-workers, in other words, would always have to be replaced and replenished by another.⁷⁶

Their system of racializing the workforce and setting it into near-constant rotation afforded the *Messageries* more than just bottom-line savings and flexibility in hiring and firing. The practice also prevented meaningful relationships from developing between “European” and “Indigenous” crewmembers; relationships with the potential to transmit labor militancy between citizens and subjects. Officially, the unions resisted the employment of imperial subject-workers and denigrated those workers themselves (it took decades before the unions experimented with advocating equal pay and benefits), but there were exceptions on the ground – or rather, on the deck. At times, workers reached beyond the color lines.⁷⁷ In 1910, one China Line captain watched this unfold, when the Arab Sarang aboard his ship issued a protest that included the provocative

⁷⁶ “La Ciotat” December 1919, MM 59, Dossier Diverse Correspondence Australien (1916–18), CCIMP, Marseille, France; see also, “Indiens, Arabes, Chinois. Amazone,” 25 January 1918, MM 5, Dossier Diverse Correspondence Amazone (1912–18), CCIMP, Marseille, France.

⁷⁷ Beyond labor militancy, the chance to secure extra income brought workers across color lines. In 1899, for example, one China Line captain learned that his European service workers and Chinese “boys” were colluding to sell pa cotille far beyond the limits assigned to them. After hurling their merchandise into the sea, he noted: “the majority of these men have irritating commercial habits.” («Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille–Yokohama. n. 2/3, Cmdt. Maubeuge », 31/1/1899, Dossier voyage reports of the ‘Ernest Simons’ (1894-1904), MM 194, CCIMP.

observation, “I lead a team of men and I don’t even have the wages of a low-down European coaler who doesn’t know how to do anything other than pour oil into a bucket.”⁷⁸ As the captain investigated further he found troubling implications in the complaint, which struck him as anything but isolated. “We must never lose sight,” he wrote to superiors, “of the fact that these men are in contact with the workers of the Workshops and the European coalers who, according to intelligence given to me by the mechanics, seek to catechize them and push them into militancy.”⁷⁹

The company had good reason to fear sociality across racial boundaries. After all, margins in the shipping industry were suffocatingly tight (hence, in part, the subsidy regime), and their profitability relied upon racially stratified wages and working conditions. Contact between “European” and “indigenous” personnel could lead to pan-racial agitation for workplace improvements. For the *Messageries*, then, ensuring the failure of labor’s “catechism” meant shuffling subject-workers in a system of racialized substitution. The workforce was thus endowed with a permanent racial Other whose race was ever-changing.

European workers, then, were not alone in fearing replacement by “natives.” Those indispensable “natives” were utterly replaceable, too. Writing in 1919 after years of service, including on *Messageries* ships that spent the war dodging torpedos, an Arab Sarang recorded as “Abdela” testified to the shock of that realization. Pleading with *Messageries* bosses after learning that he and his team would be replaced by a Chinese crew, Abdela wrote to his captain in phonetic French:

Permit me my captin to signal in this way to your high atority, the lack of consideratun demonstrated of wich I am the object by the Messageries Maritimes navigation

⁷⁸ “Lettre de réclamation d’un surang Ara be,” 17 March 1910, MM 165, Dossier Diverse Correspondence Djemnah (1903–1918), CCIMP, Marseille, France. See also, Voyage Report 17, 9 November 1917, MM 152, Dossier Voyage Reports Cordillère (1912–1920), CCIMP, Marseille, France.

⁷⁹ “Lettre de réclamation d’un surang Ara be,” 17 March 1910, MM 165, Dossier Diverse Correspondence, Djemnah 1903–1918, CCIMP, Marseille, France.

company. My captin it's been 21 years that I take the positun of serin ... I held my post during the whole duratin of the ostilities my ship was torpedoed by German ordes. Nine of us met death and among those nine I was greifing the death of my nephew... in recompense and gratitude for our services, the commpany finds nothing better than to transformm its crews, wich is my command, to replase us, the Arabs, with Chinese. We are, it's true my captin, children of the sun, butt we still havv a heart to love, a consciens to judge, and a spirit to apresiate, and I refuse to believe, my Captin, that your noble sentiments of humanity and equitable justise would be able to act in concert with the company for such prosedures. . . .⁸⁰

Whatever the captain's feelings regarding the heartfelt plea, bosses in Marseille remained unmoved. "Let the serang of the Arabs know," a superior wrote in response, "that we don't have to explain our reasons for embarking in his place a team of Chinese coalers." Indeed, not having to explain was one of the greatest luxuries afforded to the *Messageries* by its globalized labor network.

Fighting for the Fatherland

During the First World War, as hundreds of thousands of French merchant mariners were drawn into the war effort, the *Messageries* accelerated efforts to hire Africans and Asians. For the first time, though, these subject-workers possessed the leverage to win substantial increases in wages and benefits, thanks to the scarcity of labor and the exceptional risks incurred by their wartime service. *Messageries* bosses may have feared that their fabled goose was running out of golden

⁸⁰ "Lettre d'un surang," 12 December 1919, MM6, Dossier Diverse Correspondance, Amazone (1919–1920), CCIMP, Marseille, France. [*Permettez moi mon Commandent de ainsi (?) signaler à votre haute atorité le manque dégar manifeste don je suis l'objet de la part de la compagnie de navigation des Messageries Maritimes. Voilà 21 ans mon commandent que je fais fonsion de serin] et je suis au servís de cette compagnie je me suis tenue a mon poste pendant toute la duré des ostilities mon navire Atlantique a été torpillé par les ordes allemande au neuve d'entre nous ont trouvés la mort parmi ces neuves personnes jais eut déplorais le mort de mon neveux. et par récompense et gratitude a nos services la compagnie ne trouve rien de mieux de transformé son équipages s'est a dire mon commandent de nous remplacé, nous l'Arabes, par des Chinois. Nous somme il est vrai mon commandent les fils du soleil mes nous avont quand meme un cœur pour aimer, une consiense pour juger, et un esprit pour apresier et je me refuse a croire mon Commandent que vos nobles sentiments d'humanité et d'équitable justise ne sauront agir de consert avec la compagnie pour des pareilles prosédés].*

eggs, but with few options available to them, they stuck to their policy of segregating and rotating the workforce by race. By the end of 1915, for instance, company directors in Marseille and Paris launched plans to replace more of the “European element” with an “Indigenous element.” As the top technical advisor in the *Messageries*’ Central Administration explained in a memo, “given the difficulties created by the Unions [and] the less-and-less easy recruitment of European personnel, it would be good to take advantage of the conditions opened up by the war.” To this end, European personnel would be phased out of new ships as much as possible; “Tonkinese” would be sought for the restaurants and cabin service; “Japanese, preferably”, would replace the Chinese workers; and increasingly troublesome “Arab coalers” would be replaced by Indians, deemed “more intelligent than the Arabs.”⁸¹ When those Indian coalers overstayed their welcome in the *Messageries* roster, they were labelled weak and irritable, and Marseille sent its port agents instructions to replace them with Arabs, Chinese or Japanese.⁸² Similar processes were playing out in British companies along the China Line.⁸³

Though equal pay and benefits proved elusive, subject workers took advantage of wartime conditions. When ship surveillance decreased, as it did throughout the First World War, they secured extra income by selling goods and hiding stowaways. A company circular from February 1918, for example, lamented the fact that on one of the *Messageries*’ Marseille-Madagascar ships, “the indigenous personnel of the machine [room]” had managed to sell a whopping 20,857 kilograms of sugar. As the company director reminded his employees, the officially allotted

⁸¹ “Essais de l’Andre Lebon, Note sur le personnel subalterne,” 5 December 1915, MM 19, Dossier Diverse Correspondence Andre Lebon, CCIMP, Marseille, France.

⁸² “Indiens, Arabes, Chinois. Amazone,” September 1918, MM 6, Dossier Diverse Correspondence, Amazone, CCIMP, Marseille, France.

⁸³ See, for example: TNA Ministry of Transport (MT) 23/785; TNA MT 23/621; TNA Home Office 45/13392.

amount of exchangeable sugar for this 46-man team was only 230kg.⁸⁴ The conclusion was simple: “There is here a very regrettable abuse that I can only attribute to an absolute lack of surveillance.” Next time, he menaced, the captains themselves would be liable for the full value of the *pacotille*, in addition to a thousand-franc fine.

When captains did try to enforce restrictions, however, they encountered surprising resistance. On the eve of WWI, for instance, the *Amazon* set out from Marseille for Japan. Along the way, war was declared, and new restrictions were put in place over what could enter and leave the ship. When the *Amazon* arrived in Hong Kong, the entire crew of Chinese “boys” (who had been recruited in Hong Kong) “abandoned the ship... under the pretext that they were not paid enough, and refused to remain onboard even with the raise that was proposed by our agent.” Cycling through explanations for their desertion, the captain wondered if the “boys” simply did not wish to face wartime risks or be kept from Hong Kong too long. Ultimately, though, he decided that it was “renouncing momentarily their *pacotille* that made them brusquely abandon the ship without even warning us.”⁸⁵

Messageries authorities may have lamented the growing demands of subject workers, but they saw no choice but to carry on employing them. When the war ended, mass-mobilization of organized labor led France to become the world’s only country to extend eight-hour workday legislation to the maritime sector. With striking ships piling up in French ports along the China Line, a chorus of captains and company agents vented unprecedented disdain for their European personnel and called for increasing recruitment of Asians and Africans.⁸⁶ Before the rise of the

⁸⁴ « Circulaire N. 4 de 1918: Pacotilles » (13/2/1918), Service maritime, Dossier Circulaires de bord (1912-1918) MM 566, CCIMP.

⁸⁵ « Voyage report, n. 21, Cmdt. Costa, Marseille le 29 Septembre 1914 (parti de Marseille le 14 Juin) », dossier *Amazon*, rapports de voyage, MM *Amazon* (1912-1918), CCIMP.

⁸⁶ “Voyage Report 10, Commandant Cochery, China Line, 31 May 1920, » MM 129, “Chili” (1917–1922), Dossier “Indiens,” CCIMP.

maritime unions, such calls had been based on the unbearable conditions of steamship engine rooms; by the interwar, they were based on the unbearable character of the unionized sailor.

Conclusion

Faced with the task of explaining the apparently imperceptible bonds that organized resistance among workers, authorities in the *Messageries* failed – or refused – to analyze the roots and wider context behind the discontent of their workers. This failure, or refusal, is significant, for captains were, in general, highly literate, educated, and sensitive to social nuances among their passengers. In lieu of understanding, they resorted to cultivated ignorance: blaming one man for the actions of fifty, for instance, or chalking up complex acts of labor militancy and resistance to arrogance, caprice, excitability, and contagion. For a number of captains, writing in different times and places, one concept seemed especially useful for analyzing disorderly subjects: “effervescence.” Again and again, the grievances of workers, the passion of their demands, and their movements as a group were captured by the concept and dismissed by its implications.

Captains saw “effervescence” in sailors, but also in the excitability and transmission of energy among laboring bodies being transported in their ships. Thus, at the height of the First World War, 600 Chinese workers being transported to France on the *Chili* exploded into “effervescence” after their attempt to leave the ship in Singapore was met with gunfire.⁸⁷ Similarly,

⁸⁷ For almost two years, the French state had recruited hundreds of thousands of soldiers and workers from Indochina and China for war-ravaged Europe. On its return voyage to Europe, the *Chili* picked up “600 Chinese workers, commanded by an under-lieutenant assisted by a European cadre, NCOs and soldiers, as well as some interpreters” in Shanghai. The ship carried on to Singapore, where, for unstated reasons, Chinese workers attempted to disembark. Then, “a soldier escort, tasked with preventing the Chinese from getting to land, got into a fight, around 9h at night with some of them and, losing all *sang-froid*, fired a revolver at a Chinese who he had at his sides.” The result was “effervescence” that the captain could barely contain: “I had all the pains in the world to calm the effervescence of the *indigènes*. I even had to call in the police and the armed forces.” This did not relieve tensions. In an investigation, he blamed, “not only the lack of *sang-froid* from the soldier Bréau but also that the over-excited Chinese [who] were determined to avenge their comrade.” Finally, “in order to avoid new incidents,” the Captain

at the end of the war, and only a few months after naval uprisings in the Black Sea shook the French state to its core, 500 French troops on the *André Lebon* saw their homecoming delayed by inclement weather. With Marseille in sight, but out of reach, they burst into a menacing and “noxious effervescence,” and nearly took over their ship.⁸⁸

In 1912, the sociologist Emile Durkheim would use the concept of effervescence as a central plank of his landmark work, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. For Durkheim, effervescence was:

delivered the soldier to the French Consul in Singapore visibly enough to “calm” the Chinese passengers. Why had the Chinese workers rushed out of the ship? The question went un-posed and unanswered. In fact, the mass-transport of Asian workers and soldiers to France was a chaotic affair throughout, and as recent research has shown, many workers and soldiers were deeply misled about where they were going and why. Many, moreover, encountered cold and cramped conditions on their voyages, as well as disease and predatory co-passengers. None of this entered the voyage report, nor did the captain think to connect the events to a series of violent inter-ethnic altercations that had broken out during an earlier leg of his voyage. Instead, an individual’s flaws led to an accident, producing “effervescence” and bloodlust. (« Voyage of the Chili, n. 1, Marseille–Yokohama, retour, Cmdt. Amen, parti de Marseille le 2 Septembre 1917, » Chili voyage reports, 1917-22, MM 129, CCIMP).

⁸⁸ The *André Lebon* carried passengers, cargo, and 500 soldiers who had been deployed outside Europe. With the war over, the soldiers were approaching Marseille’s harbor when harsh winds convinced the captain to pass the night in the harbor of l’Estaque. There, the Commandant’s observed “a noxious effervescence... among the soldiers; all the boats that approached were met with howls and insulting jeers... a sound of wild beasts attracted my attention... it was the soldiers smacking cans and mess-kits, letting out howls.” The captain began to panic. Only a few months earlier, across the Mediterranean, the French navy, fighting the nascent Soviet Republic, had been convulsed by mutinies. Lapousse wanted the soldiers off his ship. He issued an ultimatum to the troops’ supervisor: the “excitation” had become a “real danger” to the passengers; he would have them forcibly disembarked if it did not stop. The supervisor stalled. First, he blamed the ship for having supplied “spoiled conserves,” suggesting that food poisoning was behind this “noxious effervescence.” Next, he blamed the ship for torturing his homesick contingent until they exploded in frenzy. Finally, he accused the ship’s crewmembers of infecting the soldiers with indiscipline. Lapousse took offense and insisted that the disorder reflected a breakdown in authority: “since the embarkation of the troops, no ship rules have been executed; the soldiers have been doing what they want and the officers can obtain nothing from them.” When the general responded that the troops had, as far as he was concerned, become civilians, Lapousse turned to his radio, launching a cry for help towards army headquarters in Marseille: “**COMMANDING GENERAL 15TH ARMY CORPS MARSEILLE 500 UNDISCIPLINED SOLDIERS ONBOARD OF WHOM THE OFFICERS NO LONGER MASTERS. EMERGENCY DO NECESSARY TO DISEMBARK THEM IMMEDIATELY OR TAKE OTHER MEASURES WITHOUT DELAY.**” As Lapousse waited, the contingent became more demanding. The officers assured Lapousse that they could only calm the troops with more wine; “more” because each soldier had already received 750ml of wine for the day (on top of any illegal purchases). The captain resisted, but officers had already promised the men more drink, forcing his hand. Frightened of refusing the frenzied mob of “wild beasts,” he authorized the supply, reassuring himself with a halfhearted pledge to make the officers responsible for “whatever might come of it.” A few hours later, to his horror, drunken soldiers stormed the 1st-class salons. After evacuating them, Lapousse doubled the patrols of his tired crew and settled in for a long night. As for his plea for help: “No response was made to my radio.” (“Cmdt. Lapousse à M. le Directeur. Marseille 2 Octobre 1919,” Dossier André Lebon, 1919-21, Correspondance Diverse, MM 120, CCIMP).

a sort of electricity... formed by [people] collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it goes, as an avalanche grows in its advance.

This force bursts into song and dance, leads to scenes of ecstasy, transgression, and catharsis, before finally causing groups to collapse in exhaustion. Durkheim's great innovation was to identify in this mimetic energy a frightening, yet fundamentally generative, power; one that he felt was dangerously close to slipping away in modernity. Collective effervescence, for Durkheim, seemed to represent a bulwark against anomie and a *raison d'être* for the crowd. In one passage, he writes, "A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence, in the course of which new ideas arise and new formula are found which serve for a while as guide to humanity..."⁸⁹

This concept was decidedly not what *Messageries* authorities had in mind when they resorted to the term. In fact, their usage was precisely what Durkheim was rebelling against in *Elementary Forms*. In the state of emergency hovering over maritime transit, effervescence could have no creative form. It was the contagion of irrational excitement, spreading through crowds that were incapable of reasoned expression, like a gas spreading through air, or an electrical current through the water. In this sense, it was the perfect concept for the cultivated ignorance with which maritime authorities contained the steamship's discontents.

Trans-Suez liners of the late-19th and early 20th-centuries, I have argued, offered a unique array of weapons of the weak.⁹⁰ The point should not be exaggerated. Shipboard and port authorities held a formidable arsenal of punitive measures – the recourse to martial law, the

⁸⁹ Émile Durkheim, *Elemental Forms of Religious Life*, 179, 201-202.

⁹⁰ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985).

swapping of one racialized labor group for another, outright violence – with which they could maintain the flow of traffic along lines that were considered vital components of imperial security. Indeed, one could imagine that company officials exaggerated their ignorance and oversimplified their explanations of disorder *in order to* legitimate exceptionally aggressive repression. Such a reading hearkens to early anthropological theories of liminality, which imagined power-holders as tacitly encouraging ritual transgressions from a subaltern, male population; temporarily bowing before its quasi-magical potency, only to clamp down harder than before – closing the valve, so to speak, and sanctifying the original order.⁹¹

But perhaps those who owned the means of transit simply could not acknowledge the scale of the disruption that was necessary in order to fix their routes in place and keep them flowing with traffic. Their success demanded the radical transformation of ports and the ship-space in which workers spent much of their lives. It also entailed the disruption and reordering of labor markets from Marseille to Yokohama, the creation of new forms and patterns of mobility, and the destruction and mutation of older ones. Perhaps, in other words, the owners of the means of transit believed that they were not acting upon the world as it was, but rather enacting the world as it should be.

In line with that vision of the world as it should be, steamship workers underwent a process of proletarianization. Crucially, however, they were never proletarianized.⁹² Indeed, when one accounts for the febrile activity of these workers as they jockeyed for power and wielded the weapons of the weak, the global “effervescence” of naval mutinies and labor unrest at the end of

⁹¹ Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (published in France in 1909; English translation in 1960); Max Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa* (Manchester University Press, 1954); Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

⁹² On the heuristic limits of proletarianization, see: Sewell, *Logics of History*, 276-310.

the First World War appears less like a beginning or an end, and more like a stage in a long process. Indeed, following labor militancy in transit and into the in-between spaces of empire may lead to a clearer understanding of why the current-day maritime sector has become the site of the most thorough automation in human history.⁹³

⁹³ By the mid-20th century, when maritime unions attempted interracial solidarity in earnest, automation had reemerged as a threat to organized labor. For perspective, one of the world's largest container ships, the *Jules Verne*, belongs to the *Messageries*' successor, *CMA-CGM* (also based in Marseille). Longer than the Empire State Building, the vessel is operated by a mere 24 people: 8 French officers and 16 Filipino crewmembers. "Jules Verne, le plus gros porte-conteneurs du monde," *Le Parisien*, June 5, 2013. Maritime labor militancy also points to the development of modern-day airports as temples of security that are hermetically sealed off from society.

Chapter 8. Rulers of the Route: State, Company, and the Troubled Marriage that Made Empire Move

Yokohama, Japan. On the afternoon of November 11th 1920, the guests clambered aboard the steamship *Cordillère*, where they were greeted by the French Consul in Yokohama and the ship's captain. Normally, when the consul boarded a French ship, it was to investigate outbursts of violence, or dissuade aggrieved workers from striking. Indeed, only a few years earlier, during the war whose end they were celebrating, the consul in Yokohama had been forced to come aboard a liner to resolve a bloody melee between *Messageries* sailors and Japanese dockworkers (the diplomatic fallout had been severe enough that his colleagues in the French embassy were called in to contain it).¹ This day, however, the occasion was far more serene, as the guests were celebrating two milestones: fifty years of Third Republic rule in France, and two years since the Armistice of 1918.² All in all, the event was blissfully uneventful: speeches followed speeches, and the guests – a mix of Yokohama's officialdom, high society, and veterans of the French, British, and Japanese militaries – feasted upon a copious buffet, courtesy of the French state's primary surrogate at sea, the *Messageries maritimes*. A few days later, the master of ceremonies, the French consul in Yokohama, wrote to the captain of the *Cordillère* to congratulate him: "The party was able to be celebrated in brilliant fashion in a very gracious setting and on, as it were, French land... thus giving the foreigners a good testimony of what French hospitality is like."³

¹ "Rixe à Yokohama, le 28 décembre, 1916"; "Ambassade de la Rép. Fr. au Japon. Tokio, le 29 Dec. 1916"; "Extrait du rapport sur le voyage n. 4 – ligne de Chine": correspondance diverse de l'Athos (1913-1917), MM46, CCIMP.

² A local Anglophone newspaper, *The Japan Advertiser* ignored the 50 years of the Third Republic. "Allies Celebrate Day at Yokohama," *The Japan Advertiser, Tokyo, Friday, November 12, 1920*.

³ « Rapport de Voyage du Cordillère, Marseille–Yokohama. N. 2, Cmdt. Sanguy » (21 Déc. 1920), Voyage reports of the Cordillère (1912-1920), MM 152, CCIMP ["La fête a pu être célébrée de façon brillante dans un cadre des plus gracieux et pour ainsi dire en terre Française ... donnant ainsi aux étrangers un bon témoignage de ce qu'est l'hospitalité française."].

On one level, the consul was entirely justified in imagining that he had just welcomed the guests onto “as it were, French land.” Above them, a French flag had been waving. Had anything gone awry that day, the consul could have mobilized special powers of jurisdiction, some of which were not even available to the port police of Yokohama. Moreover, in the eyes of foreigners and foreign presses, a flag-bearing French ship was frequently seen as a stand-in for the French nation. Tourists, port-city dwellers, and journalists often saw national identity and power reflected in a ship’s style and history, as well as its performance and personnel.

But the consul was no doubt aware that another flag flew alongside the French *tricolore*, this one with four red-painted corners enclosing two large M’s – the *Messageries maritimes*. By 1920, the *Messageries* had been the contracted commercial surrogate of the French imperial state for longer even than the 50 years of Republic which they celebrated that day. During the Great War, the company had seen its vast fleet requisitioned into service. By the Armistice, dozens of *Messageries* ships lay at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, their rusting, torpedo-blasted hulls the proof of supreme sacrifice to the nation. In short, the consul’s assertion that a *Messageries* ship was *French* land, and a showcase of *French* virtues, seems to rest on sturdy foundations.

And yet, as this chapter argues, behind the apparent unity of state and company lay a world of conflict. The twin rulers of the French empire’s maritime highways diverged in their ambitions and differed in their priorities. From the mid-19th century to well into the 20th, the *Messageries* and the imperial state would publicly present themselves as two partners in a happy marriage, bound by shared interests and patriotic duties. However, resurrecting episodes and encounters from the everyday life of transit, I argue that the two maritime authorities had strikingly different visions of how to inhabit and govern the in-between spaces of empires.

The struggle between the French imperial state and its commercial surrogate speaks of an age of steam at odds with prevailing assumptions. For much of human history, maritime corridors have been imagined as spaces beyond the bounds of civilization, where exceptional lawlessness wrestles with equally exceptional means of repression. However, in the mid-19th century, as the story goes, the seas began to be industrialized and colonized – ie. “civilized.” Abolition became the backdrop of global maritime history. Vicious regimes of corporal punishment were litigated out of existence, as the ship-captain’s absolutism was forced to share sovereignty with regulatory states, humanitarian crusades, and incipient regimes of international law.⁴ Uncertainty and information blackouts met their match in telegraphy and timetables, while physical discomfort was conquered by the amenities of modern travel.⁵ The stubbornly independent caste of mariners was pacified, its labor carved up into simple, monotonous tasks, and, in crucial domains, de-skilled. There is truth to each of those claims, but exaggerating them can lead us to ignore the inequalities and fractiousness of social relations at sea, the violence and confusion of liminality, and the half-controlled chaos of routine flux.

It does not require an excess of historical imagination to see how the ocean liner created new forms of disorder – or at least, new sensitivities to disorder. When, for example, the most important police force in British India unveiled its first anthropometric system, they were candid

⁴ In 1880, for instance, an inter-ministerial scandal erupted after pupils in a Navy school in Brest received corporal punishment. As the admirals learned, this practice would no longer be tolerated – even at sea and within the navy. “Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies au Vice-amiral. Paris, le 6 mars 1880”; “Le contre-amiral chef d’état-major à M. le V.A. ...préfet de Brest. Paris, 6 mars 1880”; “Le ministre à M. le V.A. commt. En ch. Préfet maritime à Brest. Paris le 8 mars 1880”: Gouverneurs et C. militaires aux Colonies, 1882-1883-1884, MVBB 8 770, Service historique de la Défense à Vincennes (SHD-Vincennes), France.

⁵ Comfort cannot be separated from advances in engineering. As Bonnetain and Tillier wrote in the late-1880s: “Au fond, la régularité du service des paquebots et en même temps le confortable dont on a pu entourer la vie des voyageurs à bord constituent peut-être le plus remarquable résultat industriel de notre époque...”: *Histoire d’un paquebot*, 205.

about their motivations, attesting to a perceived link between global criminality, security states, and steamship travel:

The extension of steamer service [has] enormously lessened the difficulty of getting from one place to another, and criminals have realised the conveniences thus placed within their reach, and avail themselves of... steamers to get from parts where they are known to fresh raiding grounds, where the assumption of a false name is sufficient to prevent local police from acquiring any information as to their past history. The necessity of devising some means of identifying the more dangerous criminals... having forced itself upon the Inspector-General's attention, has led to the introduction of the anthropometric system...⁶

And as early as 1976, the world historian, William McNeill, could write, in passing, "the steamship network that arose in the 1870s was the vehicle that dispersed the [plague] infection around the globe, and did so [...] with a speed that was limited only by the speed with which a ship could carry its colony of infected rats and fleas to a new port."⁷ The steamship as a propagator of criminality and disease, and as a navigator of security states and international health systems (not to mention a trafficker of humans, engine of environmental degradation, and laboratory of extralegal justice): these readily available lenses for reevaluating the age of steam have yet to be used to their fullest.⁸

This chapter highlights yet another source of disorder, and one that seems to have been hidden in plain sight: the authorities themselves. Along the sprawling trans-Suez highways, the authorities were engaged in internal conflicts of their own. These conflicts were anchored to a heavy question: who needed who? Did the imperial state owe a debt of gratitude to its heroic merchant marine? Indeed, since 1851, the French flag had steamed across the globe on the

⁶ "ER Henry, Inspector General of Police, L.P. to All Dist. Superintendent of Police. Calcutta, 31st July, 1894," in: Bengal Police, *Criminal Identification by Means of Anthropometry Second Edition* (Revised up to 1st Jan. 1895), 1.

⁷ William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor: New York City, 1976), 156-7.

⁸ G. Balachandran, "Indefinite transits: mobility and confinement in the age of steam," *Journal of Global History* 11, n. 2 (July 2016): 187-208.

Messageries' back, and in times of emergency, the company offered a deep reservoir of resources for overstretched French governments. Or, was the company the true vassal of the state, benefitting as it did from generous subsidies and lucrative contracts, all of which could have gone to another company? In the in-between spaces of the French Empire, such questions proved difficult to ignore or resolve.

What, moreover, was in a subsidy? The French state's subsidies applied not only to how much postal service and state-passengers the *Messageries* ships carried, or the distance they traveled, but also to ship construction. Through subsidies, in other words, the French state claimed a form of sovereignty that was rooted both in the physical ship *and* in its mobility. This claim was never uncontested or static. Rather, it was shaped relationally in the diverse and chaotic setting of ship interiors. In analyzing the complex negotiation of the state-company relationship, this chapter advances one of the dissertation's overarching claims: namely, that the routes connecting France to imperial frontiers cannot be imagined as neutral infrastructure (nor can any infrastructure be neutral, for that matter), and that ships, far from being mere vessels of state power and bourgeois pleasure, engendered social arrangements and cultural practices that conflicted with the designs of empire and the needs of industry.

To grasp this conflict of interests and ideologies, this chapter examines the relationship between state and company from three angles. First, I use contests between Republican administrators and company employees to understand how an expansionary bureaucratic and military state attempted in the 1880s and 90s to assert its authority over the interoceanic highway connecting France to its colonies. Second, I find state-company tensions in conflicts over race, status, and space that emerged from the everyday rhythms of transit. The *Messageries* consistently strove to please international crowds aboard its vessels while containing racial antagonism. At its

most basic, this amounted to commercial necessity, but the project of making French liners attractive to foreign clientele can also be seen as an aspiration to cosmopolitanism. The representatives of the French state, on the other hand, frequently saw ocean liners as property of the nation, and thus as places where French mores and French passengers deserved privileged positions. Each of these views reflected particular, conflicting notions of Frenchness and imperial power. Finally, the chapter explores contests over the management of “undesirable” passengers, such as convicts and the mentally ill. Neither state nor company successfully claimed responsibility for these passengers. A source of endless disputes between company and state, such travelers occupied an agonizing position on the boundaries of sovereignty.

Before diving into the state-company relationship along trans-Suez routes, it is worth rapidly revisiting the marriage of the state and the *Messageries*. As discussed earlier, the *Messageries* and the Second Empire (1851-1870) came into being together and reached, in many ways, the height of their power during the same heady moment of 1869, when *Messageries* steamers accompanied the Empress Eugénie across the Suez Canal. However, not everyone had applauded the privatization of French shipping in the Mediterranean and beyond in 1851. One contemporary journalist recorded the arguments of critics who resisted canceling state lines and granting subsidies and contracts to the *Messageries*:

It was a prejudice to believe the State incapable of managing an enterprise of this kind; it was to [the State] that we should have reserved it; otherwise, we would be creating an individual and egotistical monopoly... to the exclusive benefit of some speculators; a monopoly that would destroy our sail-shipping...that would take control of the transit and commerce of half of Europe. Supported by subsidies, the Company could carry out ruinous competition with businessmen by selling cut-rate merchandise abroad... It wasn't enough to give it millions, we would have to warn it when we wanted to declare war against a maritime power, unveil to it the secrets of State. Such monstrous conditions could only have been written... by the representatives of the Company. This monopoly, was it at least granted through adjudication? Was it

tempered by tariffs? No, no tariffs, no adjudication! ‘I call that the theft of the State,’ said one; ‘It’s the country thrown to the wolves of a company,’ said another.⁹

Such discourses dwindled in intensity as the Second Empire tightened its grip on dissent, and as the rapidly expanding *Messageries* provided precious lifelines for French wars of the 1850s and 60s. Critics of the “monopoly” became more vocal under the Third Republic in the 1870s, but again the *Messageries* weathered the storm. By the early 1880s, as the Third Republic lurched into imperial campaigns from Tunisia to Tonkin, the government tightened its ties with the company. In 1881, parliament passed one of Europe’s most ambitious subsidy programs, delivering crucial investment to the French shipping industry and formally granting the *Messageries* privileged status as the default carrier of the imperial state’s postal service, cargo, and passengers “beyond Suez.” For every gross registered ton of cargo carried, every thousand miles traversed, every ship constructed in steel or iron, and every engine built, French shippers earned important subsidies. To these were added subsidies for postal service, roughly half of which went to the *Messageries* every year throughout the late-19th century.¹⁰ This legal and financial framework allowed the company to extend its global tentacles as far as they could go, with lines reaching into Latin America, North Africa and the Levant, Southern Africa and the southern Indian Ocean, Australia and the South Pacific, and South, Southeast, and East Asia.¹¹

From the 1880s, much work went into presenting the partnership as a natural outgrowth of an expansionary imperial nation-state, as if company and state were two sides of the same coin. Indeed, contemporaries spoke of the *Messageries* as “carrying the French flag with honor in the

⁹ J. Smith, “Les paquebots à vapeur français: les Messageries imperiales,” *Revue contemporaine mensuelle*, n. 5 (25 May 1865), 98; cited by Bois, *Le grand siècle des Messageries Maritimes*, 16.

¹⁰ Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 362-375.

¹¹ In 1890, the company transported over 122,000 passengers with a fleet of 61 ships. Unknown author, *Journal des transports*, vol. 14, (1891), 417.

seas of the Orient,” of letting France “shine out” (*rayonner*).¹² If France was the word, then the *Messageries – impériales, nationales*, and, finally *maritimes* – was the speaker. In fact, the *Messageries* and the French state were so intimately linked that the very possibility of real, structural tensions existing within their alliance was in some sense unspeakable. In the detailed voyage reports that captains submitted to company directors, for example, an obligatory section entitled “Relations with ... French authorities” was almost inevitably followed (much to a researcher’s chagrin) with intimidatingly bland and positive one-word evaluations: “good,” “perfect,” etc.

But the marriage of state and company was more troubled than these blithe evaluations would suggest. Amidst the everyday realities of life in the in-between spaces of empires and the expansion of the French Third Republic’s Empire, the contractual neatness of sovereignty frequently broke down, while the quid pro quo of subsidies-for-services took on the form of a wrestling match. Like those critics from the early-1850s, many continued to resent the imperious demands of a subsidized and sub-contracted company, its access to state secrets, and its vote in matters of national security.

“Out of Another Age”

During the 1880s and 90s, Republican officials were assuming an administrative role along the route that could only come at the expense of the company that preceded them.¹³ If company voyage reports remained tightlipped on this point, the reports of French consuls along the route are more

¹² “Le Consul de France à Alexandrie à ... M. Poincaré, Min. des Affaires Étrangères (Direction des Affaires politiques et commerciales, Europe, Afrique, Orient. 21 Jan. 1913),” Dossier Le Caire, Navigation (1861-1956), 277, 353PO/2, CADN.

¹³ On the Republicanizing of maritime affairs more broadly, see: Jean-Francois Chanet, “Marine et Politique de 1870 à 1914. La démocratie entre au port,” *La Revue d’histoire maritime*, n. 14 (2011): 15-23.

illustrative. Take, for example, the vice-consul in Aden, then the only French official in a port that represented a small, yet critical, node of the shipping networks linking Europe to the Indian Ocean world and East Asia. In 1891, the vice-consul De Courte took over this post, ending a two-year period during which it had been held by an employee of the *Messageries*. The reign of the *Messageries* agent had begun when the previous vice-consul – the rare figure without ties to the company – was run out of town amidst personal scandals. De Courte tried to settle in, but he was soon frustrated by the obstinacy of the company. As he related to his bosses in the Quai d’Orsay (the headquarters of French diplomacy), “I had to make the Steamship Officers observant of the fact that I am not a subordinate of their administration and to remind them of the respect owed to a functionary of the government of the Republic.” To his amazement, De Courte found that *Messageries* authorities viewed him as an errand boy. “The Vice-Consul of France,” he insisted, “is absolutely not, without any reservations, at the mercy of their whims.”¹⁴

In his post at Aden, De Courte had at least three mandates: to assert the authority of the Republic’s administration; to keep French shipping competitive; and to enforce health and safety standards through a system of reviews and patents granted by his office. This last mission was especially crucial, as plague and cholera raced across the globe at a steam-powered pace. De Courte’s predecessor, however, had turned health screenings into a front: when ships arrived in Aden, their captains sent a “coolie” to the consulate with cash in hand, and a government stamp of approval swiftly followed without review. De Courte, on the other hand, demanded that company officers come to him in person, without cash, and give him time to properly verify the health

¹⁴ “Vice-Consul De Courte à M. le député Min. des Affaires étrangères. Aden, le 16 mars 1892. Correspondance commerciale. Aden, 1890-1901, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2, Centre d’archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve (CADLC), Saint-Denis, France. [“J’ai dû... faire observer aux Officiers des Paquebots que je n’étais pas un sous-ordre de leur administration et les rappeler à référence due au fonctionnaire du gouvernement de la République... le Vice-Consul de France n’est pas absolument et sans réserves à la merci de leur bon plaisir.”]

standards. Numerous companies continued offering him bribes, but the pious consul turned them all down.¹⁵

The *Messageries* responded with a campaign of harassment and intimidation. Delegations from the *Messageries* began arriving at De Courte's residence after midnight and stones were thrown at his house. Publicly ridiculing the assiduous bureaucrat's pretensions, Aden's shipping lobby ostracized him from colonial society. De Courtes held firm, however, for as he put it, "apart from the dangers... to public health," capitulation "would have resulted in placing the holder of this Vice-Consulate in an altogether grievous position of inferiority vis-à-vis the company of the *Messageries Maritimes*."¹⁶ Pressure on the consul continued to grow, to the point that De Courtes soon found himself unable to buy produce from the few merchants in Aden. As he saw it, the company, upon which any merchant depended for their livelihood, had blacklisted him in order to starve him out.¹⁷ A republican through and through, De Courtes placed his plight in the arc of human progress: "Taking people out through famine is a procedure out of another age which the reactionary spirit attributed, rightly or wrongly, to the *Messageries* may have been able to conjure up, but which does not strike me as being admissible in our epoch and under the government of the Republic."¹⁸ Europeans in Aden often imagined themselves as manning an outpost of civilization surrounded by uncivilized natives. The vice-consul was no exception; however, as he saw it, the savages moved by steam.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. ["indépendamment des dangers [...] à la santé publique," capitulation "aurait fini par placer le titulaire de ce V. Consulat vis-à-vis de la compagnie des *Messageries Maritimes* dans une situation d'infériorité tout à fait fâcheuse."] See also: "Aden, le 25 octobre 1892."

¹⁷ If he were alone, De Courte insisted, he would simply "eat as the natives do," but his wife was with him and she suffered from a stomach illness contracted during a previous stay in Tonkin (N. Vietnam).

¹⁸ "Vice-consul De Courte à m. le dép. Min. des affaires étrangères. Aden, le 20 Sept. 1892," *ibid.* ["Prendre les gens par la famine est un procédé d'un autre âge que l'esprit réactionnaire attribué à tort ou à raison, aux *Messageries* a pu inspirer mais qui ne paraît pas admissible à notre époque et sous le gouvernement de la République »].

As his desperation mounted, De Courtes took stock of the situation with grim clarity: the company was attempting to render “the position untenable for any career agent” until they had attained “the conversion of the post into a consular agency reserved definitively for a representative of the Company.”¹⁹ For the *Messageries*, the vice-consul insisted, “making me disappear with the same precipitation of my predecessor” would be “a return to the golden age” when Aden was the company’s “own fief.”²⁰ De Courte was not the first French official to decry the latitude given to the *Messageries* over affairs deemed vital to the French state. Alleging that a French company could form its “own fief” in a British protectorate was, in some regards, a more striking assertion. De Courtes, however, suspected that a stubborn government official posed more of a threat to the company than British competitors operating in their own terrain. In their campaign against the vice-consul, the *Messageries* found support from its longtime friend and rival, the *P&O*. British steamship companies, after all, had plenty of business in French ports, which they stood to lose without certification from French officials along the route. As noted earlier, a “Gentleman’s Agreement” had institutionalized collusion between the giant, subsidized lines of the French and British Empires. As De Courtes put it, “the *Messageries* has no foreign competitor capable of getting in their way except for the Peninsular and Oriental Co. [but] these two powerful companies, far from competing with one another, are tightly united and get on well together.”²¹ Though he had quietly rallied a host of equally aggrieved small-business interests to his side, De Courtes

¹⁹ “Vice-Consul De Courte à M. le ministre. Aden, le 15 mai 1892,” *Correspondance commerciale*. Aden, 1890-1901, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 2, CADLC. [“la position intenable à tout agent de carrière”] [“la conversion du poste en agence consulaire confiée définitivement au représentant de la Cie.”]

²⁰ “Vice-Consul De Courtes à M. le dép. Min. des Affaires Étrangères. Aden, le 12 Sept. 1892”; “Vice-Consul De Courte à M. le dép. Min. Aden, le 15 mai 1892”; *ibid.* [“me faire disparaître avec la même précipitation que mon prédécesseur” would be “le retour à l’âge d’or” when Aden was for the company, “un fief à lui.”]

²¹ “Vice-Consul De Courte à M. le dép. Min. Aden, le 15 mai 1892,” *ibid.* [“les *Messageries* n’ont d’autre concurrent étranger capable de les gêner que la ‘Peninsular and Oriental Co.’ [mais] ces deux puissantes compagnies, bien loin de faire concurrence sont, étroitement unies et s’entendent . . .”]

admitted, “since the company has no competition to fear at all, and since its thirteen million in subsidies guarantee its uncontested preponderance, she [the company] is not worried about these complaints.”²²

Though his hopes were waning, the Republican administrator held firm: “when one is honest and one carries out one’s duty to the best of their ability, one fears no one. If the powerful Company has imagined that she will make me capitulate through harassment and jabs [*coups d’épingle*], she is mistaken.”²³ For a moment, the company seemed willing to bow. Sending an envoy to the consul, they made an appeal, as De Courtes reported, “to my patriotism and my devotion to French interests.”²⁴ The vice consul flatly rejected their vision of laissez-faire “patriotism,” however, and the fighting resumed, with the company excluding him from port operations and making life miserable for him in Aden.

In response, the feisty functionary aimed high and low. To bosses in the Quai d’Orsay, he called for “your high and benevolent protection in order to bring this state of things to a halt.”²⁵ Simultaneously, he reached out to lower-level colleagues in consulates and sanitary commissions across the Red Sea region to coordinate quarantines of *Messageries* ships that had dodged his oversight. Time-consuming, costly, and exhausting, such quarantines were the bane of every captain’s existence. De Courte kept up the fight against the “wannabe Napoleons” (*Napoléon I au petit pied*) of the company, but a few years later, he no longer occupied the post.

²² [“comme la compagnie n’a aucune concurrence à redouter et que ses treize millions de subvention lui assurent un incontestable prépondérance, elle ne se préoccupe pas de ces doléances.”]

²³ “Vice-Consul De Courte à M. Député Min. des Affaires Étrangères. Aden, le 1 juillet 1892,” [“quand on est honnête et qu’on remplit son devoir de son mieux, on ne craint personne. Si la puissante Cie [...] s’est imaginé qu’à force de tracasseries et de coups d’épingle, elle me ferait capituler elle se trompe.”]

²⁴ Ibid. [“à mon patriotisme et mon dévouement aux intérêts français.”]

²⁵ “Aden. Le 25 sept. 1892,” *ibid.* [“votre haute et bienveillante protection pour faire cesser un pareil état de choses.”]

Though his file in diplomatic archives at La Courneuve ends without explanation, the marginal commentary of a *Messageries* voyage report spelled out De Courte's fate. In late-1893, a *Messageries* captain complained vociferously to superiors in Marseille about the insolent vice-consul in Aden who insisted on setting the terms of his reviews and certifications. In the margins of his report, management scribbled a note with good news: "The Administration has been informed by a special letter from the Direction of the latest incident provoked by M. the Vice-Consul of France in Aden, an incident that today has only a retrospective importance, this functionary of such difficult relations having been...moved [*déplacé*] by the minister."²⁶

Though displaced, De Courtes was not alone in resisting the *Messageries* as a rival ruler of the route. A few years later, for instance, when a new vice-consul took over the nearby post in Suez, he began to tell his superiors the same story that De Courte had told in Aden. "As soon as I arrived in Suez," the newcomer reported, "I noted with regret that my predecessors had admitted serious abuses and that it was critical to make them disappear. The Vice-Consulate, it is necessary to admit, was in a deplorable situation from every point of view. It was in many ways a sub-office of all the [shipping] Companies who have a seat in the city."²⁷ During the 1880s and 90s, the *Messageries* was forced to contend with assertive administrators across the maritime highways and waystations connecting France to its imperial possessions. As the Republic centralized training of colonial administrators and tightened control over its diplomats, state officials increasingly demanded that company employees come to their offices, earn their approval, and fear their wrath.²⁸

²⁶ "Voyage report of the Melbourne, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 22/23, cmdt. Vimont (review 23 Nov. 1893)," 1997 002 4228, AFL.

²⁷ Vice Consul Moment [sic], à son excellence M. Bouliron, chargé d'affaires de France de Caire. Suez, le 7 novembre, 1896," *Le Caire-Navigation* (1861-1956), 277, 353PO/2, CADN.

²⁸ In 1897, consuls east of Suez were required to submit detailed information about their foreign contacts and connections, in an effort to both harvest better information from consuls and keep an eye on corrupt business

An expanding imperial state did not only ask for paperwork. At times, state agents tried to use the *Messageries* as an unwitting prop in inter-imperial intrigue. In 1880, for example, a ship-captain reported being approached by a group of French consuls and naval officers in China who wanted to use his rescue boats in a mission to snatch a wanted Frenchman from an English ship, all in the hopes of sweeping him away under armed guard to somewhere he could be interrogated and tried without British interference. Recognizing that the operation violated British law, the captain deduced that he would be blamed if anything went wrong (state agents recognized this, too, he realized). Fearing punishment by the British government for action, and by the French government for inaction, he acted with impressive tact: without denying them, he stalled, politely asking for formal paperwork that would be impossible to procure without shifting the risk from him to the agents.²⁹

A decade later, a different captain found himself in a similar predicament after discovering that he had embarked – upon an order from the French governor of Pondichéry and under a fake name – the heir to the Burmese throne, Thu Mahar Thiri Dhammaraja. Armed with a rightful claim to rule in the British colony, the Burmese Prince, known as the “Myingun Prince,” was a wanted and very dangerous man in the eyes of British authorities. If he were discovered aboard, the *Messageries* risked the wrath of the British imperial state, but if he was turned over to British authorities, the company risked the ire of its own imperial government. Again, a quiet tug-of-war

dealings. On administrative reform, see the essays in: Patrice Morlat (ed.), *Les grands commis de l'Empire colonial français* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010); especially Gille de Gantes, “Administrer une colonie à la française au XIXe siècle. Le cas de l’Indochine,” 21-56. Reforming imperial administration was an uneasy process, and for decades to come many would question the origins, dubious professional ethics, and competency of the Republic’s administrators. De Courte’s successor in Aden, for instance, had to call up the Colonial and Foreign Ministries after receiving a stream of complaints from local hotel-owners and barkeeps about “fonctionnaires coloniaux, obligés de séjourner à Aden, [qui] avaient quitté cette ville sans régler leurs frais.”

²⁹ “Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Shanghai, n. 23, Aug.-Nov., 1880, Voyage Reports of the Iraouaddy, MM 264, CCIMP.

ensured. At the next layover in (British) Singapore, the Captain met with the city's French consul and made it clear that he knew he was being used as a pawn in a clandestine operation. The captain unofficially assented to carry the rebel prince as far as Saigon, where he would be handed off silently to French authorities. In exchange, he extracted a consular promise to release him from liability if any incidents occurred in the process.³⁰

"The Call of the State"

Despite these behind-the-scenes contests of will and wile, the *Messageries* and the government maintained a great public showing of mutual affection throughout the 1880s and 90s. The concord was put on vivid display during the disastrous conquest of Madagascar in 1895 and its aftermath. Though only a few dozen French soldiers died in combat during the conquest, roughly six-thousand soldiers and auxiliaries perished from disease and infections. The casualties are often described as if they all occurred *in* Madagascar, but many of the victims succumbed in transit and in hospitals between France and Madagascar where they had been deposited during layovers. During the ordeal, French newspapers amplified accounts of cramped and poorly equipped ships brimming with wounded warriors.³¹ A public outcry resulted, in which state transports and private shipping companies were accused of slaughtering France's colonial soldiers through negligence. Compared to other shipping lines that had been recruited into the war effort, however, the *Messageries* enjoyed lower mortality rates and came out relatively unscathed. After the war, several *Messageries* ship doctors were given medals of honor in a ceremony at the War Ministry.

³⁰ "Voyage report of the Djennah, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 7" (9 Jan. 1890), Voyage Reports of the Djennah, 1875-1902, MM 164, CCIMP. The royal pretender died in Saigon in 1923 after a life of failed attempts to overthrow the Burmese monarchy and coordinate anti-British actions. For more information, see: The Lost Footstep project, available online at: <https://lostfootsteps.org/en/history/prince-of-myingun> (last accessed 5/6/2021).

³¹ On the transport, see: Eric Jennings, *Perspectives on French Colonial Madagascar* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 36-40.

In front of their stockholders, the *Messageries* proudly declared that it had responded to “the call of the State,” “in conformity with its traditions.”³²

Inside the ship, though, a less harmonious relationship reigned between the empire’s warriors and their commercial wardens. *Messageries* captains involved in the campaign heaped blame upon the soldiers, as well as on the ineptitude of the government. On an 1895 voyage of the *Djemnah*, for example, dysentery and fever devastated the ship’s military passengers, leading the captain to declare: “many of these unfortunate [people] have died by their own fault.”³³ The captain painted a picture of soldiers guzzling wine, sneaking in fruit and other foods prohibited by anti-dysentery measures, and hiding their vices from shipboard officers. Perhaps he was simply trying to shield himself from blame, but with 15 registered deaths, the *Djemnah* was actually lucky: onboard a rival company’s steamship that the *Djemnah* crossed at Port-Saïd, a whopping 55 deaths had already been registered.³⁴ Later, as insurgencies flared up across Madagascar and disease continued taking its toll, a *Messageries* captain ferrying troops back and forth echoed the tone of the *Djemnah*’s captain. Blaming “frequent” onboard deaths from heatstroke on the soldiers’ “imprudence,” he drily noted that at least “the lesson benefits the others.”³⁵

³² Speech from the “Assemblée Générale des actionnaires, 30 May 1895,” quoted by Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 652 [“l’appel de l’Etat,” “conformément à [ses] traditions”]. Those words must have rung hollow to one China Line captain, who appealed to the “raison patriotique” and “haute patriotisme de la Compagnie des MM” during the Sino-French War of 1885, after breaking from his route to deliver supplies and provide logistical and reconnaissance support for the French fleet. In response to his patriotic deviation, company directors wrote a single, terse line: “M. Macé se trompe, nos paquebots ne sont pas des éclaireurs d’escadre et doivent éviter les parages où peuvent se rencontrer des croiseurs chinois.” (“Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Yokohama, départ le 28 Juillet 1885 ; à Saigon le 28 Aout 1885 »; filed in Marseille le 2 Janvier 1885. Voyage reports of the Iraouaddy, 1883-1889, MM 264, CCIMP.

³³ “Voyage report of the Djemnah, Marseille–Maurice. N. 9-11 (aug. 1895), » Voyage Reports of the Djemnah, 1875-1902, MM 164, CCIMP [“Plusieurs de ces malheureux sont morts par leur faute”].

³⁴ The captain also told his directors that the State needed to supply Port-Saïd with cold-weather clothing, or the weakened soldiers would surely die in droves from exposure. His direction, however, provided no comment.

³⁵ “Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Indian Ocean Line, n. 22, cm dt. Bourdon (Marseille le 24 Nov. 1898),” Voyage Reports of the Yang-Tsé, 1895-1908, MM 547, CCIMP [“son imprudence... Le fait se renouvelle a ssez fréquemment... Un homme s’endort au soleil, malgré les observations que font bien souvent les gens du bord et une insolation mortelle vient frapper l’imprudent. La leçon profite aux autres... »].

As a final example of the daily life of state-company partnership on the war route to and from Madagascar, take the steamship *Yang-Tsé*. Having been given sick and wounded soldiers without nurses and equipment, the ship's captain "had to appeal to the good will of the men from all the military branches," he noted to directors, "whose good will promptly waned when faced with the fatigues of an ungrateful service to which they were hardly habituated."³⁶ Many soldiers escaped his surveillance, leading him to report: "Among the ill, the weakening of the intellectual faculties destroyed the effect of recommendations from the doctor, and the guilty connivance of Comrades satisfied dangerous appetites."³⁷ The list of casualties would have been much shorter, he insisted, had the French consuls of layover ports not rejected his pleas to deposit the weakest soldiers in their hospitals. Instead, requests to disembark the sickest soldiers were denied by consul after consul, each citing an undisclosed "ministerial directive."

Yet, with remarkable ease the *Messageries* and state officials papered over the rifts that had opened during the campaign, and which would open again and again during dozens of invasions, "pacification" campaigns, and "interventions" still to come. Along with postal service, the movement of troops and military cargo constituted a critical link between the imperial state and the *Messageries*.³⁸ Instead of being scared away from its increasingly close relationship with an expansionist imperial state, the *Messageries* doubled down: the bottom-line benefits of transporting diseased troops (not to mention high-risk cargo like explosives and arms) outweighed

³⁶ "Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Marseille-Réunion, Cmdt. Chaboud, n. 12 (Marseille le 19 nov. 1805)," Voyage Reports of the Yang-Tsé, 1895-1908, MM 547, CCIMP [« Il a fallu faire appel à la bonne volonté d'hommes de toutes ames dont le bon vouloir s'est promptement émoussé en présence des fatigues d'un service ingrat auquel ils n'étaient nullement habitués. »].

³⁷ Ibid. [« Chez ces malades, l'affaiblissement des facultés intellectuelles détruisait l'effet des recommandations du médecin et la connivence coupable des Camarades satisfaisait des appétits dangereux... »]

³⁸ This had been the case since the *Messageries* fleet ferried thousands of troops during the Crimean War. Dedicated military transports existed, too, but troops were routinely diverted into the ships of subsidized companies like the *Messageries*. When French military resources were overstretched, the *Messageries* picked up the slack.

the risk to their public image. Consecrated in wars, the marriage of convenience endured because these military missions were more profitable than regular service for the *Messageries*. For the French state, meanwhile, contracting the private company remained a cheaper option than building a new fleet of transports, or renting ships of the larger British merchant marine, as had happened in the past.³⁹

While state and company officials traded praise and medals in metropolitan board rooms and ministerial offices, a quiet battle raged *inside* trans-Suez ocean liners. For officers and civil administrators, these state-company tensions expressed themselves in everyday contests over space, prestige, and consumption. Specifically, military passengers often became fierce critics of the internationalism they observed onboard *Messageries* ships, while *Messageries* employees came to despise the ill-mannered soldiers and bureaucrats who acted as if they owned the ship.

Much of this conflict hinged upon questions of race relations. Many soldiers and bureaucrats attempted to maintain the racial segregation and European supremacy of their colonial posts in ways that the company, dependent as it was upon a mixed-race workforce and diverse passengers, could not countenance. The threat of racialized violence between state passengers and maritime workers was evident on the *Polynésien*, traveling to Madagascar in 1895. On that ship, as discussed in chapter 4, a medic in the French army named Dumand recorded in his journal that French soldiers threw “pieces of pork-lard” at Arab coalers praying on the deck. After evicting the Arab coalers, the soldiers would join French sailors “on the deck... and chant songs of France.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Jean-Charles Jauffret, *Parlement, gouvernement, commandement: l'armée de métier sous la 3^{ème} République* (Thèse d'état Histoire Paris, Univ. de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1987), 848.

⁴⁰ Raphael Dumand, “Mardi 10 Septembre,” *Voyage de Marseille à Madagascar à bord du POLYNESIEN et de l'AVA en septembre 1895. Journal de Raphael Dumand, infirmier du corps expéditionnaire*, Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <https://www.messageries-maritimes.org/polynesien3.htm> (last accessed: 5/10/2021). [“Vers le coucher du soleil, des matelots arabes viennent à un endroit choisi, faire leur prière à leur prophète... ils se prosternent sur un tapis apporté par eux... Parfois, des soldats... jettent à cet endroit, des morceaux de lard... ils sont

The difference between the soldiers' treatment of the Arab sailors and European sailors comes across clearly elsewhere in Dumand's journal: "We bother the sailors in their work sometimes; they're very polite and decent with us. All the time we hear these words: 'coming through [attention], Messieurs Soldiers... We bump each other by accident sometimes, we don't have sea legs."⁴¹ For Arab sailors, then, there was mockery and expulsion; for European sailors, meanwhile, self-deprecation and gruff politeness. The soldiers' behavior, while particularly cruel, was not uncharacteristic of state passengers, many of whom strove to dominate the space and ceremonial life of *Messageries* liners.

To the *Messageries*, the abuse of their Asian and African workforce by state passengers posed serious risks. As discussed in the last chapter, subject-laborers made up a huge and vital component of the merchant marine workforce east of Suez. While they suffered exceptional levels of exploitation, such workers nonetheless possessed an impressive ability to impose their will upon the company and maritime authorities. On an 1891 voyage between Marseille and Yokohama, a *Messageries* captain hinted as much when he lamented to his superiors that he had nearly arrested "a subagent of the colonial commissariat" after the man, "in the style of a good old-fashioned joke, amused himself by dealing out twelve kicks in the ... below-the-belt [*bas-des-reins*] of an unfortunate Chinese [sailor] doing his shift, peacefully rolling out a mat in front of him."⁴² The captain was less outraged on behalf of his Chinese worker than he was alarmed on behalf of his

furieux et interrompent leurs litanies pour revenir plus tard. Quand... la lune monte à l'horizon, les matelots groupés sur le pont avec nous, devisent ou fredonnent des chansons de France⁷].

⁴¹ Ibid. [« Nous gênon s parfois les marins dans leur travail; ils sont très polis et convenables avec nous. A chaque instant on entend ces mots: 'attention Messieurs les militaires.'... On se bouscule parfois involontairement, nous n'avons pas le pied marin... »]

⁴² "Voyage report of the Djemnah, Indochina Line, n. 11/12 (Marseille le 5 Juin 1891)," Voyage Reports of the Djemnah, 1875-1902, MM 164, CCIMP ["sous-agent du commissariat colonial... en manière de bonne plaisanterie s'est amusé à octroyer douze coups de pied dans le ... bas-des-reins à un malheureux Chinois qui faisait son service, roulant tranquillement devant lui un paillason de batterie. »].

company. As he explained, “Our Chinese [workers] are united by a great solidarity, they do not accept such wrongdoings, and this brutality is capable of disrupting our service.”⁴³ In other words, while the employee of the colonial state may have imagined himself temporarily inhabiting a privileged space in which his racial supremacy was to be taken for granted, the captain realized that they were in fact no longer *in* the colonies, but rather, between them. In these in-between spaces, workers possessed surprising leverage, perhaps above all thanks to their ability to disappear in the blink of an eye. Along maritime highways with tense labor relations, belligerent state passengers jeopardized the company’s basic ability to operate.

The *Messageries* was not just trapped by their simultaneous dependency on subject-laborers and state passengers. At times, their personnel found themselves caught between dueling state mandates. Take, for example, the situation of the *Messageries* ship, *Saghalien*, as it voyaged between Marseille and Shanghai in 1886.⁴⁴ The voyage came on the heels of the Sino-French War of 1884-5, which resulted in China recognizing the French protectorate over Tonkin (Northern Vietnam, formerly a protectorate of the Chinese Empire).⁴⁵ As a treaty was being hammered out, the *Saghalien*’s captain received a state order to embark official delegations from China and Japan. When the French ministry of foreign affairs contacted him to stress the importance of the delegation and to remind the captain of the favor the government was doing him in choosing the *Messageries* for the job, the captain felt compelled to make leading members of the Chinese and Japanese delegation “the object of special attentions.”

⁴³ Ibid. [« Nos Chinois sont unis par une grande solidarité, ils n’acceptent pas les mauvais traitements et cette brutalité pouvait désorganiser le service. »]

⁴⁴ “Voyage Report of the *Saghalien*, Marseille-Shanghai (Marseille le 22 avril 1886),” *Voyage Reports of the Saghalien*, 1881-1895, MM458, CCIMP.

⁴⁵ Over the course of that conflict, the French fleet blockaded the Yangtze River. Despite losing several engagements with Chinese forces across Southeast Asia, the Chinese were eventually forced to capitulate.

These “special attentions” came back to bite the captain, however, when the *Saghalien* received a second order, this time to embark a French military contingent. Soon enough, the captain was confronted by “passengers who arrived onboard with very hostile dispositions,” foremost among them a General who was convinced that the Chinese passengers were receiving preferential treatment, and who announced his intention to have the company investigated by the War Ministry.⁴⁶ As the conversation grew heated, the Captain recorded the General’s words in a report to his superiors: ““these pigs over there,’ [the general said] showing me the Chinese passengers, ‘I’ve cut the ponytails off of too many Chinamen to accept this... etc. etc.’”⁴⁷ Seeing that the conversation was becoming “dangerous,” the captain struggled to defuse the situation: “My general, it’s not for me to judge whether you were right or wrong to cut off tails, but the Peace Treaty being signed with China, I don’t think that we should be cutting any here – if these Chinese messieurs deviate from the rules of decency, I will consider it my duty to make them observe the rules.”⁴⁸ What came of it all went unrecorded in the report; indeed, it was probably just another tempest in a teapot. But, like the soldiers hurling pork at praying Muslim coalers, or the functionary beating Chinese workers, the raging General points to the simmering tensions within a private company doing the bidding of an imperial state, as well as the paradoxical demands of its racial orders.

As these examples of racist abuse hint, many state passengers reacted to their transport aboard a private commercial vessel by becoming keenly sensitive to issues of prestige. Such passengers, in other words, became belligerently status-conscious when faced with the gaze and

⁴⁶ Ibid. [« des passagers qui arrivent à bord avec des dispositions très hostiles »]

⁴⁷ Ibid. [« ‘ces cochons là’ me montrant les chinois passagers, ‘j’ai coupé trop de queues de chinois pour accepter cela, si c’était un négrier on ne lui ferait pas cela, il a coupé plus de queues que moi,’ etc etc. »]

⁴⁸ Ibid. [« je lui ai répondu, ‘Mon général, il ne m’appartient pas de juger si vous avez bien ou mal fait de couper des queues, mais le traité de Paix étant signé avec la Chine, je ne pense pas que nous devions en couper ici – si ces messieurs Chinois s’écartent des règles de convenances, je considérerai de mon devoir de les leur faire observer. »]

cohabitation of non-Europeans, civilians, foreigners, and women. In part, this dynamic reflected the slow process by which the Third Republic sought to mitigate the aristocratic presence and ethos within its army's officer corps. An 1891 voyage of the *Australien* offers a window into this process. The *Australien*'s captain noted that he had been met with a barrage of vociferous complaints by a contingent of artillery officers in 2nd-class. As the captain explained, "One must not see anything in this except the desire of this category of passengers to mingle on the deck with those from 1st class as they used to, for far, far, too long, on the steamships of the Company. – The day when the Government puts these officers in 1st class, there will be no more protests."⁴⁹ Budget-conscious and wary of empowering aristocratic pretensions within the ranks of the military, Republican policymakers of the late-19th century relegated their elite passengers to second class. Ironically, vengeance was revisited upon the company.⁵⁰

The officers' resentment was echoed by their colleagues. Paul Bonnetain, for instance, the unofficial literary spokesman of France's soldiers of empire, picked up their plight: "on steamships it's an absurd rule to make them live, even up to a battalion or squadron commander, in second class, which is to say, often alongside the European domestic servants of first-class voyagers!"⁵¹ Bonnetain emphasized that the humiliation was only amplified by the fact that it took place in front

⁴⁹ "Marseille, le 1^{er} Juin 1891, Paquebot 'Australien' : Commandant Cidney [sic ?] au Directeur," Correspondance Diverse de l'Australien, 1890-1903, MM 57, CCIMP [« Il ne faut y voir que l'envie de cette catégorie de passagers d'être mêlés sur le pont avec ceux du 1^{er} classe comme ils l'ont été longtemps, trop longtemps, sur les paquebots de la Compagnie, au grand détriment de la Compagnie. – Le jour où le Gouvernement mettra les officiers en 1^{er} classe, il n'y aura plus de réclamation. »].

⁵⁰ One Captain was so fed up with handling the sensitive pride of military passengers that he requested a policy in which rank would not be disclosed to him at all, thereby absolving him of any liability: « il sera it préférable que nos agents sur la ligne en délivrant des billets aux membres des armées étrangères ne fassent pas mention du Grade ; il m'eut été très utile de pouvoir opposer aux réclamations indignées des officiers passagers un billet portant M. Sumner au lieu de Le sergent Sumner de 2^e Artillerie. » ("Voyage report of the Djemnah, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 7, 9 Jan. 1890," Voyage Reports of the Djemnah, 1875-1902, MM 164, CCIMP).

⁵¹ Paul Bonnetain, *L'Extrême-Orient* (Paris: Maison Quantin, 1887), 131-2 [« sur les paquebots le règlement est absurde de les faire vivre, jusqu'au grade de chef de bataillon ou d'escadrons, aux secondes classes, c'est-à-dire souvent avec les domestiques européens des voyageurs de première classe ! »].

of the eyes of foreign – and above all British – passengers. The indignity, in state passengers' eyes, was not limited to being neighbors with servants.

On the same ship where colonial employees had beaten Chinese workers, a different state official had been observed and recorded by the captain as he berated a Japanese passenger: “How could it be... a state-passenger in first-class was saying at the top of his lungs, that aboard a ship subsidized by the government, that I, a French functionary, I have only an engine-room cabin, while you, a Japanese, have a luxury cabin!”⁵² Descending the class ladder one rung, the same dynamic played out: on a 1906 Marseille-Yokohama voyage of the *Tonkin*, for instance, we find the ship's captain reporting, “The passengers of Third Class have protested being mixed with passengers of color... This claim was above all made by the noncommissioned officers who wanted us to put them in 2nd class.”⁵³ Also on the *Tonkin*, the “Chancellor of the French Consul in Tien-Tsin” plagued the captain with demands to remove a group of Chinese migrants packed into a corner of the deck, whose odors and alleged opium use offended the bureaucrat's sensibilities. Beyond Suez, in short, colonial soldiers and functionaries imagined themselves at the top of the social ladder, yet on ships that in other ways resembled microcosms of imperial society, they found themselves the neighbors of servants and poor migrants, and the inferiors of non-Europeans.⁵⁴

⁵² “Voyage report of the Djemnah, Indochina Line, n. 11/12 (Marseille le 5 Juin 1891),” Voyage Reports of the Djemnah, 1875-1908, MM 164, CCIMP [« ‘Comment se peut-il,’ disa it à haute voix... M. Perrim, passager réquisitionné de 1^{ère} classe – qu’à bord d’un navire subventionné par le gouvernement, moi fonctionnaire Français je n’ai qu’une cabine de batterie tandis que vous un Japonais qui a une cabine de salon !’ »].

⁵³ “Voyage Report of the Tonkin, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 2 (24 Dec. 1906),” 1997 002 4337, AFL [« Les passagers de IIIe classe... se sont plaint d’être mélangés à [sic] des passagers de couleur... Cette réclamation était surtout faite par des sous-officiers qui auraient voulu qu’on les mette en IIe classe. »]

⁵⁴ One captain offered a different diagnosis of the behavior of state passengers on *Messageries* liners: “La cause du mauvais esprit qui anime une grande partie de ces passagers réquisitionnaires il faut je crois la chercher dans le fait suivant: Ils ont tous effectué des traversées sur des transports de l’Etat, où ils se sont trouvés soumis à une discipline militaire dont ils se plaignent beaucoup, et qu’ils ont en horreur. En arrivant sur nos paquebots... ils se croient tout permis, et on a grande peine à leur imposer l’observation du Règlement du bord.” (“Voyage Report of the Djemnah, Indochina Line, v. 11/12, Marseille le 5 juin 1891, MM 164, CCIMP.

In revenge, soldiers and functionaries attempted to dominate the space and cultural life of steamships. A *Messageries* captain voyaging in 1884 experienced this firsthand when his 2nd-class passengers organized a protest against him, signing petition after petition, and grinding daily operations onboard to a halt through constant complaints, most of which hinged upon the alleged injustice of denying 2nd-class passengers access to the 1st-class smoke-room (*fumoir*). The symbolic power of the *fumoir* is hard to exaggerate, and the space is ubiquitous in voyage reports as a site of conflict. To access the *fumoir* was to enjoy not only the exclusive dignity of smoking and reclining in male-gendered leisure, but also the prime site of shipboard networking. *Messageries* captains were generally well-educated men, and a few were downright socialites. For the captain in question, the growing revolt of the passengers was a humiliation. Grasping for words to describe the situation, the captain settled on “a cabal.” Who else could be responsible for the “cabal” but state employees? “At the head of these ill-tempered passengers,” the captain emphasized, “one will notice above all two representatives of the French Colonial Magistracy.”⁵⁵ The captain’s assessment was blunt: the state employees were, “the sole cause, the only ones with a motive in this strange and unbridled behavior.”⁵⁶

As part of their assault on the space and rhythms of life aboard the *Messageries*’ ships, soldiers and state employees demanded overt displays of nationalism. A trans-Suez voyage of the *Ernest Simons* in 1907 is illustrative. As the ship sailed south through the Red Sea, “everything was going admirably,” the captain reported. A talented singer was among the passengers, so when an upper-class charity gala was organized aboard the ship, she was invited to perform. In the

⁵⁵ « Colombo le 18 Aout 1884. Commandant au M. le Directeur », Voyage Reports of the *Iraouaddy*, 1883-1889, MM 264, CCIMP. Among the signatories, he was stunned to find “a poor Japanese doctor” and to learn that the men had even tried to recruit “six missionaries heading to Colombo” and “four sisters of the charity heading to Saigon” into their protest. [« En tête ... [des] passagers au tempérament bileux ... se font remarquer deux représentants de la Magistrature Coloniale Française. »]

⁵⁶Ibid. [« la seule cause, l’unique mobile de cette conduite étrange et peu mesurée. »]

captain's recollection, "it seemed certain that no political consideration whatsoever was going to trouble our minds."⁵⁷ De-politicizing steamship space was a constant objective of the company and its employees. After all, as the captain explained, there was a vital necessity to "avoid the tensions that can become so sharp in a space as restricted as a steamship."⁵⁸ But when the singer finished a popular royalist song, "chanson de la Charrette," the bonhomie evaporated: "all of a sudden, a powerful organ drowning out all the music made itself heard: 'Down with the Royalists [*Chouans*]! Royalists are like Prussians! Down with the Prussians!'"⁵⁹

The culprit, of course, was a military man. After a brief "silence of stupor," the room erupted into a crossfire of epithets and slogans. Royalists chanted "long live the king" for ten long minutes, according to the officer, while critics of the military denounced the sonic coup in equally forceful terms. Some of the many foreigners in the room – mostly English, Germans, and Belgians – tried to slip out of a situation that seemed to be veering towards xenophobia, while others (presumably the Germans) loudly defended their honor. The shocked captain waited for the *Commandant d'Armes* – the figure "responsible for policing the military passengers" – to intervene, but when the *Commandant* did not budge, the captain cajoled the army officer himself and evacuated the room.

Over the coming days, factions arose and fragmented. A group of functionaries aboard the ship, somewhat surprisingly, rallied to the ship-captain, outraged that "a passenger of 1st class, even if he's a Captain [in the military], would gratuitously attribute to them a manifestation so

⁵⁷ "Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 3 (7 Janvier 1907), cmdt. Bourdon," Voyage Reports of the Ernest Simons, 1905-1917, MM 195, CCIMP [« Tout s'était admirablement passé », « et il paraissait bien certain qu'aucune considération politique ne troublait les esprits. »].

⁵⁸ Ibid. [« éviter des froissements pouvant devenir si aigus sur un espace aussi restreint qu'un paquebot. »]

⁵⁹ Ibid. [« tout à coup, un organe puissant couvrant toute musique se fit entendre: 'A bas les Chouans ! Les Chouans sont comme les Prussiens ! A bas les Prussiens ! »]

hostile to the government.”⁶⁰ The *Commandant*, meanwhile, rallied to the army officer, who, in the meantime, challenged the ship-captain to a duel. A number of “lady passengers” entered the fray in their own way, demanding the next day that Mass be celebrated publicly on the deck, as opposed to in a private cabin – the ship-captain agreed, though he was deeply relieved to find that the militantly laic officer never caught wind of it. As for the controversy that had started the brouhaha, the resolution was downright didactic: another concert was organized, in which the royalist song would be performed, but on the condition that it was immediately followed by “the national anthem,” and, the captain added, “to better reaffirm the political independence that existed before their shenanigans, several couplets of the International were also added in.”⁶¹

The army officer was not alone in trying to impose a certain kind of Frenchness on the *Messageries*, and while that Frenchness took on different forms for different actors, most state agents displayed remarkable vociferousness in their demands. A year after the musical mayhem on the *Ernest Simons*, for instance, a low-level functionary from Saigon’s public prosecutor’s office excoriated the company for not waving the flag during his trans-Suez voyage. Recruiting a great number of 2nd class passengers, he penned a “claim” against the company, which concluded with a damning observation:

The day of the National Holiday, the ‘Tonkin’ sailed all day without even a flag... In a word, nothing was neglected onboard in order to show the passengers that they were being ridiculed. In conclusion, the undersigned passengers protest in the most energetically violent terms possible against the procedures to which they have fallen victim on their return voyage to France on the French Steamship the ‘Tonkin.’⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid. [« un passager de 1^{ere}, qu’il soit Capitaine, leur prêta gratuitement l’entretien d’une manifestation hostile au gouvernement ».]

⁶¹ Ibid. [« pour mieux affirmer l’indépendance politique qui précédait à leurs amusements, quelques couplets de l’Internationale furent encore ajoutés. »]

⁶² “Voyage Report of the Tonkin, China Line, n. 17, cmdt. Charbonnel (21 Oct. 1908),” 19970024337, AFL [“ Le jour de la Fête Nationale le ‘Tonkin’ navigua toute la journée sans même un pavillon [...] En un mot rien ne fut négligé à bord pour montrer aux passagers que l’on se moquait d’eux. En terminant les passagers soussignés protestent de la façon la plus énergiquement violente contre les procédés dont ils ont été victimes en retour en France du Paquebot Français le ‘Tonkin’ »].

Company directors claimed that navigational considerations had necessitated keeping the flag down, but such subtleties were lost on patriots traveling on the state's dime.

Twelve years later, state actors were still emphasizing the need to vigorously reassert the French character of what was supposed to be the empire's flagship line. On the *André Lebon* in 1919, for instance, a state-passenger who boarded in Saigon with his family delivered a diatribe over what he viewed as the preferential treatment given to foreigners aboard *Messageries* ships. Accusing "the supposedly-French and massively state-subsidized Company," of giving the best cabins to foreigners, to the detriment of "large numbers of Frenchmen, colonial settlers, and others who have completed long colonial assignments," he went on to note, "over the course of the voyage, foreigners were lodged in the spacious cabins."⁶³ "The passengers," he added, "have noticed above all the supreme ease with which foreigners have been carrying on and with which certain lovable lady-passengers strut their little pooches all over the deck despite the posted prohibitions."⁶⁴

The list of accusations went on. In order to keep cabins available for foreigners, a French couple had been forced to take into their cabin a 17-year-old "Annamite" (Vietnamese) servant: "by means of this immoral maneuver," he alleged, "the Company is able to re-sell the same berth."⁶⁵ Consumption aboard the ship, this gadfly suggested, reflected the *Messageries*' true priorities: "it is worth noting how on this ship of a subsidized French Company there were only

⁶³ "Lefure Harel (sic?) aux directeurs, 28 sept. 1919," Correspondance diverse de l'André Lebon, 1919-1921, MM 20, CCIMP [« La Compagnie prétendue française et largement subventionnée par l'Etat »; « bon nombre de Français, colons, ou autres ayant [fait] un long stage colonial. »].

⁶⁴ He insisted on one foreign woman in particular, who had been allowed to walk her "pooches" wherever she pleased, ostentatiously feeding them cream from a silver cup. Ibid. [« des étrangers furent logés en cours de route en des cabines spacieuses »; « les passagers remarquèrent surtout la facilité avec laquelle les étrangers évoluaient et avec laquelle certaines aimables passagères promènèrent leurs toutous sur les ponts malgré l'interdiction affichée... »]

⁶⁵ Ibid. [« ce qui moyennant cette opération morale, permet à la Compagnie de revendre la même couchette. »]

Japanese jams, Japanese and certainly English beers, while the Company had every chance, along the route, to stock itself with French menus, French beers...”⁶⁶ The self-righteous functionary may have been on a tirade, but he had put his finger on the crux of the contentions between state and company: where the company strove to de-politicize life onboard and encourage consumption and tranquility through cosmopolitanism, many representatives of the state imagined the ship as a floating bastion of Frenchness.

The *Messageries*, in this sense, was in a bind that can only be understood by exploring the conditions in which they did business. The company faced stiff competition from other nationally subsidized companies, the list of which grew ever-longer during the fin-de-siècle turn towards protectionism. The “gentleman’s agreements” between the *Messageries* and *P&O* ensured that the two companies’ ships would depart from Europe at pre-set intervals: one week a French ship; the next a British ship, but while this agreement guaranteed French access to the market, it could not prevent cutthroat competition from other players. With Dutch, German, American, and Japanese Lines smashing their way into trans-Suez shipping, French companies were increasingly reliant on the cachet of French taste and culture.

The *Messageries* mobilized that cachet with acumen. In a sign of the *Messageries*’ ability to wield French culture as a commercial arm, the company won the loyalty of a significant portion of British and Anglo-Indian elites cycling between Britain and India – a group so synonymous with traveling in style that they were long credited with inventing the term “posh” itself.⁶⁷ But this

⁶⁶ Ibid. [« il est à remarquer que sur ce bateau d’une Compagnie française subventionnée il n’y a vait que confitures japonaises, bière japonaise, certes anglaises a lors que la Compagnie, pouvait, en cours de route, s’approvisionner de cartes Françaises, bières Françaises... »]

⁶⁷ By the 1930s, popular understanding attributed the origins of “posh” to the interoceanic commuting practices of British and Anglo-Indian elites, whose tickets between England and India were said to be marked “Port Out, Starboard Home.” This method of cabin selection was supposed to have ensured maximum comfort (shelter from the Red Sea sun on the way to India, cool breezes on the way back to England, etc), reflecting the travel-savvy of the most experienced and affluent colonial travelers. Stringent etymologists have objected that no such tickets are

success with foreign clientele rested, as one captain put it, on the *Messageries*' ability to offer "the luxury of good taste."⁶⁸ As the company's agent in Shanghai noted, "the very pure French style" marketed itself in contrast to "pseudo-Oriental styles with which travelers are exhausted in advance having already too much of them."⁶⁹ Competitors might get their passengers to port more quickly and surround them with splashier décor, but the *Messageries* could count on a competitive advantage among 1st-class passengers precisely because what they were selling – taste and refinement – appealed to those who imagined themselves as superior to market trends.

If the allure of French taste guaranteed a certain advantage among elite foreigners, much work remained to keep them happy once onboard. In this effort, no detail was too small. Thus *Messageries* employees obsessed, for instance, over which whiskey suited various types of British colonialists ("The English of the Far-East very much appreciate Buchanan, the English of Africa denigrate it as moonshine whiskey"⁷⁰), or listening attentively – and swallowing their pride – when Australian passengers told them, "your cuisine is very good... but we are accustomed to our roast beef and we miss it."⁷¹ When a British and American "party of globetrotters" jumped on the *Djemnah* between Saigon and Tokyo in 1891, to take another example, the captain dutifully reported giving "all the care in the world for them." As a result, "the registry of complaints was

a actually known to exist, but I see meaning – beyond veracity – in the fact that lore connected the word's origins to this set of travelers.

⁶⁸ "Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Dec. 1894 ("debut of the ship on the China Line)," *Rapports de Voyage de l'Ernest Simons (1894-1904)*, MM 194, CCIMP ["le luxe de bon gout."].

⁶⁹ "M. L'Agent Général à Shanghai au Secretariat de la Direction, le 23 Décembre 1915 », *Correspondance diverse de l'Athos, 1913-1917*, MM 46, CCIMP ["*le style français très pur*"; "styles pseudo Orientaux dont les voyageurs sont fatigués à l'avance pour les avoir déjà trop vus."].

⁷⁰ "Voyage report of the Djemnah, Indian Ocean Line, n. 11. Cmdt. Cousin, Marseille–Réunion (le 27 Avril 1915)," *Voyage reports of the Djemnah (1903-1918)*, MM 165, CCIMP [Les anglais d'Extrême-Orient apprécient beaucoup le Buchanan, les anglais d'Afrique le décrètent 'whiskey de traite']].

⁷¹ "Voyage report of the Yarra, Marseille–Nouméa. n. 11 (23 Octobre 1884) » *Voyage Reports of the Yarra, 1884-1892*, MM 549, CCIMP ["votre cuisine est très bonne ... mais nous sommes habitués à notre roastbeef et il nous manque."].

transformed,” he exclaimed, “into a registry of acclaim for our ships and the Company.”⁷² The captain was unexceptional in this regard. Indeed, keeping “passengers of distinction” contented was his job, regardless of their nationality.

State passengers opposed themselves to this ethos of elite consumer-cosmopolitanism. The company was keenly aware of this tension, and the risk that state passengers posed as a result. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that *Messageries* employees saw themselves as locked in a battle to deny, or at least temper, the sovereign claims of state employees onboard.⁷³ For the *Messageries*, the impact that unbridled state passengers could have on their foreign clientele was obvious. When one captain observed that aboard his ship, “some foreign passengers were lost in the flood of functionaries,” he immediately identified the danger: “it is to fear that our foreign clientele will be tempted to abandon our service.”⁷⁴ A few years later, another captain demanded a special Ledger of Claims for military men, because, as he explained to superiors, “I shouldn’t have to insist on the formidable stakes of propriety involved in not letting foreign eyes peruse the details of debates between the ship administration and the military passengers.”⁷⁵ Other *Messageries* employees were less subtle: “the government functionaries picked up in Saigon were quite numerous,” wrote one company agent in 1891, remarking, “I have never understood so clearly all of the ill that this type of passenger can do to the renown of our service.” Castigating

⁷² “Voyage report of the Djemnah, Indochina Line, n. 11/12 (Marseille le 5 Juin 1891),” Voyage Reports of the Djemnah, 1875-1908, MM 164, CCIMP. [« tous les soins du monde pour eux »; « le cahier de réclamations a été transformé par eux dans un cahier d’éloges à notre navire et la Compagnie »]

⁷³ Unsurprisingly, *laïcité* was a source of onboard tension as well.

⁷⁴ “Voyage report of the Yarra, Marseille–Yokohama, n. 4/5 (21 Février 1895), Cmdt. Maubeuge.” Voyage Reports of the Yarra (1893-1907), MM 559, CCIMP [« Quelques passagers... étrangers étaient perdus dans le flot de fonctionnaires »; « il sera à craindre que notre clientèle étrangère songeât à désert nos services. »].

⁷⁵ “Voyage Report of the Yang-Tsé, Cmdt. Marcantetti, Indian Ocean Line, n. 14 (26 Juillet 1902),” Voyage Reports of the Yang-Tsé (1895-1908), MM 547, CCIMP [« Je n’ai pas besoin d’insister sur les raisons de haute convenance qu’il y aura à ne pas la laisser traîner sous les yeux de passagers... de nationalités étrangères les détails des débats... entre le Commandant des Troupes et l’administration du bord. »].

“these second-rate functionaries of miniscule importance” for “their vulgarity, their shamelessness,” he summarized the situation for company directors in Marseille and Paris: “The subsidized ship is their Plaything.”⁷⁶ The irony of his statement is rich: while, as we have seen, state actors accused the *Messageries* of belonging to foreigners, the *Messageries* saw themselves as tortured captives of state actors.

A Leaking Vessel of Sovereignty

Beyond wars of words, ideologies, space, and symbols, the material consequences of everyday antagonism between state and company revealed themselves in the transit of passengers with special needs. Between the business of pleasure and the business of empire, some groups of travelers simply slipped through the cracks. As the example of convicts and the mentally ill makes clear, certain travelers were too troublesome for the company to hold on to, yet not troublesome enough for the state to claim. Through a requisition system, the French government could embark (space permitting) anyone they wished onto *Messageries* steamships. In the best-case scenario for the company, this meant access to a steady stream of prominent dignitaries, generals, and statesmen. But the requisition system also channeled into *Messageries* ships a flow of far less “desirable” passengers, including convicts from the colonies being sent to French courts and prisons.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ “Voyage report of the Djemnah, Indochina Line, n. 11/12 (Marseille le 5 Juin 1891),” Voyage Reports of the Djemnah, 1875-1902, MM 164, CCIMP [« Les fonctionnaires du gouvernement embarqués à Saïgon ont été assez nombreuse... Je n’aurais jamais si bien compris tout le mal que ce genre de passagers fait à la bonne renommée de nos services. »; « des seconds, fonctionnaires d’ordre infime »; « leur grossièreté, leur sans gêne »; « Le navire subventionné est leur Chose. »].

⁷⁷ These ranged from people guilty of multiple murders to juvenile delinquents. A captain in 1909, for instance, was handed two “prisoners” who were adolescents: « Monsieur le Consul de France a Port-Saïd m’a demandé de recevoir à mon bord, comme prisonniers, deux enfants de 13 et de 14 ans qu’il renvoie en France. Comme je n’ai pas de local pour les enfermer, ni le personnel militaire suffisant pour les garder, j’ai prié monsieur le Consul de me les remettre au dernier moment et je les enfermerai à l’arrivée en attendant que la police prévenue télégraphiquement

It was no easy task to hold onto convicts during layover-dotted voyages across thousands of miles. When those convicts were military men, solidarity among the rank-and-file could impede the hand of justice. On a Madagascar-bound ship of the *Messageries* in 1895, for instance, a medic noted that, while several soldiers had been punished for crimes, “They were placed in chains, but some friends freed them by breaking their chains and they escaped into the crowd. No one is divulging the authors of these misdeeds.”⁷⁸ A few years later, on the same line, the gaping holes in prisoner confinement remained evident. In a 1901 voyage report, a captain noted that his ship’s makeshift prison had been deemed too small to hold the six convicts who he had embarked. As a result, the prisoners were temporarily enchained on the deck. During the first night of this arrangement, however, several broke loose. A few days later, some were found hiding in the ship’s rescue boat, half-starved, but one remained at large. Though he was captured and sent to the ship’s holding cell, he soon jimmied the lock, and while attempting to flee, stabbed one of the ship’s officers in the chest. The response of company directors to the savage episode is telling: “It is rare,” they wrote in the report’s margins, “that the transport of disciplinary [cases] does not give rise to regrettable incidents; it would be extremely desirable for [our] steamships to be emancipated from transportation of this type.”⁷⁹ Like the prisoners who fled its grasp, then, the *Messageries* had only one wish regarding its morbid obligations to the state: emancipation.⁸⁰

les fasse prendre. » (« rapport de voyage de l’Australien, Cmdt. Riquier, Marseille–Nouméa, le 26 Juin 1909 », Rapports de voyage de l’Australien, 1904-1915, MM 58, CCIMP).

⁷⁸ Raphael Dumand, “Voyage de Marseille à Madagascar à bord du POLYNESIEN et de l’AVA en septembre 1895,” Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <https://www.messageries-maritimes.org/polynesien3.htm> (last accessed: 5/10/2021) [« Ils ont été mis aux fers, mais des copains les ont délivrés en brisant leurs cadenas et ils se sont échappés dans la foule. On ne divulgue pas les auteurs de ces petits méfaits. »].

⁷⁹ “Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Maurice, n. 21, cmdt. Allegre (Marseille le 13 Nov. 1901),” Iraouaddy (1890-1906), MM 265, CCIMP [« Il est rare », they wrote in the report’s margins, « que le transport de disciplinaires ne donne pas lieu à quelques incidents regrettables ; il sera it fort à désirer que les paquebots fussent affranchies de transports de ce genre. »].

⁸⁰ The resigned tone of the Directors was echoed in a captain’s report from 1910 written after a fleeing prisoner was gunned down (having broken out of his makeshift prison): « Cette malheureuse affaire ayant produit une fâcheuse impression parmi les passagers et ayant été sur le point, en outre, de nous créer des difficultés avec l’équipage,

As time went on, state-company contracts were revised and renewed, but a decade after the above incident, the inability of *Messageries* ships to reliably hold their prisoners was still evident. In a 1912 letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, for instance, the French consul in Cairo reported that, “The absence of a special area for prisoners aboard the steamships of the *Messageries*... is the cause of serious difficulties when the individual being transported to France is even the slightest bit difficult to guard. This insufficiency in means of incarceration has the all-too-frequent consequence of prisoners escaping in transit.”⁸¹ As the consul had warned his superiors every year since 1908, the root of this problem was simple: “the guidelines oblige ship-captains to accept prisoners who are sent to them by order from the consuls, without any requirement that the consuls should have to assure on-board surveillance.”⁸²

For the French consul in Egypt’s successor a decade later, this commentary would have sounded depressingly familiar. Writing to the *Messageries*’ Agent in Egypt in 1922, the new French consul described a total failure of security aboard a *Messageries* liner that pulled into the port of Alexandria on its way back from East Asia. The trigger for the event was brutal and banal: two cooks, one Italian and one Martiniquain, fought over a burnt chicken, until the Italian stabbed the Martiniquain to death (no autopsy was made by the ship’s doctor, the consul noted). The

lequel affolé par les coups de revolver et la vue de sang, s’est livré à une manifestation hostile contre le factionnaire et les gradés du détachement, j’estime qu’il sera prudent de donner des instructions à MM les agents pour qu’à l’avenir des passagers de cette espèce ne soient plus embarqués sur des navires ne possédant pas de local permettant de les loger » (« Voyage Report of the Yarra, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 14, Cmdt. Ristorelli, Marseille le 20 juillet 1910 », Yarra, 1908-1917, MM 551, CCIMP).

⁸¹ « A.S. du transport des prisonniers à bord des paquebots des MM. Le Consul de France à Alexandre à Son Excellence Monsieur Poincaré, Président de Conseil Ministre des Affaires Etrangères 20 Dec. 1912 », Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, Le Caire (1861-1956), 277, 353 PO/2, CADN [« L’absence de local spécial pour les prisonniers, à bord des paquebots des Messageries... est la cause de difficultés sérieuses lorsque l’individu qu’il s’agit de conduire en France est tant soit peu difficile à garder. – Cette insuffisance de moyens d’incarcération a pour conséquence trop fréquente l’évasion des prisonniers transportés... »].

⁸² Ibid. [« les règlements font une obligation aux commandants des navires d’accepter les prisonniers qui leur sont confiés sur réquisition des consuls, sans que ceux-ci aient à faire assurer leur surveillance à bord. »] [« Je puis cependant citer des exemples trop nombreux d’évasion de prisonniers dûs, en grande partie, à l’absence d’un local de sûreté à bord des paquebots. »]

murderer was arrested, but, “lacking any on-board prison,” the Captain confined him in a cabin, unchained, and in which there were glass bottles and a razor. The murderer, to the consul’s chagrin, had apparently been allowed to lock *himself* into the room. The consul first assumed the ship simply lacked proper chains, but he was horrified to learn that, in fact, the captain “was unsure if he had the right” to enchain the man. Here, the consul could not refrain from a snide aside: “In matters of legality, murderers are less timorous.”⁸³ Unsurprisingly, the murderer promptly broke out of his cabin, disappearing into Alexandria with his freedom and a razor.

When the consul reproached the captain, a fight ensued, revealing the conundrum at the heart of the state-company relationship: namely, that each side accused the other of undermining its authority. The captain, in the consul’s telling, apparently screamed out, “You are insulting me on my ship!... But I am master on my ship and here comes the Consul to insult me in front of my entire crew!”⁸⁴ Then, the consul noted, the captain “turned aside, as to incite [the crew] against me... to throw out the representative of Justice.”⁸⁵ The permanent *Messageries* agent in Alexandria, more diplomatic in his demeanor, pleaded with the consul to forget the indignity. The captain, the agent explained, was under great stress, since yet another massive strike in Marseille had forced him to work with a scab-crew of undisciplined and untrustworthy sailors. In the agent’s telling, the episode was explained by the captain’s teetering authority over his own crew. Still, the consul was determined to repudiate this “outrage to a magistrate carrying out his duties.”⁸⁶ If not, he asked, “what kind of authority will I have aboard your ships if I am again called in to intervene,

⁸³ “Consul de France à Alexandrie à M. l’agent Brunel des Messageries Maritimes, 16 Oct. 1922,” Min. des Relations Extérieures, Le Caire: Navigation (1896-1938), 278, CADN. [« n’y ayant pas de prison à bord »; « ne savait pas s’il en avait le droit »; « En matière de légalité les assassins sont moins timorés. »];

⁸⁴ Ibid. [« ‘Vous m’insultez à mon bord ! ... Mais je suis maître à mon bord et voilà le Consul qui vient m’insulter devant tout mon équipage !’ »]

⁸⁵ Ibid. [« se tournait, comme pour les amener contre moi... pour jeter dehors le représentant de la Justice. »]

⁸⁶ Ibid. [« outrage à un magistrat dans l’exercice de ses fonctions »]

as happens all the time...?”⁸⁷ In short, the episode – beyond laying bare the complete incapacity of the *Messageries* to act as a competent surrogate of the law – revealed the paradoxical dynamic of French authorities along the route: each accused the other of overreach *and* negligence.

In addition to convicts, mentally ill and suicidal state-passengers were also notoriously underserved by the chaotic setting of the liner and the rivalry of its masters. Like many passengers returning from colonial sojourns, state passengers were susceptible to suffer from mental disorders and suicidal tendencies. Their embarkation on *Messageries* ships usually followed years spent in climates that they believed were killing them. In many cases, they were traveling *because* illness or other issues had removed them from their posts.⁸⁸

As with convicts, complaints over the mentally and physical ill litter *Messageries* records from the 1880s to the 1920s. In 1885, a captain complained about his insufficient “madhouse” [*garde-fous*] and “the overcrowding that was all too apparent.”⁸⁹ In 1888, another bemoaned “inconveniences of all kinds,” after French authorities embarked a “madman” (*un aliéné*) on his ship without any warning. “One does not easily deal with a madman of this category in the layovers that we visit,” he wrote, explaining:

I was obliged, after deferring as much as the public security would allow, to lock up this madman who is powerfully strong, he broke the straitjacket in force, since August 14th, he is locked in a cabin with six men present every time that we open it, we have to use threats and often force to keep him in there. Our ships are not engineered for this kind of passengers, we don't even have a porthole railings.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Ibid. [« quelle autorité aurai-je à bord de vos navires si je suis encore appelé à y intervenir, comme cela arrive trop souvent... ? »]

⁸⁸ On French colonial attitudes towards climate and health in the colonies, see: Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers*.

⁸⁹ “Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Hong Kong, n. 11/1 (Fevrier-Mai, 1885)», Iraouaddy, 1883-1889, MM 264, CCIMP [“l’encombrement... n’a été qu’apparent.”]. The ship also carried “109 repatriates” picked up in Saigon, “many convalescent” and “68 Muslims heading to Aden,” picked up in Singapore and placed on the deck. The captain was pleased, at least, that his “madhouse” gave access to the deck without exposure to the 2nd-class.

⁹⁰ “Voyage report of the Saghalien, n. 17/18, Marseille 20 aout, 1888,” Saghalien, 1881-1895, MM 458, CCIMP [« sans parler de l’embarras de toute sorte ... Car on ne se débarrasse pas facilement d’un aliéné de cette catégorie dans les escales que nous visitons... J’ai été obligé après avoir différé autant que la sécurité générale le permettait de faire enfermer cet aliéné qui est puissamment fort, il a brisé la camisole de force, depuis le 14 Aout, il est enfermé dans une cabine avec six hommes à l’extérieur toutes les fois qu’on ouvre, il faut employer la menace et souvent la

Nine years later, a captain lamented that his ship's meager make-shift hospital had to accommodate, "military repatriates with all kinds of illnesses that come from Cochinchina and Tonkin: malarial fever, proctitis, dystenery, liver congestion..."⁹¹ In 1902, meanwhile, his colleague in the Indian Ocean described the challenge of holding an absinthe-guzzling former marine suffering from "persecution mania." "Since he had a herculean strength," he noted, "we needed the entire deck-crew to master him..."⁹² After removing his firearms, the ship's officers procured a note from the doctor, reading: "this sick man is stricken with chronic delirium and cerebral over-arousal and loquacity. He is becoming dangerous for the passengers."⁹³ Considering that the man had already attempted to hurl a co-passenger into the sea, this was perhaps an understatement. Note in hand, they tried to disembark him in Djibouti, explaining that "the necessary isolation for this type of sick person is impossible onboard," and that it was "urgent that we disembark him," but French authorities rejected the request. The ship's officers had more luck in Aden, where they convinced British police to take the man off their hands.⁹⁴

Amidst a comprehensive renegotiation of *Messageries* contracts in 1912, the state began to demand more of the *Messageries* liners that carried out so much of its dirty work.⁹⁵ The Colonial

force pour le faire rentrer. Nos bâtiments ne sont pas installés pour ce genre de passager, nous n'avons pas même un sabord grillé. »].

⁹¹ "Voyage report of the Australien, Lt. de vaisseau Verron, Marseille 17 Aout 1897 », Australien, 1890-1903, MM 57, CCIMP [« les militaires rapatriés [qui] ont tous des maladies spéciales à la Cochinchina et au Tonquin [sic] : fièvres palustres, rectites, dysenterie, congestion du foie »].

⁹² "Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Indian Ocean Line, n. 14, Cmdt. Marcantetti, 26 July 1902," Yang-Tsé, 1895-1908, MM 547, CCIMP [« la manie de persécution » : « comme il a vait une force herculéenne » ; « il a fallu toute la bordée pour le maîtriser... »].

⁹³ Ibid. [« ce mala de est atteint de délire chronique avec excitation cérébrale, loquacité. Il peut devenir dangereux pour les passagers »]

⁹⁴ Ibid. [« l'isolement nécessaire à ce genre de malade étant impossible à bord, il est urgent de la débarquer ».]

⁹⁵ Though not, in key cases, regarding prisoner transport in particular: « et j'ai suggéré de prévoir le transport des prisonniers à bord dans les nouvelles conventions postales alors en discussion. Les cahiers des charges de la dernière convention conclu avec la Compagnie des MM n'apportent aucun changement à la situation antérieure, en ce qui concerne les prisonniers provenant d'Orient. » (« A.S. du transport des prisonniers à bord des paquebots des MM.

Ministry, for instance, issued new orders to the *Messageries* and carried out special reviews of its ships. “There exists no deck hospital, no special room of any kind for debilitated or bedridden passengers returning” to France, one such review noted, before demanding the company “annex a facility to the medical room.” As for efforts already made by the *Messageries*, the reviewers were unimpressed: “Finally, the Company has had to construct two padded, makeshift cabins to lodge our insane... These facilities are very imperfect, and it seems indispensable to us that, in the case of transporting the insane, the ship possesses cabins that have been specially designed in a permanent manner.”⁹⁶ Two years later, with war raging, the *Messageries* found that the state’s newfound regulatory will was not fading. For the first time, a commission in French Indochina rejected their ship’s “madmen cabin” [*Cabine des fous*].⁹⁷ Surprised company directors acknowledged that they *could* do better, admitting, “These installations, which include 3 padded cabins for insane people, have the default of all provisory installations.” However, “To do better,” they noted, “definitive installations would have to be ordered,” and that would cost money.⁹⁸ Before embarking on any costly project, *Messageries* directors advised their captains and agents

Le Consul de France à Alexandrie à M. Poincaré, 20 Dec. 1912 », Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, Le Caire (1861-1956), 277, 353 PO/2, CADN).

⁹⁶ « Marseille, le 4 Sept. 1912. Sous-Directeur au Min. des Colonies. Chef du Service Colonial. A M. le dir. de l’Exploitation de la Cie des MM. Rapport de Traversée établi par le médecin-major Lucas. », Correspondance diverse de l’El Kantara, 1905-1918, MM 181, CCIMP [« Il n’existe à l’hôpital du bord, aucune salle spéciale pour les... rapatriés comme aliés. Nous croyons qu’il sera utile d’annexer à l’hôpital un local... Enfin la Cie a dû construire, pour loger nos [illisible] aliés, deux cabines de fortune, matelassées... Ces aménagements sont très imparfaits, et il nous semble indispensable, en cas de transport d’aliés, que le navire possède des cabines installées spécialement et d’une façon permanente. »].

⁹⁷ “23 Nov. 1914. Direction de l’Exploitation, Marseille,” Correspondance diverse de l’El Kantara, 1905-1918, MM 181, CCIMP [« Il a été construit sur le pont, par les soins de l’agence de Saigon, trois cabanons dans lesquels on devait loger des passagers aliés. La commission de visite de Haiphong a refusé d’accepter ces locaux., prétendant qu’ils étaient défectueux, bien qu’ils aient été construits dans les mêmes conditions qui, jusqu’alors, avaient servi pour le même usage. »].

⁹⁸ Ibid. [« Ces installations comportant 3 cabines capitonnées pour aliés ont le défaut de toutes installations provisoires. Pour faire mieux, il faudrait ordonner des installations définitives. »]

to wait out the state, noting that, “we could perhaps get them accepted by a less demanding commission than the one that... has refused us.”⁹⁹

As the war reached its final stages, the company remained defiant. When a captain on the Australia Line was asked to transport four “madmen” from New Caledonia, for instance, he echoed countless colleagues by observing that “the ship possesses neither the personnel, nor the installations necessary for this type of transport.”¹⁰⁰ Rather than refuse to comply and risk the consequences, however, the captain scoured existing regulations and excavated an obscure article, “1109,” entitling him to screen the suitability for travel of the “madmen” using his own ship-doctor. This gave state agents pause, but ultimately the Governor of New Caledonia himself intervened, overriding the captain and ordering the embarkation of the “madmen.” For good measure, the governor demanded that “four cabins made of wood” be “constructed on the back-deck under the supervision of the [Company’s] Agency in New Caledonia.” The captain had lost, but his bosses in Marseille were proud of him nonetheless. After all, at least he had made the state sweat.

And yet, by the early 1920s, the situation looked eerily like the 1880s, where I began. State officials had not given up pressuring the company altogether, but by the 1920s, government demands focused on prostitution, human trafficking, and stowaways. Among such menacing company, the physically sick and mentally ill elicited little more than begrudging resignation.¹⁰¹ Thus, in 1920, the captain of the *Cordillère* (the ship with which this chapter began) lamented,

⁹⁹ Ibid. [« on pourrait peut-être les faire accepter par une commission moins exigeante que celle qui les a paraît-il refusées. »]

¹⁰⁰ “Voyage report of the El Kantara, Australia Line, n. 1, Cmdt. Perrin de Boussac, Marseille le 14 avril 1916,” El Kantara, 1905-1918, MM 181, CCIMP [« le navire ne [possède] ni le personnel, ni les installations nécessaires pour ce genre de transport »].

¹⁰¹ For example: “Pres. Du conseil min. des aff. Étrangères à M. Gaillard, min. de France au Caire, au sujet des embarquements clandestins à bord des Messageries Maritimes (10 Mai 1922),” Le Caire, Navigation (1896-1938), 278, CADN.

“During China voyages it happens that the administrations of Cochinchina or of Tonkin embark the ill, stricken with psychic troubles or neurasthenia, who it is difficult to surveille with the deck-crew, and there really ought to be installed a padded isolation cabin.”¹⁰² The next year, the captain of the *André Lebon* related the story of an “insane” and “raging” “military man,” surveillance of whom was entrusted to “one of his comrades.” “This lone guardian was entirely insufficient,” the captain observed, “so I had to beg the *Commandant d’Armes* to organize with his men a permanent surveillance service for him.”¹⁰³ Even this proved insufficient, though, and while the ship’s crew worked tirelessly to monitor the man, he nonetheless managed to throw himself into the sea. The ship halted motion. Against the odds, crewmembers fetched the man out of the sea, stuffed him in a cabin, and blocked the windows with iron bars. In his report, the captain concluded:

It will be indispensable that the crew be supplied with an installation that is more suitable to this end if such travelers are going to be imposed on us. Not only is our makeshift installation insufficient in terms of solidity and means of hygiene, but also the incessant noise, the racket that its inhabitant makes, has been the cause of worries among the third-class passengers lodged nearby [*dans le voisinage*] and, as a consequence, of many protests on their part.¹⁰⁴

Despite its sense of urgency, the captain’s report merely echoed a four-decade long refrain.

Of course, despite the scandalous continuity of transitory conditions for convicts and the ill, much had changed by 1920. The Great War had come and gone. Along the way, the French

¹⁰² “Voyage report of the Cordillère, Marseille–Yokohama, n. 2, Cmt. Sanguy (Marseille, 21 Décembre, 1920),” Cordillère, 1912-1920, MM 152, CCIMP [« Durant les voyages de chine il arrive que les administrations de la COCHINCHINE ou du TONKIN embarquent des malades, atteints de troubles psychiques ou de neurasthénie, qu’il est difficile de surveiller avec le personnel du bord et il y aurait lieu d’installer une cabine d’isolement capitonnée. »].

¹⁰³ “Voyage report of the André Lebon, Marseille–Yokohama (Nov.-Fev., 1920-21), Cmt. J. Cousin,” André Lebon, 1921, MM 20, CCIMP [« ce furieux » « un de ses camarades était spécialement chargé de sa surveillance. Ce seul gardien étant tout à fait insuffisant, j’ai dû prier le Commandant d’Armes d’organiser pour lui, avec ses hommes, un service permanent de surveillance »].

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. [« Il sera it indispensable que le bord soit pourvu d’une installation plus conforme à cette destination si de tels transportés nous sont imposés. Non seulement notre installation de fortune était insuffisant comme solidité et comme moyens d’hygiène mais encore le bruit incessant, le vacarme qu’y menait son locataire, a été une cause d’ennuis pour les passagers de IIIème classe logés dans le voisinage et par conséquent de plaintes de leur part. »]

state had directly requisitioned the entire *Messageries* fleet for its desperate war effort, puncturing the illusion of a voluntaristic private sector and a liberal government. No longer could the *Messageries* afford to keep French, or for that matter, British intelligence agents at a distance. Rather, the company became entirely dependent on state intelligence in order to avoid the packs of German U-boats that haunted the northern entrance to the Suez Canal and large swathes of the Mediterranean. *Messageries* employees were pulled into the military as it hemorrhaged lives by the hundreds of thousands, while Navy men cycled in and out of undermanned *Messageries* ships. Liners began getting state orders to pick up soldiers and workers not by the tens or hundreds, but rather by the thousands. Stowaways slipped in and out of the growing crowds. Stretched beyond its limits, surveillance of ocean liners collapsed just as paranoia peaked, further enmeshing state and company in the dialectic of security and insecurity. In the fog of war and under the dictates of states, routes that had remained fixed for decades were bent into strange and contorted shapes. At sea, liners were forced to zigzag to keep submarines at bay, abandoning the crisp, straight lines that steamships had introduced into maritime mobility.¹⁰⁵

After the War, many ceremonies, like the one with which I began this chapter, wrote a victor's history of the state-company relationship: yet again and as always, the *Messageries* had responded to the call of the state. The call had changed, however, and in 1921, the *Messageries* became the guinea pig for an experiment in private-public coupling: the *Société d'économie mixte* (the Mixed Economy Company, or Semi-Public Company). Henceforth, the *Messageries* would be divided into two entities; one, private and free; the other, a novel kind of state organ, "The

¹⁰⁵ See, for example: Voyage Reports of the Nera (1997 002 4229, AFL); Voyage Reports of the Melbourne (1997 002 4228, AFL); Voyage Reports of the Armand-Behic (1997 002 4228, AFL).

Messageries Maritimes Society of Contractual Services.”¹⁰⁶ Together, yet apart, state and company were feeling their way through an uncertain postwar world.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion: The Mask of the State

For all the mutual enmity characterizing their relationship between 1880 and 1920, of course, the *Messageries* and the French imperial state needed each other. Many knots tied the two together, from the subsidies-for-services arrangement and military logistics described here to the labor disputes analyzed in the last chapter. The *Messageries* operated in-between the juridical and territorial limits of the French Empire, in-between the French and British Empires, and in an in-between empire of its own. From this de-territorialized vantage point, the company could see one branch of the state as its tormentor, another as its deliverer, and still others as obstacles to avoid or objects to appropriate.

The historical sociologist Philip Abrams once described the state as, “in every sense of the term a triumph of concealment,” concluding that, “The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask.”¹⁰⁸ For Abrams, “the ideological function [of the state idea] is extended to a point where conservatives and radicals alike believe that their practice is not directed at each other but at the state; the world of illusion prevails.” The *Messageries*, as we have seen, had no such illusions. While mobilizing the “idea of the state,” it nonetheless lifted the mask. Stitching together state practices and ideas of sovereignty here;

¹⁰⁶ Marie-Francoise Berneron-Couvenhes, “La concession des services maritimes postaux au XIXe siècle: Le cas exemplaire des Messageries Maritimes,” *Revue économique* 58, n. 1 (Jan. 2007): 259-276.

¹⁰⁷ After the French Empire collapsed from 1940 to 1962, the widowed *Messageries* struggled to find its place in the global economy, especially as a precipitous rise in air-travel and the beginnings of containerization shook up the shipping industry. In 1977, the company was sold off, eventually being bundled into what is today one of the world’s largest container-shipping corporations, *CMA-CGM* – also based in Marseille.

¹⁰⁸ Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977),” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, n. 1 (1 March 1988): 58-89.

unraveling ideas of the state and practices of sovereignty there: it wove a commercial empire into the French Empire and out of its negative space.

In straining to maintain their liminal position within and between imperial states, the *Messageries* was not fundamentally unique. The subsidized shipping companies of other empires charted similar paths through an era of colonial expansionism and disorienting globalization. In a memo circulated in 1889 to all the agents, commanders, and pursers of the *P&O*, for instance, company directors began by noting, “You will be aware that under its Mail contract the Company is obliged to carry a certain number of... Government Passengers,” before admitting that “The presence of these people has often been found to be a great drawback, and is more than ever liable to be so now.” Advising the utmost discretion, directors nonetheless demanded that shipboard authorities isolate these Government Passengers as much as humanly possible so that “they do not prejudicially affect the comfort and the legitimate expectations of the regular...Passengers.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, counterparts in the *P&O* also endured the belligerent, jingoistic, sick, and suicidal passengers who state orders brought into subsidized liners. They, too, struggled mightily to balance the business of pleasure with the needs of empire.

Around the same time as shipboard officials were instructed to hide away their least desirable Government Passengers, *P&O* directors delivered a very different message to their interlocutors in the British Admiralty (in the midst of a debate over how and whether to militarize the merchant marine). “It is now 50 years...since the first Mail Contract was entered into between the Admiralty and the Peninsular Company,” directors noted, adding, “the work being entrusted... not through any favour or political influence, but simply because....the Company’s proposals were

¹⁰⁹ “Circular n. 169: Third Class Government Passengers (London, 23rd July, 1889),” *P&O Circulars*, PO 92/2, Caird, NMM.

found to be the most efficient...and... the most economic from a financial point of view.”¹¹⁰ But

Mail was just the beginning:

Apart from the Mail... the Company have on many occasions rendered signal assistance to Her Majesty’s Government in connection with various military operations, especially in the Far East. In the first Burmese War, the Crimean War, the Persian and China wars, the India Mutiny, and more recently in the Egyptian expeditions, the Company’s Fleet has been entrusted with most important and varied duties. But in the case of the Indian mutiny it is a matter of well-known history that the manner in which Her Majesty’s Government was enabled, by the assistance of the Company...was the means of saving the Presidency from the imminent danger by which it was threatened at the hands of the Mutineers.

Having finished their history lesson, the *P&O* directors looked to the future:

It will not be out of place to point out that the Company’s Fleet may enable Her Majesty’s Government to command at any time the services of fast vessels throughout the whole East, whether in India, China, Japan, or Australia... it is almost unnecessary to point out the very great value attaching to the possession of a fleet such as the Company’s [and] the facilities offered by the Company’s Dockyards and Coal Depots in the East...

Here was a script that the *Messageries* knew all too well. Going along its grain, the private, subsidized company climbed the ranks of a liberal meritocracy through “efficiency” and “economy,” allowing it to “assist” the government out of a spirit of patriotic voluntarism. But while the duty of the company to the empire was contingent and voluntaristic, the empire, it will be noticed, owed the company nothing less than its survival – past, present, and future.

At the height of the First World War, a *P&O* passenger liner, *Persia*, was sunk by German submarines in the Eastern Mediterranean as it traveled from England to India. Subsequent government investigations cast the crew and company under suspicion, leading the Chairman of the *P&O*, the 1st Earl of Inchcape James McKay, to speak his mind in a letter to investigators. “I

¹¹⁰ “Correspondence between the P. & O. S. N. CO. and The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty Relative to The Employment of Certain of the Company’s Steamers as Armed Cruisers” (1887), P&O/69/1, Caird, NMM.

find there is a considerable amount of feeling among my people in the P. & O. Service about the ‘Persia’ enquiry” the Chairman noted, before venting:

Our men have hitherto gone to sea... and we have been maintaining our services through the danger zone all through the war. Our ships have in many cases been attacked by submarines... and have been manfully defended and now the men say that if a ship is lost by a submarine or a mine, owing to some crank in Parliament they and the Company are to be put on their trial....The sea-going people say it is not good enough to take their lives in their hands as they are doing...with the added risk of having their characters and careers ruined by a Court sitting in... judgement....This is calculated to break their nerves... Something like 620 British vessels...have now been sunk by the enemy. If enquiries are to be made into these losses, into the seaworthiness and equipment of the ships, and into the conduct of those on board you will be pretty busy!¹¹¹

Shortly after the Armistice and upon the Chairman’s request, the *P&O* sponsored a book about the “war service” of the company, which it subsequently sold to passengers – at, management noted, “a very substantial margin of profit.”¹¹² Readers were spared any glimpse into the troubled marriage of state and company.

Ships and sea lanes were the very “sinews of war and trade,” and it was through them that the knots and tensions of global capitalism, empire-building, and nation-making were bound to be felt most sharply.¹¹³ The maritime highways of empire and the ships that traversed them were anything but uncontested and undifferentiated spaces through which states radiated power and industry turned its gears. Rather, along the route, governance took shape in turf wars, liminal sovereignties, and paradoxical demands.

¹¹¹ “Inchcape to The Rt. Hon. Walter Runciman, M.O., Board of Trade, S.W. (London, E.C. 28th February, 1916),” P&O/69/1, Caird, NMM.

¹¹² Circular 116 A (10th Dec. 1920),” P&O Circulars, P&O/69/1, Caird, NMM. The book is: F.A. Hook, *Merchant Adventurers, 1914-1918* (London: A. & C. Black, 1920), and was the product of the *P&O*’s and *B.I.*’s war records, assembled by the order of Inchcape.

¹¹³ La leh Kha lilli, *Sinews of Trade and War: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020).

Chapter 9. Interoceanic Commuters: Mobile Sociality and Imperial Elites

Paris, 9 March 1890.

Louis Pasteur's most promising student had just made a decision that left his mentor and colleagues shaking their heads. Abandoning a path that led to inheriting the master's mantle, Alexandre Yersin decided instead to seek work as a doctor aboard the trans-Suez ships of the *Messageries*. Four years later, after French, German, British and Japanese scientific missions raced to Hong Kong to learn from an outburst of the bubonic plague, Yersin would be the first to discover the bacillus responsible for the disease and its mode of transmission, making him a legendary figure in bacteriology. Back in the laboratory in 1890, however, his colleagues saw only a bright rival quitting the competitive field of Pasteurian science. With thinly disguised relief, they gossiped about his self-imposed exile. Yersin ignored the chatter, and armed with a coldly-written letter of recommendation, the young scientist embraced his fate.

As Yersin quickly discovered, "exile" had its own infrastructure, resources, and social networks. With help from a cousin, he arranged a meeting with an administrator of the *Messageries*. Afterward, the future conqueror of the bubonic plague wrote to his mother, exclaiming:

Dear Mom... I went on Thursday with cousin Demole to see the Messageries Maritimes administrator. The certificate of M. Pasteur, however coldly drafted by M. Roux, made an excellent effect. I will go where I like: to Brazil, Japan, Australia, Madagascar, etc. and for as long as I please. If there isn't place in September they'll give a leave to one of the active doctors, at last, all of the company's agents will be at my service if I want to conduct research on the diseases of exotic countries. I did not dare to hope for such a fine result.¹

¹ « Yersin à sa mère. Paris, 9 mars 1890 », Correspondance d'Alexandre Yersin, Institut Pasteur Paris [Chère maman... Je suis allé jeudi avec cousin Demole voir son administrateur des messageries maritimes. Le certificat de M^r Pasteur quoique rédigé froidement par M^r Roux a fait excellent effet. J'ira i où je voudrai : au Brésil, au Japon, en Australie, à Madagascar, etc et pour le temps qu'il me plaira. S'il n'y a pas de place en septembre on donnera un

For an ambitious student who felt stifled in the sterile environment of the Parisian, Pasteurian laboratory, this was a dreamy result. He would trade the lab for the field, conducting research as and where he desired. Life along a maritime highway promised him not just a ticket out of France, but access to a global network of worksites and assistants, all courtesy of the *Messageries*. For Yersin, in other words, the in-between spaces of the French Empire held the promise of being at the center of things. After some reflection, he settled on a trans-Suez route, sending his mother a “Messageries guidebook where you can see all the different layovers between Marseille and Saigon.” He would not stay forever in the position of ship doctor. Still, a year into his new job, the notoriously restless scientist was surprised by how thoroughly *placed* he felt while shuttling between Marseille and Saigon on the steamship *Volga*. Reacting to his first transfer to another ship, the stoic doctor wrote to his family, “I regretted leaving the *Volga*... I knew everyone there well. It’s curious how quickly one becomes attached to one’s boat.”²

At Sea on the Steamship Pei-Ho, October 1894.

Embroided in scandal, Hubert Lyautey was heading for Tonkin, French Indochina’s war-torn northern frontier. After publishing a damning critique of military training in France, the disgruntled officer had promptly received an (likely punitive) assignment to ship out to the colonies.³ As it turned out, this soft exile would set Lyautey on the path to becoming one of France’s most prominent “Man of Action” figures. In Indochina, under the tutelage of his future commander and

congé à un des médecins en activité, enfin tous les agents de la compagnie seront à mon service si je veux faire des recherches sur les maladies des pays exotiques. Je n’osais pas espérer un si beau résultat].

² « Alexandre Yersin à sa mère, Saigon 6 avril 1891 », Correspondance d’Alexandre Yersin, Institut Pasteur Paris. [“J’ai regretté de quitter le *Volga*... J’y connaissais bien tout le monde. C’est curieux comme on s’attache vite à son bateau”].

³ The critical article was: Hubert Lyautey, “Le rôle social de l’officier dans le service militaire universel,” *Revue des Deux Mondes* (March, 1891). On Lyautey’s sexual orientation, see: Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 237-239.

mentor, Joseph Galliéni, Lyautey thrived, as the two gained laurels and celebrity by claiming to have developed nothing less than a foolproof process of “colonial pacification.”⁴ Curiously enough, however, the “Hero of Empire” felt that he had come of age before even setting foot on land.⁵

After a few days at sea, Lyautey wrote to his family that a new world was opening to him. Reveling in the company of his charismatic co-passengers, the young officer contrasted life on board with what he had left behind:

It would take a tome to describe to you how contact with all these hard-working men of will-power and initiative has brought forth in me regrets over 10 years wasted in France; years of following procedure, of tolerating slaps on the wrist, of accepting familiar or bureaucratic clichés. These chats between men of pure action make one feel as far away from the insincere literary salons and dinner parties of Paris, as from the mummification of our listless, tedious, shackled army. And it is a resurrection.⁶

On a trans-Suez ship, a kind of contagious “contact” with “men of pure action” allowed the young officer to shed an old life; to become a “man of action” himself. Repeated layovers in British imperial territory and meetings with British counterparts, meanwhile, left the French officer in awe. Leaving one layover tour of British garrisons along the route, he reflected, “I’m swimming in the application of all my ideas – so they are not utopias, and it exists somewhere... But what would our adjutants in France say?”⁷

⁴ Lyautey is also remembered as an urban planner and colonial modernizer from his time as Resident-General in Morocco, and as the empire’s foremost propagandist when he returned to Paris, where he organized the immense 1931 Colonial Exposition. See: Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁵ See, for example: Finch, *A Progressive Occupation? The Galliéni-Lyautey Method*.

⁶ [“J’en aurais une tartine à te faire sur ce que le contact avec toutes ces volontés, ces initiatives, ces laborieux, fait surgir de regrets, pour les 10 ans perdus de vie de France, de filière suivie, de férule supportée, de clichés familiaux ou administratifs acceptés. A ces causeries entre les hommes d’action pure, on se sent aussi loin du faux des salons de lettre et des dîners de Paris que de la momification de notre armée désœuvrée, routinière et ligotée. Et c’est une résurrection.”] Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin et de Madagascar (1894-1899)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1933), 12-13.

⁷ Hubert Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin et de Madagascar (1894-1899), Tome I* (Paris: A. Colin, 1920), p. 55 [« Je nage en plein dans l’application de toutes mes idées, - ce ne sont donc pas des utopies, et il existe quelque part... Mais que diraient nos adjudants-majors de France? »].

Six years later, the ambitious officer was looking back at France from another steamship, the *Natal*, as he reflected on his first voyage into the colonies: “When, six years ago, I was traveling the same route for the first time, I felt as if I were discovering worlds with each turn of the propeller, and the ship itself seemed to me full of mysteries.”⁸ Comparing this year’s transoceanic commute with last year’s, Lyautey realized that his ship contained the colonial community to which he now belonged. To his sister, he marveled:

Has it been a year? I cannot believe it. We are almost the same personnel around the General, the boat’s postal agent is the one from the last voyage, and two or three passengers are also here again... I am no longer the loner darting hither and thither. Enclosed in our compact group, it is life as usual for me... My cabin, still the same... the nice, comfortable little *home* [written in English] that I like to make for myself.⁹

The Pasteurian prodigy with the globe at his fingertips, and the colonial “Man of Action” coming of age: these icons of fin-de-siècle French modernity were traveling at the apex of the age of steam and the height of high imperialism. As the tentacles of shipping lines reached every corner of the globe, each new route brought timetables, agencies, port facilities, and a certain degree of standardization in the traveling experience. If, in 1867, the Saint-Simonian d’Enfantin’s famous proclamation – “we have enlaced the globe in our networks of rail, gold, silver, steam, and electricity!” – still had something aspirational about it, by the 1890s, that vision appeared to have largely been realized.¹⁰ The late-19th century triumph of steamship navigation coincided, and to a certain extent, entailed, the acceleration of colonial conquest. With each new frontier of colonial

⁸ Lyautey, *Lettres du sud de Madagascar 1900-1902* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1935), 5 [“Quand, il y a six ans, je faisais la même route pour la première fois, je croyais, à chaque tour d’hélice, découvrir des mondes, et le bateau lui-même me semblait plein de mystères.”].

⁹ Ibid. [“Y a t-il un an? Je ne puis le croire. Nous sommes autour du Général presque le même personnel, l’agent des postes du bateau est celui du dernier voyage, et 2 à 3 passagers s’y retrouvent aussi... Je ne suis plus, comme il y a six ans, un isolé allant butiner de-ci de-là. Je suis encarté dans notre groupe compact à la vie habituelle... Ma cabine, toujours la même... le bon petit home confortable que j’aime à me faire.”]

¹⁰ Henri comte de Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres de Saint-Simon & d’Enfantin, Vol. 12* (E. Dentu, 1867), 165 [“Nous avons enlacé le globe de nos réseaux de chemin de fer, d’or, d’argent, de vapeur et d’électricité!”].

conquest and each new steamship line put into service, networks of diplomats, military personnel, civil administrators, missionaries, and doctors expanded their reach. Just as importantly, these networks of imperial power began flowing with unprecedented regularity. A professional class of inter-oceanic commuters was growing and taking shape.

Historians of French colonialism have uncovered fascinating examples of the spaces in which networks of colonial power arose and thrived, from lobbies, societies, and expositions in the metropole, to spas, resorts, and port-city chambers of commerce.¹¹ While networks of colonial power have long been sought and found on terra firma, seldom have historians questioned whether steamship voyages did anything beyond mechanically enabling the rise of those networks of imperial power, or of facilitating communication between them. But in ignoring the steamship and the route-space that it constituted, we miss a critical site in both the construction of French imperial power and the building of inter-imperial ties east of Suez. Mobile sociality aboard steamships could be prolonged, intense, and unavoidable. In its capacity to assemble elites of different empires, perhaps only a luxury international hotel could rival the liner. Hotels, however, neither move nor confine their inhabitants as ships do. Indeed, steamship voyages were characterized by a peculiar alchemy: part interoceanic mobility and part cramped confinement; boredom here and immense anticipation there; isolation from familiar social networks and immersion in new ones.

And yet, from these dual realities of transit emerged the conditions of possibility for little-explored forms of exchange and collaboration, both among different elites of the French Empire and between representatives of different empires. The trans-Suez liner of the Belle Époque was a venue of soft power and a range of practices akin to what is labeled today as networking. In this

¹¹ For example: E. Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers*; Jennings, *Imperial Heights*; A. Velmet, *Pasteur's Empire*; M. Miller, *Europe and the Maritime World*; P. Morlat (ed.), *Les grands commis de l'Empire colonial français*; J-F. Klein, *Soyeux en Mer de Chine*; Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*.

sense, the in-between spaces of the French Empire – ships, port-cities, and the maritime highways constituted by their interplay – were far more central than they might first appear. A trans-Suez highway was something to pass through, but also something to build and benefit from, to dwell in and perhaps even to belong to.

Messageries liners offer useful vantage points for observing these dynamics. A subsidized contractor of the French Empire, the company was also privately owned, with investors to please and an interest in attracting foreign clientele using the lure of French culture. More often than not, on trans-Suez maritime highways, “foreign” meant British, and Franco-British inter-imperial imbrication was never more clearly perceived than from the deck of a *Messageries* steamer. The timeline of that imbrication scrambles the official diplomatic history of Franco-British relations. Previous chapters investigated conflict and contact in the trans-Suez liner vertically; that is, across hierarchies of class and race. This chapter focuses on horizontal relations: relations between colonial elites, or “empire-builders,” as they imagined themselves.¹²

For weeks, even months, at a time, trans-Suez steamships brought together diplomatic, military, and commercial elites from nearly every empire and nationality. In 1866, just after the *Messageries Maritimes* opened its Marseille-to-Yokohama line, they triumphantly reported to stockholders that a ship had made the voyage in 43 days, “including 32 days of navigation and 11 days spread out between nine stations.” Before, they claimed, the fastest recorded voyage to Yokohama had required no less than 52 days.¹³ Fifty-two years later, in 1918, technological advances had trimmed travel times, but the trip from Marseille to Yokohama still required a

¹² Of course, if steamships could weave webs in the service of imperial expansion and inter-imperial condominium, the reverse process – meetings and network construction among anti-colonial actors – was possible as well, though necessarily more tenuous and difficult.

¹³ Compagnie des Services Maritimes des Messageries Impériales, « Assemblée générale des actionnaires ordinaire et extraordinaire du 31 mai 1866. Rapport du Conseil d’administration » (Paris: A. Chaix et Cie., 1866), ch. 2.

whopping 37 days. Reaching Saigon likewise required around a month of travel. Those figures assume that everything would go smoothly. Given the immense logistical complexity of voyages that mixed commercial freight, tourism, migration, and state-organized transit, it rarely did. Delays could come in many forms, from labor disputes with crews and dayworkers to health inspections, migration controls, quarantines, and encounters with distressed ships. Just passing through the Suez Canal was no easy task: regulations changed from year to year, traffic jams and collisions were ubiquitous, and deserters and convicts often chose the passage as their moment to escape.¹⁴ Along the way to Yokohama, moreover, there were no less than nine layovers (Naples, Port-Saïd and Suez, Aden or Djibouti, Bombay or Colombo, Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Kobe), meaning that passengers had different lengths of exposure to one another.

Diplomacy in Motion

Whether mobile cohabitation lasted forty days or four, it inevitably entailed contact with elites from different empires. In the passenger lists of *Messageries* ships, representatives of every empire with possessions across the Indian and Pacific Oceans appeared. In this sense, the *Messageries* was not exceptional, at least among lines of its stature. The subsidized, trans-Suez shipping lines of other empires, like the British *P&O* or the German *Norddeutscher Lloyd*, also harbored inter-imperial passenger populations. That said, the large size of the *Messageries* fleet, relative to the small numbers of French colonial settlers in the Indo-Pacific meant that the company was particularly dependent on attracting foreign clientele. Likewise, the prestige of French cuisine, and

¹⁴ See: V. Huber, *Channeling Mobilities*.

French language and culture more broadly, attracted elite passengers from other empires with a force that few foreign competitors could hope to duplicate.¹⁵

In any inter-imperial passenger population, diplomats were a ubiquitous presence. Though they embodied their nations abroad, fin-de-siècle diplomats proved remarkably unattached to the flagships of their own imperial nation-states. *Messageries* voyage reports from the period reveal that the company's ships were regularly ferrying Russian, British, Belgian, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Siamese, Chinese, and Japanese diplomats – and that many of these diplomats paid discounted rates to travel.¹⁶ At times, the presence of diplomats and diplomatic missions aboard French liners transformed the ship itself. Thus, when the *Iraouaddy* transported the Chinese Ambassador for France and England and his forty-person suite in 1890, the liner's captain observed, "the Chinese flag was flown on the central mast in all the layover ports."¹⁷

The movement of diplomats and missions made liners useful pieces of larger diplomatic campaigns. Hints in the records of the *Messageries* would suggest, for instance, that the company's liners played a part in the strategically vital relationship between France and Siam. Wedged between British Burma and French Indochina, the Kingdom of Siam was alternately attacked and courted, but never formally colonized. As a former imperial hegemon in the region and the rare outpost of sovereign independence in an increasingly colonized world, it played a critical role in the Franco-British colonial cold war in Southeast Asia. *Messageries*' liners offer windows into

¹⁵ This was true not only in the East Asia Lines, but also in the company's Latin American Line (stripped of subsidies and canceled between 1906 and 1912), where, in the 1880s, the *Messageries* carried, proportionally, twice as many cabin passengers as its British and German competitors. Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, 430. The *Messageries* also charged higher prices than proximate competitors.

¹⁶ "Yokohama, 21 fev. 1901. Agent principal de Yokohama à M. le Min. Plenip. À Tokio (n. 26)," Min. des Aff. Étrangères 32, Tokyo, Ambassade, 697PO/A, CADN.

¹⁷ "Voyage Report of the *Iraouaddy*, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 14/15 (Marseille, 20 Jul. 1890)," 19970024228, AFL. ["Le pavillon Chinois a été hissé au grand mat dans les ports de relâche à cause de la présence à bord de l'Ambassadeur de Chine pour la France et l'Angleterre."]

that role. In 1880, for instance, the voyage report of the liner, *Anadyr*, noted that its passengers of distinction included, “the ambassador the king of Siam with a suite of 17 persons.” As the ship’s captain related, the ambassador had proposed the company a deal: the king of Siam would charter one of their liners for his next voyage to Europe and back, so long as the company obeyed a few conditions. “The vessel should be a ship similar to the great liners,” the ambassador specified, “its holds could be used for traffic, but not during layovers; the king would occupy all of the passenger rooms and facilities without exception, and no commercial operation would be conducted after he embarks and until he disembarks. The ship would have four crossings to carry out.” The ambassador, who as the captain noted, was “also the Minister of Foreign Affairs,” had apparently “expressed his strong desire several times to handle this important business with the Company rather than any other.”¹⁸

Franco-Siamese relations collapsed during the 1890s, as the Siamese-claimed territory of Laos was annexed to French Indochina, but by the turn of the century, ties were slowly being rebuilt. At that moment, the company was pressured by French diplomats to extend its price deductions for traveling diplomats to Siamese officials. The company’s agent bashfully explained how such an oversight could have occurred: “The exclusion until now of the Siamese Government from a favor granted to diverse other foreign governments may and must be, as you believe, the result of a simple oversight; but it should not have had any disparaging character for Siamese Diplomatic Agents which would be contrary to the Company’s well-known traditions of high

¹⁸ “Voyage report of the *Anadyr* (n. 3), Marseille-Shanghai, n. 12 (Marseille, 14 Jun. 1880),” 1997 002 3943, AFL. Negotiations over chartering ocean liners to foreign sovereigns appear to have been fairly common. On his return journey from England, the Emir of Afghanistan, Shahzada, nearly gave his British escort a heart attack when he began negotiating with Cook and P&O to charter a ship. “Shahzada’s Return Journey, Marseille to Suez. Sir Gerald Fitzgerald to India Office. India Office 9th Nov. 1895 (A107B),” BL.

decorum.”¹⁹ Then, finishing his diplomatic excuses, the agent rushed to implement the discounts. The next year, *Messageries* agents, captains, and diplomatic officials planned to have the company’s ships in Yokohama fly Siamese flags when the King arrived in the port for a state visit.²⁰ Of course, price deductions and flag-waving were small gestures, but if diplomats are diplomatic, it is because small gestures are the building blocks of diplomacy.

Given the cosmopolitan culture of their profession, as well as the status of French language and culture in many diplomatic milieux of the Belle Époque, the willingness of diplomats to forego their own flagships has a logic. Moreover, practical considerations cannot be ignored. At a moment’s notice, diplomats were subject to be sent on time-sensitive missions across long distances. Faced with such imperatives, they often chose the first available ship that could guarantee them a degree of comfort.

Military officers and colonial governors, while subject to similar pressures as diplomats, present perhaps a more striking presence aboard *Messageries* ships. As objects of private capital and instruments at the service of the French State, the company’s ships were legally obliged to carry postal service to the far reaches of the empire, as well as to ferry troops and state employees along their peripatetic trajectories. In times of war, moreover, the government could dictate the movement of *Messageries* ships and the nature of their cargo. Thus, it should give pause to consider that *Messageries* ships, despite being quasi-state organs, transported large numbers of officers, generals, and admirals from the military establishments of rival empires. Colonial governors and upper-level civil administrators of foreign empires also figure regularly in records

¹⁹ “Yokohama, 21 Fev. 1901/22 fev. Tokio. Agent Princip. De la C. des MM à Yokohama au M. le Min. Plenip. De Fr. à Tokio (n. 26).” Min. des Aff. Étrangères 32, Tokyo, Ambassade, 697PO/A, CADN.

²⁰ “Agence principale de la C. des MM à Yokohama à M. le Min. de Fr. à Tokio (n. 116). Yokohama, le 14 Dec. 1902.” Min. des Aff. Étrangères 32, Tokyo Ambassade, 697PO/A, CADN.

of *Messageries* ship passengers. In an era of revanchism, even German colonial governors appear in the record: in 1896, for instance, a voyage report from the Indian Ocean Line noted that, “M. Major Wissmann [sic?], Governor of the German Colony in East Africa” came aboard, along with “nine other passengers of the same provenance.”²¹ Rather than wait another week for the German ship to arrive, he and his entourage apparently decided to travel French. Whether they had to swallow their pride, or they were relieved to find a place aboard a prestigious liner, once aboard, they joined a thoroughly inter-imperial population of passengers.

Generally, international crises only confirmed the role of liners as places where imperial elites intersected and where diplomacy took to the sea. There simply was no alternative: French settlers, soldiers, and colonial administrators were never going to be numerous enough to sustain a line as large as the *Messageries*. Given their contractual obligations to imperial states, moreover, subsidized companies like the *Messageries* would always be called on to mediate inter-imperial relations. In 1886, for instance, shortly after France and China had reached a fragile peace agreement, a Marseille-Shanghai voyage report described how, in the space of a week, a captain had been forced to set aside luxury cabins for a Japanese delegation and “a Chinese plenipotentiary, accompanied by about 35 people,” followed by a French General and his staff.²² As it turned out, three different actors were behind the orders. First, the *Messageries* agent in Shanghai had ordered

²¹ « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Mauritius, n. 4, Cmdt. Bévilacqua (Marseille, 11 Mar. 1896) », *Rapports de voyage et correspondance diverse de l'Iraouaddy (1890-1906)*, MM 265, CCIMP. A couple voyages later, officials in German East Africa also entrusted the *Messageries* with a job that netted them « 10,000 roubles »: moving a « group of 47 blacks from the German colony led by a European », from Zanzibar to « the Exposition in Leipzig » (Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, East Africa Line, n. 19, Cmdt. Bévilacqua; 28 Aug-28 Oct. 1896 », *Ibid.*)

²² “Voyage Report of the Saghalien, Marseille-Shanghai (Marseille le 22 avril 1886),” *Voyage Reports of the Saghalien, 1881-1895*, MM 458, CCIMP. A 1921 voyage report showed the longevity of the Chinese diplomatic presence on *Messageries* ships: « passagers : Son Excellence TCHENG-LOH, Envoyé Extraordinaire et Ministre Plenipoteniare de Chine en France avec sa famille et les membres de légation. En troisième classe, 150 étudiants Chinois. » (“Voyage Report of the Chili, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 3, Cmdt. Martino; Marseille, le 20 Jan. 1921,” *Chili, 1917-1922*, MM 129, CCIMP).

the embarkation of the Japanese delegation, in an effort to curry favor among elite Japanese clientele. Second, the Quai d'Orsay's head diplomat in ongoing peace negotiations with China had arranged the Chinese delegation's transit on a French line, a decision that he understood as an element of his diplomatic efforts. And third, the War Ministry had requisitioned passage for the General and his staff, as part of its standardized system of using the *Messageries* for traveling officers. When, as discussed in the last chapter, that French general menaced Chinese passengers onboard, company directors in Marseille could only reassure their addled captain that balancing privileges in such a setting was "always a very delicate thing."²³

Indeed, far from reasserting national affiliations at sea, international crises accentuated the inter-imperial imbrication of shipping lines and highlighted their utility as instruments of diplomacy and soft power. During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, for example, the *Messageries* became, for practical purposes, an auxiliary of the Russian Empire. Since the early-1890s, French diplomats had anxiously sought to solidify the delicate pact of military support they held with the Russian Empire. After all, support from Tzarist Russia promised France a chance at surviving the next war with Germany, while providing diplomatic cover for its colonial expansion. In safeguarding the relationship, French heads of state pursued many channels. Under state pressure, for instance, French finance flooded fin-de-siècle Russia.²⁴ As the Russian and Japanese Empires collided in 1904, the chance to protect the relationship presented itself in sea lanes and ocean liners.

²³ Ibid. [« L'attribution de ces cabines de pont est toujours chose très délicate. »]

²⁴ See: George Michon, *The Franco-Russian Alliance, 1891-1917* (Fertig, 1969); Rondo Cameron, *The Evolution of International Business, 1800-1945, Volume 4. France and the Economic Development of Europe, 1800-1914* (London: Routledge, 2000 edition).

Arriving in Yokohama, Japan “at the moment of the rupture in negotiations,” one *Messageries* captain was charged with nothing less than evacuating Russia’s diplomatic apparatus in Japan. The mission began when the French ambassador in Tokyo ordered the ship-captain to head to Nagasaki, where he “picked up the personnel of the [Russian] consulate and a Russian hospital, who, given the political events, were obliged to leave the port.” By the time he set out from Yokohama, his ship was carrying “all the personnel from the Russian Legation in Tokyo” and “that of the consulates in Yokohama, Kobe, Nagasaki, along with many residents, and fifty or so sailors coming from a naval hospital that Russia maintained in Nagasaki.”²⁵

A year later, as the war turned into a catastrophe for the Russian Empire, another *Messageries* captain was sent to whisk away the Russian high command that had just surrendered at Port-Arthur. Welcoming an unexpected influx of passengers (“538, almost all officers or functionaries, with some families”), the captain transformed his ship’s *salon des dames* into cabins. Already carrying “eight generals, two admirals, and a head engineer” – all Russian –, the liner continued to retrieve errant Russian officers, layover by layover, as it steamed towards Suez. All the while, the captain noted, “many wounded Russians were cared for aboard.” Ship-doctors on the *Messageries* liner, *Australien*, likewise recorded providing surgical care to wounded Russians who were being evacuated.²⁶ After the voyage, the Russian General who had commanded the ill-fated garrison at Port Arthur, Anatoly Stessel, sent the company a letter via the French consul thanking it for its service to Russia. As one of the passengers who been borne to safety by a

²⁵ “Voyage Report of the Yarra, China Line, n. 8, Cmdt. Sellier (Marseille, 22 Mar. 1904).” Yarra (1893-1907), MM 559, CCIMP [« Aussi, sur la demande qui lui a vait été adressée par M le Ministre de la France à Tokyo, l’Agent Principal de la Compagnie, m’a donné l’ordre de faire escale à Nagasaki ; pour y prendre le personnel du consulat et d’un hôpital Russe » « nous a vons pris à Yokohama tout le personnel de la Légation de Russie à Tokyo – nous a vons également rapatrié celui des Consulats de Yokohama, Kobé, Na gasaki, a insi que nombreux résidents, et une cinquantaine de marins provenant d’un hôpital na val que la Russie entretenait à Nagasaki. »].

²⁶ “Journal de Bord du Medecin Sanitaire, Australien, 1904,” in Journaux du bord du Medecin Sanitaire, Australien (1899 – 1905), 200 E 1355, ADBR.

Messageries liner, the general spoke from personal experience.²⁷ Months later, the company was still coordinating with French diplomatic officials across East Asia to handle the fallout from the War, now in an effort to sideline German shipping lines and take charge of the repatriation of Russian prisoners of war in Japan.²⁸

British Passengers, French Liners

Before 1904, when the French and British Empires ended their cold war with a diplomatic accord known as the *Entente Cordiale*, the world's two largest empires spent roughly three decades repeatedly menacing each other with mutual annihilation. In the 1870s, as France labored under war, indemnities, and political turmoil, those threats were rather unilateral. Throughout the 1880s and 90s, however, French statesmen proved more willing to test their luck; armed as they were with a rebuilt army, a vast financial sector, and a growing number of overseas bases. As France and Britain lurched between “small wars” and grand “Questions,” there were myriad opportunities for belligerent bluster, increasingly amplified through the booming penny presses of each country.²⁹ During, for instance, the British takeover of Egypt, the French conquest of Madagascar, the armed Franco-British standoff in Fashoda (South Sudan), and still other foreign policy clashes, strategists dusted off detailed war plans while yellow presses howled for action.³⁰

²⁷ « Voyage report of the Australien, Marseille-Yokohama, Cmdt. Verron (Marseille 20, Feb. 1905) », *Australie* (1904-1915), MM 58, CCIMP. [« Comme passagers de distinction nous avons huit généraux, deux amiraux, et un ingénieur principal ; à savoir : les généraux Strossel, Reiss, Na leine, Trésia koff, Savitzi, Gria znoff, Kastenko, Gorbatonski, Lindebeck... à Port Saïd tous les passagers Russes transbordent à un vapeur Russe pour la Crimée... de nombreux blessés russes ont été soignés à bord ».]

²⁸ “Yokohama, 26 Juillet 1905. Agent principal de la C. des MM à Yokohama au M. le Min. Plenipotentiaire de Franca à Tokio (n. 6).” *Min. des Aff. Étrangères* 32, Tokyo Ambassade 697PO/A, CADN.

²⁹ Charles Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (1896); on “Questions,” see: Holly Case, *The Age of Questions*.

³⁰ On the role of the press in such moments, see: Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*; and Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists*.

If action were to have been taken at any point during the 1880s and 90s, its ramifications would likely have been felt instantly along trans-Suez sea lanes. Indeed, British strategists suspected that in the event of war, France would compensate for being navally outgunned everywhere but the Mediterranean by hurling multitudes of light ships into commerce-raiding as quickly as possible.³¹ Merchant shipping, then, was widely expected to be pulled immediately into any conflict. Given this assumption, one might again expect that British passengers would have avoided French liners, either out of patriotism or prudence. In 1884, one *Messageries* captain fretted about a dip in foreign passengers aboard his ship for exactly that reason, telling directors, “Concerning the English, in particular, a reason that courtesy does not permit them to say to our face, but which is more powerful than all the rest, is the national animosity that recent events in Egypt, Madagascar, and China have awakened in them.”³²

But some British passengers, per the captain’s remarks, had never left, and many more would return. Throughout the 1880s and 90s, British generals, colonial governors, and high-ranking officers from the Royal Navy figured in the vast majority of “Passengers of Distinction” lists that every *Messageries* voyage produced. When the *Messageries* agent in Singapore drew up his report for 1893, moreover, he boasted to bosses that, “Almost all the English high functionaries travel on our steamships.”³³ Meanwhile, in Aden the company’s agent wrote his superiors around

³¹ By wielding what British strategists called a “mosquito fleet” (in France the naval theory was associated with a line of thought known as the *Jeune école*, or Young School), the French could theoretically force the British Navy to choose between spreading out to protect its merchant shipping, or concentrating in strategic theaters. The strategy also stood a chance of delivering consequential damage to British supply chains *before* the French inevitably ran out of coal supplies, which Britain overwhelmingly controlled. “E.M.G. 1^{er} Section: La politique navale française; l’Argus de Melbourne – 27 Oct. 1898,” and “E.M.G. Renseignements demandés par M. Lockroy par sa lettre n. 6 (8 juin 1901),” in BB8 1903, SHD-Vincennes.

³² « Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Marseille-Shanghai, n. 21 (Marseille, 7 Oct. 1884) », Yang-Tsé, 1878-1894, MM 546, CCIMP [“En ce qui concerne particulièrement les anglais, une raison que la courtoisie ne leur permet pas de dire en face mais qui est plus puissante que tout le reste est l’animosité nationale que les récents événements d’Egypte, de Madagascar et de Chine ont réveillé chez eux. »].

³³ “Rapport général de Service, Exercice 1893, Ch. 2. Secrétariat. Agence de Singapore,” 5. Rapports d’agence, 1997 0024470, AFL.

the same time, “I take note that English officers who enjoy an annual leave of 60 days seek out your steamships from Bombay.”³⁴ For most English passengers, patriotism simply made an exception for travel. This ability of passengers to relativize international tensions and compartmentalize patriotism was never more apparent than on a *Messageries* ship transporting a large group of English passengers from India to Queen Victoria’s “Diamond Jubilee” in 1897. As the ship’s captain reported, his British passengers were so “delighted” with their experience on a French ship that, despite the patriotic purpose of their journey, “they declared they will no longer take English ships.”³⁵

Even during the French conquest of Madagascar (1895-6), French liners continued to be frequented by British passengers, including those with political and military positions. Again, one might have expected that French and British passengers would have taken to their respective flagships, at least for a moment. After all, the invasion of Madagascar proceeded in the face of loud British threats (both on the front pages of newspapers and in the halls of power), and quickly led to an occupation that stripped the island of its extensive British interests. Nonetheless, inter-imperial cohabitation remained the rule within trans-Suez liners. On a Marseille-Madagascar voyage in Spring 1896, for instance, one liner’s captain noted the presence of Anglican clergy and British engineers; though he worried about how politics might affect his British clientele, other ships throughout the year of 1896 reported transporting English journalists, military officers, and more Anglican clergy.³⁶ On a Marseille-Nouméa voyage at the same time, the French “Passengers

³⁴ “Rapport de l’agent. Aden, Jan. 1894,” Rapports d’agence, 1997 002 4470, AFL. (when speaking of company property, many employees of the major shipping lines spoke to superiors not of “ours”, but rather of “yours”).

³⁵ « Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, China Line, cmdt. Lidin (Marseille 12 Jun. 1897) », Yang-Ts, 1895-1908, MM 547, CCIMP [“ravis, ils déclarent qu’ils ne prendront plus les navires anglais. »].

³⁶ « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Mauritius, n. 4, Cmdt. Bévilacqua (Marseille, 11 Mar. 1896) », Rapports de voyage et correspondance diverse de l’Iraouaddy (1890-1906), MM 265, CCIMP; « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, East Africa Line, n. 19 (28 Aug.-28 Oct., 1896), Bévilacqua », *ibid* ; « voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Marseille-Réunion, n. 12 (Marseille, 19 Nov. 1895), Cpt. Chaboud », Yang-Tsé 1895-1908 », MM 547, CCIMP.

of Distinction” (including a general, a colonial governor, a bishop, and a consul) mingled with a British admiral and a top official from Australia.³⁷ Another *Messageries* ship reported delays after wartime requisitions caused acute shortages of day laborers along the route; nonetheless, its captain insisted that his most prestigious passengers, the governor of British Mauritius and an English Admiral, “were very happy with their voyage.”³⁸ On the ship’s next voyage, the British general consul in Uganda and a British colonel rubbed shoulders with French officers.³⁹ During his 28-day voyage to Madagascar to chronicle the invasion, meanwhile, the journalist, humorist, and colonial propagandist, Étienne Grosclaude, observed the presence, “on the same ship as us, under the direction of a big-wig in the admiralty,” of “a squadron of young [British] engineers.”⁴⁰

During perhaps the most infamous incident of Franco-British warmongering, the Fashoda Crisis (late-1898 to early-1899), the French protagonist, Colonel Marchand famously refused to evacuate Fashoda via the Nile, even though it would have saved him months of travel. Rather than make use of British ships and resources, his team crossed Ethiopia on foot until they reached Djibouti, where a French steamer awaited them.⁴¹ In his loyalty to his nation’s flagship, however, Marchand was the exception to the rule. Earlier in 1898, for instance, the “son of the Sultan of Zanzibar... heading to England accompanied by the English vice-consul” were listed onboard a *Messageries* liner. The ship’s captain received a medal from the Sultan for his stewardship,

³⁷ « Voyage report of the Australien, Marseille – Nouméa (May 1896) », *Australien 1890-1903*, MM 57, CCIMP. As well as several officers from the Japanese Navy.

³⁸ « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, East Africa Line, n. 19, Cmdt. Bevilaqua; 28 Aug-28 Oct. 1896 », *Iraouaddy, 1890-1906*, MM 265, CCIMP.

³⁹ « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Mauritius, Cmdt. Fontana (10 Feb.-Apr., 1897) », *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Étienne Grosclaude, *Un parisien à Madagascar. Aventures et impressions de voyage* (Paris: Hachette, 1898), 12-15. Grosclaude’s ship also passed by Zanzibar as it was bombarded and stormed by English troops. According to him, as they looked on, a German ship pulled up next to his French liner and loudly played the *Marseillaise*. Grosclaude seized the opportunity to quote Drummond Wolff, saying, “à partir de Suez, les Français et les Allemands n’ont que marcher coté à côté.” Despite the fact that his ship’s captain put up a sign prohibiting passengers from going to land (it was a warzone, after all), he and some shipmates toured the devastated port. After leaving, he noted that a German ship had swept away the deposed Sultan of Zanzibar and granted him asylum.

⁴¹ Marc Michel, *La Mission Marchand: 1895-1899* (Paris: Mouton & Co., 2017 ed.), 230-38.

transmitted through the British consul.⁴² That same year, a voyage report from the China Line included in its “Passengers of Distinction” a typically motley mix of diplomats and officers – Russian ministers, consuls, and navy captains, a Belgian consul, a number of high-ranking French officers and consuls, etc. Alongside them, however, were Indian royalty and “a great number of commissioned and non-commissioned officers from the English Army in Bombay.”⁴³ One British governor of Mauritius, traveling in the midst of Fashoda tensions, even died aboard a *Messageries* steamship: “the body was conserved and, with certain precautions, deposited without problems in Suez” – all, the captain specified, “at the request of the Doctor... and other English passengers.”⁴⁴

When *Messageries* agents fretted about the consequences of Fashoda, they only revealed the extent to which their liners coursed with British passengers regardless of international politics. In January 1899, for example, one captain warned directors that “politics followed us into the sea, and if Fashoda did not by any means disrupt the peace onboard, it nonetheless caused prejudice to our charitable causes.”⁴⁵ By implication, then, British passengers remained onboard. Moreover, a dip in the revenue generated by onboard charity events was a small price to pay for an event that had nearly brought the world’s two largest empires to war. In the report of that very voyage, the captain confirmed the point, reporting, “Passengers: excellent impression, they enjoyed themselves greatly.”

⁴² « Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Indian Ocean Line, n. 7, Cmdt. Bourdon (Marseille 14 Apr. 1898) », Yang-Tsé, 1895-1908, MM 547, CCIMP.

⁴³ « Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 1, Cmdt. Jourdan (Shanghai, 4 Apr. 1898) », Ernest Simons, 1894-1904, MM 194, CCIMP [« Son altesse le Mad Radja de Kapoulaka, Bombay; un grand nombre d’officiers supérieurs et subalterne de l’Armée Anglaise de Bombay... »].

⁴⁴ “Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, East Africa Line, n. 11, Cmdt. Bevilaqua (Marseille, 13 Jun. 1899),” Iraouaddy, 1890-1906, MM 265, CCIMP [« M. Cockburn Stewart, gouverneur des Seychelles, embarqué à Zanzibar pour l’Europe, est mort par congestion pulmonaire en Mer Rouge. A la demande de M. le Docteur Carré et des autres passagers Anglais, le corps a été conservé avec quelques précautions et débarqué sans difficultés à Suez. »].

⁴⁵ “Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 2/3, Cmdt. Maubeuge (Marseille, 31 Jan. 1899),” Ernest Simons (1894-1904), MM 194, CCIMP. [« la politique nous avait suivis jusqu’en mer, et si Fashoda n’altéra point la paix du bord, il causa néanmoins du préjudice à nos œuvres de bienfaisance. »]

He then offered a perfect example of why steamships continued to harbor inter-imperial cohabitation, despite international tensions. “In Bombay,” the captain explained, “we embarked passengers who had been bitten by rabid dogs and were very anxious to arrive at the Pasteur Institute as quickly as possible. It was for them a question of life or death and the entire Region followed our arrival time.”⁴⁶ With post-Fashoda tensions at their apex, in other words, the eyes of “the entire Region” were on a French ship carrying English passengers to a Pasteurian Institute; the only place where they stood a chance at surviving.⁴⁷ Highly publicized steamship races across the Indian Ocean were common in this era, attracting attention in the press and immense amounts of gambling.⁴⁸ With the movement of microbes at stake, however, such speculation took on a more serious tone.

International causes, convenience, and the prestige of French luxury were not the only factors pushing British passengers into the liners of their rivals.⁴⁹ Agents of the *Messageries*

⁴⁶ Ibid. [« Passagers : impression excellente. Ils se sont beaucoup amusés. »] [« A Bombay nous avons embarqués des passagers mordus par des chiens enragés et anxieux d’arriver à l’Institut Pasteur le plus vite possible. C’était pour eux une question de vie ou de mort et toute la Région s’intéressait à la date de notre arrivée. »].

⁴⁷ La Courneuve and CADN: “PASSPORT-Mixed”: 601 ; 616: French volunteers for Boers *** Img 540s/550s; Boer War, Lourenço Marques, Portugal. . . ; 608-9, Messageries ships dodging British in East Africa to avoid weird run-ins and shakedowns; 615: French Consul in Bombay warns French in SE Africa that 40,000 Indian troops are coming; Img 558-577: Plan to Install Boer refugees in Madagascar as Colonists including a wesome economic map of island with points colored in blue where settlement is proposed/// Marseille le 24 novembre 1899. OCEAN INDIEN. Voyage n. 22. Bévilacqua. « Au retour c’est la « Gironde » qui nous apporte la plus grande partie de nos passagers ; c’est l’exode du Transvaal ; faute de couchettes, il a fallu loger en seconde quelques passagers de 3eme classe. »

⁴⁸ The phenomena is most associated with Transatlantic crossings and the famous Blue Riband award, but it occurred in Trans-Suez routes, too. For example: “Voyage Report of the Ernest Simons, China Line, n. 8/9, Cmdt. Delacroix (Marseille, 1 May 1896),” Ernest Simons 1894-1904, MM 194, CCIMP. A P&O attempt to stop the practice seems to have made little impact (“Circular n. 76, Caution against Racing. London, 26th April 1878,” P&O Circulars, PO 92/2 Caird, NMM).

⁴⁹ Even British postal service occasionally ended up in French ships. In the 1860s, the British government came remarkably close to awarding postal contracts to the Messageries. Around 1880, meanwhile, consular officials in Aden described arrangements by which postal service would flow between warships, *Messageries* liners, and liners of the *P&O* and *British India* company. In 1888, the British Postmaster General noted to a Consul, “the good service offered by Messageries Maritimes,” leading one historian to conclude that “mails would have been sent by the most efficient line, regardless of nationality.” Stephanie Jones, *Two Centuries of Overseas Trading: The Origins and Growth of the Inchcape Group* (Penguin, 1986), 122.

carefully cultivated the mobile elites of “Perfidious Albion.” In many ways, the company had made clear that it prioritized access to British-controlled markets over maintaining French favor since 1868, when it extended the Far East Line’s terminus to Hong Kong, instead of Saigon.⁵⁰ In the half-century that followed, the company never ceased to cultivate the elites of British port-cities.⁵¹

As physical showcases, liners were critical to seducing British travelers, but only when combined with the social savvy of *Messageries* agents. When, in 1887, for instance, the *Saghalien*’s layover in Hong Kong had to be extended, the ship’s captain saved the day by mobilizing personal connections cultivated along the route:

I believed it useful in this circumstance to attract the public’s attention in a favorable manner to the Company and, benefitting from my familiarity with the General C., I placed the *Saghalien* for the day of January 20, at the disposition of Lady C., the general’s wife and those who she should do me the honor of inviting, to sail them wherever they would like. Lady C. accepted my proposition with eagerness, asking me to go to Macao. I received aboard all the high society of Hong Kong, we set out after a copious cold breakfast, arriving at Macao at 11 in the morning.⁵²

In Macao, another friend of his awaited them: the governor (ties to the governor of Macao appear to have endured to the point that decades later, in 1906, a subsequent captain of the Line stayed in his home multiple times⁵³). After a daylong field trip in which Hong Kong’s “high society” gallivanted around Macao, they returned to Hong Kong, where “everyone took part in a

⁵⁰ Fichter, « Imperial Interdependence », 152.

⁵¹ In 1913, to take one example, the French business community in Tianjin (Tientsin) complained bitterly about the *Messageries*’ disregard for their interests and its embeddedness in British commercial networks (“Consulate de France à Tientsin à M. Kahn, Consul Gen. de Fr. à Shanghai. Tien-Tsin, le 15 dec. 1913: Réclamation collective contre les Messageries Maritimes,” Min. des Aff. Étrangères 42 bis, Shanghai-Rose, 635 PO/B, CADN).

⁵² « Voyage report of the *Saghalien*, Marseille – Shanghai, n. 4/5 (Marseille, 23 Feb. 1887) », *Saghalien*, 1881-1895, MM 458, CCIMP. [« J’ai cru utile en cette circonstance d’attirer l’attention du public d’une manière favorable à la Compagnie et profitant de ma connaissance avec le général C. (sic ?) j’ai mis la *Saghalien* pour la journée du 20 janvier, à la disposition de Lady C (sic ?), la femme du général et des personnes qu’elle voudrait bien me faire l’honneur d’inviter, pour les conduire où elles voulaient. Lady Camerou a accepté ma proposition avec empressement me demandant d’aller à Macao. De 20 à 8h du matin, je recevais à bord toute la haute société de Hong-Kong, nous nous mettions en route après une copieuse déjeuner froid et arrivons à Macao à 11h du matin. »]

⁵³ « Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 3, Cmdt. Bourdon (Marseille, 7 Jan. 1907) », Ernest Simons (1905-1917, MM 195, CCIMP).

magnificent luncheon at the end of the Quai, at the end of which, the most laudatory of *toasts* [written in English] were made in our favor. The next day the press contained very advantageous articles for us.”⁵⁴

On trans-Suez routes in which most scheduled layovers were in British ports, the operators of French liners took full advantage of their access to port-city elites. In 1901, for instance, the recently constructed liner, *Ernest Simons*, broke down in Bombay’s harbor. The mechanical issues were serious, and several workers were injured in the process of diagnosing the ship’s problems and carrying out the necessary repairs. With the eyes of Bombay’s high society on him, the captain of the *Ernest Simons* pretended that his stalled ship was, in fact, a deliberate showcase of one of the company’s latest liners. “During its long stay on the docks” he wrote, “the steamship received a great many visits and produced a good impression.”⁵⁵ This sleight of hand was only possible, however, because an officer in the British army with powerful connections in Bombay had stifled negative press reports – a favor he granted as a close friend of the French captain. As the captain insisted to directors in Marseille, this officer was a frequent client of *Messageries* and was to be rewarded with special attention on all his future travels.

When the *Ernest Simons* was ready to steam out, the captain delayed until Sunday, “in order,” he explained, “to allow the largest number of guests to attend” a “reception” that would be full of “panache.” As he raved to his bosses, “I hasten to say that the result obtained surpassed our hopes.” Among the “104 guests” (the captain proudly underlined the figure), were the French Consul in Bombay and his wife, the head-commissary of customs in the port, “reputed to be the

⁵⁴ Op. cit. [«...tout le monde prit part à un magnifique luncheon à la fin du quel, les toasts les plus élogieux furent portés en faveur de notre Compagnie... La presse du lendemain contenait des articles a vantageux pour nous. »]

⁵⁵ “Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, China Line, n. 19, Lt. de Va isseau Va quier (Marseille, 12 Sept. 1901),” Ernest Simons (1894-1904), MM 194, CCIMP [“Le paquebot pendant son long séjour dans les docks avait déjà reçu de nombreuses visites et produit une très bonne impression »].

most distinguished and popular man in India and one of the most considerable,” the Port Authorities, the sanitary service, customs officials, agents and engineers of English shipping companies, their captains and officers, English navy officers, bank heads and representatives of the “great houses of commerce,” and the directors of the three largest newspapers in Bombay: “in a word,” the captain observed, “an imposing and *very select* [written in English] meeting, we might say.”⁵⁶

“We Dance Every Night in this Bain-marie”

Fin-de-siècle liners of the *Messageries* assembled elites from every empire, allies and archrivals alike, but their capacity to unite actors from different sections of the French Empire is worth underlining, too. A generation of scholarship has meticulously revealed the many internal divisions of empires, exposing the layers of divided sovereignty that enfolded imperial rule. Missionaries of different orders, generals of different branches, politicians of different parties, merchants of diverse origins: these and many other actors enacted imperial governance while – and through – fighting each other and within their own ranks.⁵⁷

Within the space of a large steamship, a rare venue provided time and space for diplomatic establishments, civil administrators, missionaries, merchants, and the military officer corps, high

⁵⁶ The directors grumbled about the costs, for instance, of the 111 table settings and 18 bottles of champagne, but they did not punish him. After all, he was only carrying out the mission of a company that staked its honor on seducing the élites of British port-cities. Such a mission was bound to have a steep price tag. Ibid. [«... il importait que cette réception contribuât à l'affirmer avec éclat... Je m'empresse de dire que le résultat obtenu a dépassé nos espérances. Parmi nos invités au nombre de 104 se trouvaient... l'homme réputé le plus distingué et le plus populaire de l'Inde et l'un des plus considérables... les chefs de Banques et les représentants des grandes maisons de commerce, les Directeurs des trois grands journaux de Bombay, en un mot une réunion imposante et '*very select*' on peut le dire. »].

⁵⁷ See, for example: Stoler and Cooper (eds.), *Tensions of Empire*; Daughton, *Empire Divided*; J. Kim Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” *The Historical Journal* 24, n. 3 (1981): 629-650.

command, and rank-and-file, to meet, interact, debate, and negotiate.⁵⁸ On Lyautey's coming-of-age voyage, for instance, he described his co-passengers between Suez and Saigon as "a summary of the colonial world, an extraordinary salad," and observed with some relish the interactions of a group whose French contingent alone included a colonial governor, a top engineer of the Suez Canal, an opium farmer, a protestant missionary, marines, a Saigon entrepreneuse and mistress to a high-ranking official, and a powerful settler from an aristocratic lineage, along with a diamond-draped woman, "who, on board, calls herself his wife."⁵⁹

An 1897 voyage report of a trans-Suez *Messageries* liner, meanwhile, offered a typical list of its French "passengers of distinction": a scion of a banking family; a painter on an official mission to collect material for the upcoming Universal Exposition; the French ambassador to Siam; the head of a prominent settler family in Senegal; the general commissary of Tonkin and his family; the French consul general in China; the Resident Mayor of Haiphong (the rapidly expanding industrial port of Northern Vietnam would become a lynchpin of French strategy in East Asia); the chief advisor to the Governor General of Indochina (an office whose occupants repeatedly became president of France); a *Messageries* head inspector; a smattering of port authorities; and several Counts, whose professions and intentions go unspecified.⁶⁰ And this was merely a partial

⁵⁸ Some authors also used the steamship as a metaphor of unity. In a heavy-handed attempt to adapt Jules Verne's caper to the French Empire, Gaston Bonnetain published *Le Tour de nos Colonies en 365 jours* (1894), in which the steamship "Equateur" not only brings the reader to every colony in the empire, but provides the pretext for writing in the first place: "It's long [the voyage]. Fortunately, the *Equateur* offers its passengers, to kill time, a well-supplied library, a piano, chessboards"; "the others engage in all kinds of amusement," "I study the history of the conquest of Tonkin; they amuse themselves, I work." (Bonnetain, *Tour de nos colonies*, 111; 104). The fruit of his work is the book itself. And, with much less whimsy than his co-authored *Story of a Steamship*, Paul Bonnetain used his steamship voyage on the "Melbourne" to tell the deep history of the French Empire in *En Extrême Orient* (1892), turning an eastbound trip into a voyage through time.

⁵⁹ Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin*, 27 ["un résumé du monde colonial, extraordinaire sa lade »].

⁶⁰ « Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, Cmdt. Maubeuge (Marseille, 13 May 1897) », Ernest Simons (1894-1904), MM 194, CCIMP.

list of an already partial list of the passengers aboard. For a traveler positioned among such pan-imperial elites, in-between time would have overflowed with opportunities.

Then again, perhaps passengers never interacted meaningfully at all. That is, after all, the implication of much historiography in which transit disappears from view. Perhaps, in other words, these interoceanic commuters were perfectly capable of avoiding one another, clustering by nationality, institutional affiliation, and political persuasion, or simply waiting out the voyage from the seclusion of their cabins. Travel accounts, however, suggest that such clustering, and certainly such self-isolation, were next to impossible. Rather, the upper-class social life of a typical trans-Suez passenger steamship was defined by parties, dinner-time discussions, smoking-room debates, encounters on the deck, and layover tours.

Reflecting on the multitude of squabbles, scandals, and conflicts that he had witnessed as a ship-doctor on British steamships in the early-20th century, J.C.H. Beaumont concluded that on a steamship, “there is no privacy except in a stateroom [ie. captain’s cabin].” Even within one’s cabin, solitude was hard to come by, and one of the perks of being a well-connected passenger was arranging to have a cabin to one’s self. On one of his dozens of trans-Suez voyages, Alexandre Yersin spoke for many elite passengers when he wrote to his mother from Suez:

There are many passengers on board; all the cabins are taken and they’ve put me in a double with Monsieur So-and-so, but I’ve asked the director of the company in Marseille for permission to occupy one of the luxury cabins on the deck reserved for V.I.P.s [*grands personnages*] and he had the kindness to grant it to me, so that I am extremely well-lodged.⁶¹

⁶¹ « Yersin à sa mère. Canal de Suez, 25 déc. 96 », Correspondance d’Alexandre Yersin, Institut Pasteur Paris [Il y a beaucoup de passagers à bord; toutes les cabines sont prises et l’on m’avait mis en double avec un monsieur quelconque, mais j’ai demandé au directeur de la compagnie, à Marseille, la permission d’occuper une des cabines de luxe, sur le pont qu’on réserve pour les grands personnages; il a eu l’amabilité de me l’accorder, en sorte que je suis extrêmement bien logé].

On a particularly crowded voyage in 1888, meanwhile, one captain remarked to directors that his most elite “passengers from India and China have become habituated to being alone in their cabins and are very displeased by the obligation of... accepting a companion.” Stripping elite passengers of the luxury of isolation was no easy task. “There must be, on the part of the commissary,” he continued, “enormous patience and diplomacy if they are not to outrage many people by the end of the voyage.”⁶²

Most passengers, however, lacked the means and connections to guarantee solitude. The steamship simply forced sociality upon its passengers. Regular concerts, balls, and charity events were held in different classes, especially once a ship was steaming through calm waters. Within the (occasionally fluctuating) limits of class segregation, such events were meeting grounds for diverse sets of passengers. One traveling soldier of the 1890s, for instance, described a charity talent show aboard his *Messageries* ship by writing, “All manner of talents show up, without distinction of race, of nationality, of religion.”⁶³ Beyond celebratory events, passengers were brought together by structured time – meals, funerals, religious worship, etc. – and idle time; smoking, waiting, watching, and hanging about the deck, either in promenades or deckchairs. Meal-room tables choreographed passenger sociality and were the source of innumerable slights, tiffs, and controversies.⁶⁴ Rarely, however, were tables segregated strictly by nationality. Indeed,

⁶² « Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé, Marseille-Yokohama (Marseille, 24 Mar. 1888) », Yang-Tsé (1878-1894), MM 546, CCIMP. [« les passagers de l’Inde et de la Chine qui ont pris l’habitude d’être seuls dans leurs cabines ne se voient pas sans déplaisir dans l’obligation de déloger ou d’accepter un compagnon. Il faut, de la part du commissaire, beaucoup de patience et de diplomatie pour ne pas mécontenter beaucoup de monde à la fin du voyage. »].

⁶³ Émile Dussaulx, (ed. S. Dulucq), *Journal du Soudan (1894-1898)* (Paris: L’Hamattan, 2000), 30 [“S’y montrent tous les talents, sans distinction, de race, de nationalité, de religion”].

⁶⁴ As a voyage report from 1888 put it: « Les tables à quatre, trouvant d’ailleurs être facilement réunies, seraient un progrès sensible car en facilitant le groupement des passagers selon leurs convenances cette installation empêcheraient des froissements nombreux que le placement à table provoque à chaque départ, quelque soin que l’on mette à les éviter. » (« Voyage report of the Djemnah, Marseille-Yokohama, Cmdt. Vaquier. Marseille, 24 Feb. 1888 », Djemnah, 1875-1902. MM 164, CCIMP).

inter-imperial dialogue worked itself into this basic social structure of steamship life, at least for those deemed sufficiently respectable. Take, for instance, a commented diagram Lyautey made for his sister, showing meal-time seating arrangements on the *Pei-Ho* (see fig. 21):

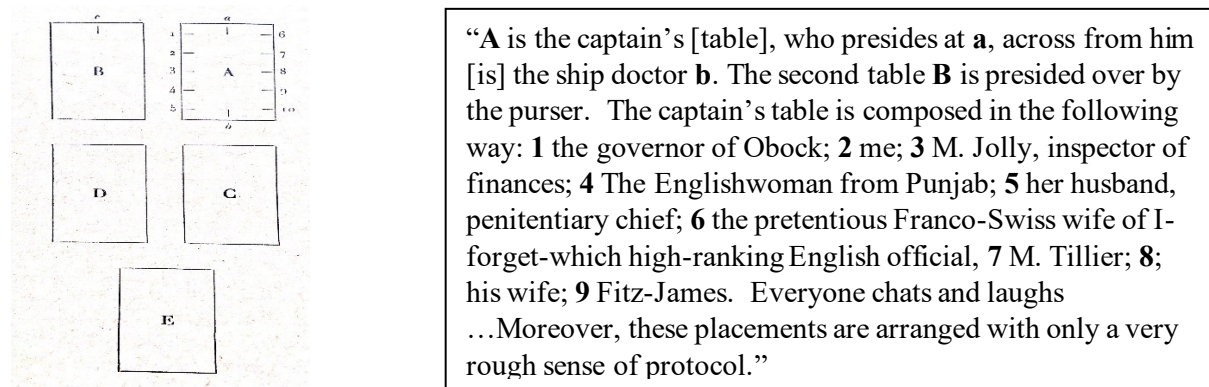


Figure 21. Hubert Lyautey’s diagram of seating onboard the *Pei-Ho* in 1894. The original French reads: “A est celle du commandant qui la préside en a, avec en face de lui le médecin du bord en b. La seconde table B est présidé par le commissaire du bord. La table du commandant est ainsi composée : 1 le gouverneur d’Obock ; 2 moi ; 3 M. Jolly, inspecteur des finances ; 4 l’Anglaise du Pendjab ; 5 son mari, le chef du pénitencier ; 6 la femme de je ne sais quel haut fonctionnaire anglais, franco-suisse et prétentieuse ; 7 M. Tillier ; 8 sa femme ; 9 Fitz-James... Tout le monde cause et rit... D’ailleurs, ces places ne se règlent que très approximativement par protocole.” (Lyautey, *Lettres de Tonkin*, p. 10).

Given this graphic illustration of French colonial officials breaking bread with their British counterparts (or arch-nemeses, depending on the moment), it is unsurprising that Lyautey would reflect in satisfaction, “the conversation goes on, so diverse, effortlessly instructive... each day an opportunity to meet someone new... these are tomorrow’s friends.”⁶⁵

Deck space, while divided by class, nonetheless served as the commons for each class. When hot weather forced passengers out of their cabins, they migrated to the deck, where music and entertainment followed them. “The ship comported itself so well,” a satisfied captain reported

⁶⁵ Ibid., 8 [“...la causerie va, si diverse, instructive sans fatigue (...) chaque jour une occasion de connaissance nouvelle (...) ce sont les amis de demain.”].

at the end of his 1884 voyage, “that the passengers were able to dance every night to the sounds of the piano placed on the deck.”⁶⁶ On the *Oxus*, the ship that so fascinated Hubert Lyautey, the officer coolly remarked to his family, “We dance every night in this *bain-marie*,” as if passengers were being slowly transformed by the water through which they steamed.⁶⁷ Beyond dancing, music, and theater, the deck also provided a stage for sporting competitions and group fishing and shark-hunting.⁶⁸ Perhaps the most sought-after and exclusive space of interaction, though, was the *fumoir*, or smoking room, which, again, tended to be divided by class. In smoking rooms, the priorities of conversation traced the gendered domains of domestic drawing rooms: politics, strategy, and business. Unsurprisingly, many a conflict aboard *Messageries* liners arose after a passenger had been excluded from this sanctuary of power.

Passengers, in short, could not avoid one another easily and this was no accident. The atmosphere of intense sociality, even when it arose through passenger voluntarism, was encouraged by captains, endorsed by prominent travelers, and assisted by crewmembers and traveling entertainers. In the *Story of a Steamship* (1890), written by Paul Bonnetain and *Messageries* captain Louis Tillier, the authors denoted four types of captains. Alongside “the erudite,” “the gourmand,” and “the mariner,” was a category that increasingly defined the position aboard large passenger steamships, “the man of the world captain”: “gay, *bon vivant*, organizer of balls, concerts and theater shows, this one brings a fiendish amount of energy [*un entrain du diable*] to everyone and everywhere, managing his ship assuredly, ably, all while giving the

⁶⁶ « Commandant au Directeur. Colombo, le 18 Aout 1884, » Iraouaddy, 1883-1889. MM 264, CCIMP.

⁶⁷ A *bain-marie* is also known in English as a double-boiler and is used to melt and incorporate ingredients gently and progressively. Lyautey, *Lettres*, 27-30. [“On danse chaque soir dans ce bain-marie »].

⁶⁸ Sports were especially encouraged on British trans-Suez liners, where committees were formed to plan and coordinate athletic events. “Circular n. 146: Amusements on Board. London, 11th August 1896,” Circular Book of S.S. China, P&O 7/12, Caird, NMM. On sports and shark-hunting, see also: Grosclaude, *Un Parisien au Madagascar*; and Docteur Carbonell, “Marseille-Singapore, Dec. 1913,” in Philippe Ramona Collection, available online at: <https://www.messageries-maritimes.org/cord2.htm> (last accessed: 5/10/2021).

impression that he's never preoccupied by it."⁶⁹ But captain's needed auxiliaries. When health was good on his trans-Suez ship and there was "little doctoring to do," ship-doctor J.C.H. Beaumont recalled:

My duties were mostly those of a social entertainer. I organized concerts, minstrel shows, dances, games, tea parties and other devices to kill time... In the long voyages, to India, Australia, New Zealand, and South America, the surgeon has too many social duties forced upon him, which might be amusing enough for a voyage or two, but are most irksome and unsatisfactory for a permanency.⁷⁰

When traveling entertainers were on board, they were often paid to entertain and organize parties. Even when their presence gave rise to scandals, captains and company directors generally accepted it as necessary cost of business. In an 1895 voyage to East Asia, for instance, the ship's captain had to answer to complaints about how his officers had behaved with the "ladies of the theatrical troop," especially after a "party organized by the passengers with the help of the troop." Normally, captains would make a host of excuses for a complaint that touched on the respectability of their officers, especially if it had reached company directors. In his response, however, the captain suggested he had nothing to apologize for: "It is all too obvious that the presence onboard of a theater troop for more than three weeks is a cause of disorders of such a type that it is quite difficult to suppress them completely or in a durable fashion – all that one can hope for is to obtain by repeated comments, that propriety be respected."⁷¹

In organizing social life, professional entertainers had help from the most distinguished passengers. An 1899 voyage report was typical, in this sense, in reporting that, "Monsieur the

⁶⁹ Bonnetain and Tillier, *Histoire d'un paquebot*, 62.

⁷⁰ Beaumont, *Ships – and People*, 44; 52.

⁷¹ « Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, China Line, n. 25/26, Cmdt. Delacroix (Sept. 1895) », Ernest Simons (1894-1904), MM 194, CCIMP [« plusieurs officiers du bord au sujet de leur manière d'être avec les dames de la troupe théâtrale... une fête a été organisée par les passagers avec le concours des artistes de la troupe... »; « Il n'est que trop évident que la présence à bord d'une troupe de théâtre pendant plus de trois semaines est une cause de désordres d'un certain genre qu'il est bien difficile de réprimer complètement et d'une façon durable – tout ce qu'on peut espérer c'est obtenir par des observations réitérées, que les convenances soient respectées... »].

Baron de Pinck, Belgian Minister in Peking, who, with an enthusiasm that has been happily crowned by success [in China, suppressing the Boxer Rebellion], placed himself at the head of a party committee for the entertainment of everyone during the return voyage.” As the captain assured his superiors, the minister had not been left to his own devices: “By my orders,” he went on, “the crew naturally lent its fullest support.”⁷² A later captain on the Far East Line, meanwhile, complained about his crew stealing while a party “was in full swing” – a party, he noted, that was “presided over by Monsieur the Governor of Djibouti.”⁷³

Far from ignoring the social life of their ships, captains routinely took it upon themselves to investigate elite passengers, at least enough to determine if they were influential. In the report of an 1885 trans-Suez voyage, for instance, the captain reminded his directors that one of his “passengers of distinction,” the “Prince Hassan” was the second brother of the Egyptian Khedive; vital information for a company whose basic viability depended on keeping abreast of the politics of the Suez Canal (the head engineer of which was also listed as traveling with them). Likewise, the captain noted the presence of a certain Madame Dillon and her children, since, as he reported, she “is the wife of the superior resident in Hué [the dynastic capital of pre-colonial Vietnam], currently president of the Commission on the Borders of Tonkin” – a critical issue for the company as it scoured the coasts of North Vietnam for a commercial port that could give it advantageous position in the South China Sea.⁷⁴

⁷² « Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, China Line, n. 3/4 [sic ?], cmdt Maubeuge (1899) », Ibid. [« M. le Baron de Pinck, Ministre de Belgique à Peking, qui, avec un entrain, heureusement couronné de succès, s’est mis à la tête d’un comité de fêtes pour amuser tout le monde pendant le retour. Par mes ordres, le bord a naturellement prêté son plus entier concours. »].

⁷³ « Cmdt. Cochéry, bord de l’Amazone. 25 sept. 1920 », Correspondance diverse de l’Amazone, Amazone, MM6, CCIMP [« Une fête... présidé par M le Gouverneur de Djibouti »]

⁷⁴ “Voyage report of the Yang-Tsé Oct. 1885,” Yang-Tsé, 1878-1894. MM 546, CCIMP. [« Le Prince Hassan, deuxième frère du Khedive, M. Lemasson, ingénieur en chef du Canal de Suez, Mme. Dillon, femme du résident supérieur à Hué, actuellement président de la Commission de Délimitation du Tonkin et ses enfants. »]

Captains, then, had to know about their prominent passengers, but also their relations, positions, and current projects. When two distinguished-looking travelers boarded his Marseille-Bombay vessel in 1897, for instance, one *Messageries* captain deduced for his bosses in Marseille that their names, “Count and Viscount de Merey,” were aliases. In reality, they were the Comte d’Eu and his son, members of the house of Orléans and next-in-line in the just-deposed imperial dynasty of Brazil.⁷⁵ As he wrote, “the princely voyagers embarked incognito... their incognito was respected despite the fact that they were the object of every attention due to their position and their illustrious origin. They were, moreover, perfectly lovable and not at all encumbering, and left our company delighted.”⁷⁶

The trans-Suez liner acted as a social hub for upper-class passengers. But, as the jaded doctor Beaumont’s remarks imply, that sociality had such an air of frivolity to it that it begs the question: did mobile sociality produce enduring relationships and meaningful exchanges, or did the cohabitation of imperial elites provide only passing distractions? There were certainly skeptics. More than a few trans-Suez travelers suggested that the meeting of nations aboard steamships was merely a spectacle, and a comic one at that. On a Marseille-Yokohama voyage in 1899, for instance, one *Messageries* captain organized a round of parties to bring together passengers, after the mood was spoiled by “some ill-bred English planters who have gotten rich.” How, the captain complained to his bosses, could he possibly be expected to harmonize the “bizarre diversity of nationalities, characters, education, positions, etc.” that each steamship voyage placed under his

⁷⁵ Curiously enough, the larger-than-life Comte d’Eu died at sea. “Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, cmdt. Maubeuge (Marseille, 13 May 1897),” Ernest Simons (1894-1904), MM 194, CCIMP.

⁷⁶ Ibid. [« S.A.R. M le Comte d’Eu et son fils SAI M le Prince Pierre d’Orléans Bragance Duc de Para »; « ces voyageurs princiers ont embarqué incognito sous les noms de Comte et Vicomte de Merey. Leur incognito a été respecté malgré qu’ils aient été l’objet de tous les égards dus à leur position et à leur illustre origine. Ils ont d’ailleurs été parfaitement aimables et très peu encombrants, et nous ont quittés enchantés »].

supervision.⁷⁷ The colonial explorer and propagandist, Rondet-Saint, meanwhile, concluded a lengthy description of the disputes, revelries, and miscommunications among his eclectic mix of co-passengers with the following evaluation: “a collision of mentalities and mores from which light does not always shine forth.”⁷⁸

Perhaps the most poetic attempt to grapple with the question of what that “collision” produced came from “G. Verschuur,” a well-connected and popular travel writer of the fin-de-siècle. Likening the “curious mix of people from every point of the globe” aboard his ship to a firework exploding in the sky, Verschuur reflected: “very probably the majority of this society, so different in mores, customs, age, will never see one another again! Like the rocket of a firework, which, in bursting, scatters its sparkles without leaving a trace, these groups of chance will launch themselves in the directions which destiny has traced for each of them.”⁷⁹ Read in one light, Verschuur’s metaphor could aptly summarize the fleeting nature of mobile contacts in the heady moment of globalization through which he was living. And yet, in the same passage, Verschuur specifies that, “We have lived two, three weeks in this artificial intimacy engendered by life onboard; we have become more tightly tied at sea in less than a month than we would have on land after a year of relations.”⁸⁰

Arguably, Verschuur’s second remark is as salient as his first. Thanks to the “artificial intimacy” [*intimité factice*] of passengers and the warped sense of time at sea, relationships

⁷⁷ « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Yokohama, Cmdt. Bretel (left Marseille, 24 Feb. 1889) », Iraouaddy (1883-1889), MM 264, CCIMP [« la diversité insolite de nationalités, de caractères, d’éducation, de grades, etc. »].

⁷⁸ Maurice Rondet-Saint, *Les randonnées asiatiques* (Paris: Plon, 1919), 246-7. [“Choc de mentalités et de moeurs don’t ne jaillit toujours pas la lumière”].

⁷⁹ G. Verschuur, *Aux colonies d’Asie et dans l’Océan Indien* (Paris: Hachette, 1900) [“très probablement la majorité de cette société, si différente de moeurs, de coutumes, d’âge, ne se reverra jamais! Semblable à la fusée d’un feu d’artifice, qui en éclatant disperse ses étincelles sans laisser de trace, ces groupes du hasard se lanceront dans les directions que la destinée a tracées pour chacun d’eux. »].

⁸⁰ Ibid. [“On a vécu pendant deux, trois semaines dans cette intimité factice, qu’engendre la vie du bord, on s’est lié plus étroitement sur mer en moins d’un mois qu’on ne l’aurait fait à terre au bout d’une année de relations »].

developed rapidly. This accelerated intimacy, coupled with the unique capacity of liners to connect the people, resources, and opportunities of multiple ports, created an ideal site for modes of exchange, education, and interaction that necessarily generated power. For upper-class travelers, this site took the shape of its inhabitant's desires and ambitions: for some, the liner became a floating chamber of commerce; for others, a traveling university or think-tank; for others, still, a kind of training camp. In any case, encounters onboard and during layovers left more in their wake than small talk.

Of course, no one was better situated to reap the social riches of the route than shipping companies themselves. Away from splashy posters placed in railway stations and the mahogany tables of board rooms, ship captains and port agents used mobile encounters to produce publicity, influence political processes, and build relationships with powerful actors who could advance company interests and allow them to expand.

An entrepreneurial captain, after all, had access not only to captive audiences that included the elites of every empire, but also to the elites of multiple port cities. In 1888, for instance, the captain of the liner *Pei-Ho* seized the opportunity of a prolonged layover in the Tamatava (Madagascar) to organize a lavish dinner and ship-tour for the "His Excellence the Hova Governor and their staff" (unnamed, this "governor" represented the Merina Kingdom of Madagascar, then under a loose French protectorate, and which would be overthrown and formally colonized seven years later). As the captain related, a broad network of consuls, company agents, and merchant families had made it clear that "this mark of attention would facilitate the... transactions in process relative to the concession of terrain to our company." Thus, the captain wrote to superiors in Marseille, along with a company agent and a prominent family, "I visited the Fort to deliver my invitation to His Excellence," who "appeared enchanted by the welcome that had been given him;

he altogether admired the *Pei-Ho* of which I showed to him every part, and he demonstrated his satisfaction, following the Malagasy custom, in giving me the gift of a cow, which I accepted on behalf of the Crew.” To take another example of company-building in motion, in 1896, a ship-captain delayed his layover in Djibouti (on the horn of Africa), to meet with the colony’s governor, Lagarde, where he managed to extract a promise “to give our Arab coalers some land to establish themselves.”⁸¹

Even at sea and far from port, passengers provided chances for publicity and political influence. In an 1881 Marseille-Shanghai voyage, for instance, the captain reported long interviews with Indochina’s first civilian governor and one of his passengers, to whom the captain made the case for vital infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, several of which would be completed in the coming years.⁸² In 1911, meanwhile, the captain of the *Oxus* noted that “we had aboard in Yokohama an Englishman named Chamberlain who enjoys great fame in Japan.” Aware that the company’s rivals in Japan had flooded newspapers with negative press, the captain made a point of “often chatting with” the widely read travel writer. By the end of the voyage, the charm offensive seemed to have paid off: “he [Chamberlain] recognized that he had never been so well off, whether on English, German, or American liners. He even added that he had written his friends in Japan letters which will appear in the papers.”⁸³

Two years later, a China Line captain seized a similar chance when he discovered among his passengers Monsieur and Madame Rondet-Saint; ardent colonial propagandists, who, as he

⁸¹ « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille-Mauritius, n. 4, Cmdt. Bevilacqua (Marseille 11 Mar. 1896) », Iraouaddy. MM 265, CCIMP [« A Djibouti j’ai été bien accueilli par M. La garde, gouverneur de la colonie, qui a promis de donner à nos Arabes chauffeurs du terrain pour s’établir. . . Il paraît que le Gouverneur d’Aden a déclaré que tout Arabe qui quittera avec sa famille sera considéré comme expulsé »].

⁸² « Voyage Report of the Iraouaddy, Marseille – Shanghai, n. 6 (Marseille 19 Mar. 1881) », Iraouaddy (1873-1889). MM 264, CCIMP.

⁸³ “Voyage report of the Tonkin, China and Japan Line, n. 10, Cmdt. Charbonnel (Annex 20 Mar. 1911),” 1997002 4337, AFL.

told directors, “are particularly active in maritime questions, seeking to create a movement of tourism to the benefit of Indo-china.” As he reminded his bosses, “if this movement takes shape, it would increase the numbers of first-class passengers on our Far-East lines.” Thus, the captain strove to “offer all the facilities concerning their wellbeing aboard. I believe to have succeeded.”⁸⁴ Unsurprisingly, the *Messageries* figured prominently in the many books that Rondet-Saint published, all of which encouraged French people to leave the metropole, travel, and witness the achievements of French imperialism firsthand. From infrastructure and labor to health screenings and tourism, the mobile lobbying of *Messageries* captains contributed to the gradual construction of empire’s maritime infrastructure while giving the company room to maneuver within it.

One *Messageries* captain, Louis Tillier, even went so far as to turn an onboard relationship into a book, *Story of a Steamship*, which he co-authored with Paul Bonnetain. As the preface to the book explained:

The story of this book is very simple. One day, two friends, one a sailor, the other a novelist, found themselves united aboard a steamship, the “Anadyr,” which the former was commanding. Both loved the sea and both, over the course of long discussions held under the stars and in the breeze, frequently lamented that the Great Blue should have so few followers [*fidèles*] in France. (The ship was going to China and was transporting hardly anyone except English, Dutch, and German passengers...). One night, the sailor says to the novelist, ‘unless it weren’t so: perhaps there would be more of a taste for all things maritime among us French if we vulgarized them more. Hold on! We should tell the story of a Steamship!’⁸⁵

What followed were three hundred, lushly illustrated pages meant to indoctrinate the layman into the allure of ocean liners. While it is difficult to assess how successful the book was in inculcating

⁸⁴ « Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 13, Cmdt. Brunot n. 13 (Marseille 20 May 1913) » Ernest Simons (1905-1917). MM 195, CCIMP [« Nous avons à bord M et Mme Rondet-Saint... qui s’occupe particulièrement des questions maritimes, cherche à créer un mouvement de tourisme en faveur de l’Indo-Chine. Si ce mouvement pouvait prendre corps, il y aurait une augmentation de passagers de première classe sur nos courriers d’Extrême-Orient. J’ai donc pensé qu’il était bon de donner à M. et Mme Rondet-Saint pendant leur voyage, toutes les facilités concernant leur bien-être à bord. Je pense y avoir réussi. »].

⁸⁵ Tillier and Bonnetain, *Histoire d’un paquebot*, preface.

the French public with a love of the steamship voyage and the nation's merchant marine, many copies of the book continue to circulate online today, some of which were held by schools. In any case, Tillier and Bonnetain's project, hatched at sea "under the stars and in the breeze," was appreciated enough by the *Messengeries* that the latter was the only journalist invited to accompany a select group of government officials and maritime magnates on the inaugural ride of the company's latest steamship in 1898.⁸⁶

Captains were well-positioned to lobby, barter, and learn along the route, but not exclusively so. As suggested by Yersin's letters home, with which the chapter began, ship-doctors also converted steamship voyages across Suez into commercial possibility and professional development. J.C.H. Beaumont, a British ship-doctor who chronicled his decades-long career, painted a vivid picture of the kinds of professional opportunities and interpersonal connections that a single trans-Suez voyage could offer. Some of those opportunities lay within the ship itself, for, as Beaumont wrote,

The public rooms of the ship are open to [a ship doctor]... Socially, he will be shipmates with all classes and grades of folks from the highest to the humblest – men and women drawn from every profession and occupation and from every nationality under the sun. From amongst these he can pick and choose at will during his leisure hours, and has the opportunity at least of meeting distinguished and interesting people – a privilege which is denied to many doctors on shore.⁸⁷

Beaumont took only one voyage as a doctor on a London-Yokohama ship (he preferred quick and cool trans-Atlantic routes) in the 1890s. Along the way, he had plenty of spare time, since, with few passengers his only potential patients were the Chinese crew, who, he quickly learned, refused to be seen by a British doctor, preferring instead to treat themselves with their own "potions," as he put it.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Beaumont, *Ships – and People* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1926).

Layovers, however, would provide education and professional resources. In Georgetown, British Penang, he toured a hospital run by an Armenian doctor (“He took me around the hospital and also to the Leper Isolation Camp where for the first time I saw leprosy”⁸⁸), where he was offered a position. In Singapore, another hospital tour (“at the hospital I spent a good deal of time and saw several operations on Chinamen”) was followed by the meteorological station, where he admiringly studied “every modern instrument” there. Next, in Shanghai, the doctor “visited the opium dens and saw the addicts” and, “by special permission, being a doctor... was allowed... to witness the beheading of a criminal,” which he compared favorably to “hanging from the gallows or electrocution.” At the ship’s terminus in Yokohama, he toured the city’s “large hospitals,” marveling that they “had all the equipments both in wards and operating rooms of an up-to-date English hospital.” As he prepared to set out, Beaumont was again offered a job, this time as the shipping company’s permanent doctor in Yokohama. Beaumont’s trip read like a traveling internship, and though he turned down the posts offered to him, his unclaimed offers reveal the professional networks that could be woven together by a single steamship voyage.

Other mobile doctors were more willing to capitalize. Alexandre Yersin, in his post-laboratory stint with the *Messageries*, offers an interesting example. Yersin’s biographers tend to depict his time as a *Messageries* doctor as an unremarkable steppingstone to grander pursuits: exploring the highlands of Indochina, conducting groundbreaking experiments in bacteriology and agronomy, and cultivating the global network of Pasteurian Institutes. To an extent, they are right. Yersin was serious and somewhat solitary man for whom the social life of steamships never held any enchantment; in fact, he found it all a bit of a nuisance. But, as a recent history of Pasteurian Institutes notes, on layovers, Yersin “acquired the habit of accompanying ship-owners and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 23-24.

businessmen on expeditions inland,” forging a network of relations that extended all the way to the Governor-General of Indochina.⁸⁹ On his first scientific expeditions, moreover, his most precious equipment came from colleagues in the *Messageries*. In fact, his very ability to explore came from his time as a ship-doctor, when, during long hours at sea and on layover, he forced himself to study and master navigation.⁹⁰

The Trans-Suez liner could also function as a kind of inter-imperial chamber of commerce, and in the same voyage reports where French captains described lobbying the powerful and mobilizing social connections from port to port, passengers were recorded peddling their wares. Of course, when those passengers were imperial elites, the “wares” could be considerable. In 1904, for example, *Messageries* voyage reports relayed the in-depth expositions of the head administrator of Singapore’s powerful *Tanjong Pagar Dock Company*, a “passenger of distinction” whose “very interesting blueprints for the planned expansion of Singapore’s port” were no doubt worth a fortune. By 1904, Franco-British relations were turning the corner on decades of warmongering and entering the Entente Cordiale. What better instantiation of the emerging partnership than a subsidized French company studying the blueprints of the British Empire’s most vital naval node east of Suez.⁹¹

Even before the Entente Cordiale changed the tenor of Franco-British relations, however, British passengers on French ships were making bold overtures and propositions. During an 1899

⁸⁹ A. Velmet, *Pasteur’s Empire*, 92-93.

⁹⁰ Alexandre Yersin, *Voyages chez les mois d’Indochine* (Geneva : Editions Olizane, 2016 ed.), 73. When boredom struck during his long voyages, he once wrote, “Pour occuper mes loisirs, j’a vais tenté de m’initier à la science de la navigation, en particulier à la détermination des longitudes et des latitudes. J’a vais fait venir de France un théodolite et je m’exerçais assidûment à faire le point, pendant les séjours à Saigon, sur le quai des Messageries Maritimes. » On an early expedition, meanwhile, he praised the power of a « chronomètre » « qui m’a vai t été prêté par M. Roland, l’a gent de la Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes. »

⁹¹ « Voyage report of the Ernest Simons, Marseille-Yokohama, n. 15. Cmdt. Bourdon (Marseille. 28 Jun. 1904) », Ernest Simons (1894-1904). MM 154, CCIMP [“Monsieur Nicholson... a bien voulu me montrer les plans très intéressants de l’a grandissement projeté du port de Singapore. » Singapore held Britain’s largest naval yard in Asia.

voyage between Marseille and South Africa, for instance, one captain quoted his passenger, the British General Commissary of Uganda, as proposing that:

our ships... go to Mombasa. According to him, this head-of-the-line of the railroad penetration toward Victoria Nianga is destined for a great commercial future and is only served by an annex of the 'British India,' with transit in Aden, and by one of the two German steamships that touches there every 28 days. [He] believes that, like him, all the English passengers would give their preference to the *Messageries maritimes* if our ships did this layover.

In margins of the report, directors noted that the plans would be an important object of study.⁹²

On the *Yarra* in 1896, to take another example, the "Rajah of Serrawack" [sic], as his name was recorded in the voyage report, took advantage of weeks of conversation with the liner's captain by explaining explain to him, in depth, the opportunities emerging from the coal market "that he exploits in his principality."⁹³ The "Rajah" – a frequent traveler aboard ships of the *Messageries* – even handed out literature outlining the opportunities, which the captain folded into the voyage report that he submitted to company directors in Marseille and Paris.⁹⁴ The ultimate colonial networkers, the Brooke family had implanted themselves as sovereign "Rajahs" of Sarawak in Southeast Asia. In acquiring and holding a large piece of Borneo from the 1840s-onward, the Brookes wove together networks of financial backers and colonial mercenaries with such success that they almost single-handedly opened the door to a (re)privatization of sovereignty

⁹² « Voyage report of the Iraouaddy, East Africa Line, n. 11. (Marseille. 13 Jun. 1899) », Iraouaddy (1890-1906). MM 265, CCIMP [« M. Berkeley, Commissaire Général de l'Uganda, me demandait si nos navires n'iraient pas à Mombasa. D'après lui cette tête de ligne du chemin de fer de pénétration vers le Victoria Nianga, est appelée à un grand avenir commercial et n'est pas desservie que par un annexe de la 'British India' avec transbordement à Aden et par l'un des deux paquebots Allemands qui y touche tous les 28 jours... croit que, comme lui, tous les passagers Anglais donneraient la préférence aux Messageries Maritimes si nos navires faisait cette escale. »]

⁹³ A signed letter and detailed information came with the voyage report. « Voyage Report of the Yarra, Indo-china and Japan Line, n. 10/11 (Marseille. 31 May, 1896) », Yarra (1893-1907). MM 559, CCIMP. [« Le Rajah de Serrawack m'a beaucoup entretenu du charbon qu'il exploite dans sa principauté et au sujet duquel il m'a donné la note manuscrite ci-jointe. »]. Brookes also appeared in « Voyage report of Djemnah, Marseille-Yokohama (Marseille. 18 Jan. 1887) », Djemnah (1875-1902). MM 164, CCIMP.

⁹⁴ See: S. Press, *Rogue Empires*.

(subsequently legitimated in principle in the colonial conferences of the 1880s). Generations of colonial hustlers would look to the Brookes as models and attempt to follow in their footsteps.⁹⁵

In addition to smoke-filled rooms, colonial banks, and international hotels, the often-hidden worlds of steamships must have provided those hustlers with mines of social capital. *Messageries* liners would have been outsized hubs of “Passengers of Distinction” (especially relative to the middling position into which the company had slipped, in terms of tonnage, by 1910). After all, foreign elites often justified their patronage of the *Messageries* by saying that they came for the fine cuisine. Of course, over time, the original motive for traveling French, fine cuisine, produced another incentive: elites came to be with each other.

For Hubert Lyautey, it was an encounter with another member of the Brooke family, the Rajah’s thirty-year-old niece, which illustrated the opportunities emerging from a steamship. Enchanted by the young “Sultanness” and her sole companion, “miss Smith,” Lyautey wrote in letters home:

Already the ship is full of teachings. My English professor, miss Brooke, who is going to join her uncle the Rajah of Sarawak, recounts for me the beginnings of the great uncle... What do you want! These English have initiative in their blood. Miss Brooke, at 30 years of age, alone with a friend of 20, leaves her cottage in Kent county to go to the antipodes to pay her uncle the sultan a visit of two months, and that is natural.⁹⁶

As shocked by the initiative of the young woman as he would be by the modern policies of British military that repeated layover trips unveiled to him, Lyautey deepened his commitment to reforming French imperial institutions.⁹⁷ His voyage became an instructional tour of the British Empire and a

⁹⁵ David de Mayréna, who set up an independent polity in Indochina, is perhaps France’s most prominent example. His rise and fall were also metered by *Messageries* voyages. See: Antoine Michelland, *Marie Ier. Le dernier roi français. La Conquête d’un aventurier en Indochine* (Perrin, 2012).

⁹⁶ Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin*, 48.

⁹⁷ Lyautey was not the only officer to tour British sites with an eye toward learning from them. An 1894 *Vademecum de l’officier au Tonkin* (Guidebook for the Officer in Tonkin), for instance, instructed officers how to take advantage of layovers on their way to Indochina, repeatedly recommending that they tour English sites, from the infrastructure of Aden, to the barracks and English quarter of Colombo. If the author’s appreciation for the British

blueprint of change in the French Empire. Mobile encounters with other empires may have been temporary, in other words, but they left lessons and legacies in their wake.

Miss Brooke was just one piece in a puzzle of co-passengers that Lyautey, like many travelers, felt the need to arrange and understand. In travelogues of the period, countless writers devised typologies of passengers, treating their liners as master classes in current affairs and spaces in which they could map the world. Perhaps no one exemplified that trend so didactically as André Bellessort, a public intellectual and self-appointed expert on Japan, whose 1904 book, *Voyage au Japon* had the fortune of being released just as the Russo-Japanese War pulled the world's attention toward the ascendant empire. "What did I know about Japan?" the book began by asking. In response, the author recited a chorus of proclamations culled from conversations with fellow travelers, ranging from the profound – "they are striving to prove to us that the superiority with which we flatter ourselves is not remotely inherent to our nature" – to the gratuitous: "'you are setting out for Japan?' they told me in Marseille's quai, 'Lucky traveler, that's the country of Japanese women!'"⁹⁸

Fortunately for Bellessort, his liner exposed him to a reputable source: "a Japanese senator who we had the honor of counting among our companions of the route." After several interviews, as if providing the author with an introduction to his book was not enough, the Japanese senator supposedly offered to put at Bellessort's disposal "his house, his friends, his twelve societies." Still not satisfied, however, Bellessort, carried his onboard exploration of Japan into other quarters

Empire remains understated through much of the *Vade-mecum*, it looks clearer when he describes how, though Singapore is a pleasure to tour, "One generally remains only a brief while in Singapore, where the provisioning of perishables and coal on the quay proceed quite quickly, as indeed is generally the case at all English ports." Such comments subtly recommended to French officers that they could learn something about colonial administration as they traveled through British spaces. Gallais, Henri. *Vade-mecum de l'officier au Tonkin. Recueil de renseignements utiles sur la vie des postes dans les régions montagneuses. À l'usage des Européens allant débiter dans notre nouvelle colonie d'Extrême-Orient* (Paris: Challamel, 1894).

⁹⁸ Bellessort, *Voyage au Japon: La société japonaise* (Perrin, 1904), 1-2.

of the ship: interviewing Chinese passengers; asking “our Hindu what he thought of the Japanese”; and interrogating Filipino passengers about Pan-Asianism. With group after group of passengers, the author pushed his survey:

As I approached the end of my voyage, I was not a little bit stunned... The Anglo-Saxons manifested more disdain than they customarily accord to the rest of the world. The Russians could not wait until the blessed hour when the Muscovite bear would pounce on this brilliant and absurd prey. The Spanish relegated them to the bottom rung of civilized nations... Japan appeared to me through their discourse like a charming land peopled by malevolent monkeys.

In a particularly extravagant form, Bellessort had done what countless passengers did before and after him: he turned a trans-Suez ocean liner into the newspaper of the world.⁹⁹

Ships of State

Of course, not all passengers wanted to see the world’s reflection. Some wanted to find and figure out their own nations and empires, while taking advantage of the transitory assembly of countrymen. Lyautey, for instance, arranged French co-passengers on a trans-Suez liner of the 1890s in a hierarchy determined by how much they could teach him. Among the women on board, “three Ladies of Charity on a mission to [Madagascar], living monastically on the deck,” did not fare well in the officer’s assessment: “edifying but a mediocre resource.”¹⁰⁰ At the top of the hierarchy, by contrast, was “M. Tillier, chief operating officer of the Suez Canal,” who, Lyautey wrote to his sister, had “out of all of us the fullest supply of observations and experiences, which he shares with the most simple and cordial amiability.”¹⁰¹ From the mechanics of the Suez Canal to the question of Japanese expansion

⁹⁹ Ibid., 1-8.

¹⁰⁰ Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin*, 6 [“trois Dames de la Charité, en mission pour Diégo-Suarez, vivant monastiquement sur le pont » « édifiantes mais de ressource médiocre »].

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 7 [“M. Tillier, chef de l’exploitation du Canal de Suez »] [“de nous tous le sac d’observations et d’expériences le mieux garni qu’il nous ouvre avec la plus simple et la plus cordiale amabilité.”].

in Korea, Tillier provided the young officer a floating class on infrastructure and pan-imperial strategy. Not far below Tillier in Lyautey's colonial club was Léonce Lagarde, the administrator who devoted his career to implanting French influence in Djibouti in the 1880s and 90s. Lagarde briefed Lyautey and others on his plans to break the British monopoly on coal-stations in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden by turning Djibouti into a defensible French port and establishing train connections to Ethiopia. After long, educational conversations, Lyautey summed up the experience to his sister: "And it is all a library."¹⁰²

In transit to the colonies, in other words, Lyautey tapped into a reservoir of knowledge about building and ruling the French Empire. In a robust stream of letters, which he later published to great acclaim, Lyautey used voyages like these to encapsulate a colonial community that he made a career of contrasting with metropolitan society.¹⁰³ On maritime highways, Lyautey portrayed colonial society as a kind of parallel France ruled by Men of Action and guided by patriotic devotion, as opposed to parliamentary pettiness. Out of ocean liners, Lyautey crafted an imperial identity.

But if ocean liners of the *Messageries* were best suited to worldly aristocrats like Lyautey, state transports were perhaps the ideal venues for constructing imperial fraternity. Stripped of amenities and tight on space, state transports concentrated the colonizers in homosocial environments, leaving them little room to avoid one another.¹⁰⁴ Then again, not all passengers wanted to avoid one another in the first place. As a captain of a transport steamer running between France and Madagascar

¹⁰² Ibid., 29 ["Et tout cela est une bibliothèque: l'Evêque m'a fait sur cartes une conférence sur le vicariats de Chine; le fermier de l'Opium en sait long de Pékin à Bombay; Miss Brook me racontel'aventure étonnante de son oncle le Rajah; Miss Helyett, la vie de Cochinchine par ses dessous, et les marins piquent le tout de la note jeune, gaie, rigolo, que j'aime"].

¹⁰³ Bonnetain's, *En Extrême-Orient* attempted something similar, as did, in its own way, Albert Seigneurie, *Le tour du monde d'un épicier* (1886-1887).

¹⁰⁴ Bonnetain, *Tour du monde d'un troupiér*, 94-97; see also: Edgar Boulangier, *Un Hiver au Cambodge*.

in the 1880s noted, “numerous syphilitic manifestations among the... soldiers. This fact is explained by the illicit relations that they frequently have with each other.”¹⁰⁵

The adventurer, officer, and colonial propagandist, Xavier de Brau Saint Pol Lias, offered a master class in how state transports could foster a different kind of imperial military fraternity. In an 1880 voyage to Southeast Asia, Brau de Saint Pol Lias used his transport as a forum of debate and a recruiting center for colonial lobbies. Traveling on the *Tarn*, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias’s voyage was ruder than what he would have enjoyed on a *Messageries* liner. Indeed, watching a *Messageries* ship pass by him in the Suez Canal, he admiringly described it as an “illumination – a festival that passes on the sea.”¹⁰⁶ Due to the rough conditions on state transports and the regulations on who could use them, his ship contained far fewer foreigners and tourists than those of the *Messageries*. But, like *Messageries* liners, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias’s *Tarn* contained a representative sample of French imperial personnel: soldiers, administrators, sailors, explorers, teachers, missionaries, and more. A month after setting out from Toulon, a naval port near Marseille, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias prepared to part paths with the band of imperialists aboard the *Tarn*, leading him to describe the bonding experience of his voyage: “Above all, it will cost us dearly, and very seriously, to separate from many of our voyage companions, who, for us, are no longer mere acquaintances, but with whom we have had the time to tie together extremely caring relationships.”¹⁰⁷ Relations would not end at the port, however, and Brau de Saint-Pol Lias declared his solemn intention to “respond to the invitations” of

¹⁰⁵ “Voyage à Madagascar et à la Réunion. Tra versée d’aller. Transport le Rhin, commandé par M. Reynault,” Service historique de la Défense Toulon (SHD Toulon).

¹⁰⁶ Xavier Brau de Saint-Pol Lias, *De France à Sumatra par Java, Singapour, et Pinang. Les Anthropophages* (Paris: Oudin, 1884), 107.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 114-5 [“Il nous en coûtera surtout, et plus sérieusement, de nous séparer de plusieurs de nos compagnons de voyage, qui ne sont plus pour nous de simples connaissances, mais avec lesquels nous avons eu le temps de nouer des relations extrêmement sympathiques. »].

up-and-coming officers, administrators, “and others who demand that we promise to come and see them in Cochinchina, in Tonkin...”¹⁰⁸

Beyond personal connections and friendships from across the empire, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias’s voyage consolidated constituencies during a crisis in French colonial policy. In 1880, French colonial expansion in Southeast Asia was in-between gears, lurching forward and backward over the question of expanding into Tonkin (Northern Vietnam). France’s future in Indochina was caught between, on the one hand, a metropolitan public and parliamentary factions with little appetite for costly, interminable, far-off conflicts and, on the other hand, a body of soldiers, sailors, and adventurers in Southeast Asia under only minimal supervision, and hungry for medals, glory, and a domain of their own. Suspicion of the French military in Indochina was rampant not only in the metropolitan political commentariat, but also among the civil administration of colonial governments.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the voyage of the *Tarn* was the perfect occasion to convert representatives from across the empire into partisans of expansion in Indochina. “The Tonkin question has occupied a great place in our conversations during the crossing,” noted Brau de Saint-Pol Lias, thanks in part to a selection of literature about Tonkin – written by partisans and participants of expansion – that he had introduced to the ship. Describing a kind of contagion, he claimed that “these documents that make such gripping reading passed successively onboard through everyone’s hands.”¹¹⁰

Among the passengers on his ship, opinion was mixed as they set out. By the time of arrival, however, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias claimed that ranks had closed in support of the controversial

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. [« et d’autres qui veulent que nous leur promettons d’aller les voir en Cochinchine, au Tongkin... »]

¹⁰⁹ Brocheux and Hémerly, *Indochina*; see also: Sylvain Venayre *Une guerre au loin. Annam, 1883* (Les Belles Lettres, 2016).

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 114-120 [La question du Tongkin a occupé une grande place dans nos conversations pendant la traversée / Ces documents d’une lecture si attachante sont passés successivement, à bord, dans toutes les mains].

campaign. When the ship pulled into Singapore, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias prepared to say goodbye to his travel companions. Instead of merely shaking hands, expressing vague commitments to see each other again, and saying goodbye, two farewell receptions were held; one onboard, and the other in a hotel in Singapore. Uniting military officers, civil administrators, doctors, “and other companions from our voyage,” the reception led to speeches that reflected the diverse, competing interests of the passengers aboard the *Tarn*, while emphasizing the common interest they had, and the place of their shared voyage in reminding them of it:

We all have here a common sentiment, the love of our country whose interests we are going to serve abroad, and a common idea, French expansion, the development and prosperity of French influence in the countries we are facing. This is far more than sufficient to establish between us these sympathies which you have expressed. You can help us greatly, Sirs, you whose opinion on colonial matters is so authoritative.¹¹¹

Then, rather than watch his fellow imperialists disappear in different directions, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias recorded a call to form a “common center”:

We are happy to be able to ask for your names in the registration lists of the Society of commercial Geography in Paris, which will give us a common center. You will help us with the information that you will send to this Society and more directly by those of you who can come to us in person... We are moving forward in the steps of Dupuis [an adventurer pushing for Southeast Asian expansion], of whom you have all been able to make, during this voyage, an enlightened opinion which is so legitimately favorable to him.¹¹²

The travelogue-writer, Verschuur, had imagined his fellow passengers, so tightly bound together in their ship, exploding outwards in a thousand different directions like a firework in the sky. On

¹¹¹ Ibid. 119 [Nous a vons tous ici un sentiment commun, l'a mour de notre pays dont nous allons servir les intérêts à l'étranger, et une idée commune, l'expansion française, le développement de la prospérité et de l'influence de la France dans les contrées où nous abordons. C'est plus qu'il n'en faut pour établir entre nous ces sympathies que vous nous avez exprimées... Vous pouvez nous aider puissamment, vous, Messieurs, dont l'opinion sur les choses coloniales est si autorisée.]

¹¹² Ibid. 120-121 [Voilà pourquoi nous sommes heureux d'avoir à demander l'inscription de la plupart de vos noms sur la liste de la Société de Géographie commerciale de Paris, qui nous fera un centre commun. Vous nous aiderez par les renseignements que vous enverrez à cette Société et plus directement par ceux que vous voudriez bien nous adresser à nous-mêmes... Nous marchons dans la voie de Dupuis sur lequel vous avez pu vous faire, pendant cette traversée, une opinion éclairée, qui lui est si légitimement favorable].

Brau de Saint Pol Lias's ship, on the other hand, political projects and associational life reconsolidated passenger connections, guiding a far-flung network toward a "common center." The case for the controversial campaign to conquer Tonkin, meanwhile, was unfolding not only in colonial lobbies in Paris or Saigon, but at sea in the floating forum of the steamship.

By assembling disparate colonial actors, trans-Suez steamships provided a chance to meet one's own empire, perceive it in its totality, and extract lessons from the diverse experiences of its agents. Returning to the *Tarn*, for instance, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias painted a vivid portrait of "the pipe and cigar time" when the ship's deck filled up with "groups formed according to individual attractions": an infantry commander and the president of the tribunal in Saigon analyzed the route together; a hero of Garnier's expedition in Tonkin played chess with a veteran of four colonies as they discussed the expedition; three elite doctors debated in gruesome detail how a recent massacre in Réunion *actually* unfolded; four officers compared their varied experiences in Senegal; an artist sketched the scene, attracting a crowd of onlookers as he drew. Nearby, an officer "employs his leisure time on board researching indigenous languages, the knowledge of which will certainly serve him well upon his arrival."¹¹³ Throughout, Brau de Saint-Pol Lias emphasized the breadth of knowledge among his co-passengers: "between the four" officers alone, he marveled at one point, "they know every French colony." By the end of his voyage, he had discussed every corner of the empire in "intimate conversations during long nights on board." Dazzled by the devotion and experience of his co-passengers, he had a revelation: "No it is not initiative that's lacking

¹¹³ Ibid. ["qui emploie ses loisirs du bord à faire des études de langues indigènes, dont la connaissance lui sera certainement utile à son arrive."]

among us; no, a thousand times no, it is not colonial aptitude that is missing from our nation, but rather colonial policy...”¹¹⁴

Conclusion: “The Era of Beautiful Departures”

Many of the French Empire’s interoceanic commuters would never stop frequenting the state transports that so inspired Brau de Saint-Pol Lias. For the inter-imperial commuter class of the *Messageries*, however, including the British contingent within it, the world of the ocean liner proved more difficult to maintain. The *Messageries* would eventually lose its grip on elite British travelers in the Indo-Pacific, but only years after the two empires had put aside their grievances. Indeed, by 1910, the company was feeling the consequences of a new wave of industrial consolidation, publicity wars, and price cuts; all of which accompanied the aggressive entry into world shipping of Japanese, German, and American lines. Price pacts over 1st and 2nd-class passengers – signed by the P&O, NDL, trans-Pacific companies, and the Trans-Siberian Railroad (operating by 1905) – staunch the bleeding, but just barely.

State commissions and colonial chambers of commerce accused the company of being run by old men who waited for business to come to them. Throughout the 1910s, *Messageries* agents offered different explanations for their troubles. For one, while the number of interoceanic commuters remained frustrating finite, the number of lines available seemed only to grow. Thus, in response to a state commission reviewing the *Messageries* in 1915, one agent wrote: “If we admit that there are in China and Japan a maximum of 40,000 Europeans [government

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 117 [Je pourrais, abusant de ce que m’ont appris des conversations intimes, pendant des longues soirées du bord, citer, parmi les projets de ce genre, ceux du colonel Brunot, alors lieutenant à Kan Duoc, du capitaine Zimmerman au Sénégal, du lieutenant Gaultier à Ha-Tien, où il tâchait de seconder le zèle infatigable du capitaine Chessé, un des hommes les plus dévoués à nos intérêts coloniaux... et de tant d’autres! Non ce n’est pas l’initiative qui manque chez nous; non, mille fois non, ce ne sont pas les aptitudes coloniales qui font défaut à notre nation...mais la politique coloniale qui a constamment manqué au développement de ces aptitudes].

representatives of all kinds] susceptible to return on average once every four years, that gives an average of 10,000 travelers to split between 14 regular lines plus the Trans-Siberian railway.”¹¹⁵ Such numbers could not sustain a company.

Those many competitors, moreover, were increasingly breaking their lines into pieces, offering “intermediate” service to travelers with particular needs, and linking themselves to the Trans-Siberian railway. Meanwhile, the *Messageries* found itself tethered to interoceanic empire lines and bound to Marseille. To survive, the company would have to generate “tour du monde” tourism, impress “native” passengers, and capture masses of low-class migrants. This was not the world of trans-Suez British imperial elites whose loyalty had long sustained the *Messageries*’ pride and profit. Indeed, as a trans-Suez captain lamented in 1911, “in full season, in the month of April, I only had 30 first-class passengers of which 15 or so were Parsis, the only ones who remain with us.” The captain told his bosses what they already knew: “the era of beautiful departures from Bombay is finished.”¹¹⁶ Like all shipping companies, the *Messageries* would gain and lose ground after 1910; “reconquering” the Eastern Mediterranean; surrendering Australia; periodically seeing their British passengers spike; holding ground in China and Japan; and so on. Annex lines would open and close, just as prices went up and down; though mostly down. What was disappearing, however, was the singularity – the world-making quality – of the interoceanic commuter class at the height of the New Imperialism. A few major lines had multiplied into fourteen. Line-less tramp steamers were fanning out. The Conference System for controlling the industry was crowded and

¹¹⁵ The 14 lines were the *Messageries*; P&O; two NDL lines; 2 NKK (Japan) lines; Glen; 2 Austrian Lloyd lines; Russian Voluntary Fleet; Pacific Mail; Toyo Kisen Kaisha; 2 Canadian Pacific lines. “Shanghai. 9 Sept. 1915. Compagnie des MM, Agence gen. de Shanghai. N. 474 au M. le Consul Gen. de France à Shanghai”; and “Min. des aff. Étrangères. Direction des Affaires politiques et commerciales. Le min. des aff. Etr. À M. Naggiar, le consulat gen. de Fr. à Shanghai. Au sujet de la Compagnie des MM - CONFIDENTIEL (Paris, 11 Sept. 1915),” in Min. des Aff. Étrangères, Shanghai Rose 42 bis, 635PO/B, CADN.

¹¹⁶ “Voyage report of the Armand-Béhic, Australia Line, n. 2 (annex 25 fev. 1911), cmdt. Guionnet,” 1997002 3943, AFL.

wobbling. Moreover, only a few years after the Trans-Siberian railway broke the Trans-Suez liner's monopoly on travel between Europe and Asia, a new mode of mobility appeared on the horizon.

Around 1910, Alexandre Yersin hatched a new plan from his home and research laboratory in Nha Trang. For years, the conqueror of the plague had imported all manner of things to his compound: plant specimens, laboratory equipment, farm animals, and even an automobile – all of it carried on the same liners in which his overseas career began. In 1910, however, Yersin began looking into buying an airplane and bringing it to Indochina. In the end, he abandoned the plan after determining that it would be too costly and dangerous to construct a landing strip – but the curiosity remained. In 1934, Yersin's wish came true. Instead of the monthlong steamship voyage from Saigon to Marseille (still roughly the same length as when he first embarked), he took a bi-motor airplane from Saigon to Paris. Then he took it again – and again, and again. During seven to ten days of travel, a new set of layovers became habitual: Angkor, Bangkok, Rangoon, Calcutta, Allahabad, Jodhpur, Karachi, Dhaks, Bouchir, Bagdad, Damascus, Beirut, Castelrosso, Athens, Corfu, Marignan.¹¹⁷ From home experiments to international conferences on disease control, Yersin had business to attend to. For so business-minded a traveler, the ocean liner would no longer do.

J-H. Penseyres, *La peste et l'indochine: récit d'une vie aventureuse* (Conférence U3a-Neufchatel, 10 Nov. 2017), 58.

Conclusion

In July 1900, the *Pei Ho* set out from Marseille for Tianjin, where it was to deliver troops, animals, and materiel as part of the eight-nation campaign to crush the movement known as the Boxer Rebellion. Under a special contract with the state, the *Messageries* liner deviated from its typical itinerary and laid over in Oran, Algeria. While the ship waited for soldiers, officers, and mules to embark, dockworkers loaded 50 tons of barley and mountains of baggage into the holds. Around 5 PM, a thousand-odd soldiers of different regiments, officers, and mules assembled in front of the liner as music rang out through the harbor. “Just about the entire population of Oran” had gathered to watch and cheer, the ship’s captain claimed. Before anyone boarded, the commanding general gave a speech to his soldiers. Then, along with his officers, he inspected the facilities of the ship that would be dedicated to their transport. To the captain’s relief, the general “did not cease during the entire tour to express his utter satisfaction.”¹

The order was given for the troops to embark, and after ninety minutes, all were onboard. Military officers and officers of the *Pei-Ho* planned to toast each other in the ship’s 1st-class *salon*, but the room “was literally bursting with the entire *beau monde* of Oran, who had come en masse to deliver crowns and bouquets to the battalion.” So, instead the captain offered up his stateroom to the general and officers. There they gathered, trading patriotic speeches as the champagne flowed. When the ship finally steamed out of Oran’s harbor, church-bells rang, crowds screamed, and nearby warships fired off their canons in salute.

At the same moment, in the port of Bremen, the Kaiser Wilhelm II was delivering parting words to German troops as they boarded a *Norddeutsche-Lloyd* liner, also bound for China. In

¹ “Voyage report of the Pei-Ho, China Line, *affreté*. Cmdt. Bru (Annex. 18 Jan. 1901).” 1997 002 4254, AFL.

front of a vast crowd that had assembled to support the troops, or simply to take in the spectacle, he delivered a speech that famously included lines encouraging German troops to fight with the ferocity of “Huns.” If they did, he promised, then surely “no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.” The rest of the speech spoke to a more positive project: defending the “law of nations,” for example, and “open[ing] the way to civilization.” With the steamship as backdrop, the Kaiser declared: “The tasks that the old Roman Empire of the German nation was unable to accomplish, the new German Empire is in a position to fulfill.”² A month later, the troops of France, Germany, and six other empires had ransacked the Chinese capital. New concessions were extracted and a novel experiment in inter-imperial governance was launched in Tianjin. All the while, firsthand accounts of the pillaging inspired some in Europe to wonder if the defenders of “civilization” had become barbarians.³

Rites of passage like those that took place in Oran, Bremen, and many other ports in 1900 provided a fitting apotheosis for an age of steam-powered imperialism. As they unfolded, millions of visitors to the Paris Exposition enjoyed virtual trans-Suez voyages in simulated liners, with hundreds of meters of mobile panoramas (painted by *Messageries*-funded artists) and groups of live “indigenous” performers recruited from layover ports along the route.⁴ In real and virtual

² Johannes Prenzler, ed. *Die Reden Kaiser Wilhelms II*, Leipzig, pp. 209-212, Trans. Thomas Dunlap

³ Pierre Loti, *Les derniers jours de Peking*; P. Singara velou, *Tianjin Cosmopole*. On looting, see: Hevia, *English Lessons*.

⁴ In fact, visitors could embark on not one but two kinds of virtual steamship voyages. The most technologically sophisticated was the *Maréorama* designed by Hugo d'Alési, an artist and engineer famous for the travel posters he designed for transport companies. Inside the *Maréorama*, hundreds of participants entered a steamship deck that move and shook as if at sea, while mobile panoramas formed a horizon around them in a simulated voyage across the Mediterranean. In terms of popularity and press, however, the panoramic *Tour du monde* designed by Louis Dumoulin probably the *Maréorama*. Housed in a spectacular building near the Eiffel Tower, the *Tour du monde* was the product of Dumoulin's climb through networks of patronage that made him the Official Painter of the Navy. In 1896, he was granted an official mission by the Navy and a generous stipend by the *Messageries* to travel from Marseille to Yokohama aboard the company's liners (the painter Gaguin would try with varying degrees of success to reproduce Dumoulin's savvy use of *Messageries* funding and “official mission” status). Along the way, he was to paint the most eye-catching sites he encountered and to hire indigenous artisans and performers. (assisted by *Messageries* agents and captains throughout) [*XLIXe siècle*, 21 Septembre 1897].

ocean liners, capital, nation, and empire seemed to be assembled in perfect harmony, each in the service of the other. Whether bursting with the soldiers of imperial nations or the hungry tourists of the metropolis, the steamships encapsulated a belligerent nationalism and amplified a declaration of white supremacy, just as they conjured up an international order built on friendly international competition, Free Trade, and Free Seas. It was a powerful fantasy, requiring a level of compartmentalization that only a liner could provide. It was also a fantasy that thrived – at least symbolically – in the world of shipping and trans-Suez maritime highways; the “playground of civilized peoples.”⁵

Of course, the First World War revealed that international order to be a house of cards, just as it transformed maritime “playgrounds” into warzones. During the War, trans-Suez highways were at once the lifelines of the French and British Empires and the sites in which those empires seemed poised to unravel. To fill factories, ships, docks, and front lines, French officials manically manipulated the imperial switchboard of racialized labor. Hundreds of thousands of workers and soldiers were hastily recruited in China, Indochina, Madagascar, the Maghreb, West Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania. Accompanied by skeleton crews of interpreters, medics, and police, they were packed into liners and state transports in groups that could reach almost 3000 at a time, then hauled for weeks across oceans. Those who disembarked in Marseille encountered hundreds of thousands of Indian subjects of the British Empire, who had also followed trans-Suez highways to war-torn France.

In an epic migration west of Suez, these millions of soldiers and workers provided labor that sustained the allied war effort. With the world’s attention riveted on conventional battlefields

⁵ The phrase of a Triestine merchant in the 1860s as he called for the Austro-Hungarian Empire to enter shipping in the China Seas: quoted by Alison Frank, “Children of the Desert,” 415.

from Gallipoli to Verdun, the process of transporting them into France was little noticed and little memorialized. In fact, these voyages were battles in their own right. Occasionally the enemy appeared in sea mines and submarines, but more often it was disease, inter-racial violence, and desertion that took workers and soldiers off the imperial highway. When the *Pei-Ho*, for instance, was called to transport 2300 Vietnamese troops in early-1916, it witnessed 131 deaths and 297 hospitalizations in a single voyage.⁶ Breakdowns in health were perhaps inevitable on ships that, as another trans-Suez captain noted in 1916, frequently allotted only 1.5 meters cubed per soldier.⁷ In those tight spaces, the hyper-circulation of racialized groups created bloody conflicts of mobile cohabitation: Japanese workers attacked Chinese soldiers⁸; Chinese workers besieged Arab coalers⁹; Vietnamese soldiers clashed with Chinese laborers¹⁰; European sailors with Indian coalers.¹¹ Those spared from violence onboard often disembarked only to find violent conflicts and race riots in docklands from Cardiff to Marseille.¹²

To block the contagion of conflicts over race and labor, authorities tried to manage flows of people. For instance, when, between 1915 and 1916, coal depots near Marseille suffered labor shortages, French agents in Port-Saïd proposed sending hundreds of migrant workers hailing from across the Red Sea who were then looking for work in Port-Saïd. After all, such workers were

⁶ This was a different *Pei-Ho* than the one – its namesake – which transported French troops to China in 1900. “Voyage report of the Pei-Ho. Cardiff-Calcutta-Saigon-Marseille. *Libre jusqu’à Calcutta*. Cmdt. Guizol (Annex. 31 Jul. 1916).” 1997002 4254, AFL.

⁷ “Voyage report of the Melbourne, Madagascar Line, *Réquisition*, n. 3. Cmdt. Cazilhac (annex 25 Jul. 1917).” 1997 002 4228, AFL.

⁸ “8 Mars 1917. Confidentielle, M. les Admin. au sujet de l’Athos,” in: dossier, “Chinois ‘Athos.’” Athos, 1913-1917, MM 46, CCIMP; “Rixe à Yokohama, Dec. 1916,” Athos, 1913-1917, MM 46, CCIMP.

⁹ “voyage report of the Polynésien. Far East Line, n. 9 (postal). Cmdt. Schwab (annex 27 Feb. 1918).” 1997002 4254, AFL.

¹⁰ “voyage report of the Armand-Béhic, China and Japan Line, n. 16. Cmdt. Lauriol (annex 10 Jan. 1918).” 1997 002 3943, AFL.

¹¹ “9 mars 1918. N. 9. M. le commandant de l’Amazone,” in: Dossier “Indiens, Arabes, Chinois. ‘Amazone.’” Correspondance diverse de l’Amazone, 1912-1918, MM Amazone, CCIMP.

¹² LE7 936, National Archives, Kew, London, UK.

familiar with coal and working far from home. Despite those qualifications, however, the labor transfer was cancelled: the presence of “these foreign and Muslim workers,” officials worried, “could be in the current circumstances, the source of conflicts with the dockers and Muslim troops in residence in Marseille.”¹³

Amidst the chaotic conditions of wartime transport, though, illicit travelers compromised the ability of authorities to open and close their gates. Many stowaways, like Ibrahim Isma'il, hopped aboard transports and freighters, but plenty of others opted for liners. In the latter stages of the war, Navy brass complained to the *Messageries* that the problem had become systematic and that it had clear focal points: “there often arrive in Marseille individuals... embarked clandestinely in the ports of the Red Sea, either with the complicity of the *Surangs* under the pretext of helping out the Native Crewmembers, or having hidden themselves aboard. These individuals arrive in Marseille without work and resources, constituting a burden and often a danger to the public.”¹⁴ Nor were such individuals slipping into France and England one by one. Indeed, when a *Messageries* captain pulled away from a layover in Djibouti on the way back to France in 1918, he discovered roughly 30 stowaways aboard his liner. Though he disembarked most, he assumed that many others had evaded detection in coal rooms and cargo holds.¹⁵

As the trans-imperial flows that they had created became overwhelming and opaque, authorities began to see threats everywhere they looked. Germans were thought to have infiltrated

¹³ “Consulen France à Port-Saïd à m. Defrance, Min. de Fr. en Egypte, le Caïre; arabes charbonniers Marseille (Port-Saïd, le 30 juin 1915)”; 23 Juin 1915; 3 Oct. 1915; 22 Sept. 1916. Min. des Aff. Étr. Port-Saïd Consulat 82. 542PO/1, CADN.

¹⁴ « Circulaire N. 17 de 1918, 27/6/18, EMBARQUEMENTS CLANDESTINS DANS LES PORTS DE LA MER ROUGE » (le 22 juin). [“il arrive souvent à Marseille des individus provenant du Somaliland Britannique embarqués clandestinement dans les ports de la Mer Rouge, soit avec la complicité des surangs sous la prétexte d'aider l'équipage indigène, soit après s'être cachés à bord. Ces individus arrivant à Marseille sans ressource et sans travail, constituent une charge et souvent un danger public »].

¹⁵ “Voyage report of the Nera, Indo-China Line, n. 7 (Req.). Cmdt. Amen (vu 2 Aout 1919),” 19970024229, AFL.

the Indian army in Marseille.¹⁶ Algerian soldiers were really pan-Islamists planning to jump ship in Suez and relay with Turks.¹⁷ Vietnamese sailors were nationalists with international webs of connections. To regain the semblance of control, incipient identification regimes became complex and mandatory. In 1917-18, for instance, the governor's office and *Inscription maritime* in Indochina hammered out a system of identification for every indigenous seafarer who touched down in the colony's ports, replete with fingerprints, photography, information in multiple languages, and anthropometric files. Importantly, sailors were never to see or possess the entirety of their file. The "essential goal" of the project, authorities specified, was "to allow the Security services to surveil and track, in every one of their movements, a class of natives that is fundamentally mobile." The need for such a system, they noted, "had been felt for a long time."¹⁸ In Aden and Djibouti, similar attempts were underway to finally impose bureaucratic legibility upon the "Arab" sailors who maintained trans-Suez traffic.¹⁹

Much of the determination to finish building colonial security states across the Indo-Pacific stemmed from wartime events in Singapore. In 1915, Singapore was gripped by a week of insurrection after an Indian regiment stationed in the city erupted in rebellion. In nearby Saigon, French officials anxiously monitored the situation. As they prepared for uprisings to spread, unofficial communications with the British territory were cut. Hastily typed telegraphs informed French intelligence that Singapore's "Europeans, women, children" had taken refuge in steamships

¹⁶ See: Min. des affaires étrangères, CPC, Nouvelle série, 1897-1914, Indes 50; Archives diplomatiques de la Courneuve; see also: reports of Maj. R.A. Steel: Feb. 4, 1915; Oct. 8, 1914. Caird, NMM.

¹⁷ "Defrance, Min de Fr. en Eyg. À M. L. Cote, Consul de France à Port-Said, a.s. du sieur Mohamed ben Ka ddour, Algérien. Le Caire, 9 Sept. 1914," Min. des Aff. Étr., Port-Said Consulat 66. 542PO/1, CADN.

¹⁸ "DOSSIER RELATIF AU PROJET D'ARRETE CONCERNANT L'EMBARQUEMENT DES INDIGENES SUR DES NAVIRES FRANÇAIS ANNEE 1917. » 3101 (IA.5/185, 10), National Archives II, HCM City, Vietnam.

¹⁹ LE 7 936; R20A 2133; R20A 2132 (Nat. Archives, London); 2 MI 3218, CADN.

in the harbor.²⁰ From the decks of liners, those Europeans watched as allies joined British imperial forces to stamp out the mutiny. Fortresses of European imperial sovereignty, those ships provided a mirror image of the liners in which troops had been sent off to bring China to its knees fifteen years earlier.

But European empires' grasp over the steamship was slipping. Just before the outbreak of the War, Gurdit Singh, a Sikh British subject, had chartered a Japanese ship in the hope of launching an Indian line across the British Empire.²¹ No sooner had the War ended than the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey founded a Black Star Line with the goal of bringing Pan-Africanism into the sea.²² Each of these movements had evolving goals and leaders who courted controversy. When each line collapsed under legal intimidation, police harassment, and financial strain, however, millions of sympathizers made martyrs out of the men who had been denied entry into "the playground of civilized peoples." Throughout the 1920s, similar projects took place in Indonesia, where Hajj travelers wielded their consumer power to form shipping lines of their own, only to be driven out of the market by a cartel of Dutch shipping companies backed by the imperial state.²³

Martyrdom was just the first act of this story. Japan, having already forced its way into international shipping, took advantage of a decomposing Conference System to reach into European colonies and capture markets throughout the 1910s and 20s.²⁴ In China, meanwhile, the struggle to harness shipping to nation-making steadily gained ground throughout the first two

²⁰ "Telegramme official: Gouv. De la Cochinchine, n. 454 18 [sic] à 10h30." Dossier relatif à la mutinerie d'un regiment indien à Singapore dans la guerre 1914-1918. X. 1. N. 34496, National Archives II, Vietnam.

²¹ See: Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law*.

²² See: Bandele, *Black Star*.

²³ Alexanderson, *Subversive Seas*, ch. 1.

²⁴ Ibid.

decades of the Republic.²⁵ And in Indochina, a generation of sailors and former sailors became delegates to the Communist Party, offered each other hideouts and getaways, and moved through ships disguised as Asian businessmen.²⁶ Fanning out across global shipping lanes, thousands of similar figures – some politicized, others not – came to represent a seemingly emergent subjectivity: no longer colonized, in the fullest sense of the word, yet far from free.²⁷ Collectively, they presented a striking premonition of a Third World.²⁸

But if this liminal stage of European empires in crisis and anticolonial consciousness in formation became undeniable after 1914, it had been lurking for decades in Belle Époque liners and trans-Suez highways. Mobile heterotopias, liners in motion had long projected a lofty vision of empire, while revealing the compromises of sovereignty in practice. Coal-powered liners had encouraged inhabitants to describe a world of empires, while disrupting the categories for making sense of it. And while steamships had appeared to be perfectly enclosed objects of sovereignty and pleasure, they were in fact the intersection of many worlds and influences. Contrary to appearances, this space was not the encapsulation of imperial power, but rather an imperial crisis in motion.

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Just after the end of the First World War, the head of France's *Colonial and Maritime League*, Maurice Rondet-Saint, set out for a trans-Suez voyage across many empires. The book that he

²⁵ See: Reinhardt, *Navigating Semi-Colonialism*.

²⁶ Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941*, 124-127; 196; footnote 40. Sailors appear among the delegates to the French Communist Party in 1927. They are also vital to the survival of Ho Chi Minh. His Thai hideout in 1929, for instance, turns out to have been ensured by a "liaison agent, Cao Hoai Nghia, a former sailor." A few years later, he is mysteriously ferried away from deportation and arrest, then travels disguised as a wealthy Chinese businessman to Shantou. The party's communication network at this point was rebuilt through sailors.

²⁷ Claude McKay's 1920s novels, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* and *Romance in Marseille*, capture the spirit.

²⁸ See: Denning, *Noise Uprising*.

published immediately after the trip contained a long list of grievances. The ignorance of the French public regarding their vital maritime interests was decried.²⁹ The rise of the tourist – now an “all powerful” word – was teased.³⁰ The work ethic of sailors was condemned (with the decline of the “great line” and the rise of short, intermediate routes, he found sailors had lost their zeal and increasingly resembled railway workers).³¹ In a foreign steamer, the lack of a ceremony upon crossing the equator struck him as sad.³² And when he was invited to tour an engine room, he turned down the offer – how, he wondered, could any human tolerate those temperatures.³³ Along the way, with parables pulled from layovers, the propagandist impatiently explained why assimilation politics were outdated. Port-Saïd, “too familiar, not tempting,” was not one of those layovers.³⁴

Towards the end of a long voyage spent analyzing ports, hopping ships, and reflecting on France’s place on the highways of empire, Rondet-Saint cruised through the Mediterranean, a day away from the “native soil” of Marseille. There, his steamer crossed “a singular ship, lacking funnels; one of these long motor-powered couriers.” In the oil-powered vehicle, Rondet-Saint saw the end of an era:

... the novelty... shocks our unaccustomed eyes, I thought about the emotion felt by those who, for the first time, glimpsed in the distance the Fulton [steam]boat, and saw in it a new era opening up to human activity. I, too, had the vision... But when, an hour later, we crossed the *Cordillère* of the *Messageries Maritimes* heading where we were coming from, pure in its outline, fit for the sea, I caught myself deploring, for the future, the disappearance of today’s beautiful ships. Like yesterday’s sailors grieve the large, beautiful sail-ships of bygone time!³⁵

The eulogy for an age of steam had begun.

²⁹ Maurice Rondet-Saint, *Les Randonnées Asiatiques* (1919), 1-5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 80-90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 267-68.

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ADBR, Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, Marseille, France
Série E, Rapports des médecins sanitaires

AFL, Association French Lines, Le Havre, France
Fonds Messageries Maritimes
Rapports de voyage
Rapports des agences

ANOM, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France
Fonds ministériels
SLOTFOM, Service de liaison avec les originaires des territoires français d'outre-mer

Bibliothèque d'histoire militaire, Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes, France

BL, British Library, London, United Kingdom
IOR/P, Proceedings of the Government of India and Presidencies and Provinces
IOR/R, India Office Records transferred later through official channels
IOR/L/PJ, Public and Judicial Department
IOR/L/Mil, Records of the Military Department
Mss Eur, Genealogical material

CADC, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve, Paris, France
Correspondance diplomatique, Ministère des affaires étrangères
Correspondance commerciale

CADN, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Nantes, France
PO, Fonds des consulats: Alexandrie; Bombay; Colombo; Hong Kong; Majunga; Port-Saïd; Shanghai; Singapore; Suez; Tokyo; Zanzibar.
MI, fonds microfilm, Aden

Caird-NMM, Caird Library and Archive, National Maritime Museum, London, United Kingdom
P&O, Peninsular & Oriental Records
Circulars
JOD, Diaries and Journals

CCIMP, Chambre de commerce et d'industrie, Marseille Provence, Marseille, France
Fonds Messageries Maritimes
Rapports de voyage
Correspondance divers
Circulaires de bord

EMM, L'Encyclopédie des Messageries Maritimes, Collection de Philippe Ramona
Collection "la vie quotidienne à bord des paquebots"

HCMM, Ho Chi Minh Museum, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Permanent collections

NAV-II, National Archives of Vietnam II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Fonds gouvernement de la Cochinchine
IA. Dossiers relatifs à l'Inscription Maritime; les compagnies de navigation; la main
d'œuvre indigène
SLI. Dons du gouvernement de la Cochinchine

TNA, The National Archives, London, United Kingdom
ADM, Admiralty records
MT, Ministry of Transport records
FO, Foreign Office records
BT, Board of Trade records
WO, War Office records

IP, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France
Fonds Alexandre Yersin

SHD-Vincennes, Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes, France
Fonds de l'armée de Terre
Série N. Troisième République
Série GR 7 N, Attachés militaires
Fonds Marine
Sous-série 10 H, l'Indochine
Série BB, Ministère de la justice
Série DD, Matériel, télégraphie sans fil, service de santé

SHD-Toulon, Service historique de la Défense, Toulon
Série MT, personnel
Série P, l'Inscription Maritime

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