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Maritime Labour, Transnational Political Trajectories and Decolonisation From Below: The Opposition to the 1935 British Shipping Assistance Act.

This paper uses a discussion of struggles over attempts by the National Union of Seamen to exclude seafarers from the maritime labour market in the inter-war period to contribute to debates at the intersection of maritime spaces and transnational labour geographies (cf Balachandran, 2012, Hogsbjerg, 2013). Through a focus on struggles over the British Shipping Assistance Act of 1935 it explores some of the transnational dynamics through which racialized forms of trade unionism were contested. I argue that the political trajectories, solidarities and spaces of organising constructed through the alliances which were produced to oppose the effects of the Act shaped articulations of ‘decolonisation from below’ (James, 2015). Engaging with the political trajectories and activity of activists from organisations like the Colonial Seamen’s Association can open up both new ways of understanding the spatial politics of decolonisation and new accounts of who or how such processes were articulated and contested. The paper concludes by arguing that engagement with these struggles can help assert the importance of forms of subaltern agency in shaping processes of decolonisation.

Key words: maritime labour, transnational spaces, subaltern agency, decolonisation, political trajectories

Maritime Labour, Transnational Political Trajectories and Decolonisation From Below: The Opposition to the 1935 British Shipping Assistance Act.

Introduction

The 1934 report of the British section of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) noted that the organisation had ‘endeavoured to meet [...] the campaign now being waged by the British ship-owners to obtain a shipping subsidy from the British National Government, in return for which they will undertake to clear all coloured seamen- Lascars as these seamen are very generally called- out of their ships and replace them by white British Seamen, nearly 50,000 of whom are now unemployed’ (League Against Imperialism, 1934). The ship-owners, the report noted, ‘were supported in their campaign by ‘the reactionary officials of the National Union of Seamen’ and as a result ‘Large numbers of Indian, Arab, Somali, Chinese and Negro Seamen are menaced by this new development’. Efforts, the report assured its readers, were ‘being made by the League Against Imperialism to assist the coloured seamen to organise resistance’.

The campaign referred to by the League was the sustained lobbying by ship-owners and unions which resulted in the National Shipping Assistance Act a piece of legislation passed in 1935 by the ‘National Government’. Known as the ‘Ship owners’ dole bill’, the law was a response to the slump in shipping during the depression and offered built on proposals to offer ‘temporary assistance to tramp voyages to enable shipowners to meet foreign competition and advances out of a £10mn. for a scrap, build and modernisation programme’ (Marsh and Ryan, 1988: 143). While the Act did not explicitly exclude seafarers of colour from the maritime labour market, the debates over the Act in parliament and the way it was reported were explicitly racialized. The support given by the NUS and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) for the legislation, which invoked the context of high unemployment among seafarers, was made conditional on the understanding that subsidies would be given to ships that prioritised ‘British’ crews. This was something which was also lobbied for by Labour Party politicians such as Arthur Greenwood MP and Lord Strabolgi.

The League’s involvement in the opposition to the Act speaks to significant alliances between what the League termed ‘colonial seafarers’ and leftwing anti-imperial activism, including various Communist networks, in the inter-war period (Weiss, 2013). The political trajectories, solidarities and spaces of organising constructed through these alliances shaped articulations of ‘decolonisation from below’ (James, 2015). These forms of organising

exceeded the contained nationalisms of some anti-colonial struggles and shaped diverse spaces of politics which brought into contestation practices of labour organising which were unequally articulated with racialized hierarchies. Through tracing these alliances and forms of transnational opposition to the Act this paper contributes to debates at the intersection of maritime spaces and transnational labour geographies. Sustained engagement with the forms of organising against the Act and the alliances they generated is warranted as while they have been noted by many authors there has been little attempt to systematically engage with this resistance and the transnational dynamics it shaped (Balachandran, 2012, Lawless, 1995, Sherwood, 1991, Tabili, 1994).

The alliances construct in opposition to the Act speak to important but neglected histories and geographies of multi-ethnic organization which shaped forms of working class multiculturalism in the inter-war period and beyond. These histories and geographies are particularly significant in a contemporary UK political context where pervasive constructions of the 'white working class' which displace and erase such multi-ethnic histories are part of increasingly entrenched 'racialised structures of feeling' (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: 3). By challenging such erasures this paper seeks to contribute to different politically narratives about racialized class formation and the geographies through which they are shaped (see also Bergin and Rupprecht, 2016, Connolly and Fuentes, 2016). As a white leftist geographer who racializes differently from the seafarers of colour who are central to the paper I engage with these trans-racial alliances out of a commitment to their significance and importance to left political cultures and imaginaries.

To reconstruct the debates about the Act and the alliances shaped in opposition to it the paper engages with a range of sources. These include official correspondence about the Act and the reaction to it; accounts of discussions between NUS officials and shipowners through the various panels of the National Maritime Board; the correspondence and publications of left organisations such as the League Against Imperialism which sought to contest the Act and the writings of seafarers who were affected by the Act. These sources have been read in combination to highlight the contested articulations of the Act and to reconstruct some of the transnational geographies through which the Act was contested. Through engagement with these sources the paper seeks to trace articulations of subaltern agency in relation to processes of decolonization. The paper first engages with the relations between coloniality and labour and how they shaped the racialized spatial imaginaries at work in the Act and then outlines the relations between maritime labour and 'decolonization from below'. I then discuss the contested impact of the Act before tracing some of the transnational dynamics of the alliances

and organisations formed to fight the Act. The paper concludes by arguing that engaging with the struggles of seafarers from racialised minorities in British ports in the inter-war period can help assert the importance of forms of subaltern agency in shaping processes of decolonisation.

Transnational Maritime Spaces, the Coloniality of Labour and the National Shipping Assistance Act

In her book *Global Displacements* Marion Werner argues that ‘considering labor through the lens of colonial legacies that intersect with particular transnational production arrangements’ is ‘a first step towards conceiving of labor as an active structuring agent in the production of place’ (Werner, 2016: 12). Her intervention draws on Anibal Quijano’s contention that the ‘raced and gendered hierarchies forged through the conquest of the Americas constitute a terrain of articulation, one that adapts historical patterns of exploitation and domination to the necessities of contemporary and capitalist accumulation’ (Werner, 2016: 134). Werner usefully argues, however, that the ‘abstract terrain of articulation described by Quijano can only be understood by examining actually existing geographies of uneven development’ (135). Her account outlines useful theoretical resources for ways of thinking about the contested articulations between coloniality and its attendant racialized and gendered hierarchies and labour organizing and movements. This is important as such questions have tended to be rather down-played in the ways in which work in labour geography and labour history has approached questions of labour struggle and organizing.

Werner’s attention to the ways in which these articulations are not abstract but relate to questions of spatial politics/ division is particularly useful in terms of thinking about both forms of labour agency actively invested in such racialized hierarchies and through attempts to challenge and rework such relations (cf Roediger, 1999, 2017). The debates and struggles around the National Shipping Assistance Act (NSSA) signal how some forms of labour organizing were actively shaped by investments in particular racialized spatial divisions of labour. Further, they suggest how key ways of thinking about transnational maritime spaces were produced through particular articulations of coloniality and labour organizing. Scrutinising the geographies through which such articulations of coloniality and labour were imagined, produced and contested can help shed important light on the dynamics of transnational labour organizing.

The racialized divisions and imaginaries which the National Union of Seamen (NUS) articulated in their lobbying for the National Shipping Assistance Act had significant

histories. The position adopted by the union built on a long-standing politics of hostility shaped by the NUS, and by its predecessor the National Seamen and Firemen's Union (NSFU), towards seafarers from racialized minorities.¹ From the early 1900s until the First World War, as Balachandran notes, seafaring unions in the UK largely directed their ire at Chinese seafarers 'with race combining complexly with nation and empire as filters of allegiance and rights' (Balachandran, 2014: 533). Before the First World War, however, the NSFU had shaped some internationalist and multi-ethnic organizing strategies, particularly during the 1911 strike where black seafarers 'picketed alongside whites' in key hubs of the dispute such as Cardiff and which was 'internationalist' on a 'European scale' (Byrne, 1994: 93; Evans, 1994: 73). Through the First World War the NSFU leader Havelock Wilson entrenched a stridently patriotic and xenophobic position which shaped an intensification of racist strategies and culture in the union.

This hostility took its most aggressive and violent form in relation to the direct involvement of officials the NSFU in targeting and demonizing seafarers from racialized minorities in the seaport riots of 1919 (see Jenkinson, 2009, Tabili, 2009). These riots were shaped by particular hostility to and pathologising of inter-racial relationships. The union was also involved in mobilizing for legal provisions such as the 1925 Coloured Alien Seamen Order which led to systematized harassment of seafarers of colour from diverse backgrounds in British ports (Evans, 1985, Lane, 1994, and Tabili, 1994). This was part of a context whereby 'racial difference, compatible in the eyes of many with British nationality, came through a political process to signify "outsider" status' (Tabili, 1994: 120). Such forms of exclusion were integrally shaped by racialised colonial articulations of Britishness. The propagation of negative discourses about seafarers of colour was central to this racialised political context and continued to shape the organizing cultures of the union.

The minutes of the NUS's Cardiff branch record, for example, that a meeting in October, 1929 unanimously agreed a motion moved by the District Secretary George Reed that 'With reference to the Arab, Alien and Coloured Seamen problem it was very essential that some steps should be taken to bring about more stringent regulations to prevent British ships being over-run by this class of labour, as at present there were thousands of Arab and Somali seamen in British ships which prevented the Britisher having a fair opportunity of employment.'² The term 'Britisher' here becomes synonymous for white and is allied to an

¹ The NSFU became the NUS in 1926.

² Report of meeting on 4th October, 1929, National Union of Seamen, Cardiff Branch, Minute Book, Glamorgan Record Office, GB/0214/DNUS.

investment in racialized hierarchies, with Arabs and Somalis positioned as both a threat to the 'Britisher' and a 'problem'. This racialized and imperial articulation of the term Britisher was consistent with the usage by leading officials in the union (Byrne, 1994: 94; Tupper, 1938). The refusal of the Liverpool writer, syndicalist and seafarer George Garrett, a vehement critic of the NSFU and member of the Seamen's Vigilance Committee, to use the term in a speech at a rally of unemployed workers in Liverpool in 1921 underscores both its contested character and its imperial associations. He noted that 'I don't tell people I'm a Britisher' and made it clear he was committed to a 'fight for the emancipation of all workers, no matter what country, colour or creed' (cited by Morris et al, 2017: 31, see also Garrett, 1921).

These racialised constructions of maritime labour were underpinned by an ethos of collaboration with employers and the national and local state shaped by the NSFU/ NUS. This collaboration was institutionalized in the National Maritime Board which was set up in 1917 after the Ministry of Shipping, partly because of concerns relating to rank and file unrest among seafarers, invited both the NSFU and the Shipping Federation to 'confer with government representatives on the supply of seamen, wage difficulties and other problems which were causing waste and delay to shipping' (Marsh and Ryan, 1989: 80; Lawless, 1995). Central to this was the PC5, a "work ticket", stating that a man was "in compliance with" the NSFU, which was needed to 'qualify for a job' producing a 'closed shop' on British merchant ships (Tabili, 1994: 93). Instituted in 1922 by the National Maritime Board the PC5 became a key technology for regulating the maritime workforce, allowing the NSFU to assert control by '[w]ithholding access to the PC5' to 'exclude members of rival unions and to discipline NSFU dissidents' (Tabili, *ibid.*). Seafarers of colour were in a particularly ambiguous position here as despite attacks from the NSFU, and despite facing harassment and vilification from their own union officials, they still needed to join the union to be able to acquire a PC5. In this sense the NSFU/ NUS was never a 'whites only' union, and indeed faced some hostility for not being so, but the inclusion of seafarers of colour in the union was on decidedly unequal terms (see Lawless, 1995: 97-90).

The union's strategies of working with the local and national state and employers was a marked contrast to the syndicalist influences which were prominent in other sections of the national and international labour movement (Cole, 2007, Holton, 1976). Thus Matt Tearle, the secretary of the NSFU in the Bristol Channel district, argued in the wake of the 1921 miners' strike that 'the employers and the employees, not only in the coal industry but in

every industry, have got to come together before Britain will be put in its proper place, and will be able to compete and win back her commerce' (Tearle, 1921). Such union strategies constructed the role of the NSFU as 'docile to the point of subservience in its dealings with shipowners' (Lane, 1994: 119), and by the early 1920s the NSFU 'increasingly resembled an employment brokerage for seafarers loyal to the union, employers and the state' (Balachandran, 2012: 255).

These strategies were also articulated with what Lara Putnam has described as 'a global pattern of white supremacist state making practices' (Putnam, 2013: 170-171). She notes how 'British West Indian commentators' positioned events such as 'the treatment of black seamen in British ports after the war' as part of a 'global panorama' of racialised division. The NUS actively sought to locate its organizing cultures in relation to entrenching such racial divisions or 'global colour lines' (Anievas et al, 2015: 1). The NUS's support for the NSSA was of a piece with such organizing cultures. The NUS leader William Spence reported to the Union's 1935 AGM that the provisions in the Act would lead to the 'sacking' of 'all and sundry who have the slightest taint of alienage' (cited by Marsh and Ryan, 1988: 143). It was not only the NUS/ NSFU that were invested in such exclusionary ways of thinking about transnational maritime spaces, however. The 'programme and prospectus' of the more left-leaning Amalgamated Marine Workers Union (AMWU) which existed in the early 1920s, for example, as printed in its paper *The Marine Worker*, included the 'Abolition of Chinese and Asiatic labour west of the Suez Canal' (AMWU, 1921).³

These organizing cultures, and the geographical imaginaries that they were produced through, were shaped by discourses of what Jon Hyslop (1999) has termed 'white labourism' and which he defines as the 'common ideology' which was 'produced and disseminated' by an 'imperial working class' in different sites. He argues that the 'profound ideological hostility to capitalism' and of 'widespread influence of syndicalist doctrines in the unions' which shaped this era of labour militancy became 'fused with the notion that employers were attempting to sap the organised power of white workers internationally by subjecting them to the competition of cheap Asian labour' (Hyslop, 1999: 399). Such discourses of white labourism influenced the organising cultures of syndicalist-inflected unions which contested the NSFU such as the British Seafarers Union which had a strong presence in Glasgow and which 'linked hostile feelings towards specifically non-white labour competition for jobs' to

³ Modern Record Centre, University of Warwick, MSS 175/6/AMW/4/1-22.

demands 'for a shorter working week' (Griffin, 2015: 124).

What is of most direct relevance here is the distinctive articulations of 'white labourism' that were shaped by the NUS and which were directly forged through linkages with the state, employers and the Labour Party. These articulations of 'white labourism' depended on ways of regulating maritime labour and transnational mobility which emerged at the intersection of the colonial state, ship owners and by the National Union of Seamen and produced particular articulations of imperialism and whiteness. They were particularly important in this context as the Act prioritized 'tramp shipping', which was the most irregular, exploitative and racialised part of the maritime labour market. 'Tramps', Tony Lane writes 'went wherever there were cargoes to be carried, collecting a cargo in one port and delivering it to another on an ad hoc basis. For these ships, freights were determined on an open, international market which in the years of depressed world trade between the wars had been intensively competitive' (Lane, 1990: 14). There is also evidence to suggest that tramp shipping was shaped by particular racialized geographies of labour or at the very least were understood in relation to such divisions. The Cardiff based Pan-Africanist Aaron Moselle told the 1945 Pan-African Congress that there was a concentration of seafarers of colour in Cardiff because 'as a rule coloured seamen were given employment only on coal carrying ships, those with clean cargoes carrying white seamen' (Padmore 1947: 67).

These dynamics became explicitly politicized through the debates around the NSSA. The Labour Party's Annual Report for 1935 notes, for example, that during the Second Reading of the Shipping Assistance Bill in 1934 the Party moved that 'while this House recognises the necessity for State intervention to secure the rehabilitation of the Mercantile Marine' it regarded the 'payment of a public subsidy to private interests as a method of assistance' as one had proved ineffective (Labour Party, 1935). Further, the Party noted that the subsidy was 'still less worthy of support when unaccompanied by any measures to ensure the payment of fair wages and good working conditions to those employed on board ship, as well as the reinstatement of the many British domiciled seamen who are out of employment through the substitution of cheap labour'. This Amendment was rejected by 121 to 38. In Committee the Party made a number of Amendments along similar lines which 'were moved and rejected' and which included 'That payment of the subsidy should be dependent upon a reasonable proportion of the crew being British domiciled seamen' (Labour Party, 1935).

While the Party's amendments and interventions were formally unsuccessful they played a significant role in shaping the widespread view that the subsidies were to be given only to ships with British crews. The interventions of some Labour members in debates made it clear

that such notions of Britishness were posed in racialized terms. As Marika Sherwood notes the Labour MP N. Maclean argued that ‘a subsidy ought not to be given to British shipping so long as there is a single white British seaman unemployed’ (Sherwood, 1991: 238). Such linkages between unions and state around racialized imaginaries of exclusion became central to the analysis of seafarers of colour who opposition to the Act. Thus an article in the *Negro Worker* by the Cardiff Coloured Seamen’s Committee, an organisation set up to contest the effects of the Act, noted that at ‘the first meeting of the committee a delegate was sent to see the officials of the NUS.’ Mr George Reed the District Secretary of the NUS, who had moved the 1929 motion against Arab and Somali seafarers noted above, had ‘told the deputation that they [the NUS] did not assist in the making of the new regulations and that they would help the colonial workers in their fight against injustice’. The Committee continued, however, that ‘now the facts are starting to come out- that those very people Messr’s Spence and Keep’ [key NUS officials] had ‘sat on a body called the Trade Union Parliamentary Committee for Shipping and Waterside Industries’ (Cardiff Coloured Seamen’s Committee, 1935: 10-11).

The *Negro Worker* was the paper of the Communist led- International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, which had links to the League Against Imperialism. The League, which was linked to the Communist International, shaped a politicized construction of ‘colonial seamen’ as strategically important actors in shaping anti-colonial politics (League Against Imperialism, 1934). This work was linked to organizations such as the Seamen’s Minority Movement (SMM), a Communist affiliated grouping which challenged the NUS and shaped fraught but significant inter-racial alliances in the dockside areas of ports such as Cardiff, London, Liverpool and South Shields in the late 1920s early 1930s (Adi, 2014, Featherstone, 2015, Seamen’s Minority Movement, 1932). The placing of the Cardiff Coloured Seamen’s Committee’s article in the paper situates the opposition in Cardiff as shaped and articulated through forms of left, black internationalist politics. These links emphasise that the opposition to the Act was shaped by an inter-racial left political imaginary which drew on the analysis of activists who had experience of organisations such the Seamen’s Minority Movement.

In Cardiff, for example, opposition to the Act coalesced around these linkages between NUS officials and key local politicians. Thus George Reed, despite his claims to help the ‘colonial workers’, had publicly called for the repatriation of what he termed the ‘thousands of coloured men [that] had been ‘imported’ to Cardiff’.⁴ Harry O’Connell, a Guyanese seafarer,

⁴ Western Mail, April 2nd, 1935

who was appointed as the Committee's delegate to liaise with the NUS noted in a letter to the *Western Mail* that he had been 'elected three weeks ago by the coloured seamen of Cardiff' to travel to London to interview Captain Arthur Evans the Conservative MP for Cardiff South, 'with regard to the new regulations which debar coloured seamen whose British nationality has been recognized for years from getting jobs on British ships' (O'Connell, 1935). Further, when in London he had 'discovered that these regulations were put into force as the result of a Parliamentary Committee on which there were representatives of the NUS and TGWU'. He observed that the 'the tears now shed by Captain Arthur Evans and the trade union officials in Cardiff could have been avoided and the coloured seamen can only thank these people for their present situation' (O'Connell, 1935). O'Connell's letter also indicates some of the terms on which opposition to the Act was articulated. He concluded by arguing that the 'existing committee of coloured seamen in Cardiff is leading the fight to secure rights for all seamen, no matter what their colour' (O'Connell 1935). The next section uses his interventions as a starting point for thinking about the relations between opposition to unequal, racialized spatial divisions of labour and forms of decolonisation from below.

Maritime Labour, Transnational Trajectories and Decolonisation From Below

O'Connell's interventions around the 1935 Act speak directly to what Leslie James has termed 'decolonisation from below' (James, 2015). James uses this term to frame her account of the major Trinidadian anti-colonial figure, Pan-Africanist and erstwhile Communist George Padmore. Her use of the term evokes some of the ways in which anti-colonialism and decolonisation was shaped by non-elite actors and transnational organising. She argues that while questions of 'nationalism and the formation of the state' were clearly significant in the 'late colonial period' they were not the only important political narratives that shaped anti-colonial politics (James, 2015: 12). She contends that engaging with the ways in which 'transnational organisers like Padmore confronted nationalist projects, how they reconciled their own vision that went beyond the nation, and how local nationalists responded to their ideas' can shed light on 'another story that helps to round out some of what was going on during the period of decolonization and the issues that black thinkers and organisers were dealing with' (James, 2015: 12). This is a story of diverse forms of transnational organising which shaped anti-colonial politics in relation to expansive geographical imaginaries. James is clear, however, that engaging with such transnational project does not necessitate effacing the importance of the nation and articulations of nationalism (James, 2015: 12). James's work offers ways of redrawing some of the maps through which processes of decolonisation are

understood (see also Iton, 2008). As Benjamin Zachariah has argued decentring the national offers ways of moving beyond the ‘disciplining lens of ‘nationalism’’ and can foreground different articulations of anti-colonial political movements (Zachariah, 2011: 111).

Such a project has significant implications for revising understandings of decolonisation which has primarily been understood in the post Second World War period as an elite process involving dialogues between leaderships of national anti-colonial movements and the administrations of imperial states. Moves to challenge such nation-centred accounts have helpfully coincided with renewed interest in relations between the left and racialised minorities in both the inter-war and post-war-period (Smith, 2017, Virdee, 2014). Such work offers more heterogeneous understandings of the makeup of the left and labour organizing and suggests important possibilities for reframing understandings of those involved in contesting coloniality and the terms on which it was contested. Much existing work on processes of decolonization has, however, tended to centre the role of writers and intellectuals, though authors like Bill Schwarz have scrutinized how Caribbean intellectuals such as George Lamming and CLR James mediated between the ‘arena of formal, or high, culture’ and ‘lived experience, on the ground’ (Schwarz, 2003: 11). Related work has foregrounded the importance of activists from racialized minorities in shaping decolonisation processes in the inter-war period (Makalani, 2011, Matera, 2015, Ahmed and Mukherjee, 2011, Pennybacker, 2009).

Some of this work engages in some depth with the role of maritime workers in relation to these processes, suggesting their potential importance, but their broader importance and agency tends to be rather downplayed. Sustained engagement with the political trajectories and activity of seafarers’ organisers like O’Connell can open up both new ways of understanding the spatial politics of decolonisation and new accounts of who or how such processes were articulated and contested. In this regard O’Connell’s trenchant critiques of the role of NUS officials in drawing up the National Shipping Assistance Act, demonstrates how opposition to the legislation brought aspects of the ‘coloniality of labour’ into contestation. O’Connell was a Communist seafarer from what was then British Guiana, who had been in Cardiff since the early 1910s, and was a long standing militant who had been involved in the Seamen’s Minority Movement and the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers. He had spoken at the 1932 International of Seamen and Harbour Workers congress in Altona near Hamburg, was prominent in the opposition to the effects of the Shipping Assistance Act in Cardiff (Padmore, 1932, O’Connell, 1935). He had a long history of contesting the racism of both the NUS and the local state, such as involvement in campaigns against the

introduction of unequal unemployment rates for black and white workers in the city in 1933 (Featherstone, 2016).

O'Connell's interventions in relation to the Act speak to articulations of 'decolonisation from below' in two key ways. Through his concerted opposition to forms of 'white labourism' brought the colonial and racialised constructions of maritime labour that underpinned the imaginaries of both unions and shipping owners into contestation. He was also involved in shaping and mobilising different alliances in opposition to such spatially articulated racialized divisions of labour. These alliances were shaped by the diverse trajectories of maritime labour and reflected the multi-ethnic communities in dockside areas of port cities such as Butetown in Cardiff. This emphasises that there were important relations between seafarers' trajectories and the ways opposition to racialized accounts of maritime labour were contested.

These articulations, shaped opposition to the coloniality of labour which were shaped through through plural trans-racial alliances and connections. The forms of maritime organizing were shaped through transnational routes and trajectories which have often been marginalized in 'nationed', terracentric, understandings of labour movements and organizing (Rediker, 2014: 3, Scott, 1986). Tracing such political trajectories permits a focus on diverse practices of labour agency which can open up different ways of accounting for the contested articulations of labour and coloniality. Such forms of labour agency have been recovered in recent work on the strategies of maritime workers including in a compelling discussion of Caribbean dockworkers activism 'during the 1919 Isthmian dock strike' in Panama by R.L. Fausette. Fausette argues that this strike 'revealed the boundaries of West Indian working class agency in the age of empire' and usefully draws attention to forms of transnational agency shaped through these disputes. (Fausette, 2007: 181-2). She argues that these black longshoremen were '[a]ware of their strategic importance to the expansion of maritime commerce' and 'used their role at the hubs of imperial exchange to challenge the structure of the colonial labour market.' Her account also gives a strong sense of the ways in which port cities functioned as sites of the intersections of different trajectories and how this was productive in political and organising terms. She notes how 'the maritime linkages they maintained with itinerant sailors, Garveyite followers, and migrant kinsmen' enabled West Indian dockworkers to utilize 'knowledge obtained from the maritime grapevine and circulating radical newspapers in an attempt to appropriate the benefits of continental wartime labor accords and to contest racial exploitation in the Canal zone' (Fausette, 2007:181-2).

Organisations involved in the struggle against the effects of the NSSA such as the Cardiff

Coloured Seamen's Committee and the Colonial Seamen's Association were shaped in similar ways by diverse trajectories. They brought together seafarers of many different ethnicities and were shaped by seafarers with both Atlantic and Indian Ocean trajectories. While maritime organising, as the spatial practices of the NUS testify, could be far more 'nationed' than stereotypes of motley crews suggest, it could also be decisively shaped by diverse forms of multi-ethnic politics which shaped organising practices in generative ways (Hyslop, 2017, Linebaugh and Rediker, 2001). Tracing trajectories, solidarities and articulations which cut across some of the neat spaces of politics imagined through some nationed articulations of anti-colonialisms can, then, be integral to thinking about the forms of spatial politics of decolonisation from below. Through adopting such a focus the rest of the paper seeks to assert forms of subaltern agency through the ways maritime labour functioned as a terrain of struggles over different articulations of coloniality. There were three particularly key aspects of these struggles.

Firstly, by contesting the role of maritime unions as strategic actors in shaping and attempting to entrench racialised hierarchies of labour, struggles like that over the NSSA challenged the ways colonial imaginaries shaped the structures and experience of maritime labour markets. The resulting transnational alliances and contestation shaped in opposition to forms of labour organising which was invested in unequal racialised spatial divisions and formations shaped contested articulations of labour agency. Such interventions unsettle understandings of labour agency as something to be straightforwardly valorised (see also Ince et al, 2015, Virdee, 2014). Second, the opposition to the Act explicitly contested the terms on which unions allied with actors in the local and national state to produce exclusionary effects. These relations were decisively shaped by the ways in which the state imposed various restrictive forms of mobility and regulation on racialised minorities. If the state has functioned as something of an absence in labour geography (Castree, 2007, Kelliher, 2017), a consequence has been a lack of engagement with the contested articulations and relations between labour and the state. Tracing such geographies of contestation. Emphasises that forms of decolonisation from below could be shaped through actively contesting the articulations between unions and state institutions and activities.

Thirdly, these struggles illuminate the ways in which dockside spaces in British port cities became key sites of antagonism over the relations between maritime labour and colonial imaginaries and practices. The opposition to the Act both reflected the way that British port cities were shaped by diverse trajectories which traversed colonial and metropolitan spaces and explicitly challenged the unequal terms on which such transnational geographies of

maritime labour were constructed and envisioned. Indeed, such contestation was shaped by political organising facilitated by the ways ‘colonial seafarers’ lives traversed metropolitan and colonial spaces (Høgsbjerg, 2013, Tabili, 1994). The spaces of politics shaped through such struggles and the transnational imaginaries they shaped were important in challenging colonial politics through spatially stretched relations and alliances. The remainder of this paper develops these concerns through exploring the dynamic spatialities shaped through struggles over the responses to the National Shipping Subsidy Act.

Political Trajectories and Contested Articulations of Britishness

The impact of the Act when it came to force in February 1935 was swift. The effect was particularly strong in ports such as Cardiff and South Shields which had a high reliance on Tramp Shipping, significant populations of diverse seafarers and high unemployment. Thus, on the 6th March of 1935 B. Faroze Bhader, an Indian seafarer resident in South Shields wrote to the Office of the High Commission for India to raise concern about the implications of the British Shipping Assistance Act on British Indians. He noted that ‘I don’t know who is responsible but each time a ship signs we have been refused, the Union blames the owners and the owners blame the Union’ (India Office, 1935: 441). Bhader was one of five Indian firemen who had been ‘on the *SS Dagenham* for 5 years’. He noted that they had been ‘paid off’ in South Shields last Sunday and ‘it signed on taking white crew and we were sacked (5 firemen) without explanation or reason and we can’t get to know why’. Officials at the India Office noted that Bhader was believed to be ‘identical with a seamen of the same name who holds a certificate as a British protected person, also from Jammu and Kashmir State’. Further they noted that it was ‘more than probable that the men of whom he writes have a similar national status’.

That the context for the sacking of Bhader and his fellow firemen and their replacement with white crew members was the implementation of the National Shipping Subsidy Act, was made clear by debates among officials regarding his letter and those of other British Indian seafarers who were stopped from signing on other vessels in South Shields including the *Arlington Court* and the *Llanberis*. Thus W Dimond of the Mercantile Marine office in South Shields observed that ‘The National Union of Seamen has interfered in many cases that have arisen at this port’ and that in the case of the “Dagenham” the change was made on the owners’ instructions.’ He argued that it is ‘understood that one of the conditions for the

payment of the Shipping Subsidy is that the crew must be British subjects' (India Office, 1935: 445). In similar terms F. Norman of the Mercantile Marine Department of the Board of Trade observed that the reason for the change was that the 'owners appear in some cases to be substituting white for coloured seamen [...] to put themselves in a favourable position as regards the new subsidy.'

As Bhader observed the interlocking relations between unions, ship-owners and local officials in ports became key to both the implementation of the Act and how it was contested. To understand how contested articulations and claims to Britishness and subject status shaped struggles over the Act necessitates looking beyond the details of the legislation and to trace the practices of its implementation in particular ports. Board of Trade officials were quick to point out that the Act 'made no change in the law in respect of the employment of coloured or alien seamen on board British ships' (India Office, 1935: 426). They noted, however, that while 'amendments proposed with the object of restricting the subsidy to vessels employing white British subjects were resisted by the Government in parliament, and were defeated' such ideas pervasively shaped the discourses around the Act. In this regard they drew particular attention to the role of key figures involved in the Tramp Shipping Subsidy Committee set up to administer the Act.

The chair of the Committee was Sir Vernon Thomson, who had been prominent in negotiations for the subsidy, and as a Chairman and Managing Director of the Union-Castle Line had strong links to shipping interests. His involvement as chair of the Committee indicates the centrality of ship-owners to the administration of the Act and the failure of the Labour Party to de-couple the administration of the Act from Shipping Company interests (Labour Party, 1935). Thomson had, along with Labour Party demands, intervened to ally the subsidy with the employment of British crews issuing a letter to the press before the legislation was passed, which stated that 'he felt sure that all owners wishing to qualify for the subsidy would employ British subjects as crews wherever possible' (IOR, 1935). Board of Trade officials noted this position had been endorsed by the Tramp Shipping Subsidy Committee. and concluded that the 'preference for British crews in subsidized vessels' was also in conformity with the opinions strongly expressed on all sides of the House during the Debates [on the Act] and the Committee's attitude had the approval of the Board of Trade.

After the passing of the Act Thomson's official position, as communicated in a response to the clerk in charge of the National Maritime Board, was that 'shipowners intending to apply for subsidy will be expected to employ British subjects, as crews where available, the term

‘British Subjects’ including all subjects of the British Empire’.⁵ Board of Trade officials noted, however, that ‘some shipowners, in seeing to be on the right side, may in some cases have given preference to white British subjects. We have, however, made it perfectly clear to the Committee that there must be no discrimination so far as they are concerned between the various classes of British subjects’. There is evidence, however, that responses to the Act were allied to a directly racialized hierarchy of labour hiring. Thus Jimmie Henson, Chairman of the Seamen’s Section of the International Transport Workers’ Federation alleged that the “Shipping Federation” had issued a ‘confidential circular which suggests that preference should be given in the order of 1) seamen of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; 2) Southern Irish, 3) British subjects from other parts of the Empire: (4) aliens’ (India Office, 1935: 425). That Henson critiqued such racialised hierarchies suggests that some former NUS officials did develop more progressive positions around race, in Henson’s case this was potentially through his involvement in the International Transport Workers Federation. Henson had in 1923, for example, described the ‘employment of Arab seamen as ‘not merely a national but an international problem’ during a delegation of NUS officials to the Board of Trade (see Lawless, 1995: 103, on Henson see also Hyslop this special issue).

NUS officials, however, through their local actions in specific ports and representations through the National Maritime Board (NMB) apparatus, however, sought to entrench the racialised implementation of the Act. Thus at a June 19th, 1935, meeting of the Sailors’ and Firemen’s Panel of the NMB NUS representatives sought to ‘raise the question of the Employment of Lascars’ in relation to the Act. After being told by the Shipowners’ Representatives that ‘they were not prepared to discuss the question of Lascars as the employers primarily concerned’ were ‘not present’ they made it clear they ‘intended to raise this matter again at an early date’.⁶ On 12th April, 1935 NUS representatives had presented a set of proposals relating to the ‘employment of British crews’ in respect of the British Shipping (assistance) Act 1935 at the Sailors’ and Firemen’s panel of the NMB which included proposals that shipowners should ‘give an undertaking through the NMB that where Lascars are carried on deck, no matter in what trade these steamers are employed, that a percentage of the deck crew and Catering Department in future shall be British white seamen. The sea-going personnel with any individual Owner or Company shall contain at least 25 per cent British white seamen. In Troop Ships, the Deck Department and Catering Department

⁵ MRC- MSS 367/NMB/12/16 p. 20

⁶ MRC- MSS 367/NMB/12/16 p. 20-21.

should be exclusively British White Seamen’.

These proposals indicate that NUS officials were concerned to intervene not only in racialised hiring practices but in the spatial and racialised divisions of labour aboard ship. They were informed both by a desire to maintain particular racialised division of labour, with an association of lascars and other seafarers of colour as firemen rather than deck hands. They also powerfully indicate the strong coupling of Britishness and whiteness which informed the imaginaries of the union. The panel decided, however, to advise the Chairman of the Subsidy Committee, merely for his information and consideration, that the employment of a number of Alien Seamen who have been domiciled in this country for many years and serving on British ships has become an established practice, and that many such Aliens are members of the National Union of Seamen, and that the displacement of such Aliens is not favoured by the Panel, is likely to cause trouble, and may lead to further manning difficulties in certain ports.’⁷

If the panel was concerned about the Act having deleterious consequences and fomenting division these fears certainly had strong grounds. Thus the *Shields Gazette* reported in September, 1935 that a ‘dozen Tyne-owned vessels which had traditionally carried an Arab stoke-hold crew’ had ‘replaced them with white firemen’ (Lawless, 1995: 167). Lawless notes that ‘fifty or so Somali seamen in South Shields protested to the Foreign Office about the discrimination by shipowners against coloured seamen but received no reply’ *ibid.*) In Glasgow the Mercantile Marine Office that reported that eight ‘coloured seamen’ from Sierra Leone and one from the Gold Coast had been ‘discharged [...] from the *SS River Afton* on account of the fact that the Owners were applying for a subsidy in respect of the vessel’ (IOR, 1935). In Cardiff a near riot was sparked when union officials ‘intervened against the engagement’ of non-white firemen on the *SS Ethel Radcliffe* (Little, 1947: 73-4). A ‘serious disturbance’ was only averted by the intervention of the League of Coloured Peoples and the shipping company which reversed its initial hostility to seafarers of colour and the *Ethel Radcliffe* sailed with its existing multi-racial crew.

The effects were not confined to British ports. The regulations intersected, for example, with ‘new restrictions at Aden on Arab seamen wishing to travel to Britain in search of employment’ (Lawless, 1995: 168). These stipulated that “‘Adenese” seamen should not be issued with certificate of nationality and identity at Aden which would enable them to proceed in Britain to look for work unless they had a record of residence in the UK and of

⁷ MRC- MSS 367/NMB/12/16 p. 20-21.

service in British ships, ‘closely antecedent to the date of their applications for such certificates’ (Lawless, 1995: 168). In Bombay there were particular impacts on Goanese seafarers who were treated as Portuguese not British subjects. There ensued correspondence between British and Portuguese officials, the latter complaining that the ‘replacing of Goanese stewards by natives of British India in four transports in Government employment’. HJ Seymour was forced to explain on behalf of the British government that there were ‘special reasons for not employing Goanese seamen in these vessels’ ‘that the number of men affected by this decision is less than 300’ and that no ‘general decision to exclude all Goan Portuguese from service on British ships has been made’. Seymour explained that ‘Vessels in receipt of subsidy under the British Shipping (Assistance) Act, 1935’, were ‘expected to employ British seamen as crews whenever they are available so that except in a few cases where they might have been long employed in the service of one owner, or in other exceptional circumstances, Goanese as well as other foreign seamen would not normally expect to find employment on these vessels’ (IOR, 119, see also Balachandran, 2012: 191-2). The case of Goanese seafarers indicates how racialized hierarchies and maritime labour intersected with differentiated and contested citizenship claims. British imperial citizenship, as Niraja Gopal Jayal notes was ‘not unlike that of imperial Rome: similarly inclusive in the formal sense, and similarly stratified in reality’ (Jayal, 2013: 30). She notes further that ‘differential access to rights were even more pronounced across the empire, echoing and reinforcing the inequality between its different constituent units’ (Jayal, 2013: 30). Differential experiences and distinctions such as between British subjects and British protected persons had effects on how the Act was articulated and conducted. Thus Henson in an interview with Board of Trade/ India Office officials sought to clarify ‘the position of a number of Arab seamen who claimed to be British subjects from the Aden settlement and who had been in this country for some years’ but had ‘lost their identity papers during the war and had never troubled to renew them, and having lost touch with Aden feared that it would not now be possible for them to be identified as British subjects’ (India Office, 1935: 425, see also Lane, 1994).

These were significant issues as it often proved very difficult for seafarers from racialized minorities to prove claims to British nationality. A ‘fairly large number of the Indians at this port’ Dimond noted of the situation at South Shields, ‘cannot prove British nationality’. A letter from Abdul Qayum, like Bhaider a British Indian seafarer based in South Shields, demonstrates how seafarers’ documentation proved central to disputes over the implementation of the Act and to challenges of the association of Britishness with whiteness.

Qayum noted, 'that along with eight of his countrymen 'all owning British subject Passports' he had been 'duly engaged by the Chief Engineer and Capt of the Steamer *SS Llanberis* belonging to Radcliffe (E.T) & co. Baltic House, Mount Stewart Square, Cardiff, and we were all served with the regular PC5' (India Office, 1935: 444). He notes however that the Captain had then come 'on board 20 minutes later and told the Chief Engineer to take back the PC5s from me and my countrymen, well I kept mine and still have it, and I went this morning to Dunston to ask what was the matter when I spoke to the Chief Engineer. He said the owners order was to carry white men. But I don't believe that. We are all us 9 men British subjects. Born in Indian and we have our British Seamen's Passport. Not British Protected and Not Alien and not Otherwise.'

Qayum's letter makes a direct challenge to an association of Britishness and whiteness- and asserts importance of his holding a British Seamen's passport. The centrality of the PC5 to this encounter indicates the importance of its role in shaping the terms on which the employment of seafarers from racialised minorities was policed and regulated by both union officials and ship's officers. The tenacity with which Qayum made sure that he held on to his own PC5 once it had been issued, locates the encounter and opposition to the Act in relation to struggles over the PC5 in ports like South Shields. During renewed campaigns against Arab seafarers in the port in 1930 the 'National NUS used its control over the PC5 as a weapon by which it sought to impose a rota arrangement' something which brought Arab seafarers into an alliance with the Seamen's Minority Movement in the port in attempts to challenge such racialised constructions of maritime labour (Byrne, 1994: 96-7; Lawless, 1995: 135).

The contestation of the NUS's attempts to construct Britishness and whiteness as synonymous were also made by different organizations supporting the seafarers in their grievances against the union. During its organizing against the Act in 1934-5 the League Against Imperialism made a set of challenges to the NUS's investment in associations of Britishness with whiteness. Thus in correspondence with the NUS the LAI raised key questions about Britishness and 'coloured seamen'- and challenged the discriminatory practices of the NUS. Thus the League questioned representatives of the Union on 'Which coloured seamen are British?' and 'Whether a Trade Union should adopt a policy of discrimination apart from the question of wages, esp as the NUS through the TUC are affiliated to the IFTU?'. The response of the NUS was 'that the appropriate Committee, to which the League's letter had been referred, had not met and was not likely to meet for a

couple of months'.⁸

The interventions of the LAI emphasises that the opposition to the Act was shaped by an inter-racial left political imaginary which drew on the analysis and experience of organisations like the SMM and the LAI. These shaped important international trans-racial alliances. Thus the *Negro Worker* article of the Cardiff Coloured Colonial Seamen noted that 'On the Committee sat spokesmen of Malayan, Arab, Somali, West-Indian and African workers' (Cardiff Coloured Seamen's Committee, 1935: 10-11). This in itself was an important and significant organizing achievement, as such multi-ethnic alliances involved negotiation tensions within places like Butetown in Cardiff where there had been riots between different ethnic groups in the 1920s (Evans, 1985). Such trajectories and organising were central to the composition of other organisations, notably the the Colonial Seamen's Association which was founded in mid-1935 partly as a result of campaigns against the Act. The next section explores the way the CSA brought together diverse trajectories of seafarers and explores the forms of transnational opposition to the Act that this shaped.

Racialized Divisions of Labour and the Spatial Politics of Decolonisation from below

The composition of the Cardiff Colonial Coloured Seamen's Committee indicates the diverse multi-ethnic alliances that were important in shaping the opposition to the National Shipping Assistance Act. This was a part of the forms of working class multiculturalism shaped in particular districts of British port cities (cf Bressey, 2015: 255). One of the most sustained ways in which these relations shaped the opposition to the NSSA was the formation of the Colonial Seamen's Association- which from its inception appears to have been linked to the League Against Imperialism. Thus the September 1935 issue of the *Negro Worker* reported in its 'Notes and Comments section' that 'a meeting of colonial seamen' was held at 68, East India Dock Road. London had 'decided to form a colonial seamen's association to fight for the redress of grievances and to cooperate with other organizations when necessary to questions affecting seamen' (*Negro Worker*, 1935).

Noting that the meeting was 'well attended by seamen from most of the colonies' the article noted that 'Over 20 members enrolled at the first meeting.' The founding of the Colonial

⁸ Hull History Centre League Against Imperialism Papers- British Section- Bridgeman, U DBN/25/1

Seamen's Association (CSA) was a direct result of the organizing and contestation linked to the introduction of the Shipping Subsidy. The centrality to the CSA of the National Shipping Assistance Act, and the ongoing nature of the campaign against it, is demonstrated by the resolution passed by its first 'annual conference' held in London in November 1936. The text noted that 'The Conference condemns the Regulations of Shipping Subsidy Act of February, 1935 by which vast sums of money have been granted to ship owners, and which has debarred many colonials in Great Britain whose services were considered indispensable during the War of 1914-18 from working in British Ships' (Negro Worker, 1937).

The attendance at this conference emphasises the diverse composition of the Association. The report in the *Negro Worker* noted that 'Fifty one workers attended this conference. Besides the members of the Association which is composed of Indians, Negroes, Arabs, Somalies, Malays and Chinese, representatives of other colonial and local working class organizations such as the Negro Welfare Association, India Swaraj league, League of Coloured People, League Against Imperialism and the Cypriot Club participated in the conference' (Negro Worker, 1937). The leadership of the organization was similarly diverse. Led by President Chris Jones (aka Chris Braithwaite), the secretary was Surat Alley, an Indian labour organizer and the organization also involved figures such as Rowland Sawyer from Sierra Leone and Arnold Ward, a pivotal figure in the Negro Welfare Association, who like Jones was from Barbados (Tabili, 1994: 158-9). As Christian Høgsbjerg notes 'the range of support for the organization was unprecedented and historic, as black, Indian, Arab and Chinese seamen were employed in British ships in a very strict hierarchy of wages and provisions' (Høgsbjerg, 2013: 51).

The organization brought together activists with a significant reach and transnational linkages. One of the particularly significant aspects of the CSA was the way in which it forged connections between seafarers' organisers who had both Atlantic and Indian Ocean trajectories and experiences. At the time of the formation of the CSA Surat Alley ran the Hindustani Social Club in Poplar, in a disused pub which was used as a meeting space for the organization and which Alley rented from the London, Midland and Scottish Railway and where he lived with a 'white woman called Sally Reder' (India Office, 1941, Ahmed, 2011). Alley, who had been born in Orissa in 1905, was a key "lascars' leader with long-standing connections to Indian seafaring unions. Thus in 1930 Jimmie Henson had sought to facilitate a meeting between Alley and 'Mr M Daud, the President of the Indian Seamen's Union" who were founding an Indian seamen's Union of Calcutta and Bombay' and William Spence of the NUS (Tabili, 1994: 103). The request for the meeting, was unsurprisingly turned down,

but it emphasizes Alley's strong networks with Indian seafarer's unions. By 1939, presumably through his intervention, the Colonial Seamen's Association 'amalgamated with the All-India Seamen's Federation' (India Office, 1941, Visram, 2000).

Alley's connections contributed to the formation of a transnational discourse of opposition to the Act was shaped. The British Shipping Assistance Act and the support for its provisions by key figures within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) was discussed critically by trade unionists in India. The Trade Union Record (Bombay) July and August 1935 noted that a 'joint conference' of trade unionists had expressed 'its regret at the unfriendly attitude taken by the Parliamentary Labour Party, as evidenced by their speeches and the voting in the /matter of paying subsidy to the British Shipping Industry, towards the employment of Indian seamen on British-owned ships. The members of the PLP, who took part in the discussion on the Bill in the House of Commons, even went so far as to demand discharge of those Indian seamen, who had already been employed, in order that unemployment among the British seamen might be reduced. This attitude is, in the opinion of the joint conference, fundamentally opposed to the recognized labour principles and international solidarity of the working classes' (India Office, 1935: 307).

This challenge to the role of the Labour Party in undermining international solidarity was significant. While some in the Labour Party, and many activists in the Independent Labour Party, developed a consistent anti-colonial position, the predominant approach was based on expectations that colonial trade unions would passively model themselves on the procedures and processes of the British labour movement (Reddock, 1988). As the Bombay statement indicates trade unionists in India articulated a set of interventions informed by discourses of international solidarity which were both deeply critical of the Labour Party and refused to adopt a subordinate position in relation to the Party. Arguably the most sustained critique of the role of the Parliamentary Labour Party in relation to the Act was made by Jamnadas Mehta, the then President of the All-India Railway Federation. Mehta a 'prominent left-winger', associated with the Congress Socialist Party, had been in the UK in early 1935, and had also visited the UK and Ireland in 1927 when, along with VJ Patel, ostensibly 'to study democratic procedures' (O'Malley, 2009: 57).

On his return to India in April 1935 Mehta released the text of a letter he had written 'against unfair attacks on Indian seamen' to George Lansbury, the then Leader of the Labour Party in the UK Parliament. As the *Statesman* of May 2nd 1935 noted, the letter drew Lansbury's attention to the 'injustice that is being done to Indian seamen employed in British-owned ships' urging him 'to take immediate steps to set matters right' (India Office, 1935). As well

as demonstrating the circulation of protest about the Act between the UK and India, Mehta's letter was also reprinted in the *Bombay Chronicle*, Mehta's intervention located his criticism of the Party in relation to a critique of the racialized imaginaries of transnational maritime labour. Mehta pointed out that 'what was noteworthy' about the debates in Parliament about the Act and 'what he wished to emphasise in his letter was the attitude of the Parliamentary Labour Party.' He noted that the Party had 'opposed the payment of subsidies, not because of the uselessness of such devices but because the Government in replying to the debate, declined to give an undertaking to reduce unemployment at the expense of Chinese, Arab and Indian seamen, who were as good British subjects as the Labour MPs who demanded their dismissal.' Mehta drew attention to the explicitly racialized constructions of Britishness here- arguing that 'the spokesmen of the Labour Party stated that there about 40,000 British seamen out of work, and therefore, it would be a wrong policy at such time to spend the tax payers' money on subsidies to ship owners unless such payment resulted in a reduction of unemployment among British seafarers and that is the desired reduction could not be brought about in the ordinary way, it should be effected by discharging what are called 'coloured' men from British-owned ships.'

A significant aspect of Mehta's analysis was the way he interrogated the unequal geographies through which 'British' shipping was constructed and maintained. Thus he contested the claim that 'British ships were entirely and exclusively constructed from the resources of people born and working in Great Britain.' Rather, he contended that 'the dominance of British shipping in the world had been rendered possible and had since been maintained mainly through the fact that India and other eastern countries in the British Empire and the people of these countries had not been given opportunities to construct, own and run their own mercantile or even coastal shipping services.' His letter explicitly challenged the divisive racialized spatial divisions of labour which were central to the debates around the Subsidy Act and articulated different understandings of maritime labour and spaces through doing so. He argued that 'British shipping companies could not be ignorant of the fact that without India, Africa and portions of Arabia and China, the major portion of their revenue and their ability to pay wages to their White crews would disappear He therefore requests the PLP to recognize that lascars and Oriental crews had an obvious right, along with the White crews, to employment in British-owned ships.' As a solution he argued that 'In justice, to the seamen of both countries, Mr Mehta suggests that a statutory system of quotas should be adopted, there being a ratio of at least 50 per cent of Oriental employment on all British ships. The time had arrived when such a quota policy had become imperative.'

Finally, Mehta contrasted the Labour Party's position on the Act with 'the helpful co-operation which he had received from all labour organizations and the Labour Party in Parliament in the matter of moving certain amendments to the Government of India Bill.' He argued that the Party's position in relation to the Act 'was a negation of what labour stands for all over the world. If the British Empire was to become a real Commonwealth the distinction between British seamen and an Arab sailor or an Indian lascar who are all British subjects, should be forgotten. Judged by this test the attitude of the PLP was open to the greatest objection.' Mehta's references to the British Empire as Commonwealth here indicates that the opposition to the Act was shaped by organizations which adopted differing positions in relation to imperialism. This position arguably differentiates Mehta from movements like the LAI which adopted a more explicitly oppositional language in relation to imperialism.

In this regard the terrain on which such anti-colonial left interventions were made was not smooth and uncontested (Legg, 2014). Mehta had clashed with Communists during in the early 1930s during his attempts to unite different Indian union federations and the accused in the Meerut trial, of 33 Indian and British communists/ trade unionists who were charged with conspiracy and imprisoned, 'targeted Mehta directly in their statements, declaring him an enemy of the workers' (Stolte, 2013: 58). Mehta also represented Indian workers at International Labour Organisation conferences, which were generally frowned upon by Communists. The debates around the Meerut trial were significant on the transnational left, and it is notable that, one of the Meerut accused, Ben Bradley was involved in the LAI's organizing work among seafarers of colour in British ports. At the LAI British Section conference in November 1934 Reginald Bridgeman drew attention to the role of Ben Bradley, who had been one of the Meerut prisoners, in work to set up branches of the League among 'the coloured seamen in Cardiff'.⁹ These differences were suggestive of tensions over the terms on which different anti-colonial actors/ organisations brought the Act into contestation, suggesting, for example, why Mehta's critique of Lansbury was not covered in papers like the *Negro Worker*.

It is significant, however, that both Mehta and the Colonial Seamen's Association linked contestation of the Act to broader critiques of colonialism and the lack of democratic rights it entailed. This emphasises that configuring struggles over the Act on a transnational terrain

⁹ British Library India Office Records- League Against Imperialism activities- L/PJ/12/274 1935

had consequences for the political imaginaries through which they were articulated. Thus there are resonances between some of the framing of Mehta's letter and the resolution of the CSA conference which explicitly allied the opposition to the British Shipping Assistance Act to a challenge to the repressive citizenship/ legal status of colonial subjects. This signals the ways in which these questions around maritime labour were related to broader grievances of the lack of political rights of colonial subjects. The Conference of the CSA demanded not only that 'the disability thus imposed on colonial seamen in this country be immediately removed' in terms of the Act- but also 'that seamen in the British Empire be given full democratic rights, especially do we demand the right of trade union organization, freedom of speech and assembly' (Negro Worker, 1937).

Conclusions

The esteemed African American anthropologist St Clair Drake who conducted research in the Butetown area of Cardiff in the late 1940s argued that 'the Seamen's Minority Movement, the Colonial Defence Association and 'Larry' [his pseudonym for O'Connell] have had an influence over the years out of all proportion to the number of their numbers' (Drake, 1954: 497). St Clair Drake's assessment emphasizes that the struggles and political interventions such over issues such as the role of the NUS and the Labour Party in relation to National Shipping Subsidy Act were significant. The opposition shaped by the diverse alliances forged against the Act had consequences. As Balachandran notes 'before long, the principle of white-only crews proved unworkable. Some shipowners especially from South Wales complained of not being able to find full crews of white British sailors, while fears of divisions in its ranks persuaded the NUS to back away from its earlier demand for excluding all foreign seamen' (Balachandran, 2012: 193). That the union conducted a renewed campaign against seafarer of colour in the immediate post-war period, however, suggests that the impact on the views of the NUS itself was limited.

The paper has situated such struggles were important as part of broader struggles which challenged the investment of unions like the NUS in relation to racialised imaginaries of maritime space and labour that were underpinned by colonial assumptions and values. By locating these struggles in this broader context, I have sought to signal the way the interventions shaped through opposition to the Act were part of a politics that shaped aspects

of ‘decolonisation from below’. The paper has argued that sustained engagement with the political trajectories and activity of seafarers’ organisers like O’Connell can open up both new ways of understanding the spatial politics of decolonisation and new accounts of who or how such processes were articulated and contested. These interventions were shaped by important trans-racial alliances both within organisations like the Colonial Seamen’s Association and between them and organisations like the League Against Imperialism which shaped transnational spaces of politics.

These spaces of politics were generative of diverse political alliances and imaginaries which produced an internationalist opposition to ‘white labourism’ and which located these struggles in relation to critiques of the unequal power-geometries of transnational maritime labour relations and colonial citizenship practices. While the fact that the CSA became amalgamated into the All India Seamen’s Federation might suggest a narrowing of multi-ethnic politics – the writings of Alley in the early 1940s suggest a different expansive anti-imperial politics which may have been shaped by linkages with figures like Jones and the diverse anti-colonial culture of the CSA. Thus in a piece written for circulation on ‘Empire day’ in 1940, Alley argued that ‘On this day the British Empire holds meetings etc to belaud its own administration. But, the people of Africa, the Arabs in Palestine, the Malayans in Singapore and our compatriots in Jamaica and Trinidad who endure the oppression of the British Government, all know that until the British Government is ended there will be no peace or tranquility in the world’ (India Office, 1941).

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