

theories and
methodologies

The Prospect of Oceanic Studies

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THE SEA IS NOT A METAPHOR. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE HAS ITS PLACE IN ANALYSES OF THE MARITIME WORLD, CERTAINLY, BUT OCEANIC studies could be more invested in the uses, and problems, of what is literal in the face of the sea's abyss of representation. The appeal that figures of oscillation and circulation have had is easy to understand, since the sea, in William Boelhower's formulation, "leaves no traces, and has no place names, towns or dwelling places; it cannot be possessed." Boelhower's description of the Atlantic world is representative of characterizations of the ocean in recent critical work: it is "fundamentally a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified lines and images—in short, a field of strategic possibilities in which the Oceanic order holds all together in a common but highly fluid space" (92–93). The ready availability—and undeniable utility—of fluidity as an oceanic figure means that the actual sea has often been rendered immaterial in transnational work, however usefully such work formulates the ethos of transnationalism and oceanic studies alike. In this essay I advocate a practice of oceanic studies that is attentive to the material conditions and praxis of the maritime world, one that draws from the epistemological structures provided by the lives and writings of those for whom the sea was simultaneously workplace, home, passage, penitentiary, and promise. This would allow for a galvanization of the erasure, elision, and fluidity at work in the metaphors of the sea that would better enable us to see and to study the *work* of oceanic literature.

The sea is geographically central to the hemispheric or transnational turn in American studies and to Atlantic and Pacific studies.¹ Hemispheric American studies has sought to challenge traditional definitions of the United States as a self-contained political and cultural entity, working against notions of American exceptionalism by observing the transnational dimensions of cultural and political formulations and exchanges in the United States. Often complementary with hemispheric methodologies, Atlantic- and Pacific-based scholarship

has tended to venture the relative irrelevance of state affiliations in the maritime world. The material conditions of maritime transit, trade, and labor would seem to be logical focuses of study in fields that take oceanic spaces as fundamental “unit[s] of analysis,” to adapt Paul Gilroy’s description of the black Atlantic (15). Yet recent work in transnational studies has been dominated by attention to questions of empire, exchange, translation, and cosmopolitanism—critical frames not unique to the sea.

The sailor, both mythologized and consigned to invisibility, presents a challenge to these emerging fields. To date, few scholars (Marcus Rediker is a notable exception) have taken up questions of labor, citizenship, and nation in terms of seamen, whose work placed them at the center of such spheres of circulation. The sailor’s career, in all senses of the word, circumscribes a lacuna in how current methodologies of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and hemispherism account for the ocean’s exemplarity, in theory and in fact. I would like to see a new model for oceanic studies, one whose prospect moves beyond methodologies and frameworks imported from existing discourses and takes the sea as a proprioceptive point of inquiry. As oceanic studies reveals, freedom from national belonging can make possible other ways of understanding affiliation, citizenship, mobility, rights, and sovereignty, all of which have been read in recent critical history as overdetermined by nationalism. Wendy Brown makes an analogous argument in *Politics Out of History* when she says pointedly that “we have ceased to believe in many of the constitutive premises undergirding modern personhood, statehood, and constitutions, yet we continue to operate politically as if these premises still held, and as if the political-cultural narratives based on them were intact” (4).² Looking at the globe from a position at sea challenges some of the axioms of such methodologies (one such axiom, as I’ll describe below, is a focus on racial identification).

Oceanic studies calls for a reorientation of critical perception, one that rhymes with the kind of perspectival and methodological shifts seen, for example, in Jesse Lemisch’s influential conception of history from the bottom up, in the hemispheric prospect of recent work in American studies, and in Daniel K. Richter’s repositioning of our view of Native American history in *Facing East from Indian Country*. My point is not that seamen themselves must be the principal focus of hemispheric or transnational studies, or even of oceanic studies per se; such investigations should aim to have more critical and theoretical purchase than simply reclaiming the unheralded work done by laborers at sea. Acknowledging the sailor, I am arguing, allows us to perceive, analyze, and deploy aspects of the history, literature, and culture of the oceanic world that might otherwise be rendered obscure or abstract. If methodologies of the nation and the postnation have been landlocked, in other words, then an oceanic turn might allow us to derive new forms of relatedness from the necessarily unbounded examples provided in the maritime world.

The value of sailors, and their paradoxical lack of sovereignty, was the focus of some debate in the nineteenth century. “The seaman may be said to have no political existence,” declared R. B. Forbes, a ship captain and sailors’ advocate, in an 1854 lecture (6). Speaking as a representative of a broader reform movement that had emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, Forbes was seeking to correct popular depictions of the sailor as careless of the concerns of ordinary citizens, a “Jack Tar” who lived blithely at the margins. Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century merchant seamen indeed existed largely outside the bounds of national affiliation, and even those sailing in the United States Navy primarily performed the work of nationalism without benefitting from it. But those who failed to recognize sailors as objects of public interest, as one veteran captain wrote, did not consider

“the relative importance of seamen, either for the advancement of commercial pursuits, or for the protection of our country’s rights, or for the maintenance of our national honor. They [did] not consider that seamen are the great links of the chain which unites nation to nation, ocean to ocean, continent to continent, and island to island” (Little 369). The internationalism embodied by sailors abstracted them from participatory citizenship, even as they were central to its functioning.

For despite the putative freedoms of nautical life, sailors seldom received the benefits of national identification: they were subjected to the near-absolute rule of captains; lived under threats of press gangs, piracy, and the slave trade; and toiled in an environment that prohibited the common practices of wage labor. The sailor, Forbes continued,

cannot vote because of his absence, or for the reason that when present near the polls, he may not have been there long enough to warrant the exercise of this right. His wages are smaller, considering the amount of labor and the responsibility devolving on him, than are the wages of any other class of our working population. He must be up day and night incessantly, when duty calls; and, when the Sabbath, that great boon of the landsman comes, his rest depends on the faithless winds of Heaven. He has not day, nor night which he can call his own. (6)³

Seamen, Forbes maintained, were alienated both from their labor (and from legal protections thereof) and from the privileges of national belonging.

Yet these conditions of isolation and distance granted sailors certain benefits over other laboring groups, such as mill workers or farmers. One such advantage, for example, is the uncommon extent of literacy among seamen. Knowing how to read, write, and perform basic math was a condition of advancement for sailors—estimates of early-nineteenth-century sailor literacy range con-

servatively from seventy-five percent to over ninety percent—and long periods at sea made for ample time for reading, storytelling, and study.⁴ “The forecabin,” where the common sailors lived, “was more like a school than any thing else; the elementary branches of education were taught, as well as the sciences of navigation and mathematics,” a seaman, George Little, remembered (128). We might think of the conjunction of sailors’ labor and literature in Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” in which narrative writing is identified as a craft rather than an art; it is “an artisan form of communication” best practiced in the “milieu of work” (91). Sailors are a representative class of storytellers, Benjamin recognizes. Their degree of literacy was remarkable for a working class, and, as I’ve argued elsewhere, their contributions to and engagement with literary culture in the United States have not been sufficiently acknowledged. Forbes had earlier conceded this point in his appeal to merchants and ship captains, when he regretted that “we have been too much accustomed to consider the seaman, the foremost ‘Jack,’ as a mere machine,—a mass of bone and muscle, to bear all the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ without a murmur, and for the smallest pittance” (6). In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “time before steamships,” the industry of seamen’s bodies propelled sailing vessels, and thus global trade (Melville 43). But as Forbes, Benjamin, and their own work remind us, to think of sailors simply as components of the engine that is the ship—and, by extension, to class their textual productions in such registers—would be to disregard their literary and cultural engagement with a broad range of works and issues.

What follows, by way of example, is a brief discussion of the critical reception of the narrative of an early-nineteenth-century sailor, Robert Adams, who had been held captive in Saharan and Central Africa after his ship wrecked and who claimed to have visited Tombouctou while in captivity. My discussion

of Adams's narrative aims to place in sharper relief the multiplying critical frameworks brought to bear in the emerging field of oceanic studies and how they might be resolved by an oceanic framework that takes into account the literary and labor conditions of seamen.

Adams, or Benjamin Rose (a name he also went by), was a sailor from Hudson, New York. The son of a sailmaker, he had ventured under two flags in his turn-of-the-century nautical career, serving on a British man-of-war as an impressment victim, as well as on an American merchant ship. While embarked in 1810 on a trading voyage that made stops along the northwestern coast of Africa, his ship, the *Charles*, ran aground, and he and his fellow seamen were taken captive by Saharan Arabs. Bought and sold numerous times while in the interior of North and Central Africa and resistant to attempts at conversion to Islam, Adams was eventually redeemed by a British consul in Mogadore (Essaouira), Morocco. By the time he managed to sail to England, however, Adams was just one of many "distressed seamen, with whom the metropolis was at that period unfortunately crowded," seeking transit back to America (Adams and Cock x). His narrative would earn him such passage: Adams was discovered in London by a gentleman who recognized him from Cadiz, where the story of his captivity had earned him local celebrity. Just as the Barbary confinement of several other American sailors inspired their narrative accounts, Adams's experience of captivity formed the basis of a book, the full title of which is *The Narrative of Robert Adams, an American Sailor, Who Was Wrecked on the Western Coast of Africa, in the Year 1810; Was Detained Three Years in Slavery by the Arabs of the Great Desert, and Resided Several Months in the City of Tombuctoo* (1817).

But unlike other narratives of North African captivity by United States sailors, Adams's account is related in the third person by editors rather than written in the first person; his editors describe him as illiterate. Adams's

is also the only narrative—and this has been seen as no coincidence—by a former captive sailor described as nonwhite. According to an aside in the lengthy, multipart textual apparatus provided by the volume's British editors, Robert Adams's "mother was a Mulatto, which circumstance his features and complexion seemed to confirm" (xxi). His narrative's editorial framework resembles the prefatory and authenticating materials found in American narratives of chattel slavery, as Ann Fabian, Paul Baepler, and others have observed. It is important to note that the main editor, one "S. Cock," was a representative of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa (known as the African Company), a British colonial venture that sponsored the publication of the volume and whose elite members verified its accuracy. Their interest in Adams was sparked by his knowledge of the semi-mythical city of Tombouctou, which at the time had not yet been visited by Westerners.

Indeed, the attention that Adams's narrative received in the nineteenth century was focused entirely on his claims of having visited Tombouctou. This was unlike the reception of other Barbary narratives by American sailors, which consisted of sympathetic concern for the captives' suffering. Adams's account of Tombouctou, however, was received with abundant skepticism. The reasons for this are various; they include his descriptions of outlandish animals, his claim to have seen no mosques or religious practice, and his representation of the residents as living in mud huts rather than the golden palaces of myth.⁵ James Riley, an American sea captain famous for having himself spent time in Saharan slavery (and the author of a narrative of his own North African experience), disbelieved Adams's account of Tombouctou primarily because Adams had recorded the wrong year for his shipwreck. "Consequently," as Riley submits in the sequel to his best-selling captivity narrative, "all the incidents he states before that period, must so much the more be looked

upon as fictitious” (Riley and Riley 419). Riley, however, esteems Adams’s acquisition of Arabic in his years of captivity, which serves as an endorsement of his story and an interesting counterpoint to his oft-invoked illiteracy: “I shall not deny to Adams’ narrative all sort of merit; as the author somehow understood and spoke the Arabic, he very likely gathered from Moors and Negroes what he afterward related at Mogadore, Tangier, Cadiz, and London; and in that respect his information should not be entirely rejected” (420). Adams’s observations, in other words, are strengthened by his ability to consult with and learn from his North and Central African captors.

The categorical designations *Moor* and *Negro*, which Riley mentions, are in wide and significant use in Adams’s narrative and those of other American captives in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *Moors* signifies North African Muslims, while *Negroes* identifies non-Arabic Central Africans. The third designation implied in this equation is *whites*, and Adams explicitly places himself in this category—as do his editors—throughout his narrative. In Tombouctou, where he is held along with a Portuguese boy, “Adams could not hear that any white man but themselves had ever been seen in the place” (42); when he traverses the desert, women “expressed great surprise at seeing a white man” (57); and in the catalog of prisoners ransomed from Tombouctou, Adams is placed in the category of “2 white men” (47) or “the two whites” (14).⁶ He is a curiosity in the interior of Africa, always described in opposition to the populations of Moors and Negroes.

Yet since the editor Cock briefly mentions his mulatto mother, Adams has become, in the small but growing body of recent critical notices of his text, the “black, illiterate Adams,” in Baepler’s terms, an “African-American captive” whose Barbary captivity narrative Baepler calls “the first by an African-American” (20, 207, 205). To Alan Rice, Adams is a “black wayfarer on . . . choppy waters,” one “denied

credit by a skepticism that refuses to give plaudits for black achievement” (14, 16). Paul Gilje mentions Adams as a “mulatto seaman” (52), whereas a UCLA graduate course on “slavery, empire, and the black Atlantic” labels Adams “black in England, white in Africa” (“Class Meetings”). Charles Hansford Adams, editor of a recent Cambridge University Press edition of the *Narrative*, presumes him to be a “son of slaves” (all we know of Adams’s father is that he was a sailmaker), an “obscure African American,” “poor black sailor,” or “ignorant American ‘mulatto’” (xlii, xiii, xxii, ix). Those who note Adams’s white racial status in the text of the narrative find it to be strategic; this critical position is best represented by Rice, who writes in *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* that the “one-drop rule which would designate [Adams] black in America has no equivalent in North Africa, where his almost-white pigmentation (at least in the eyes of the darker natives) defines him as white” (15). Certainly Adams’s experience of impressment and enslavement fits under the black Atlantic rubric. As Rice puts it most astutely, Adams’s experience “expose[s] some interesting fault-lines along the colour-line that complicate the binary oppositions which too often determine academic discourse about blackness in the Atlantic” (14). I share Rice’s assessment but perceive these fault lines from a different perspective. For notwithstanding the recent critics who have made Robert Adams an exemplar of the black Atlantic, throughout the nineteenth century, to the best of my research, Adams’s nonwhite status is mentioned *only* in the brief genealogy provided by S. Cock, his narrative’s editor. It should be noted here that Cock’s status in this tale is itself far from stable: his name is variously given as Silas or Simon Cock, or Cook, or Cox throughout the century, even as he stands as the authenticating figure in Adams’s narrative.

No one else in the nineteenth century comments on Adams’s race, whether they embrace his account or, more commonly,

condemn it. A large reason for this is likely the number of black seamen in the oceanic world; there is nothing remarkable about Adams's ethnicity in an era of motley crews. In turn, Adams's racial classification is of no interest to those evaluating or reading him. This is all the more notable since before the British edition of Adams's story was published in America, the *North American Review* printed a version in which Adams is presented as white (as he is in the narrative text), with no qualifications ([Sparks]). What is more, this version is presented in the first person, not the third, as Adams related it to an American gentleman in Cadiz, in an account that differs in some particulars from the third-person narrative edited by Cock. To approach Robert Adams using the critical methodologies of black Atlantic or transnational studies serves to apply a kind of scholarly one-drop rule to him.⁷ His narrative and its circulation can in these terms only be understood, on the one hand, as a function of his effaced, minoritized status as the nonauthor of his own narrative and, on the other hand—in the light of his whiteness while in Africa—as a kind of racial self-fashioning, an autonomous impulse in the face of hegemonic racial categorizing. This is what Rice means when he writes of Adams that “by talking of black others, he more fully Americanizes and whitens himself” (16).

It is understandable that Adams's narrative, given its apparatus, subject matter, and editorial amanuenses, would invite comparisons with slave narratives—I came to such conclusions in writing briefly about Adams in earlier work. But an oceanic studies approach reveals another reason why his story would require its elaborate frame: Adams's illiteracy was uncommon for sailors at that time and almost unheard-of for a sailor with a story to tell. When reviewing his account, in fact, several of his contemporary critics refer to his illiteracy as an identifying condition, calling him “the unlettered seaman” (*Quarterly Review* 309) or “the illiterate sailor” (“Cursory

Observations” 221). This modification implies a common recognition that literacy is standard for sailors. What is surprising and unusual in the oceanic world of Adams's experience is his putative inability to tell his own story, to be his own witness and advocate.⁸

If we consider Adams's narrative in an oceanic studies framework attentive to the lives, labor, and writings of seamen, then the failures of his account as a personal narrative—that is, its editorial frame, its implausibility, its contradictions—become a consequence not of his quantum of blackness but of his lack of literacy. A fuller analysis of his narrative would reveal that the navigational inexpertise Adams displays while in the Sahara, relative to that of other captive seamen, such as Riley, is a factor too. In the oceanic world of the nineteenth century, Robert Adams's illiteracy and relatively poor nautical skills were exceptional—not his race. It need not be the primary current in critical conversation about his experience.

The example of Robert Adams, I hope, reveals the dialogic function to be played not only by the figure of the sailor as a historical worker agent but also by the discourse of and about sailors themselves. Oceanic studies allows us to recast theories of oceanic spaces and transnational crossings with the aid of the speculative labor of figures whose lives were oceanic in practice. The bodies of laborers, in other words, exemplify and enact a body of work whose broader circulation in the literal and critical oceanic worlds still looms.

NOTES

1. Recent hemispheric and transnational work of note includes Bauer; Brickhouse; Goudie; Gruesz; Kazanjian; Lazo; and Levander and Levine. Critics who address the maritime world more explicitly—and more historically—include Gilje; Gilroy; and Linebaugh and Rediker. Theoretical attention to the nautical world has been mostly oriented through Foucault's model of the heterotopia; for

theoretically informed conceptions of sea literature, see also Casarino; Cohen.

2. I am indebted to Christopher Castiglia for bringing Wendy Brown's work to my attention and for his helpful reading of this essay.

3. Jacob Hazen, a sailor, was among the many who found maritime work more grueling than other forms of labor (in Hazen's case, shoemaking): "I was already enabled to perceive that fortunes were not to be more easily realized at sea, than on land, and that even the few dollars per month, which were earned was with far more severe labor. As a journeyman shoemaker, my labors in the shop were usually light; and though not very well contented with my occupation, yet I had always something palatable to eat, and was, besides, master of my own time, and actions. Such, however, was not the case here. I was kept to the most constant, and severe labor, both day and night" (93).

4. For more on sailor literacy and reading habits, see my *View* 19–45, as well as Rediker 307 and Dye.

5. Space does not permit me here to address the primacy of British and other European imperial interest in Adams's Tombouctou travels. The narrative was published in many of the countries with imperial interest in Africa; editions were printed in London, Boston, Paris, Stockholm, and Amsterdam.

6. The British consul in Mogadore remarks that Adams's "pronunciation of Arabic resembled that of a Negro, but conclude[s] that it was occasioned by his intercourse with Negro slaves" while in Central Africa (Adams and Cock xxiv).

7. A review of Baepler's anthology of Barbary captivity narratives by David E. Johnson makes a similar point, but without suggesting an alternative methodology or critical frame for interpreting Adams's narrative: "Adams is 'white,' not 'black'; 'Arab,' not 'Negro': and yet he remains, for us, African American. . . . On the basis of what biology or what cultural studies, might we decide (with Baepler . . . and others, no doubt) that Adams was African American? When asked by the emperor, he claimed he was an Englishman. . . . He did not see himself as an American of any color" (362–63).

8. For a useful reading of witnessing and advocacy in the context of the nineteenth-century American slave narrative, see DeLombard.

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