Northumbria Research Link

All at Sea? Using seaborne mobilities to decolonialise national narratives in British maritime museums

Abstract

The article argues that British maritime museums do more to represent the nation than the sea, thereby contributing to nation-building discourse, and offers an alternative way of thinking about belonging through the lens of maritime mobilities. The United Kingdom's national maritime museums are, of course, but a few among many museums seeking to incorporate a more diverse range of community voices and perspectives into their collections and exhibitions. Yet maritime museums are a particularly pertinent example of Britain's nation-building discourse due to the global reach of Britain's seaborne colonialism and exploration, and the concomitant range of their galleries. The article discusses the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth, Cornwall (NMMC) in the wider context of how maritime museums depict the nation. It argues that the NMMC's presentation of the sea illustrates how nation-building connects with colonialism in latent, largely unacknowledged ways that are broadly representative of Britain's maritime museums. The article concludes that were maritime museums to take seaborne mobility as a starting point for decolonialised exhibits, they would provide visitors with a greater range of tools with which to critically analyse Britain's maritime histories, the legacies of which are still being played out today.

Keywords: mobilities, maritime, museums, nation, decoloniality

Word Count:

The article argues that British maritime museums do more to represent the nation than the sea, thereby contributing to nation-building discourse. The United Kingdom's national maritime museums are, of course, but a few among many museums seeking to incorporate a more diverse range of community voices and perspectives into their collections and exhibitions. Yet maritime museums are a particularly pertinent example of Britain's nation-building discourse due to the global reach of Britain's seaborne colonialism and exploration, and the concomitant range of their galleries. For example, the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich is reinterpreting its collections in response to current debates around the legacy of Empire for British belonging. As such, the UK's maritime museums can be likened to political landscapes in miniature, reflecting evolving national identities and relationships to histories in the stories they choose to tell. The article discusses the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth, Cornwall

(NMMC) in the broader context of how maritime museums depict the nation (Sutherland 2017). It argues that the NMMC's presentation of the sea illustrates how nation-building connects with colonialism in latent, largely unacknowledged ways. The article addresses this by offering an alternative way of thinking about belonging through maritime mobilities.

Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006, 208) characterised the mobilities paradigm in terms of countering '[s]ocial science as static' and bringing the importance of people and travel to the fore. Sheller (2014) later noted that the mobilities turn had yet to take root in sociology to the same extent as in human geography, and the same can be said for political enquiry. As Peter Nyers (2006, 3) notes, the words state and static are both derived from the Latin '*stave*', meaning to stand, and methodological nationalism, understood as taking the nation-state for granted as a category of analysis, continues to be prevalent within the discipline (Sutherland 2016, 2017). To take the nation-state as the norm entails, conversely, that 'mobility between nation-states is understood as anomalous' (Brubaker 2015, 132). In turn, studies of the nation-state that start from its bounded territorial and ideological parameters as an 'imagined community' are not well-placed to critique nativist assumptions of rootedness and national belonging (Anderson 1991). On the contrary, flipping that assumption to make human mobility the norm allows for a more fluid analytical approach to the politics of identity and belonging (Anderson 2019; Sutherland 2020). As Edward Saïd (1999, online) put it; 'I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance.' In turn, challenging the native as an aspirational norm has important implications for narratives of migration and national citizenship (Fortier 2012). This article contributes to mobility theory by using seaborne mobility, specifically the notion of Hypersea, to approach national identity from the perspective of 'demethodological nationalism' (Anderson 2019). In so doing, it applies one aspect of mobility theory – namely the value of watery mobilities for reimagining sociopolitical relations - to political enquiry, and demonstrates this in practice by critiquing a maritime museum representation of Britain that cleaves to static, statist understandings of national belonging.

The modernity-coloniality-decoloniality (MCD) movement, as one among many radical, decolonial schools of thought, posits that the last five hundred years of Western-centric modernity cannot be distinguished from coloniality, and defines decoloniality as 'delinking' from modernity's universalising claims to use other modes of apprehending the world instead (Mignolo 2013, 4). Decolonialising is a long-term, potentially never-ending process of

uncovering, challenging and overcoming the colonial foundations of modern knowledge and institutions that in turn give rise to systemic racism. Stephen Legg (2017, 347) suggests we 'think not of 'decolonising' (unacquiring colonies), despite how clearly useful it has been to many scholars and activists, but of 'decolonialism' (challenging the practices that made colonies and which sustain colonial durabilities).' This approach rejects the universalising claims of European Enlightenment thinking in favour of a 'pluriverse' of parallel historical perspectives co-existing and yet often going unheard. Decolonialism follows different narrative and theoretical paths to the dominant norm as 'a way to memorialize histories of violence and to rupture notions of progress. These narratives merge the human subject of the past and the present' (De Loughrey 2010, 704), in the sense that the hierarchies of power and subjection that were established in the era of coloniality and modernity continue to be played out today, most obviously through systemic racism. Britain's maritime museums could play a key part in these decolonialising debates by using maritime mobilities as an alternative approach to representing British history and identities, as this article will go on to show.

'Mobility is moving across time and space. It is also movement in and through historical, cultural, social and political dimensions' (Kuusisto-Arponen 2009, 550). In turn, Philip Steinberg and Kim Peters (2015, 250) define wet ontology as problematizing dominant understandings of mobility. This article explores the notion of watery mobility through Steinberg and Peters' analysis of the Hypersea, which extends the challenge of wet ontology further by taking seaborne perspectives as a starting point and thereby 'deterritorialising' social scientific approaches to mobility. In order to apply this ontological critique to museum representations of the nation, as this article does, it is also necessary to draw attention to how national narratives are racialised. In taking seaborne perspectives as its starting point, this article uses watery mobilities to destabilise and thereby begin to decolonise those national narratives. It begins this work with maritime museums, which would be well-placed to connect with seaborne mobilities and the potential they hold for reappraising dominant representations.

'A significant part of decolonising the museum is about *situating* collections, making explicit the cultural contexts of imperialism and colonisation' (Tolia-Kelly & Raymond 2020, 4). The packet ships that left from Falmouth in Cornwall for the West Indies and the Americas at a time of growing transatlantic trade and Empire-building cannot be understood in isolation from the Atlantic Ocean itself as the locus of centuries of suffering, torture, jettisoning of human 'cargo' and other unspeakable acts during the trade in African slaves. Indeed, as MCD makes

clear, the 'history of capital is inextricable from the history of Atlantic chattel slavery' (Sharpe 2016, 5). Yet Falmouth's NMMC exhibition about its packet service represents the Atlantic as 'a space of transit in which the sea is barely present, subsumed by the telos of masculine conquest and adventure' (DeLoughrey 2010, 704). It largely disregards the ghostly presence of transatlantic slavery and 'the violence of Atlantic modernity' (DeLoughrey 2010, 712) which underpinned the triangular trade and imperial networks of which Falmouth's packet service formed a part. Instead, the NMMC exhibits adopt a tone of heroic endeavour and plucky British resistance to various enemies that constitutes the only thematic link between disparate historical episodes. Such representations of history matter, because they continue to shape the present moment. This is evidenced in the United Kingdom's difficulties in coming to terms with its imperial past and its ongoing legacy of institutional racism. 2007's bicentennial celebrations of the slave trade's abolition – as opposed to a reckoning with the preceding two hundred and fifty years of British slavery - and the sacralisation of William Wilberforce in the national imaginary, only serve to underline the poverty of understanding of how Britain's expansion and prosperity have been interwoven with the slave trade since Elizabethan times (Gwyn 2012. 301). This connects across time to the UK Home Office treatment of the Windrush generation and the outpouring of pain and anger seen in the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 2020, leading to the toppling of the slave trader Edward Coulson's statue in Bristol. Maritime museums undoubtedly have a role in writing and revisiting national narratives to make these connections across time and space. They are also privileged in being able to draw on maritime mobilities to do so.

The NMMC describes itself on its website as; 'A place to enrich our understanding of the sea, and Cornwall' (NMMC website). Developed from the Cornwall Maritime Museum, it opened its doors in 2003 and enjoys a central, seafront location in a custom-built building designed by the architect M.J. Long to recall the boat sheds that once occupied the site. Fifteen exhibition galleries are arranged around the museum's main atrium, which displays small boats and an adjoining boatbuilding workshop where visitors can watch shipwrights at work. The museum offers education programmes and started boat tours of the harbour in summer 2019, thereby providing a seaborne perspective of the area that was new to many locals and tourists alike. Despite its national status as the home of the National Small Boat Collection, originally curated by the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, the museum is an independent charity that charges admission, hence the need to attract visitors with eye-catching exhibitions on subjects like the Titanic and 'Monsters of the Deep'. It also offers a literally immersive experience, in

that the downstairs gallery has an underwater window alongside information about the harbour's marine life. The museum's permanent exhibitions devoted to Falmouth and Cornwall's maritime history seek to fulfil its stated mission to 'enrich our understanding of the sea,' but it is questionable whether they actually 'bring new and diverse perspectives to maritime issues.'

The following analysis is based on tours of the NMMC museum and its harbour boat trip in August 2019, as well as participant observation of other events organised for visitors. The Cornwall galleries were exhaustively photographed and later analysed according to the themes of maritime mobility, imperial mobility and nationalism, as was the museum website. For example, particular attention was paid to the galleries' erasures and omissions, the nationalist framing of specific exhibits, and their spatial distribution, as indicators of key messages the museum conveyed. In order to understand its regional context alongside its identity as a maritime museum, follow-up research was undertaken into its designation as a 'national museum', its relationship with the Greenwich maritime museum and other Cornish museums, and its architecture and socio-economic status within Falmouth. Similar field trips to the National Maritime Museums in Greenwich and Irvine took place in October 2018 and January 2019, respectively, in order to situate the NMMC within UK maritime museum narratives.

The argument proceeds as follows: The first section, maritime mobilities, introduces a maritime analytical perspective derived from the materiality and mobility of the sea itself (Steinberg 2016). It discusses the limited extent to which seaborne perspectives are adopted in the UK's maritime museums, which might be considered well-suited to applying these ideas in practice The second section, imperial mobilities, sets out to show that maritime mobilities can provide inspiration for a decolonialised socio-political analysis freed from the strictures of territorial, national frameworks that are frequently suffused with colonial, racialised and nationalist assumptions. This is illustrated with reference to an ocean voyage undertaken over a century ago by the South African journalist Solomon Plaatje. The final section, maritime museums and nationalism, proposes possible alternative, decolonialised approaches that take maritime mobilities as a starting point. The article finds that exhibition narratives tend to be framed in nationalist terms with a marked erasure of colonial historical context, so that heroic and folkloric narratives dominate. The article concludes that taking seaborne mobilities as a starting point would provide visitors with a greater range of tools with which to critically analyse maritime and colonial histories, the legacies of which are still being played out today.

Maritime mobilities

The sea's fluid materiality is inherently suggestive of both mobility and the motility of objects - from vessels, through driftwood to human bodies - across its surface and down into its depths. A focus on the sea as one of many 'water worlds' (Barnes & Alatout 2012) also signals 'a resistance to terrestrocentrism: it is a response to the materiality of water and a call to follow the water and to question the politics of moving through and with water' (Bear & Bull 2011, 2265). As such, this study reflects the foundational focus of the mobilities paradigm on 'complex mobility systems and their restructuring of both space and time' (Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006, 3). It contributes to mobilities debates by also taking watery mobilities as a starting point for critiquing national narratives in UK maritime museums. These, as elsewhere, are often premised on rootedness in space and chronological longevity across time (Sutherland 2020).

This article argues that maritime museums should take a lead from the work that maritime historians and mobilities scholars have been doing for some time, in which the 'spatial framework, rather than being an unselfconscious analytic tool, becomes an object of research' (Wigen 2006, 720). Anim-Addo, Hasty and Peters, K. (2014, 339) have pointed to the complementarity of maritime historians' work with mobilities scholarship on water and the sea. This extends to how socio-political relations were reimagined and reconfigured on board ships, as discussed in the next section (Hasty 2014). Maritime historians and scholars of watery mobilities have a shared interest in understanding the extent to which the notion of a sea or ocean is constructed – not least in colonial terms - whose interpretation of the sea dominates discourse and why, and how different perspectives inform our knowledge of the sea, and by extension our world. For example, Matt Matsuda (2006, 761; 2018,) highlights the need for an '"Oceanic" vision to match' longstanding Eurocentric and Pacific Rim perspectives on the Pacific. That is, one which fully includes the peoples of the Pacific themselves and their long histories of seaborne culture, migration and contacts, and which engages with different ways of 'doing' history across the region. Similarly, in a special section of the journal *Transfers*, Georgine Clarsen's (2015, 41) 'ambition is to bring critical mobilities frameworks into closer conversation with the humanities', specifically by exploring settler-colonial mobilities across the Pacific and its impact on indigenous experiences of seafaring and settled life.

Kären Wigen (2006, 717) noted a trend towards retelling world history 'from the perspective of the sea.' At the same time, however, she recognised that it 'rarely peers beneath the waves;

sea space within the basin-centered genre comes across as essentially a two-dimensional (and practically friction-free) surface for the coming and going of ships' (Wigen 2006, 721). In other words, it misses an opportunity to exploit the sea's materiality to theorise mobility and identity. Since then, human geographers have increasingly sought to look below the hull and beyond oceanic basins to develop a fuller understanding of seaborne mobilities and how they can contribute to our understanding of the Anthropocene. The climate emergency is also raising public awareness that seas and oceans are not an Other 'over there' for human landlubbers to enjoy on holiday through swims and seafood, but an essential element deeply imbricated in human survival. Thalassography, or sea-writing, can only hope to capture the sea's essential mutability with great difficulty, but it has been an important arena for developing innovative conceptual and analytical tools around maritime mobilities (Steinberg 2016).

Extending their work on *Wet Ontology,* Phil Steinberg and Kim Peters (2015) use the concept of Hypersea to capture the relationship of co-dependence between air, water, earth and life. In their words; 'the Hypersea approach spurs us to think of the ocean not as an isolated physical entity in distinct opposition to the land but as a *state of the hydrosphere* that, both in its overall state and in the properties of its individual molecules, is perpetually in mutation and that is always exceeding the ocean's geographic boundaries. The ocean exists, then, as 'more-than' water' (Peters and Steinberg 2019, 297, emphasis in original). Seawater, for example, seeps through land and evaporates into the atmosphere, only to fall back into the sea as rain, hail or snow. At the same time, the changing state of seawater will have an impact on maritime temporalities. Arctic ice floes impede movement through the water while facilitating passage across it; '[T]he space of the ocean is transformed as solid; time is slowed; motion is stilled and stilted' (Peters and Steinberg 2019, 302). In turn, the climate emergency upends a biosphere that depends on a regular cycle of freeze and thaw. By extension, the concept of Hypersea offers rich insights into mobility across time and space.

Humans are enmeshed in the Hypersea through all five senses, from ingesting seafood, perhaps many miles from shore, through the smell of the sea wafting inland, to being caught up in the materiality of the sea itself. Human geographers and anthropologists who are also surfers and sailors have sought to capture the embodied sensation of being 'all at sea' and how this helps them make sense of their place in the world. For instance, Clifton Evers (2009, 903) writes of a terrifying wipeout on his surfboard; 'The underwater world with its sea life and energies pops, hisses, and crackles as it makes its way into my body. It is a 'soundscape', where this is a

human–nature relationship of sounds that help us to recognise our place in relation to our surroundings in time and space.' Jen Bagelman (2016: 1026) reflects on her experience of canoeing: 'immersed in this fluid field, it's a stretch to think of community as confined within the strictures of national borders'. And Jon Anderson probes the ineffable and intoxicating experience of riding a wave and the sense that surfing 'can only be felt but never, ever shared or represented' (Medeiros, cited in Anderson 2014, 29). 'Blue space geographies' also highlight wild swimming, spas and the health benefits of water-based activities, which speak to the therapeutic qualities of both contemplating and feeling part of nature (Foley and Kistemann 2015). These accounts all recognise the powerful moment of connection between human biosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere that combine into the Hypersea as a multi-dimensional expression of maritime mobilities. Added to this are the material flotsam and jetsam - from the sea glass beloved of beachcombers to the polluting and poisonous (micro)plastics - which are increasingly part and parcel of the ocean. Thus, the Hypersea serves to capture both mobility across space and time and the motility of human and other bodies through the multidimensional materiality of the sea. This is a liberating, seaborne perspective from which to view the construction of national identity (Sutherland 2020).

Peters and Steinberg (2019) point to how the sea is not only, but also a metaphor. They caution against turning the sea's materiality and mobility into a vessel emptied of its own vitality and presence to become a cipher. Nevertheless, they recognise its power as an alternative to land-based imaginaries. This chimes with Solomon Plaatje's experience of subverting racist hierarchies while 'all at sea', as recounted in the next section. The very concept of the Hypersea requires a leap of the imagination to grasp its vastness and scale, helping to refocus attention on interconnected global flows and away from national narratives (Sutherland 2017). The Hypersea also connects to decolonialised thinking. As Elspeth Probyn (2011, 97) notes from her own experience; 'Analogous to a critique levelled by Aboriginal people about how whites walk through country rather in it, I have too often floated above the densely populated world of the sea. It's a one- sided view of the world that we need to re-address if we are to do justice to the immensity of human-ocean entanglements.' Combining the maritime lens of the Hypersea with the imperial critique articulated in Solomon Plaatje's account of maritime mobility offers an alternative perspective on belonging which escapes the landlocked strictures of national political imaginaries and could be explored in maritime museums. UK maritime museums currently do relatively little to exploit this potential, however.

Maritime museums tend to represent human stories relating to the sea rather than focus on the life of the sea itself (Sutherland 2017). This institutional separation from the aquarium already does much to distance maritime museums from the Hypersea's materiality, fluidity and mobility. For example, boats are quite often exhibited without any visual or textual reference to the actual waters in which they sailed. Despite their association with the sea, then, national maritime museums often project the spatiotemporal framing of the nation onto their specialist subject, reproducing territorial understandings of conflict and control rather than adopting a seaborne perspective. For example, exhibits on naval battles and local fisheries primarily reflect national politics and economics, respectively. It is therefore instructive to consider how maritime museums mirror nation-state-centric perspectives, as a way of critically challenging the way in which they map national concerns onto the sea. Maritime museums located in ports connect primarily to the human activity that starts from the harbourside, for instance, rather than the experience of seaborne mobility. Harbours are linked most often to fishing, trade and exploration and sometimes to sport, recreation and tourism. In turn, most of these activities are framed in the national mode, such as a national fishing fleet, sportspeople representing their country, national naval exploits - especially in wartime - and seafarers expanding colonies and commerce in the name of their national sponsors. All of these come under the standard purview of maritime museums.

National maritime museums' tendency to represent the sea as an accessory to human endeavour plays a part in maintaining the 'imagined community' of the nation (Anderson 1991). For instance, Australia's National Maritime Museums in Sydney and Perth were conceived as part of larger national celebrations, namely the bicentenary of Australia's European settlement and millennium celebrations, respectively. Although the Sydney museum marked the bicentenary, it was not subject to the same public debates and controversy as Canberra's National Museum of Australia (Taylor, 2012). Instead, it appeared to fit less prominently but no less powerfully into a conventional linear chronology of '"natural" progression: from aboriginal landscape to colonial port, to booming nineteenth century docklands then finally to a redundant industrial wasteland' (Burns cited in Taylor 2012, 403). The aboriginal relationship to the sea appeared to be downplayed overall and was relegated to a closed off section in the Perth museum that suggests ongoing marginalisation, as opposed to integration into the museum's aim of 'defining Australia' (Taylor 2012, 409) through its social history, its material culture and its role in European navigation and colonisation. It is not hard to see how a decolonialised approach to Aboriginal cosmography would destabilise a fundamentally Western-centric national

perspective primarily focused on land and territorial property, when Aboriginal 'dreaming paths' continue from land to sea and combine spiritual, cultural and material sustenance in ways that the rest of Australian society still finds hard to understand. Indeed, Jackson (1995, 94, emphasis in original) notes the coining of awareness-raising terms like sea-country and '*salt-water* country as an analogy with the well-established relationship and sense of belonging indigenous people have to the land and the role of land as the source of origin and spirituality with that of the sea, thus conveying Aboriginal concepts of the sea to non-indigenous Australians'. A decolonialised approach to the museums would have incorporated these concepts of the sea across their exhibits.

If a museum is indeed a political landscape in miniature, how can it begin to represent any 'vast waterscape' (Bashford cited in Johnson 2018, 3) such as the Atlantic, replete with its colonial crossings, let alone the enormity of the Hypersea? In a survey of Atlantic history, Alison Games (2006, 744) suggests that it is the seascape's 'political neutrality that encouraged scholars seeking to escape the restrictions of the nation-state to move toward the borderless world of the Atlantic […] by privileging interactions and comparisons and by rejecting nationalism altogether for new analytic categories.' In other words, it is only by decolonialising and stepping outside methodological nationalism - an approach that takes the nation-state for granted as an analytic category – that scholars, museums and their audiences can critically analyse heroic and folkloric nation-building narratives (Sutherland 2016; Anderson 2019). An alternative analytical approach premised on the Hypersea's inherent mobility holds out that possibility.

By focusing on the sea itself rather than its contribution to a national story, a maritime museum like the NMMC could pursue its stated aim to 'bring new and diverse perspectives to maritime issues' (NMMC website). The NMMC does approach the sea from a number of different perspectives, ranging from displays on safe surfing, through artists' depictions of the sea, to three Cornwall galleries introduced with a quote by John Rowe (1953, 262); 'The sea has played a greater part in the life of the Cornish people than the land on which they dwelt.' The Cornwall galleries are the only ones to provide a sustained narrative that, as the opening quote suggests, adopts an anthropocentric perspective towards aspects of trade, fisheries and warfare. While the focus of the first gallery, entitled 'Cornish quayside' is on local fisheries, featuring oral history recordings and reconstructed sail and fishermen's lofts in the style of an eco-

museum, 'Cornwall and the sea' and the 'Falmouth gallery' rely more on display cases and reproductions of historical documents and photographs. The 'Cornish quayside' exhibit, subtitled 'Living by the sea – the smell and feel of the shoreside,' attempts to evoke bustling pilchard cellars and the daily lives of fisherfolk recorded 'speaking for themselves,' while the other galleries take a more thematic approach. For example, a panel entitled 'Growth and decline' surveys the nineteenth-century mining industry, another entitled 'A living from the sea' highlights the infrastructure of the industrial revolution scattered across Cornwall, and a third called 'Sons of the sea' places the stories of five seafarers within 'our national history of trade and war.' This last panel emphasises 'this grand maritime history,' pointing out that 'By 1800 Britain had the largest merchant and naval fleets in the history of the world and shipbuilding was a huge national industry.' What is lacking, however, is any discussion of the colonial context that powered Britain's naval exploits or Britain's Atlantic trade in slaves that was ongoing at the time. For example, a map entitled 'sea routes past Falmouth 1881' draws broad lines from major British ports towards all continents and into the Mediterranean, but is strangely devoid of any commentary, dates or detail to put it in the colonial context of the time. That is, the NMMC tends towards a littoral perspective that looks out from the quayside, but does not engage with the multifaceted potential of the Hypersea to trouble and ultimately upend settled national narratives of Britain's 'grand maritime history'. In order to suggest how this might be done, we must turn to the potential for shipped mobilities to challenge racialised hierarchies.

Imperial mobilities

This section analytically connects watery mobility to racialised hierarchies and the need for decolonialised thinking. It offers an added dimension to studies of imperial, embodied mobility and its legacies by emphasising the emancipatory potential of encountering someone racialised as black - at sea, on deck and relatively at ease in the company of his white, fellow passengers - as opposed to fanning them in the smoking lounge or stoking the furnaces in the bowels of the ship (Stafford 2019). Indeed, Solomon Plaatje's seaborne writing showed the sea to be 'a space of political struggle' in itself (Hallaire and McKay, 2014: 136). This example of shipped mobilities also gestures towards 'new narratives of mobility' (Anim-Addo, Hasty & Peters 2014, 339), which challenge racialised hierarchies and explore other forms of belonging that transcend the static nation-state container, not least in museum representations (Sutherland 2017). As Georgine Clarsen (2015, 42) and colleagues have shown, settler colonialism served

to circumscribe indigenous mobilities at the same time as according non-convicted colonisers and settlers freedom to sail towards the promise of a better life.

The Hypersea is but one of many modes of thinking to draw on watery mobility, as Elizabeth DeLoughray (2007, 21) notes in the context of Pacific cosmologies:

> The sea is conceptually linked to human origins and exploring these fluid histories offers an alternative to the rigid ethnic genealogy of colonialism and nationalism. In other words, the ocean's perpetual movement is radically decentering; it resists attempts to fix a locus of history. Focusing on seascape rather than landscape as the fluid space of historical production allows us to complicate the nation-state, which encodes a rigid hierarchy of race, class, gender, religion and ethnicity.

A perspective derived from maritime mobilities can escape a linear chronology of past, present and future to show how the past is part of the present and that the dead are all around us, an obvious premise of many non-Western cosmologies and a lived reality for black people across the world (Sutherland 2020). For example, Christina Sharpe (2016, 8) uses the meanings of wake, including a ship's wake, 'to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual [Black] lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery' in the United States. The significance of slavery and the burying of the Black Atlantic also haunt the United Kingdom (Gilroy 1993).

Janet Remmington's account of Solomon Plaatje's Atlantic voyage in 1914 offers a means of connecting maritime mobilities to a decolonialised critique of dominant national narratives in Britain. Plaatje was a black South African journalist and editor travelling to Britain as part of a delegation petitioning against the 1913 Natives' Land Act and its consequences for black South Africans, but his writings on board ship are the focus of attention here. Plaatje used 'a sea narrative, with its metaphoric distance from landed fixities […] to unsettle social dynamics and to open imaginative possibilities, not least to question racial prejudice' (Remmington 1916, 82). The process was more than metaphorical, since his writing contrasted the unsegregated social arrangements he experienced at sea with those in South Africa, where he was a professional black man in a British imperial environment increasingly hostile to independent black voices. He also capitalised on seaborne mobility, since his immunity to seasickness reversed hierarchies of supposed white racial superiority; 'A sentiment that Africans weren't wont to hear too often was that white men "wished they had his constitution"' (Remmington

citing Plaatje 2016, 99). In other words, Plaatje's novel surroundings had quite literally destabilised his travelling companions and the racial hierarchies they embodied.

At sea, Plaatje felt free to poke fun at notions of white colonisers 'ruling the waves' and his fellow travellers' idleness while he wrote in his cabin, at a time when Africans were often accused of being lazy and indolent (Remmington 2016, 101). His experience could be compared to Elspeth Probyn's (2011, 99) account of swimming with tuna, which she likened to seasickness and a form of culture shock; 'I am viscerally out of my domain.' Plaatje also experienced a kind of culture shock in finding himself on a boat unsegregated by colour or class, though it was not all plain sailing. His travelling party was reminded on occasion of some of the white South African passengers' attitudes towards a perceived 'inferior native of the land aspiring to join the ranks of connected white society' (Remmington 1916, 95). Plaatje's experiences on board ship still resonate today. His shifting, seaborne perspective suggests a model of resistance to racial discrimination; '[the] Afro-Asian subject can tentatively cohere at momentary points of connection in a shifting, related whole, but it must refuse to participate in reproducing the exclusionary structuring of the subject' (Nguyễn-võ, 2018, 346.)

Plaatje's sea narrative commented on oppression and resistance within a supposedly multiracial empire, and also expressed solidarity with people of colour more broadly. The experience of a sea voyage and maritime mobility itself were important to inspiring Plaatje's vision of a more inclusive, less racialised Empire; 'His sea narrative was […] one of challenge for those not angled towards openness. Its implication was that readers should "come on board" and respond to the messages of the ship and the sea' (Remmington 2016, 96). Thus, one message of the (Hyper)sea is to refuse racialised hierarchies. Taking to the seas freed Plaatje from social constraints, enabling him to imagine a brighter future for people of colour that he captured in his writing. The inherent mobility of the Hypersea, as a space untethered from entrenched social imaginaries, offers a productive means of thinking through and against political projects, including national projects. By extension, maritime museums might be considered a counterpoint to national museums and the stories they tell. Far from subverting dominant national narratives, however, the UK's national maritime museums tend to propagate them through tales of folklore, heroism and enterprise that largely overlook their imperial context.

The United Kingdom's National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London, is reinterpreting its collections in response to current debates around the legacy of Empire for British belonging. It also nods to seaborne mobilities in some of its newest galleries, opened in 2018. However,

other permanent exhibits in Greenwich, such as the one entitled *Nelson, Navy, Nation,* indicate that national heroes and histories are still very much a part of the museum's remit. Similarly, a huge Mercator map of the world covers the floor of the central atrium, with the land in green, the seas in blue and Europe at the centre. As is to be expected of a British national museum, conventional cartography clearly dominates, thereby missing an opportunity to encourage visitors to think differently about their view of Britain in the world. Rather, the museum offers a relatively conventional representation of the national imaginary reflecting the industrial and imperial glory of Britain's maritime history. Minority voices remain at the margins and the sea itself is not used to decentre dominant national narratives.

The tone of the Scottish Maritime Museum in the west coast town of Irvine, near Glasgow, is similarly celebratory, but with a different emphasis that perfectly illustrates the imbrication of modernity and coloniality which the MCD movement brings to the fore.[1] Instead of naval exploits, it focuses on Scotland's contribution to the shipbuilding, commerce, engineering and invention that made imperial Britain the 'workshop of the world.' Yet the colonial context of its commercial success is barely touched upon, whereas the visual impact of hulking, obsolete industrial machinery is very strong. In both Greenwich and Irvine's national maritime museums, the materiality and mobility of the sea itself is hard to fathom. Even in the Greenwich exhibition entitled *Atlantic Worlds*, which traces slavery, trade and migration across three continents against a black and white backdrop of roiling waves, the focus is on 'the movement of people, goods and ideas across and around the Atlantic Ocean from the 17th to the 19th century'. That is, the Atlantic connotes the 'positive emptiness' (Padrón 2014, 212) of the sea, ready to be inhabited by human experience, rather than exploiting the decentring and decolonialising potential of conceptualising maritime mobilities as a challenge to dominant national narratives.

Post-imperial national imaginings still prevail in other British museums with connections to the sea. That is, they tend to leave the legacy of Empire intact by avoiding or eliding any reckoning with it. For example, Deborah Withers (2011, 246) notes that the attraction of the ss Great Britain museum in Bristol may lie in how it 'evokes a particular kind of nostalgia common to maritime heritage.' Designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel and completed in 1843, the ss Great Britain had an eventful career as a cargo, passenger and storage ship before eventually returning to Bristol from the Falkland Islands and the dry dock where it now stands.

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[1] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

Withers (2011, 251) shows how the ss Great Britain is presented as a proxy for national glory, grandeur and heroism, while the 'violence of British colonialism is completely removed from the frame of understanding presented in the museum.' The word colonialism itself appears only once throughout the exhibition text. Visitors are encouraged instead to identify emotionally with British migrant journeys through the well-established museum mode of first-hand narratives, personal artefacts and entrance tickets designed as passenger tickets (Sutherland 2014). The colonial context of the ss Great Britain's voyages is all but absent. For example, visitors are neither informed about nor invited to critically engage with why the ship was ferrying British soldiers from Ireland to India in the 1850s. As shown in the final section, this none-too-subtle erasure of colonial history in favour of celebratory, 'feel good' stories suitable for a family day out is also replicated at the NMMC (Withers 2011, 257).

The NMMC addresses nineteenth century emigration and seaborne travel in much the same way as the ss Great Britain exhibition (Withers 2011). As a panel entitled 'Emigration across the Sea' puts it; 'Most were economic migrants, escaping agricultural poverty and industrial and social changes at home. Many were drawn by the greater opportunities for work, education and social advancement as citizens of the New World or the Colonies.' Several panels detail the scale and breadth of Cornish emigration, alongside posters advertising the 'Orient line to Australia' (1928) featuring Captain James Cook, and the 'Orient Co's Pleasure Cruise to the West Indies' (1895) depicting a tropical paradise. Once again, the exhibition strategy is to elide the colonial context or to refer to it in positive terms as a source of opportunity in 'the New World or the Colonies'. There is no reckoning with the legacy of Empire, such as post-war immigration of colonial subjects to the UK on ships like the Empire Windrush that sailed from Jamaica (nineteen of whose passengers planned to go to Plymouth and may have families living in Cornwall today) (Rodgers & Ahmed 2019, online).

The exhibit on Falmouth's packet service is perhaps where the colonial context is most obviously addressed. As Britain's most westerly deep-water harbour, Falmouth was not only an excellent place from which to set sail into the Atlantic and to land transatlantic cargo, but also an excellent base for a postal, or packet, service 'to the important British colonies in North America and the West Indies,' as an exhibition panel puts it. Established in 1689, it carried payment for British troops abroad as well as official dispatches and passengers, thereby representing an important conduit for Britain's colonial endeavours. The panel entitled 'The Falmouth Packet Service 1689-1851' rightly notes that 'During this time, Britain's overseas empire was growing rapidly, supported by effective international communications – through

Falmouth.' As noted in the panel entitled 'Growth and expansion 1770-1823', the 'packet service prospered alongside the expansion of the British Empire' to number 39 ships. The panel also mentions the triangular trade of slaves sent to work plantations in the West Indies that produced sugar imported to Europe. However, a map of packet routes from 1688-1850 to the Americas and Malta effectively depicts two sides of the triangular trade, with the African nexus notable by its absence. Steam packets to South America took over from sailing ships in the mid-nineteenth century, leading to closer trading links (Anim-Addo 2014). By 1893 there were 27 registered Consuls in Falmouth, mainly from South and Central America and continental Europe. These no longer corresponded to Britain's colonial centres, and so Falmouth's contribution to Britain's imperial endeavours is quickly brought to a close.

Maritime Museums and Nationalism

The visitor is left with the overall impression that Falmouth enjoyed an excellent situation to profit from shipping, but no clear sense of how this contributed to Britain's colonial endeavour. The Falmouth gallery appears to fill in the gaps with a panel entitled 'Enemies from the Sea'. It opens with a quote from a civil engineer's report dated 1835 stating that 'Falmouth […] is justly esteemed one of the most important harbours of the Empire.' Yet the accompanying exhibition text asserts that 'Britain has spent much of the last 500 years at war with its continental neighbours,' mentioning the Battle of the Trafalgar and the D-Day landings but nothing further about Empire. It is telling that a quoted period source explicitly put Falmouth's value in the context of Empire, whereas the museum's interpretation falls back on familiar, much-feted moments of glory in Britain's past. Another panel titled 'Scourge of the French' lists the numbers of French ships captured and destroyed by a naval captain operating out of Falmouth during 'the war against France', which is not explained or put in the context of the Napoleonic wars. Overall, the impression from these blood red panels, which also cover two episodes from World War II, is episodic and rather triumphalist, with an emphasis on enemy defeats and with very little context provided.

Decolonialising museum practice involves exploring how exhibitions may be informed by and inflected with racialised British nationalism and imperial legacies; 'the decolonising process is a series of struggles, through which we learn what obstacles, political prejudices, complacencies, misunderstandings, culture-clashes, and infrastructural anomalies there are to be overcome' (Tolia-Kelly & Raymond 2020, 2). This applies as much to reviewing and renewing interpretations of dominant cultural narratives of British culture and history as to

museum representations of 'Others'. Above all, it should engage with some of the 1.8% of the Cornish population that identified as Black, Asian or minority ethnic in the 2011 UK Census, to ensure they feel recognised and reflected in the museum (Cornwall Council 2013, 5). As Solomon Plaatje experienced, emphasising seaborne mobility is helpful in seeing things anew. For example, a seaborne perspective on Cornwall's connections with slavery might highlight its long-standing cross-channel links with Celtic Brittany. This is evidenced, for example, by the Bodmin gospel book that was taken from Brittany to Cornwall in the tenth century and was later used to note the manumission of Cornish slaves, which the Domesday Book records as constituting twenty-one percent of the Cornish population in 1086 (British Library, no date). The 'culturally erased' (Esra cited in Bodkin 2017, online) seventeenth and eighteenth century enslavement of Cornish people by barbary pirates coming by sea from North Africa could be brought into conversation with Cornish Methodist abolitionists who, inspired by John Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery* following his sea voyage to Georgia in 1736, refused to take sugar in their tea to protest Britain's involvement in the slave trade (Drew 2014).

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, a contemporary reckoning with the legacy of Empire is in evidence just across the Cornish border in Plymouth, which is due to rename its John Hawkins square after the black Plymouth Argyle footballer Jack Leslie, whose father came to England from Jamaica. Leslie's call to play for England in the 1920s was likely revoked due to racism, and more than fifty years would pass before Viv Anderson became the first black England player (Plymouth Argyle Football Club 2019). Sir John Hawkins fought against the Spanish Armada in 1588 with his relative Sir Francis Drake. Hawkins also captained England's first slaving expedition, which set sail from Plymouth in 1562. This was one of several voyages, part financed by Queen Elizabeth I, which captured west Africans and sold them in the Americas and on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean, now the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In the 1790s, the British sent troops there to support the French colonisers, but were unsuccessful in suppressing the slave revolution led by Toussaint L'Ouverture that ended with Haiti's independence from France in 1804. All of these strands can be connected back to British imperialism and slavery. This is just one example of how stories of seaborne mobility might offer decolonised interpretations 'that are more reflective and representational of everyday inclusive Britishness, beyond the reductive sensibilities of "nation"' (Tolia-Kelly & Raymond 2020, 3).

Parallels can be sought in Wales, where Swansea's National Waterfront Museum's 'Everywhere in Chains' exhibit was praised by the Black History Foundation for its community engagement and investment in explaining slavery's legacies (Gwyn 2012, 308). Like Wales, Cornwall's museum and heritage landscape is characterised by its heavy reliance on tourism, a broader cultural identity defined in opposition to Englishness, a strong emphasis on working class industry – especially mining – and a small black and ethnic minority population (Coupland & Coupland 2014). Ongoing and sometimes difficult debates advocating for Cornwall's 'authentic' industrial past over its romantic associations with Celtic myths and wild land and seascapes may have prevented its heritage sector from engaging with what the 2011 census shows to be the growing ethnic diversity of its population, though its Jewish history has been 'revisited' (Hale 2001; Sassenberg 2012; Cornwall Council 2013, 5).

Ensuring plurivocal recognition and representation of a range of voices from Cornwall's past and present is a form of decolonialised practice (Hale 2001). Ensuring that exhibition spaces are co-designed by those they represent, on their own terms, is also a way to challenge dominant national or proto-national narratives, helping to avoid stereotypes or tokenism and challenge 'Othering', including racialised othering, as a dominant museum classification system (Tolia-Kelly & Raymond 2020, 8). That means ensuring that ethnic minority experiences are represented as developing and dynamic and also as part of an evolving national story, rather than being 'objectified' outside of it. It also means recognising that the legacies of Empire and slavery are an integral part of Cornwall's story, and are therefore relevant across its heritage sector. Maritime museums are particularly well-placed to engage with this endeavour by using maritime mobilities as a starting point to explore evolving ethnic identities, shifting national stories, dynamic international connections and decolonialised histories.

Britain's colonial history is very much bound up with its naval power and its transatlantic trade in slaves. At a time when 'Britannia ruled the waves', it was not just the ports at which slaves were brought to land, but also those which traded slave-grown Caribbean commodities, consumed them, and carried correspondence by packet ship to and from the West Indies that were implicated in the slave trade. The Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro has begun exploring Cornwall and the Transatlantic Slave Trade with the help of a local historian (Mackenzie 2019). In the wake of Black Lives Matter protests in June/July 2020, the National Trust has responded to calls to explore its properties' colonial connections. The Trengwainton estate near Penzance, for example, was built on the slave-owning Price family's profits from a Jamaican sugar

plantation (Becquart 2020; Huxtable *et al* 2020). This family with connections to Cornwall was not alone in profiting from or defending West Indian slavery, including as Members of Parliament (Morgan 2007, 44; Hall *et al* 2014, 131.)

Documenting imperial-era commerce decontextualized from its exploitative underpinnings is, I would submit, an example of 'white innocence'. To argue that slave ships did not depart from Falmouth itself, or that a Cornish museum is national in name only, would illustrate rather than undermine this point. Gloria Wekker (2016, 1) defines 'white innocence' in the Dutch context as 'the reactions of denial, disavowal and elusiveness' elicited among white Dutch citizens highly invested in their national self-representation. This, in turn, is described as an uncommonly tolerant, 'small, but just, ethical nation; color-blind, thus free of racism; as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground, thus a guiding light to other folks and nations' (Wekker 2016, 1-2). The parallels with British national representation in self-congratulatory mode seem striking. The past is not even past, and yet it is forgotten. The afterlife of slavery is racism, but ignoring racism will not make it go away. To draw a different parallel, Georgine Clarsen describes historiographies in settler colonies – specifically Australia – as progressively eliding the fact of Aboriginal dispossession as the twentieth century progressed, resulting in a 'cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale' (Curthoys, cited in Clarsen 2015, 43). Characterising conquered lands as remote, empty or barren 'terra nullius' is a convenient erasure of indigenous lives, histories and cultures that can easily be extended to the sea, which has often been seen as empty and unknowable (Sutherland 2021). But to do so would also erase 'those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still, in the time of the wake' (Sharpe 2016, 19).

Conclusion

Mobilities range across time and space, history, society, politics and culture (Kuusisto-Arponen 2009, 550). In turn, the Hypersea's multidimensional, endlessly mutable watery mobility poses a conceptual and analytical challenge to static, territorialised national narratives (Sutherland 2016). Seaborne perspectives are not new. As we have seen, Solomon Plaatje was reflecting on his shipped mobility in 1914, as a means of challenging racialised colonial hierarchies. This article has sought to extrapolate from the 'changing rhythms and routines' (Anim-Addo, Hasty & Peters 2014, 343) that Plaatje experienced at sea to critique the nationalist narratives still represented in maritime museums like the NMMC. Maritime museums are places where

visitors often find themselves combing through the flotsam and jetsam of diverse collections to find a point of connection to their lives. Political imaginaries derived from maritime mobilities would enable these museums and their visitors to step away from the apparent certainties of bounded, landed national narratives to embrace the inherent mobility and mutability of the Hypersea, diving into a watery, icy and misty realm of responsibility and possibility to explore 'the representational potential of the unbounded ocean' (Remmington 2016, 82). As Steinberg and Peters (2019, 300) point out, 'It is necessary to think of the ocean as more-than-wet so as to not take it as an abstract set of coordinates within which resources can be found, but as a space of life.' With the world in the midst of both a climate emergency and an international upsurge of anger at systemic racism, maritime museums could and should be at the centre of this approach. In practice, this means challenging settled national narratives by privileging instead seaborne perspectives that trace the cross-cutting currents of transatlantic slavery, migrant identities and their enduring legacies, among other expressions of mobility.

Variously perceived as an empty, blank space to be explored and conquered, a place of mystery and threat, or an essential 'Other', the maritime space has the power to subvert rooted, nativist national imaginaries and representations. Making watery mobility the starting point of analysis and representation highlights the circulation of people, ideas and commodities. It should not overlook circumstances when these were combined into human cargo, nor should it erase the colonial connections that once fuelled and financed maritime transport. This article has shown that British maritime museums tend to reproduce national imaginaries rather than exploiting the potential of maritime mobilities to subvert and question national categories, as captured in the notion of Hypersea. National imaginaries are very often projected onto the sea, but it is also possible to read 'oceanic cultures as drawn together across nationalities by their shared sea experiences more than by their national contexts' (Mathieson 2016, 13). As such, maritime mobilities hold the potential to transcend bounded, terrestrial national imaginaries and conceptualise other ways of belonging that are more inclusive. Maritime museums in the UK and elsewhere would do well to take inspiration from the sea - the very medium they purport to represent - to rethink their representations of the maritime world for a diverse audience.

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