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Metamorphosis Afloat: Pirate Ships, Politics and Process, c.1680–1730

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ABSTRACT This paper follows some late-seventeenth and early eighteenth century pirate ships, focusing upon the moments when these most enigmatic and elusive of ocean-going vessels were appropriated and inhabited by mutinous mariners who literally risked their necks to take charge of them. This paper builds upon recent work in mobilities and oceanic studies which is developing more materialist perspectives as a means for better understanding the seas and ships as lived, dynamic spaces. By exploring some of the ways that pirate ships were crafted and modified, and then occupied, at the turn of the eighteenth century, this paper contributes new perspectives on the formation of piratical spaces and identities, and in the process, the role of mobilities and spatialities in creating spaces afloat. The paper argues for a greater acknowledgement of the role of process in the making of space and mobility at sea as a means of better understanding the complex geographies of the pirate ship and the experiences of those who sailed aboard them.

KEY WORDS: Piracy, Ship, Mobilities, Politics, Space, Eighteenth century, Historical geography

Introduction

This paper follows some late-seventeenth and early eighteenth century pirate ships, focusing upon the moments when these most enigmatic and elusive of ocean-going vessels were appropriated and inhabited by mutinous mariners who literally risked their necks to take charge of them. The most expensive and technologically advanced objects in existence (Adams 2001), the ships seized by pirates were their homes, where their founding moment of rebellion and subsequent life as pirates unfolded, where they lived in contempt of international efforts towards their extirpation (Earle 2004). However, one theorises pirates, whether as opportunistic thieves (Earle 2004), rational choice-making entrepreneurs (Leeson 2009), savvy lawyers at the edges of order (Benton 2010) or politically radical rebels (Rediker 2004), in each and every case, the practices of the pirate were inescapably entangled with the geographies of the ship. Thus far, in accounts of the pirate ship, neither spatiality nor...
mobility has been particularly prominent or well-developed analytical levers. The potential for picking through histories of piracy and the ship more generally are therefore significant, since, as Merriman et al. (2012, 7) insist, thinking with space (and mobility, it might well be added) is a sure means of unlocking narratives too quickly closed down otherwise: ‘spatiality can disrupt theories that have not taken it seriously’.

In drawing attention to the material practices involved in the transition of a ship to a pirate ship, this paper presents the ship as a space defined by process, as a site wherein form and function were subject to continual negotiation, re-imagined and reshaped by social, political and practical imperatives. Piracy, then, by extension, can be thought of as a process or set of processes, as an inherently relational practice, rather than one which is in any way fixed or stable. Piracy in this period was always the result of radical shipboard transformations, the changing social and material shape of the ship; a sort of metamorphosis afloat. The ship became the pirate ship as it changed from one state to another, not in a pre-given sense (in the way that metamorphosis might describe the transformation of one stage of a species into another, as in the case of the caterpillar into the butterfly), but in a fluid way, through a contested set of transformational practices. Pirates seized space at sea and made it their own, enacting their own politics, social arrangements and cultural practices through ship-space and the modifications they made to it.

This approach speaks to concerns with mobilities in important ways. The ship, Cresswell (2011, 555) argues, is a good place to re-think and re-tool the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry 2006). Firstly, ships seem to present a means of raising ‘an awareness of the mobilities of the past’, encouraging a stronger, deeper historical consciousness in the work of the new mobilities paradigm (Cresswell 2010, 28). Secondly, venturing into earth’s watery realms and engaging the ship seems to promise a vast range of new empirical, methodological and conceptual challenges for mobilities scholars (Cresswell 2011, 555; Hasty and Peters 2012), perhaps encouraging an encounter with what Chambers (2010, 3) has recently called ‘maritime criticism’: a shift in thinking which ‘sets existing knowledge afloat: not to drown or cancel it, but rather to expose it to unsuspected questions and unauthorised interruptions’. Taking mobilities to sea aboard the ship, then, allows us to see things previously viewed as ‘bounded and fixed, stable and permanent, in terms of flows and fluids – in terms of movement’ (Adey 2006, 77).

In its attention to early modern pirate ships, this paper embraces these challenges. Moreover, the pirate ship presents a serious challenge for a problematic assumption about the potential mobilities of the ship embedded in Cresswell’s (2011, 555) ‘watery mobilities’ injunction; namely, the idea that ships are, at any given point, ‘essentially the same thing as they have always been, give or take a few modifications in power supply and navigation’. Following Blum’s (2010, 669) assertion that the ‘sea is not a metaphor’ and Steinberg’s (2013, 157) insistence that we ‘directly engage the ocean’s fluid mobility and its tactile materiality’, this paper contends that accounts of the ship must also venture beyond the comforts of the metaphor – the ship as ‘heterotopia’ (Foucault 1986), the ship as ‘natural contract’ (Serres 1995), to name but two – and embrace what Blum (2010, 670) calls ‘the material conditions and praxis of the maritime world’ (see also Peters 2012). Indeed, to better understand the important socio-spatial relations that have for centuries been woven around ships, the people who sailed them and the locations they visited and inhabited at different times, we must precisely avoid thinking of ships in this static way, and instead look
for the ways that ships were (and are) inherently physical and dynamic, lived and contested sites of multiple mobilities. We must see the ship not only as a mobilising force – a technology for moving things across space – but as a site itself inherently constituted by ideas and practices of movement.

To examine an act of piracy, then, is to see a ship shifting in states – material, social and political – and, as a result, to see space itself in flux. The remainder of this paper proceeds by first considering the conceptual underpinnings of a mobilities analysis of pirate ships, and then presenting an account of the pirate ship as a site of material transformation and socio-political contestation. This focus follows Massey (2005, 11) in thinking about space (and mobilities) as ‘always in process … never a closed system’. As Steinberg has recently argued, thinking this way, about fluidities, enables new perspectives on ‘space itself and how it is produced (and reproduces itself) within the dynamics of spatial assemblages’ (Steinberg 2013, 163). This paper attempts to realise some of this promise and seeks to develop recent work in geography and mobilities studies more generally which has, as Adey (2006, 90) suggests, re-imagined space with movement and process at the heart of things: ‘To be sure, process rules. Space is never still, it can never just be – because mobilities compose material process and becoming. They constitute new apprehensions of space’. It is arguably through attending to these mobile and mobilising processes that we can better understand the politics of piratical identities, the social and cultural worlds of seafarers and the nature of being afloat, in the past, more generally.

**Ships, Mobilities and Pirates**

In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy (1993, 4) famously positions the ship as ‘a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion’. As Steinberg (2013, 158) has recently joked, however, delving ‘into Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, one never gets wet’. The elision of the sea as a physical entity in the influential work of Gilroy and many others (e.g. Virilio 1977) is mirrored in a similar neglect of ships’ materialities; their lived and lively qualities overlooked as they serve as metaphors in the tales of connection and flow their movements inspired. Take, for example, Casarino’s (2002, 19) claim that ‘[t]he ship never travels, never goes anywhere, never even moves’. Here, the ship is not really a ship; it is a cypher for something else, a metaphor. In essence, the problem with the ship as metaphor, and only metaphor, is that it must remain fixed and pre-given to successfully occupy that role. Smith and Katz (1993, 68) have argued this in relation to spatial metaphors more generally: ‘[m]etaphor works by invoking one meaning system to explain or clarify another. The first meaning system is apparently concrete, well understood, unproblematic, and evokes the familiar’. My purpose here is not to dismiss the metaphor entirely, rather, it is to encourage a move beyond the kinds of metaphorical formulations of the ship which ignore the vibrancy inherent to notions of spatiality and mobility. For this reason, while the ship never moved beyond the realms of metaphor for Gilroy, his injunction to others to see ships as living, dynamic spaces remains salient; indeed, despite the innumerable accounts of famous, infamous and supposedly archetypal ships that litter scholarly and popular histories, ‘the ship as a physical entity has barely been explored’ (Jarvis 2007, 52).

New geographies of the ship are steadily emerging and this situation is beginning to change (Hasty and Peters 2012). Recent work on, amongst other things, ocean liners (Ashmore 2013), Royal Mail steamers (Anim-Addo 2011), pirate ships (Hasty...
2011), passenger ferries (Vannini 2011), educational cruisers (della Dora 2010), private yachts (Ryan 2006) and a commuter boat (Boshier 2009) has taken significant steps towards explicating the complex socio-spatial arrangements to be found afloat at various times and places. What this work does well is that it acknowledges the diversity of material and social structures which constitute a given vessel and its movements to better account for the formation of particular identities, social relations, ideas and knowledges, senses of place and so on. Ashmore (2013, 14), for example, in considering the ‘processuality of passengering’ aboard steamships in the early twentieth century, suggests that ‘[b]eing mobile over a long period spent at sea is … generative of specific affects and feelings in the humans who dwell in and travel through these watery spaces’. In particular, he points out that an ‘important element shaping the experience of travel is the physical form of the modality travelled in. The physical layout of the ocean liner as a mobile form is very different to that of other modalities that are often the focus of study’ (Ashmore 2013, 8). In short, this emerging body of exemplary work situates the ship as a material entity and its multiple mobilities in the foreground of the story in the telling. With few exceptions, however, this attention has thus far been directed almost exclusively at what might be called ‘ship-shaped relations’, those interactions induced and produced by being aboard ship (Hasty and Peters 2012, 664). For example, for Ashmore (2013, 15), ‘the ship is a more or less durable structure’, while ‘the affects that work through it are more transitory’. As a result of this kind of thinking, another important facet of this socio-spatial dialectic remains relatively untouched; namely, the role of socio-political relations in shaping the spatialities and mobilities afloat. To consider this is to ask to what extent the form and function of the ship might reflect the on-going social and political exchanges both aboard and in other locations.

Though there are many ways to divide the literature on ships – by discipline, time period, technical type, method of power and so on – a significant and influential section can be separated into two broad streams according to their position vis-à-vis shipboard social relations. On one side, we have those who see the ship as a clear extension of the norms, values and structures of landed society and on the other, we have those who find exactly the opposite, profound difference and otherness. For the former, Conrad’s observation that the ship was ‘fragment detached from the earth’ which ‘went on lonely and swift like a small planet’ rings true (cited in Casarino 2002, 19). For example, Pearson (2010, 9–10) insists that the social order of the ship in the early modern period replicated ‘quite precisely landed society, as seen in authority structures, food, reaction to stress, the comforts of religion and so on’.

Conversely, for the latter, the ship is actually where we find the structures of landed power contested and subverted, ‘a place to which and in which the ideas and practices of revolutionaries … escaped, re-formed, circulated, and persisted’ (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, 144–145). Indeed, rather than finding a fragment of the earth detached, the early modern ship – especially the pirate ship – was a site in which one could find ‘the world turned upside down’ (Rediker 2004, 61; after Hill 1972). While acknowledging the clear tensions between these positions, there are a couple of important, and somewhat problematic, assumptions they hold in common. In the first instance, both helpfully envision the ship in broadly relational terms, as formed and maintained through social, political and cultural bonds, held in relation to other spaces, either those of dominant polities (Pearson 2010) or pan-oceanic subaltern networks (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). Secondly, within this, we can see that spatiality is acknowledged, and that both follow Dening (1992, 19) in his pithy
observation that ‘[s]pace and the language used to describe it make a ship’. They acknowledge that (most) ships were riven with spatially engrained hierarchies, what Jarvis (2007, 61) calls the ‘complex social geography’ of the ship.

Space is theorised in these accounts in rather problematic ways, oscillating between fixity and relationality, and without an acknowledgement of the centrality of process to space (Massey 2005). As Featherstone (2005, 392–393) has noted of Linebaugh and Rediker (2000) in particular, there is a tendency to ‘treat space as a fixed backdrop to political activity. Ideas, tactics and radical experiences flow and move across space, but these circuits remain unchanged through these processes’. A similar critique could be made about the way mobility is understood in this literature. While movements, flows and connections are rightly foregrounded in much of the work on maritime history, mobilities are too often conceived of in too simplistic a fashion. The ship is usefully understood as a mobilising force, as the thing that moves people, ideas and other things around, as the ‘engine of commerce, the machine of empire’, and the primary ‘means of communication between continents’ (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, 150–152). More than this, however, the movement of the ship was central to the seafaring way of life: ‘Mobility, fluidity, and dispersion were intrinsic to the seaman’s life … Seamen were in many ways nomads, and their mobility ensured a rapid diffusion of their culture’ (Rediker 1987, 159). Notwithstanding the important contributions made by this literature to our understanding of the cross-oceanic connections facilitated by the movement of ships, these analyses of seagoing movements stop short of fully engaging mobilities theory. This is true of work on the sea more generally. On the possibility of directly engaging the ‘very geophysical mobility’ of the sea in our accounts of mobilities, Steinberg (2013, 165) writes:

From this perspective, the ocean becomes the object of our focus not because it is a space that facilitates movement – the space across which things move – but because it is a space that is constituted by and constitutive of movement.

The ship too is a space that deserves attention not only on the basis of its ability to move things, but because it is a space clearly created, inhabited and understood in various ways according to differently experienced mobilities and immobilities. It is a space constituted by and constitutive of movement. The ship, and in particular the pirate ship, appears as a floating assemblage on the move, carrying things across space, but also shifting form in space: transmuting as well as transporting. Such a focus speaks to the very core of mobilities theory: ‘Mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial infrastructure and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities’ (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 3).

This paper builds on and develops work on the pirate ship and the mobilities of ships by foregrounding the processual nature of the pirate ship as a space. These spaces are notoriously elusive for the historian: ‘Of the life on board buccaneer and pirate ships only a somewhat hazy and incomplete picture reaches us’ (Gosse 1924, 21). Perhaps, as a result of this perceived shortage of reliable or recognisable evidence, the pirate ship is much mythologised, and now casts an instantly identifiable shadow. A number of academic accounts have done much to cast new light upon the pirate ship, bringing into focus the alternative social structures enacted aboard (Rediker 2004), the complex cross-cultural interactions it engendered (Bialuschewski 2008), the violent practices it witnessed (Earle 2004) and the ingenious legal
posturing it promoted (Benton 2010). Through these studies, our understanding of
the pirate ship moves beyond simple myth and romance, but, by and large, they fail
to directly engage the pirate ship as a mobile, physical entity. The ship is presented
as somewhat dynamic, but only in the moment that the pirates seize it and take con-
trol – otherwise it is fixed. After the ship becomes the pirates ship (with the excep-
tion of Benton’s (2010) work on the pirate ship as a space of alternative legal
practices) space stands still, held in place by a set of assumptions about the intersec-
tions of identity, practice, space and mobilities.

Drawing on the insights of mobilities scholars and geographers, it is possible to
get beyond the static space of the pirate ship presented in the literature and develop
an account of the ship which embraces the processual nature of ship-space. As
Ashmore (2013, 15) argues, there is ‘a necessity to consider the materialities and
socialities specific to different modalities of mobility’, focusing not on the ‘static’
but on those which are ‘continually emergent’ as they ‘cohere, disperse and reappear
in new assemblages’. This attention to the assemblage of physical and social things
chimes with another strand of recent work in mobilities. As Strohmayer (2011, 121)
argues of the bridge, it ‘is not a unified, homogenous structure. Nor do bridges func-
tion in a unilateral manner. As a result, the particular forms of mobility facilitated
and enabled by their presence are historically specific and anchored in concrete existing
contexts’. A similar sensibility could offer new ways of interrogating the pirate
ship, by working through the multiple mobilities enacted in and constitutive of the
material structures of the ship and the social, political and cultural interactions
engendered therein.

Metamorphosis Afloat

Stillness is a rare thing. The sea, or ‘hydroworld’ as Peters (2012, 1242) puts it,
is characterised by ‘instability, and sheer, motionful, dynamic power’. Even in the
dreaded doldrums, ships and all they contained were subject to the motions of the
sea. The ship not only moves between points on a plane, but in other directions
and dimensions too, with the swell of the waves. Anchors don’t hold ships still,
they hold them in place, and only to an extent. These forces are constant, and as
they moved the ship they took their toll on its fabric and form. The ships timbers
were usually dressed in sticky tar to preserve them against the corrosive power of
saltwater. Ingress was inevitable, slowly but surely the wooden ship would suc-
cumb to mould and rot. Other organisms, like the Toledo worm, clung, gnawed
and burrowed their way through the wood, eating the ship and altering its struc-
tural properties as they went. Thundering waves, howling winds, unknown rocks,
even the odd piece of flotsam or jetsam could substantially alter the fabric of the
ship, or, at least, call on the ship’s hands to make alterations. The ship, as abso-
lutely any sailor in the age of sail would have been able to testify, was a living,
breathing entity. Far from barely changing over the course of centuries, the ship
was a space literally on the move, on the shift, from one moment to the next, in
subtle and profound, intentional and inevitable ways. It was never static and it
was never stable. It was a body decaying from its launch, kept afloat through the
continuous labours of those who sailed it, modifying as they went to keep it
moving. This speaks to a key contention emerging in the study of mobilities and
materialities:
… in reality the body is changing form at every moment; or rather, there is no form, since form is immobile and the reality is movement. What is real is the continual change of form: form is only a snapshot view of a transition. (Bergson, quoted in Adey 2006, 77)

As well as the changes necessitated by the force of the elements, pirates were apparently inclined to alter their vessels according to another set of forces, those emanating from political and social imaginaries. Central to this paper is the argument that pirates took ships and shaped them, socially, politically and materially to suit their own ends, that, in other words, the pirate ship was a mobile and mobilising force at sea but it was also an inherently mutable entity. Not only was the ship not merely a metaphor, but it was a living thing, a transformative, material site of contested politics. In what now follows, the nature and extent of these changes are considered in three important ways, looking first to concerns around speed and practicality, before moving on to examine the relations between materiality and politics on the decks of pirate ships, before ending with a discussion of the social and political implications of this mutability for our understanding of the pirate ship and those we find aboard them.

**Moving Fast and Getting Close**

On 1 April 1719, pirates boarded the slave ship *Bird Galley* at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River and took its captain captive. As was the custom on such occasions, William Snelgrave found himself in conference with his captors, who wanted to know how well his ship sailed, ‘both large, and on a wind’ (Snelgrave 1734, 213). Pirates’ ships were never built for them and their particular purposes. They worked with what they could get, crafting space afloat, on-the-fly, through assiduous and resourceful re-appropriation. First and foremost, they sought vessels which appeared seaworthy. They also preferred ships that were well-armed (or displayed the potential to bear significant arms) and those that were fast. His reply that his ship, a galley-built vessel designed for speed, sailed ‘very well’ seemed to confirm the pirates’ own favourable impressions, and led to their commander throwing his hat in the air and declaring of the *Bird Galley* that ‘She would make a fine Pirate Man of War’ (Snelgrave 1734, 213).

Mobility, in the most straightforward sense, was an essential feature of piracy, indeed in his *History of the Pyrates* – arguably the most important and heavily debated source for piratical histories of the so-called golden age (c.1680–1730) – Johnson (1726, 168) opines that ‘a light pair of heels was of great use either to take or to escape being taken’ at sea. As well as taking the opportunity to seize notably fast ships, we can find evidence of pirates’ deep understanding of the kinds of modification and maintenance required to ensure speed, nothing less than a matter of life and death for them. Having spent a month in their company, Snelgrave serves as a good witness to the moment when a ship became a pirate ship. One thing he records about this event is that as soon as the pirates had decided that his ship should be theirs, ‘all hands went to work to clear the Ship, by throwing over board Bales of Woollen Goods; Cases of India Goods; with many other things of great Value’ (Snelgrave 1734, 223). This kind of thing has often been interpreted as either the mark of wanton irrationality (e.g. Earle 2004) or anti-capitalist radicalism (e.g. Rediker, 2004), though it more likely speaks of the pirates’ desire to lighten the load.
of the ship, thereby rendering it clearer in case of engagement and more agile afloat. The ship and its constituent parts were never sacred in the hands of pirates. The ship was their home at sea, but it was also a tool for transport, one that had to be honed for the purpose of the pirate through modification.

We can look to the practice of careening, extremely common among pirates during the late-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to see this awareness of mobility and speed more clearly still. Careening a large wooden ship was an arduous task, one involving significant labour starting with the hauling ashore of the ship and then the scrubbing, scrapping, burning, replacing and resealing of every inch of its submerged timbers. Though this labour was taxing and dangerous for the pirate, the build-up of ‘[w]eeds and barnacles adhering to the underside of a hull could seriously impede the speed of a vessel by as much as three knots’ (Konstam 2003, 5), so it was undoubtedly worth the effort. Every ship at sea for long periods needed to countenance this task on a regular basis, but the various pressures exerted on merchant and naval fleets meant that this was sometimes impossible; indeed, for much of the period under consideration, naval captains were ‘forbidden to careen their ships, due to the expense’, despite the fact that they knew ‘this was essential if they were to catch pirates’ (Earle 2004, 186). Writing to his superiors in 1683, one navy captain reported that ‘the pirate sailed three feet to his one’ (CSPC 1681–85, Item 963). William Dampier mentions careening his piratical vessels at least a dozen of times in his journal, in one passage, explaining the rationale: ‘We now concluded to Careen our ships as speedily as we could, that we might be ready to intercept this fleet’ (Dampier 1699, 171). The Navy eventually recognised the importance of this process, ensuring as part of their measures in the 1720s to tackle the piracy problem that ‘orders were given to careen twice and then three times a year’ (Earle 2004, 187).

As well as moving fast, the practice of piracy demanded stealth. Knowledge of the seas – currents, winds, local geography – clearly mattered in this respect, but one of the ways pirates were able to get close involved a significant, if structurally minor, modification to the ship, involving perhaps the most famous symbol of piracy there is. Like privateers and naval ships, pirates were well acquainted with the ruse de guerre of flying false flags, a form of trickery used to advance on prey. The court presiding over the trial of the crew of the infamous Bartholomew Roberts heard of his geopolitically savvy use of flags and colour: ‘The Colours they fought under (beside the Black Flag) were a red English Ensign, a King’s Jack, and a Dutch Pendant’ (Anon 1723, 5). Twenty years earlier, in the Indian Ocean, pirates were doing something remarkably similar:

a Pyrate came into Calcutta Road the 23rd November 1696 under English Colours, where were several ship at anchor, coming in call of the Outermost The Pyrate fired a Gun at her, and hoists Danes Colours; firing broadsides and volleys, small shot. (IOR/H/36, ff.277)

Alongside the various national flags present aboard each pirate ship, there was often a black or red flag, famously (though not always) adorned with ‘a death’s head and bones’ (Anon 1718, 24), created and flown as a symbol of the pirates’ violent intent and avowed autonomy. These Jolly Roger flags are certainly the most iconic and arguably the most significant acts of material modification undertaken in the crafting of the pirate ship. This simple but effective symbolism, denoting ‘death, violence,
and limited time’ (Rediker 2004, 165), was reproduced time and again by pirates throughout the early eighteenth century. The ultimate aim of such flags was, of course, to stop other ships in their tracks, a tactic of immobility. As Adey (2006, 83) reminds us, ‘movement may be an action of domination in one circumstance but it may be viewed as an action of resistance in another. Mobility, like power, is a relational thing’. The raising of the Jolly Roger as the ship was in pursuit of its prey both an act of resistance vis-à-vis the state, and an act of domination with respect to the pursued ships’ crew who were supposed to see the flag and yield.

The striking of a black flag was synonymous with piratical intention, and was an important indicator of the ‘social and cultural differences … made, negotiated and contested in and through the geographies of the ship’ (Lambert, Martins, and Ogborn 2006, 487). It might be thought to signal the kind of social contract articulated in 1721 by one Admiralty judge when he accused the pirates who stood in front of him of the following:

You did Bind yourselves … to stand by one another & by your Captain or any other one of them … to the Last drop of your Blood in your pyrat articles …
 Called the Customs of the Blades of Fortune. (AC/16, ff.323)

In the taking of a ship, pirates seized space and seemingly remade it in their image. While the clearing and careening of the ship speak of a clear desire to move quickly, the raising of false flags and the notorious Jolly Roger is more about stealth, about getting close and sending a visual warning to other ships that they should not attempt to engage or flee. These are clear practices of on-going ship alteration bound up with the specificities of pirate life, which serve as important markers of the distinctiveness of the pirate ship within the wider notion of ‘the ship’, and prompt us to see the ship both materially and politically as a dynamic rather than fixed object.

Making Things Flush: Speed or Sedition?

Early modern seafarers knew all too well that ships were often sites of division and difference:

By the eighteenth century, the quarterdeck was sacred to the presence of sovereign power in displays of etiquette and privilege. It was the captain’s territory – his to walk on alone, his to speak from but not to be spoken to unless he wished it … The quarterdeck embodied his commission from the King. It was the space of his sovereign’s power, and all its trivial gestures and etiquette were its geography. (Dening 1992, 19)

Ships built for navies and traders were designed with specific social geographies in mind, principally targeted at separating officers and sailors in their work, rest and play, and the arrangement of decks was central to this. Such demands on space could only ever be intentions, the reality of socio-spatial relations is that space is contested and negotiated in an on-going, processual way. There have been tentative suggestions that we might consider the ship to be an ‘immutable mobile’ (e.g. Law 2002; Hetherington and Law 2000), indeed Law and Mol (2001, 612) ask the following question: ‘Is there no change in the working relations between the hull, the spars, the sails, the sailors and all the rest? If this is the case then the ship is immutable in
the sense intended by Latour. It does not move in relation to a network space’. One of the main arguments being pursued in this paper is that any exploration of the mobilities and spatialities of ships needs to reckon with the fact that many ships are mutable rather than immutable mobiles. As Jarvis (2007, 55) puts it: ‘Far from being static entities, ships were organically and often repeatedly altered over the course of their life spans’.

Aboard pirate ships, and other ships in different ways for different reasons, the material form of the ship did change as it moved, in response to practical concerns about stowing cargo, natural phenomena such as storms and social pressures such as mutiny. Examples from beyond the pirate ship confirm this. In her work on slave ships, Webster (2008, 7) has noted that a ‘vessel engaged on a slaving venture was not, for much of its voyage, a “slave ship” at all’. Throughout its circulation, making its way around the Atlantic triangle, the ‘slave ship’ required a ‘routine series of modifications – mainly carried out as vessels lay off the coast of Africa negotiating for slaves – that transformed merchant ships designed to transport inanimate cargoes into slave ships designed to transport, under duress, cargoes of human beings’ (Webster 2005, 250). More generally, Jarvis (2007, 55) insists that:

Ships were readily modified … and structurally enhanced (rerigged, hold configurations altered, physically expanded vertically and laterally) as needs arose to fit better, new, or different maritime uses … Form and fabric were thus changeable, and descriptions must be situated in time for a given vessel.

One way of demonstrating this mutability is to consider a little acknowledged spatial modification noted in a number of accounts of the pirate ship; namely, the shifting of the decks to make the ship flush. With years of experience in ‘legitimate’ maritime services behind them, sailors turned pirates undoubtedly understood that ships were intended to be spatially divisive, but that this was subject to change and modification. It, therefore, follows that we might see their resistance to this hierarchy – should there be any – in the way they chose to structure, or re-structure, the pirate ship.

In 1721, the mutinous crew of the Gambia Castle set about reworking the now former slaving vessel to suit better their piratical ambitions, and in their first autonomous act, they ‘knocked down the cabins, made the ship flush fore[e] and aft’ before they ‘prepared black colours’ (Johnson 1726, 307). John Gow’s pirate ship was also noted as being ‘flush fore & aft’ (SP 54/15/3b, ff.10; 11) and at around the same time we find yet that another crew endeavouring to make much the same arrangements aboard their own prize:

The pirates kept the Onslow for their own use … and then fell to making such alterations as might fit her for a sea-rover, pulling down her bulkheads, and making her flush, so that she became, in all respects, as complete a ship for their purpose as any they could have found. (Johnson 1726, 229)

Their labours in reworking the form of the ship gave them the ideal pirate ship. Amongst other things, their ideal entailed a flush ship, an end which they could have achieved, in some vessels at least, if they ‘removed the forecastle and lowered the quarterdeck’ to ensure that the vessel was ‘without a break or step in the weather deck’ (Cordingly 1995, 159). This was certainly the case when the pirate John Martel apparently implored the captain of the captured John and Martha to ‘tell his
Owners that their Ship would answer his Purpose exactly, by taking one Deck down’ (Johnson 1726, 64). Again in the General History of the Pyrates, we find that upon taking a vessel in the river Gambia, the commanding pirate ‘went into her, with his Crew, and cutting away her half Deck, mounted her with 24 Guns’ (Johnson 1726, 175).

While it is impossible to tell quite how common this undertaking was – pirates are not noted for leaving substantial paper trails – it is apparent that it was not at all uncommon. In an account of his travels among pirates in the 1680s, Basil Ringrose (Sloane MSS 3820, pg. 71; 84; 171) relates that he and his fellow crew ‘tooke downe our roundhouse and coache and all the high carved works of her sterne’ and found that the ship sailed ‘much better for her alteration’; a development which they later improved upon further by removing one deck. Dampier (1699, 380) also comments on a similar decision made by the crew in which he was part of, to instruct the ‘Carpenters to Cut down our Quarter-Deck to make the Ship snug, and the fitter for sailing’. A contemporary of both these men, John Cox, records a remarkably similar process in his own journal: ‘Our Ship had 2 decks & large quarter deck … we cut off her upper deck … & lowered her quarterdeck [convenient] for a great Cabbin & this work we did all in 10 days time’ (GOS/4, 46). The task was not insignificant and clearly required a degree of skill and a deep understanding of maritime architecture. Almost 30 years later, a mutinously minded sailor called Robert Sparkes articulated a very similar thought process while serving aboard the slaving ship Abingdon. He whispered to some of his fellow sailors that ‘he believed that he could make the Ship go much better than she did’ by ‘Ripping off the upper Deck’, thus making it ‘a Ship fit for Business’, claiming that ‘she would make a good Pirate Ship, for he believed, that she would be stiffer and go better’ (Anon 1721, 40).

In a number of the examples cited here, it is clear that speed and increased mobility was a motivating factor in the process of removing the upper deck of the pirate ship. If these pirates are understood as purely economic creatures (cf. Leeson 2009), then this functional ‘speed’ explanation suffices. However, since such explanations fail to capture the complexity of piracy in every other respect, then it follows that they would also fall short of fully explaining why pirates would alter the spatial arrangement of their ships.

Another way of interpreting this practice is hinted at by Baer (2005, 208) when he writes that the removal of the ‘upper work on a pirate ship’ was ‘primarily to improve its agility but also to eliminate class differences among its crew’. Beyond this paper, Baer’s suggestion remains unchallenged and unsubstantiated in the literature, despite the fact that it chimes so clearly with one of Rediker’s (2004, 65) central claims about piracy; that aboard the pirate ship we can see the ‘determined reorganisation of space and privilege [which] was crucial to the remaking of maritime social relations’. Developing our understanding of the pirate ship requires critical attention to ways in which that space was created – the ways that the ship metamorphosed into the pirate ship – and the ways in which it was then inhabited. By focusing on these hitherto ignored fluidities and processes, we are able to gain new perspectives on ‘space itself and how it is produced (and reproduces itself) within the dynamics of spatial assemblages’ (Steinberg 2013, 163). What is more, focusing on these mobile materialities allows us to really grapple with the social and political geographies of pirate ships, unsettling those narratives, such as that of the radical pirate (Rediker 2004) that have failed to take them seriously (cf. Merriman et al. 2012).
Looking for the Complex Geographies and (Im)mobilities of the Pirate Ship

Jensen (2009, xv) rightly insists that ‘mobile practices are more than physical practices, as they also are signifying practices’, so as well as foregrounding the materialities of pirate ships – highlighting their mutability – this paper brings this transmutative space into conversation with the complex social and political geographies to be found within. The pirate ship of the early eighteenth century, Rediker (2004, 61) argues, the scene for a ‘new social order … conceived and deliberately constructed by the pirates themselves’. There is plenty of evidence to support this. Rodgers (1718, xv), a colonial governor, noted that ‘there was no distinction between the Captain and Crew: for the Officers having no Commission but what the Majority gave them, were chang’d at every Caprice’. Similarly, the merchant William Betagh (1728, 148) testified that pirates ‘had no regular command among them’. After an encounter with pirates aboard their ship, another merchant noted that: ‘There appeared Very Little order amongst the crew and that every one of them dealt about Wine and fruits to persons who came aboard at their pleasure’ (SP/15/3b, ff.11). What these men all mistook for disorder was, Rediker (2004, 61) argues, merely a ‘different social order – different from the ordering of merchant, naval and privateering vessels’.

Such a profound difference ought to be manifest in spatialities and mobilities of the ship. Can we read the examples of deck alteration cited above as evidence of pirates’ egalitarian will manifest in the re-organisation of the ship? Among the things that captured the attention of Snelgrave during his time among the pirates was their apparent lack of acquiescence to the authority of their captain. This extended to sleeping arrangements, which involved the entire crew having to ‘lay rough … that is, on the deck; the Captain himself not being allowed a Bed’ (Snelgrave 1734, 217).

Where someone like Snelgrave (1734, 216) would expect a captain to sleep, he found an altogether different scene: ‘There was not in the Cabbin either Chair, or anything else to sit upon … [only] a Carpet was spread on the Deck, upon which we sat down cross-legg’d’. Another observer at close quarters with pirates noted the same arrangement, writing that ‘the Captain cannot keep his own Cabbin to himself, for ther Bulk-Heads are all down, and every Man stand to his Quarters, where they lie and mess, and they take the liberty of ranging all over the ship’ (Downing 1737, 108). These examples seem to suggest that the space of the pirate ship, and the lack of barriers to movement between its different areas, did reflect the supposedly egalitarian values of the pirates, in some cases.

Different pirate ships were different spaces. Nathaniel North is said to have received his captaincy of a pirate ship like this:

The Ceremony of this Installation is, the crew having made choice of him to Command … desire he will take upon him the Command, as he is the most capable among them. That he will take Possession of the great Cabin; and on accepting the Office, he is led into the Cabin in State, and placed at a Table, where only one Chair is set at the upper End, and one at the lower End of the Table for the Company’s Quarter-Master. (Johnson 1726, 524)

A similar tone is apparent in the bloody rise of William Fly to the position of captain of the Elizabeth in 1726: ‘All Obstacles being removed, Mitchell saluted Fly Captain and, with the rest of the Crew, who had been in the Conspiracy, with some
Ceremony, gave him Possession of the great Cabin’ (Johnson 1726, 608). Of Captain Davis, Johnson (1726, 193) writes that he ‘held Certain Privileges, which common Pyrates were debarr’d from, as walking the Quarter-Deck, using the great Cabin, going ashore at Pleasure’. When Snelgrave (1734, 240) was aboard Davis’ ship, he recalled that the pirate captain ‘spoke to all his people on the Quarter-deck’, hinting at how he occupied it as captain. This situation is further demonstrated in another of Snelgrave’s recollections; namely, that on a particular occasion when one of the pirate crew approached him aggressively, in protection of his captive, ‘Davis caned him [the approaching pirate] off the Quarter-deck’ (Snelgrave 1734, 274). More striking still is an account of Gow’s immediate spatial organisation of the ship he had seized:

THE first Order they Issued, was to let all the rest of the Men know, That if they continued Quiet, and offer’s not to Meddle with any of their Affairs, they should receive no Hurt: But strictly forbid any Man among them to set a Foot Abaft the Main-mast, except they were call’d to the Helm, upon Pain of being immediately Cut in Pieces; keeping for that Purpose, one Man at the Steerage-door, and one upon the Quarter-deck, with drawn Cutlashes in their Hands. (Anon 1725, 10–11)

Besides offering a window into the often brutal world of the pirate ship, this somewhat hyperbolic observation highlights a key concern of this paper, namely that an analysis of the materialities and mobilities of the pirate ship seems to reveal that the crew of the pirate ship and ‘the humanity of the ship’ were not one and the same; the former was the dominant part of the latter.

The geographies of the pirate ship were complex and did not straightforwardly flatten out spatialised hierarchies. It was noted earlier that Gow’s ship was one which was flush, but here we have a divided ship. Perhaps the ship changed form over time, perhaps they changed ships, or it could be that one of the recorded observations is unreliable. It remains, however, that following Massey (2005, 99), we can see the space of the ship better as ‘the sphere of heterogeneity ... of relations, negotiations, practices of engagement, power in all its forms ... of coevalness, of radical contemporaneity’. The pirate ship was a space in flux, socially and materially on the move, always becoming. Taking this approach addresses Buck-Morss’ (2009, 79) call to work:

...through the historical specificities of particular experiences, approaching the universal not by subsuming facts within overarching systems or homogenizing premises, but by attending to the edges of systems, the limits of premises, the boundaries of our historical imagination in order to trespass, trouble, and tear these boundaries down.

Approaching the pirate ship through the lens of spatiality and mobility embraces Buck-Morss’ argument by foregrounding questions about the mutable socio-spatialities of the pirate ship. Such questions take us to the edges of both conservative (Earle 2004) and radical (Rediker 2004) histories of piracy, to the limits of premises of avaricious brutality and anti-authoritarianism. Following Massey, Buck-Morss, and others towards thinking about the pirate ship as a space of heterogeneous relations, as a space comprising more than simply ‘the crew’, opens up the possibility
for more nuanced interpretations of piracy and pirate ships. Unfixing the pirate ship, stripping the metaphor bare, reveals a more complex and challenging set of agents, motives, forces and relations.

As Featherstone (2008, 109) has argued, ‘[f]oregrounding the forms of political activity constituted through these shipboard spaces offers possibilities for asserting and allowing dynamic trajectories of subaltern political identities’. Pirates are, of course, one subaltern group, but the pirate ship contained other subalterns who are somewhat lost in most accounts of the pirate ship. With space limited, I can only focus on one of these groups and their place aboard the pirate ship to explore the implications of working with changing spatialities and mobilities.

Despite it being the apparent ‘Custome among the Pyrates to force no Prisoners’, in a number of trials, and in the accounts of many observers, the (mis)use of prisoners among pirate crews is discussed (Anon 1717a). When considering the treatment of these people, who lived for a period aboard the pirate ship, but were not part of its crew, it is important to consider how space and (im)mobility shaped their captivity. For example, in 1696, one merchant reported his captivity among pirates to the Board of Trade, informing them that: ‘They used us extremely hard, beat us, pinched us of victuals, shut us down in the night to take our lodgings in the water-casks’ (CSPC 1696–97, Item 1203: emphasis added). Another sailor testified to the Admiralty in 1702 that the pirates who seized his ship ‘did also seize the men that belonged to ye ship … and put them under a guard’ (HCA 1/53, f. 133). Without much empathy, one Admiralty official noted during a trial in 1720, that there was a tendency among pirates to ‘force’ men:

That they themselves were taken at Sea by the Pirate-Crew while sailing … and were compelled to go along with the Pirates by Threats, and the Apprehension they had of the Treatment they might meet with from so barbarous a Set, in case of Refusal … That they at different Times endeavoured severally to make their Escape by running away, and were brought back again, and some of them whipt for so endeavouring to make their Escape, and others kept for some Time in Irons after. (AC 9/681, F.3)

In the aforementioned case of Gow, an account of his piracies holds that of the 24 crew members aboard the ship he seized, only eight were active in the mutiny, meaning that sixteen were unwilling. Four more joined with the pirates shortly afterwards, leaving twelve aboard who did not want to be part of the pirate crew, but were nevertheless taken (Anon 1725, 11). From 1696 onwards the Admiralty Court took the line that to be aboard a pirate ship was to be a pirate, unless the accused could prove otherwise. Regular acquittals in pirate trials show, however, that there was clearly some acknowledgement that pirate ships contained a ‘crew’ and ‘others’.

Of particular interest to pirate crews were those possessing knowledge and skill in carpentry and medicine, both potentially life-saving talents afloat. Thomas Davis was a carpenter and, when his ship was captured in 1717 by pirates, he was coveted by the crew of the pirate ship Whydah, so much so, that they would rather have him dead than not in their company. When the Whydah’s captain ‘asked his Comp’y if they were willing to lett Davis the Carpenter go’, they ‘Expressed themselves in a Violent manner saying no, Dam him, they would first shoot him or Whip him to Death at the Mast’ (Anon 1717a). The ship aboard which Davis might have been whipped to death was formerly a slaving vessel, and so corporeal punishment of
crew and cargo at the mast would have been a familiar event, especially for those among the pirate crew who had been slave-ship mariners themselves. In the transition, things changed dramatically aboard the pirate ship, but not all of the oppressive structures and practices were removed. The mast was itself a site of symbolic importance aboard the ship, a sort of public place where the collective will for punishment could be exercised, where individuals felt the full force of not being part of that collective. In the same run of trials, John Brett, related to the court that one of the pirate crew, a certain John Brown had ‘told a prisoner then on board that he would hide him in the hold, and hinder him from Complaining against him, or telling his Story’ (Anon 1717b). Acknowledging the relational nature of space, mobility and power within the ship through attention to the mutable materialities of the ship brings these souls into our picture of piracy and gives them agency. Those marginalised by the re-ordered but still ordered pirate ship, those whipped at the mast or bundled into the hold to prevent them from seeking their own path, their own idea of liberty, are revealed when we see the ship as process rather than outcome.

An ever-more intriguing picture of the pirate ship emerges from such a position. One prisoner of pirates told a court that he was abused by some and not by others, suggesting that social relations (and spatial order) aboard were never set but were a matter of negotiation and contestation. Pirate ships were, like all other spaces, sites of juxtaposition wherein ‘contemporaneous heterogeneities’ (Massey 2005, 5) existed in tension. Seeing the ship as a mutable mobile brings to light an ever-evolving distinction between the crew, who were signed up to the pirates’ articles and enfranchised, and others, who, for whatever reason, were not part of the crew. It is the latter group who have so often been lost from analyses of piracy, an inconvenient element left at the fringes of the narrative. Spatialities and mobilities unsettle these narratives to capture important juxtapositions, allowing us to more sensitively incorporate these ‘non-pirate’ inhabitants of the pirate ship into the picture of piracy, perhaps in a fashion which escapes the rather grand narratives of historians bent on telling stories of naval dominance and piratical resistance. The pirate ship was, in fact, a site wherein a ‘plurality of trajectories’ (Massey 2005, 5) took shape and flight, moved and were moved, a site of contestation wrought in shape-shifting timbers and personal politics, a space where power was shared differently but always unevenly.

Conclusions

Piracy begins with the ship, with the deliberate and forceful appropriation of space afloat. Seditious thoughts, rebellious whispers and violent actions became piracy when they culminated in the taking or attempted taking of a ship. ‘Ships are first and foremost physical objects and artefacts belonging to particular times, places, and cultures’ (Jarvis 2007, 52), and while the act of piracy is deeply infused with symbolic and political meaning (Rediker, 2004), it is, first and foremost, a material manoeuvre. This paper has sought to foreground some of the ways that the pirate ship existed as a real, lived and dynamic space, one crafted by pirates in their own image with their own ends in mind. The ship functioned as a technology of mobility and speed, as a locale for piratical politics and as a space of multiple contestations, and revealing their spatial practices in modifying this space sheds much needed light on their intriguing way of life. The practices of pirates in converting ships to pirate ships have been discussed as a means of demonstrating the inherently unstable nature of
ship space, its mutability. Through this discussion, it has been shown that the pirate ship is a far more complex place, both socially and materially, than is commonly thought. This complexity challenges dominant views of the pirate ship as an inherently radical or anarchic site by allowing for the processual nature of space and mobility, suggesting that social relations were contested and negotiated in an ongoing way, rather than one which is fixed in time and space. Current understandings of the pirate ship – and perhaps many other kinds of ships besides – hold only so far as we can hold space still.

Using records of pirate’s shipboard activities, this paper not only addresses issues in the historiography of piracy, it also begins to address some of the gaps in new mobilities paradigm. As well the need for more consideration of ‘watery mobilities’, there is also a pressing need for ‘a strong sense of historical consciousness’ in mobilities studies (Cresswell 2011, 555). As Ashmore (2013, 1) has also contended, the long-distance or long-term journeying of seafarers, whether as passengers, pilots or pirates, is ‘a form of mobility that has received limited attention in the mobilities literature’. Furthermore, developing our understanding of the historical geographies and mobilities of the sea, ‘necessarily involves thinking also about ships and the spaces on board ships’ (Ryan 2006, 580). This exploration of the mobile and mobilising form of the pirate ship develops these emerging debates, adding a maritime angle and historical perspective to the literature which contributes to our understanding of mobilities as much as it does our understanding of pirates, ships and the seafaring world. As Steinberg (2013, 160) has argued, ‘objects come into being as the move (or unfold) through space and time’, so this focus on mobilities furthers our appreciation of the world of the pirate through an attention to the materialities of their lives afloat. Change and transformation, as Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006, 14) have suggested must be central to our interrogation of materialities, mobilities and space: ‘there is now a growing interest in the ways in which material “stuff” makes up places, and such stuff is always in motion, being assembled and reassembled in changing configurations’. This paper has embraced this challenge and adds to our understanding of just how piracy worked as a mobile, material and spatial practice afloat, showing some of the ways that mobilities theory might be used to further interrogate the mobile worlds of the ship and the seafarer.

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Notes

1. Though the term ‘metamorphosis’ denotes a very specific physical process in the biological sciences, the word also conveys rather neatly the idea of radical material or physical change. The etymology of the word is revealing in this regard, coming from the Greek meaning ‘to transform, change shape’.

2. For a sustained critical discussion of metaphor in relation to notions of space and mobility, see Urry (2000).
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