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The Deadly Voyage of the Allanshaw: Rebellion, Indenture, and Sex Across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans

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[This presentation is a collection of extremely preliminary thoughts on what we in American Studies mean by “agency.” I really look forward to any suggestions and comments on the topic from the other panelists and the audience.]

In the late summer of 1885, the merchant ship *Allanshaw* reached British Guyana after a long voyage, disembarking its six hundred or so Asian Indian indentured immigrants who had come to work in the cane fields. Also going ashore was the vessel's master Captain Frederick Wilson. He headed directly to the local authorities to level a charge of mutiny against two of his crew. No one, not even the accused men, disputed the fact that during the voyage from Calcutta to the Caribbean six sailors had confronted Captain Wilson on his own poop deck, about his unfair punishment of a sixteen-year-old white cabin boy. Not only did most of the men resist his order to leave the poop, but one man, James Smith, struggled with him, causing the captain to

fall at the feet of his subordinates. Almost immediately afterwards a fight ensued between the mutineer Robert Ipson, and the ship's first officer. Captain Wilson reported that both Smith (a white man) and Ipson, a twenty-two year old West Indian: since Ipson had been the most defiant of the mutineers Wilson reserved a particular animosity towards the latter, whom he singled out for the additional charge of rape and manslaughter. The captain alleged that Ipson had sexually assaulted one of the indentured emigrants, a young woman known only as Maharani, resulting in her illness and death by peritonitis days later. In making this accusation the captain had little interest in the life or suffering of Maharani; rather, since the *Allenshaw* was contracted by the Colonial Office to transport the indentured workers, the rape allegation suggested that if Ipson had so little regard for the authority of the master of his ship, then he was more than willing to disobey the rule set down by the Colonial Office that crews on transport ships were not to have any contact with the Asian Indian passengers. According to this logic, by defying traditional shipboard rules, Ipson would also be defying the British Empire. While Wilson's mutiny charges were upheld, the Demarara commission of inquiry set up to investigate the rape and death of Maharani failed to condemn the black sailor, because according to Dr. Edward Hardewick, the man on board in charge of the immigrants' welfare, there was no evidence of violence or forced sexual contact on her body. With the rape dropped Robert Ipson served seven weeks in jail for mutiny, and also had to pay a fine for stealing canvas from fellow sailor. Upon his release, he probably signed up with another ship, heading out to sea once more.

If take away the figure of Maharani, Ipson's story might easily have graced the pages of W. Jeffery Bolster's *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, or Marcus Rediker's *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, historical studies that seek to recuperate in the case of Bolster the largely unknown life of nineteenth-century black sailors, and in the case of Rediker,

the late eighteenth-century sailor as a new kind of proletarian figure, someone who “could be a free and mobile worker in an expansive international economy” (116). According to Rediker there was an “increasingly collective consciousness and activity among seamen” who chose to mutiny. He suggests that the word “strike” “evolved from the decision of British seamen in 1768 to ‘strike’ [that is, to lower] the sails of their vessels, thereby crippling the commerce of the empire’s capital city” (110). Indeed, suggests Rediker, other acts of disobedience at sea such as desertion or theft should be read as deliberate expressions of personal agency among sailors, allowing them to chip away at the supposedly absolute power of the captain. Without the complication of Maharani’s sexual assault, the mutiny onboard the *Allanshaw* suggests a heroic story of a band of multi-racial sailors seeking to protect one their own (in this case the helpless white cabin boy) against the tyranny of management, aka Captain Wilson. [There was also the additional factor that her death translated into a financial and labor loss for the sugar cane plantation owner who had paid for passage.] However, regardless of whether Robert Ipson was or was not a rapist, the ghost of the indentured worker Maharani insistently haunts this otherwise romantic drama of Atlantic male solidarity across race lines, demanding an analysis of not just racial or class dynamics, but also the equally powerful effects of gender relations at sea. What would change about Bolster’s or Rediker’s theses, if they had engaged in a rigorous accounting of the impact of gender (that is, relations between men, as well as relations between men and women) as part of their recovery of the resistant lives of seamen “in the age of sail?”

Both the mutiny on the *Allenshaw* and the alleged rape and subsequent death of Maharani came to public notice in 2002 when Caribbean migration historian Verene A. Shepherd edited and published selected transcripts from the Demarara commission of inquiry set up to investigate Maharani’s alleged rape. Shepherd’s choice of a title, *Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a*

Passage from India to the Caribbean emphasizes her placement of this female indentured worker at the center of a story that in the nineteenth century appeared to be about the interaction of crew and captain aboard an immigrant transport ship. As she rightly observes, it is Maharani as well as Ipson whose character is called into question by the inquiry. Ipson's black body is literally and figuratively on display during the inquiry, but so is Maharani's brown body, as witnesses describe her postures, whether she kept her legs open or closed during her last hours onboard the *Allanshaw*, what fluids she emitted, her level of pain, and even the conditions of her sex organs observed during the autopsy by Edward Hardwicke, the doctor and superintendent in charge of the migrants. By publishing the transcripts Shepherd also focuses attention on "the level of gender-specific exploitation, or, more precisely 'sexploitation' on emigrant ships" (xviii-xix) traveling from India to the British Caribbean. The case of Maharani's death, she argues, brings to light not only the suffering and struggle of women emigrants on board ships such as the *Allanshaw* to achieve some control over their own lives as they attempted to mediate the sexual threat posed by the often polyglot, multiracial crews on the one hand, and their English ships officers on the other. Indeed, the transcripts prove that Maharani's story would never have come to light, had it not been for the actions of two of her ship-board friends, Mohadaya and Moorti, returning indentured workers who each reported hearing Maharani's account of events, complete with a physical description of her assailant, given before she died. These two women were also sexually exploited throughout the voyage; indeed, Moorti herself seemed to have been raped by Dr. Hardwicke. At the same time the testimonies also suggests that both women carefully assessed and maneuvered within the terms of their exploitation so as to gain as much material advantage as they could (for example, cooked food, clean water, cloth, even extra sustenance for accompanying family members).

At the same time, the transcripts illuminate the violently antagonistic relationship among the crew and officers of the *Allanshaw*, articulated through the race, class, and generational hierarchies on the ship, factors which directly determined who had “access” to the women passengers, and who did not. Maharani’s rape and death directly re-contextualizes the *meaning* of freedom of movement and semi-autonomy of the crew, conditions so celebrated by current studies of working class black and white sailors of the early Atlantic world. Her story also reminds us of how the tendency among many scholars to see the Atlantic world as black and white obfuscates the presence of other non-black racial groups moving through this space, as well as the varieties of racialized labor that existed even before the abolition of slavery in the British colonies. This tendency also seems to hide the fact that scholarly arguments about a collective, e.g., “African Americans,” “slaves during the Middle Passage,” or “subjects of the African Diaspora” by default represent male experience, because 1) so little work has been done to theorize the role and experience of women in the Atlantic world; and because 2) the value of gender as an “category of analysis” to quote Joan Scott, has been misunderstood, or else entirely ignored in any number of studies of the so-called Atlantic world. Just as importantly I would argue, Maharani’s story could prove instructive to use as scholars of American Studies and of African Diaspora Studies, in terms of our own tradition of not sufficiently interrogating what we mean by the “agency” of those at the bottom. In an important and illuminating essay entitled “The Intimacies of Four Continents” where she discussed in part the impact of indentured workers from China who were brought to the West Indies at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Lisa Lowe reminds us of “the unspoken intimacies among the colonized”:

There are also the intimacies of captured workers existing together, the proximity and affinity that gave rise to political, sexual, intellectual connections, including subaltern

revolts and uprisings: organizations and rebellions that included the Haitian Revolution, the Louisiana cane works strike of 1887, or the cross-racial alliances that underlay the Cuban struggles for independence from 1895 to 1898. (203)

At the risk of being shot down during the Q & A period after these presentations, I ask: How many times does a sentence similar to Lowe's appear in one form or another in the majority of graduate student papers, dissertations, articles, and monographs addressing "subaltern" populations—especially population of color—in the Americas? What difference would it make to utilize the lessons of Maharani's story to interrogate through the lens of gender analysis these "connections" between the variously oppressed, or intricate mechanism behind these "revolts and uprising?" How might the arguments for agency be affected if we understood the power appropriated by the six mutineers who physically challenged Captain Wilson on his own poop deck sprung from same roots that generated the attack on Maharani?

Any investigation of the incidents aboard the *Allanshaw* must confront the politics of space within what would have been the very tight confines of the vessel. The indentured workers were in the ship's hold, suggesting not only their status as "cargo," (hints of the Middle Passage) but also their relative place in the power structure during the voyage. The crew had their own quarters "before the mast," which for example could not be entered by the ship's engineer, whose place was strictly in the bowels of the ship, close to his equipment. Meanwhile, the Captain and officers were quartered "aft," that is in the area of the ship behind the mast, close to the quarter deck, which in turn, held up the poop deck, the highest part of the ship and the province of the captain, his officers, and any other individuals given special permission to be

there. The crew of the *Allanshaw* was composed of a number of white English sailors; at least five men of African descent including Robert Ipson; as well as a group these crew members referred to only as “Lascars,” namely seaman representing a variety of South Asian ethnicities. Though Lascars were from the Indian Ocean, they had always been well represented among crews in many a ship plying the Atlantic Ocean. For black and white crew members, Lascars as well as the passengers from Calcutta appeared to have represented particular racial “others,” as did the Indian emigrants, who were always referred to by the ethnic slur “Coolie.” The term itself was used to signify not only South Asian labor, but also unskilled labor, which would have been looked down upon by seamen who would have seen themselves within a highly skilled, if working-class, profession, and therefore above the category of mere laborer. However, according to Shepherd, during transport voyages captains and superintendants often placed so-called “repeats”—that is, indentured workers who were making a second or even third trip to the West Indies, in positions of authority, in part because they were more likely to speak English and be aware of the rules governing their lives aboard ship. In the case of the *Allanshaw*, the apparent superiority of the immigrants, in this case specifically the female passengers, enabled them to stand, sit, or sleep on the poop deck, in close proximity to the captain and officers, often accompanied by their children and female relatives from the hold. As the commission of enquiry transcripts reveal, it was widely assumed that these women, Mohadaya and Moorti most prominently among them, were used by the officers for sex, and there was even a rumor among both the crew and the immigrants that Mohadaya herself was “the mistress” of the ship. According to the testimonies of individual sailors, the crew guarded their assigned space jealously, at one point refusing entry to even Captain Wilson, who then had to muster them on the main deck to conduct any business. Given the power assigned to one’s literal location aboard

ship, the action of the six mutineers including Robert Ipson to approach the captain on the poop deck had to have been a calculated move not just to threaten the authority of Captain Wilson, but also the privileges (provided unfairly in their eyes) to the woman immigrants, who were allowed to come and go at will. Everyone testified that Maharani was one of the women allowed on the poop, leading to the rumor she was the favorite of the ship's first mate.

In her introduction to *Mahrani's Misery* Verene Shepherd is careful to note that those in charge of organizing Asian Indian labor were anxious to silence critics strict laws were set in place to protect passengers from the crew during voyages, suggesting that women especially were not to be seen as available commodities for sexual consumption (as had been the case for enslaved African women on the Middle Passage). During the testimony many crew members described the officers on the poop deck "skylarking" with the women, some having them in their cabins, others utilizing the pilot house, a nearby sail locker, and even the charthouse for sexual encounters. More than one seaman also described a kind of "envy" or "jealousy" suffered by the crew against the officers, suggesting that the seamen saw themselves as the equal of their commanders. Crew members black and white especially emphasized their masculine equality with—even superiority over—the officers: According to Warner the sailmaker: "No matter we're a rough crowd, but I believe ever one has the principle of a blood man" (101). But what did manhood mean on the ship? The engineer August Makohl put it more succinctly: if his command of English had allowed him to write to the emigration authorities he said, "I would have asked why we wasn't allowed to come aft on the quarter deck. We weren't allowed to talk with the women. We were always stopped not to do so: and the officers were doing it" (127.) This struggle between "fore" and "aft"—that is, between the sailors and the captain and

officers—surfaced between every comment made during the enquiry concerning or characterizing the women passengers.

Robert Ipson's own testimony is instructive. While he admitted to being "a rough character," as with every other black or white sailor deposed he swore he had had nothing to do with Maharani: "I never spoke to her. I never had a chance. She was always at the [first] mate's door or on the poop"(102). Whether he was the rapist or not, his characterization of Maharani as an agentive subject who kept herself away from any and all the common sailors in favor of a ship's officer suggests his perception of almost a conspiracy among the female passengers to avoid the crew, a perception apparently shared by others who corroborated the story of Maharani's alleged affair with the first mate. Indeed the women were described as "playing" with the officers, as playfully daubing paint on their foreheads, as sitting on male laps, dancing, and banging drums, all while on the poop deck. According to Ipson

Mohadaya was the one the Captain gave his chair to. Moorti was the one the Steward had in his room. Mohadaya is the one the second mate used to have. I have seen the captain and the doctor shoving their hands between a woman's legs and asking "what is this?" and they used to carry a woman into the pilot house. (103)

Ipson's lewd description might say more about his personality as an impulsive trouble maker,, than about whether or not he was the rapist. But implicit in his and the description of many crew members was the women's access to privileges denied the seamen, such as food, given that Captain Wilson, the steward, and the third mate were each accused of cheating sailors of their agreed upon rations. Several crew members also testified that they expected that once the *Allanshaw* arrived in Guyana, the captain and the doctor had planned to report them for sexual

misconduct with the women, and that as a group the seamen had agreed to testify to what they had witnessed on the poop deck.

But then there was still the rape and death of Maharani, and how her ordeal played among the crew themselves. Another West Indian sailor, William Lee, deliberately testified that before Maharani Ipson had already raped the wife of a male passenger. As for the dead woman, Lee testified that on the night of her assault:

On the fore part of the water closet, when I got opposite, I heard a bawling, very low and groaning. I stopped at the capstan and went up and heard the woman say “Salam, salam, he is too big.” These were the words used. I don’t know what they meant. I went up and saw this man Robert Ipson with his hands on her shoulder. It was [Maharani,] the same woman who died. (119)

Lee recounted that from that moment into the following day he had tried to warn Ipson that “if you follow these women you will get yourself in trouble.” According to Lee Ipson’s only reply was “damn her to Hell, she’s big enough to bear it.” Lee then corroborated the rumor that Ipson had not only bragged about the rape afterwards, but that he had dropped his pants before at least two crewmen, arguing that the visible bruising on the head of his penis was evidence of how “tight” Maharani’s vagina had been. Had Ipson gone too far in his shipboard behavior towards the much older Lee, who may have seen him as a threat because of his admittedly impulsive and sometimes wild behavior, suggesting the possible importance of how generation as opposed to simply race may have structured alliances among even the black crew?

This sense of any number of tensions about sexual assault in general arising among the crew, despite (with the exception of Lee and the two who claimed to have seen Ipson's genitals) their public solidarity, is also supported by the story of the cabin boy William Clintworth, whose unfair punishment by Captain Wilson had sparked the mutiny in the first place. On the day of the mutiny Clintworth had accidentally cut an emigrant passenger walking nearby. When questioned by Captain Wilson he lied to save himself, whereupon the captain gave him a physical punishment. It is at this point that Ipson and five other sailors confronted Wilson on the poop deck, arguing for Clintworth's release. This particular part of the story suggests that the six seamen were simply standing up for perhaps the most disenfranchised member of the crew. But what was the nature of his disenfranchisement? In his testimony Captain Wilson offered a throw-away description of Clintworth as "the boy [who] . . . was intimate with the other men and was led away by them" (90). According in the testimony of Ipson and his fellow mutineers Clintworth was considered their "pet," and as their chief entertainment. The sexual exploitation of sailors, especially cabin boys was of course nothing new in the history of shipboard life, and throughout the centuries Britain had issued a variety of laws punishing sodomy with hanging—sometimes of both parties, even if the passive partner had in fact been raped. By the late nineteenth century no one was hanged for having sex with another crewmate, and most ship's masters turned a blind eye to what happened in the crew's quarters. Was Clintworth raped by the older sailors, or was he a consensual partner? If the already faint lines of Maharani's assault is barely visible in the recriminations, accusations, and declarations of the crew during their individual testimonies, Clintworth's own experience and position of victimization is even more invisible. For his part, Clintworth described Ipson and two of his fellow mutineers as "all bad,

but Ipson was the worst.” Then he proceeded to, perhaps in his mind, clinch the fate of someone who may well have been one of his victimizer:

One day Ipson was talking to me and O’Brien, he said, “last night I had a Coolie woman at the [water] closets. Three or four days after he told me the same story. . . He first told me this three days before the woman [Maharani] died and the 2nd time it was after she died. . . . He was never in his bunk at night. He was always walking the deck. He would be there three hours out of four [hours of watch]. . . . He was always swaggering about.”

[To conclude, though I have not had time to discuss the role of the immigrant men in the enquiry, their testimony towards the end of the inquiry play a crucial role—they suggest an alternative story—that Ipson carried Maharani against her will to the crews’ quarters, where she was gang raped by the sailors themselves, and then returned to deck, which might have been what William Lee had seen. This would explain further why most of the sailors agreed to support each other and lay the blame only on the officers and the doctor. Yet, even though the commission actually believed the testimony of the emigrant men, they still saw no merit in the rape charge, because there was no “physical” evidence of trauma on Maharani. (Note that the doctor on the commission disagreed with the verdict, refused to sign the report, and wrote to England of his belief that not only had Maharani been brutally raped by the crew, but also that the officers also guilty of indecent conduct with the other women. Officials in colonial office acknowledged that his was the more convincing conclusion, the original verdict was still upheld.)

So in the case of the tragic incidents aboard the *Allanshaw*, how do we describe the alliances among the “disenfranchised” groups, or for that matter, even what constituted the notion of “disenfranchisement” itself? What were the factors that structured alliances—was it race,

generation, ethnicity, sex, traditional authority, geographic affiliation? Were Lascars involved in the rape of Maharani, or as one sailor suggested, the authorities would sooner blame Atlantic sailors over those of the Indian Ocean? None of the other women on board ship ever suggested they were sexually abused, or that they slept with the officers, perhaps because such silence might have been part of their own self-protection—do we deem this silence a sign of their coercion? Their agency? Their defeat? This paper only touches on the complex events surrounding Maharani, I want to leave you with the following question:

What if, just sometimes, “resistance” and “agency” are arguments we as scholars put forward to comfort ourselves in the face of a highly imperfect, even tragedy-producing intersectionality structuring relationships among the “oppressed?” For those of us who rested on the notion that the Middle Passage was about a struggle between black and white, what do we say to the work of Stephanie Smallwood, who has found new evidence that at very early moments in the transatlantic slave trade, free West Africans traveled on slaves ships to the Americas as armed guards assigned to keep the slaves in line, and that these guards saw themselves aligned with the crew, not with the captives? Is it time to rethink our default arguments for “resistance,” if only to imagine the other possibilities of power obfuscated that don’t quite fit our favorite plot?