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Onboarding

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I enter the ship through the doorway of the fifth-floor lounge for my first introduction to the cruise ship staff. I wear my sporty casual outfit because I know it will match the clean military look most of the workers will have on to greet the onboarding cruise ship guests. Before heading to Miami, I packed several "looks" to wear during this cruise, each designed to enhance the various "roles" I will play this week—lecturer, dinner guest, poolside dancer, or international traveler. Boarding a cruise ship involves a lengthy intake process where scores of locally hired employees examine passports, tag and cart luggage, review credit information, and eventually allow passengers to board the ship. I have just completed that process, skirting through by presenting papers that document my role as a "Destination Lecturer" working with the "Entertainment" staff. At the registration desk, the port staff gave me my ship card, a plastic identification card that keeps track of my spending during the all-inclusive journey. A three-story ramp brings me to the entrance of the ship where I am greeted by smiling servers holding trays with glasses of champagne. They invite me to settle in and explore the ship. I head to my cabin where the housekeeping staff, now serving as porters, will have deposited my heavy bags, turned back the bedsheets, and placed an envelope with work instructions on my desk. I am ready to settle into my temporary job as an onboard specialist offering presentations to passengers. The business of cruising has begun.

The business of cruising is a performance engagement where my own labor as an academic intersects with the labor of staff hired to deliver a vacation experience to a cross-section of middle- to upper-class consumers. All of us are imbedded within a maritime culture where Black and Brown bodies have been historically associated with servitude or enslavement. Because of the persistence of traditional maritime hierarchies, we are expected to participate in what I call "performances of servitude." Many people cruise for leisure or exploration, but few cruise as a Black destination lecturer. I was introduced to the role of destination lecturer when a recruiter from a Florida talent agency contacted me at my university in 2001, asking if I might be interested in working on a cruise ship. They were specifically reaching out to theater

professors because they thought they would be able to provide the kind of "edutainment" labor that cruises require. At first, I was cautious. I had never cruised before, and I wondered why anyone would. I agreed to try it out, and two decades later, that journey has led me to this book. Destination lecturers, as the title implies, provide information about regional histories and cultures, in my case by giving short forty-minute talks, usually during "sea days."[11] In my role, I occupy a liminal position—neither fully paid laborer nor vacationing guest. I receive a free sleeping cabin and free food for sharing my expertise, but my interactions with the guests are moderated and monitored to ensure I am presenting an appropriate persona for the paying travelers. My identity as a Black female academic complicates this role.



Fig. 1 Anita Gonzalez onstage as Destination Lecturer. Credit: Anita Gonzalez.

Cruise ship hierarchies are clear. Black and brown bodies primarily labor in subservient roles—as waiters or housekeeping staff—while higher-level staff members are generally white-presenting managers from Europe or Australia, Canada or the United States. Contemporary cruise hierarchies arise from earlier maritime social structures where Black and brown people prepared food in the kitchen, offloaded barrels at maritime docks, or were cargo transported in the holds of ships. Many continue to work on cruise ships in variations of these roles. Historically, shipowners managed maritime merchant trade from distant locations while a hired captain directly managed the onboard laborers. Within the context of contemporary cruise hierarchies of race, my appearance as a higher-ranking Black woman, an entertainer with brains, is an anomaly. There are usually other Black women on the ship, but most of them will be in the business of serving passengers, not educating them. I also self-identify as a woman, while maritime work has traditionally been performed by men. With few exceptions, navies recruited male conscripts, and oceanic adventures and explorations were conducted by male captains presiding over male crew members. Women traveled primarily as captains' wives or, by the end of the nineteenth century, as privileged passengers seeking respites in exotic settings. Black women were never a part of this maritime landscape. So, when I enter a ship as a destination lecturer, my presence brushes up against historical framings that are both exclusionary and intimidating. Lecturing offers me an opportunity to observe and study the role of others on the ship and consider how past shipping cultures intersect with twenty-first-century paradigms of race and labor. For me and others on the ship, performance serves as a mechanism for functioning within a contained, hierarchical, and very structured entertainment venue. I use performances of intellect and humor to intervene and succeed.

Performance Paradigms

Performance operates within this space on several levels. First, I take on an imaginary role when I cruise, deliberately marketing a character called "Dr. Anita" that simultaneously identifies me as a highly educated Black woman while also somewhat diminishing my academic title by only referencing my first name, similar to the way that plantation owners referred to their enslaved workers by first name only—calling the cooks Betty or Sally instead of Mr. or Miss. "Dr. Anita" also implies that I am somewhat informal, willing to converse with passengers as equals even though I have a PhD. My character is friendly but knowledgeable; always approachable. As an African American who has been educated in public, primarily white universities, I am well schooled in the multiple behavioral codes needed to function within primarily white environments. Doubly conscious sensibilities allow me to easily adapt to the unfamiliarity of the cruise ship ambience. Double consciousness, a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in the 1903 edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*, describes the sensation of feeling as if your identity is divided into several different parts.[2] Adjusting to multiple external expectations

about Black performance is one aspect of living in a doubly conscious way within a work setting.

A secondary way in which performance operates within the cruise ship environment is through performances of servitude. By this I mean that cruise ship workers, following historical precedents, labor on ships in service to a leisure class of passengers who pay to ride the ship for entertainment. Performances of servitude are not unique to cruising—those involved in hotel or restaurant industries also serve and respond to visitors' whims, but the cruise ship is a twenty-four-hour immersive environment where the housekeeping staff is expected to serve continuously and where waiters are always on call. Unlike hotel or restaurant workers, they do not have time away from the ship to recover with their families and then resume their role of servitude. If they are not physically below the waterline and in their cabins, then their performances are ongoing. The historical precedents for divisions between workers and guests, captains and laborers, investors and crewmen are explored throughout this volume.

Finally, certain types of performances on cruise ships are designed and coordinated by cruise operators and managers to provide passengers with ongoing entertainment throughout a cruise journey. Vacationing passengers pay a single, all-inclusive fee to be entertained by staff members like myself who create educational and fun activities to pass time between destinations. Ship activities are "free" in that no money transfers at points of sale or entry, yet the entire cruise experience is monetized through the use of the onboard ship card. Crafted performances range from theatrical entertainments in main-stage venues to impersonations of pirates and mermaids on destination docks, and from shore excursions controlled and managed by cruise operators, to technologically inspired events where passengers listen and dance to playlists provided by crew personnel. Coordinated and crafted performances are imbedded throughout the cruise experience.

The elements of race, performance, and labor intersect in distinctive ways throughout cruise journeys. When traveling as a destination lecturer, I am an unpaid worker performing the role of an educated academic within a space where most of the paid laborers are involved in physical, manual, service work. We are all working for passengers who may themselves be workers escaping their own jobs by taking a cruise vacation. My clientele, depending upon the cruise line, can range from primarily white and middle- or upper-middle-class retirees to working-class teachers and service workers. What performance of leisure and work are each of us enacting as we encounter one another in our common liminal space at sea? Most of the ship's laborers live on the ship, so their work environment is also their home environment. Still, they maintain connections with families on land, or friends whom they may see only when their contract ends or when they are able to take shore leave. Our encounters with one another throughout our journey are crafted to ensure that each move in our dance of entertainer, laborer, passenger, voyager, educator, guest, and servant is managed within unspoken codes of behavior. Some of the codes evolve from norms of service

and hospitality, some from maritime histories, and some from theatrical innovations unique to cruise ship protocols.

Throughout the journey I will be concerned about the efficacy of my performance. By this I mean that as a laborer within this environment I will need to perform in a manner that the cruise personnel deem to be "excellent." Excellent behavior conforms to norms of the maritime trade, including a sense of masculine efficiency based upon militaristic expectations drawn from naval traditions. On higher-priced vessels, men will wear standardized haircuts and women will wear jackets with ties. Service is expected to be crisp, functional rather than friendly. Excellent behavior is evaluated through customer surveys coupled with the observations of the permanent cruise ship staff. All cruise personnel are scored by passengers on a survey distributed at the end of the journey, and passengers rate their vacation experience in all service areas including entertainment. For me, the impact of the ratings is minimal; if my ratings are poor, I won't be able to book another cruise. But for full-time contracted staff, good performance ratings might mean additional shore leave or time off, while bad ratings could mean the loss of a job. Consequently, all laborers are invested in performing roles of service and entertainment excellently. My family trained me to strive for excellence, therefore I tailor my lectures to match the interests of each unique set of passengers, working to find a comfortable balance between education and vacation entertainment.

My specialty is the Caribbean, but there are destination lecturers for ports of call throughout the world. In addition to destination lecturers, many ships also support "special interest" lecturers who speak about topics unrelated to the ship's itinerary. Popular subjects delivered by this category of lecturer include astronomy, nature, celebrities, or world affairs. The ability to entertain is as crucial as the presentation topic, and as a result, talent agencies select only dynamic speakers to place on their ships. This makes cruise ship gigs particularly attractive to those trained in theater or public speaking. Cruisecritic.com author Dan Benedict explains it succinctly: "On a cruise ship, audience members attend lectures out of curiosity and for fun; they don't need to pay attention or take notes in order to pass an exam. They are free to walk out when their interest wanes, and they will—the casino may be only a few steps away, the lido grill is open most of the day, and there are always other activities and options."[33] It makes sense that on cruise ships, lecturers are a part of the entertainment team.

The lecturers complement other "enrichment" positions that differ from cruise line to cruise line. Cruise directors and their entertainment staff have creatively designed positions that run the gamut from expert card player, to "Bridge" experts who talk about landscapes visible from the ship, to "distinguished gents" who dance with single women in club venues. Enrichment offerings change as each cruise line develops it brand. For example, Carnival Cruise Line will have more dance instructors and fewer historical lecturers because their clientele tend to prefer party and sports activities. Cruise lines with more elderly guests will have more academic lectures.

Enrichment staff are not contracted workers on the ship but rather function as temporary workers who cruise for only a week or two. Their only compensation is airfare, complimentary cabin accommodations, and meals. Complementing the enrichment staff volunteers are a paid cohort of "Activity" staff who are under six-month contracts. They work with the cruise director to deliver more high-energy, active events like pool splash parties, dance classes, carnival parades, or Bingo playoffs.

So why do I cruise? There are several reasons. First, cruising allows me to perfect my lecturing skills, because I must communicate my content to an audience who is probably not that interested. They came to vacation. My content must be crafted to effectively engage listeners, a skill I find useful in all presentation venues. Second, I want to learn about perspectives outside of academic bubbles in order to test the relevance of my research and scholarship. Cruise ships, as popular cultural sites, bring me into contact with people I might never meet in my normal social circles. Lecturing on ships allows me to expand my horizons by participating in cultural exchanges with those outside of my comfort zone. There is something about working in a liminal zone where daily routines are forgotten and the traveler is able to reflect upon what it means to be in a nowhere zone between and betwixt the familiar and the unfamiliar. This liminality of place and space, race and labor, home and destination links the experience of sea travel across time. And it is my engagement with this liminal space that has catalyzed my interest in this research and writing this book. When I travel through the Caribbean, where Arawak, Caribe, English, French, Spanish, Dutch, Indian, and Portuguese cultures have shaped encounters, experiences of cultural exchange seem simultaneously pertinent, historical, and performative.

In addition I cruise because as a theater director and producer, I am in awe of the coordination and improvisational skills of the creative artists and management staff who craft entertainment spectacles on board ocean liners. The ship's architecture facilitates entertainment events throughout all areas of the megaship. In some ways, the experience of the cruise ship replicates elements of immersive theater because the entire vessel provides a full-scale, nonstop, alternative environment. James Frieze, in his edited volume *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, establishes that "immersive experiences depend on the creation of an event bubble that excludes the reality of the wider world." Maintaining the experience requires removing referents to reality-based life events.[4] This principle of immersion is particularly apt for cruise ships. Entertainment and hospitality staff design the guests' entire entrance ritual to quickly establish that they are entering an alternative seascape where their needs, and indeed their desires, will be attended to. Frieze writes, "The crux of participatory performance lies not in the object of our attention, what might normally be called the 'content,' but in the ways that our attention is managed, the ways in which our engagement is co-opted *with and as* content."[5] Ostensibly, the intention of a Caribbean cruise is to experience the Caribbean with the ship functioning as the means of transport. Instead, passengers' attention is redirected from destinations to onboard activities; the cruise

industry manages the journey by focusing activities on the ship itself as an immersive entertainment environment. A well-coordinated team collaborates on this trick of redirection. From an economic perspective, one goal of immersing passengers in onboard activities is to keep the money on the ship. Drinks, food, spa treatments, Bingo boards, upgrades, shore excursions, photographs, clothing, artwork—in short, anything and everything is available within a cashless environment managed through internal financial systems, with the cruise ship card documenting all transactions.

The creation of an all-inclusive, commercial fantasy spectacle of this kind is certainly not unique to the cruise ship industry. Theme parks like Disneyland or Universal Studios have deep experience monetizing immersive entertainment experiences. However, on a cruise ship, the experience is even more immersive because the guest cannot simply exit the environment—even the shore excursions are crafted to continue the fantasy of vacation immersion. The experience also has elements of immersive commercial theater: even though the audience's interactions are planned and scripted in immersive commercial theater, guests still make choices about what they want to do and how they want to do it. The ability to re-sort elements of an immersive theatrical experience gives participants a sense of agency as they invent their own expressive response to the environment. Cruise guests can fashion a unique and pleasurable experience for themselves because there are so many options. Ship managers, like Disney executives, do not attempt to re-create actual structures or to simulate authentic experiences. Instead, they use themes and visual references to maritime iconography to create something altogether new. Cruise lines strive to design contemporary experiences while giving a nod to the past. As new lines emerge (like Virgin Voyages),[6] experiences become even more tailored to specific audiences.

Taking codes and cues from these designed environments, guests make daily decisions about how they want to craft the offerings. If guests prefer to immerse themselves in a drinking, fun-in-the-sun fantasy, they can, or they might instead imagine themselves as art connoisseurs, shopping at art auctions or taking classes in glass blowing on the upper deck. Vacationing guests have agency and the ability to construct, resist, recast, and dream within the codes and cues of the fantasy world. Like Disney guests, they "participate far more actively in the onstage experience than many assert."[7] Cruise passengers are able to construct a vacation experience that matches their imagined cruise experience, be it the *Love Boat* or the *Titanic* crossing, but they do it within the theatrical imaginary constructed by the cruise companies' entertainment formula. It is no accident that management offices for Carnival, Norwegian, Royal Caribbean, and Disney cruise lines are all headquartered in Florida, and near Disneyland, where infrastructure for populist fantasy entertainment abounds.[8]

One might think that passengers cruise because they want to see new countries or experience new cultures, but that is seldom the case. Even though cruise companies advertise various destinations in the Caribbean cruises, the ship itself is the mainstay of the experience. Shore stops are brief—usually six to ten hours—and the air-

conditioned vessel is the passengers' home base. Many passengers never leave the ship at all, preferring to eat and take advantage of amenities they find on board instead of venturing out into the hot and chaotic experiences they might find in the ports. For those who do disembark, the primary draws are frequently the same—sun, beach, and shopping. Any distinctive cultural aspects of each port are brought to life only through the storytelling of the destination lecturer and the expertise of local islanders if passengers choose to pay for a cultural shore excursion. Within this context, the role of the destination lecturer becomes essential in fulfilling passengers' perception that they have actually traveled somewhere other than the container ship and its ancillary shore excursions. The passenger experience of the twenty-first-century cruise vacationer is meticulously managed, differing considerably from earlier centuries when boarding a ship was a fraught, risky necessity. Crew workers who support these leisure travelers encounter a different set of challenges.

Shipboard work has changed substantially across the centuries. Maritime historians differentiate between sailors connected to the military (naval seamen) and those involved in shipping goods (merchant seamen). Modern cruise ships evolved from merchant ships that moved goods from place to place. Seen as another form of freight, passengers are merchandise and the vessel of the cruise ship operates as a contained mobile environment for transporting them through oceanic landscapes. The cruise ship needs workers, thousands of them, in order to fulfill its function as a mobile transport unit filled with hotel, dining, and entertainment options. All workers live below deck; only some of them come to the upper decks to interact with passengers and service their needs. Others stay below deck to work in the kitchen or the laundry or with the engineering staff and remain effectively invisible to passengers. Workers who do interact with passengers are trained to interact in a performative and functional manner. By this I mean that cruise ship workers specialize in performing an attitude of service and responsiveness that differs considerably from what one might expect on a different type of vessel. On a naval vessel, crew members respond to military hierarchies with an imperative of defending the nation. On a cargo ship, workers manage the weight and load of their goods especially when moving across waters known to be treacherous, such as the Great Lakes or the Cape of Good Hope. However, on cruise ships, work demeanors are similar to those employed in the hospitality and service industries. Consequently, micro performances—small acts of service and servility—impact how passengers experience the all-inclusive cruise experience.

For example, when I enter the ship and arrive at my cabin, a member of the housekeeping staff will introduce themselves, ask how and when I would like for my bed to be made, and offer to get me ice or water. At first, it's disconcerting; I have never had a butler before. This deliberate first moment establishes that the staff member is at my service and ready to accommodate my every need. I mark this moment as a performative moment of servitude where the housekeeper and I establish how we will relate to one another. If I were a normal passenger, I would

simply say "thank you" and begin to unpack. But I am actually a fellow crew member, albeit temporarily. So, I usually say thank you, and mention that I am a destination lecturer delivering programming for the ship. The housekeeper may already know this, because on many cruises my cabin is located just behind the door that separates the crew from the passengers. It's a borderline space where I receive upgraded services including wine and chocolates, while simultaneously functioning as a worker. Nevertheless, the two of us move through a choreography of service and introduction as we explore the boundaries of our now-nebulous roles of worker and passenger. Once the housekeeper leaves, I unpack and arrange my traveling dressing room.

Even though my accommodations are comparatively luxurious for a crew member, it's still a pretty small space, somewhere between 170 and 240 square feet. Once I close the cabin door, I settle in to prepare for my meeting with the cruise director who manages the entertainment staff. We will discuss timing and venues for my lectures after the ship sets sail; my plan is to discuss each of the Caribbean destinations through the lens of music, dance, and cultural studies, explaining the unique cultural mixing—Indigenous, African, European, and Asian—that characterizes the Americas. This approach to lecture content allows me to link history with folklore and tourism, and to raise awareness about how historical subjugation impacts the very landscape the travelers will move through, even if they have no interaction with Caribbean people during their journey. As cruise passengers, they may encounter more Caribbean islanders in their dining room than they do on their shore excursions.

Diversity and Internationalism

During my time on board, I will interact with an international set of crew members who come from the Caribbean, the Philippines, Greece, the United Kingdom, India, and Australia, as well as other nations. Collectively, their experiences represent a broad swath of cultures and class locations. They are working in a fairly secure job where room and board is provided, and consequently are able to save their wages and, for many who have families, send support back home. Most travel with six-month contracts, yet many have worked on cruises for years, even decades. Most paying passengers will never learn much about the men and women who serve them and guide the ship through the Caribbean waters. The workers are a "motley crew" who create an immersive onboard atmosphere of leisure. The experience of working on board a ship connects me to histories of others who have traveled this way, other workers who traveled seas and oceans within a multicultural environment. Some were lured by the promise of experiencing new destinations; most were trying to earn money through employment in the primary transportation industry of their era. Workers on cruise ships generally come from economically challenged countries and hope to advance their social and political circumstances by leaving homelands, often located in the Global South, for lucrative employment within the cruise industry. Through their work on international waters, they learn how to strategize success

alongside international crew members from other cultures. I'm interested in how performative interactions within the contained work environment of ships (past and present) transfers knowledge across these cultural communities.

On the ship, I watch, and participate in, micro performances of cultural engagement throughout the journey. The West Indian housekeeper encounters the Filipino food service worker. They meet and greet in the hallways of the ship, and while the common language is English, their native languages are different so they use gestures to augment their conversations. Their nonverbal communications and the knowledges they transmit are instructive, and different jobs hold differing statuses within the social ecosystem of the ship. Coworkers, through onboard interactions, participate in what Dorinne Kondo calls "the complex dance of domination and counter-domination, of approaching and drawing back."[9] Through a process of interactions with different national or ethnic communities, crew members shape themselves and their identities for what will be future cultural adaptations. This back-and-forth of cultural adaptation is something I've also witnessed in my university work, whenever I orchestrate exchange programs with students or artists seeking to communicate across cultures in foreign countries. For a maritime worker who has service skills and but limited access to social mobility, the stakes of cultural exchange are even greater. While cultural exchange certainly happens in land-based communities, the unique circumstances of traveling in a modified container ship for extended periods of time with workers from various cultures amplifies the tone and intensity of the exchanges. Learning cultural fluency allows workers employed by international enterprises to advance economically as they educate themselves about diverse cultural paradigms.

Shipping companies have been practicing segregation based on ethnicity since the globalization of the seafarer market starting in the 1970s. According to an International Labor Organization report, "the composition of the multinational crew is the result of clear policy and not chance."[10] On the one hand, cruise lines pride themselves on the international and multicultural identities of the crew and staff members. Passengers can experience the diversity of the world through their interactions with entertainment and service staff. On the other hand, there is a troubling tendency to replicate hierarchical identities, where male seafarers from the Global North dominate senior officer positions, while those from the Global South are lower-level staff members.[11] The majority of seafarers are recruited by crew agencies in their countries of origin. "White-collar" crew positions, like hotel lead staff, cruise directors, and destination lecturers, tend to be direct hires.

Front-facing staff on higher-end Caribbean and European cruises tend to be American, Canadian, or European—white faces to make the primarily white guests feel comfortable. Services like the spa require intimate contact and spa staff tend to have strong English skills and come from the Global North. Workers who staff specialized small-scale entertainment areas (e.g., glass blowing, art auctions, wine tasting), are also usually white. Below deck, Asian workers and Black workers are employed in food

preparation, laundry, and housekeeping. Engineering staff tends to be Greek or Italian because of their historical dominance in the shipping industry.[12] In general, people from developing countries occupy the lower positions, and employees from similar ethnic groups tend to work together. About 80 percent of the staff is male with women occupying more service-oriented positions.[13]

Because cruise ship companies recruit internationally, they can hire cheap workers while avoiding legal restrictions. They cut financial corners much like the captains of earlier centuries who scrimped on sailor's uniforms and rations.[14] The industry justifies its use of international labor by promoting the internationality of crew members. Management insists that each staff member's name tag must bear their country of origin and invite guests to chat with the workers about their home countries. Ester Ellen Trees Bolt and Conrad Lashley, two researchers specializing in hospitality on cruise ships, have written extensively about crew members' perceptions of their work environment. They explain how making and maintaining friendships on board is somewhat fraught and crew members from the same country tend to stick together: "Different ways of greeting, behaviours, language and impressions were seen to be interesting to employees working on board a cruise ship. However, crew members seemed to be acting more sensitively to others, to find out what approach is expected from others in order to gain mutual respect."[15]

The authors interviewed workers who were attempting to communicate across language boundaries, and who were confused about tasks and frequently had to demonstrate with embodied gestures. The performative use of gestures to explain tasks is typical of crosscultural communication. Inherent in such communication is disjuncture—moments when meanings are muddled or communication is incomplete. Some crew members admitted they were racist and disliked working with crew members of other ethnicities. "Most of the utility Galley are Caribbeans. So, but, if they see one Philippines in the area they take care more about him. But if it is Caribbeans they just don't care about that. (Interview 3, Galley employee, Nicaragua, male)."[16]

I received similar observations in speaking with entertainment performers about how they interact with other staff members. One Black dancer described how, when eating in the officers' dining room, the Russians and Croatians would exit the dining room because they did not want to be around other Black entertainers. Nonverbal cues and informal microaggressions help crew members to understand where and how they are to interact with other nationalities while working on the ship.

The past informs the present and it is useful to look back to the era when global sea traffic on merchant sailing and steamships peaked. Across the long nineteenth century, sea workers, migrants, the enslaved, and leisure passengers traveled across ocean waters to establish themselves in new destinations. Their interactions in vessels and ports created contested social hierarchies where, ultimately, new class structures were negotiated. Within this process, acquiring information about new locations was essential for success and, indeed, survival. Musicologist and maritime historian James Revell Carr writes: "The sea for the nineteenth-century world was what the Internet is

for the world today, a seemingly boundless communication network that transmitted information, commerce, news, maps, art, music, literature and the like from person to person, across great distances."[17] For sailors, the maritime network allowed crew members to learn from one another about how to navigate culture and employment. Crews that were diverse could better educate one another about how to navigate challenges of social mobility.

Archives document the labor activities of these multicultural crews in images and ledgers. As merchant trading expanded during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to include new goods—cotton, sugar, wood from the Americas, and enslaved Africans—more workers were needed first to support sailing ships, and, later, steamers. Some voyagers sought new opportunities in the "New World," but many were merely mobile workers performing tasks like cleaning or carpentry that they could have done on shore. However, working at sea—traveling across maritime highways with a diverse set of laborers—enabled exchanges of innovative practices and survival strategies in ways that doing the same job on shore could not. Much of this communication network flowed across nonliterate bodies, bodies that utilized gestures, songs, and chants to unite with unfamiliar foreigners around common tasks. Performances, quotidian and embodied, were, in this context, a way of establishing dialogue with strangers. In a nineteenth-century merchant ship, a white New England barrel maker might sleep within inches of a Black steward charged with gutting chickens to feed the workers. Thus, cultural and social worlds collided for extended periods as workers, laboring under the control of the captain, moved across ocean waters.

It is difficult to access the perspectives of disempowered laborers by relying on written narrative. Literary writings that document histories of the underclass, and particularly the Black or ethnic underclass, describe their activities through a racialized lens usually tainted with Euro-American cultural and class bias; however, viewing these histories through the lenses of dance studies, folklore, and musicology somewhat illuminates underclass epistemologies. I draw upon methodologies from these fields to access information about how merchant seamen interacted with one another, methodologies that include the analysis of cultural expressions depicted in historical images, examinations of merchant trade logs, and tracing musical traditions documented in song lyrics and popular performance practice. Unfortunately, the historical, theatrical, and maritime archives in England and the United States yield only a few images of ethnic communities working on merchant vessels.



Figure 2 Workers on a merchant ship bound for Australia. Seafarers career papers of Hugh Thomas of Port Dinorwic, c. 1888–1897. Courtesy of the Merseyside Maritime Museum

One of the rare images shows the crew of the *Moel Ellian*, a packet or merchant cargo ship that traveled between England and Australia during the late nineteenth century (*see* Fig. 2). I'm struck by the way in which the working men gather on the deck of the sailing vessel posing for the crew portrait. Each of them wears a distinctive hat, defined by their personal taste or, perhaps, their ethnic community. With their arms crossed, the subjects pose facing the camera. The captain sits down in front, perched on a seat, his status marked by his casual hands and rough-hewn suit. The others who wear suits are probably mates who assist the captain with navigation. The ropes and rigging surrounding the men are symbols of their watery occupation. For me, this photograph represents the enigma and challenge of the maritime world. How did men from such varied ethnic and national backgrounds come to live and amuse themselves together for extended periods? How did they translate and share experiences? How did they accommodate one another? What was the theatricality of their daily encounters?

The "motley crew" of the nineteenth century operated within an expansive network of transatlantic and transpacific commerce routes. The merchant trade industry drew (and continues to draw) from international communities. Shipping networks included many ethnicities who moved through even more culturally complex shore cultures. The notion of a "motley crew" infuses imaginations about the world of maritime travel. What actually happens when men crowd together on a wooden ship for months at a time seeking a better life? I sit in my stateroom on the cruise ship wondering what it would have been like to sail while Black during the nineteenth century. Because I am a theater professor, I am most familiar with the Black stewards of the African Grove Theatre who worked for packet ship lines running between New York, Liverpool, and the Caribbean. Their story captures one aspect of migration and social mobility.

Black Stewards

The African Grove Theatre, touted as the first African American theater company in the United States, was founded by free Black stewards who shipped out of New York City during the early nineteenth century. Their history drew me into this investigation of how free Black seamen found employment by serving others on transatlantic journeys.

> Nearly half a century ago—in 1816–17, to wit—there sailed from the port of New York, in one of the Liverpool packets, as steward thereof, a tall black man named Brown. He belonged to the class which, at that time, and for years afterward, even to the present day, occupied a respectable and responsible position. The steward was then, next to the captain, the most important personage on the ship. Dressed in his brilliant-colored morning-gown and red slippers, he was wont to receive passengers with "stately courtesy," which was duly reciprocated by those who went down to the sea in ships. The stewards of the different lines of packets vied with each other in their style on board ship, and in their private houses. They were all colored, and sailed to every port at home, or abroad—Liverpool, Canon, Bremen. Charleston, New Orleans, Savannah, &c.[18]

This passage, written by Thomas Hamilton in the January 1860 issue of the *Anglo-African*, describes the colored freeman and seaman named William Brown who founded the African Grove Theatre in 1821. William Brown was a retired ship steward and his main actor, James Hewlett, worked as a tailor and a steward on the Liverpool packet ships, vessels that transported mail and passengers between New York and Liverpool. Brown likely relocated to New York City from the Caribbean, sailing up the

Gulf Stream to settle within a community of free African American and Caribbean domestic workers. There, he established a summer entertainment garden that offered weekend entertainment to the free Black working class. The history of the African Grove players highlights how maritime migrations contributed to the movement of ideas across transnational ethnic communities. Actors in this company, which operated during the height of slavery, performed works by Shakespeare, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and other European playwrights as well as new work about Caribbean politics. The African Grove's original play *The Drama of King Shotaway* described a revolution on St. Vincent Island led by Indigenous leader Joseph Chatoyer.

The creation of this play is significant because it captures a history of rebellion embedded in the story of the Garífuna or Black Caribe communities. When a slave ship wrecked off the coast of Honduras, the survivors intermarried with local Caribe Indigenous communities, forming a unique Garífuna nation. The Garífuna fought against the British for their freedom and were eventually exiled to the coasts of Honduras and Belize. Their multilingual communities contributed greatly to Afro-Caribbean expressive cultural forms that may have informed the original production of *King Shotaway*.[19] When I cruise through the British Caribbean, I can see the lasting impact of the Black Caribe uprising because contemporary Garífuna cultures extend from the coast of Nicaragua, across the island of Roatán, and on to Honduras and Belize. Cruise ship guests are exposed to Garífuna cultures through island tours and folkloric exhibitions where they observe traditional *punta* dancing, food products using the native cassava plant, and hand-carved dugout canoes. Garífuna cultures are one of the few Black ethnic communities in the Americas to maintain their traditional language. Their expatriate communities extend to New York, California, and other sections of the United States.

In 1821, the African Grove players incorporated histories of the Garífuna into their performance repertory to document the history of the rebellion and perhaps to celebrate the nobility and diversity of African American experiences. Because the African Grove players worked both on land and on ships, they were able to share and compare experiences in England, the Caribbean, and the United States. Indeed, the coastal sea currents would have directly propelled the merchant sea trade along this route making exchanges of information facile. Consequently, the social encounters of Black seamen working the maritime routes extended beyond what they would have experienced living solely in the United States as members of racially marked cultural communities. James Hewlett, for example, the lead actor from the company, built a career as both an active steward and an up-and-coming actor. He used his skills as an entrepreneur to market his Shakespearean performances in New York City, Liverpool, and Trinidad. Historian Marvin McAllister maintains: "Hewlett refused to concede his career to the historical accident of being born black … and decided to create opportunities and representational freedom in a less culturally restrictive locale."[20] Working on ships enabled him to subsidize his passion for acting while exposing him to cultures and fashions of the Caribbean and the United Kingdom.[21]

Other members of the African Grove players also participated in transatlantic economies by working as stewards, cooks, or able-bodied seamen on ships. Most learned on the job or through word of mouth, but there was a seaman training program at the African Free School in New York City that included navigation and cartography.[22] Stewards were basically servants; they served the captain and his mates by cleaning cabins, helping with dressing and laundry, repairing clothing, and serving meals. The cook served meals to all the seamen, working round the clock to provide viable rations to an often-surly crew. Even though African American men occupied these subservient roles, it is likely that they used their proximity to the main cabin to advance their knowledge of cultural practices and global events. The materiality of the ship, and the architecture of the vessel itself, demonstrate how the stewards and cooks could closely observe the captain at work. In order to serve the captain, the steward, especially on passenger voyages, would need to sleep in a crude berth on the upper deck. It was within this space that stewards would spend their time serving. Rendered largely invisible by their race and social status, they were nevertheless privy to intimate conversations of officers and first-class travelers. Like the African American Pullman porters of the early twentieth century who used their proximity to passengers on railway lines to develop intellectual networks,[23] stewards on packet ships used their access to upper-class cabins to their advantage.

[…] Men who worked on whalers in many ways exemplified the motley crew—they came from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Native Americans were active in the industry[24] and African Americans appear in photos and lithographs[25] depicting whale captures. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*[26] offers a remarkably accurate account of life on this type of vessel. Because of their relatively small crew and the extended amount of time crew members spent together, the culture of the whale ship was less hierarchical. This sense of equality would have appealed to African American seamen seeking respite from the violent and racially polarized social life of the early nineteenth century United States.

Even though sailing while Black in the nineteenth century was lucrative, it was also undoubtedly fraught. Free African Americans needed multiple skills to survive during a time period where slavery knocked on the doorstep of every Black individual. For those who chose to work at sea, situations in ports varied considerably. Mid-Atlantic and New England ports in the United States—Salem, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York—had communities of free Blacks that could provide services to itinerant sailors. In these communities, boarding houses accommodated domestic workers of all industries. Churches and entertainment centers like the African Grove were social meccas where news and gossip fueled social activism.[27] Some ports, like those in the Caribbean, were suited for information exchange across nationalities, and social life within these ports required multilingual skills. For example, a New Orleans port in the 1700s would have been an international French province. After the Louisiana Purchase, however, landing there would have been dangerous for a free Black sailor working as either a cook or a steward.

Even enslaved Blacks would sometimes take advantage of variable port environments to escape. One of the most renowned maritime escapes is Frederick Douglass's departure from the shipyards of Baltimore using borrowed papers from a free African American seaman. Douglass worked as a caulker[28] and acquired a knowledge of sailor vocabulary, which made his assumed identity credible. He writes in his autobiography about how he managed to realize his escape. "I had one friend—a sailor—who owned a sailor's protection, which answered somewhat the purpose of free papers—describing his person and certifying to the fact that he was a free American sailor. The instrument had at its head the American eagle, which at once gave it the appearance of an authorized document."[29] The narrative of his departure demonstrates how working at sea offered a somewhat liminal space for contested Black identities. W. Jeffrey Bolster succinctly sums this up: "He succeeded that September day in 1838 largely because free Black seamen were then so common as to cause few second looks."[30] Sailing while Black in the nineteenth century meant negotiating a racial construct that was fluid and relative. Crew lists record people of color as *black, mulatto, colored, brown, dark, very dark*, and so forth. Since maritime waters cover multiple nations and postcolonial ports, cultural definitions of race varied widely. Black in one port was brown in another, colored in another, and so on. While these records are confusing to the researcher, they were undoubtedly advantageous to the Black traveling mariner.

On the one hand, as political and social systems shifted, Black sailors were able to literally navigate themselves away from one port and into a more favorable territory, albeit at the loss of familial or friendship circles. On the other hand, the dangers of the waters complicated life for Black sailors as much as any other Jack Tar.[31] Notices of drownings include mentions of colored stewards along with everyone else. The *Norfolk Beacon* of 1827 describes how the schooner *Xenophon,* coming from Havana and carrying sugar, coffee, oranges, and sweetmeats, was lost off the coast of an inlet. The crew was stranded on the ship for twelve hours. During that time five men, all colored, including the cook and steward John C. Williams, took account of the incident.[32] On another voyage a colored steward, John Taylor II, was not so lucky. *The Evening Post* of 1824 reports how he accidentally fell off the wharf in Savannah and drowned.[33] Considering the role of the steward during the early part of the nineteenth century provides context for the African Grove players. William Alexander Brown, who managed the enterprise, was financially successful and settled down after international travels. His theater, which lasted for three years, marked a high time for free Black seamen. The entrepreneurial skills of the free Black working-class domestics allowed them to achieve some degree of notoriety and freedom both on land and at sea. Imagine how shifting identities and perceptions of self-worth might impact a man's choice of work environments. Black seamen made strategic choices, carefully weighing the dangers of being at sea against the dangers of being Black onshore.

The contemporary cruise ship's version of the steward is the housekeeping staff. On Caribbean cruises, most of the housekeeping staff members are Black.

Housekeeping staff are responsible for the upkeep of each passenger's cabin during their time of occupancy and each worker manages about twenty cabins—changing bedding, filling ice buckets, picking up discarded clothing, and rearranging bedding for "turndown" service. Their presence is part of the performance of service hospitality essential to the leisure cruise experience. On the cruise lines where I lecture, many of the housekeeping staff are from the Caribbean. Consequently, their knowledge of both the passengers and the islands we travel to is acute. When possible, I tend to check in with the housekeeping staff about the ship's journey to keep myself up to date on new developments at the various ports.

On one engagement, as I settled into my cabin, a male member of the housekeeping staff entered with a name tag that read "Edward—St Vincent." St. Vincent, as mentioned earlier, is where the Black Carib nation helped to fight against the British. Noting his name tag, I mentioned to Edward that today my lecture would mention St. Vincent and I asked if he had ever heard of the African Grove. With a hint of exasperation, he said "no" and turned away. Perhaps he was annoyed that I would mention his country of origin when all he was trying to do was bring in the water. The efficacy of his service depended upon him servicing a large set of cabins in a very short amount of time during a long port day. But I wanted to chat. I asked Edward if he knew about a play called *The Drama of King Shotaway*, a play some historical African Americans wrote about a rebellion in his home country. With a bit of an eye roll and a hint of surprise Edward responded, "Shotaway?" he asked, "Do you mean Chatoyer?" "I guess …" I responded. Now I would get my comeuppance from Edward. "His name is Chatoyer, and everyone knows him. He is a very famous king who fought the British. His statues are all over the place on my island." I sat subdued. While the story of King Shotaway sits as a footnote in European-focused theater history books, this maritime worker, this modern-day steward, was deeply connected to histories of intercultural knowledge. This transference of knowledge has long been a part of the way in which laboring communities explain presence across waterways that have transported them as enslaved, as immigrants, and as performers. Histories of resistance especially resonate within a contained labor setting. As Edward travels across ocean waters, his knowledge about his island and its history intersects with multiple stories shared by multiple service workers about their homes and their communities. This is a core component of the maritime world: the ability to exchange histories and broaden cultural competencies through work.

Notes

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[1] Sea days are times when the ship is not at port. Because most of the passengers are on board, with nothing to do but explore the ship, the majority of entertainment activities are scheduled for sea days.

[2] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Bantam, 1903), 8.

[3] Dan Benedict, "So You Want to Be a Cruise Ship Lecturer?" *Cruise Critic*, January 8, 2020, https://www.cruisecritic.co.uk/articles/so-you-want-to-be-a-cruise-ship-lecturer

[4] James Frieze, editor, *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

[5] Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, 23.

[6] "Welcome to Virgin Voyages," Virgin Voyages (Virgin Cruises Intermediate), www.virginvoyages.com.

[7] Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 14.

[8] "Cruise Lines, Cruise Lines Industry Association, 2023, https://cruising.org/en/cruise-lines

[9] Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 24.

[10] Denys Bulikov, May 2009.

[11] Christine B. N. Chin, "Labour Flexibilization at Sea: Mini United Nations Crew on Cruise Ship," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10, no. 1 (2008): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740701747584

[12] Jess Peterson, "The 10 Kinds of Nationality in the Cruise Industry," *Medium*, blog, July 29, 2016, https://medium.com/@jesspeterson/the-10-kinds-of-nationality-in-the-cruise-industry-450ebfdac165

[13] Ester Ellen Trees Bolt and Conrad Lashley, "All at Sea: Insights into Crew Work Experiences on a Cruise Liner," *Research in Hospitality Management* 5, no. 2 (2015): 199–206, https://doi.org/10.1080/22243534.2015.11828345

[14] Maria Borovnic, "Seafarers: The Force That Moves the Global Economy," in *The Routledge Handbook of Ocean Space*, ed. Kimberley A. Peters, Jon Anderson, Andrew Davies, and Philip Steinberg (Routledge, 2022), 149.

[15] Bolt and Lashley, "All at Sea: Insights into Crew Work Experiences on a Cruise Liner," 204.

[16] Bolt and Lashley, "All at Sea: Insights into Crew Work Experiences on a Cruise Liner," 205.

[17] James Revell Carr, *Hawaiian Music in Motion: Mariners, Missionaries, and Minstrels* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

[18] Thomas Hamilton, "Ira Aldridge," *Afro-American* magazine, January 1860.

[19] Tomás Alberto Ávila, *Black Caribs—Garifuna: Saint Vincent's Exiled People and the Roots of Garifuna: A Historical Compilation* (Milenio Publishing, 2008).

[20] Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 177.

[21] Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Harvard University Press, 2002). White writes extensively about James Hewlett, the African Grove Theatre, and the quest for freedom within the free Black New York City community. His book uniquely uses storytelling as a methodology for unpacking how individuals mobilized their freedom to ensure their success in a society where slavery was present, but freedom and agency were achievable.

[22] Anna Mae Duane and Thomas Thurston, "The History of the School," n.d., https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/history/curriculum.html

[23] Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (Macmillan, 2004). Tye writes about how southern Black porters working on luxurious sleeping cars were able to move from bondage to secure positions in the Black middle class where they created an intellectual culture of activists and political leaders.

[24] Michael Sokolow, *Charles Benson, Mariner of Color in the Age of Sail* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

[25] "New York Daily Advertiser," *New York Daily Advertiser*, 1820.

[26] See W. Jeffrey Bolster, "'Every Inch a Man': Gender in the Lives of African American Seamen, 1800–1860," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920*, ed. Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling (Johns Hopkins University Press 1996), 152.

[27] Alex Roland, W. Jeffrey Bolster, and Alexander Keysaar, *The Way of the Ship: America's Maritime History Reenvisioned, 1600–2000* (Wiley, 2007), 69– 81. These three maritime historians write extensively about the importance of coastal shipping in the formation of American identity because it led to the development of small businesses that helped to establish the United States as an independent trading entity.

[28] John Bull, "Letterbook Of Capt. John Bull, Falmouth Packet Service," *Letterbook Of Capt. John Bull, Falmouth Packet Service* (1800).

[29] J. Welles Henderson and Rodney P. Carlisle, in *Marine Art & Antiques: Jack Tar; a Sailor's Life 1750–1910* (Antique Collectors' Club, 1999), 65.

[30] Bolster, "'Every Inch a Man': Gender in the Lives of African American Seamen, 1800–1860," 139.

[31] "Jack Tar" is the generic name used to describe the common sailor. It refers to the tar used by sailors to seal the seams in wooden boats. The term is derogatory because it alludes to the dirtiness of both the job and the person.

[32] John C. Williams, *New York Spectator*, 1827, 2.

[33] *Evening Post*, 1824, 3.

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