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“Nothing but Noyse”

The Political Complexities of English Maritime and Colonial Soundscapes

Johan Heinsen

An early modern ship—large, hollow, and made of wood—in many ways resembled a giant resonator. Its noises resounded within the colonial and maritime soundscape. They produced dissonances. The sounds that the maritime lower classes produced with their tongues led the captains and officers to consider members of these classes as savage as the colonial others. Attention to the perception by maritime authorities of such a soundscape and especially their descriptions of certain forms of speech as “noise,” complicates histories of colonial lower-class subjects and the politics of their tongues.

In the study of colonial pasts, aural metaphors such as noise, dissonance, and silence are often employed by historians and theorists to signify or deconstruct the discourses of difference between colonizer and colonized. Being perhaps the most pronounced example, postcolonial and subaltern historiographies have rigorously asserted that colonialism and its dominant narratives constituted a sort of “silencing machine” effacing the voice of the colonized.¹ Hence, aural metaphors have become a staple of studies concerned with the lines of exclusion that defined early modern empires. Recently, the study of colonialism has become complicated by a wide array of attempts to show how European expansion also involved the exploitation and silencing of lower-class Europeans—such as sailors, convicts, and indentured servants.² These attempts owe much to Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh’s pathbreaking study of the “hidden history” of lower-class radicalism and resistance in the Atlantic.³ Within this line of thought, historians have perceived the ship—an essential agent of both capitalism and colonialism—as a type of factory, built upon the exploitation of labor, which in turn produced hitherto overlooked solidarities and traditions of resistance. Through the exploration of the maritime soundscape, this article asks how such conflicts were also conflicts about sound and speech. This complicates the link between speech and experience that is either explicitly or implicitly present in studies of maritime resistance.

The argument presented here explores the ship as a world of sound and the place of its lower classes within the extended colonial soundscapes. This is done by drawing upon a wide range of studies in colonial and maritime history as well as on travel accounts. The article engages predominantly with the Anglophone Atlantic, though it also includes examples from several other European empires. This survey will demonstrate how the sailor inhabited an ambivalent place between self and other. He lived aboard ships, which signified both the triumph of empire and potentially threatening aural spaces in themselves. Having outlined this, the article turns to a specific body of writing—English long-distance

travel narratives from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—in order to explore how sailors were conceived of as making “noise.” Such descriptions worked anxiously toward silencing maritime lower-class subjects by delineating what the sailor was able to articulate on the basis of his social position. Hence, the sailor was thought by his superiors unable to speak politically, as the government of the ship was separated from that which experience (his work) had taught him.

The Maritime Soundscape and the Sailor as “Other”

Ships were worlds of sound. In his collections of writings by English seafarers in the late sixteenth century, Richard Hakluyt included many passages that described the great “noyse” that any port-residing contemporary would have known well. Such noises read as triumphant:

The shippes hereupon discharge their Ordinance, and shoot off their pieces after the maner of warre, and of the sea, insomuch that the tops of the hilles sounded therewith, the valleys and the waters gave an Eccho, and the Mariners, they shouted in such sort, that the skie rang againe with the noyse thereof. One stoode in the poope of the ship, and by his gesture bids farewell to his friendes in the best maner hee could. Another walkes upon the hatches, another climbs the shrowds, another stand upon the maine yard, and another in the top of the shippe. To be short, it was a very triumph (after a sort) in all respects to the beholders.⁴

In another passage, the ships in a fleet hailed each other in “a ceremonie done solemnly, and in verie good order, with sound of Trumpets and noyse of cheerefull voyces: and in such sort performed as was no small encouragement.”⁵ As the maritime soundscape greeted the reader, it signified the triumph that Hakluyt’s seminal monoliths celebrated and encouraged—a narrative of maritime subjects organized to conquer the world. When the crew ran to their designated places, the ship constituted a harmonious success to the outsider. The noise of the choir of sailors and the guns signaled such unity. It was a loud triumphant sound of a well-orchestrated community—a recognizable self, ready to meet the other.⁶

The English were especially known for such audible acts of salutation. A Danish traveler described this in his narrative of voyages in the early 1670s. Upon meeting an English ship, the Danes were greeted “three times with a happy and jubilant scream so that it tickled our ears. . . . Our captain who was familiar with this maritime tradition had already commanded our people to show them the same honor so they climbed [the ropes] and yelled just as crazily.”⁷

Such noises were associated with the customs and discipline of war. Mid-eighteenth-century circumnavigator Richard Walter described the positive effect of marching sailors and their “shouts and clamours”: “The huzza’s, I say, of this spirited detachment, joined with the noise of their drums, and favored by the night, had augmented their numbers, in the opinion of the enemy, to at least three hundred.”⁸ Noise could be a useful aid.

In fact, all early modern European navies used music and sound for a wide variety of purposes. Drummers and trumpeters were a regular fixture on both war and merchant ships

and performed an array of functions. In many navies, visits from prominent guests required rolling drums.⁹ An Icelandic traveler described the visit of a Russian aboard a warship in the early seventeenth century as accompanied by four “trumpeters” playing trumpets, horns, and various string instruments “with great art.”¹⁰ Music and cannons were also used when ships passed each other.¹¹ The world of sound aboard ship was part of the workings of diplomacy. Such sounds also helped secure the ship in other important ways. If a squadron was caught in a fog they could use “sound and noise by drumme, trumpet, horne, gunne, or otherwise means, that the ships may come as nigh together, as by safetie and good order they may.”¹² They served other practical purposes as well. In many Atlantic port cities, authorities used drums when ships departed to signal that the crew needed to embark. Gun or cannon fire were used ritually during burials at sea.¹³

Music might also have served entertainment purposes. The articles of the pirate Bart Roberts suggest that pirates kept trumpeters, who got Sundays off.¹⁴ British naval historian N. A. M. Rodger concludes, “Music and dancing were part of life in wardroom and mess throughout the Navy. . . . Some ships had bands of a sort, and privateers used music to help recruitment.”¹⁵ A Danish naval officer remarked that “music and play on board is a wonderful means of encouraging and mitigating the in many ways painful and hard service. It cheers the men up and makes them forget their hard labour.”¹⁶ Pirates and naval officers were two distinctly different (even opposed) social groups, but each seems to have delighted in music. Plain singing was also common. In his famous study of the mutiny on the *Bounty*, historical anthropologist Greg Dening underscored how singing accompanied work and brought the crew together.¹⁷ This was a common practice throughout European navies. Songs even transgressed borders. Danish mariners often sang songs borrowed from their Dutch colleagues when in need of a song befitting of a specific task.¹⁸ Like music, singing also helped keep the crew content. A Danish traveler aboard a naval vessel described how, during especially tiresome tasks, officers encouraged the sailors to sing in order to keep them from complaining: “And so they sang a couple of ballads during the work, but the most part of them complained of the dryness of their throats.”¹⁹ Religious songs as well as prayer were fixtures of life at sea.²⁰ On many such occasions, the ship’s bell called mariners to service. All the major seafaring nations produced hymn books specifically for mariners.²¹

In all these various functions, sound, music, and song served ritual and even ceremonial purposes. Greg Dening has underlined how “ceremony enplots relationships in unambivalent spaces.”²² In all the examples cited above, the ship exists in such an unambivalent mode. However, the ship and all its many sounds could also make for uneasy spaces. Other more jarring sounds often supplanted loud triumphant noises or harmonious singing. The scientist Frederik von Haven described the frightful sounds he heard aboard the ship as it “worked” in bad weather. He detailed the “groaning and roaring which this causes in the timber as well as by the cannons” and anxiously remarked, “It seems that the planks and the beams want to snap from each other. The cannons whine and howl and seem to want to tear themselves loose. . . . This makes for a most discomforting music and a terrible alarm down in the ship. In the middle of the ship is the mast tree doing its work and making a peculiar tumult.”²³ In its worrisome materiality—signaled by its noises—the ship was a disconcerting space. Other outsiders convey similar unease in resonant ways. French mathematician Amédée-François Frézier remarked,

The Tediousness of so long a Stay, the Sharpness of the Winter, then well advanc'd, the Wind, the Cold, and the Rain, which I must be expos'd to every other four Hours, during the Watches we kept alternatively Day and Night without Interruption, according to the Custom of the Sea; and the Inconveniency of a Merchantship, in which a Man scarce knew where to bestow himself, began to make me sensible to the Hardships of a Sailor's Life, and how opposite it was to that Quiet and Retiredness which are requisite for Study and Meditation, my greatest Delights ashore.²⁴

To such learned men, the ship itself was a place that did not belong to the civilized self. It distinctly lacked "quiet" in all the aural and social meanings of the term.

To many contemporaries, sailors' voices sounded in ways that befitted life in such an alien and noisy space. The problem was often one of politics and what we might call "dissonance."²⁵ This term signifies the lack of difference among people. The ship itself was perceived by authorities to be a space dependent upon difference that was to displace any politics. The commissions granted to captains delegated sovereignty to punish anyone stepping out of bounds.²⁶ Greg Denning has phrased this displacement succinctly: "There is a commonsensical character to institutions of discipline that says they can have no politics, no negotiating power within them. The fact of their necessity fills them with natural, even universal, signs. They have, it is supposed, their own intrinsic logic."²⁷ Hence, the stark realities of shipboard life and its hierarchical relations demanded that inherent differences between people were to be taken as a fact. Dissonance was what happened when such a demand and the signs of difference imposed by it were contested. As applies to the consonance of notes in music, the order of the ship rested upon that which were perceived as stable intervals between its parties. Dissonance was the instability that happened when such a system no longer dictated social relations on the ship.

Descriptions of displeasing sounds were an intrinsic part of even early colonial writing.²⁸ Within the confused soundscape of colonialism, full of what John Smith called "hellish notes and screeches," we find the ship and its dubious community.²⁹ In his writings, Smith equated the sailor with the noisy savage. Like many travel writers, Smith equated "Souldiers, Sailers, and Salvages" in his description of a cacophony of unruly subalterns.³⁰

In his attempt to replicate the voyage of Francis Drake, Sir Richard Hawkins heard sailors speaking in various disorderly ways. His narrative of his voyage represented a kind of instructional text to help captains interpret the signals of a murmuring shipboard community. What Hawkins feared most was "idle navigations"—the long uneventful time aboard ship when the tongue would employ itself in telling stories and become "possessed with imaginations" that might eventually lead to mutiny.³¹ He likened the on-board community to the hydra. The only way to counter its monstrous voice was to use historical examples, such as those provided by Hakluyt's collections, to teach the community of their ancestors' "patience, silence, and suffering."³² This is a logic of identity (teaching subjects who they are through the use of the past as example) and difference (naturalizing the social hierarchy).

Hawkins was not the only maritime authority fearing empty time.³³ Maritime historian Peter Earle remarks that during long and tedious voyages, captains would make up work to keep sailors employed.³⁴ However, in spite of such precautions, sailors were gregarious and loud people. Hawkins's contemporary Sir William Monson advised,

If any under your Command in that Ship shall be a common Swearer, Blasphemer, Railer, Drunkard, Pilferer, or Sleep at his Watch, or make Noise, and not betake himself to his Place of Rest after the Watch is set, or shall not keep his Cabin cleanly, or be discontented with his Proportion of Victuals, or shall spoil and waste them, or any other necessary Provision for the Ship, or shall commit any Insolency or Disorder, sitting by you to be corrected, you are to Punish them according to the Order and Custom of the Sea.³⁵

The equivalence between actual noises and disorderly speech is telling. In both instances, the sailor was to be silenced by the law, and the ship should be a well-governed economy of sounds, silences, and authoritarian words: “The Next Care of a General is to give Instructions to his Captains, in as brief and plain a manner as he can, that no Ambiguities may arise.” Should the tongue run its harmfully disruptive ways, Monson went as far as to devise a remedy fit for the crime: “to Gagge or Scrape their Tongues for Blasphemy or Swearing: This will tame the most Rude and Savage People in the World.”³⁶ For Monson, sailors were true barbarians.

Further exploration of the sailor’s part in the colonial soundscape could follow many different itineraries. There are similar histories of the dissonances of maritime communities outside the Anglophone Atlantic. In his comprehensive study of blasphemy in Western Europe, Alain Cabantous includes sailors among the groups that were seen as emblematic swearers. He notes that the link between blasphemy and ships might be due to the consequences that such foul language might have entailed aboard ship. Not only could blasphemy provoke God’s punishment, it was also seen to be potentially upsetting the social order of the ship itself by igniting “simmering disgruntlement.”³⁷ Spanish maritime historian Pablo Pérez-Mallaina identified attempts to rule the tongues of Spanish seafarers in the colonial fleets, while Javier Villa-Flores found sailors to be among the chief blasphemers in colonial Mexico, where blasphemy was linked to a “mobile culture of work.”³⁸ South African historian Nigel Penn has studied life aboard Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (United East India Company, VOC) vessels rounding the Cape and found sailors to be anxiously associated with foul language countered only by psalms and prayer.³⁹ A perhaps less well-known example of maritime conflicts involving sounds and problematic speech derives from the much smaller Danish Atlantic empire, whose first decades were marked by authorities’ anxieties over language that often involved sailors. One incident is particularly striking. The first ship that set off to colonize the island of St. Thomas in 1671 erupted into conflict as the sailors refused to come to service when the ship’s bell rang. The solution was to displace their noises with more prayers and psalms. The governor-to-be imposed severe punishment on any speech that he interpreted as unruly or mutinous. Still, he complained rigorously about blasphemous language in long letters to Copenhagen. However, once the sailors had left him and his colonists (continually fighting over language) in the Caribbean and ventured back to Denmark, they took their revenge and spread stories about the young colony as being “worse than Barbary.” This meant that Copenhageners dreaded the colony for decades, hampering the growth of the fledgling empire.⁴⁰

In the Anglophone Atlantic from c. 1670 to 1750, captains and other travelers often relied upon the term *noise* to mark disorderly and noisy speech as sound distinct from speech.⁴¹ The deployment of the term *noise* appears in narratives of extraordinarily long

voyages and frequently deals with issues of mutiny and piracy. Several, though not all, of the narratives are well known to maritime historians, as they have figured as valuable sources about life at sea.⁴² Much less is understood about the political logic behind the frequent descriptions of noisy lower-class subjects and what this reveals about maritime conflict and traditions of resistance.

Voyage Narratives and the Noises on the Deck

During the last decades of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth century, at the time when English piracy in the Caribbean and the Atlantic peaked, narratives about long-distance voyages proliferated. These writings form a complex and heavily layered tradition full of intertextual references to the writings of other travelers. They are often concerned with intricate portrayals of the exotic locations observed and targeted at readers and even scientists in Europe, while simultaneously acting as instructional texts to be carried along on future voyages. In the latter function, they had important precedents and relied on a form familiar to readers of older narratives of long-distance voyaging, such as those collected by Hakluyt or written by Hawkins—as manuals on how to constitute worlds of harmonious sounds and silences. These writings implicitly and sometimes even explicitly situate themselves as interventions in the soundscapes of ships. They anxiously attempt to ward off the politics that ships were to be voided of, but which continued to unsettle the maritime soundscape.⁴³

Privateer Captain Woodes Rogers, author of an authoritarian account of his circumnavigation, applied the term *noise* to nature at its wildest, such as the famous sea lions at Juan Fernandez: “I struck the Point into his Breast, and wounded him all the three times he made at me, which forc’d him at last to retire with an ugly Noise, snarling and shewing his long Teeth at me out of the water.”⁴⁴ Thus, the long-distance voyage narratives of the time were firmly within the tradition of othering through descriptions of noise.⁴⁵ However, “noise” was also employed to describe the circulation of certain stories about piracy among the maritime classes. Describing the Cape of Good Hope, he remarked, “I spoke with an English and an Irish-man, who had been several Years with the Madagascar Pirates, but were now pardoned, and allowed to settle here: They told me, that those miserable Wretches, who had made such a Noise in the World, were now dwindled to 60 or 70, most of them very poor and despicable, even to the Natives, among whom they had married.”⁴⁶ He went on to describe the need to destroy such pirate strongholds, as they were “a Temptation for loose stragling Fellows.” What he feared was, in part, that such places which “scarce deserve to be mentioned” had become myths circulating among sailors wishing to emulate the pirates. Such circulation constituted a noise. Rogers sought to counter it by telling the “true” story. In addition, he demonstrated how corporeal punishment could be used to produce “quiet” among the sailors who might be tempted by the words circulating among them. Thus, with explicit reference to such a strategy of silencing, he describes the punishment of a sailor named Peter Clark—“an ill abusive Fellow”—whose crime was exactly such a noise as “he had wished himself aboard a Pirate.”⁴⁷

Such instructions on how to produce “quiet” fill the narrative of another privateer, Captain Nathaniel Uring. Like Rogers, Uring associated “noise” with the colonial

soundscape, as in his descriptions of the sounds of Tunis: “Their musick is the worst I ever heard in any country, except Guinea; tho’ it appears some of them are Lovers of Noise.”⁴⁸ In other places, he attributes “a most fearful Noise” to a group of Indians, “several of them speaking at the same Time.”⁴⁹ Yet, to Uring the ship itself was also tainted by such “hideous” sounds, which were linked to piracy as a threat emanating from the speech on the deck. Like Rogers, he portrayed corporeal punishment as the only way to produce “quiet.” He described how, in a mutiny that had made him wary that his people might “turn Pirates,” he summoned his crew and struck a supposed conspirator until “seeing Blood run plentifully about his Ears.” This brutality seems to have made other sailors in the community open their mouths, yet this only causes Uring to subject them to the same treatment. Such passages read as a moment of triumph for Uring’s silencing law: “This put an End to the Spokesmen, not another Man daring to open his Mouth.”⁵⁰

In his famed narrative, Rogers’s pilot and famous explorer William Dampier often seems to suggest that one would be better off among Indians than among sailors, owing to their distinctly more pleasing soundscape:

And they are withal the quietest and civilest People that I did ever meet with. I could never perceive them to be angry with one another. I have admired to see 20 or 30 Boats aboard our Ship at a time, and yet no difference among them; but all civil and quiet, endeavouring to help each other on occasion: No noise, nor appearance of distaste: and although sometimes cross Accidents would happen, which might have set other Men together by the Ears, yet they were not moved by them. Sometimes they will also drink freely, and warm themselves with their Drink; yet neither then could I ever perceive them out of Humour.⁵¹

Dampier’s narrative leaves no question that the “other Men” were the crews of ships. Mutinous speech is described as “noise.” In the unpublished manuscript version of Dampier’s narrative, the crew becomes unruly when seditious words are “once noysed.”⁵² Dampier later found himself in the position of commander. In this role he would, ironically, be accused by his officers of not distancing himself properly from “noise.” In a court-martial, his lieutenant, George Fisher, described Dampier’s insufficiently authoritarian handling of mutinous tongues: “[Dampier] answered as before, that he would send them [two mutineers] ashore when the shipp was upon Saileing, and not before, to avoid a Noise; Notwithstanding which, they being his Old Acquaintance, he carried them to sea.”⁵³

Other captains also had problems countering noise. Slave trader William Snelgrave was betrayed by his own crew as they joined pirates off the African Gold Coast. Snelgrave would use the narrative of his time among pirates to show “the Humours and Temper of [this] sort of People.”⁵⁴ The barbarisms of the pirates were to be experienced with one’s ears: “Moreover, the execrable Oaths and Blasphemies, I heard among the Ship’s Company, shock’d me to such a degree, that in Hell itself I thought there could not be worse; for tho many Seafaring Men are given to Swearing and taking God’s Name in vain, yet I could not have imagined, human Nature could ever so far degenerate, as to talk in the manner those abandoned Wretches did.”⁵⁵ Snelgrave also equates the sailors with the slaves in the hold, who were also capable of producing “great noise.”⁵⁶ A similar story was penned by another pirate captive, Philip Ashton Jr., who was taken by pirates around the same time as Snelgrave, and who describes the soundscape as equally tormenting: “prodigious drinking,

monstrous cursing and swearing, hideous blasphemies, and open defiance of heaven, and contempt of Hell itself was the constant employment, unless when sleep something abated the noise and revelings.”⁵⁷ His description evoked the typical captivity narrative—a genre that usually portrayed Europeans, captive among non-Europeans, confronting the threat of cultural and religious difference. In Ashton’s narrative, this fear is transposed onto the pirate ship, where Ashton finds himself able to heroically resist his captors’ intent of making him succumb to the ways of the pirates.

Voyage narratives provided a varied array of instructions on how to counter the threatening noise of the decks. Captain George Shelvocke (traveling with Rogers’s narrative on board) strikingly describes the common sailors as issuing “fore-castle conversation.” Shelvocke then shows how such “noise” made even an officer of his “dead to all the civilities I had continually heap’d upon him, and [who] now . . . prefer’d the mean despicable familiarity of the common sailors, to any thing he could see in the great cabin.”⁵⁸ This is the paradoxical crime of the noisy sailor: telling stories that worked to erase difference and hierarchy—in this example turned into a spatial hierarchy distinguishing the “fore-castle” and the “great cabin.” Shelvocke might write off the words of sailors as “needless tautologies, insignificant expressions, incoherency, and dull confusion,” but he demonstrated how such articulations carried the potential to completely unsettle the order of the ship-board community.⁵⁹ The ultimate threat was mutiny. Shelvocke describes mutinous language as “noise”: “But as this must be carried by a majority of votes, according to their own Articles, they assembled before my tent to debate this matter, which they did in a noisy clamorous manner on both sides.”⁶⁰ Such noise would render the social body foreign to itself by manifesting as an equality of speech, ignoring the markers of difference and the imperative of silence. For captains, the term *noise* represented a political problem of voices speaking out of turn—a break within a social order in which some sounds represented “speech” while others were merely “noise.”

As remarked by Jacques Rancière, “the disorder of politics is strictly identical to a disorder of knowledge.”⁶¹ Nowhere is this equivalence more clearly felt than in supercargo Richard Simson’s unpublished account of his Pacific voyage under John Strong in 1689–90. He describes the challenges faced by the crew when reaching the Pacific: “There it was one might have observed what mettall our men were of.”⁶² What Simson heard from the deck was the manifestation of difference expressing itself as a limitation. In certain situations, the inherent ability (or lack thereof) of men would emerge. The character of this limitation was fundamental and would emerge despite the sailors’ pretending to be capable of taking part in the government of their own worlds and despite the extent to which their tongues would cause them to be “possessed with imaginations”:

I had occasion to observe, that excepting that which Men call Business, that is, what they are well versed in, in [which] they have served, and about which they have been conversant, the most part of their Life, the rest of the acting of some Men amount to nothing but noyse, . . . by this they are acted, but when any thing of considerable concern comes in their way, tho of common Interest, y[et] being a thing in which they have not labo[r]ued (such as [coun]sell and foresight) they seem to be at a palpable loss.⁶³

The “noyse” of the maritime soundscape is the result of the impossible attempt to break the link between the speaker’s inherent social and political inferiority and the speaker’s tongue.

It marks a threshold that the sailors might attempt to cross, but which they ultimately cannot cross. We may see this as an attempt to ward off a certain politics in which the sailors appropriated a language that authorities saw as exterior to the social world of their subjects. Hence, “noyse” signals a paradox: the (faulty) “speech” of those who did not possess such an ability. Like so much colonial discourse, this demarcation reads like a feverish act of what Rancière calls “policing”—an act “that puts bodies in their place and their role according to their ‘properties,’ . . . The principle of this kind of being-together is simple: it gives to each the part that is his due according to the evidence of what he is.”⁶⁴ This principle enables a taxonomy of difference: “The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned a name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.”⁶⁵

Hence, maritime power relations were predicated upon the idea of a distribution of ability that the tongue could never overcome. This distribution of speech was a very real mechanism within the ship, as evidenced by the many stories of tongues being punished to put them back in place.⁶⁶

“Noise” was tied to the emergence of an excess of speech dislocated from the authoritarian conception of the social body. This excess was expressed in several related ways by Simson’s contemporaries. Another recurring portrayal depicted such moments of shipboard discourse as “pretend.” What was spoken by mutinous sailors could not be the truth because it was spoken by subjects who did not know the world they sought to appropriate. Instead, it was to be understood as a kind of dangerous play in which the parties claimed to know it. Nowhere was the paradoxical character of this crime expressed more succinctly than in a narrative of a mutiny among a pirate crew in early 1681 at Juan Fernandez in the Pacific, in which an officer of the expedition remarked, “A party of the disaffected to Captain Sharp got ashore and subscribed a Paper to make John Watling Commander, pretending liberty to a free election as they termed it, and that Watling had it by vote.”⁶⁷ Here, lower-class subjects proved dangerously able to accomplish something that was ruled out by authoritarian logic. Hence, their appearance as political actors took the form of a misappropriation of language, as they were “pretending” that their voices had the ability to speak. The distancing framing phrase “as they termed it” closed off what seemed to be a dangerous appropriation of political forms, signaled by the term *liberty* and the dangerously anarchic *free election*. Other voyagers would complain of similar crimes against a reserved political language and terms such as *justice*.⁶⁸ Such appropriations were also often accomplished by the refrain “as they termed it.”⁶⁹ Similar to the “noise” demarcated by Simson, such framings nervously warned readers not to be tricked by what masked itself as political speech spoken by those who could not know such language.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The wooden ship resonated with sounds. Some signaled the triumph of European expansion, while others signaled the ambivalences inherent to the project. Central to such concerns were the tongues of sailors and the sounds they uttered. Often conceived as blasphemous or

outright rebellious, sailors spoke in ways that repeatedly unsettled the maritime soundscape. This anxiety marked all European maritime empires, both large and small.

The political logic behind such assertions of the noisy sailor tied speech to experience, creating a threshold that the sailor was perceived to be unable to cross. Paradoxically, the writings asserting such a threshold often read as instructions on how to keep the common sailor from the conceptually impossible act of crossing it. Such is the case in the long-distance voyage narratives studied in some detail here. In these, we hear the sailor contributing to the maritime and colonial soundscape. Whether they are authoritarian instructions on how to impose a silencing law ritual or captivity narratives detailing how to keep one's civility among such barbarous tongues, the writings of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries conceive of the sailor's voice in a paradoxical manner: as both inert and somehow too powerful. The noise of the sailors was both to be discarded as inherently nonsensical and to be fought vehemently as deeply dangerous. Such ambivalences characterize the conception of the sailor's ability of speech as being limited by his social position and the experiences it offered him—while at the same time being linked to fears that the sailor's tongue was able to conjure up “imagination” and “pretend liberty.” The formula “nothing but noise” therefore resonates with unease.

This article has worked to explore the political logic inherent in the maritime soundscape and its dissonances. The complexities of this soundscape present a certain challenge to histories of maritime resistance. At its heart is a contradiction that should not be ignored. The employment of the term *noise* studied here points to the way in which the ability of speech was tightly linked to class, work, and experience in the discourses of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authorities. At the same time, conflicts of the maritime soundscape were to some extent also conflicts in which the sailors spoke out of place, appropriating speech in an open-ended struggle over language itself. If we are to fully appreciate the ways in which antagonisms shaped early modern colonialism, we must therefore, from time to time, allow for a break in the tight symmetry of exploitation and expression that social histories of resistance traditionally rest upon. This break might allow historical agents to speak what cannot otherwise be deduced from their place within a social division of bodies, places, words and actions; in other words, we must allow for a conception of dissonance (that uncertain collapse of proper intervals) as an issue of relevance in history.

Notes

1. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Other emblematic studies within this tradition using aural metaphors include Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45–85; Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313; Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Encounters in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1–58.

2. A host of the researchers working toward this goal contributed to Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus, and Marcus Rediker, eds., *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and more recently in the 2013 special issue of *International Review of Social History* entitled “Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution: A Global Survey.” Aside from these two valuable collections, many other relevant examples can be cited. I would consider the following to be the most important in the context of maritime studies. Julius S. Scott’s *The Common Wind* (unpublished PhD dissertation, 1986) broke new ground in its study of black sailors in the maritime Caribbean. Niklas Frykman has conducted a fascinating study of radicalism in European navies, summarized in the article “Seamen on Late Eighteenth-Century European Warships,” *International Review of Social History* 54 (2009): 67–93. Isaac Curtis’s promising ongoing work on networks and connections among Caribbean lower classes is briefly presented in “Masterless People: Maroons, Pirates, and Commoners,” in *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephanie Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 149–63. While most studies in this tradition have focused on the Atlantic, several important works have considered issues of conflicts involving sailors in the Indian Ocean. These include Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class, and “White Subalternity” in Colonial India* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Blackswan, 2009); and Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
3. Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000). See also Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004); and to a lesser extent Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007).
4. Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 12 vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1903–5), 2:244–45.
5. *Ibid.*, 4:242.
6. In one passage, this constitution of a surface through sound becomes reflexive. When his distressed community comes under threat from locals while preparing their homeward voyage, a captain devised a strategy to make his men seem stronger than they were: “He would make all his men whole & sound to make a great noyse with knocking stickes, stones, hammers, and other things together” (*ibid.*, 8:248).
7. Johan Petri Cortemünde, *Dagbog fra en ostindiefart 1672–75 (Diary of an East India Voyage 1672–75)* (Helsinki, Denmark: Handels og Søfartsmuseet, 1953), 53. Translations of titles are my own.
8. Richard Walker, *A Voyage Round the World*, 3rd ed. (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1748), 269.
9. Jakob Seerup, *Søetaten i 1700-tallet: Organisation, personel og dagligdag i 1700-tallets danske flåde (The Navy in the Eighteenth Century: Organization, Personnel, and Daily Life in the Danish Navy of the Eighteenth Century)* (Copenhagen: Copenhagen University, 2010), 305.
10. Jon Olafsson, *Jon Olafssons oplevelser som bøsseskytte under Christian IV (Jon Olafsson’s Experiences as an Artillerist under Christian IV’s Reign)* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1905), 133.
11. Seerup, *Søetaten*, 308.

12. Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations*, 2:376.
13. On slave ships, music was sometimes used when the sailors brought the slaves on deck for daily exercise. The spectacle was often referred to as “dancing.” See Rediker, *Slave Ship*, 237–38.
14. Daniel Defoe, *A General History of the Pyrates* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), 212.
15. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986), 44.
16. Quoted from Jakob Seerup, “Community on Danish Warships in the 18th Century” (paper presented at the conference, “Community and the Sea in the Age of Sail,” Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark, April 23–24, 2012).
17. Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh’s Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 57.
18. Quoted from Seerup, *Søetaten*, 338.
19. Frederik von Haven, *Min sundheds forliis: Frederik Christian von Havens rejsejournal fra den Arabiske rejse 1760–1763* (*The Wreck of My Health: The Travel Journal of Frederik Christian von Haven from the Arabien Voyage 1760–1763*) (Copenhagen, Vandkunsten, 2005), 69.
20. Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaina, *Spain’s Men of the Sea: Daily Life on the Indies Fleets in the Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 238.
21. Seerup, *Søetaten*, 342.
22. Dening, *Mr Bligh’s Bad Language*, 27.
23. von Haven, *Sundheds*, 75–76.
24. Amédée-François Frézier, *A Voyage to the South-Sea and along the Coasts of Chili and Peru, In the Years 1712, 1713, and 1714* (London: Jonah Bowyer, 1717), 2.
25. This meaning of the term might not be entirely anachronistic. In the English translation (1603) of Montaigne’s well-known comparison between Native American societies and Plato’s utopia we find a conception of “dissonance” that is worth careful consideration: “The very words that import lying falsehood, treason, dissimulation, covetousnes, envie, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them [the Indians]. How dissonant would hee [Plato] finde his imaginary commonwealth from this perfection?” Plato’s utopia, referred to by Montaigne, was an organic community without politics. It was one in which the lack of a proper foundation or beginning, as made manifest in the contingent and political words spoken on the agora, was displaced by the monologue of the philosopher-king who knew the truth and founded community in the reserved logos of true authority. By way of comparison, Montaigne’s remark would then suggest that even such an apolitical order contains the scandalous words of politics—treason, dissimulation, detraction, and so on. Without buying into Montaigne’s myths about noble savagery, we can, with this apt reminder, stake out the contours of a research agenda: to explore how even those orders that claim to be void of politics contain dissonance. See Michaell de Montaigne, *The Essayes: Or Morall, Politike, and Millitaire Discourses of Lo: Michaell de Montaigne* (London: Edward Blount Montaigne, 1603), 102.
26. Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the East India Company* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 52–54.
27. Dening, *Mr Bligh’s Bad Language*, 132.
28. Historian of sound Bruce R. Smith has suggested that elites in the period had a “pronounced distrust of non-verbal sounds.” Such sounds marked a line between the barbarity and civility, which “became ever more apparent as colonial expansion and voyages of conquest placed the strategic boundary between civility and barbarity ever farther away in

- geographical space—and made the people on the other side of the boundary ever more remote.” See Bruce R. Smith, “Tuning into London c. 1600,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (New York: Berg, 2003), 127–35.
29. Cited from Neil Rennie, *Far-Fetched Facts: The Literature of Travel and the Idea of the South Seas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 26.
 30. John Smith, “A Map of Virginia. With a Description of the Countrey, The Commodities, People, Government and Religion,” in *The Jamestown Voyages under the First Charter 1606–1609*, ed. Philip L. Barbour, 2 vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1969), 2:417.
 31. Richard Hawkins, *The Observations of Sir Richard Hawkins, Knight, in His Voyage into the South Sea*, reprinted in *The Hawkins’ Voyages during the Reigns of Henry VII, Queen Elizabeth, and James I* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1878), 220. *We find the specter of idle tongues in many places, including the writings of pirates. The editor of the pirate Basil Ringrose praised his author because of his difference from such tongues: “At the same time making Quadrants at Sea, that others sate idle and murmuring upon the Decks.” See Basil Ringrose, “Preface to the Reader,” in *Bucaniers of America. The Second Volume* (London: William Crooke, 1685).*
 32. Hawkins, *Observations*, 220.
 33. An example of this is found in preacher John Flavel’s spiritual instructions to sailors. He ironically remarked, “Friends, Providence oftentimes confines many of you together within the narrow limits of a Ship, where you have time enough, and if your hearts were sanctified, many choice advantages of edifying one another.” However, according to Flavel, such discourse was absent from the deck where a good man might instead find himself confined within “a little Hell.” John Flavel, *Navigation Spiritualiz’d: Or, A New Compass for Seamen. The Fourth Edition* (London: M. Fabian, 1698), 21–22.
 34. Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen 1650–1775* (London: Methuen, 1998), 74–75.
 35. Sir William Monson, “Sir William Monson’s Naval Tracts: In Six Books,” in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels, Some Now First Printed from Original Manuscripts*, ed. Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill (London: Awnsham and Churchill, 1734), 3:333.
 36. *Ibid.*, 3:330–31.
 37. Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 84–85.
 38. Javier Villa-Flores, *Dangerous Speech: A Social History of Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006), 58; Pérez-Mallaina, *Spain’s Men*, 154.
 39. Nigel Penn, “The Voyage Out: Peter Kolb and VOC Voyages to the Cape,” in Pybus and Rediker, *Many Middle Passages*, 72–91. In the close study of a particular mutiny aboard a VOC vessel, historian Nigel Worden has found that blasphemy played a key part. See Nigel Worden, “‘Below the Line the Devil Reigns’: Death and Dissent aboard a VOC vessel,” *South African Historical Journal* 61, no. 4 (2009): 702–30.
 40. “Landets protokol” (“Minutes of the Country”), 484, p. 1, West India and Guinea Company Archive, Danish National Archive, Copenhagen; Brevkopibog (Copybook of letters), 41, p. 328, West India and Guinea Company Archive, Danish National Archive, Copenhagen. In a Danish context, the fear of the tongues of the maritime classes ranges back at least to the 1620s when the Danish King was forced to submit the wives of sailors to the harsh laws of the Copenhagen dockyard, as they had become known to brandish harsh words at other social groups.
 41. This is a somewhat imprecise term, as several of these voyages went beyond the Atlantic in a strict geographical sense.

42. As an example, both Uring and Rogers are quoted throughout Rediker's writings.
43. There has been some scholarly debate of the way in which these and similar texts portray shipboard politics. In his otherwise nuanced study of voyage narratives as examples of travel writings, Carl Thompson has argued that the serial, "unreflective" logbook qualities of many long-distance voyage narratives render them ambivalent, as the power of captains (from whose perspective they were most often written) reads as excessive. Carl Thompson, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 123–24. I believe such reading is only possible from the vantage point of a highly abstract and ahistorical reader. Seventeenth- or eighteenth-century readers would have expected the power of a captain to border on absolutism and considered violence a part of the working of both truth and law. Other studies have argued that these voyage narratives are anything but unreflective. Jonathan Lamb has argued for the Hobbesian undercurrent within many such narratives; Jonathan Lamb, *Preserving the Self in the South Seas 1680–1840* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). Even more convincingly, in a recent study, Richard Frohock has drawn attention to the intense focus of voyage narratives and especially those dealing with encounters with pirates on questions of voice and speech acts; Richard Frohock, *Buccaneers and Privateers: The Story of the English Sea Rover 1675–1725* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012). Frohock's study deduces much of the politics of such narratives, but his focus on their literary character seems to prevent him from considering an important context in which such attention to speech was crucial: the voyaging ship itself. Hence, I would argue that we should read the aural politics of such narratives as tied directly to the antagonisms of shipboard life, as they were written to help the reader (such as captains of ships) interpret and prevent dissonances. I argued extensively for this interpretation in my PhD thesis, "Intet andet end støj" ("Nothing but Noise") (Aalborg University, Aalborg, 2013).
44. Woodes Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage round the World: First to the South-Seas, Thence to the East-Indies, and Homewards by the Cape of Good Hope* (London: A. Bell, 1712), 265–66.
45. In a similar vein, his contemporary Lionel Wafer described the "otherness" of colonial experiences through their unpleasant aural component: "the Croaking of Frogs and Toads, the humming of Moskito's or Gnats, and the hissing or shrieking of Snakes and other Insects, loud and unpleasant; some like the quacking of Ducks." See Lionel Wafer, *A New Voyage and Descriptions of the Isthmus of America* (Cleveland, OH: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1903), 94.
46. Rogers, *Cruising Voyage*, 419.
47. Ibid., 280.
48. Nathaniel Uring, *A History of the Voyages and Travels of Capt. Nathaniel Uring* (London: J. Peele, 1726), 282.
49. Ibid., 133.
50. Ibid., 261.
51. William Dampier, *A New Voyage round the World* (London: James Knapton, 1697), 433.
52. William Dampier, "Dampier's Adventure in Darien, Etc.," c. 1695, Sloane ms. 3236, British Library, 190.
53. "Courts-Martial," in *Dampier's Voyages*, ed. John Masefield, 2 vols. (London: E. Grant Richards, 1906), 2:597.
54. William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea, and the Slave-Trade* (London: James, John, and Paul Knapton, 1734), 212.
55. Ibid., 217.
56. Ibid., 171.

57. Philip Ashton Jr., *Ashton's Memorial: Or, an Authentick Account of the Strange Adventures and Signal Deliverances of Mr. Philip Ashton* (London: Richard Ford and Samuel Chandler, 1726), 21.
58. George Shelvocke, *A Voyage round the World by the Way of the Great South Sea, Performe'd in the Years 1719, 20, 21, 22* (London: J. Senex, 1726), 221. In a different passage, Shelvocke explicitly associates this voice with "noise": "This insolence being carried on in the steeradge, I stept out to see what might be the cause of such a noise; but was surprized at the unparallel'd impudence of these fellows, who, when I came to enquire into the reason of the confusion, accosted me with all the sawcy expressions they could think of" (ibid., 24).
59. Ibid., 37. Hence, the continuous assertions of the ignorant ways of sailors were part of these politics of expression. Nathaniel Uring offers what is perhaps the most emphatic formulation of this logic. He complained that he had spent his life among "unthinking, ungovernable Monsters" (Uring, *History of the Voyages*, 344). South Sea traveler Richard Simson would also complain of having "convers'd with Monsters of both Men and Beasts" (Richard Simson, "Voyage to the South Seas," Sloane ms. 86, British Library). And Dampier similarly underscores that he traveled among "unthinking Rabble" (Dampier, "Dampier's Adventure," 175).
60. Shelvocke, *Voyage*, 234.
61. Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 21.
62. Simson, "Voyage," 6–7.
63. Ibid., 36. Simson also hints that sailors were in general too loud. Describing a bird at Juan Fernandez, he remarks that it was "articulate" with a call that sounded, "BE QUIET, a very pertinent evening note" (ibid., 77).
64. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 27.
65. Ibid., 29.
66. While this demarcation is particularly eminent in the narratives discussed here, they are in no way limited to them. As an example, a Norwegian sailor remarked in his diaries of shipboard life that "Jan Hagel's speech cannot be esteemed as he often speaks of what he cannot know." See Nils Trosner, *Tordenskiolds Matros: Dagbok ført av en norsk matros paa den dansk-norske flaate 1710–1714* (*Tordenskiold's Sailor: Diary Kept by a Norwegian Sailor in the Danish-Norwegian Navy 1710–1714*) (Oslo: Gyldendalske Bokhandel, 1923), 6.
67. John Cox, "The Adventures of Capt. Barth. Sharp, and Others, in the South Sea," in *The Voyages and Adventures of Capt. Barth. Sharp and Others, in the South Sea: Being a Journal of the Same*, ed. Philip Ayres (London: Walter Davis, 1684), 48–49.
68. For example, Rogers, *Cruising Voyage*, 235.
69. For example, ibid.
70. Such defensive formulations and demarcations read as reactions to the traditions of resistance and radicalism unearthed by Marcus Rediker, Peter Linebaugh, and the scholars they have influenced. However, the structure of "noise" also presents a challenge to the study of such radicalism. According to Rediker, through collective work seamen learned a language that also constituted a community of speakers. This language enabled "within it a set of bonds, the basis for a consciousness of kind and a collectivism among all those who lived by the sea." Consequently, the sailor is found to speak his own special language, expressing a clear-cut identity founded in hard social and economic realities. See Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 164. This separation of languages founded upon discrete socialities is

expressed most emphatically in Rediker's description of the clash between the puritan priest Cotton Mather and the pirate William Fly: "Two discourses, one Christian and providential, the other maritime and social, came together in a cosmic clash." See Marcus Rediker, "Pirate and the Gallows: An Atlantic Theater of Terror and Resistance," in *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 241. Ultimately, such an argument links maritime resistance to the collective experiences of the ship as an exploitative factory. This presents a certain limit. By making the sailor express what he knows from experience, a certain affinity is displayed to the limiting principle expressed succinctly by Simson. This new social maritime history is therefore predicated upon a slightly too stable link between social position and speech.