

*Between Ship
and Sea and
Shore: Spatial
Practices from the
Black Pacific*

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I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World — without the mandate for conquest.

— Toni Morrison¹

Toni Morrison, in laying out her audacious project of mapping race and the literary imagination, could well have been describing Mbembe's practices of disenclosure — an opening of the world without the mandates of extraction and conquest.² Following Morrison, we desire to draw a blueprint, so to speak, of a critical architecture that facilitates human spaces for self-discovery and exploration that are too often contained by racism and colonialism. Morrison's words might also describe Black spatial practices, that is, the navigational maps and blueprints that Black people draw, learn, and deploy to make selves and make freedoms despite racial enclosures. We offer that a critical architecture might be realised by designing with Black spatial practices in mind. This provocation resides in our brief analysis of maritime environments traversed by Black people during the Age of Sail (mid-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth century) and shortly thereafter.

In her essay 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', Morrison attends to a simple adjective whose racial meanings were left unscrutinised for over a century of literary analysis of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*: the *white* whale. In doing so, she uncovers Melville's allegorical aim of hunting down and destroying 'the very concept of whiteness as an inhuman idea', a purpose that

1 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 3.

2 Achille Mbembe, 'Disenclosure', in *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 42-89.

Melville helms with Captain Ahab and his non-White crew.³ Indeed, Morrison discusses how Black characters are often surrogates for taboo subjects in the White literary imagination — a critical point that we will not go into here. However, Black mariners were also more than allegorical. Representing nearly twenty to thirty percent of multiracial seafaring crews, they were part and parcel of colonial and commercial maritime activity. And, as Morrison insists in her essays and demonstrates in her novels, Black people have their own reasons for living other than hunting down the great myth of whiteness. Suffice to say, Black mariners were real people, with their own maps, and their own allegorical whales to hunt.⁴

Melville's 1851 book was inspired by the notorious, true story of the *Essex*, a whaling ship from Nantucket, Massachusetts that, because of decimated sperm whale communities in the Atlantic, in 1820 rounded Cape Horn on the southern tip of the Americas to hunt in the Pacific, only to be sunk by a vengeful whale. The Black seamen aboard the *Essex*, despite playing critical roles including retrieving the navigation instruments from the sinking ship, all perished, adding to the notoriety of the story in the race-sensitive Quaker society of Nantucket.⁵ Melville's writings were also informed by the daily lives of seamen in Richard Henry Dana's highly popular memoir *Two Years before the Mast*, in which he narrates his undergraduate pause from Harvard to work and travel on the *Pilgrim* and the *Alert*, brigs carrying trade goods between Boston and Mexican colonial California from 1834 to 1836. Dana also directly references Black crewmembers, although more sparingly and often in condescension.⁶ It is a prominent text that not only reflects an adventure-filled maritime entry within the American literary

3 Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28.1 (1989), p. 16.

4 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.

5 Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (Viking, 2000).

6 Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years before the Mast* (Modern Library, 1936).

canon. Dana's travelogue also helped shape the cartographic imagination of its contemporary readers in ways that aided and abetted expansionist rhetoric, at times acting as an 'unofficial guide for emigrants traversing the largely unmapped far western territories in the wake of the Mexican–American War'.⁷ Black mariners were but a rare, shadowy presence in these popular stories, yet their spatial understandings and navigational practices have much to teach us about how people create openings despite the enclosures of racial capitalism, extraction, and imperial expansion.

We write together to think about another critical mapping that, while often unrecognised and 'unspoken', also occurred within this oceanic context during this period: specifically, how Black mariners deployed Black spatial practices to navigate the social structure of the ship as well as the vast ocean and its many shores. Here, we consider sixteenth- to nineteenth-century ships as built environments that are not quite emplaced. The ship travels with sovereignty (the flag country), pausing at multiple sovereignties (the ports), through an indigenous sovereignty (the sea). In recognizing indigenous sovereignties of the sea, we do not mean that Indigenous governmental entities own the sea. Rather, we align with critical geographers such as Michele Lobo and Meg Parsons, who in turn follow Black and Indigenous writers, in understanding more-than-human worlds as indigenous, sovereign-to-themselves, and existing for their own reasons.⁸ At the same time, we acknowledge that nation-states regularly claim sovereignty over parts of the sea through colonial-capitalist frameworks organised around owning and dismembering this world.

The ship, then, is a curious assemblage of corporation and

7 Steffen Wöll, 'Voyages Through Literary Space: Mapping Globe and Nation in Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*', *Polish Journal for American Studies*, 14 (2020), pp. 197–271 (p. 197).

8 Michele Lobo and Meg Parsons, 'Decolonizing ocean spaces: Saltwater co-belonging and responsibilities', *Progress in Environmental Geography*, 2.1–2 (2023), pp. 128–140.

state, dependent on trade routes and capitalistic extraction, as well as international and territorial laws. Given the prominent role of vessels as critical technologies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the ship may seem like an unlikely architecture for Black self-determination. Yet, Black spatial practices have long been in the business of building freedom under sovereignties often antithetical to Black life.⁹ In attending to the spatial practices of Black people who (often voluntarily) took to the sea, and particularly the Pacific, we begin to sketch out primary elements of a map — the ship, shore, and sea — that may speak to the theme of this special issue on disenclosure. In other words, if we recognise that situated contexts such as race and power not only coproduce space which individuals may experience differentially but also may distinctively *read* and survey unevenly, what potentials could we open if we designed and studied architecture with Black spatial practices in mind?

Our Pacific Positionalities

We write from the shores of the Pacific in Kumeyaay territory, which spans the border between the United States and Mexico, and includes the regional areas surrounding the cities of San Diego and Tijuana. This area was claimed by the United States in 1848, Mexico in 1821, Spain in 1769. It has been and is still in Kumeyaay stewardship since time immemorial. We think together through our Black Like Water collaboratory at UC San Diego in which students, faculty, staff, and community members attend to Black fluidity of identity, relationships to land and water, and ways of knowing as they flow through cultural and historical experience via offerings including scholarly talks, art shows, and embodied water activities.

Finally, this brief essay is rooted in the overarching Black

9 We are influenced by Katherine McKittrick's writings about the plantation as a place where Black people created futures. See McKittrick, 'Plantation Futures', *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, 17.3 (2013), pp. 1–15.

Pacific Project, a research initiative led by Dr Caroline Collins. Currently, as we write, Collins' travelling banner exhibit, *Take Me to the Water: Histories of the Black Pacific*, is wending its way through museums and libraries on this coast. Its large-scale physical gallery version will open at the Maritime Museum of San Diego in late summer 2025. These exhibits feature Black peoples' long connections to what is now the US Pacific: California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Hawaii.¹⁰ Black mariners are significant actors in the roots and connective routes of the Pacific coast, beginning with early sixteenth-century colonial activity where African descendents, both enslaved and free, journeyed on Portuguese and Spanish colonial ships.¹¹ Today, Black people continue to play integral roles in the United States' maritime enterprise upon the Pacific, though dominant conceptions of oceanographic space often neglect their inclusion. This project joins emerging scholarship of the Black Pacific which reimagines notions of race, migration, and diaspora.¹² Much of this work engages with, and builds upon, the foundational theorising of historian Paul Gilroy who, in the late twentieth-century, popularised the Black Atlantic as a transnational and transcultural diasporic framework extending

10 For information about *Take Me to the Water*, see Caroline Collins, 'Water Berth: My Journey to the Black Pacific as a Site of Memory and Futurity', *Public: A Journal of Imagining America*, 7.1 (2023). For the Black Pacific Project, see <<https://www.blackpacificproject.com>>.

11 Matthew Restall. 'Black conquistadors: armed Africans in early Spanish America', *The Americas*, 57.2 (2000), pp. 171–205. Alex Borucki, David Eltis, and David Wheat, 'Atlantic history and the slave trade to Spanish America', *The American Historical Review*, 120.2 (2015), pp. 433–461.

12 Black Pacific is a capacious term used in multiple ways by many scholars. For a sense of some of its usages, see: Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Extract from "Water, Shoulders, Into the Black Pacific"', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 18.2–3 (2012), pp. 263–276.; Nitasha Sharma and Simeon Man, 'The Black Pacific: Contributions to Histories, Concepts, and Methods', *Ethnic Studies Review*, 44.3 (2021), pp. 24–30; Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-colonial struggles and oceanic connections* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Gary Y. Okihiro, 'Toward a Black Pacific', *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, and Politics* (2006), pp. 313–330.

across Africa, Europe, and the Americas.¹³ The focus of this brief essay are Black mariners involved with merchant and colonial activities such as whaling during the Age of Sail and shortly thereafter — a temporal framing generally perceived as the height of maritime culture within the national imagination, and one that we offer to provide a rich lens in which to examine Black spatial practices.

Black Spatial Practices

We understand Black spatial practices to encompass the various ways Black subjects imagine, negotiate, and move through space, as well as Black place-making both material and metaphorical. Our attention to these ways of knowing and being reflect Black epistemologies which have long been concerned with the collision and coproduction of space, place, race, and power. Our thinking is made possible from foundational literature by scholars in Black geographies including Clyde Woods, Katherine McKittrick, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Latoya E. Eaves, Camilla Hawthorne, and contributors to the seminal anthology *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*.¹⁴

Black subjects upon and near the waters of the Pacific during the so-called Age of Sail by necessity developed a Black spatial literacy. Many Black sailors could converse in dominant tongues of colonial powers.¹⁵ Just as Black mariners were often

13 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

14 See: Clyde Woods, *Development arrested* (Verso Books, 2017 (1998)); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag* (University of California Press, 2007); Latoya E. Eaves, 'Black geographic possibilities: On a queer Black South', *Southeastern Geographer* 57.1 (2017), pp. 80–95; Camilla Hawthorne, 'Black matters are spatial matters: Black geographies for the twenty-first century', *Geography Compass*, 13.11 (2019); Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (South End Press, 2007).

15 W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

polyglots navigating multiple languages, many also exhibited the necessary ability to effectively read, analyse, and respond to multiple sovereignties that were spatially organised across ships, seas, and shores. Sixteenth- to nineteenth-century ships traversed manifold nation-state jurisdictions and also contained their own distinct sociocultural structures. Black subjects had to become literate about the rules that governed these multiple perilous spaces when attempting to negotiate power over one's destiny within White supremacist frameworks. Such literacies, in tandem with a myriad of complexities outside of individual mariners' control, could tip the scales between forging a new life in distant environs or (re)abduction into enslavement, between grasping a higher social status or imprisonment. Black spatial literaries, then, include not only the seafaring knowledge to cross vast oceanic space, but nuanced world-faring knowledge of differences from port to port, ship to ship, and within discrete portions of individual vessels themselves. In deploying these knowledges, many of these mariners turned spaces of seeming enclosure into vehicles of agency and opportunity.

In gesturing to their journeys, we might map a critical geography, which we summarise as the Black ship, the Black sea, and the Black shore. Such nomenclature does not mean that we position these places as 'Black' in a purely possessive sense (though in some distinct cases, levels of possession applied).¹⁶ We acknowledge social productions of Blackness in which colonial projects invent racialised identities to serve the needs of capitalist extraction and incite practices of escape. However, we align with theorists who remind us that escaping racialising structures is not a natural condition of Blackness. Indeed, Black subjects like all racialised people might lean into racial structures and identities depending on context. In other words, Black life is not just a response to or a resistance to anti-blackness. Thus, Black ship, sea, and shore refer to the varied ways Black people enter, inhabit, navigate, leave, and map these spaces.

16 See later discussion on Paul Cuffe, who owned or partially owned multiple trading vessels, for example.

These mappings are akin to GIS layering which illustrates multiple geographic realities or blueprints under blacklights that reveal obscured passageways and hazards, and even forms of leisure, play, and privilege that comprise the complex range of human experience. This perspective centres Black senses of place — and specifically Black spatial practices — to better appreciate the contours of built environments structured by race and sovereignties, as well as the passageways for human agency that are less evident within colonial-capitalist enclosures. Such spatial tools and practices reveal the possibilities and limits of disenclosure within architectural thinking.

The Black Ship

In the course of my lifetime [...] the question has often been asked of me: Where were you educated? To these well-meant inquiries, I have almost invariably answered: in the forecastle; in the forecastles of a hundred ships.

— James H. Williams (1864–1927), African American whaler¹⁷

In some ways, a vessel at sea was a contained society to its own. Many of the ships that we examine from the Age of Sail, whether whaling vessels or brigs carrying trade goods, were built to be lived on for months or years at a time by ostensibly all-male crews that might even change from port to port.

These vessels themselves structurally contained different societal hierarchies often demarcated spatially — who lived where and what areas of the ship one could or could not occupy. However, the dangers of the sea also meant that these boundaries could be eroded by necessity. ‘All hands on deck’ is a phrase from the sea, a call issued when urgent situations required total

¹⁷ James H. Williams, *Blow the Man Down!: A Yankee Seaman's Adventures Under Sail* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2018 (1959)).

effort from the entire collective, regardless of rank (and race). Survival at sea depended upon the reliability of this moment of exception. As such, the vessel was a contained social unit. There were no other people from which to draw; labour could not simply be fetched from some external source. Seafarers, then, depended upon one another's knowledges and capabilities not only for their livelihoods, but for their literal life and death. Such 'sea-sense' as Black whaler James H. Williams described the embodied and spatial 'talent that [could] only [...] be developed by long practical experience and intensive training', created moments of integration and interdependence, compared to more absolute forms of segregation on the shore.¹⁸ Because of this context, other types of societal barriers could break down even as the hierarchy on the ship was absolute.

Despite — and often because of — this social isolation sharpened by mutual dependencies, some Black seamen perceived vessels as vehicles towards possible disenclosure. For these Black mariners, such a structure afforded complex but real opportunities to participate in a society that might not be as readily available on land. By complex, we mean that the social order on a ship was never democratic. Rank and role mattered, impacting senses of animosity or camaraderie. Various historians, however, also write about the space of the whale ship as a meritocracy in which knowledge and skill could eclipse race and social class in career advancement opportunities.¹⁹ Though certainly ableist and gendered, and often still in the service of colonial and extractive projects, Black mariners deciphered passageways for human agencies within these complex spatialities.

In some cases, Black mariners seized these opportunities via captaincy, and even actual possession, of ships. Whaling captain, merchant, and abolitionist Paul Cuffe, for example,

18 Ibid.

19 Skip Finley, *Whaling Captains of Color: America's First Meritocracy* (Naval Institute Press, 2022).

was born in 1759 to a Wampanoag mother and a formerly enslaved father. Cuffe not only typically led all-Black crews, he also owned or partially owned multiple trading vessels out of Massachusetts. At least one of his ships sailed to Pacific whaling grounds in 1810 under the hired captaincy of another officer.²⁰ Cuffe was among more than fifty whaling captains of colour.²¹ Most of these men were based out of the Eastern Seaboard, though they ventured to Pacific waters as overhunting depleted Atlantic whale populations. One Black captain, however, was based on the Pacific coast in northern California: Captain William T. Shorey, later dubbed the ‘Black Ahab’ likely due to his intrepid whaling career spanning over three decades.²² Among the many ships that Shorey commanded, the *John and Winthrop* notably had at one point an all-Black crew. Shorey married a woman from a prominent Black family in San Francisco. They settled in Oakland and often sailed on Shorey’s ships with their children in tow. Like Cuffe, Shorey was also mixed race. Born in Barbados in 1859 — nearly a hundred years after Cuffe — Shorey was born to a Scottish planter father and a Barbadian creole mother. These lineages also gesture to the role colourism may have played in Cuffe and Shorey’s particular navigation of, and ascensions within in, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maritime spaces.

While some Black mariners ascended to positions of heightened authority within ships from lower officers to captains, most generally comprised the crew.²³ Acting in many capacities on sailing vessels including common seamen, Black sailors often

20 ‘Paul Cuffe Voyages’, Westport Historical Society, n.d. < <https://paulcuffe.org/voyages/> >.

21 Finley, *Whaling Captains of Color*.

22 A late twentieth-century historian, E. Berkeley Tompkins, likely first bestowed the moniker ‘Black Ahab’ upon Capt. William Thomas Shorey. For this reference and more regarding Shorey, see: E. Berkeley Tompkins, ‘Black Ahab: William T. Shorey, Whaling Master’, *California Historical Quarterly*, 51.1 (1972), pp. 75–84; and Finley, *Whaling Captains of Color*.

23 For reference to a Black mate of Captain Shorey’s, see Walter Noble Burns’s memoir *A Year with a Whaler* (Macmillan, 1919).

served as cooks and stewards.²⁴ Richard Henry Dana wrote about the spatial arrangement of the *Pilgrim*: the cabin locations and access to parts of the ship delineated different classes among the sailors — from the everyday workers to the Captain’s quarters which were generally off limits to sailors. He writes with gratitude for, and amused condescension of, the ship’s cook, who he explicitly identifies as Black yet equally explicitly fails to name, referring to him instead through racialised language including ‘our [...] darky’ and ‘a simple-hearted African’ who regularly read his Bible on the Sabbath.²⁵ The cook is only named in a crew appendix of a later edition of the text where he is listed as forty-year-old Thomas Curtis, a sailor from Boston with a ‘Black’ complexion and ‘wooly’ hair.²⁶ Dana also dedicates time to discussing the ship steward, who had access to the captain’s quarters, who lived adjacent to the cabin, and thus was physically and socially distant from the common seamen. As a result, Dana explains that stewards, by way of this general proximity, were not trusted by the other sailors as they not only had the ear of the Captain, but were ‘mongrel[s]’ of sorts existing within a liminal plane within the ship’s social structure.²⁷ Dana himself writes in disparaging terms about the steward, whose race he never describes.²⁸

Though providing potential for disenclosure, the vessel was by no means a racial oasis and moments of integration and interdependence could be tenuous. Black sailors during the Age

24 Mary Malloy, *African Americans in the maritime trades: a guide to resources in New England* (Kendall Whaling Museum, 1990).

25 Dana, *Two Years before the Mast*, p. 7.

26 The Library of Congress version of the book includes the crew appendices. For further reference to the cook, Thomas Curtis, see: Richard H. Dana, Jr, *Two Years Before the Mast; a Personal Narrative* (Houghton Mifflin company, 1911) <<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/calbk.139>>.

27 Dana uses the term ‘mongrel’ to describe a seaman who resides in the steerage near the captain as opposed to the forecabin with other sailors where they are ‘free’; see: Dana, *Two Years before the Mast*, p. 51.

28 Though the revised appendix refers to him as a sailor from England with ‘light’ complexion and ‘dark’ hair, see: Dana / Library of Congress.

of Sail experienced discrimination often exacerbated by their subjection to the unquestionable authority of various ship's captains — especially those known as a 'Negro driver'.²⁹ Most Black sailors doubtless understood the critical ways their experiences at sea could vary depending not only on which territory they dropped anchor, but on who helmed their ship. Such an awareness highlights collisions of spatial sovereignties Black mariners consistently navigated. That is, when we think about water abutting land, erosion often comes to mind: the sea breaking down certain features on the shore. However, through these complex relationships and hierarchies onboard we can perceive the inverse of these dynamics as well — where terrestrial understandings could at times erode existing social structures on the vessel. Such erosion was especially relevant to forms of Black sovereignty created at sea. Despite these risks, Black mariners continued to take to the water — viewing the sea, like the ship, as a possible space of disenclosure and, at times, of potential transformation.

The Black Sea

We are sailing slowly along the coast of Peru. The Lat is 200 38' Long. 910 52' [...] I felt as peaceful as the ocean with which I was surrounded. There not a wave was seen rising abruptly, from any part of our ship; all rolled smoothly and gently along. The succeeding night was beautiful beyond description; and all was peace within.

— Betsey Stockton, African American missionary and educator during moments of calm on the Pacific, 20–26 March 1823³⁰

29 Dana recalls the captain of the *Pilgrim* referring to himself as a 'Negro driver' while whipping a White sailor after a heated exchange, see Dana, *Two Years before the Mast*, p. 101.

30 From the journal of Betsey Stockton, see: Constance K. Escher, *She Calls Herself Betsey Stockton: The Illustrated Odyssey of a Princeton Slave* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022), pp. 57–58.

The spatial practices of the Black Pacific at the core of our discussion were created *between* the ship and shore and sea. Open water in the Age of Sail was an expansive site of mobility in which people, goods, and sentiments traversed great distances across oceanscapes often unclaimed by state powers. Like the land, the sea is indigenous. Terrestrial colonial philosophies of the period deemed that Indigenous territories were made productive when claimed within the project of a settler nation-state. However, beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, vast swathes of the world's oceans were, and continue to be, considered international waters located beyond territorial zones and governed by a 'freedom of the high seas' that included the right to unobstructed navigation.³¹ Indeed, such a shared claim to oceanic space furthered the abilities of imperialist nations to sustain the trade, extraction, and commercial enterprises required for terrestrial projects across the globe.

Given the broader stakes of oceanic travel within the Age of Sail, navigating the high seas became a colonial imperative of which Black mariners participated. In 1565, Afro-Portuguese mariner Lope Martín became the first navigator to sail from the Americas to Asia and back.³² Martín's historic journey required a mastery of skills often referred to as the Art of Navigation, a scientific practice requiring expertise in mathematics, astronomy, and cartography. Martín was not the only Black navigator of the period. Other early Black seafarers charted vessels' courses. Maritime captains particularly respected the navigational abilities of Krumen sailors of West Africa. British ships often hired them, including on Pacific voyages and anti-slaving vessels.³³

31 Renisa Mawani, 'Oceans as Method: Law, Violence, and Climate Catastrophe', *The Funambulist: Politics of Space and Bodies*, 39 (2022), pp. 16–19.

32 Andrés Reséndez, *Vuelta: Conquering the Pacific* (Mariner Books, 2021).

33 Jarvis L. Hargrove, 'Krumen and the suppression of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade from West Africa', *Liberian Studies Journal*, 36.2 (January 2012), p. 72.

Beyond gauging opportunities to navigate oceanic space upon ships as means of employment, Black mariners recognized the sea itself as a possible site of disenclosure. Just as Black sailors comprehended the insulation of the contained vessel which at times operated apart from social structures from shore, so too could they perceive the opportunities of so-called international waters untethered from the jurisdiction of territorial entities. Such a spatial recognition meant not only that free Black mariners often took to the water, but that enslaved Black subjects also regularly sought emancipation by sea. When viewed within Black spatial literacies, the Pacific Ocean transmogrified into an oceanic zone of escape from enslavers with the ability to transport, and transform, formerly enslaved individuals in destinations including Alaska, Vancouver, Hawaii, and Alta California.³⁴

Life on the water certainly contained peril, labour, extraction, strife, and uncertainty illustrated by the need for Black seafarers to attempt to outmanoeuvre chasing enslavers or produce documents to protect their free status onboard. But moments at sea also included periods of respite and appreciation of the natural world. Betsey Stockton, a previously enslaved African American missionary and educator, reveals these simultaneous realities of enclosure and disenclosure. In November 1822, Stockton boarded a whaling vessel, the *Thames*, for a five month journey to the Hawaiian islands. To protect her from enslavers and patrollers, her written contract clarified she was not a runaway taking to the sea but instead engaged as a missionary — a project with its own colonial aims.

Her journal entry about a time of peace off the Pacific coast of Peru, written during that maritime journey, describes a moment of simple humanity in relation to the sea. Stockton's travels and

34 Ian C. Hartman and David Reamer, *Black Lives in Alaska: A History of African Americans in the Far Northwest* (University of Washington Press, 2022); Crawford Kilian, *Go Do Some Great Thing: The Black Pioneers of British Columbia* (Harbour Publishing, 2020); Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (Yale University Press, 1995).

words resonate with Achille Mbembe's as he also reflects on other Black writers, such as Édouard Glissant: 'the veritable disenclosure of the world is thus the encounter with the world's entirety: what Glissant calls the *Tout-Monde* [*All-World*].' And Paul Gilroy: 'the shape of a new planetary consciousness [...] one that gives a central place to the ethics of mutuality, or, as Gilroy suggests, to conviviality, being-with-others.'³⁵ In parallel with these ethics, we meditate for a moment on Stockton's being-with-the-sea, and what the sea had to offer in that moment, 'an Other always there, from the outset'.³⁶ Such a meditation aligns with calls from Black studies scholar Marlon Bailey and geographer Rashad Shabazz to attend to the humanity of Black subjects in space. As Black geographies scholar Latoya E. Eaves reminds us: 'Black geographies promotes the humanization of place'; '[e]xpanding humanistic examinations of Black life into the everyday experiences offers important and metamorphic insights [into] Black subjects' negotiations with societal structures, communities, [...] other human beings' — and the natural world including the expanse of the sea.³⁷

While this expansive sea may seem timeless, life upon it was not. Voyaging is a transitory experience, and for Black mariners during the Age of Sail, one that was met by the realities of eventually leaving the sea by will or force. The spatial literacies needed to gauge when and how to leave, or not, leads us to the final geography of our map: the Black shore.

35 Mbembe, 'Disenclosure', *Out of the Dark Night*, p. 76

36 Ibid.

37 Eaves, 'Black geographic possibilities', pp. 86, 88.

I took passage on board the Isabella Capt. Wm. H. Davis & came to the Sandwich Islands in 1811 & here came ashore with permission and lived four months with Hevaheva the high Priest of the Islands.

— Anthony Allen, African American mariner who self-emancipated to Hawaii³⁸

Back in port, the liminal spaces of the ship and the sea collided with terrestrial sovereignty. Like ocean winds, racial dynamics which scaffolded complex jurisdictions of various nation-states could shift from port to port. Such dynamics demanded the deployment of Black spatial literacies that informed possible decisions to stay aboard, temporarily disembark, travel home, dialogue with other Black folks at port, or even desert. Some regions of the United States in the nineteenth century, for example, explicitly worked to suppress the terrestrial mobility of incoming Black sailors. After African American seamen were suspected of acting as vital communication channels in a thwarted large-scale slave revolt in South Carolina in 1822, southern states across the US passed a suite of Negro Seamen's Acts meant to prevent Black mariners from communicating with other Black subjects — especially enslaved individuals — both at port and in points inland.³⁹ These laws not only illustrate the critical roles that Black mariners played in Black information networks of the day. They also remind us of the stakes of Black spatial literacies and the complexities of decisions made via their processing. In

38 In 1822, Anthony D. Allen wrote a letter to Dr. Dougal, the son of his former enslaver. Dougal had read about Allen's generosity and success in a missionary article. Dougal wrote to Allen and Allen chose to respond. In his letter to Dougal, Allen details his life since emancipating himself by sea. He describes Hawaii, its cultural differences, and his new family. For more, see: Anthony Allen, letter to Dr. Dougal, 11 Oct. 1822, Hawaiian Historical Society.

39 Philip M. Hamer, 'Great Britain, the United States, and the Negro Seamen Acts, 1822–1848', *The Journal of Southern History*, 1.1 (1935): pp. 3–28.

addition to jailing scores of individuals, the government of South Carolina executed thirty-five people in response to the thwarted uprising. During the Age of Sail, Black mariners deployed Black spatial literacies in ways they saw fit according to their distinct personal assessments, knowledges, contexts, and ethics. No amount of analysis, however, provided fail-proof protection against the full weight of state sanctioned racial violence.

Though perhaps more well-known in popular history through their connections to the American South, these Negro Seamen's Acts were not spatially bound to the Eastern Seaboard. Black sailors pulling into ports in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-nineteenth century faced legal discrimination meant not to prevent uprisings of enslaved individuals, but to keep Black mariners out of the territory's settler project. Oregon territorial laws in effect by 1849 prohibited Black sailors from leaving their docked vessels without written permission or supervision. The second Oregon Black Exclusion law of 1849 contained an ensemble of restrictions intended to prohibit Black sailors from jumping ship and permanently settling in the US territory including language stating, 'it shall be the duty of masters and owners of vessels having brought negroes or mulattoes into Oregon [...] [to ensure] such negro or mulatto to leave this territory with such vessel [...] or from some other vessel within forty days'.⁴⁰

Attempts to arrest such settlement highlight the potential power and agency represented in the act of desertion — a spatial practice exhibited by mariners of various races. As historian Rudolph Lapp describes the practice in California during Mexican rule: 'In the 1830s the number of American ships,

40 Oregon Exclusion Law, 1849. A BILL TO PREVENT NEGROES AND MULATTOES FROM COMING TO, OR RESIDING IN OREGON (enacted by the Oregon Territorial Legislature, 1849). For more regarding Oregon's Black exclusion laws, see: Quintard Taylor, 'Slaves and free men: Blacks in the Oregon country, 1840–1860', *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 83.2 (1982), pp. 153–170; and Kenneth R. Coleman, *Dangerous Subjects: James D. Saules and the Rise of Black Exclusion in Oregon* (Oregon State University Press, 2017).

especially those from New England, that touched the California coast increased, and so did the number of black and white deserters.⁴¹ Like many decisions, however, racial dynamics could complicate the contours of this practice for Black mariners when compared to their White counterparts, requiring that they draw upon Black spatial literacies to decipher optimal contexts, locations, and possible allies for desertion. At times, previous relationships forged across colonial regimes could impact the future of Black deserters as could social constructions of race within new destinations of choice.

A young man named Anthony Allen, for example, fled bondage in New York in 1800, circumventing a circuitous and treacherous route to his eventual settlement in the Kingdom of Hawaii. Born enslaved in pre-revolutionary New York in 1774, Allen spent his early years in or near Schenectady with his enslavers, the Dougals. At first, Allen fled ‘on foot’, as he phrased it.⁴² He made it to Hartford, Connecticut where, like many other enslaved Black people before him, he sought his freedom by sea. Allen journeyed by sea to other locations. He later wrote that, ‘I worked my passage to Boston, where I expected to find my father [who was also a seaman], but not finding him I shipped on board the *Henry*.’⁴³ Allen traversed the Eastern seaboard from Massachusetts to South Carolina. He travelled abroad, visiting ports in Havana, Bengal, and France. And he negotiated an array of experiences from clashes with pirates to escaping near re-enslavement in Norfolk to finally reuniting with his father in Boston when his father returned wounded after a three-year voyage to British Columbia. When Allen sailed to what he and others called the Sandwich Islands aboard the *Isabella*, it is likely that he was not only attracted to the islands’ tropical weather and natural landscapes. We can also imagine that after visiting ports around the world during a decade at sea,

41 Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, p. 4.

42 Allen, letter.

43 Ibid.

the Hawaiian Kingdom's more amenable racial climate may have also factored into his decision to permanently settle on Oahu. Allen eventually resettled in Waikiki where he served as an advisor to Kamehameha I, married two native Hawaiian women as was 'the custom of the country', and owned a six-acre oceanfront compound including lodgings and a hospital for wounded sailors.⁴⁴ There, he became part of a broader chain of emigrants of African descent in Hawaii whose settlement both preceded him and would continue well into the nineteenth century.

In fact, in 1822, Allen met Betsey Stockton, another African American settler through his newly established, and likely strategic, relationships with American missionaries in the Hawaiian islands (whose presence he predated). Stockton had become the first unmarried and first African American woman to serve as a missionary in Hawaii. Upon meeting him in 1823, Stockton wrote in her journal of Allen, 'Mr. Allen was very kind to me, and seemed happy to see one of his own country people.'⁴⁵ Again, Mbembe's writings on disenclosure could well be describing both Stockton's and Allen's spatial practices, 'in going forward to meet the world, and in being able to embrace the inextricable web of affiliations that form our identities and the interlacing of networks that make every identity necessarily extend out in relation'.⁴⁶

We offer these brief examples of navigations of shore to illustrate how Black mariners deployed Black spatial practices in ways that were cognisant of sovereignties as systems of contradictory enclosures through which degrees of personal humanity and privilege and authority might be made possible.

The Black shore is a map of colliding sovereignties. For Black people in most man-made territories, disenclosure is not a place. It is a practice. Our provocation is whether a

44 Ibid.

45 Escher, *She Calls Herself Betsey Stockton*, p. 40.

46 Mbembe, 'Disenclosure', p. 64

critical architecture can design with a spatial awareness of sovereignty and sovereignties and of Black spatial practices and cartographic imaginings that seek to disenclose.

Implications for a Critical Architecture

The ship and sea and shore, as mapped by Black spatial practices, might offer useful methods and questions for a critical architecture. Black mariners had to develop spatial practices to navigate multiple sovereignties, any of which could become deadly. Moreover, they found routes between and within these sovereignties to pursue their goals, whether they were geographic exploration, social mobility, settlement, or simply being human despite social systems which consistently challenged the humanity of Black subjects. Perhaps a methodological benefit exists in analysing other built environments as ‘ships’ that travel through multiple human and Indigenous sovereignties. Such a method might produce new principles for designing and analysing built environments.

From the metaphor of the ship, we notice how hierarchies that are scaffolded into the built environment might actually provide unexpected opportunities for individual Black self-determination. In addition to the optimism of designing for democracy that might assume similarly empowered and equally right-ful actors, can we design for Black spatial practices that create transportative possibilities within unequal societies? In already built environments, can we shine a blacklight on their blueprints, to find passages, hidden rooms, and escape routes within the complicities of capitalist enterprises?

From the metaphor of the shore, we consider how ports and pockets of sovereignty become more apparent when we consider Black spatial practices. In US cities, we think about how homes in public housing have often been subject to warrantless, non-consensual searches. We think about how some estates include private roads where even police have to stop at the gate.

We think about corporate campuses and public university campuses, and consider how people seek disenclosures in unexpected places. We are reminded by the lyrical insights by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney:

We went to the public hospital but it was private, and we went through the door marked ‘private’ to the nurses’ coffee room, and it was public. We went to the public university but it was private, and we went to the campus barbershop, and it was public.⁴⁷

Whether through overseas routes or by underground railroads, Black freedom-makers have travelled through multiple private and public sovereignties, proving how man-made sovereignties can be repurposed. Can a critical architecture make transparent the sometimes colluding, sometimes colliding, often contradictory authorities over Black life?

From the sea, we marvel at how more-than-human sovereignty has taught humans to practise solidarity. Drawing upon Indigenous epistemologies, the sea is teacher, ancestor, connector, and sovereign.⁴⁸ We wonder how a critical architecture can learn to design with a respect for Indigenous sovereignty. Can we imagine built environments that are not insulated from the natural environment, such as communities trying to make themselves immune to climate change, but rather require collaboration for mutual survival and livelihood?

Surrounding but slightly beyond this essay are Indigenous-

47 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, ‘Debt and study’, *E-flux Journal*, 14 (2010).

48 See: Epeli Hau‘ofa, *We Are the Ocean* (University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Heather Ponchetti Daly, Alexandria Hunter, and Eva Trujillo, ‘The Kumey-aay: Original Stewards of our Lands and Sea’, in *San Diego Seafood: Then and Now* (forthcoming 2025); Luhui Whitebear, ‘Pen of Molten Fire’, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 46.1 (2023), pp. 115–128; Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (AK Press, 2020).

Black relationships, that is, epistemological, cosmological, pedagogical, and spiritual relationships to land and water. In the Pacific, where Black people have sought, found, and created some kind of a personhood, many of these settlement practices were based on capitalist systems of extraction or in state-based governmentalities. The ships we examine in this essay are not Indigenous. Indeed, the whaling ship was dependent on the commodification of death of our non-human relatives.⁴⁹ Yet Black spatial practices were not just about navigating up the ranks of seamen, but fundamentally about being more fully human, and in many cases, about being in relationship with a disenclosed world, an Indigenous world. Black people sought and sometimes experienced disenclosure in the vast interconnectedness of the sea and within Indigenous nations. Thinking about Indigenous architecture with Black spatial practices in mind, can built environments help restore, revive, maintain, and protect relationships to Indigenous-Black places and peoples?

Black geographies are not only disenclosures, but complex maps that reflect resistant, complicit, and other possibilities with respect to colonial and capitalist enterprises. We build off of scholars of Black geographies to think about how Black spatial practices are also capacious in their desires. As capacious as Morrison's vision for a map of the world, as capacious as the sea for Black mariners. As capacious as re-imagining capitalism, refusing to be contained by its overdetermining forces.

⁴⁹ And eerily echoes with Christina Sharpe's analysis of the slave ship *Zong*.

