

“A Wretched and Slave-like Mode of Labor”: Slavery, Emancipation, and the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company’s Coaling Stations

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The Children’s Employment Commission in Britain offered its first report on mines to Parliament in 1842 and deployed the trope of slavery to critique mining labor practices. “As bad as the African Slave Trade,” was the verdict concerning the lengthy apprenticeship of children bound to work in mines to the age of twenty-one.¹ Child workers in the Forest of Dean were reported as suffering “a wretched and slave-like mode of labour.”² In the aftermath of this report, employment practices in the British coal mining industry were reformed.³ Yet in the same year that the commission delivered its report, on the other side of the Atlantic, four of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company’s (RMSPC) steamships were fueled each month at St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies.⁴ Since slavery had not ended in St. Thomas, the coal-bearers who carried coal onto the RMSPC’s steamships, in baskets or sacks, were enslaved women and men hired out by their owners. Robert Woolward, a junior officer on board these vessels during the 1840s, later wrote in his memoirs of the coaling process at St. Thomas:

I saw the ladies and gentlemen employed at the work were kept moving by a white man with a whip in his hands; the ladies also carried baskets on their heads which held 112 lbs. coal, [...]and had to move smartly with their load, or the whip came into requisition.⁵

Thus, while in the aftermath of formal abolition in the British Empire the metaphor of slavery was liberally invoked to condemn children’s involvement in the coal mining industry, the British Government’s sponsorship of a steamship service that employed enslaved labor in the Caribbean was a consideration simultaneously surrounded by governmental silence.

Through a focus on the space of the coaling station and labor arrangements within this space, I seek, in this paper, to further nuance our understanding of maritime operations in the Caribbean during the region’s transition from slavery to freedom. In this paper, I explore the theories and

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contexts underpinning this analysis of the coaling station, the RMSPC's coaling operations in slave and post-slave societies, and finally the coaling station as a place that engendered debates on slavery and emancipation. I argue that the RMSPC exploited a trans-imperial geography to coal its ships, relying on stations within and beyond the British Empire. In so doing, the Company sought to employ laborers whose mobility was restricted, and depended upon bonded as well as free labor. The coaling station, which functioned, in Mary Louise Pratt's terms, as a "contact zone," also served to mobilize debates on slavery and emancipation.⁶

Maritime mobilities

In examining geographies of slavery and freedom at the coaling station, I draw on a theoretical intersection between the "new mobilities paradigm" and "tidalectics." Tidalectics (or tidal dialectics) is a concept first articulated by Kamau Brathwaite and subsequently developed by Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey.⁷ Brathwaite's use of the term "tidalectics" is poetically ambiguous, but invokes oceanic rhythms to suggest a Caribbean experience alternative to Western epistemologies.⁸ As expressed by Brathwaite's sister, Mary Morgan, tidalectics is "a way of interpreting [Caribbean peoples'] life and history as sea change, the ebb and flow of sea movement."⁹

Elizabeth DeLoughrey has adopted and elaborated the concept of tidalectics in her book, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. DeLoughrey refers to cyclical ocean-borne relationships between apparently oppositional terms as tidalectic relations, through which she undertakes comparative readings of Caribbean and Pacific island literatures.¹⁰ In particular, DeLoughrey underscores the tidalectic relationship between the sea and the land. It is this crucial relationship that is explored in this paper through a focus on the coastal space of the coaling station. As DeLoughrey highlights, Brathwaite's tidal dialectic is a cyclical alternative model to Hegel's dialectic. As such, tidalectic readings foreground an "'alter/native' historiography to linear models of colonial progress."¹¹ By examining the coaling station, which is usually in the background of steamship operations, I seek here to challenge straightforward understandings of the steamship as a symbol of innovative progress.¹²

Although DeLoughrey's interest is primarily literary, her conceptualization seems equally suggestive for the framing of historical geographies, as DeLoughrey describes tidalectics as a methodological tool that highlights geography's role in shaping island histories and cultures.¹³ Thus tidalectics allows for historical analysis through the central invocation of oceanic space, and affords recognition of the fact that, as David Lambert,

Luciana Martins, and Miles Ogborn emphasize, ships and ship-borne communication have been central to the history of empire.¹⁴ Tidalectics, with its emphasis on oceanic relationships and interconnections, lends itself to the writing of maritime historical geographies, particularly in island spaces.

Alongside tidalectics, the second theoretical strand informing this paper is the “new mobilities paradigm” or “mobilities turn.”¹⁵ The new mobilities paradigm invites analysis of diverse forms of material and human movement, as well as the “moorings” that enable these flows.¹⁶ A mobilities perspective seeks to challenge notions of rooted authenticity (“sedentarist metaphysics”) on the one hand, and uncritical celebrations of nomadism on the other.¹⁷ Crucially, mobilities theory is concerned not only with movements, but the contexts of power which shape voluntary and involuntary displacements.¹⁸ While research on mobilities has thus far focused more on contemporary than earlier periods, as Tim Cresswell argues, “new mobilities” cannot be analyzed without some historical understanding.¹⁹

It is useful to underscore at the outset that the steamship coaling station should be understood, with reference to the new mobilities paradigm, as an “exceptionally immobile platform” and as a place that simultaneously enhanced the mobility of some while constricting the mobility of others.²⁰ In considering the coaling station as place, and specifically by taking a smaller, less-considered, and liminal maritime space as a site through which to examine the RMSPC’s circumvention of emancipation, I also follow the new mobilities paradigm in challenging concepts of relevant scale.²¹ Furthermore, as Lisa Norling argues with reference to the American whaling industry, when writing maritime histories we should expand focus beyond the ocean to include spaces on shore as well as those at sea.²² I propose in this paper that the coaling station, as a place of differentiated mobilities, remained subject to negotiated power dynamics.

Sheller and Urry remind us that “[p]laces are about relationships, about the placing of peoples, materials, images, and the systems of difference that they perform.”²³ On these terms, this paper considers the RMSPC’s coaling stations, which existed effectively so that ships could move. As a result, both material and human resources were gathered at the coaling station to facilitate the ship’s smooth passage. Yet as I will argue, the RMSPC’s concern to secure regular and predictable movement for its ships, passengers and cargo caused the Company’s managers to circumvent emancipation by seeking out bonded labor in non-British colonies. Thus the nineteenth-century Caribbean coaling station, an immobile platform that supported industrialized oceanic mobilities, must equally be understood in terms of slavery and emancipation.

“Sea change:” coal and Caribbean bonded labor

Some consideration of the central political problem in the Caribbean during this era, namely the struggle for control over labor and land, sheds useful light on this maritime discussion.²⁴ As Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt, and Rebecca Scott emphasize, a key question in post-emancipation societies was whether or not the formerly enslaved would continue to work.²⁵ When planters faced the prospect of declining sugar profits, slave labor in the Caribbean was replaced by a variety of alternative forms of coercion including indentured labor and debt peonage. These alternative coercive forms meant that legal freedom did not necessarily enhance the quotidian mobility of formerly enslaved individuals. For example, indentured laborers in Jamaica faced penalties not only for desertion, but also for leaving the estate without a pass.²⁶ Yet mobility was a key means through which many formerly enslaved individuals exerted agency, by re-locating, where possible, away from estates, or through regional migration.²⁷

As Mimi Sheller argues with reference to the Caribbean, “[g]reater attention to bodies and their (im)mobilities can help to show the intertwining of circuits of production and consumption with processes of generating, racialization, and domination.”²⁸ Others specifically highlight the importance of mobility in a post-emancipation context.²⁹ O. Nigel Bolland stresses that “[f]reedom of movement was vital, for its symbolic value and also because former slaves sought to be reunited with family members and friends.”³⁰ The struggle to control mobility in the post-emancipation Caribbean reflected conflicting definitions of freedom held by planters and the formerly enslaved. Since the presence or absence of the formerly enslaved on the estates, as well as the rhythms with which they labored, were contested areas over which the planter class struggled to retain control, the mobility of laboring bodies was an important dynamic in the post-emancipation era.

Scholars of the post-emancipation Caribbean focus on the continuities, as much as contrasts with the era of slavery, and underscore the fact that the emancipation period was characterized by indirect forms of subjugation.³¹ The maritime perspective of this paper reinforces this complex view of emancipation, as oceanic enterprises such as the RMSPC operated simultaneously within slave and post-slave societies. Thus although the chronological focus of this paper falls within the British post-emancipation era, I am nevertheless concerned with the geographies of slavery (and freedom) under discussion in this special issue.

The RMSPC, incorporated in 1839, developed out of the vision of former sugar-estate manager James McQueen. McQueen’s plan to establish a communications network between Britain and the West Indies formed

part of an ambitious project that he hoped would one day connect “China and New South Wales with Great Britain, through the West Indies.”³² Although during the nineteenth century the RMSPC’s routes did not become quite as expansive as McQueen had hoped, the Company secured a mail contract to serve the Caribbean, and extended operations into Brazil and the River Plate in 1851. For the RMSPC, as for contemporaneous steamship services such as Cunard and P&O, government support was highly significant in ensuring the viability of such a capital-intensive undertaking. Thus the RMSPC’s service comprised part of a wider series of networked steamship routes funded by the British Government and stretching across the British Empire in this period.

In order to secure government support, McQueen invested in the rhetoric of steam technology and progress, as indeed he had earlier invested in pro-slavery rhetoric.³³ McQueen implied that the service would promote efficiency when he argued that it was a means through which to “infuse” the West Indies with “a little European energy and regularity.”³⁴ Yet in reality, the expectation of calculable and perfectly regular travel failed to correspond with the daily demands of an intricately interconnecting service. Contingencies such as extreme weather conditions, technological failures, and human error, as well as logistical challenges, disrupted the ideal of entirely predictable passages. Coal comprised the RMSPC’s largest item of working expenditure, with the cost of the raw material, freight charges, and associated labor totaling up to sixty per cent of expenditure on a typical voyage.³⁵ In spite or perhaps because of the enormous costs associated with coal, the Company sought to hold Caribbean coal-bearing laborers’ wages to a minimum, and, in the process, circumscribed the social mobility of these workers. A shift of focus to the coaling station sheds light on one set of logistical concerns.

Circumnavigating emancipation

During much of the first decade of service, the RMSPC loaded its steamers with coal at Southampton, Madeira, Fayal, Grenada, St. Thomas, Jamaica, Cuba, and Bermuda (Figure 1).³⁶ Such coaling activity effectively illustrates Sheller and Urry’s notion of the “hybrid geography of humans and nonhumans” that coalesced at coaling stations, including coal, and also equipment, buildings, and laborers. Engineers, firemen, and coal trimmers worked with the fuel on board ship, while coal-bearers loaded fuel onto vessels from the shore. From the outset, the Company considered ways to avoid a heavy reliance on Caribbean coal-bearers.

Since it was considered superior in quality, the RMSPC’s coal was predominantly imported to the Caribbean from South Wales. Iron baskets, lanterns, weighing machines, and other essential equipment were also



Figure 1. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's Caribbean coaling stations, according to the Modified Plan for performing the West India Mail Packet Service, May 1843. Original base data from Mountain High Maps®. Copyright 1993 Digital Wisdom, Inc.

shipped to these spaces from British shores.³⁷ Initially it was thought that labor too might be imported to the coaling stations. In February 1841, McQueen wrote from Barbados to the Company's secretary in Britain with the suggestion that, "it would be a good thing for the Company to send out three or four European labourers to each of their principal depots in this quarter, men accustomed to such work as they would have to perform at them, and who would teach and excite to activity the Negro labourers, which to a certain extent it may be necessary to have additional."³⁸ McQueen therefore initially envisaged that European and Caribbean coal-bearers would work together at these stations, with Caribbean workers supplementing a small European core.

Yet by February 18, McQueen had changed his mind, and proposed instead that the Company should employ an additional six to ten crew members on board their ships who would assist with the coaling process.³⁹ This balance of "European" to "Negro" labor, McQueen

assumed, would ensure that the ships could be coaled with the utmost "speed and regularity."⁴⁰ In McQueen's opinion, then, the presence of laborers from elsewhere was necessary to promote efficient working rhythms at the Caribbean coaling station.⁴¹

By employing a greater number of Europeans on board ship, McQueen hoped that the Company could avoid a heavy reliance on Caribbean laborers, who, by his assessment, could not "be depended upon to continue steadily at the work." Moreover, while European immigrants were expected to influence Caribbean laborers with their working rhythms, McQueen decided that there was an equal danger of Europeans falling into "habits" associated with their new location. On reflection, McQueen decided that it would be safer for Europeans to be based on board ship, since there "these extra European hands would always be kept in a proper state of discipline whereas such persons living constantly on shore are apt in this climate to get into habits of intemperance and thus to shorten their days."⁴² The initial proposal for land-based European and Caribbean coal-bearers working at the stations was replaced by a dichotomous arrangement in which Europeans working with the coal were primarily based on ship, and Caribbean coaling laborers were largely based on shore.

A second proposition for circumnavigating the labor market in the Caribbean turned not to European, but to African shores. Within a Caribbean context in which, as Keith Laurence explains, the importation of workers was considered a key means of addressing the labor shortage and maintaining lower wages in the long term, the RMSPC, like planters in the region, considered importing African immigrants to Grenada.⁴³ The possibility, proposed in a report by Captain Maclean, was rejected by McQueen and managers, Captain Strutt and Mr. Carr, as "wholly out of the question," presumably due to the financial and logistical imposition of arranging such an undertaking.⁴⁴ In rejecting the proposition of immigrant labor at the coal wharf, and by instructing Captain Maclean to see what work could be accomplished by "Negro" – by which they meant black Caribbean – men and women, the RMSPC's managers took a step towards conceiving of their Caribbean coal-bearing labor force on localized terms. Thus after proposals to import coal-bearing labor from Europe and from Africa, the Company instead came to rely on laborers resident in the Caribbean to fuel the steamships. Yet even after accepting the need to operate within the Caribbean region, the Company continued to avoid a full engagement with post-emancipation labor arrangements, by constructing a trans-imperial chain of coaling stations.

Initially, the RMSPC expressed discomfort at operating within a post-emancipation labor context on the island of Grenada. In early February 1841, travelling through the Caribbean to make arrangements for the RMSPC's operations, McQueen reported that the "Negro laborers" were

"slow in all their movements and moreover under the existing state of things uncertain in their attendance while in several places their demands for wages is too frequently exorbitant, especially when they perceive that they can with impunity take advantage of the party which stands in need of their labor."⁴⁵ Thus McQueen, sensitive to the ebb and flow of the period's financial tides, articulated the local mobility of Caribbean coal laborers as problematic and as potentially threatening to the regular passage of the Company's ships.

As McQueen's words imply, wages were contested at the coaling station. The Company's managers soon discovered that coal-bearers were liable to disrupt a ship's passage not only by exercising an everyday localized mobility (the "uncertain attendance" feared by McQueen), but also by exercising a strategic immobility. To illustrate, the *Tay* traveled from England in January 1842 bound for Havana. This was the first of the RMSPC's ships carrying mail from Europe to the West Indies. The ship arrived at Barbados in seventeen days and was coaled on the eighteenth day of its journey. It then proceeded to Grenada, where the schedule fell a further two days behind time because the coal depot was ill-prepared for the steamer's arrival, "but chiefly because the Negro labourers refused to work at even high wages especially during the night."⁴⁶ The Admiralty Agent on board reported that although the *Tay* arrived at the coal wharf at seven o'clock in the evening, coaling did not commence until seven o'clock the following morning.⁴⁷ At St. Thomas the ship lost a further day, and coaling laborers' unwillingness to work was again cited as the reason for the delay. In response to the *Tay*'s experiences, the directors expressed hope that the coal depots would in future be better organized but also that they would be prepared with a sufficient labor force, for which no expense would be spared.⁴⁸ The Company, realizing the ability of Caribbean coaling laborers to throw their communications network into disarray, committed to a higher level of expenditure. While, in terms of mobilities, power was unevenly distributed at the coaling station, the Company implicitly acknowledged that this power was negotiable by raising coaling laborers' wages to secure the smooth passage of its ships.

Pay was not the only source of coaling station conflict. There is evidence too of coal-bearers' actions influencing decisions on equipment and working conditions. In May 1844, when the Company tested Lyon's patent fuel on board their steamships, coal-bearers in the Caribbean refused to work because the coal dust was so irritating to their eyes. This reaction was noted in the Company's internal report on the fuel and, combined with the fuel's inefficiency, ensured that Lyon's was rejected for future use.⁴⁹ By immobilizing their bodies and refusing to work, the actions of shore-based coaling laborers in the Caribbean comprised a kind of transoceanic negotiation with management decisions taking place in Britain.

Coaling station arrangements were negotiated, but the Company sought to strengthen its negotiating hand across these spaces by circumventing British emancipation. Where the Company could find coal-bearers whose legal status ensured a restricted social and geographical mobility, it sought to engage these forms of labor in preference to free wage alternatives. That is to say, the Company deliberately sought out bonded laborers, who were, of course, mostly people of African descent. In this way, the RMSPC established its Caribbean coaling stations on differentiated socio-economic terms and drew maximum advantage from constructing an archipelagic chain of stations cutting across imperial boundaries.

The RMSPC's vessels literally circumnavigated emancipation by taking on fuel at pre-emancipation islands such as St. Thomas. The increase of the enslaved population in the Danish West Indies culminated at the end of the eighteenth century concurrently with Denmark's decision to abolish the transatlantic slave trade in 1802. From this time onwards, the enslaved population slowly diminished on the islands until the abolition of slavery in July 1848. St. Thomas, although sugar-producing, was not as important in this respect as the island of St. Croix.⁵⁰ By the 1830s, the urbanization of St. Thomas meant that three-quarters of the island's population was concentrated in Charlotte Amalie (by St. Thomas Harbor).⁵¹ Exploiting this urban concentration of enslaved labor in order to minimize coaling costs, the RMSPC contracted out responsibility for coaling its ships in St. Thomas to a Mr. Stubbs, who, while the slave system remained intact, hired enslaved laborers to carry coal on board.⁵² By hiring enslaved laborers, the Company facilitated British industrialized oceanic mobility through continuing partial reliance on bondage.⁵³

Another possibility for coaling station labor was considered at Bermuda, where the RMSPC identified an alternative source of bonded labor. In September 1843, the Company's directors declared the coaling arrangements at Bermuda to be "expensive, perplexing and unsatisfactory."⁵⁴ In an attempt to improve arrangements, the Company asked the Government for permission to employ convict labor.⁵⁵ These laborers from England worked at the naval base strengthening defenses and carrying out construction work. The RMSPC required "100 of the lowest class of convict laborers three days in each month" and offered to pay the Government wages for their hire.⁵⁶ Although the request was declined, the RMSPC's attempt to secure coaling laborers in bondage reflects its determination to avoid entering a free wage-labor market.⁵⁷

The coaling station was, then, a place that enabled the mobility of steamships, and thus the smooth passage of travelers, texts, money, and goods on board, but labor relations reflected a more complex set of mobilities, as the geography of the RMSPC's coaling stations created a hybrid network of enslaved and free labor. The Company's determination to avoid

paying full wages in a free labor market meant that the Caribbean coaling station was characterized by legally inscribed bondage, as much as by the liberty to move. By choosing to exploit enslaved as well as free labor, the RMSPC constructed the coaling station as a place underpinned by shore-based immobilities, and these were exploited to facilitate the reliable and smooth passages so desired by the Company's directors and managers. The RMSPC's management of its Caribbean coaling stations in the first decade of operations therefore reinforces Sheller's insistence that "with the mobility of some, comes the production of the immobility of others."⁵⁸

Fueling debates

As Ann Laura Stoler stresses, racial discourse circulated between metropole and colony.⁵⁹ The coaling station was one space which set such discourse in motion. The process of fueling transformed vessels into "contact zones," and mobilized transatlantic commentaries on Caribbean laborers.⁶⁰ At times, these commentaries were formalized and circulated through incorporation into published texts such as travel narratives. Discussions mobilized by coaling station contact intersected with wider debates on slavery and emancipation. I focus this analysis of Caribbean coaling debates further upon three texts, the publication dates of which indicate how ideas raised by coaling station contact continued to resonate into the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The first text is Charles Kingsley's 1871 publication *At last a Christmas in the West Indies*, the second is James Anthony Froude's 1888 work *The English in the West Indies; or, The Bow of Ulysses*. The final text, *Nigh on Sixty Years at Sea*, is less well-known, and was published towards the end of the century as a memoir of a RMSPC captain, Robert Woolward. The narratives indicate the complex ways in which the coaling station was a key site where privileged European steamship travelers came into contact with coal-bearing laborers. These moments of coaling station contact informed a post-emancipation depiction of the Caribbean that reverberated across the Atlantic.

In the early post-emancipation years it was hoped in Britain that "'civilization' would stimulate tastes and habits in the black worker that could only be satisfied with a monetary income."⁶¹ However the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica was seen, in many quarters, as a key turning point and as evidence of the failure of Britain's emancipation policy.⁶² Interpretation of late nineteenth-century steamship travel narratives in this context sheds particular light on coaling station debates. Moreover, taking Mary Louise Pratt's definition of contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination," the coaling sta-



Figure 2. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's S.S. *Atrato*, by William Frederick Mitchell, 1864. Copyright National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Used with permission.

tion becomes significant.⁶³ The coaling wharf, a place of tidalectic relation between the sea and the land, and between mobility and immobility, was also a place of contact across class, "race," and culture.

Coaling station contact is apparent in travel narrative accounts such as Charles Kingsley's *At Last a Christmas in the West Indies* narrated a steamship journey undertaken in the RMSPC's *Shannon* in the latter half of the 1860s. Kingsley described the coaling process at St. Thomas, the ship's first Caribbean port of call, as well as at Grenada. Of the three texts, Kingsley's most strikingly depicted the coaling station as contact zone, as his writing emphasized contrasts between the passengers on board the ship and the coaling labor taking place around them. At St. Thomas, Kingsley wrote, "we got back to the ship, but not to sleep. Already a coal-barge lay on either side of her, and over the coals we scrambled, through a scene which we would fain forget." He then recorded:

the scraps of Negro poetry which we could overhear; while on deck the band was playing quadrilles and waltzes, setting the Negro shoveller dancing in the black water at the barge-bottom, shovel in hand; and pleasant white folks danced under the awning, till the contrast between the refinement within, and the

brutality without, became very painful.⁶⁴

As Joanna de Groot points out, theories of “race” and “sex” in the nineteenth century were partly grounded in supposedly “observable” points of physical difference.⁶⁵ By availing themselves of the opportunity to observe while the ship was being coaled, steamship travelers found fuel for their polemics.

The depiction of Caribbean peoples re-mobilized by coaling station contact was distinctly Carlylean in strain. Thomas Carlyle’s notorious *Occasional Discourse*, first published in 1849, was centered upon the “Colonial and Negro question,” and attacked abolitionists in polemic style. Carlyle depicted the West Indies as a place where black men sat feeding easily on pumpkins, while sugar cane rotted around them.⁶⁶ Charges of idleness and irresponsibility, specifically laid at the door of black Caribbean men, and a preoccupation with laborers’ refusal to work to pre-emancipation daily rhythms (that is, as enslaved peoples) were notions re-mobilized and reinforced at the coaling station. Thomas C. Holt notes that concurrently with the publication of Carlyle’s text, an official rhetoric emerged that was highly critical of the recently emancipated.⁶⁷ This official rhetoric was matched by unofficial voices who waded into the debate armed with observations of the coaling process.

Carlylean tropes emerged in response to coaling station contact, and centered on alleged wages and working patterns of coal-bearers. Kingsley reinforced Carlylean notions in his discussion of coal-bearers at Grenada, writing, “I can well believe the story that beggars are unknown in the island. The coalers, indeed, are only too well off, for they earn enough, by one day of violent and degrading toil, to live in reckless shiftless comfort, and, I am assured, something very like debauchery, till the next steamer comes in.”⁶⁸ By referring to this lifestyle of “reckless shiftless comfort” enjoyed by the coalers between working days, Kingsley invoked echoes of Carlyle. Thus, under the pen of those such as Kingsley, coaling laborers came to signify the broader problem of securing regular labor in the post-emancipation Caribbean.

On its appearance towards the end of the century, the strident polemics in Froude’s controversial *The English in the West Indies* provoked some angry responses.⁶⁹ While several points of controversy emerged from Froude’s writing, crucially for this article, *The English in the West Indies* indicates how the coaling station as contact zone, as a place of unequal and globalized power relations, mobilized and bolstered a Carlylean discourse of which *The English in the West Indies* was archetypal. Similar to Kingsley, Froude discursively constructed the coaling station as a place in which black Caribbean men demonstrated their irresponsibility and a failure to fulfill European bourgeois ideals. Froude’s depiction of the coaling station

was framed by a wider pro-imperialist plea for England not to turn its back on paternalistic duties to the Caribbean islands.

Evidence in support of this argument was gleaned in various Caribbean spaces, and the coaling station was one of these. At Kingston, Jamaica, Froude wrote:

Two planks were laid down at a steep incline from the ship's deck to the yard. Swinging their loads on their heads, erect as statues, and with a step elastic as a racehorse's, they marched up one of the planks, emptied their baskets into the coal bunkers, and ran down the other. Round and round they went under the blazing sun all the morning through, and round and round they would continue to go all the afternoon. [...] The poor women are content with the arrangement, which they prefer to what they would regard as legal bondage. They earn at this coaling work seven or eight shillings a day. If they were wives, their husbands would take it from them and spend it in rum.⁷⁰

In a similar fashion to Kingsley, Froude highlighted the wages earned by coal-bearing laborers. It should be noted, however, that in comparison to Froude's claims about wages, during the 1890s (just a few years after Froude's text was published), at Castries, St. Lucia, coal-bearing women earned two cents for five baskets carried, or approximately three shillings a day.⁷¹ In contrast to Kingsley's focus on coal-bearing women, Froude was particularly at pains to belabor the supposed irresponsibility of black men. In Froude's writing also, then, we see echoes of Carlyle.

Froude utilized the moment of coaling station contact to reinforce a broader argument by implying that Caribbean men could not be trusted with suffrage. Joanna de Groot writes of how, in controversies over the rights of colonial subjects, "examples of 'naturally' / 'normally' unreliable or irrational behavior were given as evidence that women or 'natives' were by nature unfit for public life and achievement in work, politics, or creative activity."⁷² Strikingly, Froude claimed to have found such examples as the ship was coaled, before even setting foot on shore at Kingston. Douglas Hall suggests that the question being asked across Britain and the British empire in the wake of abolition was whether the formerly enslaved would adopt the working patterns expected of laborers in Britain.⁷³ Writers such as Kingsley and Froude thought that they saw the answer to this question at the coaling station. In their minds, the answer was a resounding "no."

In contrast to Froude's polemic, Woolward's memoir *Nigh on Sixty Years at Sea* was not an overtly political text. Instead, the book lightly promoted the services of the RMSPC, of which Woolward was a longstanding employee. Yet in Woolward's narrative, too, the coaling process was afforded prominence, and the coaling station was represented dichoto-

mously along the axis of slavery and emancipation. Whereas Woolward framed the coaling process at Grenada in terms of contentment, he invoked pathos through his description of coaling at St. Thomas. Woolward's description of coaling at Grenada was constructed as a comical scene: "This operation is carried on by coloured 'ladies' (there are no women in the West Indies except white women), who transport the coal in baskets containing 80lbs. on their heads, and march along with it with a carriage that a countess might be proud of, singing all the time."⁷⁴

The use of parentheses creates a mocking aside between author and reader, and the suggestion of the coaling woman marching proud as a countess, sits in contrast to a very different kind of condescension in Woolward's description of the St. Thomas coaling station. Here Woolward wrote, "We did not get coaled any quicker here than we did at Grenada, if so quickly, and it was a sorry sight to see women driven like cattle."⁷⁵ In post-emancipation Grenada, Woolward presented coaling as a contented, if remarkable labor arrangement.⁷⁶ In the context of slavery, however, Woolward invoked humanitarian pathos, and also implied that enslaved labor was inefficient. Without explicitly engaging in political debate, Woolward's textual representation of the coaling station nevertheless gestured towards an advocacy of free labor, and therefore spoke not only to long-standing abolitionist rhetoric, but also chimed with debates on the efficiency of free labor that had resonated through British politics in the middle of the century.⁷⁷ Given that slavery had been abolished throughout the Americas (ending with Brazil in 1888) by the time that Woolward was writing, his focus upon the contrasts between these two coaling spaces seems suggestive also of an attempt to present "evidence of Britain's national identity as the embodiment of liberty."⁷⁸

For European travelers, the coaling station provided a first interaction with the land, and a point of contact after several days of deep ocean travel. Coaling station contact allowed writers to reinforce relational identities, by projecting difference upon coal-bearing laborers. As Woolward's narrative illustrates, the coaling station brought to the fore questions of slavery and emancipation. The steamship, when taking on fuel, was transformed into a contact zone, and steamship travelers availed themselves of the opportunity to observe coaling laborers in order to comment on pre- and post-emancipation labor rhythms and relations. Steamship travelers who used their experiences at the coaling station to fuel debates on the state of the British post-emancipation Caribbean ensured that questions about slavery and freedom continued to echo, re-mobilized, around the Atlantic.

Conclusion

After an initial period of deliberation, the RMSPC came to conceive of its Caribbean coaling labor force as a localized group of workers, whose mobility should ideally be restricted. By exploiting regional variations between slave and post-slave societies, the Company was able to employ coaling laborers held in bondage by their enslaved status, as well as wage-laborers. Thus the RMSPC's coaling stations, as some of the nineteenth century's "zones of connectivity," were places in which the disempowerment and immobilizing bondage of particular groups was exploited in order to strengthen a transportation network.⁷⁹ The coaling station, as a nodal point within the steamship network, also operated as a space of contact across "race," class, and gender. In the Caribbean context, the coal depot served as a platform for debate on the condition of the post-emancipation islands, and Britain's imperial duty to the Caribbean. Steamships were re-mobilized, then, through the addition of fuel, but ideas were also re-mobilized within these coaling places. A focus on the coastal maritime space of the coaling station helps to foreground the tidalectic relationship between the land and the sea, but also helps to expand our spatial focus upon the post-emancipation Caribbean. While traditionally considered spaces, such as plantations and estates, are key sites of enquiry, much remains to be written about marginal spaces of complexity such as the coaling station. The RMSPC's steamships were introduced to the Caribbean with the justification that they would transport efficiency and "European energy" into that region. Paradoxically, during the early years of the RMSPC's operations, the service was underpinned by the labor rhythms not of Europe but of the Americas, through the use of enslaved labor alongside the recently emancipated.

The RMSPC exploited a transoceanic and trans-imperial geography in order to minimize labor costs, and literally circumnavigated emancipation by steaming to islands such as St. Thomas to take on coal. While steamship companies operating during the 1840s were justified in accordance with the imperial ambitions of individual nations, a tidalectic interpretation of a steamship company must recognize that the ocean brought empires into relation according to the shape of their networked routes. Thus the steamers operated simultaneously in the pre- and post-emancipation Caribbean. As an "alter/native" reading of the RMSPC, a focus on the coaling station equally emphasizes the centrality of bonded labor to the viability of early forms of industrialized oceanic transport.⁸⁰

Notes

1. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1842 Children's Employment Commission, First report of the commissioners, Mines, 42.
2. *Ibid.*, 103.
3. The 1842 Coal Mines Act restricted the work of young children underground, and subsequent reforms placed further restrictions on the employment of children and women. See Roy Church with the assistance of Alan Hall and John Kanefsky, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Vol. 3, 1830-1913: Victorian Pre-eminence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 191-193.
4. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London (NMM) Royal Mail Steam Packet Company Papers (RMS) RMS 36/3, Modified table of routes for performing the West India Mail Contract, 1843.
5. Robert Woolward, *Nigh on Sixty Years at Sea* (London: Digby, Long & Co, [1894]), 62. See also NMM RMS 32/2, Cash Book, 12 December 1843.
6. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
7. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith usefully remind us of the "dialectic of bound- edness and connection" associated with islands. See Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, eds., *Islands in History and Representation* (London and New York: Rout- ledge, 2003), 4.
8. Kamau Brathwaite, *conVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (New York: We Press & Xcp, 1999), 34.
9. Mary Morgan, "Highway to Vision: The Sea Our Nexus" in Verene Shepherd and Glen Richards, eds., *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2002), 3-11, 4.
10. For example, DeLoughrey writes of the tidalectic relationship between routes and roots, between settlement and migration, and between land and sea. See Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Is- land Literatures* (Honolulu: University Of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 45-48.
11. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, 2.
12. See Susan Leigh Star on foregrounding the "backstage" elements of work through an infrastructural inversion. Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," *American Behavioural Scientist* 43:3 (1999): 377-391, 380.
13. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, 2.
14. David Lambert, Luciana Martins, and Miles Ogborn, "Currents, Visions, and Voyages: Historical Geographies of the Sea," *Journal of Historical Geography* 32:3 (2006): 479-493, 486.
15. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A* 38:2 (2006): 207-226; Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings," *Mobilities* 1:1 (2006): 1-22; Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).
16. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities, and Moor- ings."
17. Tim Cresswell, "Introduction: Theorizing Place," in Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell, eds., *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation*

- in a *Globalized World* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 11-31.
18. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 2.
 19. Tim Cresswell, "Towards a Politics of Mobility," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (2010): 17-31, 29.
 20. Sheller and Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," 207, 210.
 21. Sheller and Urry point out that challenging "scalar logics" forms part of a new mobilities perspective. See Sheller and Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," 209. My analysis in this paper is of a space that might traditionally have been considered too small or marginal to merit scrutiny.
 22. Lisa Norling, "Ahab's Wife: Women and the American Whaling Industry, 1820-1870," in Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling, eds., *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 70-91.
 23. Sheller and Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," 214.
 24. O. Nigel Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Labour Movement* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2001), 3.
 25. Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, "Introduction," in Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1-32, 19-20.
 26. Verene A. Shepherd, *I Want to Disturb My Neighbour: Lectures on Slavery, Emancipation, and Postcolonial Jamaica* (Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2007), 169.
 27. Karen F. Olwig, ed., *Small Islands, Large Questions: Society, Culture, and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean* (London: Frank Cass, 1995).
 28. Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: from Arawaks to Zombies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 27.
 29. For example, Verene Shepherd stresses that mobility was a key means through which low income women expressed agency in the post-slavery Anglophone Caribbean. See Verene A. Shepherd, *I want to Disturb My Neighbour*, 157.
 30. Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 25.
 31. Karen F. Olwig, "Introduction: Emancipation and its Consequences," in Karen F. Olwig, ed., *Small Islands, Large Questions: Society, Culture, and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 1-7, 3.
 32. James McQueen, *A General Plan for a Mail Communication by Steam between Great Britain and the Eastern and Western Parts of the World; also, to Canton and Sydney, Westward by the Pacific: to Which are Added, Geographical Notices of the Isthmus of Panama, Nicaragua, &c. with Charts* (London: B. Fellowes, 1838), v-vi.
 33. In 1797, McQueen began to serve as an overseer on Westerhall estate in Grenada. David Lambert suggests that, "the political outlook and views of this young man would have been influenced by the paranoid, anti-French, negro-phobic white community that he joined." Little surprise, then, that McQueen became a vocal opponent of abolitionism during the 1820s and 1830s. See David Lambert, "The 'Glasgow King of Billingsgate': James MacQueen and an Atlantic Proslavery Network," *Slavery and Abolition* 29:3 (2008): 389-413, 394.
 34. McQueen, *A General Plan for a Mail Communication*, 56.
 35. University College London Special Collections (UCL) Royal Mail Steam Packet

- Company Papers (RMSP) 21, Memoranda, 1857-1863.
36. NMM RMS 36/2 Modified Plan for performing the West India Mail Packet Service, May 1843.
 37. NMM RMS 5/1, Store Committee Minutes, 28 February 1842.
 38. NMM RMS 7/1, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public Departments, 5 February 1841.
 39. NMM RMS 7/1, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public Departments, 18 February 1841.
 40. *Ibid.*
 41. This assumption is comparable with hopes harbored by the planter class who, for example in the Leeward Islands, hoped that immigrant white artisans and farmers might set an industrious example to the newly-emancipated. See Douglas Hall, *Five of the Leewards 1834-1870: The Major Problems of the Post-Emancipation Period in Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, Nevis, and St. Kitts* (Barbados: Caribbean Universities Press, 1971), 32.
 42. NMM RMS 7/1, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public Departments, 18 February 1841.
 43. Keith O. Laurence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the 19th Century* (Barbados: Caribbean Universities Press, 1971), 7; NMM RMS 5/1, Store committee minutes, 27 November 1842.
 44. NMM RMS 5/1, Store committee minutes, 27 November 1842.
 45. NMM RMS 7/1, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public Departments, 5 February 1841.
 46. NMM RMS 7/1, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public Departments, West India service remarks, 1842, 212-213.
 47. NMM RMS 6/1, Letter-book: In-letters from Public Departments, 26 January 1842. The Admiralty Agent was appointed by the British Admiralty to oversee the transmission and delivery of the mail at the vessels' ports of call.
 48. NMM RMS 7/1, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public Departments, West India service remarks, 1842, 212-213.
 49. NMM RMS 7/2, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public departments, 12 May 1845.
 50. Neville A.T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, ed. by Barry W. Higman (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 3.
 51. *Ibid.*, 87.
 52. NMM RMS 32/2, Cash Book, 12 December 1843. See also Woolward, *Nigh on Sixty Years*, 61-62.
 53. From the perspective of enslaved individuals, being hired out as labor could sometimes offer important financial opportunities, as it was possible for them to earn a portion of the wages paid for their hire. See Manuel Moreno Fraginals, "Plantations in the Caribbean: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic in the Late Nineteenth Century," in Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Frank Moya Pons, and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *Between Slavery and Free Labor: The Spanish-Speaking Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1985) 3-21, 18.
 54. NMM RMS 1/2, Minutes of the Court of Directors, 21 September 1843.
 55. Convict laborers were deployed in Bermuda to speed up the construction of

- the naval base between 1824 and 1863. These were convicts of the criminal justice system in England, as well as military and naval offenders. Approximately nine thousand prisoners were transported there, but in batches of no more than 1500 at any one time. See Roger Willock, *Bulwark of Empire: Bermuda's Fortified Naval Base, 1860-1920*, 2nd edition. (Bermuda: Bermuda Maritime Press, 1988), 44.
56. NMM RMS 7/1, Letter-book: Out-letters to Public Departments, 17 August 1843.
 57. NMM RMS 6/1, Letter-book: In-letters to Public Departments, 6 September 1842.
 58. Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, 30.
 59. Ann Laura Stoler, "Cultivating Bourgeois Bodies and Racial Selves," in Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 87-119, 88.
 60. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 60.
 61. Thomas C. Holt, "The Essence of the Contract: the Articulation of Race, Gender, and Political Economy in British Emancipation Policy, 1838-1866," in Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 33-59, 51.
 62. *Ibid.*, 56.
 63. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 4.
 64. Kingsley, *At Last a Christmas in the West Indies*, 4th edition. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1874), 21.
 65. Joanna de Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century," in Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 37-60, 40.
 66. Thomas Carlyle, *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*, 2nd edition. (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1853), 5.
 67. Holt, "The Essence of the Contract," 54.
 68. Kingsley, *At Last*, 62-63.
 69. One such angry response was provoked in historian and writer J. J. Thomas, who styled Froude a "negro-phobic political hobgoblin". See John J. Thomas, *Fraudacity: West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1889), 12-13.
 70. James A. Froude, *The English in the West Indies; or, The Bow of Ulysses* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1888), 197-198.
 71. Bonham C. Richardson, *Economy and Environment in the Caribbean: Barbados and the Windwards in the late 1800s* (Barbados: UWI Press, 1997), 113-115. According to Richardson, these coal-bearers tended to assemble under a foreman and were usually paid in coal tickets or coal tokens, a currency that was accepted by merchants and market women in Castries.
 72. Joanna de Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century," 44-45.
 73. Hall, *Five of the Leewards*, 35.

74. Woolward, *Nigh on Sixty Years*, 53.
75. *Ibid.*, 62.
76. What Woolward found remarkable was the gendered division of labor.
77. British abolitionism concerned itself firstly with abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the British colonies, and then shifted focus towards an international context. See Howard Temperley, *British Antislavery 1833-1870* (London: Longman, 1972), ix-xvii. See also Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter ten, for analysis of free labor debates.
78. David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 230.
79. Sheller and Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," 210.
80. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, 2.