02

SHOCK CITY:
SAILORTOWN
LIVERPOOL

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Liverpool's 'otherness' has been upheld and inflated in self-referential myth, a 'Merseypride' that has shown considerable ingenuity (and some self-pity) in adjusting to the city's changing fortunes as it collapsed from the second city of empire to the shock city of post-colonial, post-industrial Britain. By exploring 'sailortown', the maritime-urban interface immediately inland from the waterfront, this paper offers wider comparative perspectives which point to Liverpool as exemplar not as exception. A 'shock' city apart in Britain, 'sailortown' Liverpool established many of the representational clichés identified with transience, drink, prostitution and foreignness that became universal in major port cities throughout the globe. It is thus somewhat ironic that the current regeneration of Liverpool privileges the waterfront and city centre but has yet to extend to the sailortown which once occupied the crucial space in-between.

Outside the main narrative frameworks of modern British history, Liverpool has long been characterized as different, the proverbial exception within the nation. In the north of England but not of it, Liverpool (and its 'sub-region' of Merseyside) was (and has continued to be) highly distinctive, differing sharply in socio-economic structure, cultural image and expression, political affiliation, health, diet and speech from the adjacent industrial districts. The industrial conurbations of the north grew out of conglomerations of small towns and villages, augmented by short-distance rural in-migration which tended to reinforce their culture, character and status as regional centres. Long distance in-migration – the multi-ethnic, mainly celtic inflow – transformed Liverpool and its 'scouse' culture, setting it apart from its environs. In Liverpool, competing and conflicting inflexions of celticism (Irish, Welsh, Manx and Scottish) have been particularly pronounced, tensions (awaiting full scholarly investigation) at the very centre of the multi-national United Kingdom. Beyond the 'inland' Irish Sea, Liverpool's private celtic empire, the great seaport looked to the oceans, adding an external dimension to the city's cultural life and its migrant mix.

The 'community' mentality of the Scottie-Road 'slummy' – the prototype scouser – co-existed with a broader culture, a seafaring cosmopolitanism which made Liverpool, the gateway of empire, particularly receptive to (unEnglish) foreign ideas (syndicalism, for example) and to American popular music. A cultural intersection on the geographical margin, 'edge city' Liverpool is thus a critical site for investigation of northern-ness, Englishness, Britishness and the (pre-devolved) United Kingdom.[1]

Much has been written about Liverpool's exceptionalism within the British context. Repudiated by some as an external imposition, a stigma originating from the days of the infamous slave trade and/or the impact of the Irish famine influx, Liverpool's 'otherness' has been upheld – and inflated – in self-referential myth.

Notes

1. **John Belchem**, *Merseypride: essays in Liverpool exceptionalism*, 2nd edn, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006.

    Steve Higginson and Tony Wailey, *Edgy Cities*, Liverpool: Northern Lights, 2006

This 'Merseypride' has shown considerable ingenuity (and some self-pity) in adjusting to the city's changing fortunes as it collapsed from the second city of empire to the shock city of post-colonial, post-industrial Britain. By exploring the maritime-urban interface on the waterfront, this conference offers a timely opportunity to consider wider perspectives of cultural regeneration and urban branding. A 'shock' city apart in Britain, was Liverpool similar to other great world sea-ports? Viewed in this way, Liverpool may well appear as exemplar and not as exception.[2]

Liverpool can be incorporated into international comparative socio-economic and demographic analysis of port cities commended by my colleague Robert Lee with dependent labour markets, long distance in-migration and exposure to infectious disease – in its case, 'Irish fever'.[3] Its distinctive cultural character is probably best captured through more specific comparison with other 'edge' cities, de-centred major ports like Naples and Marseille with similar 'second city' pretensions and picaresque reputations.

Paul Du Noyer has described Liverpool as 'a sort of sunless Marseille', defiantly non-provincial, the capital of itself:

> It's deeply insular, yet essentially outward-looking: it faces the sea but has its back turned on England. There were local men for whom Sierra Leone was a fact but London only a rumour. They knew every dive in Buenos Aires, but had no idea of the Cotswolds. And Liverpudlians speak with merry contempt for their Lancashire neighbours, displaying all the high indifference of a New Yorker for Kansas.[4]

This account accords pride of place to 'sailortown', a distinctive space and culture – identified with transience, drink, prostitution and foreignness – replicated in major port cities across the globe. The term was first deployed in impressionistic style by Stan Hugill, one of the last mariners with memories of British deep-water sailing ships. Usually dismissed as a collection of nostalgic tall tales, Hugill's book has been unduly neglected, but is now receiving the attention it deserves through the exciting research of another of my Liverpool colleagues, Graeme Milne.[5]

As Milne shows, Hugill identified sailortown – an edgy place of relative liberation from the privations of work at sea – as a generic seaport phenomenon, a world-wide urban sub-type. He also set out a convincing chronology of its development, from the booming waterfronts of the sailing ship era through change and marginalisation in the age of steam, to the sanitisation of the dockland zone in the mid-twentieth century. While Hugill sought to keep the memory alive, the regeneration industry has subsequently reinvented (and relocated) 'sailortown' in kitsch fashion, adding 'heritage' cultural cachet to fashionable waterfront redevelopment.

When they landed in foreign ports visiting mariners perforce ventured a short but crucial distance inland, away from the dockland and commercial waterfront, to an urban area of bars, brothels, boarding houses and other services. True to Du Noyer's characterisation, they seldom penetrated beyond the familiar cultural and spatial boundaries of this 'sailortown' area. In ports where Europeans were recent arrivals, sailortown remained a European or inter-colonial enclave. Bars, lodging houses and shops were run by expatriates from all parts of the maritime world.

In the early twentieth century, Valparaiso's worst waterfront bar was managed in succession by an Irishman and a West Indian; Kobe's China Dog tearoom was run by a Malay; and Singapore had cafés run by Italian women. Names cloistered visiting mariners from anything alien or unfamiliar:

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2. Owing much to the work of **Franco Bianchini**, the 'Cities on the Edge' programme, 'a unique cultural exploration of six European port cities' which ran throughout Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture, opened up some important comparative perspectives.

3. **W.R. Lee**, 'The socio-economic and demographic characteristics of port cities: a typology for comparative analysis?', *Urban History*, 25, 1998, pp.147-72.

    On the Liverpool-Irish, see **John Belchem**, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: the history of the Liverpool-Irish, 1800-1939*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.

4. **Paul Du Noyer**, *Liverpool: Wondrous Place: Music from the Cavern to the Coral*, London: Virgin, 2002, p.5.

5. **Stan Hugill**, *Sailortown*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.

    What follows owes much to **Graeme Milne's** current research on 'sailortown'.

Antwerp, Amsterdam and Hamburg each had a bar called 'Channel for Orders', while Marseille and Liverpool both had a 'Flags of all Nations'. Ports worldwide had bars with 'Liverpool' in their names. The numerical supremacy of British mariners forced other seamen and foreign bartenders alike to learn English.

Given the dominance exerted by British ships and mariners over the international, deep-water shipping industry of the nineteenth century, the great general cargo and passenger port of Liverpool was to the fore in this Victorian globalisation. As new routes and markets opened after the abolition of the slave trade, ethnic diversity became increasingly visible in Liverpool: significant numbers of Kru (from West Africa), Lascar (from the Indian sub-continent), Chinese and other sea-faring communities within and beyond the 'black Atlantic', were drawn to the port and its open 'sailortown' culture, often more than temporarily. Here were services catering for the high levels of mobility and unpredictability which characterised the long-distance commercial sailing ship industry, services enjoyed (as Charles Dickens discovered)

by among others, 'British Jack', 'Loafing Jack of the Stars and Stripes', 'Spanish Jack', 'Maltese Jack', 'Jack of Sweden', 'Jack the Finn' and 'Dark Jack'. By the mid-nineteenth century, 'cosmopolitan' Liverpool had become a favourite stopping-off point for African-American seamen, descended from victims of the triangular trade. Relishing 'the friendly reception extended to them', they were able to enjoy what Herman Melville dubbed 'unwonted immunities'. In the absence of factory employment, young Irish women in Liverpool developed a niche market in the sex industry observed by F.W. Lowndes, servicing 'the numerous negroes always present in Liverpool as ships' cooks, stewards, seamen and labourers' in a network of streets in sailortown 'known by various names, the least objectionable, perhaps, of which, is "Blackman's Alley".[6]

There were limits, however, to inter-cultural contact, not least through the segregation imposed by some of the foreign seamen when in port, as the reporter for the *Morning Chronicle* discovered when he visited Dennison Street in 1850: 'This street is frequented almost wholly by American sailors, who look upon it as so entirely

their own, that they have established a rule forbidding a "darkey" or coloured man to pass thorough it — a popular law, worthy of Charleston, or any other slave town in America'.[7] During the 1860s, the Frederick Street locality, the epicentre of cosmopolitan Liverpool, was the scene of at least one murder and of 'numberless outrages' against Manila seamen and other foreign sailors, whose misfortune, the *Daily Post* reported, 'seems to consist in having a darker complexion than the natives of our "tight little island".[8] Down to the early twentieth century, Frederick Street continued to represent the cosmopolitan essence of seaport Liverpool, as a newspaper report of 1906 attested:

In this short and narrow, but by no means dismal, thoroughfare dwells in concert a motley population of British, Chinese, negroes and Scandinavians, coming and going on their own mysterious affairs, lounging and conversing on public house steps and in their own restaurants. The street has been successively 'Little Africa', the temporary home of natives of Manila — who disappeared after the diversion of trade caused the Spanish-American war — and finally,

with portions of Pitt Street, the lodging place of Chinese cooks, stewards, deck-hands, firemen etc. who have been coming to Liverpool in increasing numbers for the last 8 or 9 years. The African is still in evidence, some of the oldest inhabitants being of this race, and their children and grandchildren flourish in the same quarters.[9]

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6. **Charles Dickens**, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, final edition, 1869, ch.5. **Herman Melville**, *Redburn*, 1849: Penguin edn, London, 1976, p.277. **F.W. Lowndes**, *The Extension of the Contagious Diseases Acts to Liverpool and other seaports practically considered*, Liverpool, 1876, p. 31, and *Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in Liverpool*, London, 1886, pp. 3-4.

7. 'Labour and the Poor: Liverpool letter xv', *Morning Chronicle* 26 August 1850.

8. 'Brutal attack on foreign seamen', *Daily Post* 15 December 1864

9. *Weekly Courier* 6 November 1906

The cosmopolitan complexion was enhanced by development of the emigration trade, where too Liverpool, the flood-gate of the old world, stood pre-eminent. Some groups of moving Europeans, such as the Mormons from Scandinavia en route to Utah, kept themselves insulated and apart in their own mission and accommodation houses in Liverpool, while other groups fell victim to the notorious 'sharpers' who practised various costly deceits upon unsuspecting emigrants awaiting trans-shipment. A pleasure zone of cultural contact, sailortown Liverpool was a place of danger for the unwary. Disoriented by lack of funds for further travel, poor Irish migrants, Jews and others found themselves unexpectedly stuck in a 'curious middle place', forced into poor accommodation close to the Liverpool docks. Gateway to the empire and the new world, sailortown Liverpool was what historical geographers term a 'diaspora space', a contact zone between different ethnic groups with differing needs and intentions as transients, sojourners or settlers.[10]

Given its proximity to the central commercial districts, sailortown Liverpool was not hidden from view: unlike in London, there were no boundaries for flaneurs to transgress. Hence the fear among social reformers of moral contamination given the area's 'unenviable pre-eminence in the unnecessary superfluity of its moral and material temptations to wrong-doing'.[11] Beneath the licensed theatres and music halls of the city centre, sailortown offered 'entertainment' in a number of public, beer and refreshment houses, nearly 50 in total in 1866, 'low places' catering for the vast floating, migrant and casual population. In these dubious premises various acts lured the unwary into drink and other dangers through device and deception: risqué tableaux vivants in which participants cross-dressed or wore only flesh-coloured cotton tights; and the 'hideous' blacking up of musicians and dancers such as Mr Nozzle ('a nigger singer with blackened face, striped shirt, tight trousers, and top boots') and Mr Banjo Bones, a favourite who, as Dickens observed, could command a considerable fee.[12] In areas like this, with a floating population of transients, sojourners and settlers, Liverpool was more akin to Five Points, 'the 19th century New York City neighborhood that invented tap dance,

stole elections, and became the world's most notorious slum'.[13] Liverpool, however, seems not to have matched such 'syncretic' fusion between Irish and black culture, although it was always receptive to the latest fashion from across the Atlantic – boys as young as seven took to the cheap concert room stage to perform clog dances 'à la Juba'.[14]

For Edwardian guide books and 'booster' publications at the time of Liverpool's 700th anniversary in 1907, cosmopolitanism was Merseyside's unique selling point. Ramsay Muir's specially commissioned history was duly infused with cosmopolitan pride, noting that 'there is no city in the world, not even London itself, in which so many foreign governments find it necessary to maintain consular offices for the safeguarding of their exiled subjects'. Underneath the rhetoric, however, a different set of attitudes was emerging, increasingly xenophobic and racist, the origins of Liverpool's deeply troubled racialised relations throughout the twentieth century.[15]

Down on the waterfront, discrimination intensified in the 1890s against 'Lascars Adrift', exploited sailors from the Indian sub-continent forced to accept lower wages and harsher conditions by 'Asiatic Articles', and often left sick or incapacitated in port to be tended by the diminutive English Muslim community, led by W.H. Quilliam, a Manx migrant and convert to Islam.

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10.　John Belchem and Donald M. MacRaild, 'Cosmopolitan Liverpool', in John Belchem, ed., *Liverpool 800: culture, character and history*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006, pp. 311-91

11.　'Liverpool's Character', *Porcupine* 30 June 1877

12.　See the evidence of Head Constable Greig to 'Report of the Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations', PP1866(373)XVI, qq.6943-7199.
　　'The Amusements and Literature of the People: Labour and the Poor, Liverpool, letter xvi', *Morning Chronicle 2* Sept.1850;
　　'The Free Concert Room' in H. Shimmin, *Liverpool life: its pleasures, practices and pastimes*, Liverpool, 1857, ch.4;
　　Dickens, *Uncommercial Traveller*, ch.5.

13.　Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points*, New York: Plume, 2001.

14.　Shimmin, 'Free concert room'.

15.　Ramsay Muir, *A History of Liverpool*, London, 1907, p. 305

By the Edwardian period, as fears grew that the 'black gangs' of firemen and trimmers working in the heat and fumes of steamship stokeholds were a new dangerous class, 'cosmopolitan' Liverpool was to the fore in calling for legislation to restrict in-migration, to prevent what the *Liverpool Review* described as the 'wholesale immigration to this country of dirty, destitute aliens'.[16]

The 'unguarded dumping' of 32 Chinese in Liverpool in 1906 without the guarantees of employment required by the new Aliens Act of 1905 prompted an hysterical 'Yellow Peril' reaction. Fears of displacement by cheap 'Ching-Ching' labour were compounded by moral alarmism, an indication of the way in which inter-ethnic relations in Liverpool tended to be refracted and racialized through masculine competition and sexual jealousy. Following sensationalist press forays into Liverpool's 'vice-ridden' Chinatown, the city council appointed a special commission. Its report repudiated allegations of immoral, criminal and insanitary behaviour: their penchant for petty gambling apart, the Chinese emerged as model citizens.[17]

Tensions remained in the labour market, however, as employers continued to favour 'alien' Chinese firemen down in the boiler rooms, applauding their superior skills (all the more vital during wartime labour shortages) while still maintaining the racial wage hierarchy with its lower 'Asiatic' rates. At the end of the First World War (and again at the end of the Second World War), large numbers of time-regulated Chinese seamen in Liverpool were repatriated. Little attention was accorded to the distress which accompanied these deportations. The focus of concern in labour and race relations in 'sailortown' Liverpool had shifted away from the alien 'yellow peril' to the much enlarged 'British coloured' presence.

Black settlement had been growing steadily in the late nineteenth century. Numbers increased significantly during the First World War, a time of critical shortage in the labour market. Subsequent demobilization, compounded by the rapid collapse of the short post-war boom, had a disastrous impact on labour and race relations. Wartime xenophobic anti-alien fervour was now extended to colonial subjects, the 'British coloured' who were purportedly taking jobs

(and women) away from demobilized white workers denied the land fit for heroes promised by the government. Race riots occurred in a number of ports across Britain in 1919 – London, Glasgow, Hull, Cardiff, Barry and Salford – but those in Liverpool were particularly intense, reflecting tensions which extended far beyond 'sailortown'. Following a hastily convened conference in the Colonial Office, a special repatriation scheme was introduced, offering various inducements to 'British coloureds' to return to the colonies. The black community proudly and defiantly asserted the right to remain. 'Some of us', T.D. Aleifasakure Toummanah, Secretary of the Ethiopian Hall, declared, 'have been wounded, and lost limbs and eyes fighting for the Empire of which we have the honour to belong.' His demand was both clear and simple: 'We ask for British justice, to be treated as true and loyal sons of Great Britain.' These British subjects, however, were soon to encounter the full force of British institutional racism.[18]

Various vested interest groups – shipping owners, trade union leaders, government departments and local officials – struggled to redefine British nationality so as to codify and institutionalize racial hierarchy for their own advantage. The extent of documentary proof required by the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order in 1925 was an impracticable stipulation for thousands of seamen born in Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, India and Malaya. Their British nationality and right of domicile were snatched away by bureaucratic fiat.

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16.　*Liverpool Review* 7 March 1903

17.　*Report of the Commission Appointed by the City Council to inquire into the Chinese Settlements in Liverpool*, Liverpool 1907

18.　**Laura Tabili**, '*We ask for British justice*'. *Workers and Racial Difference in late imperial Britain*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

To compound matters, the notorious extra-legal Elder Dempster agreements of the 1920s and 1930s allowed the shipping firm to engage and discharge 'undocumented' crews in West Africa at discount wages and conditions. Over time, Elder Dempster's West African employees developed an array of resistance strategies against their exploitation, acquiring British passports and/or marriage partners, entitling them to work (at union rates), relief and social services in Liverpool.[19]

Throughout the inter-war years there were repeated 'moral panics' about the growth of black (and Arab) settlements and the wholesale dumping of 'coloured seamen'. The Home Office sought to set the record straight about its efforts to restrict immigration:

> We have done what we can to prevent the alien element increasing but there is no power to deal with the British element. It is a penalty of being a mother country with a large mixed Empire. The most that we can do is to discourage coloured seamen from obtaining British passports, so that we can treat them as aliens, when they get here, and prevent them remaining.[20]

By this time, the growth of the black settlement was attracting the attention of academic social scientists based at the University whose approach, however, differed little from the blend of sex, prejudice and economics favoured by other interested parties, not least Havelock Wilson's seamen's union in defence of its white members. In his 'Foreword' to M.E. Fletcher's *Report on an Investigation into the Colour Problem in Liverpool and other ports* (1930), a frankly racist condemnation of miscegenation in Liverpool, Professor P.M. Roxby, chair of the Liverpool Association for the Welfare of Half-Caste Children, questioned the value of temporary expedients short of the 'total exclusion of negro labour on ships entering the port'. Fletcher's verdict on inter-racial marriage with negro seamen – promiscuous, ridden with sexually transmitted diseases, violent and contemptuous to their women – was damning. In most other contexts inter-marriage has acted as a register of racial integration: in Liverpool, however, it was stigmatized and condemned as *the* 'social problem'. The black community retreated from sailortown into Toxteth, the 'new Harlem of Liverpool', seldom to be seen in the city centre.

A similar pattern applied in seaports throughout post-colonial Europe. What was formerly exotic multicultural contact space, acquired more problematic meanings: sailortown came to pose awkward questions about citizenship, inter-racial marriage and employment discrimination (although in Hamburg, there was a shift to bohemianism and hedonistic tourism). Black communities in near waterfront zones inherited many of the defining myths of sailortown in terms of crime, vice and foreignness and were unable to disabuse such misperception and media misrepresentation. Beyond Europe, sailortown came to symbolise western imperialism, provoking an ambivalent range of reactions.

Viewed in terms of other major seaports, sailortown in Liverpool was not exceptional but a formative example of a world-wide urban sub-type: indeed Liverpool established many of the representational clichés that became universal. Sailortown, however, remains the crucial factor for Liverpool's notorious 'otherness' within the British national context. A circumscribed area on the maritime-urban frontier, sailortown has stood as metonym for the wider city, the critical influence in representations (my own included)

of Liverpool's distinctive culture, character and history. It is thus somewhat ironic that the current regeneration of Liverpool privileges the waterfront and city centre but has yet to extend to the sailortown which once occupied the crucial space in-between.[21]

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19. Diane Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers since the nineteenth century*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999, pp.80-3.
     See also the special issue (edited by Frost) on 'Ethnic Labour and British Imperial Trade: A History of Ethnic Seafarers in the UK', Immigrants and Minorities, 13, nos 2 and 3, 1994.

20. National Archives, Kew: HO45/25404 Aliens: Colour problems and white slave traffic in Liverpool and other ports; police reports; correspondence with the Association for the Welfare of Half-Caste Children

21. For the limitations of conservation and regeneration, see Dennis Rodwell, 'Urban Regeneration and the Management of Change: Liverpool and the Historic Urban Landscape', *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, July 2008, pp.83-106.

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