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The Packet Rats of the Yankee Hell-Ships: Class Identity in  
Chanties on Trans-Atlantic Packet Ships, 1820-1850

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Abstract:

The beginning of the Atlantic packet shipping lines marked a new stage in the industrialization of the Atlantic. This article seeks to understand nuances of that period of industrialization through the perspective of the laborers who worked aboard these ships, the sailors known as the “packet rats.” They were the source of many chanties, or shipboard work-songs used to coordinate labor onboard a vessel. These chanties will be used as a primary source to argue that a conscious proletarian sailor class could have emerged in the early 19th century rather than the traditionally earlier date given for its emergence.

Article:

O' the times are hard and the wages low  
Leave her, John-ny, leave her,  
I'll pack my bag and go below;  
It's time for us to leave her.<sup>1</sup>

The verse above is provided by the famous maritime historian Marcus Rediker, who describes it as an “old sea song” and uses it to begin discussing desertion in his classic book *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*.<sup>2</sup> In that book, Rediker argues for understanding the deepwater sailor, or Sailor John as he was known, of the first half of the eighteenth century as a proletarian who survived practices like impressment, crimping, and flogging by participating in tactics of resistance like desertion, work stoppage, mutiny, and piracy. I don't necessarily disagree with that vision. I would, however, correct some misrepresentations. The “sea song” Rediker deploys was actually a “chanty” or a shipboard work song used to coordinate the labor of sailors -- and it is not “old,” either. In fact it likely originated one-hundred years after the period which Rediker described, on Atlantic packet ships manned by the sailors known as the “packet rats.” *Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her!* is also not about desertion; the former sailor and chantyman Frank Bullen describes how it was used by the crew to threaten mutiny to the officers.<sup>3</sup>

Rediker's misrepresentation brings into focus how chanties have been misunderstood by historians and this article seeks to revise that understanding. Chanties were a way for the packet rats to express their grievances with their livelihood at the time. While the captain and shipowner were making more money from the regularized transportation of goods and people across the

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Thomas Bullen and W. F. Arnold, *Songs of Sea Labour (Chanties)* (London: Orpheus Music Publishing, 1914), xiii.

Atlantic, Sailor John was left trying to maintain an industrial system without the aids provided by industrial technology such as the steamship. He also faced brutal discipline at the hands of the officers, and exploitation from both the officers and crimps ashore. To express his dissatisfaction with this state of affairs Sailor John would sing of these ills in his chanties. In these chanties, created at the beginning of the regular Atlantic packet shipping, class consciousness or awareness of the packet rats' status as exploited labor began to appear. However, in these same chanties, the packet rats' working class identity was also complexified by powerful, competing national and racial identities, as part of a larger, industrializing Atlantic World.

## **The Yarns Told of The Deepwater Sailor**

Although Rediker continues to be a pillar of the field, the maritime history of sailor identity has since branched out both in support and opposition to his work. First, it should be acknowledged that Rediker was not the first to write of sailors as a class. That discussion began with Jesse Lemisch's article *Jack Tar in the Streets*, which argued that the image of the sailor "as jolly, childlike, [and] irresponsible," was created by a society that wanted him dependent on wages and laws and then came to the conclusion "that that was the way he really was."<sup>4</sup> Since then, most of the conversation has shifted to Rediker, however, he isn't alone in his view of a proletarian sailor class. Paul Gilje's article on the maritime workers of the New York docks extended the class conflicts of the sailor identified by Lemisch and Rediker from the ship to the New York boardinghouse where Sailor John's landlord held the powers of banker and broker over him. The boardinghouse keepers would often engage in the practice of crimping, which was to try and "extract every possible monetary value from the seafarer, initially by taking his wages and then by exchanging his body (whether alive, sober, drunk or dead) for an advance on the

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<sup>4</sup> Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets," in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1968), 380.

wages from his next [voyage].”<sup>5</sup> Basically, the boardinghouse keepers worked to steal John’s pay ashore just as the masters and courts of Rediker would at sea.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, John has also been shown to be a more complex man than Rediker has suggested. For example, far from supporting the British merchant class, the admiralty courts of the British Empire were exhibited by George F. Steckley to be kind to Sailor John who would be able to “reasonably expect to win [his] wages at Admiralty,”<sup>7</sup> suggesting Sailor John was also supported by the system and not just a victim of it. Furthermore, sailing was much more a phase of life rather than a lifelong career. In *Poor Man’s Goldmine?*, Ojala, Frigren, and Ojala find that of Swedish and Finnish sailors, three-fourths were hired out on board a ship less than five times while ninety percent were hired out less than ten times.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Vickers supports this, writing “even if most youths in maritime societies shipped themselves before the mast several times in their teens and twenties, few remained seamen into middle age.”<sup>9</sup> Vickers also goes further in disassociating sailors from the mobility ascribed to them by Rediker as “the work they performed on the water took place much closer to home, in more routine voyages... any portrait of sailors that casts them primarily as adventurers to distant parts distorts the context within which most seafaring actually unfolded.”<sup>10</sup>

Not all sailors’ experiences were the same, though, and just as the class identity of sailors has been explored, so too have other kinds of identities. Racial identity has been one of the main

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<sup>5</sup> Graeme J. Milne, *People, Place and Power on the Nineteenth-Century Waterfront: Sailortown* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 107.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Gilje, “On the Waterfront: Maritime Workers in New York City in the Early Republic, 1800-1850,” *New York History* 77, no. 4 (October, 1996), 399.

<sup>7</sup> George F. Steckley, “Litigious Mariners: Wage Cases in the Seventeenth-Century Admiralty Court,” *The Historical Journal* 42, no. 2 (1999), 345.

<sup>8</sup> Jari Ojala, Pirita Frigren, and Anu Ojala, “The Poor Man’s Goldmine? Career Paths in Swedish and Finnish merchant shipping, c. 1840-1950,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 42, no. 5 (December, 2017), 583-607.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Vickers and Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Vickers and Walsh, *Young Men*, 3.

kinds of identity explored by historians. W. Jeffrey Bolster, writing of the experiences of African American seamen, demonstrates the advantages that a seaman's life could provide for African Americans, but also shows that there were no opportunities for skilled black sailors to rise to the quarterdeck like white sailors, making them a permanent underclass at sea.<sup>11</sup> Indian sailors or lascars, due to the specific conditions they faced under dual European and Indian labor systems, were also "in many respects 'unfree labour' while at sea."<sup>12</sup> Gender has also been a serious consideration of scholars of sailor identity. Crucially, Margaret S. Creighton argues that men shaped the sailing voyage as a masculine endeavor to the exclusion of women not just as a gendered goal, but as a class goal as well. In other words, the interdependence of a sailing crew was a masculine objective to be worked toward by the sailing crew through the complex rejection of attachments to women.<sup>13</sup> My research on chanties suggests a more nuanced picture, as some chanties, including those used later in this article, note the dependence of sailors on women both back home and at sea.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the case, for all these maritime historians, class is salient for their sailors, but their specific sailors' relationship to class is ambivalent. The scholarship on Sailor John as mobile, exploited, Atlantic proletariat, or homeward bound, well paid, and protected seasonal worker is therefore highly contested. Vickers perhaps sums it up best: "Any attempt to classify sailors as adventure-seeking youths, old salts, shipmasters on the make, saltwater mechanics,

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<sup>11</sup> W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 75, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Michael H. Fisher, "Working across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600-1857," *International Review of Social History* 51, no. S14 (2006): 21.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret S. Creighton, "American Mariners and the Rites of Manhood, 1830-1870," in *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour*, ed. Colin Howell and Richard Twoney (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Acadiensis Press, 1991), 145-146, 148-149.

<sup>14</sup> Stan Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas: Shipboard work-songs and songs used as work-songs from the great days of sail* (Mystic: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1994), 150-151, 177-178.

proletarians, or lumpenproletarians runs into this obstacle: that in the course of their lives most seafaring men fell into several of these roles.”<sup>15</sup> This article seeks to expand upon this problem by exploring one place and time, packet shipping between Europe and North America, where and when sailors fell into one of these roles that of class conscious proletarians in an industrializing and recently pacified Atlantic.

## **Singing Aboard The Bloodboats**

Modern chanty literature has failed to relate the deep-water sailor’s work-songs to their class consciousness. Instead, much more attention has been placed on the other identities expressed through chanties. Beginning in 1961, Stan Hugill’s *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, often called the ‘chanty bible,’ devotes extensive attention the ethnic and national origins of sea shanties.<sup>16</sup> However, no attention is directed in the book toward the class identities of sailors, but Hugill’s second book on chanties, *Shanties and Sailors’ Songs*, is better in this regard with several references to sailors’ class issues including vicious punishment, impressment (the practice of kidnapping sailors or really any able-bodied man and forcing them to work on British ships), and conflict between the captain and crew. He uses this primarily to contrast the reality of a sailor’s life with the ‘sea music’ of the time before chanties, which created a false image of the sailor.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent scholarship on chanties has focused on the sexuality and eroticism of sailors by using an unpublished unexpurgated manuscript for a shanty collection, the influence of Hawaiian sailors on the genre, and the national identities of the folk revival movement which sought to preserve them.<sup>18</sup> The most recent book on the subject of chanties, *Boxing the Compass*

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<sup>15</sup> Vickers and Walsh, *Young Men*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 9-20.

<sup>17</sup> Stan Hugill, *Shanties and Sailors’ Songs* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), 12-15, 25, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Jessica Floyd, “Jib-Booms, Barrels, and Dead-Eyes: Singing Sex in Sea Chanteys” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2017), 3; James Revell Carr, *Hawaiian Music in Motion: Mariners, Missionaries, and Minstrels* (Urbana:



by Gibb Schreffler, has taken a critical look at mapping the chanty discourse that has developed around racial identity.<sup>19</sup> The fact that none of these studies have seriously evaluated chanties with regard to their class identities is a serious gap in the literature that needs to be rectified.

That this gap hasn't been rectified perhaps speaks to how the packet shipping lines have been forgotten as well. These packet shipping lines were freight lines of sailing ships that transported transatlantic cargo and passengers on a regular schedule. Previously, a captain or owner would advertise the departure of a vessel on a certain day or time but would often wait past said date a few days or even weeks for a full load of cargo to be assigned aboard, infuriating the passengers and exporters who had already paid. Beginning with the Blackball Line, launched in 1817 and originally called the Old Line, these ships would instead leave and arrive on schedule as part of a regular liner service.<sup>20</sup> This new industrialized form of shipping reflected the need for more regular transatlantic voyages. It also put greater pressure on the crews to maintain an industrialized shipping industry without any of the aids of industrial technology like the steamship. One way these sailors, or packet rats as they were known, expressed their frustrations with the additional pressure and lack of industrial technological aid was through the practice of chanting.

Chanting was a work-song tradition of sailors singing to coordinate their labor and the songs they sung became known as chanties. Although music had been used to coordinate labor since the time of the Greeks and Romans, the specific practice of chanting only really took off

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University of Illinois Press, 2014), 12; Gerry Smyth, "Shanty singing and the Irish Atlantic: Identity and hybridity in the musical imagination of Stan Hugill," *International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 2 (May 9, 2017): 387-406; Graeme J Milne, "Collecting the sea shanty: British maritime identity and Atlantic musical cultures in the early twentieth century," *International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 2 (May 9, 2017): 370-386.

<sup>19</sup> Gibb Schreffler, *Boxing the Compass: A Century and a Half of Discourse About Sailor's Chanties* (Lansdale: Loomis House Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Melissa Meriam Bullard, *Brooklyn's Renaissance: Commerce, Culture, and Community in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 66.

after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and ended with the widespread use of the steamship, which reduced the need for coordinated physical labor by crewmen.<sup>21</sup> Chantying was led by a crew member with a particularly strong singing voice and a large repertoire of songs known as the chantyman who held a higher station than an average sailor within the crew hierarchy.<sup>22</sup> While these are all relatively uncontroversial statements on the activity of chantying, folklorists and academics debate on the ethnic origins of and ethnic influences on chantying.<sup>23</sup> Suffice to say whatever their origins the functional role they played in coordinating labor led to their adoption by sailors.

The origins of the various chanties are a particular concern of the famous collector, folklorist, and former chantyman Stan Hugill, and I will be relying on his collection as an archive of chanties in this article. Specifically, I will be using an abridged version of his monumental tome *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, on account of the sheer volume of chanties and breadth of versions included within. Moreover, to illustrate and contextualize the chanties, I will also use notes from other chanty collections (and collectors) as well as from maritime historians. There are, however, certain limitations to this archive. For one, many of the chanties were bowdlerized, with much of the sexual content being expurgated or camouflaged, as many of the lyrics were simply unprintable by mainstream publishers and still are.<sup>24</sup> The other problem is that chantymen frequently improvised on their verses -- so much so that Frank Bullen goes so far as to not include any verses in his chanty collection.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hugill, *Shanties and Sailors' Songs*, 1, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> See *Boxing the Compass* for an overview of this debate.

<sup>24</sup> For a modern bowdlerized chanty collection see *Sailor Song: The Shanties and Ballads of the High Seas* and for a look at what unbawdlerized chanties were see *Jib-Booms, Barrels, and Dead-Eyes: Singing Sex in Sea Chanteys*.

<sup>25</sup> Bullen and Arnold, *Songs of Sea Labour*, vi-vii.

There are nonetheless reasons to be optimistic about these songs as sources. For one, the chanties and their verses were almost all written down from the mouths or memories of sailors. So even if some lyrics were incorrect or barely used, the fact remains they were remembered and thought to be used by sailors on ships. In particular, Hugill asked many of his shipmates and sailor friends for chanties and lyrics, compiling them in a list of “Deck Sources.”<sup>26</sup> The chanties he didn’t acquire from his list or his own memory as a chantyman he pulled from other collections, which gathered their chanties from sailors as well.<sup>27</sup> In response to the concern of bowdlerization, the chanties were often used on passenger lines where such indiscrete chanties couldn’t be sung for fear of offending the passengers. Furthermore, “many versions of the same shanty were either quite clean by comparison or else the dirt was disguised.”<sup>28</sup> It’s entirely plausible then that the versions provided by Hugill were the ones frequently used on the packet ships. The chanties discussed here are primary sources gathered directly from sailors and dated by folklorists to the time of the packet ships. It is from these sources that I will seek to reveal expressions of class consciousness by the packet rats.

## **“For the bonnie green flag and the harp without the crown”**

First, though, there is a challenge to teasing out the class consciousness of sailors: the intermeddling of other identities in chanty lyrics. This is especially true of Irish nationality, as it is the primary identity that seems to unify afterguard (the officers of the ship) and crew. The men who worked the packet lines “were almost one hundred per cent Irish.”<sup>29</sup> They were fleeing the potato famine of the 1840s and infused certain chanties with an Irish nationalism in a genre

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<sup>26</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, xiv-xv.

<sup>27</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>28</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 18.

where other nationalities are less visible. An example of this is *The Gals of Dublintown*. The song tells of an Irish ship's captain, raising "the bonnie green flag an' the Harp without the Crown" when the ship reached Dublin and again when the ship reached New York on St. Patrick's Day. That the captain is the protagonist of the song for raising the Irish flag shows a connection between a figure of authority such as him and the regular crew who were singing this song through their shared Irish identity. Similarly, later in the song the following line appears after the crew arrived in for St. Patrick's Day: "the officers an' men dead drunk, around the decks they pile." Here again a camaraderie appears between countrymen celebrating their national holiday that crosses over the class boundaries created by the decks of a ship. Then by the next day they'll "work widout a frown, for on board the saucy *Shenandoah* flies the Harp without the Crown!"<sup>30</sup> Even though there was hard work to do on the packet ships, as long as the ship was led by an Irishman flying the bonnie green flag, the chanties tell us the packet rats were happy to work. What *The Gals of Dublintown* is yearning for, then, is an Irish nationalistic dream, a country where everyone worked together under the united flag of Ireland no matter their station in life. Some of the sailors onboard these packet ships were much more interested in their identity as Irishmen rather than any sort of collective working class identity that was forming below deck.

Irish identity also operated favorably between the differences of crew and passenger. Often the Irishmen who didn't go to work on the packet ships emigrated to America on them. The chanty that encapsulated this migration was *The Irish Emigrant*. The song tells of an Irish emigrant leaving Ireland and reaching America via a packet ship. The emigrant does so in spite of the packet rats who "broke open me chest, an' stole me yellow meal."<sup>31</sup> A self-deprecating

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<sup>30</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 112.

<sup>31</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 224.

willingness to denigrate themselves in order to heroize Irish immigrants aboard one of their ships indicates a cross-class nationalism on the part of the packet rats. Some of the packet rats were clearly responding to the prevailing winds of nationalism that were blowing at the time, creating a strong sense of Irish identity that blew over shipboard class fissures.

Nationalism wasn't the only identity besides class on the minds of the packet rats on board. Race was an identity that some of the mostly Irish sailors navigated in order to sympathize with the black slaves and black workers of the Americas. At the same time, race was also an identity that the packet rats exploited to promote their own interests. The chanty *My Dollar An' A Half A Day* is a site of tension between these intersecting views of black sailors among the packet rats. The chanty itself is likely of white origins but was picked up by black men in the cotton-exporting ports of the South and adapted and taken over by sailors.<sup>32</sup> The chanty's first line of verse is "Lowlands away, I thought I heard them say, my dollar an' a half a day./A dollar an' a half is a n\*\*\*\*\*'s pay." While two verses later is the line "A dollar an' a half a day is a [sailor's] pay."<sup>33</sup> The sailors here are thus comparing themselves to black labor. This assertion is backed up by another verse noting that "A white man's pay is rather high. A black man's pay is rather low."<sup>34</sup> The sailors here could possibly be empathizing with the plight of black men, slave or free, by understanding themselves as having the same low pay. This could be evidence for a broad class consciousness that crossed racial boundaries. However, there is also the likelihood that the sailors here are instead exploiting the poor position of blacks on the racial hierarchy to gain sympathy for themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

*Shallow Brown* provides more evidence for this idea. The song, which has heavy black influence on it, tells of a man who's about to "ship on board a whaler" but not likely by choice.

A few verses later the chanty breaks into

*Massa going to sell me.  
Sell me to a Yankee.  
Sell me for the dollar.  
Great big Spanish dollar.*<sup>35</sup>

Here again the sailors are comparing themselves to enslaved people. The "massa" that this song refers to is (figuratively) the boardinghouse master who sometimes controlled a sailor's life while ashore. When the singer is talking about being sold, he's probably referencing being crimped on board a new voyage. "The dollar" is then the advance notice that sailors got on their wages but was often taken by crimps when they shipped Sailor John. The packet rats are therefore understanding themselves as slaves, even less than a proletarian. Although the system of crimping could at times steal a sailor's ability to sell his labor freely as will be discussed shortly, the comparison to slavery is likely done more to elicit sympathy from other whites rather than to exhibit empathy with enslaved people. Black racial identity was therefore a complexifying addition to a sailor's class consciousness. At times perhaps the sailor could feel empathy toward black labor, but overall it seems the sailor saw the black man's plight as something to be exploited lyrically to gain sympathy for himself.

## **"Shipped Onboard of a Liverpool Liner"**

Although the identity of sailors as a class rarely overshadowed the pull of nationality, many chanties do show the packet rats were very aware of their status as exploited labor. Their awareness of that status is clear through their portrayals of some of the issues that sailors

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<sup>35</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 190.

struggled through at the time, such as crimping and shipboard discipline. They also project a sense of identity for sailors as collective workers. Through their complaints about sailors' compensation and working conditions, the chanties of the packet rats reveal their awareness of the rough life their exploited labor status gave them.

Foremost among the sailor's issues was the system of crimping and shanghaiing that deprived the sailor of his pay and shipped him before the mast again far sooner than he would have liked. While crimping, the practice of swindling John out of his pay and shipping him aboard before he desired, was likely more common, shanghaiing was a major subject of chanties. Shanghaiing was the process whereby sailors (or sometimes others without sailing experience) would be drugged, kidnapped, and shipped aboard a voyage. Some chanties make mention of shanghaiing in the Atlantic despite the process' more famous presence in the Pacific.<sup>36</sup>

The occurrence of shanghaiing in chanties speaks to a larger system that attempted to control the labor of sailors. *Reuben Ranzo* begins: "[Ranzo] wuz a New York tailor... Shanghai'd aboard of a whaler,/They tried to make him a sailor."<sup>37</sup> *Ranzo* attests to the presence of shanghaiing in the Atlantic. Similarly, the chanty *Liverpool Judies* is from the perspective of a sailor who has just dropped anchor in New York and is approached by a crimp who promises

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<sup>36</sup> Most historians who have written on crimping in the nineteenth century seem to dance around whether or not shanghaiing took place in the Atlantic. Graeme Milne makes no mention of whether shanghaiing took place in the Atlantic and all of his specific examples of shanghaiing take place in the Pacific.<sup>36</sup> Judith Fingard argues that the traditional association of crimping with just shanghaiing in Canada is misleading, suggesting it wasn't that common but doesn't come out and say whether it happened or not.<sup>36</sup> The interesting part here is that neither historian denies shanghaiing took place in the Atlantic, but they don't seem willing to put their names to the idea that shanghaiing was a part of Atlantic crimping. Even though there are stories of crimps in the Atlantic willing to engage in far more dangerous activities such as boarding a ship while and getting into a gun-fight. Milne cites a story of how "the first and second mates of a ship lying off Savannah had a gun-fight with three crimps in 1847 that left both of them injured, while the crimps were run off by the ship's carpenter wielding a cutlass."<sup>36</sup> Given the willingness of crimps to use far more dangerous methods to secure crewmen and the occurrence of shanghaiing in some chanties I'm willing to say that shanghaiing is more likely than not to have happened in the Atlantic during this time.

<sup>37</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 176-177.

him a voyage “wid lashin’ o’ liquor an’ beggar-all to do.” The crimp then asks if the sailor will desert to which the sailor refuses, but “the lousy ol Barstard had drugs in me drink” and “The next I remembers I woke in de morn,/On a three skys’l yarder bound south round Cape Horn.”<sup>38</sup> Rediker has argued that desertion was a way for the sailor to take control of his labor.<sup>39</sup> Just the same, a decision by a sailor not to desert is also asserting his control over his own labor. That control was taken away by shanghaiing, reducing the sailor to a status below the proletariat that he has so often been compared to. Moreover, if shanghaiing was everywhere, as the chanties suggest, then there was a worldwide system of shanghaiing whereby sailors coming from a long voyage would be subsequently deprived of their pay, kidnapped, and shipped aboard another awful voyage by the crimp, which removed their control over their labor completely.

Even if there was not as much shanghaiing going on as some chanties lead us to believe, crimping was an invaluable part of the shipping industry at the time.<sup>40</sup> *Go To Sea Once More* showcases this. After losing all his money on sex workers and alcohol, the sailor Jack Ratcliffe is forced to go to the Liverpool crimp Rapper Brown who says “Last time yiz was paid off wid me yiz chalked no score, but I’ll take yer advance an’ I’ll give yiz a chance an’ I’ll send yiz to sea once more.”<sup>41</sup> From there Jack is sent on a whaling trip in the freezing Arctic. The swiftness that Jack returns to the crimp adds to the idea that this was a system, to which the sailors of the time were often resigned.<sup>42</sup>

The inability to escape crimping is also suggested by the chanty *Paddy, Lay Back*. In it a sailor is shipped onboard a bad voyage and then he decides to desert:

*I quickly made me mind up that I’d jump ‘er,*

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<sup>38</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 306-307.

<sup>39</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 100-101.

<sup>40</sup> Fingard, *Jack in Port*, 200.

<sup>41</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 404.

<sup>42</sup> Milne, *Waterfront: Sailortown*, 119-120.



*I'd leave the beggar an' git a job ashore;  
I swum across the Bay an' went an' left 'er,*<sup>43</sup>

However, despite deserting,

*Jimmy the Wop [a crimp] he knew a thing or two, sir,  
An' soon he'd shipped me outward bound again*<sup>44</sup>

*Paddy, Lay Back* describes a system that was incredibly difficult for sailors to escape. It was also most certainly one of the problems sailors were aware of that made them feel as though they were exploited labor. Indeed, the widespread presence of shanghaiing and crimping in these songs showcases the effects of industrializing shipping on labor in the Atlantic.

## **Fed Only Handspike Hash**

The risks for the packet rat weren't just in port, but on the high seas as well. Though no longer the era of the privateer, the packet ship was no place of peace either. Hugill claims that “[Atlantic] Ocean Law was a rule of fist with a capital F.”<sup>45</sup> This plays into the famous chanty *Blow the Man Down*, which he terms “the war-cry of the Packet Rats.”<sup>46</sup> In the chanty, “blow” refers to the act of knocking “a man down by means of fist, belayin’-pin, or capstan-bar’.”<sup>47</sup> It should say something about the intensity and frequency of the brutal discipline enforced on these Packet Ships that a chanty known as the “war-cry” of these sailors goes:

*Timme way, hay, blow the man down!*

...  
*Ooh! Give us some time to blow the man down!*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 243.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 158.

*Blow the Man Down* is also not the only chanty to discuss the use of discipline aboard the Packet Ships. *Blow, Boys, Blow*, features the following verses:

*What d'yer think they had for dinner?  
Belayin'-pin soup and a squeeze through the wringer.*

*What d'yer think they had for supper?  
Oh, handspike hash an' a roll through the scuppers.*<sup>49</sup>

“Handspike hash” and “belayin’-pin soup” refer to the handspikes and belaying-pins that officers used to discipline the crew. Rediker demonstrates the regular use of use of such instruments by listing off the many such tools that could be used for violent ends on a ship.<sup>50</sup> Regular use of these instruments in disciplining the crew, so much so that they would be spoken of in sailors’ work-songs, suggests an industrialized work order that promoted the efficiency and timeliness of a ship’s voyage over the well-being and conditions of its crew. This wouldn’t be too surprising to folklorists either. Chanty collector Richard Terry makes clear that the packet ships’ “immaculate condition was the result of a terrible discipline, in which the belaying-pin was a gruesome factor.”<sup>51</sup>

When the belaying-pin and handspike weren’t enough to cow the crew, the officers could always turn to flogging to maintain discipline. Flogging was often brutal with the damage caused sometimes permanent and excessive.<sup>52</sup> The previously mentioned chanty *Reuben Ranzo* details one such flogging. *Ranzo* is the story of a shanghaied tailor who had no idea of the art of seamanship. After a few failed attempts at basic seaman’s tasks the captain resolves to flog him which the song describes as excessive: “They gave him lashes twenty,/Nineteen more than

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<sup>49</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 173.

<sup>50</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 237.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Runciman Terry, *The Shanty Book Part I* (London: J. Curwen & Sons Ltd., 1921), 29.

<sup>52</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 213-217.

plenty.”<sup>53</sup> The point to note here is that the sailors singing this song could recognize the needless brutality of the discipline that was meted out aboard ship. Ranzo’s flogging was apparently so excessive that “Reuben Ranzo fainted,” but the captain resolved to give him thirty more lashes until “his daughter begged for mercy.”<sup>54</sup> Though Ranzo’s story ends on a happy note, whereupon he receives an education from the captain’s daughter, becomes a captain himself, and marries her, many such stories of real flogging end with permanent disfigurement or death.<sup>55</sup>

*Ranzo* illustrates the perils and opportunities of life at sea. On one hand, learn navigation and the skills of seaman, stick with it long enough, and you could become a captain or at the very least a mate. On the other hand, fail to do so and you could be flogged well past the point of fainting and even death. It’s unsurprising then that some chanties are filled with complaints of the working conditions and the officers.

## **Pay Me My Money Down**

Of course, one of the chief complaints was pay. Although Rediker mentions the many non-monetary ways in which sailors received their pay, the primary compensation concern of the following chanties seems to be with the monetary payment received by sailors.<sup>56</sup> Going back to *My Dollar an’ a Half a Day*, declares that “A dollar an’ a half is a [sailor]’s pay,/A dollar an’ a half won’t pay my way.<sup>57</sup>” For these sailors, higher pay was important because otherwise they “can’t git home.”<sup>58</sup> The song ends with the sailors resolving to become hoosiers, or white cotton stowers, in Mobile Bay likely for the “five dollars a day” that was apparently a hoosier’s pay.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 177.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 177-178.

<sup>56</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 126-133.

<sup>57</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 63.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 63-64.

The chanty itself shows some of the importance of receiving good pay to Sailor John because without it he'd be stranded away from home unable to return. This was especially true for the packet rats who "would freely boast that they never made more than a 'passage', i. e. a one-way trip"<sup>60</sup> across the Atlantic. The worst case of said phenomenon could be that of a sailor trying to return to Brooklyn but kept getting shanghaied in the wrong direction, a narrative that again speaks to how the lack of labor power and money worked against sailor John.<sup>61</sup> There were of course other reasons to desire good pay, many of which are related in *Pay Me The Money Down*. Among them are paying for sex workers and alcoholic beverages.<sup>62</sup> The restraint aboard ships often meant that once a sailor had reached shore, he began to lose it all to the delights of sailortown and not just those provided by the crimp at inflated prices.<sup>63</sup>

## Deserters and Mutineers

The pay wasn't the only part of their work with which sailors took issue. *Paddy, Lay Back* lists many of the conditions that convinced the sailor to jump ship. These include an abusive mate who "blowed [him] down an' kicked [him] hard a-stern-o" and called him "a lousy, dirty son-o'-a-bitch" after he asked which watch was his.<sup>64</sup> Desertion was, after all, often "used to escape the grasp of a brutal master or mate."<sup>65</sup> After they got out of port "half the crew [was] a-pukin' o'er the ship's side." This is reference to sickness, which was another common reason sailors deserted as it would aid in avoiding getting ill from sailing to disease-ridden areas.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 162.

<sup>61</sup> Milne, *Waterfront: Sailortown*, 106.

<sup>62</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 370.

<sup>63</sup> Milne, *Waterfront: Sailortown*, 120.

<sup>64</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 243.

<sup>65</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 101.

<sup>66</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 101.

When the ship reached port, the captain “stopped the boardin’-masters comin’ aboard.”<sup>67</sup> A reference to how, when planning to jump a ship, Sailor John would sometimes simply wait for the crimps to come to him. Right before his ship entered port, a crimp, usually a boarding master, would climb aboard and hand out business cards and tell him the location of their boarding house.<sup>68</sup> Then, after reaching dock, the deserting sailor would leave to head to the boardinghouse he was directed toward. By preventing these boarding masters from coming aboard, the captain was hoping to prevent his sailors’ desertion and control their labor; however, his action in this regard just served as one more reason for this sailor to desert. The list of complaints laid out in *Paddy, Lay Back* serves to illustrate sailors’ awareness of their poor and dangerous working conditions and the fact that so many would desert because of these reasons serves to underline said awareness.

Another response to these conditions was mutiny, and one chanty in particular, *Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her!*, has been noted for its connection to mutiny. No less than chantyman Frank Thomas Bullen has testified that “to sing [*Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her!*] before the last day or so on board was almost tantamount to mutiny and was apt even at the latest date to be fiercely resented by Captain and Officers.”<sup>69</sup> The chanty is a list of complaints about the voyage the sailors just finished. The complaints are sometimes general, for example “the work wuz hard an’ the voyage wuz long,” and sometimes more specific such as “no Liverpool bread, nor rotten crackerhash, no dandyfunk, nor cold an’ sloppy hash.”<sup>70</sup> What they all show is a general dislike of the working conditions on the packet ships. Since *Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her!*, was a way to signal to the officers the crew was united in a near mutinous mood the chanty helps to reveal

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<sup>67</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 243.

<sup>68</sup> Milne, *Waterfront: Sailortown*, 113.

<sup>69</sup> Bullen and Arnold, *Songs of Sea Labour*, xiii.

<sup>70</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 218-219.

many of the reasons sailors did mutiny and at the very least clarifies the reasons why a collective working class identity might have emerged in an industrializing Atlantic.

## He Was One of the Crew

A couple of chancies also give space to a cross-national, even cosmopolitan identity of sailors as working class. That identity was, as previously established, often restrained by the powerful conflicting and complexifying identities of race and nationality, especially Irish nationality and race. For example, the chancies that do celebrate a trans-national sailor identity pointedly do so without any reference to Irish nationality. One chanty that does so, *Golden Vanitee*, follows the story of a vessel blocked by a pirate ship (full of either Spaniards or Turks) in the lowlands of the Netherlands. The cabin boy then agrees to jump over the side of the ship and sink it, and the captain promises to give the cabin boy his daughter's hand in marriage. The boy then sinks the pirate ship, but the captain refuses to let him on board, promising that "I will sink ye, I will kill ye, if ye claim my child as bride." The cabin boy swims to the other side of the ship where his shipmates are, and in contrast to the captain the crew "hailed him up so quickly, but when on deck he died, and they buried him." The burial itself was quite ritualistic, almost as if the crew claimed him as one of their own: "They sewed him in his hammock which was so strong and wide,/They said a short prayer o'er him, and they dropped him in the tide."<sup>71</sup> The song clearly draws a line between the conduct of the captain and that of the crew and in doing so creates a sense of identity around the bravery and hard work of being a sailor versus an officer. It's important to note that in *Golden Vanitee* this working-class identity showcases itself only in the absence of other identities, such as race or any nationality.

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<sup>71</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 59.

Not all chanties view class identity in absence of others. *Paddy, Lay Back* provides a view of a collective working-class identity that overshadows several national identities. In the song, the sailor sees that “there wuz Spaniards an’ Dutchmen an’ Rooshians,... An’ most o’ ‘em couldn’t speak a word o’ English, But answered to the name of ‘Month’s Advance’.” At first the sailor wishes he was far away from this ship “an’ then I thought what jolly chaps were sailors, An’ with me flipper I wiped away a tear.”<sup>72</sup> The sailors who sang this song were able to show a clear connection to each other over the ties of nationality. There is reason to be cautious about the power of this connection, though. The nationalities here, Spanish, Dutch, and Russian, were all pretty weak in the Atlantic at this time. The Spanish and Dutch empires were already (mostly) consigned to history while the Russians sought greater influence in the east rather than the west at this point. These were not powerful identities in the Atlantic like those of the Irish, who were fleeing the Potato Famine, or black men, who were seeking out a living in the Atlantic away from the plantations of the American coast. That Spanish, Dutch, and Russian nationalities were the ones that a collective working-class identity overcame speaks to how nationality and race were still considerable obstacles for the formation of a more general class consciousness to come through, even in the rigors of industrializing life in the Atlantic.

## **Industrializing Oceans**

That class consciousness does come through the work-songs of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Atlantic packet ship sailor speaks to the challenges the packet rats faced in their line of work. Whether those challenges came in the form of abusive officers, spiked liquor, or simply just poor pay, the sailors of the packet ships endured and, at times, laughed at their predicament through their chanties. What counts for this study, though, is that the packet rats were aware of their

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<sup>72</sup> Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 242.

predicament and willing to work against it. Though *Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her!* may not have been about desertion, as Rediker seems to think, it was still a way for the crew to collectively protest their conditions. The chanties of the packet rats must be seen as a tool just like the handspikes they would use on the windlass. Only their chanties were tools of expression, resistance, and survival, rather than tools of the Atlantic shipping lines.

The packet shipping lines helped to turn the Atlantic Ocean into an industrial zone of the global economy. As part of that process, the voyages across the Atlantic were regularized, the labor aboard ships was controlled with brutal discipline, and profit made from it was vast. While I have explored this industrializing region from the perspective of labor and the through the use of sea chanties, further work could be done to explore this industrialization from the perspective of owners and captains and the passengers who were shipped across it. Similarly, historians can and should explore the perspective of labor utilizing a wider set of archives. I would be particularly curious about the new dynamics between captains and owners given that owners of packet lines now set the date of departure and destination. How did that affect the captains who previously commanded total control over their voyage from departure to dock? Moreover, how did the economics of this system evolve? Clearly, the owners of the lines no longer made as much from each individual voyage, but how did they turn a profit from this regularization? The last economic study of the packet shipping line was *Square Riggers on Schedule* by R. G. Albion published in the 1930s. A new study could perhaps shed a better, more accurate light upon how the packet lines generated profit for their investors. Furthermore, the chanties were not the songs of the passengers who travelled on these ships, although they could have been adapted from said passengers, which leads to the question: what was their relationship to the crew? Was it as bad, as *The Irish Immigrant* would suggest or was it more nuanced? Further research in any of these



areas could be insightful in understanding the industrialization of the Atlantic Ocean and perhaps also in understanding the lives of the people who lived through it.

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