



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

---

## Article

**How to Cite:** Jernigan, B 2017 Belaboring the Maritime Novel: *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Sea Fiction, and Constituent Power. *Open Library of Humanities*, 3(2): 5, pp. 1–33, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.200>

**Published:** 08 September 2017

---

## Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

## Copyright:

© 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## Open Access:

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

## Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

ARTICLE

## Belaboring the Maritime Novel: *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Sea Fiction, and Constituent Power

Brandon Jernigan

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, US  
[bljernigan@gmail.com](mailto:bljernigan@gmail.com)

---

In this article, I argue that Joseph Conrad's revision of popular maritime fiction in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) stages the anachronistic nature of romantic adventure in modernity in order to recuperate its own recognition of the revolutionary capacity of the body and collective labor. Throughout his work, Conrad participates in a range of popular genres, often engaging with, and drawing on, multiple genres in the space of a single novel. His formal flexibility at least partially accounts for his complex critical legacy as a writer who exposes the imperialist ideology in which he participates. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, however, demands that we partially amend our notion of Conrad's deconstructive aesthetic. This approach helps to clarify how the novella engages in critical self-reflection as it reveals the fragile constructedness of both genre and history. In adapting the genre of sea fiction, Conrad places pressure on extant tensions within the genre, especially around labor, and nearly renders the romantic adventure untenable. However, this pressure ultimately becomes an adaptive strategy to confront growing anxiety around imperial interdependency, including the rejection of commodified labor. At a moment in imperial history when the recognition of global interdependence and antagonism threatens the ideological, economic, and political underpinnings of imperialism, Conrad adapts the flexibility of sea fiction to confront this mounting pressure on the imperial consciousness and thus to reconstruct a more flexible representation of imperial relations.

---

## Introduction

‘The world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world:  
[. . .] A strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented’.  
—Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 6.

In this article, I examine Joseph Conrad’s revision of popular maritime fiction in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897 [1984]). Contrary to many critics’ interpretation of the novella as being, as Benita Parry terms, ‘lyrical about authorized deportment and venomous towards deviations, [. . .] declaring social obedience a moral imperative’ (Parry, 1983: 61), I offer a more dialectical reading of Conrad’s text. This reading argues that *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* simultaneously entertains the ‘truth’ of mutiny as well as exposing the untruth of the romantic maritime adventure—its own precarious genre—while attempting to adapt to, and contain, this dialectic. *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* reveals contradictions in maritime fiction and imperial modernity as it highlights the fragile constructedness of both genre and history, but it also uses the flexibility of genre to confront the growing anxiety of late nineteenth-century imperial interdependency: the rejection of commodified labor by an insurgent workforce (via Donkin and the collective subject of the crew) as well as the legacy of slavery and imperial insurrections across the globe (via James Wait). What we might describe as Conrad’s critical approach, which is in part generated by the fading poetics of sea fiction and the instability of genre more broadly, ultimately becomes an adaptive strategy. At a moment in imperial history when the recognition of interdependence and antagonism threatens the ideological, economic, and political underpinnings of imperialism, Conrad taps into generic flexibility to acknowledge this mounting critical pressure on imperial consciousness and thus reconstruct a more flexible representation of imperial relations.

## Modernity and Maritime Fictions

In *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, Conrad channels his own maritime experience into the late nineteenth-century public vogue for ocean adventures. At the same time, the novella demonstrates Conrad’s ability to trouble, estrange, blend, and even assault

generic expectations. Maritime or sea fiction, as Margaret Cohen (2012) has outlined in her work, grew popular in nineteenth-century England with the revival of seafaring adventures in the 1830s by writers such as Frederick Marryat. Cohen notes how seventy-five years after the wave of sea adventures that followed *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the maritime novel was readapted by James Fenimore Cooper in *The Pilot* (1824). Over the next decade, as Cohen writes, 'Cooper's poetics were taken up and reworked by writers in the UK, France, and the US [who] shifted from an innovation to an established international practice – the "traveling" genre' (Cohen, 2012: 133). Because these popular narratives included both short fiction and novels, Cohen uses the broader term 'sea fiction', which had 'a number of names in its day: sea tale, sea romance, sea novel, nautical novel, naval novel, *le roman maritime*' (Cohen, 2012: 134). Like earlier nautical fiction, Cooper's nineteenth-century maritime poetics emphasized practical and professional seafaring knowledge, privileging the technical craft of the sailor, and the adventure is set in the hierarchical community of a ship under the command of a leader who inspires confidence and obedience among his crew (Cohen, 2012: 137–8). Sea fiction relies on authenticity, especially in its nautical jargon, but it also participates heavily in the masculine adventure tradition, where protagonists test themselves in extraordinary, often remote environments alongside idealized heroes and villains. At the same time, the romance of sea fiction was also 'a thoroughly secular romance of men at work; a romance of human practice' (Cohen, 2012: 4). The most idealized character in sea fiction is thus what Cohen describes as the 'complete mariner', who embodies the ethos of craft. He becomes a cultural 'icon of effective practice and human ingenuity, able to beat brutal high-risk conditions against all odds, while pushing knowledge to the frontier and beyond' (Cohen, 2012: 15).

Theorists have focused on the importance of ocean space in global modernity (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003; Virilio, 2016; Steinberg, 2001; Augé, 1995), and literary historians have noted how sea narratives function as nascent attempts to conceptualize modernity itself and, consequently, to adapt new representational strategies for voicing or resolving the various contradictions of an emerging global capitalist system (Cohen, 2012; Baucom, 2005; Casarino, 2001; Jameson, 1981). Though

trans-national and trans-cultural, ocean space for Britain became an imaginative and even material way of managing the difficult cognitive task of grasping imperial space. This oceanic realm functioned not simply as a trope of the global but as an unstriated fluid space in which trade ships opened and traced the networked flows that capital would fill (see Connery [1996]). Increasingly efficient industrial technologies like the compound steam engine facilitated the global circulation of goods and stimulated international financial investments (see O'Rourke and Williamson [1999: 33–4, 217]). As Cesare Casarino (2001) argues, the nineteenth-century sea narrative plays no small role in this macroeconomic shift towards a global system:

It is precisely such a preoccupation with the world of the ship and the sea voyage conceived as autonomous enclosures that turns the emergent form of the modernist sea narrative into a representation producing machine for the turbulent transitions from mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism, into a laboratory for the conceptualization of a world system that was increasingly arduous to visualize, the more multiple, interconnected, and global it became. (Casarino, 2001: 10)

Conrad's work, particularly his innovative approach to genre, helps illuminate such conceptual and representational adaptation under the pressures of nascent global capitalism. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* accumulates a series of related generic tensions that threaten to abrogate its own participation within the tradition of sea fiction. The epicenters of this conflict for Conrad include modern technology, especially steam-powered shipping, and constituent power. In elucidating the key role of 'constituent power' in the novella, I rely on the theoretical combination of Marx (especially the notion of 'living labor') and Spinoza (the theory of *potentia* or immanent power) that Antonio Negri (1999) develops in his materialist ontology to describe the collective and creative power of human beings to produce new social, economic, and political arrangements.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most illuminating here, Negri repeatedly invokes Marx's distinction between living labor and dead labor. For example, 'Living labor [. . .] embodies constituent power and offers it general social

### Sea-Anachronisms: Genre as/and Technology

Sea fiction, especially as it overlapped with boy's adventure fiction, may have provided imaginative stability for British imperialism at its most expansive (Wheeler, 2014: 177–8), but it faced potential irrelevance in the latter half of the nineteenth century. After all, Cohen notes, ocean transportation was becoming safe and reliable, and as a result, it was increasingly vital to 'global communications, passenger travel, and freight transfer' (Cohen, 2012: 179).<sup>2</sup> However, this 'routinization of the sea' meant 'the demise of craft' at the heart of sea fiction: 'As craft faded, the complete mariner started to lose his cultural prestige. Sea fiction's adventure poetics were still in splendid working order in the middle of the nineteenth century. But they celebrated a kind of work that increasingly seemed archaic' (Cohen, 2012: 179). For Cohen, sea fiction's fading relevance provided Conrad with an opportunity to translate 'adventure scenarios into the territories of the mind' by 'taking the psychopathology of everyday life on board ship as his subject' (Cohen, 2012: 204).

In describing Conrad's 'modernist turn' towards frontiers 'situated at the level of language and the human psyche, rather than the physical world' (Cohen, 2012: 180), Cohen builds on earlier interpretations by scholars such as Levenson who focus on Conrad's depictions of human consciousness in the early history of modernism. In fact, Levenson traces modernist aesthetic consciousness to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* as an early example in which 'the defence of work and solidarity must begin to accommodate the claims of consciousness' (Levenson, 1984: 35). In general, literary scholars trace modernist formal experimentation to Conrad's sea

---

conditions through which it can be expressed: constituent power is established politically on that social cooperation that is congenital in living labor, thus interpreting its productivity or, better, its creativity. In the immediacy, the creative spontaneity of living labor, constituent power finds its own capacity for innovation; in the cooperative immediacy of living labor, constituent power finds its creative massification. One must look carefully at this nucleus of living labor, this creative tension that is at the same time political and economic, productive of civil, social, and political structures — in a word, constituent. Cooperative living labor produces a social ontology that is constitutive and innovative, a weaving of forms that touch the economic and the political; living labor produces an indistinct mixture of the political and economic that has a creative figure' (Negri, 1999: 33 [cf. also 264–8]).

<sup>2</sup> For a short discussion of how late-Victorian industrial technology intersected with the disillusionment of imperial romance, see Brantlinger (1988: 37–45).

fiction and specifically *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (or its preface), and they generally agree that the novella participates in conventional idealization of authority, a generic component of sea fiction (Parry, 1983: 61; Levenson, 1984: 34). Citing this critical consensus, Lillian Nayder goes so far as to argue that Conrad responded to the replacement of sailing ships with steamers 'by idealizing life on the sailing ship' and obscuring 'the harsh realities of life under sail' (Nayder, 1996: 191). On Conrad's fictional ships, she writes, 'the men are consistently unified, content, and obedient', and historians have sought 'to reconstruct the social history that underlies Conrad's glorified "distortions", pointing to the dangers, degradation, and isolation to which Victorian sailors were exposed' (Nayder, 1996: 191). In my reading, however, Conrad's maritime adventures rarely offer crew members who are consistently obedient or content, and the degradation and isolation of seafaring seem paramount in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. Both the critical focus on Conrad as a modernist precursor and the tendency to oversimplify his representations of life at sea elide the complexity with which Conrad adapts sea fiction during a time of rapid technological and social change.

For example, consider how Conrad incorporates steam technology into his sea adventures. In *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Typhoon* (1902) and *Lord Jim* (1900), Conrad regularly notes the obsolete status of sailing as it is gradually replaced by steam technology. However, this juxtaposition does more than idealize the archaic craft and prestige of sailing. Because traditional ways of ocean life are so heavily linked to romantic adventure in sea fiction, Conrad ends up wrestling with the potentially anachronistic status of romance itself or, to invoke Carlyle's earlier framework, the anxiety that humanity's 'dynamical' potential has been canceled as the 'mechanical' infiltrates social, imaginative, and individual life (Wheeler, 2014: 8–9).

In *Lord Jim* (1900 [1971]), the hellish atmosphere of the *Patna* is as technological as it is metaphysical: the 'phantom' steamer lets out a 'slight hiss' as it moves across a 'viscous, stagnant, dead' sea (Conrad, 1971: 18). Despite the opportune success of the complacent steam engineers, Jim notes that they do not 'belong to the world of heroic adventure' (Conrad, 1971: 25). Likewise, *Heart of Darkness* (1899 [1988])

elaborates on the role of technology in Conrad's metacommentary on romantic adventure. In the manuscript, Marlow's lament that Africa 'had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery' follows an extended description of a steamship as both the conduit to explore the 'unknown' inner continent and the reason why the earth has lost its mystery. As Marlow looks out across the traffic on the Thames:

A big steamer came down all a long blaze of lights like a town viewed from the sea bound to the uttermost ends of the earth and timed to the day, to the very hour with nothing unknown in her path[,] no mystery on her way, nothing but a few coaling stations [. . .]. And the earth suddenly seemed shrunk to the size of a pea spinning in the heart of an immense darkness. (Conrad, 1988: 11)

It would seem here that modern technology has made adventure impossible but, rather than simply dismiss the modern steam industry, Conrad situates new technology in *Heart of Darkness* as a pharmakon—both poison and antidote. Through technology, Marlow twice wards off his mix of desire and horror towards the 'black and incomprehensible frenzy' of the African jungle around him (Conrad, 1988: 37). Faced with the thrill of 'the thought of [his] remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar', Marlow responds to his audience's unasked question, 'You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn't' (Conrad, 1988: 38). Marlow's reason is simple and devoid of conventional justification:

I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woolen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. (Conrad, 1988: 38)<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the racist justification inheres in this emphasis on technology. Marlow must ensure that the superstitious black fireman (grotesquely juxtaposed next to Western technology) performs his job correctly.



In other words, the steamer, which so often in Conrad marks his disillusionment with the impossibility of romance in modernity, becomes in *Heart of Darkness* the vehicle for narrative—it produces the unconventional form of the text as it oscillates between imperial romance, quest narrative, and metaphysical impressionism. The steamship, like sea fiction, is mobile. While it appears vulnerable (always on the verge of deterioration), it also becomes a resistant boundary marker, toiling along the edge of darkness. The very technology that closes the spatial distance between Britain and Africa becomes the only (precarious) marker of difference. Faced with the recognition of remote kinship, Marlow can only bandage the leaky steam pipes. Whether confronted with the thrilling music of drums or a deadly barrage of arrows, technological disparity becomes Marlow's only reassurance. Likewise, in *Typhoon* (1902 [2008]), the steamship exposes the otherwise idealized Captain MacWhirr as he fails to rely on traditional seafaring knowledge and steers the ship directly into a typhoon, but it is also the durable technology that perseveres on to port, without much help from the conventional compleat mariner and despite ending up 'with a broken, torn, devastated aspect' and 'the worn, weary air of ships coming from the far ends of the world' (Conrad, 2008: 66).

To return to *Heart of Darkness*, the second form of technology that allows Marlow to turn from the jungle around him is the book. Following his compulsive attention to the steam engine, Marlow finds a sailor's handbook left by Kurtz's Russian disciple. He draws comfort from the work's dull intransigence. The description of the book clearly alludes to the generic conventions of sea fiction. The title ('*An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*'), the author's professional designation ('Master in his Majesty's Navy'), and the technical content provided by the 'simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases' (Conrad, 1988: 39),<sup>4</sup> all reference the traditional craftsmanship of nineteenth-century sea fiction. The book helps Marlow 'forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real' (Conrad, 1988: 39). He finds himself reassured by the genre of

---

<sup>4</sup> In sea fiction, authorial details such as naval ranks are often used to highlight the professional maritime experience and identity of writers (Cohen, 2003: 490).

the book—its singleness of intention, its solidity, its dedication to an older way of life before the steamship. *Heart of Darkness*, like much of Conrad's fiction, participates in multiple genres and repeatedly provides meta-reflection on its own organizing principles. Like the strange cipher in the sailor's handbook, the generic instability gestures towards something more. Faced with the historical transformation of shipping, Conrad's sea fiction cannot establish a simple nostalgic longing for a romanticized past; instead, the world of romantic adventure is *anachronistic*—it lingers on, out of sync with modernity. The form of the narrative itself becomes a machine, hovering between the ideals of romance and their failure, threatening to break down, signaling its own failure—participating in sea fiction and romantic adventure but not belonging to it.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, steamships are often described as monstrous. Returning to the English channel, the crew sees 'a string of smoking steamboats waddled, hugging the coast, like migrating and amphibious monsters, distrustful of the restless waves' (Conrad, 1984: 162). The cook describes firemen in the stokehold of steamers as 'fiends [. . .]—firing—firing—firing—down there' (Conrad, 1984: 114). At the conclusion, the narrator equates the steam industry with death: 'The sea took some, the steamers took others, the graveyards of the earth will account for the rest' (Conrad, 1984: 172). Though the ship glides like a planet with 'her own future', it is destined for disassembly (Conrad, 1984: 29). The *Narcissus* wavers between the monstrous steam inheritors and the fading 'long record' of the romantic history represented by Old Singleton (Conrad, 1984: 172). However, while steamboats may signal the end of romantic adventure, the nostalgia embodied in Old Singleton proves illusory.

---

<sup>5</sup> As Jacques Derrida writes, 'there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (Derrida, 1980: 65). For Derrida, *genus* functions—whether as genus, gender, or genre—by the principle of participation with and without belonging. Although Derrida's theory remains largely ahistorical, it offers a potentially nuanced understanding of literary history. The notion that 'participation never amounts to belonging' reveals the crucial way in which texts, as well as modern subjects, engage the principle of *genus*, of belonging, always with surplus or compromised engagement with prescribed, supposedly coherent identity.

At first, in contradistinction to the monstrous steamers, Old Singleton seems to be the compleat mariner, a fading but steadfast romantic embodiment of an older form of ocean life (Conrad, 1984: 6, 98–9). However, the text offers competing connotations of Singleton's nickname. The crew finds 'Old Singleton' venerable but also outdated and ridiculous. As the ship's 'oracle' (Conrad, 1984: 43), his proverbs often seem to parody wisdom. The participant narrator observes that 'Singleton seemed to know nothing, understand nothing. We had thought him till then as wise as he looked, but now we dared at times, suspect him of being stupid—from old age' (Conrad, 1984: 42). The crew's suspicions are confirmed when, after Singleton prophesies that Wait will die, Donkin explains to the naïve Nilsen, 'so will you' (Conrad, 1984: 43). The crew is 'appalled. We perceived that after all Singleton's answer meant nothing. We began to hate him for making fun of us. All our certitudes were going' (Conrad, 1984: 43). Contrary to the critical consensus that Singleton serves as a moral center of the novella,<sup>6</sup> Conrad represents the old sailor as a vestige, 'a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation [. . .] with a vast empty past and with no future' (Conrad, 1984: 24). As a fading remnant whose romantic travels are a 'vast empty past', Old Singleton counterbalances the nostalgia for traditional ocean life and the disgust at steam technology with a continual sense that the ideals of romance were absent or empty all along. This absence is precisely the 'sinister truth' that Singleton confronts in the storm—one of two dark epiphanies Singleton experiences in the course of the story.

After the traumatic storm, the crew gradually recovers and Singleton is 'possessed of sinister truth' (Conrad, 1984: 100). This 'sinister truth' breaks through Singleton's insipid wisdom after he collapses from exhaustion. While the crew frets over the

---

<sup>6</sup> As Levenson writes, '[a]mong the values endorsed in the novel, there has been broad critical consensus that the steadfastness of Old Singleton is foremost' (Levenson, 1984: 3). While Ian Watt avoids many of his contemporaries' unabashed praise for Singleton, he argues that 'Singleton does, and the heroic quality of his labors reminds us, not only that what has been most enduring about human society has been the mere continuity of its struggle against nature' (Watt, 1958: 283).

old sailor, Singleton returns to the deck for his midnight duty. Then, with a shift in focalization, the narrative peers into the old man's thoughts:<sup>7</sup>

For many years he had heard himself called "Old Singleton", and had serenely accepted the qualification, taking it as a tribute of respect due to a man who through half a century had measured his strength against the favours and the rages of the sea. He had never given a thought to his mortal self. He lived unscathed, as though he had been indestructible [. . .]. He had panted in sunshine, shivered in the cold; suffered hunger, thirst, debauch; passed through many trials—known all the furies. Old! It seemed to him he was broken at last. [. . .] He moved his arms, shook his head, felt his limbs. Getting old. . . and then? He looked upon the immortal sea [. . .], and he saw an immensity tormented and blind, moaning and furious, that claimed all the days of his tenacious life, and, when life was over, would claim the worn-out body of its slave. . . (Conrad, 1984: 98–9)

In this epiphany, two interpretations pull at one another. On one hand, Singleton realizes the futility of the crew's narcissistic sense of their heroism. He recognizes their sense of indomitability as a ruse; instead, he has merely survived 'as though' indestructible. The sea becomes the 'pitiless vastness' of existence that claims worn-out bodies despite their 'tenacious life'. We can read this moment in line with Fredric Jameson's discussion of Conrad's 'proto-existential metaphysic' that centers on Nature and specifically the violent sea in *Lord Jim* (Jameson, 1981: 267). Singleton peers into the sea and understands the emptiness and futility of existence. At the same time, Old Singleton not only relies on the metaphysical—the apparent futility of his service to the indifferent vastness of the ocean—but also emphasizes the material human body. As he examines his arms and limbs, Singleton's 'sinister truth' is equally a recognition—in 'the worn-out body', in physical suffering—of what's

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on the particular technique of narration and the shifting points of view in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, see Levenson (1984), North (1994), Richardson (2006), and Lawtoo (2016).

repressed in the romantic conception of the sea: the actual conditions involved in the expropriation of living labor.

### **Living Labor on the *Narcissus***

To fully understand Singleton's recognition, we must briefly turn again to the generic tendencies exploited by *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. Few novels, for Conrad, represented the romance of the maritime adventure more powerfully than Captain Frederick Marryat's work.<sup>8</sup> Conrad's short essay on Marryat, 'Tales of the Sea' (1898 [1964]), published six months after *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, touches on many of the problems that Conrad unravels in his novella. In praising Marryat's work as the 'completely successful expression of an unartistic nature' (Conrad, 1964: 47), Conrad constructs a series of rhetorical paradoxes to capture the pleasure of reading Marryat's sea fiction.

First, Conrad considers the tension in Marryat between the acknowledgment of mass labor and the tendency to repress this labor through the conventions of genre. For Marryat, 'the sea was not an element. It was a stage, where was displayed an exhibition of valour'; however, as Conrad points out, the achievements of such idealized heroes 'cannot be pronounced imaginary, since its reality has affected the destinies of nations' (Conrad, 1964: 47). Conrad's causal link between Marryat's sea fiction and 'the destinies of nations' is twofold: Marryat idealizes the men who achieved naval prowess for Britain and in doing so he supplies a generation of young men, including Conrad, with 'the initial impulse towards a glorious or a useful career' (Conrad, 1964: 50). Most importantly, Conrad writes, echoing *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, these ocean adventures function as a supplement for official History:

History preserves the skeleton of facts and, here and there, a figure or a name; but it is in Marryat's novels that we find the mass of the nameless, that we see them in the flesh, that we obtain a glimpse of the everyday life and an insight into the spirit animating the crowd of obscure men who

---

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of Marryat's work, see Brantlinger (1988: 47–70) and Cohen (2012: 164–170).

knew how to build for their country such a shining monument of memories  
[. . .]. (Conrad, 1964: 47)

Contra the more individualistic tradition of earlier historical and nautical romances, Conrad finds in Marryat's everyman heroes the recognition of a collective subject of history that remains nameless. Like Singleton, they are unable to sign their name in the payroll of History. Nevertheless, inasmuch as Marryat foregrounds this 'crowd of obscure men' as crucial to collective identity, he represents them as equally dispensable in such a collective. Conrad notes, for example, the 'intimacy with violence' in Marryat's work (Conrad, 1964: 48). In gruesome battles, bodies are mutilated and dismembered. As Patrick Brantlinger argues, this repetition of pure violence threatens to reduce Marryat's characters to 'figures of heroic slapstick, odd yet expendable cells of the body politic for whose health and happiness they would cheerfully sacrifice limbs, eyes, wives, lives' (Brantlinger, 1988: 55). Such violence becomes the ground on which to stage the fast-paced *bildung* of a young hero. From the routine violence, rigidity of the ship's hierarchy, devotion to the captain, and desire for glory, Marryat's young heroes ultimately realize the 'true' principle of authority. At the end of *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836), the enlightened Jack Easy denounces his father's liberal ideals of equality:

Your principles are all confounded nonsense. . . . The most lasting and imperishable form of building is . . . the pyramid . . . and to that may the most perfect form of society be compared. It is based upon the many, and rising by degrees, it becomes less as wealth, talent, and rank increase in the individual, until it ends at the apex or monarch, above all. Yet each several stone from the apex to the base is necessary for the preservation of the structure, and fulfils its duty in its allotted place. (Marryat qtd in Brantlinger, 1988: 56)

In many ways, this passage represents the dialectical counterpart to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. Jack Easy realizes that the social is 'based upon the many', and yet 'the many' serve as dutiful support for their superiors, whose wealth and rank apparently correspond to their social productivity. The ship for Marryat becomes the space to

establish romantic recuperation: individual bodies (or body parts) may be lost, but they are sacrificed to the collective of the ship. It is a vivid metaphor for the normative totality of nineteenth-century naturalism, wherein the 'priority of the whole over the parts generally meant little, if any, acknowledgement of the claims of the individual against the whole' (Jay, 1982: 28).

There is a fundamental difference, however, between Marryat's sea fiction and Conrad's engagement with the genre. Marryat's ship is a closed and instrumental totality, whereas Conrad's *Narcissus* is an open and expressive totality.<sup>9</sup> On Marryat's ship, every individual plays an allotted role in an ordered whole, and the ship represents the *telos* of society. Marryat employs the sea fiction genre to travel into the open space of the ocean and create an idealized form of society; the form and content relate to what Lukács describes as romantic art's ability to resolve contradictions by creating a universalizing 'homogeneous, organic world unified within itself' (Lukács, 1974: 49–50). Marryat represents constituent power only for the purposes of recuperating it within a constituted social pyramid where individual laborers are stones that support their superiors.

Conrad's *Narcissus*, however, is both a fragment and a small planet—never a closed form with a determined end. As I discuss in the following section, the *Narcissus* exists as an expression of the crew as a heterogeneous collective. Marryat's ship is transhistorical, embodied in the pyramid and the navy ship, and structurally determined by the sovereign monarch, but Conrad's *Narcissus* is steeped in the historical sediment of the late nineteenth century even as it attempts to escape its own historical situatedness.

### **From Survival to Insurrection: Reading the Collective**

As an example of sea fiction, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* offers realistic representations of sailors' labor. In fact, this focus on labor is central to the sea fiction genre, which 'dramatizes humans at work' at a moment in history when the 'nature of work,

---

<sup>9</sup> In the following paragraph, I describe the different versions of totality (or society as a whole) in Marryat and Conrad. In this reading, I draw from Martin Jay's elucidating history of Western Marxism in *Marxism and Totality* (1984), especially his reading of Lukács.

along with the status of the worker, are among the most urgent social questions [. . .] in the advanced capitalist nations of the world where sea fiction flourished' (Cohen, 2003: 487–91). Participating in this generic tradition, Conrad's novella explores the world-making power of labor on the 'small planet' of the *Narcissus*. However, the novella also reveals labor, corporeality, and rebellion as interconnected in ways that exceed the conventions of its genre. As the sailors struggle to keep the *Narcissus* afloat during a violent storm off the Cape of Good Hope, the immediacy of the laboring body gives birth to a collective antagonist that thwarts both socio-economic and generic mechanisms.

The *Narcissus*, on its way out to sea, seems:

A fragment detached from the earth, [. . .] lonely and swift like a small planet [. . .] She had her own future; she was alive with the lives of those beings who trod her decks; like that earth which had given her up to the sea, she had an intolerable load of regrets and hopes. On her lived timid truth and audacious lies. (Conrad, 1984: 29–30)

Here, the ship at sea becomes both a detached space and a social microcosm—a paradoxical representation that Casarino argues expresses the desire 'to escape the social while simultaneously representing it, contesting, inverting it' (Casarino, 2001: 21). Between 'fragment' and 'small planet', the ship at sea emerges both as an acknowledgment of the labor underpinning imperial trade and as a repression of that labor. As Jameson argues, the sea in Conrad's work 'is both a strategy of containment and a place of real business; it is a border and a decorative limit, but it is also a highway [. . .] the repression of work [. . .] as well as the absent work-place itself' (Jameson, 1981: 210).<sup>10</sup> The novella attempts to represent the real conditions of individual laborers and their ocean workplace, with its daily tasks and dangers—all

---

<sup>10</sup> As Jameson continues, 'the sea is the empty space between the concrete places of work and life; but it is also, just as surely, itself a place of work and the very element by which an imperial capitalism draws its scattered beachheads and outposts together, through which it slowly realizes its sometimes violent, sometimes silent and corrosive, penetration of the outlying precapitalist zones of the globe' (Jameson, 1981: 211).



of which are repressed in the capitalist imperial economic system. At the same time, the *Narcissus* becomes a stage for archetypal characters and generic conventions. Moreover, even foregrounding the repressed labor of imperial trade is not strictly disruptive, partly because work itself is central to the maritime genre. Sea fiction had long reconfigured this labor in its generic conventions. First and foremost, the genre's representation of nautical work idealized traditional forms of craftsmanship and the implied agency of 'know how' in contrast to dehumanizing industrial labor (Cohen, 2012: 143–5). Secondly, the specialized descriptions of work and technical knowledge serve as a mimetic technique that only heightens the wish fulfillment of romantic adventure. They immerse metropolitan readers in the adventure as if these technical terms 'were obviously known [. . .], with no gesture towards their possibly specialized status' (Cohen, 2012: 489).

In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, labor—perhaps more than in any of Conrad's later novels—remains central to the text. The novella relies on the maritime genre's representation of the concrete daily tasks of sailing while also exploring a more abstract sense of labor, 'that eternal natural necessity', in Marx's words, 'which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself' (Marx, 1990: 133) (see also the *Grundrisse* [Marx, 1973: 704–6]). The former is a representation of those specific (sometimes specialized) tasks exchanged for wages while the latter is a more general understanding of the 'productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands' (Marx, 1990: 134). Nowhere does *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* note the cargo that the ship transports, yet the text foregrounds many of the raw materials, including abject bodily exhaustion and exposure to the elements, that conventional ocean adventures had generally avoided or managed. Initial reviewers could not help but note the novella's gritty 'realism'. *The Spectator*, for example, found that Conrad's 'choice of themes, and the uncompromising nature of his methods, debar him from attaining a wide popularity' (qtd in Nayder, 1984: 217). Whereas *Lord Jim* juxtaposes the fiction of romance with life at sea (and then rewrites the genre; see Jameson [1981: 242–69]), *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* operates not through the repression or recuperation of labor but through representing the laboring power of the body in a form that exceeds capitalist value. The *Narcissus*

becomes a microcosm in which, rather than simply romanticize work, Conrad probes living labor's constituent power.

In the frequently discussed passage following the storm at sea, the text resorts to its more omniscient narration, culminating in a view of life as a 'weary succession of nights and days tainted by the obstinate clamour of sages, demanding bliss and an empty heaven, [that] is redeemed at last by the vast silence of pain and labour, by the dumb fear and the dumb courage of men obscure, forgetful, and enduring' (Conrad, 1984: 90). As I noted earlier, this passage certainly exemplifies the proto-existentialist themes of the novella and of Conrad's work in general. However, this moment cannot simply be reduced to a stoic view of existence as a 'vast silence of pain and labour' in a postlapsarian world. Alongside this continual toil emerges the potential of *justification, redemption, and endurance*—a potential that, for the laboring crew, cannot be abstracted into a philosophical tenet about the 'acrid savour of existence'. In this opening passage, the narrator supplements any such universal existentialist insight with a dialectical recognition of the productive forces of human labor, which are both repressed (obscured, forgotten) and enduring. As Ian Watt noted, the account of the storm offers 'a sequence of unequalled enactments of the theme of solidarity' and a 'climactic recognition of our utter and yet often forgotten dependence, night and day, by sea and by land, on the labors of others' (Watt, 1958: 282).<sup>11</sup>

The passage exposes an interdependent imperial system and represents the solidarity of the crew. When the crew member, like Marx's worker, 'cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality and develops the capabilities of his species' (Marx, 1990: 447). Foregrounding such interdependence, Conrad abandons an individual protagonist for a collective subject. As the *Narcissus* embarks, the narrator prefigures this collectivity, describing the ship as 'alive with the lives of those beings who trod her decks' (Conrad, 1984: 29). The ship becomes the living embodiment of its crew. More than a decade later, reminiscing on his

---

<sup>11</sup> It seems telling that, while Watt notices the novel's deep interest in a collective subject, he reduces 'solidarity' to the social writ large—opposing 'our dependence' and 'the labor of others' in a way that potentially imagines laborers as outside the social world. That is, Watt imagines a 'dependent' world rather than an 'interdependent' one.

reputation as a writer of the sea, Conrad articulates this core interest in 'A Familiar Preface':

In my two exclusively sea books, "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'" and "The Mirror of the Sea" [. . .], I have tried with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have for ages traversed its solitudes, and also *that something sentient which seems to dwell in ships—the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care.* (Conrad, 1984: 120, emphasis added)

The ship at sea, for Conrad, becomes the dwelling place of a form of life generated by the cooperation of its crew members. In this case, one cannot disentangle the ship from its crew. Parry argues that the crew 'fails to live up to the stringent codes of the sea, [while] the ship [. . .] rises above her material shape as an instrument of trade, to stand as the novel's heroine' (Parry, 1983: 63). To posit such a distinction, however, repeats the early misunderstanding between Wait and Singleton. When Wait asks 'What kind of ship is this? Pretty fair?', Singleton replies 'Ship! . . . Ships are all right. It is the men in them!' (Conrad, 1984: 24). Punning on the metonymic sense of 'the ship' as representing its crew, Conrad lets us in on the joke: Singleton's response is no kernel of oracular wisdom. Rather, it is an empty response that avoids Wait's question by figuring 'the ship' literally. Singleton's cantankerous answer may appear to reiterate the novella's interest in the relationships between men on the microcosmic *Narcissus*, but it becomes empty sophistry. A wooden vessel cannot be fair or unfair, the text implies, because justice lies in the community of the crew. Rather than an autonomous symbol, the *Narcissus* emerges as the living expression of the collective subject created by the cooperation of the crew.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Kaoru Yamamoto (2017) summarizes the complex ways in which Conrad viewed the individual and collective. He is 'at once traditionalist and revolutionary, conservative and deeply egalitarian and individualist, although not democratic. This conflict, according to Watt, is evident even in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, a story that could be read as reflection of Conrad's conservatives in its praise of solidarity and collective identity—a novella in which selfishness is apparently subordinated in the end by communal duty. It seems that the individual is not necessarily an antithesis of the collective in

In fact, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* underpins its recognition of enduring but repressed collective labor by emphasizing animal, biological existence in pain and fear. Throughout the storm and in its aftermath, the narrator anatomizes the crew's bodies. Despite the accounts of individual crew members, such as Old Singleton at the wheel, the narrative often describes jumbled body parts and indistinct masses of bodies: 'as soon as they got up they shot to leeward in clusters, [. . .] groaning, they rolled in a confused mass' (Conrad, 1984: 58). The crew 'crawled in heaps where there was foothold; they held on with both arms, hooked themselves to anything to windward with elbows, with chins, almost with their teeth' (Conrad, 1984: 59–60). In this dire moment, they become 'a crowd of cold and hungry men, waiting wearily for a violent death' (Conrad, 1984: 61). These bodily descriptions—both stripping the crew to their basic vulnerable parts and meshing the crowd together through shared corporeality—become starkly impersonal: '[u]nder the torment [. . .] a pair of shoulders would writhe a little. Teeth chattered' (Conrad, 1984: 61). With the nonspecific 'a pair of shoulders' and the plural 'teeth chattered' (one mouth or many mouths?), the description oscillates between an unidentified sailor, suffering in the dark, and the crew in general. In a twofold movement of synecdoche, the shoulders and teeth stand in for the anonymous sailor and that sailor (via his body) represents the crew as a whole. In the storm, there is only a collectivity struggling for survival. Though the crew will recall this survival as heroism, they are stripped down to their shared animal life. The crew 'looked wretched in a hopeless struggle, like vermin fleeing before a flood; [. . .] half naked and staring wildly' (Conrad, 1984: 58). Mr. Baker, the chief mate, grunts, 'spluttering and blowing amongst the tangled ropes like an energetic porpoise' (Conrad, 1984: 56). The steward's ripped shirt sleeves 'flapped like wings' (Conrad, 1984: 60). Rescuing the trapped James Wait, 'Wamibo made noises resembling loud barks' (Conrad, 1984: 66), and when Wait emerges, he glares 'with his bulging eyes, mute as a fish' (Conrad, 1984: 71). On one hand, these descriptions reduce the crew to their animal substructure—to an immediate capacity to feel pain

---

Conrad's notion of "community". Rather, being is singularly plural, to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy's phrase, undermining the dichotomy between individuality and collectivity' (Yamamoto, 2017: 4).

and 'dumb fear'.<sup>13</sup> They appear, in Hannah Arendt's formulation, as *animal laborans*. Nevertheless, through drawing attention to the body, Conrad also illustrates the collective capacity of the crew. While the former 'animalizes' the human, the latter reveals humans' constituent capacity. As Marx writes in *Capital*, 'a new power arises' not only from 'the fusion of many forces into a single force' but also in 'mere social contact', which produces:

A stimulation of the animal spirits [. . .] this is why a dozen people working together will produce far more in their collective working day than twelve isolated men [. . .] this originates from the fact that man, if not as Aristotle thought a political animal, is at any event a social animal. (Marx, 1990: 443–4)<sup>14</sup>

Later in *Typhoon*, Conrad would employ a similar approach with very different implications. The two hundred Chinese laborers aboard the *Nan-Shan* are stripped of their humanity and treated as cargo early in the story and when the storm strikes, they become a rolling mass of bodies, a disturbing reflection of the ocean itself. Both the ocean waves and Chinese *en masse* threaten to consume the young sailor Jukes and the idealized captain MacWhirr. The captain sets 'the unconscious faces of the multitude towards inconceivable goals and in undreamt-of directions' (Conrad, 2008: 34). In the midst of the storm, he is a reassuring 'thick, solid body' (Conrad, 2008: 106), whereas the Chinese laborers become a 'struggling mass [. . .], dark, indistinct, helpless, with a wild gleam of many eyes in the dim light of the lamps' (Conrad, 2008: 186–7). *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, however, offers a more dialectical account of labor with its collective subject. In fact, its descriptions of the crew as 'life-long prisoners of the sea' or the 'sea's slave' draw our attention to the biopolitical workings of imperialism—its growing capacity to dominate, organize, and administer life, reduc-

---

<sup>13</sup> For a compelling discussion of animality in *Lord Jim*, see Krishnan (2004: 341–2).

<sup>14</sup> See Negri's discussion of these passages and 'the process of "cooperation" and of its becoming antagonistic subject' (Negri, 1999: 259–68).

ing humans to the collective survival of their animal substructure. However, unlike in *Typhoon*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* represents such animal life *and* the concomitant emergence of the crew as a resilient and collective force.

It is no coincidence that the threat of mutiny intensifies directly after this focus on the capacity of the body to feel pain and fear but also to endure and resist. Not long after the storm, the participant narrator notes that the crew, proud of 'our pluck, of our capacity for work, of our energy', 'decried our officers—who had done nothing' (Conrad, 1984: 100). Of course, the text then redirects this recognition of exploitation through the 'venomous' Donkin, whose 'picturesque and filthy loquacity flowed like a troubled stream from a poisoned source' (Conrad, 1984: 101). Nevertheless, despite their constant distaste, the crew 'listened to the fascinating Donkin. [. . .] We abominated the creature and could not deny the luminous truth of his contentions. It was all so obvious. We were indubitably good men; our deserts were great and our pay small' (Conrad, 1984: 100). As Jameson suggests, while *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* may end 'with the transformation of its villain, Donkin, the epitome of the *homme de ressentiment*, into a labor organizer' (Jameson, 1981: 215–16), the ongoing abomination of Donkin makes it difficult to identify him as any type of romanticized rebel hero. Neither is it possible to understand this transformation as character development. Instead, the narrative often implies that Donkin's idleness, hatred, and loquacity qualify him as the perfect labor organizer. The critical point here, as Casarino points out, is that Conrad represents Donkin as 'the modern political subject of an antagonistic working class that is [. . .] determined to resist ruthless exploitation' (Casarino, 2001: 231). The narrator, the crew, and potentially the audience despise Donkin even as they acknowledge the truth of his antagonism. Clearly, Donkin is an *homme de ressentiment*—from the beginning we witness his abject poverty and the pleasure he takes in antipathy—but, following the storm, Donkin's general *ressentiment* connects with the immanent recognition of exploitation. He thus exposes an affirmative correlative: the constituent power of the crew. That is, to reinterpret Singleton's answer to Wait, he reveals that ships have always been created by the cooperation of their crews. Even in Donkin's bitterness, the text implies, there

emerges the potential of 'luminous truth'. In the collective animal moment, the possibility of being more than an animal emerges—but it is only a glimpse of constituent power. This truth remains in the form of the negative. When the crew wonders 'What had [the skipper] done?' that he should receive their credit for saving the ship, Donkin pushes the question even further: 'What 'ee could do without hus?' (Conrad, 1984: 102). The implied answer to Donkin's question is *nothing*, yet even this answer remains absent. The crew, including the narrator, simply 'could not answer'.

The narrator, however, quickly devolves from Donkin's 'luminous truth'—which, in this case, is fairly *specific*, directed at the exploitative conditions of the ship—to a hyperbolic notion of *universal resentment*. Rather than address Donkin's call for revolt on an individual ship or even his complaints about the industry of shipping and by extension the economic system of capitalism, the participant narrator zooms out to 'the injustice of the world' and 'its burden'. In other words, the recognition of an unfair labor system becomes part of the text's more existential commentary. If the 'luminous truth' of Donkin's critique remains, it is in the overstatement and the potential sarcasm embedded in the narrator's repeated claim of ignorance—'We were men enough to courageously admit to ourselves our intellectual shortcomings'—which threatens to become a *parody* of the very message that critics have often extracted from the novella: the stoic, unquestioning, and somehow heroic endurance embodied in Old Singleton at the wheel in the face of antagonistic Nature. Instead, the crew's silence and (potentially ironic) claim of ignorance appear as the only method of coping with the *aporia* that follows Donkin's complaints. Moreover, after recognizing exploitation, the participant-narrator, speaking on behalf of the crew, retroactively imagines the ship as courageous rather than struggling for survival—or, more accurately, he conflates the two. Rather than repress labor, reworking the narrative, as Jameson argues, 'in melodramatic terms, in a subsystem of good and evil which now once again has villains and heroes' (Jameson, 1981: 216), Conrad allows the sailors of the *Narcissus* to confront and then manage their status as the exploited. Rather than dismiss the toil of the storm, they transform their struggle for survival into a narcissistic work ethic:

The hours of ineffective turmoil were forgotten; the fear and anguish of these dark moments were never mentioned in the glowing peace of fine days. [. . .] And we were conceited! We boasted of our pluck, of our capacity for work, of our energy. We remembered honourable episodes: our devotion, our indomitable perseverance—and were proud of them as though they had been the outcome of our unaided impulses. We remembered our danger, our toil—and conveniently forgot our horrible scare. (Conrad, 1984: 99–100)

This nostalgia, with its romantic stoicism, allows the crew to decry their officers and yet still move the ship on its ‘unswerving path’. They ward off any specific mutinous desire—and the collective antagonist engendered by their capacity as a species—by turning towards a hierarchal system of steadfast longsuffering. Though the ‘little world’ of the *Narcissus* now carries ‘a discontented and aspiring population’, Donkin’s whispers to let the skipper slip overboard become a comforting *fantasy* for the crew, who:

Found comfort of a gloomy kind in an interminable and conscientious analysis of their unappreciated worth; and inspired by Donkin’s hopeful doctrines they dreamed enthusiastically of the time when every lonely ship would travel over a serene sea, manned by a wealthy and well-fed crew of satisfied skippers. (Conrad, 1984: 103)

The crew copes with both the brutality of natural force and their disruptive social collectivity in one fell swoop. They simultaneously submit to the world’s injustice and turn that submission into ‘pluck’, ‘devotion’ and ‘indomitable perseverance’. Though their physical domination by the storm leads to a recognition of their economic exploitation, both forms of domination are then turned into the ‘indomitable’.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that modern subjects’ instrumental domination of nature inevitably leads to dominating one another: ‘[w]hat human beings seek to learn from nature’, they write, ‘is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 2). The



modern subject's commanding ability to manipulate the surrounding object world—only through recourse to a false sense of its objectivity—posits 'power as the principle of all relationships' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 5). Yet, as they note, this domination does not always take the form of brute control; in the face of an asymmetric relationship, the modern subject can master nature through acknowledging his own powerlessness—that is, by adapting:

The superiority of nature in the competitive struggle is repeatedly confirmed by the very mind which has mastered nature [. . .] The reason, however, is that all power in class society is beset by the gnawing consciousness of its powerlessness in face of physical nature and its social successor, the many. Only deliberate adaptation to it brings nature under the power of the physically weaker. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 44)

The crew of the *Narcissus* may manipulate currents and trade winds with shipping technology, but the storm exposes the precariousness of such control. In terms of 'second nature'—the domination of others solicited by the control of nature—the storm also demonstrates the economic system's vulnerability when it leads to the recognition of 'the many', the constituent power of the working crew members.

However, the centrality of both obedience and craftsmanship in sea fiction provides Conrad with generic tools to resolve this disruptive recognition. The text posits a conservative ideological alternative to rebellion: stoic resolve on the part of the many. Torn between their physical weakness and their cooperative endurance in the face of superior natural force—a tension reflected on the social level between their cooperative potentiality and their recognition of its expropriation—the crew turns precarious survival into 'indomitable perseverance'. Thus, they repress their fear and re-master nature, but this 'devotion' plays another ideological role. In their sense of unappreciated worth, the crew soon faces a false conclusion similar to that of Adorno and Horkheimer's wandering Odysseus, who 'can never have the whole, he must always be able to wait, to be patient, to renounce' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 44). While Conrad remains fascinated with the crew's ability to withstand and endure

the unmediated violence of the sea, the crew ultimately re-channels this struggle into mediated socio-economic domination. To imagine the 'world's injustice' is to return to the hierarchal workplace with a bit more *ressentiment*, but in universalizing their 'unappreciated worth'—abruptly zooming out from Donkin's situated critique to the metaphysical—they reassert the social's founding mastery of their constituent power.

To reiterate the larger argument here, the sequence of the storm and its aftermath lead in a false ontological circle. The animalistic survival of the crew calls attention to the constituent power and collective nature of living labor. This recognition is inherently disruptive; it leads to the 'luminous truth' of exploitation. Rather than mutiny, however, the crew transforms this truth into a form of existentialist ideology. Living labor becomes dead labor, constituent power becomes merely work, and work becomes a quasi-Christian long suffering with the dream of an infinitely delayed transformation. Thus, the text moves from one ontological position—the collective constituent power of living labor—through the specific social situation towards a false ontological position: stoic comfort in the world's injustice, an injustice that conflates the indifference of the sea with the indifference of an economic system. Put differently, the crew recognizes the domination inherent in the objectification of living labor. Rather than the 'domination of people by other people', social domination under capitalism, as Moishe Postone writes, 'is grounded in the value form of wealth itself, a form of social wealth that confronts living labor (the workers) as a structurally alien and dominant power' (Postone, 1993: 30). Such domination is particularly intense at sea, where labor faces unmediated physical danger, but *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* collapses the structural alienation of a socio-economic system, or dominated labor, into the indifference of the natural world.

### **James Wait and the Synthesis Memory of Sea Fiction**

Although I have focused here on the dialectical relationship between Singleton and Donkin, the critical role of James Wait deserves further inquiry. Through a seemingly minor act of insurrection, Wait's refusal to work aboard the *Narcissus* becomes even more discomforting to the narrative than Donkin's explicit call to mutiny. While critics have attended to Conrad's potentially racist metaphysical representation of Wait's

blackness, few have accounted for the specific historical and literary implications of James Wait—as a black cosmopolitan imperial subject—in a text concerned with labor and its constitutive role in maritime fiction.<sup>15</sup>

In his second dark epiphany, Singleton offers a half-glimpsed flashback, partially filtered through the narrative and partially imagined by the crew members who stare at him. When the crew grows mutinous because of Wait's illness, Singleton tells them:

"I have seen rows aboard ship before some of you were born [. . .] for something or nothing; but never for such a thing. [. . .] And a black fellow, too [. . .] I have seen them die like flies". He stopped, thoughtful, as if trying to recollect gruesome things, details of horrors, hecatombs of niggers. [. . .] He was old enough to remember slavers, bloody mutinies, pirates perhaps; who could tell through what violences and terrors he had lived! (Conrad, 1984: 129–30)

Through the faded romantic Singleton, we realize that the romantic ship was formerly a slave ship. This realization—the ineffable presence of slavery—is reiterated as Wait dies. When the malicious Donkin tells Wait that he is destined to be cast overboard, the black sailor grows terrified: 'as though he had been looking at unspeakable horrors; and by his face one could see that he was thinking of abominable things. Suddenly with an incredibly strong and heartbreaking voice he sobs: 'Overboard! . . . II. . . My God!' (Conrad, 1984: 153). In these elliptical cries—a culmination of the dialogic anacoluthon that pervades the text—we glimpse the invisible presence of the global slave trade in the sea fiction that has fueled the British imagination.<sup>16</sup> The

<sup>15</sup> On Wait's symbolic blackness, see Schaffer (1999: 51–4) and Lawtoo (2016: 219–21). North provides an important analysis of how Wait punctures the text's sense of community (North, 1994: 57). For a brief yet insightful discussion of Wait's role as a black sailor, see Baucom (1997: especially paras. 20–1). In Casarino's reading, 'the explosive question of racial difference is [. . .] allowed to be present as no less than the historical-political condition of possibility for the complex apparatus of labor, discipline, and same-sex desire' (Casarino, 2001: 243).

<sup>16</sup> In other words, the colonial and increasingly global contradictions that Conrad tackles correspond to Édouard Glissant's compelling arguments regarding the emergence of global consciousness in *Caribbean Discourse*, where he writes that 'History [with a capital H] ends where the histories of those peoples were once reputed to be without history come together' (Glissant, 1989: 64).

maritime romance does not simply repress the constituent labor of sailors but also the traffic in laboring bodies and the imperial legacy of the expropriation of colonial labor. Wait's global, transversal movement—his home in Saint Kitts, his boarding of the *Narcissus* in Bombay, the storm at the Cape of Good Hope, his near approach to England—echoes those forms of collective life that violently refuse and threaten the hierarchal organization on which sea fiction relies. Wait's refusal to work—his refusal to belong to the collective subject of the *Narcissus*—not only (inversely) recalls the exchange in animalized, commodified, laboring bodies, but it also echoes a primary source of anxiety at the end of the nineteenth century: the rejection of imperial rule as a legitimate authority. By the late 1890s, the British Empire held influence over nearly three-quarters of the globe and faced no significant military threat or imperial competition from European rivals. Such global dominance, however, required constant imperial maintenance and inevitably bred concern over the expansive empire's integrity, especially as colonial violence rose to visibility every few years and reverberated through the metropolitan imagination.

If sailors are forced to abandon the romance of sailing in favor of steamers in Conrad's work, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* represents a twofold illusion: steamships are ghastly illusions of romantic splendor *and* romantic splendor (embodied in the paraphernalia of older sailing technology and Old Singleton himself) is itself illusory. This imagined past becomes another narcissistic misrecognition, another disruption in perceived Self. After all, when the narrator describes Singleton as 'a ready man with a vast empty past and with no future', it is clear that the old seaman, like the *Narcissus* itself, has grown anachronistic. In contrast to the ship, which is destined for salvage, and the obsolete technology of sailing, Conrad notes Singleton's 'vast empty past'. This is a radical move in a text that has long been interpreted as nostalgic for the romanticized naval past embodied in ancient Singleton. Singleton appears in the present as an anachronism, and yet the narrator describes an absence that runs in both directions, towards futurity and back into the past. As Wait's name implies, both he and Old Singleton interrupt the identity of the present. To read nostalgia as embodied in the character of Old Singleton is to overlook the text's disruptive potential. Critics have interpreted Singleton as symbolizing the loss of a romantic past but,

as I have shown, Conrad implies that such a past was always already empty. The *never-there* of the romantic imperial adventure has always been *never-there*.

However, this recognition always threatens to turn towards the metaphysical as an adaptive mechanism. This movement seems most apparent when the narrator describes Old Singleton—who, the text suggests, may have served on a slave ship—as the sea's 'slave'. If the memory of slavery animates the text, here it is turned back into a metaphysical form of powerlessness in the face of nature. By reverting to stoic metaphysics, the text attempts to solve (provisionally) the anxiety of a culture founded on slavery and beset by insurgencies. The powerlessness of Old Singleton in the face of time and natural force easily becomes an adaptive mechanism for the narrative. Faced with the multitude expropriated, commodified, yet constitutive laborers that resurface in the *Narcissus's* ocean pathways, Old Singleton refashions himself as powerless, rather than complicit, in this expropriation of life.

## Conclusion

Despite the idealism of the maritime romance—its interest in the 'perfect form of society'—Conrad claims that Marryat's novels are primarily *historical*. They capture a material base for history that cannot be fully recovered: a corporeal mass of laboring men who leave behind 'a shining monument of memories'. In both *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and his short essay on Marryat, Conrad focuses on the romantic maritime adventure in ways that foreground the dialectical interplay between genre and history. On one hand, he offers a claim quite similar to Robert Louis Stevenson's defense of romance in 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884). The danger in the mimetic desire to represent 'life', Stevenson argues, is that 'in seeking to draw the normal, a man should draw the null, and write the novel of society instead of the romance of man' (Stevenson, 1884: 147). Like Stevenson, Conrad is clearly interested in the truths embodied in the 'great men' of sea fiction. However, unlike Stevenson, Conrad undermines this ahistorical desire for truth by insisting both on the historical contingency of sea fiction *and* the materiality of such idealism. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* exposes a genre increasingly overburdened with historical sediment: sea

fiction both emphasized laboring bodies and fueled an 'energizing myth of English imperialism' (Green, 1979: 3) that faced increasing contradictions in its expansive global hegemony.

*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* wrestles with these key contradictions embedded in sea fiction. On a material level, the genre represents international 'democratic empowerment' by workers (Cohen, 2012: 144) and the kernels of Glissant's post-colonial, non-universalizing 'transversality' or convergence of multiple flows of histories and identities that extend 'in all directions in our world through its network of branches' (Glissant, 1989: 67). In Conrad's novella, these take the form of the constituent power of the crew and the return of the repressed slave trade combined with the global movement of James Wait. At the same time, maritime adventures use the rigidly authoritarian hierarchy of the ship to represent an idealized society based on natural, masculine white authority that recuperates dynamic constituent power within the transcendent power of the administrative empire. Insofar as Conrad's novella resolves its destabilizing representation of imperial relations, it hardly reestablishes order through the conventional recourse to hierarchical social authority. No fatherly officer emerges, and Singleton provides a metanarrative of futile longing for the absent meaning at the heart of romantic adventure. Conrad refuses even to rely on authorial power—the ability to mold a coherent narrative within the confines of generic expectations. As critics have pointed out, Conrad's claim in the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* that his goal as a writer is 'by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — [ . . . ] before all, to make you see' (Conrad, 1984: 162) seems more ambiguous than it initially appears. Conrad's work, with its generic discontinuities and narrative interruptions, also posits the 'structural impossibility' of the 'aesthetic attempt to conjure out of some sensually unrewarding marks on paper a full sensory experience' (North, 1994: 38). Does Conrad just mean vivid writing, Cohen asks in her reading of the preface, or does he mean the ability 'to compel the reader to participate in the processes of wresting intelligibility from obscurity' (Cohen, 2012: 209)? In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, the process of extracting meaning out of the modern maritime adventure becomes a kind of

self-recuperating failure. Conrad's adaptation of sea fiction cannot be written off as a romantic longing for a world-view no longer capable of capturing modern social and political realities. Conrad reveals the immanent, constituent potential of laboring bodies embedded in the genre itself, but the text transforms this potential into indifference and self-repression; the crew recodes its own social power in metaphysical terms only as the text stages the inability of romantic sea adventure to create a convincing social totality in global modernity. Conrad's meta-fictional awareness—his tendency to call attention to the conventions of genre and narrative form—becomes itself a strategy for managing crises in the emerging global imperial system of the *fin de siècle*.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### References

- Augé, M** 1995 *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated from French by J Howe. London: Verso.
- Baucom, I** 1997 Charting the 'Black Atlantic'. *Postmodern Culture*, 8(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.1997.0033>
- Baucom, I** 2005 *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822387022>
- Brantlinger, P** 1988 *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Casarino, C** 2001 *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cohen, M** 2003 Traveling Genre. *New Literary History*, 34(3): 481–99. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2003.0040>
- Cohen, M** 2012 *The Novel and the Sea*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Connery, C** 1996 The Oceanic Feeling and the Regional Imaginary. In: Wilson, R and Dissanayake, W (Eds.), *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational*

- Imaginary*, pp. 284–311. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381990-012>
- Conrad, J** 1964 A Familiar Preface. In: Wright, W (Ed.), *Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, pp. 117–25. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Conrad, J** 1964 Tales of the Sea. In: Wright, W (Ed.), *Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, pp. 47–50. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Conrad, J** 1971 *Lord Jim*. New York: Penguin.
- Conrad, J** 1984 *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Conrad, J** 1988 *Heart of Darkness*. 3rd ed. New York: Norton.
- Conrad, J** 2008 *Typhoon and Other Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, G** and **Guattari, F** 2003 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated from French by B Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J** 1980 The Law of Genre. Translated from French by A Ronell. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1): 55–81. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/448088>
- Glissant, É** 1989 *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- Green, M** 1979 *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*. New York: Basic Books.
- Horkheimer, M** and **Adorno, T W** 2002 *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated from German by E Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jameson, F** 1981 *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Jay, M** 1984 *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Krishnan, S** 2004 Seeing the Animal: Colonial Space and Movement in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 37(3): 326–52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/ddnov.037030326>
- Lawtoo, N** 2016 *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.



- Levenson, M** 1984 *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–1922*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lukács, G** 1974 *Soul and Form*. Translated from German by A Bostock. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Marx, K** 1973 *Grundrisse*. Translated from German by M Nicolaus. New York: Penguin.
- Marx, K** 1990 *Capital: Volume 1*. Translated from German by B Fowkes. New York: Penguin.
- Nayder, L** 1996 Sailing Ships and Steamers, Angels and Whores: History and Gender in Conrad's Maritime Fiction. In: Creighton, M and Norling, L (Eds.), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920*, pp. 189–203. Baltimore, NJ: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Negri, A** 1999 *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Translated from Italian by M Boscagli. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- North, M** 1994 *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Rourke, KH** and **Williamson, J G** 1999 *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Parry, B** 1983 *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*. London: Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-04826-7>
- Postone, M** 1993 *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511570926>
- Richardson, B** 2006 *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Schaffer, B** 1999 The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' (1897). In: Orr, L and Billy, T (Eds.), *A Joseph Conrad Companion*, pp. 49–64. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Steinberg, P** 2001 *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stevenson, R L** 1884 A Humble Remonstrance. *Longman's Magazine*, 5(26): 139–47.

**Virilio, P** 2006 *Speed and Politics*. Translated from French by M Polizzotti. New York: Semiotext(e).

**Watt, I** 1958 Conrad Criticism and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 12(4): 257–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3044424>

**Yamamoto, K** 2017 *Rethinking Joseph Conrad's Concepts of Community: Strange Fraternity*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

**How to cite this article:** Jernigan, B 2017 Belaboring the Maritime Novel: *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Sea Fiction, and Constituent Power. *Open Library of Humanities*, 3(2): 5, pp. 1–33, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.200>

**Published:** 11 September 2017

**Copyright:** © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access icon, a stylized 'O' with a circular arrow around it.