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Port towns and the ‘paramaritime’

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Jamie Linton has remarked that something of an exceptional nature is afoot with respect to the idea of water. Such scholarly attention reflects a growing interest not just in water and water issues per se but in the sense in which water articulates in different ways with people from one social and historical context to another.1

Describing those different articulations in a precise way would be easier if we had a more extensive and appropriate vocabulary for them. For example, people, things, and activities that are not-quite-oceanic abound, forming a vast penumbra receding inward from the coastline. Gérard Le Bouëdec has introduced (without comment) a word, ‘paramaritime’, which does not yet appear in French or English dictionaries.2 This helpful term deserves wider usage. A working definition of the paramaritime, drawing on conventional uses of the para- prefix, might look like this: ‘Occurring beside, around, or between maritime areas; containing elements not usually regarded as maritime; analogous or parallel to maritime entities (spaces, cultures, occupations, activities), but separate from or going beyond them’.3 The paramaritime, then, is pertinent for shallow waters (bays, coves, estuaries, firths, fjords, inlets), but it also speaks to interstitial watery spaces (straits and portages; reticulated systems of lakes, rivers, or inland seas; archipelagos or island clusters).4 It is also a way to put the spotlight on foragers and opportunists whose recourse to the water was seasonal or otherwise intermittent. Studying pluraiactives – whose occupation is best described using a hyphenated form (sailor-blacksmith), or whose households regularly made ends meet by supplemental work in support of fisheries or seafarers – was the aspect of the paramaritime that caught Le Bouëdec’s attention in the Breton parish records.5 The paramaritime encompasses the watery trades that were not truly oceanic, but also recognizes the broader spectrum of people who worked on the coast, yet who rarely (or never) got their feet wet.6 This offers a better chance to appreciate women’s experiences, in particular.
Defining paramaritime culturally is not as easy as formulating the spatial or occupational definitions, but the potential rewards are very great, helping us put ‘contextual flesh and muscle on the bones of economically driven cross-cultural interactions’, as Raquel Reyes recently expressed it. The port town is the place where maritime history finds its high water mark and then recedes, but from a paramaritime perspective, it is the starting point for all kinds of new inquiries.

In 1783, the lexicographer Samuel Johnson, speaking of ‘the wonderful extent and variety of London’, where ‘men of curious inquiry might see […] modes of life as very few could even imagine’, urged his protégé James Boswell to ‘explore Wapping’ in particular. If men like Johnson exulted in the foreign flavours and exotic salt-tinged vocabulary of London’s docklands, we also know that a significant number of sailors made the pilgrimage in the opposite direction, submitting petitions to the Admiralty offices at Somerset House on the Strand and frequenting Charles Dibdin’s theatre across the street, where they cheered and jeered at representations of themselves – and occasionally rushed the stage to join in the action. Most ports, of course, were provincial and considerably more humble. No flâneur was ever likely to wander into the ‘smelly hell’ of Russia’s Arctic port, Archangel, that ‘wen of seal-blubber distillers, beef- and seal-tallow scour-works, shipwrights, salt-works, and vodka soaks’ where much of the revenue collected was derived from a tax on the town’s many taverns. Writing in 1792, a local merchant, Vasilii Vasil’evich Krestinin, nonetheless found something to praise in Archangel’s proud, orderly civic life; the election of judges was celebrated with a formal dinner of ‘barbecued deer, finches, tundra mush-rooms, and breads’, followed by a public distribution of gifts to the general populace assembled outside. On the other side of the world, the enslaved African healer Domingos Álvares navigated a starkly different urban geography in the Rio de Janeiro of the 1730s. He lived next to the Cemitério dos Pretos Novos, where a ‘steady stream of corpses [were] brought from the slave market on the city’s waterfront’, still slung in the hammocks where they had died during the Atlantic crossing. Other defining landmarks of Álvares’ port town included the Terreiro da Polé, where slaves were tied to a tall post and whipped in the central plaza, and Nossa Senhora do Rosário church, favoured by the town’s black residents, but sited next to a fetid garbage pit. The contradictions between just these three perspectives – the incongruous cityscapes traversed by Johnson, Krestinin, and Álvares – should serve as a reminder that a truly global history of port towns will be a difficult reckoning indeed.

Classic discussions of ports and harbours have tended to focus on their role as facilitators of the efficient movement of money, ships, people, and goods. Amsterdam could stand as an example of this pragmatic ideal, its canal-based urban design concept – ‘the modular, compact incremental Dutch style’ – enabling it to expand where, and as, needed. Amsterdam was also, of course, famous for its equally pragmatic approach to religious difference. Yet as an urban space, the waterfront and its surrounding area were not always open to free flow and exchange, or designed to facilitate these things.

New scholarship has expanded our notion of the work of ports, as well as our ideas about why ports mattered. They could be a place of quarantine; of carefully regulated extraterritorial trading enclaves; of walled and policed warehouse districts.
The waterfront could serve as the backdrop for elaborately choreographed courtly ceremonies, or equally choreographed diplomatic snubs. Anthropologists, sociologists, architects, and even philosophers have approached port towns with new interest in recent years, inspired not by an interest in their commercial life as such, but by the unique social formations and tacit understandings (often loosely referred to as ‘tolerant’ or ‘cosmopolitan’) that flourished there.16

Michael Pearson’s work on intensely local ‘littoral societies’ puts the spotlight on people who both relied on the water for their livelihood and also stayed put geographically, a helpful corrective to narratives that emphasize the highly mobile empire builders of the period. This littoral population included fisherfolk, but also ‘people who tend the lighters that go out to meet the big ships’.17 Future scholarship could undoubtedly do more with the people who, in the Swedish expression, kept ‘one boot in the boat and the other in the field’.18 However, focusing solely on occupations or work identity leaves an incomplete impression of what could be at stake when we speak of the paramaritime. If (to invoke Le Bouëdec’s words again) there is an opportunity to shift the focus from a maritime community pure et dure to reciprocal relationships and blurred boundaries, the espace d’interface, then we can and should approach the pluriactive in more than just an occupational register.19 Feminist and Atlantic World scholars, who have emphasized the agency of translators, sex workers, culture brokers, and familial go-betweens in producing a shared contact zone, suggest the potential for writing about emotional pluriactives and fractional or hyphenated identities, expanding and complicating the potential scope of a term such as ‘littoral society’ and suggesting new lines of investigation for the future.

Splendour and authority

Italian Renaissance planners drew idealized diagrams of perfect octagonal port towns enclosing a symmetrical array of streets and squares, with the harbour as an afterthought at the bottom (see Figure 8.1).

Such schemes did not make it past the blueprint stage, but the dream of building a perfect port town by decree points to ambitions for the exercise of comprehensive control over these spaces. European planners came to appreciate water ‘as an urban space that, like a piazza, offered a visual prospect of other parts of the city beyond itself’.20 If planners worried about whether major port features such as canals, fortifications, and dockyards would present a splendid vista from the waterline, this anxiety arose out of some legitimate, practical considerations.21 The waters of the harbour and the streets of the port could form the backdrop for great occasions of state, where ambassadors might first present their credentials. It was where official delegations, including those involved in royal weddings, might disembark with appropriate fanfare.22 For those on official business, ‘the moment of transfer from ship to shore provided the first stage on which to mark out their authority and required, for this reason, special care’.23 Newcomers sometimes had to undertake preliminary negotiations on how to preserve the dignity of their office upon landing.

For rulers, the outward appearance of a port town could send diplomatic signals, establish prestige, or even offer an insight into the regime’s overall stance toward the
outside world. Historians of Asia have noted the striking contrast in tone and outlook between polities with inland capitals (Beijing, Delhi) and those, like Malacca and many others in Southeast Asia, where ‘the administrative and economic heart [was] fused into one city’. These Asian examples suggest a fresh perspective on Peter the Great’s momentous decision to relocate his seat of government to a new port town on the Baltic:
As seaport, imperial capital, and metropolis combined, St. Petersburg was much less the predecessor of Washington, D.C., than it was the successor to Constantinople and, more distantly, Alexandria. The first new city of that type since Constantinople, it was also the first since then to be named for its founder.  

Peter’s ambitions, at first glance, might seem worlds away from the challenges faced by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), but their emissaries struggled to win acceptance at some Asian courts because they did not represent a royal dynasty. In response, the VOC reshaped Batavia into something that looked like ‘the Port of a Prince’. This included grand ceremonies for visiting ambassadors, who were assigned ‘specialy decorated vessels’ for the official landing ceremony, where they were greeted with festive cannon shots, and escorted to purpose-built diplomatic quarters. The governor-general did not appear in public without his official carriage and his retinue of horsemen and halberdiers. The birthdays and funerals of governors-general were marked by expensive public commemorations. Soon rulers were addressing letters to the ‘King of Batavia’.  

Ambassadors and merchants – even those hailing from quite dissimilar cultures – had to learn to conform to the protocols and etiquette of the host country. Beginning in 1634, the VOC representatives paid an annual homage to the shogun following a set procession route, beginning in Nagasaki harbour and ending in Edo. Contemporary sketches show a long, snaking line of dignitaries, palanquin bearers, attendants, carts, and beasts of burden (see Figure 8.2). This hofreis procession recurred each year with little change in the route, and only a little variation in the stipulated date, for more than two centuries.  

Not all pageantry was pre-planned and choreographed. In 1636, for instance, in the hopes of winning the release of a captive company official, the VOC shipped an 800 pound brass chandelier to the Japanese shogun. This ungainly, 30-armed object was ‘a display item that was designed to be seen – and indeed seen by as many people as possible – rather than used’. The unloading of the chandelier amounted to an event in its own right. It had been broken down into separate crates for shipment, each piece meticulously marked in Japanese characters for reassembly. The chandelier excited so much curiosity that it was unpacked and assembled in public twice. The onlookers grew so numerous that the Japanese authorities had to improvise special supplies of food and drink to meet their needs.  

Many of the great Asian land-based empires sought to balance an openness to trade with a serious effort to limit and control destabilizing seaborne influences. The Japanese decision to confine the Dutch to Deshima, a three-acre artificial island in Nagasaki harbour, is a somewhat extreme example, but islands regularly played a role in strategies of containment. For instance, Venice’s famous lazaretto was built on a nearby island. Such entities are best considered not as outside the urban space, but as a specially contained feature of the city, able to open or close as needed. Though the waterfront might appear, inherently, as a space of reception, it could also be pressed into service as a security perimeter. After a spate of privateering activity in the Caribbean, Spain reconfigured the built environment around their ports there with a system of defences ‘garrisoned by permanent militias and given the logistical
Figure 8.2 Engelbert Kaempfer, History of Japan, 1727.
Courtesy of Indiana State University Library.
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support of sentinel systems on various coasts, patrol boats in some areas, and additional militia units stationed at strategic points near the coast’. Both the construction and staffing of this fortified seawall would rely heavily on black labour, both free and enslaved.

Even at home, European rulers worried over the balance between prosperity and security, power and disorder. It was increasingly taken as axiomatic that founding new or additional ports would inevitably increase trade, naval power, or both. In the 1660s, Louis XIV plotted with his ministers to establish four new naval bases, Brest, Rochefort, Lorient, and Sète, each to be situated on sections of the French coastline ‘where no useful commercial or military port yet existed’. The new sites proved viable, although the French planners were also confounded by squatters, pilferers, and the congested, disorderly clusters of wooden shacks housing the construction workers. The king fretted over the prevalence of prostitution, imposed curfews, and even banned troupes of comedians from visiting his naval base at Brest. He also fretted about the presence of foreigners near his naval bases. In 1695, almost all foreigners were expelled on short notice. This included thousands of recent Irish Catholic exiles who considered France a refuge. Both the planned character of the new French ports, and the unusually vigilant hand of the state there, offer an interesting corrective to an image of coastal communities as places where governance attenuated or disappeared. In some quarters, a fascination with planned port towns established by decree persisted through the end of this period; Odessa’s leafy squares and inspiring prospects were laid out in Catherine the Great’s reign, and as late as the 1790s, Ullapool and Tobermory were built on ‘empty’ coastline in the Scottish Highlands, with help from the famed engineer Thomas Telford.

Telford also helped design some of London’s new docks. While a project like the St Katharine’s Docks or the West India Docks was not the same as establishing an entire new port community by fiat, the use of ‘walled basins and fortified warehouses’ coupled with 24-hour monitoring and even dress codes to discourage theft by employees did represent a social and political experiment on a grand scale. The aim was to ‘bring to reasonable order some thousands of men, who had long considered plunder a privilege’. The creation of modern facilities also threatened to starve other, more traditional locations for docking ships on the Thames. Londoners, in turn, fretted that Bristol or Liverpool might enter the construction race and divert ships away from the Thames altogether, in favour of a more modern facility. St Katharine’s Docks are remembered for Telford’s ingenious engineering, but to make room for them it was necessary to demolish a hospital, a church, and a graveyard, in addition to 1,250 houses. This meant the eviction of approximately 11,300 residents. Such a drastic upheaval predictably drew some critics, but the rejoinders (nothing was lost as St Katharine’s was a ‘den of infamy’ filled with ‘rogues and vagabonds’) prefigure later debates about urban reform and urban renewal.

Disease formed one of the clearest pretexts for state intervention into the life of port towns. Outbreaks often proved difficult to contain, despite measures such as mandatory quarantine, the construction of lazarettos or ‘pest houses’, and other precautions such as handling letters with iron tongs prior to fumigating them. Bribery and cheating around the edges of the quarantine regime undoubtedly took place, although the extent of it would be hard to quantify. While ports on the Mediterranean and the
Black Sea worried about plague, ports involved in the Atlantic trades had to contend with yellow fever. The July 1793 yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia, the result of a single ship arriving from West Africa, tested the resolve and even the sanity of the city’s residents. The citizens’ desperate countermeasures included rinsing walls with vinegar, fumigating one’s lungs by smoking tobacco nonstop, firing cannon down the empty streets to disperse the miasma, or simply fleeing to the countryside, abandoning family members who had already fallen ill. Dr Benjamin Rush, the prestigious Edinburgh-trained physician, prescribed a stringent regime of bleeding, purging, and salivation, the latter with the aid of mercury. To maintain what remained of the public’s shaken morale, churches received orders to stop tolling their bells for each new death, and the dead had to be conveyed to graveyards in closed carriages.

Notwithstanding famous images like Thomas Rowlandson’s ‘Portsmouth Point’, the foreshore was not merely a ludic or chaotic space, and ‘foreshoring behaviour’ could take many forms other than welcoming, facilitating, and marketing. The drawing-in impulse of foreshoring behaviour might alternate with, or give way to, the pushback thrust of offshoring behaviour. It would be difficult to do justice to the urban character of port towns without acknowledging the uneasy dialectic between the two. Although aspects of port town life have, justifiably, been characterized as peripheral, liminal, or transnational – and indeed Michel Foucault, in his discussion of heterotopia, lamented that ‘civilizations without boats’ had nothing left but the police state – an unrelenting focus on these aspects may cause us to overlook the situations where state power was both vigilant and highly visible. Port towns were in the vanguard of experiments in planning and central control.

**The urban estuary**

The rich mélange of coexistence, collaboration, and outright mixture is an inescapable theme in the historiography on port towns in this period. This has long been true of writing on the Levant, for example, but it has emerged as a central issue for a wide variety of ports, including those once characterized as mere trading posts or beachheads for one ‘seaborne empire’ or another. The tidy schema of fort-bazaar-native town seems increasingly inadequate to capture both the social character and economic operations of the ‘colonial’ ports. All of these spaces were composite ones, running on a substantial infusion of local expertise and entrepreneurship, and often with some degree of devolved or shared urban governance. Many ports remained ‘Middle Grounds’ in multiple senses. Governors of captured strongholds had to make their calculations about profit and loss, war and peace, in the context of still flourishing, still innovative non-European polities nearby, often led by the same dynasties or merchants only recently displaced by the interlopers. Portuguese Malacca had to endure long rivalries with the sultanates of Johor and Aceh; Dutch Batavia had a similar experience with Makassar. Meanwhile, a merely political map of Southeast Asia would have missed the profound role played by expatriate Chinese merchant communities in virtually every port.

Even at the confluence of globalizing flows, a considerable amount of agency about just how an individual port town would look, feel, and function remained in
the hands of the inhabitants. Successful port towns often made a deliberate effort to foster good communication and appear welcoming to outsiders. The office of shahbandar or port master is an interesting way that this kind of practice could be institutionalized. ‘Usually a foreigner’, the shahbandar’s ‘sole purpose was to attract, manage, and promulgate trade’, Eric Tagliacozzo has argued, suggesting that the work of this figure, typically ‘the second-most important official in most Southeast Asian polities after the ruler’, set the tone for the port town as a whole and reinforced existing habits of accommodation and openness. Another tangible sign of officially sanctioned coexistence were clusters of mosques, shrines, temples, or churches that could stand almost side by side. In Penang, this acquired the nickname ‘the street of harmony’. These sorts of sights made a great impression on visitors, particularly those from societies that were less diverse or less tolerant of open displays of religious heterodoxy. Similarly, Philadelphia’s social experiment in religious toleration fascinated commentators, and the synagogues in Amsterdam attracted tourists who came to marvel at the spectacle of open Jewish religious observance in a grand style.

Whether such communities are best described as truly cosmopolitan in spirit, or merely ‘plural’ and pragmatic, remains a topic of debate. Adam Sutcliffe has stated bluntly that ‘it would be wrong to imagine early modern port cities as utopias of tolerance, understanding, and cultural empathy’. Not every port had people in leadership positions who thought that a welcoming and respectful environment around issues of ethnic and religious difference was a practical necessity. Jamaica, for instance, was known both for its sizeable Jewish community, but also for the special taxes and humiliating rituals of obeisance expected from Jews. Colonial officials demanded ‘Jew Pyes’, pastry shells crammed with gold doubloons and following the earthquake of 1692, it was proposed that the special tax on Jews should rise still further to help rebuilding efforts.

Nor did the lived experience of trade at a cultural crossroads invariably produce warmth and empathy. The West African ports were well known for their polyglot savoir faire – one visitor was even addressed in German – yet the relationships between European buyers and African magnates followed a landlord-stranger template, supplemented by tactical alliances and temporary ‘country marriages’. The powerful signares of Gorée, in Senegal, were women whose commercial prosperity relied primarily upon selling slaves. In Gorée, pragmatic considerations dictated the suppression of empathy, not an embrace of it. Another West African port, Atorkor, had a name derived from the Akan expression meaning ‘let me buy and go’. Such brisk, indifferent attitudes were, surely, neither unique to West Africa, nor to the slave trade.

Even if the circumstances of trade sometimes hardened hearts, trusted partners were – if not an absolute prerequisite to long-distance commerce – then certainly one of its most highly desirable preconditions. As trade routes lengthened, diasporas ‘of consanguinity, religion, and culture’ offered one way to deliver reliable credit and also reduce the need for multiple layers of translators and culture brokers. Some diasporas may have achieved a dominant role because they were uniquely well-positioned to bridge otherwise self-contained cultural zones. For example, Sephardic Jews fleeing to the Balkans after the 1490s carried with them the knowledge of the Spanish language and a familiarity with languages written in the Latin alphabet. Other diasporic
trading groups existed, but at the time, few others were equally comfortable with the scripts and business practices used across the whole range of the Eastern and Western Mediterranean.\(^{61}\)

Other diasporic groups actually developed new, composite dialects in the course of their trade and travels. The Armenian trade diaspora headquartered in New Julfa, near Isfahan, left rich archives behind, but they were unintelligible even to most Armenian-reading historians because the Julfa dialect had accumulated so much vocabulary – and so many legal and commercial concepts – from ‘Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hindustani, among other languages’.\(^{62}\) Not every trading diaspora inherited such a linguistically privileged position, but many attempted to foster an equivalent degree of cultural literacy by a system of farming-out young children to live with grandparents or uncles in distant ports. This could begin as early as the age of five, and involve frequent relocations thereafter.\(^{63}\) These extended families, once ensconced across a line of carefully chosen ports, could become formidable networks. Some Julfian Armenian ‘households’ could have ‘as many as five hundred extended members, a fact that sometimes allowed them to survive as a corporate entity for several centuries’.\(^{64}\) Simple expressions like ‘one of our own’ or ‘our people’ or ‘our nation of Julfa’ could mobilize the ‘bounded or exclusionary nature’ of the group’s identity.\(^{65}\) In such a community, cheating a trading partner or just letting someone down could quickly result in ‘blotting out’, a kind of social death sentence.\(^{66}\) Even across the vast distances spanned by the great trade diasporas, frequent exchanges of letters made a startling degree of intelligence-gathering possible. One Julfian Armenian trader was rejected as a business partner because it was known that his brother had once gotten drunk and lost a sum of money placed in his charge.\(^{67}\)

Yet, as Francesca Trivellato has noted, this image of a ferociously self-invigilating and utterly reliable kinship network deserves a second look. Just as there is no such thing as an infallible succession of competent family members in a hereditary monarchy, a strict adherence to father–son succession would eventually place an inept, short-sighted, or malevolent individual in charge. Even deepening the pool of leadership candidates (for example, the cultivation of nephews) did not preclude rivalry and other forms of friction. Simply put, sharing a lineage, language, and religion was not enough to guarantee that trust would never be betrayed. In practice, many of these allegedly kin-based trading networks made extensive use of partnerships with co-religionists outside their own extended family, and even the bonds of kinship did not obviate the need for written, enforceable contracts.\(^{68}\) If we find ethno-religious minorities cultivating a reputation for astonishing levels of probity, Trivellato argues, this might have more to do with a rather different pragmatic concern: a fear that outsiders would reject them as potential business partners, choking off their commercial opportunities.\(^{69}\) Perhaps reliability figures, here, as a discourse as much as a reality.

Observers around the world agreed that trade diasporas exercised a powerful shaping influence on the overall urban structure of many port towns. The important Vietnamese port of Hoi An, in the early 1600s, had two riverside neighbourhoods identified with the Chinese and Japanese communities, respectively. A French visitor, Christophore Borri, remarked that these enclaves were legally and culturally demarcated in emphatic ways: ‘They live separately, each having their own governor. The
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Chinese living according to the laws of China, the Japanese to those of Japan. This [sic] seems to be two different cities’. This characterization seems evocative of the Ottoman policy of millet, in which religious enclaves were granted substantial self-governance in ports such as Smyrna; indeed, there is probably some risk that globe-trotting travellers, when making fresh observations about a new location, compressed distinct legal regimes into a single simplified template.

A different way to consider the evidence might be to look at how legal and diplomatic considerations acted to define and police the borders of group membership and acceptable conduct. Undoubtedly, allowing ethno-religious groups to police themselves, a practice already widespread ‘from Canton and the Philippines to Aden and Alexandria’ well before the period covered in this volume, acted as a powerful force strengthening ethno-religious self-awareness (‘identity’, if we wish).71 However, old identities could take on new meanings, or altogether new identities could become institutionalized by practice, as when the sultan of Malacca arbitrarily divided all foreign merchants among four shahbandars, assigning Chinese, Japanese, and Okinawans to the same one.72 The Portuguese, and later the Dutch, continued this approach in the Asian ports at the time that they assumed control, designating ethnic ‘captains’.73 A group without a recognized captain would have little clout, leading some to undertake tactical alliances creating larger, stronger groups, rather than adhering to the strict, pristine character of the original kinship-based trade diaspora. Under Dutch rule in Malacca, the Moors (Muslims from what is today Indonesia) and the Kelings (Muslims from South Asia) chose to pool together.74 Meanwhile, other forms of governmentality could militate against blurred or hyphenated identities, as when a British ordinance in Penang required the number plate outside each home to state the ‘ethnic origin’ of the house’s inhabitants.75

Did the fragmentation of urban life into trade diaspora enclaves mean that many port towns were, in effect, plural societies featuring mere adjacency without deep and meaningful interaction? It is important to acknowledge the power of the enclaves without losing sight of other possibilities. Under the Dutch, Malacca’s auction house was a popular crossroads for all of the different communities. Nordin Hussin has drawn attention to non-segregated streets, or streets segregated by wealth alone, not ethno-religious differences.76 He concludes that eighteenth-century Malacca ‘had developed a character that was neither pluralistic nor integrated. It had elements of both’.77 Another powerful argument against a plural society that ran on parallel tracks is the emergence of totally new hybrid groups that became, in many places, a major, permanent fixture of the urban scene. Where men from the Chinese trade diaspora intermarried with Malay women, the result was a distinctive Sino–Malay ‘Peranakan’ identity that persisted for centuries as a community in its own right. Centuries of European presence in South and Southeast Asia resulted in an equivalent grouping of ‘Eurasian’ people, who – not surprisingly – seem to have felt at home in port towns. It was also quite possible to be bi- or multi-cultural without being of mixed parentage oneself. The first South African Christian of native origin, Krotoa (‘Eva’, born c.1642) was herself the daughter of an interpreter employed by the VOC. She wore imported Indian clothes, preferred Dutch food, and upon puberty, sequestered herself for the traditional Khoikhoi rituals.78 Finally, if differences in faith were often taken to align
neatly with differences in ethnic identity and kinship affiliation, then religious syncretism stands out as one of the most striking possible examples of the mixing and melding that was possible—or even routine—in cosmopolitan settings.

In Salonica, the self-appointed Jewish messiah Sabbatai Zevi shocked some and entranced others with his sumptuous outfits, daring transgressions, and predictions of the world’s end.

He used to carry a sort of Sceptre in his hand and to go about Town always escorted by a great number of Jews, some of whom, to honour him, would spread carpets on the streets for him to step on.79

The fervour of his followers, not to mention his insubordination to all authorities religious and secular, drew the attention of the Ottoman emperor. Once arrested, it was not long before Zevi turned apostate, converting to Islam and adopting the name Aziz Mehmed Efendi. A significant number of his followers chose to follow his example; although the Turks sceptically called them dönmehs (turncoats), they formed a special, somewhat heterodox Islamic community in Salonica for centuries thereafter. They developed novel doctrines about awaiting the return of the Messiah who had withdrawn from the world, which might have been influenced by Shia concepts of the ‘hidden Imam’.80 Long coexistence in Salonica led to many other instances of religious concepts that blended or migrated from one faith community to another. ‘Christian women used both the Jewish cemetery and Muslim mausoleums when collecting earth from freshly dug graves to use against evil spirits’, while Jews used an Arabic word to describe their custom of going to pray at the graves of rabbis.81 Was Mousa Baba a Sufi holy man, or Saint George? Some devotees explained that he was both: he had ‘metamorphosed into a Turk with supernatural powers’ in order to ‘make the unbelievers believe’.82

The case of Salonica, as well as the better-known examples of syncretism from the Atlantic World, make it difficult to characterize similar practices elsewhere as sui generis. When we read that the badr-mokan shrines built by Muslim seafarers were considered ‘equally holy’ by non-Muslims, or that the Muslim saint Badr al-Din Awilya’ was worshipped ‘in coastal Burma as a nat by Burmese Buddhists, a Deva by Hindus, [and] as a spirit by Chinese’, it seems representative of a more general pattern.83

While a common trope in writing about the peculiarities of port towns has been that this behaviour (this innovative music; this mixture of cultures; this coexistence) surely could only be unique and place-bound (only in Odessa; only in Rangoon), Michael Pearson has suggested otherwise. He notes that entire regions (in his example, the Indian Ocean) have been hotbeds of syncretism, and argues that there may be a general tendency for coastal regions to be more heterodox than their inland counterparts. This pattern was discerned not only by historians in retrospect, but by observers at the time; several generations of Islamic ‘rectifiers’ set sail from Yemen to set the Comoros Islands and other Indian Ocean locales back on the straight and narrow path.84 Indeed as Stuart Schwartz has remarked about the Dutch Caribbean, ‘societies of continual cross-religious contact [became] places of conversions,
internmarriages, and interchanges'. Syncretism was only one possible outcome here, however. Cosmopolitan settings also seem to have emerged as havens for cultural relativism, if not outright scepticism about religious claims to truth. Felipe Tendeur, a Catholic soldier originally from Brabant, found himself stationed in the garrison at Cartagena de Indias. Confronted about a heretical book in his possession (a Dutch tract, *Prayers and Devotional Songs for Seamen*), he retorted that it was permissible because he ‘read the good parts and left out the bad ones’. Likewise, Juan Pablo de Echigoien, denounced to the Inquisition in Mexico in 1761, praised the Freemasons on the grounds that they ‘only sought good men’ and did not exclude anyone, even Jews, on the basis of religion.

As Schwartz has shown, the records of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions preserve a rich array of questionable sentiments, often from individuals in port towns and with significant experience at sea. Of course, glimpses of everyday pragmatism, irreverence, or anticlericalism could be mistaken for closely reasoned and sincerely maintained unbelief. Reflections on daily lived experience (‘Love […] your neighbour like yourself, aren’t the Moors and heretics our neighbours?’) or dry wit (‘if they are all going to hell, a bigger hell will be needed’) are hard to pinpoint along that spectrum of possibilities. Statements such as ‘Shut up, all can be saved by different roads’ and ‘Let’s leave this alone and find a way to eat and survive’, betray a tone of impatience as much as a desire to declaim any philosophical position.

Cheek-by-jowl neighbourliness could prompt religious questioning, but perhaps with greater regularity it suggested practical challenges. A cosmopolitan town had to organize itself in the face of fires, plagues, and assaults, or simply to address the needs of maintaining the streets and offering a modicum of support for the poor. Not all of these problems were well-suited to a fragmented approach in which each sub-community looked after its own. It was hard, of course, to enlist or engage across ethnic or religious lines without implying — de facto if not de jure — a somewhat more inclusive vision of civic identity. In fact, formal co-governance did exist in some places. Siobhan Talbott’s work on Scottish merchants has shown that in the second half of the seventeenth century, European ports were not averse to reserving seats for foreigners on their town councils. She notes a number of examples in Sweden in that period, but even in Louis XIV’s France, where barriers of religious suspicion might have thrown up insuperable obstacles and legal restrictions on Protestants were on the rise, we find Scots ‘embedded in civic institutions’. Such communities of stakeholders were brought about, in the first instance, only by the pragmatic necessities of trade and economic interdependence. Yet it is hard to see how the experience of co-operation and mutual recognition would not have left a lasting memory. A more ambitious example of inclusive governance occurred on the other side of the world, in Dutch Malacca. The Orphan Chamber (*Weeskamer*) performed predictable philanthropic functions, but it also managed the estates donated to charity, and issued loans, mortgages, and bonds. Indeed the *Weeskamer* served as Malacca’s only public bank, making it a key civic institution. Its managing committee included permanent seats for the ‘ethnic captains’ representing three of the town’s non-European populations, and ‘the regulations of the Chamber were written in Dutch, Portuguese, Malay, Chula, and Chinese’.
Not surprisingly, military exigency also inspired inclusive practices that went well beyond token gestures. In Mexico, Spanish governors encouraged free blacks to join coastal defence militias in and around ports like Veracruz. This provided much-needed defence against pirate attacks. Once under arms, however, black militia members lobbied for enhanced rights: ‘[t]hrough contact with sailors, merchants, coloured travellers, free-coloured’s living in Mexico’s coastal regions became aware from a fairly early period that their peers abroad were obtaining specific privileges in exchange for their military duties’. They demanded, and won, exemption from the tribute tax, a status that only whites (españoles) and mestizos had previously enjoyed. However, black militias would not be accorded the honour of bearing edged weapons such as swords and daggers, or the privilege of using guns. Instead, they would carry only machetes and long spears. In the event of an uprising, this left the decisive weaponry in the hands of more trusted troops. In an interesting parallel, the Dutch initially considered Malacca’s Eurasian minority with some concern – as they were Catholic, and also Portuguese-descended – but later put them to work ‘as members of the town’s security patrol’. Weapons would be placed in the hands of minorities, yet conveniently minorities whose ancestry or appearance handily marked them out as unlike the local majority population.

These balancing acts between hybridization and purity, empowerment and containment might seem paradoxical. Yet it is fair to conclude that such practices were typical of the muddy, ambiguous waters of the urban estuary. In the historiography, the expectation persists that port towns will be both urbane and cosmopolitan. This is underscored by the iconic imagery, reproduced – usually without comment – on book jackets and as glossy textbook illustrations: the dense forest of masts in a harbour, the polyglot spice market, the merchant’s counting-house with maps on the walls. However, it is particularly difficult to reconstruct the daily lived experience of coexistence, the atmosphere on the street, or the attitudes that accompanied life in the planet’s most diverse locations. The ancient Southeast Asian port of Srivijaya was said to have been so diverse that ‘the parrots there spoke Arabic, Persian, Greek and “Hindu” [sic]’. These sorts of exuberant assessments, often penned by those who only visited briefly, do not include a reckoning of how linguistic diversity was perceived, experienced, or managed. After the fall of Portuguese rule in Malacca (not far from the abandoned site of Srivijaya), the new Dutch administration issued an edict that slaves who could not speak basic Dutch would henceforth not enjoy the privilege of wearing hats. It was possible to view the most brilliant kaleidoscope through a jaundiced lens, and even the tolerant port town was, to some extent, another arena for experiments in planning by the authorities. At minimum, the contours or limits of tolerance were shaped by regulation and tempered by assertions of hierarchy.

**Littoral societies**

Most of the world’s coasts were settled in this period, but only a few were heavily urbanized. Some populations in Africa, the Indian Ocean region, and the Pacific responded to the opportunities of long-distance trade by migrating to the coast and pitching tents when the ships came in; after the sails passed over the horizon, these
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seasonal trade fairs would simply disband. Similarly, some sites, such as fishing stations, smugglers’ coves, and offshore islands rich in the eggs of sea fowl or turtle meat, could be important centres of activity without corresponding to traditional expectations of a year-round port. Those who exploited the sea or shore on an improvisational, opportunistic basis also might not have recognized themselves in occupational terms like ‘sailor’, ‘merchant’, ‘smuggler’, ‘wrecker’, or ‘pirate’.

Many coastal activities were not, or could not be, full-time pursuits. Terrestrial and maritime harvests followed a precise calendar, and in many places a calculated economy of makeshifts evolved to follow it, redirecting labour to the most productive location for that season. For example, the herring migration made fishing an easy, low-skill activity in many locations in northern Europe, but only for a few weeks of the year. Anyone with access to a small boat could seize the opportunity: in Cornwall, this included tin miners; on the Isle of Man, shopkeepers took to the water. Farmers drew on maritime resources, as when Bretons collected seaweed to fertilize their fields. This resource was sufficiently important that it became the subject of litigation. The French courts ruled that if the seaweed was visibly attached to the rocks, it counted as a production of the land and was not mere flotsam. Seaweed unattached to rocks was fair game for anyone, even from a different parish or village.

The Native American peoples settled around what is today known as Long Island Sound were at home in the water. Although they hunted deer and cultivated corn, beans, and squash, they derived much of their food supply from the sea and the tidal marshes. Even when they made territorial concessions to European settlers, they sought to reserve harvest rights to good oyster beds. The presence of shell piles remain the best indicator of a former village site. The currents in this area are turbulent and complex – the Dutch called the place where the Hudson River meets the Atlantic Ocean ‘hellmouth’ – but their large canoes and navigational skills were equal to the task. Although these seagoing canoes lacked outriggers to stabilize them, rowers ventured out of sight of land at times, confident in their ability to swim back to shore if necessary.

All of this is in keeping with very ancient coastal harvesting practices common in many parts of the world. However, as Andrew Lipman has explained in his book *The Saltwater Frontier*, these same Native American groups had also developed a waterborne trading network on such a scale that it required a lingua franca to interact with strangers. European colonists grew suspicious when they realized that the phrases they were, laboriously, learning from the locals were not the ones that the natives used in private conversation with each other. Making some allowances for scale, Long Island Sound was a fairly cosmopolitan setting, even before European contact. Colonists quickly learned that these societies were capable of mounting significant naval or trade expeditions in their large, heavily manned canoes. Building on this foundation as contact continued, seafarers from these Native American populations became an integral part of the early whaling industry in New England.

Amphibious livelihoods and opportunistic, improvisational pluriactivity are fairly straightforward concepts. However, in keeping with the spirit of a paramaritime inquiry, it is worth expanding the meaning of terms like ‘amphibious’ and ‘pluriactive’ to include a richer set of possibilities. Taverns in the Atlantic World can serve as a
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concise example. They were often owned and operated by women, and even passed down routinely from mother to daughter. Taverns were not simply havens for the purchase of drink and sex; they could serve variously as slave markets, courtrooms, auction houses, public assembly halls, lending libraries, post offices, venues for cock fighting and even, occasionally, as exhibition spaces for exotic animals. Indeed, women were permitted to dominate the port town’s nerve centre. In her study of non-elite or downwardly mobile white women in the Leeward Islands, Natalie Zacek summarizes how the authorities rationalized this practice:

[T]he granting of a tavern license would allow the councillors of an island to portray themselves simultaneously as generous, by giving assistance to impoverished and deserving women, and as hard-headed, by offering these women an opportunity for self-help rather than outright charity.

Even in a number of cases where the licence was, nominally, held by a husband or father, it was a woman who managed the tavern. Perhaps port towns offered women special leeway and unusual opportunities and the pattern was likely to have been especially prevalent in newly colonized or newly conquered settings where custom and law appeared less obvious or precedent less settled. Migrant women might find a way to practise a trade or run a small business even though corporate tradition (for example, guild restrictions) in their country of origin would have prohibited this. Once again, while we might imagine port towns as necessarily liberated or liberating spaces, there was nothing timeless or inevitable about this phenomenon, and women found it more difficult to sustain their prominent role as social norms calcified. Sheryllynn Haggerty notes that the number of women listed as proprietors of coffee houses, taverns, or inns in the Philadelphia Trade Directories fell by half between 1785 and 1805. Men were increasingly expected to hold management positions, while the assumption became that only a ‘working girl’ would be seen in a tavern.

Women occupied a strategic location along the land–sea divide, and at the intersection of empires and cultures. Douglas Catterall and Jodi Campbell offer a vivid metaphor for this gatekeeper or mediator position. They describe the ‘majestic expanse of [Amsterdam’s] roadstead or its main gateway, the three-sided expanse of anchorages’ versus the:

bridge’s hinge or a chain’s links [that] actually governed access to a port’s harbour and interior waterways […] Like the hinge of a canal bridge, women could determine the motion of these forces in ways that supported their own agendas.

Of course, proximity to power rarely came without ambiguity and constraints. Pamela Scully has written eloquently about the complex multiple roles played by Malintzin, Pocahontas, and Krotoa, who have been read, among other things, as gifts conveyed to Europeans by male authorities for the purposes of ‘cementing alliances’, as ‘foundational mothers to settler cultures’, or as individuals who ‘performed very complicated negotiations within constrained possibilities’. Scully quotes Anna Lanyon on the heartbreaking conflicts inherent in the role, which are elided in a term like...
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‘foundational mother’: ‘They were obliged to consort with the enemy, to bring forth children in a devastated world and learn to love them, whatever the bitter circumstances of their conception’. They were, out of necessity, emotional and cultural pluriactives. These indigenous mother figures appear in an absolutely pivotal role, both in narratives of ethnogenesis and in nationalist critiques. The woman who was known (variously) as Malintzin, Dona Marina, or La Malinche bore a child to Cortes, and, as Scully notes, also lives on in the pejorative term ‘malinchista’, or traitor.

In a prescient thought-piece published a generation ago, Pearson observed that ‘maritime influences, or perhaps the area we can call the littoral, are of very varying depth inland’. He advocated for a littoral history that would engage with ‘both land and sea’, including the ‘part of the land influenced by the sea’, but admitted that there were potential pitfalls to his approach. The littoral might be too large to be analytically useful, since ‘almost everywhere’ was in some sense influenced by the sea; ‘the whole Malay world’ would fall within the littoral as he defined it. Even if his expansive littoral were shown to have some limits, he acknowledged that this might set up a different problem: a fuzzy border provoking cycles of ‘tortuous speculation’, rather than productive discussion.

Pearson suggested several ways forward. To establish the analytical value of the littoral, he argued that a careful comparison of many different littoral regions would turn up some coherent and predictable patterns, beginning with the fairly prosaic (a heavier consumption of seafood, a heightened chance of involvement in long-distance trade) but extending into the realm of attitudes and cultural formations such as religious pluralism. He also suggested that we could refine the concept of maritime influence (or, indeed, terrestrial influence) as a statement not just about physical proximity, but about proximity of causation. The example he offered was ‘Mughal-Safavid conflict over the great fort of Gandahar’, an inland event with identifiable coastal repercussions. Another way to escape some of the potential hair-splitting about the proper geographical boundaries of the littoral was to focus not so much on the physical topography, but on tracking the ‘people whose lives were connected with the sea’ wherever they might go.

All this sounded a bit abstract in 1985. We can appreciate the value of Pearson’s approach better today, partly because of the territory opened up by a generation of scholars from non-maritime subfields who found themselves engaging with littoral people or littoral issues. With that rich vein of examples in mind, it is easier to visualize ‘maritime influences’ snaking their way through the foothills, much like the annual Dutch procession up from Nagasaki and back down to Edo. We also have a somewhat enlarged vocabulary to describe potential littoral realms or dimensions, diversifying away from the usual occupational, mercantile, and naval suspects. Although the relevant scholarship does not yet cite its counterparts very often, there is now the potential to benefit from a much more complete comparative framework; thus, we can match up the religious pluralism that Pearson identified in the Indian Ocean littoral with Zevi’s apostasy, as well as Felipe Tendeur’s insouciant free-thinking.

Looking ahead, it is possible to discern a much more expansive concept of ‘littoral society’ as the longue durée version of what we are accustomed to call contact zones. Scully’s discussion of ethnogenesis, emotional pluriactives, and national myth-building.
might begin on (or near) the beach of encounter, but it proliferates and elaborates outward in time and space from there. Many of the laws and institutions discussed in this chapter reflect a process where initial cross-cultural encounters were regularized and formalized: the beach of encounter with a street grid imposed, officials appointed, and regulations drawn up. Although Pearson expressed some trepidation about including (for example) ‘the whole Malay world’ as littoral, we may ultimately conclude that it is both accurate, and analytically useful, to include entire cultures, societies, or politics inside the vast penumbra of the paramaritime.

Notes

3 To assemble this definition, I drew on OED s.v. ‘para-’, as well as ‘paramilitary’, ‘paranormal’, ‘paracellular’, ‘paracystitis’, OED Online.
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20 Konvitz, Cities, p. 11.

21 Konvitz, Cities, p. 53.


26 Chulow, The Company and the Shogun, p. 68.


31 Konvitz, Cities, p. 16.


33 Konvitz, Cities, p. 47.

34 Konvitz, Cities, p. 77.

35 Konvitz, Cities, pp. 104, 125.

36 Konvitz, Cities, p. 126.


43 Smith, Ship of Death, p. 220.


47 M. Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, Diacritics 16/1, 1986, p. 27.


54 B. J. Kaplan, ‘Fictions of Privacy: House Chapels and the Spatial Accommodation of Religious Dissent in Early Modern Europe’, *American Historical Review* 107/4, 2002, pp. 1031–64 offers an overview of hidden chapels and clandestine synagogues across Europe, as well as the legal and cultural frameworks that permitted some to exist out in the open.


61 Sutcliffe, ‘Jewish History’, p. 5.


64 Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*, p. 147.

65 Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*, p. 177.

66 Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean*, p. 292, endnote 82.


70 Lockard, ‘Sea Common to All’, p. 236.


72 Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, p. 130.


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78 Northrup, *Africa’s Discovery*, p. 66.
80 Mazower, *Salonica*, p. 73.
82 Mazower, *Salonica*, p. 80.
98 C. Ralston, *Grass Huts and Warehouses: Pacific Beach Communities of the Nineteenth Century*, Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978, pp. 20–43. This observation can be scaled up to other settings: G. Le Bouëdec, ‘Small Ports from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Century and the Local Economy of the French Atlantic Coast’, *International Journal of Maritime History* 21/2, 2009, p. 107, draws attention to Jean Tanguy’s survey of Brittany, compiled in the mid-sixteenth century, counting 123 ports, many of which Tanguy admitted were so seasonal or occasional that they ‘are practically impossible to find’; see also G. Jackson, ‘The Significance of Unimportant Ports’, *International Journal of Maritime History* 13/2, 2001, pp. 8–10; Gillis, *Human Shore*, p. 108.
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