

Conference

Carceral Seas

Laleh Khalili 

Queen Mary University of London, UK

Keywords

maritime, migration, carcerality

Millennium: Journal of
International Studies
1–10

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/03058298211040188

journals.sagepub.com/home/mil



In his haunting ‘The Sea Is History’, the great Trinidadian poet Derek Walcott marries the story of the maritime transportation of enslaved Africans to the narrative progression of the Old Testament:

Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.

Bone soldered by coral to bone,
mosaics
mantled by the benediction of the shark’s shadow,

that was the Ark of the Covenant.

Then came from the plucked wires
of sunlight on the sea floor

the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage,
as the white cowries clustered like manacles
on the drowned women,

Corresponding author:

Laleh Khalili, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS, UK.

Email: l.khalili@qmul.ac.uk

and those were the ivory bracelets
of the Song of Solomon,
but the ocean kept turning blank pages

looking for History.

The harrowing history of captivity at sea – of the Middle Passage – is also the history of emergence of capitalism in Europe, and of the economic, political and social transformation of the Caribbean and the Americas. Historically, captivity at sea has also been used as a means of incarcerating the unwanted; usually the politically intransigent who needed to be kept out of vision, hearing and access. The British used ships as prisons for American colonists during their independence struggle against London. More recently the Home Office in the UK has floated the idea of such migrant detention brigs again. Histories of navigation in the early modern period also tell us of the forcibly recruited seafarers who worked the great sailing ships of the colonisation age. They did so at the point of a whip and under the constant threat of horrific punishment. And of course, there is a millennia-long history of slaves working in the galleys of sailing ships, as the corporeal force that powered the movement of vessels upon the deeps. So, from very early on, captivity at sea has been both a means of producing value *and* wielding coercive power across the surface of the globe, and sometimes both at once.

What could have been a contingent condition of capital accumulation, of having to transport African persons across the Atlantic to work in New World plantations, and of using carceral power as a means of punishing vast swathes of intransigent populations, became central, pivotal, formative for the European empires. The sea as a social space is often portrayed as being unreachable; its far expanses undiscoverable. The sea's surfaces and boundaries are perpetually changing; subject to multiple and overlapping forces, regulations and laws. It is, strangely, divisible both near the littorals and on the high seas. Sovereignty over it is difficult to define, ascertain and defend, even with the extraordinary force of both law and navies. At the same time, coercion on the surface of the deep is difficult to detect for the very same reasons – unreachability, invisibility, and divisibility.

In this article I will focus on particular forms of contemporary carcerality at sea. I reflect on what it means to hold people captive on the sea, and what sort of work such confinement at sea does for the accumulation of capital *and* for notions of security and sovereignty, and in both instances for the mutual effect of such captivity at sea on legal regimes and the reverse.

I shall begin with captivity at sea during the War on Terror. As I have written in *Time in the Shadows*, different modalities of captivity and confinement in liberal counterinsurgencies arise out of the complex of laws and administration, and in reaction to anticolonial protest. Liberal counterinsurgency depends on legal regimes which pay lip service to concepts of legality, accountability and transparency. Given the importance placed on these latter virtues, forms of confinement emerge in liberal counterinsurgencies which allow the counterinsurgent force, often an imperial one, to extra-territorialise captivity, precisely in order to confound calls for accountability, legal conformity and clarity.¹

1. Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013).

There is a long history of island prisons as places of exile and confinement, and the British Empire in particular perfected this form, with every corner of the empire hosting its own island prisons and penal colonies, from the Andaman Islands to Seychelles and Malta, from Tasmania to Ceylon.

In a sense, prison ships act as a kind of floating, unmoored island, fragments of sovereign confinement floating on the surface of the sea. They are hard to reach and escape, just as island prisons are. But they have the added benefit that they can steam through different legal regimes. This multiplicity of legal regimes emerges out of powerful states' constant attempt at territorialising the world's seas. Whether by custom or by law, the perpetually changing surface and subsurface of the sea is zoned into different spaces to which different legal regimes apply. As Phil Steinberg has written, these legal regimes emerged out of a sustained 'tension between the ideal of the ocean as a space that supports the division of the world into sovereign states and the ideal of the ocean as a "free" space of flows that supports commerce among them'.² Using this variability in the legal regimes applicable to thalassaemic regions, the US has tried to avoid the kinds of legal challenges or political demands for accountability that have arisen in response to captivity in places like Guantanamo Bay or Bagram Air Force Base or any number of its landbound detention centres in Iraq. As it is now well understood, the US assumed Guantanamo Bay was exempt from the writ of *habeas corpus* because of its ambiguous territorial status: at once a perpetual holding of the US under an indefinite lease, *and* not included within the boundaries of the US because it is a non-annexed colonial space. This gave the US the language it needed to first transform the base into a migrant detention centre for Haitian refugees and later as a counterinsurgency detention centre. It is also worth noting that the detention of Haitian refugees, under a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, was ostensibly a quarantine. And the Haitian refugees, racialised, abandoned in these horrific camps, refused entry, were also portrayed as vectors of illness, as carriers of a new plague, HIV, as alien bodies to be banished and interned. In their incarceration, the malleability of law, anti-black racism, xenophobia, and deeply dehumanising discourses of hygiene and pollution all converged in a maritime space of immobility.

A ship afloat on the sea can act in much the same way. When outside the territorial waters of the US, the applicability of *habeas corpus* or other legal strictures becomes less clear. In Europe, the ruse of 'quarantine' is used to reject the racialised bodies of migrants afloat. Not all ships become spaces of detention of course: a rich tourist from the global North will be able to leave an infected ship after a few days. But for those who have no power to challenge their internment a ship can become a space without no right to demand the release the body. Migrants on rickety boats will be rejected ostensibly because they may carry coronavirus (COVID-19); seafarers cannot leave ships they have worked on for months after the end of their contracts and are refused entry at ports of disembarkation.³

In the early years of the War on Terror, two US ships (and perhaps up to 17) were known to have acted as brigs for War on Terror prisoners. These included USS Peleliu which held David Hicks and John Walker Lindh, the Australian and American

2. Phil Steinberg, 'The Deepwater Horizon, the i, and the Dynamic Zonation of Ocean Space', *The Geographical Journal* 177, no. 1 (2010):12-16.

3. Austin Carr, 'The Cruise Ship Suicides', Bloomberg (30 December 2020); Francesco Bongarra, 'COVID-19 Forces Italy to Close "Unsafe" Ports to Refugee Ships', *Arab News*, 9 April 2020.

combatants respectively, and USS Bataan which operated off the coast of Pakistan in 2001-2002 and held other less high-profile detainees. But this form of captivity continued even under Barack Obama, where for example Ahmad Warsame of Somali al-Shabab was held for several months on USS Boxer at sea in 2011; a large number of other al-Shabab fighters that were held on other amphibious assault ships; or USNS Lewis and Clarke which was used as a brig for Somali pirates in 2009.⁴ The Vietnam War which was a watershed in the mass use of containerships, also saw the usage of containers as brigs for intransigent US soldiers in the theatre of war. In his *Fish Story*, Allan Sekula quotes a US general in charge of Vietnam War logistics as saying that ‘the CONEX container . . . has found countless additional uses in the war theatre. The metal cubes are converted into dispensaries, offices, supply rooms and command posts’. Sekula adds, ‘Perhaps the innovation was yet to come, or perhaps the general saw fit not to sully his suburban metaphor, but the containers were also used to imprison mutinous and delinquent American troops at the Long Binh Stockade, or jail, nicknamed LBJ by its inmates’.⁵

The British cannot be left out of this story either. Much like island prisons, British colonial and counterinsurgency officials also used seaborne prisons to detain intransigent political populations. HMS *Agenta* was used in the 1920s as a brig in the Irish uprising under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act (Northern Ireland) 1922; and in the 1970s, HMS *Maidstone* was a place of internment for Irish Republicans of Northern Ireland.

While this militarisation of captivity at sea is one of the most obvious instances of a state’s projection of its direct power across the world, there are three other instances I will discuss here where securitisation and captivity at sea have served in a more diffuse form to bolster capitalist accumulation in unexpected and sometimes even unintended ways. These three categories of events are: the movement of ghost ships of migrants across the sea; and the captivity of seafarers first by pirates in the Gulf of Aden, and later by COVID aboard ships.

Ghost ships are ships abandoned at sea by their officers and crew. This abandonment lends richly to fiction and imagination, as for example not too long ago a story circulated about a ghost ship full of cannibalistic rats floating off the coast of Britain. Less melodramatically, very often ghost ships are abandoned by seafarers because the ship is considered by them to be unseaworthy or even more frequently because of non-payment of wages by the ships’ owners or charterers.

In the last few years, one of the most contested use of ghost ships is as transport vessels for desperate migrants traversing the Mediterranean or the Aegean seas in order to reach Europe. Perhaps the most infamous are the *Blue Sky M* under a Moldovan flag and the *Ezadeen* under a Sierra Leonean flag.⁶ It is not yet entirely clear whether these ships were actually abandoned by their crew or if the representation of them as abandoned vessels is part of the propagandistic discourse of European border control.⁷ *Blue Sky*

4. Duncan Campbell and Richard Norton-Taylor, ‘US Accused of Holding Terror Suspects on Prison Ships’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2008.

5. Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (London: Mack Books, 2018), 136.

6. Jasmine Coleman, ‘Migrant Ghost Ships: Who Are the People Smugglers?’, *BBC News*, 9 January 2015.

7. Maurice Stierl, ‘A Sea of Struggle – Activist Border Interventions in the Mediterranean Sea’, *Citizenship Studies* 20, no. 5 (2016): 561-78.

M – carrying 970 people – was originally built in 1976 and had been decommissioned as a bulk carrier before being chartered and captained and crewed by other migrants themselves when the ship was boarded by Italian Coast Guard in December 2014. It appears that the ship's crew and officers, themselves migrants, melted into the body of passengers once the ship was boarded by officials. Only days later, Ezadeen with 360 migrants onboard was abandoned by its crew and captains and was towed to port in Italy. Ezadeen which was a livestock carrier was even older than the Blue Sky M, having been constructed in 1966. It is worth noting that today the average age for scrapping ships is around 25 years, so the fact that these ships were 39 and 49 years-old gives an indication of how precarious their conditions must have been. In fact, photographs of the ships themselves shows something of this – with rust covering the hulls and other surfaces of the ships. The vessels were filled with bodies so tightly packed that one does not want to contemplate what might have happened had there been an accident.

More recently, and as I just mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse for rejecting seaborne migrants. Migrants, often escaping coastal or island encampments with little or no health support, have attempted watery crossings both across the Mediterranean and the English Channel. Both Malta and Italy have rejected ships full of migrants citing COVID-related public hygiene measures as justification.⁸ Britain has detained migrants on arrival, also using COVID as a bogeyman with which to appeal to the xenophobic segments of British citizenry.⁹ The discourse of a Britain invaded by hordes of foreign bodies carrying a deadly illness has mobilised far right vigilantes to police the southern coasts of England. The racialised human as a source of contagion, and as a danger to public hygiene, has a long history in the annals of colonialism, racism, and slavery. The far right in Europe represents the inflatable boats and ghost ships as an invasion of the body politic.

What makes these ships not only a repository of hopes, desperate dreams and the courageous will of the wretched of the earth but also a weathervane for the fortunes of capital accumulation is a three-fold context of meaning and practice.

First, the captivity at sea of these migrants depends on a global regime of shipping (de) regulation which the International Transport-workers Federation has called 'flags of convenience'.¹⁰ In the 1920s, US ship-owners who were trying to avoid regulations around labour, commercial use, and high taxes began registering their ships in Panama. The practice has expanded massively and today, certain 'open registries' such as Liberia, Panama, and Marshall Islands flag some 40 percent (by tonnage) of the world's ships. By flagging to these open registries ship owners can avoid labour and environmental regulation, fair payment of taxes, and higher registration fees which come with higher regulatory demands.¹¹ It is notable that both ghost ships carrying migrants were flagged to open registries.

8. Lorenzo D'Agostino, 'Italy, Malta Reject 52 Migrants Stranded on Animal Cargo Ship', *Al Jazeera*, 6 July 2020.

9. Andrew Connelly, 'Britain Doesn't Have a Refugee Crisis, So It Created One', *Foreign Policy*, 22 February 2021.

10. Allan Sekula, 'Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs)', *October* 102 (2002): 3-34.

11. International Transport-Workers' Federation, 'Flags of Convenience'. Available at: <https://www.itfglobal.org/en/sector/seafarers/flags-of-convenience>. Last accessed August 16, 2021.

A second characteristic of the process of migration is the manner in which the movement of people is often both facilitated *and* constrained through an assemblage of forces: states that prevent the entry with their laws which are simply modalities of border coercion; public and private security organisations who prevent the entry of such migrants into fortress Europe or the borders of North America; vigilantes that guard these borders; and those who facilitate the movement of the paperless migrants. I want to briefly touch on the role of illicit or unlicensed businesses in facilitating these migrations. Here I am not speaking of small-scale smugglers, but the kind of businesses that would be able to spend hundreds of thousands upfront to buy large floating rustbuckets from the freighter market before they are scrapped. There is no question that what has fundamentally facilitated the emergence of these large-scale businesses that move people across the land and onto unsafe ships are the laws of European or North American states which foreclose the possibility of safe movement. Blame rests first with these states. However, should we want to imagine these larger facilitators as humane instruments of mobility, it is worthwhile to remember that the work they do requires capital investment on aged and unsafe though still expensive vessels, the exploitation of labour of crew and captains beholden to the business providers by their own desperate need to escape, and rapacious rates of return on the facilitation of migration of any one migrant.

In fact, the manner in which the rates charged for smuggling migrants across the sea are calculated smacks of the same global regime of racialised and geopolitically determined value-extraction which can be observed in all sorts of workplaces worldwide. Perhaps the most horrifying instance of such racialised migratory regime was observed in April 2015 on a boat trying to leave from Libya to Italy with 900-1000 migrants onboard and which sank with untold casualties (the very uncertainty about the number of passengers and casualties itself says something about how lives count or are counted). On that ship, Africans, including women and children, were locked into the dank, foul and overcrowded hold which sprang a leak immediately, while others who had paid more for their crossing were allowed access to the decks.¹² When the ship sank, those in the hold were unable to escape and drowned while those on deck had a better chance at rescue. Being a captive in the hold proved deadly for the migrants, in echoes of past deaths. As Christina Sharpe writes, ‘The addition of the word *human* to *cargo* does nothing, here, to ameliorate the ghosting these ships do of transatlantic slavery or the afterlives of slavery or the afterlives of property’.¹³

But perhaps the reason such racialised regimes of value extraction are allowed to persist and why illicit business people can operate on the margins of Europe is because migrants – particularly illegal ones – provide a reserve army that can be deployed for cheap employment – below minimum wage and in forcible conditions on the European continent.¹⁴ In 2011, Allan Sekula and Noël Burch wrote, ‘The cargo containers are

12. Linda Pressly, ‘1,000 Lost on One Boat – This Woman Hopes to Name Them’, BBC, 22 December 2020.

13. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 55.

14. See *inter alia*, Sara Farris, ‘Migrants’ Regular Army of Labour: Gender Dimensions of the Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Migrant Labor in Western Europe’, *The Sociological*

everywhere, mobile and anonymous: “coffins of remote labour-power,” carrying goods manufactured by invisible workers on the other side of the globe’.¹⁵ Today, increasingly production takes place in nearer factories – Foxconn outposts in Eastern Europe for example – where wages have been suppressed.¹⁶ And the ships come to carry people who will work at these low-wage jobs back in the centres. The centrifugal movement of capital becomes the centripetal motion of working bodies. And if they manage to land finally in Europe, these working bodies are those that are most exposed and vulnerable to COVID. The news we hear are of warehouse, transportation systems, care home networks, abattoirs and other meat-processing factories, where migrants, huddled together in badly ventilated spaces, unprotected by personal protection equipment (PPE), work together for much needed wages, and are exposed to the virus. It is a deadly cycle: people escaping from unbearable conditions to find work in unbearable conditions, with the shadow of danger and death constantly haunting this escape.

Where the virus is not the assassin of these migrant workers, bullets are. The case of Bangladeshi fruit-pickers in Greece who were forced into work, not paid and shot at when they protested against their working conditions is only the most egregious of migrant workers being exploited.¹⁷ It is worth noting that the reason a country like Germany can accept hundreds of thousands of migrants and trumpet its munificence is because a combination of its manufacturing hunger for labour and an aging population has made it the most desirable destination for *gastarbeiters* since the end of the Second World War.¹⁸ This perpetual hunger for labour – whether through everyday extraction of labour value in a manufacturing powerhouse or through the forcible conscription of disciplined and deportable labour in commercial agriculture – is precisely why the securitisation of the seas functions (un)intentionally to produce a reserve army of ever more vulnerable unemployed.

A more recent example of captivity at sea has seen hundreds of thousands of seafarers aboard ships unable to disembark. When during the first round of lockdowns in the first half of 2020, ports denied entry to all ships, massive cargo carriers with a few dozen seafarers or recently emptied cruise-ships with hundreds of crew members had to wander from shore to shore, carrying workers who were often months beyond their contracts and not being paid. International treaty obligations require seafarers to disembark after 11

Review 63, no.1 (2015): 121-43; Prem Kumar Rajaram, ‘Refugees as Surplus Population: Race, Migration and Capitalist Value Regimes’, *New Political Economy* 23, no. 5 (2017): 627-39.

15. Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, *The Forgotten Space: Notes on a Film* (Halifax, Canada: Centre for European Studies, Dalhousie University 2011), 19.
16. Rutvica Andrijasevic and Devi Sacchetto, ‘Made in the EU: Foxconn in the Czech Republic’, *Journal of Labour and Society* 17, no. 3 (2014): 391-415.
17. Helena Smith, ‘Bangladeshi Fruit Pickers Shot at by Greek Farmers Win Human Rights Case’, *The Guardian*, 30 March 2017.
18. Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, *Migration, Integration, Asylum: Annual Policy Report by the German National Contact Point for the European Migration Network* (Germany: BAMF, 2016); Florence Schulz, ‘Germany Needs a Quarter of a Million Migrant Workers a Year’, EURACTIV.de, 20 February 2019.

months onboard ships. But many seafarers were still on their ships some seven or eight months after the February/March 2020 lockdown, many into their 18th or 19th month at sea, travelling along ghostly routes of travel, carrying goods in an economy that was slowly returning to trade and exchange. And these abandoned, forgotten seafarers had not been able to get off the ships for nearly two years, had not seen their families, except via satellite internet connections, all so the circulation of goods and capital could continue apace. Here the violence enacted on the seafarers is that of borders being closed to them, of their inability to land – literally – anywhere, of an endless wandering at sea which can become deadly with fatigue, depression, anxiety and a sense of abandonment.

But even before COVID, another instance of captivity at sea could reveal the worldwide hierarchies of exploitation: the confinement of seafarers by pirates – sometimes for years on end.

There has been a tendency to romanticise modern pirates who climb aboard ships, often the low-slung tankers and bulk carriers, in seas and straits marked as pirate grounds. This is not only because of the way in which stories of pirates as antiheroes are an indelible part of Anglophone literature, but also because of the recognition that the foot-soldiers of so much piracy, in the Gulf of Aden, or the Gulf of Guinea, or in the Malacca Straits, are fishermen put out of work by global conglomerates' overfishing in their waters and the destruction of their countries' infrastructures and communities through neglect or, worse still, war. In the case of Somalia, whose pirates were in the news in 2004, internal conflicts were only exacerbated by foreign intervention (by both near and far powers such as Kenya, Eritrea and the US).¹⁹

Here it is also worthy of note that like the work of facilitation of migration – with its extraordinary labour hierarchies, quotidian violence, and murky destinations for income and profits – piracy also benefits a few who are decidedly *not* those left-behind fishermen. Piracy today is a kind of transnational business which requires negotiators, investment in fast skiffs and armament, dedicated phone lines, and bank accounts only reached circuitously and secretly. If the fishermen do the dangerous work of climbing aboard ships and wielding violence to subordinate seafarers, the profits gained from the ransoms go to businessmen in suits in posh cars in new centres of capital, from Nairobi to Abu Dhabi.

Nor does the mythology created by Hollywood's *Captain Philips* – or indeed the Danish filmmakers who made the more nuanced *A Hijacking* – have any bearing on the reality of most hijackings. When at the height of the Somali piracy some 400 ships a year were hijacked, the vast majority of them were not European or US-flagged ships with Western European or US crew and officers. Most targets of piracy have been ships flying flags of convenience; some have been rusty vessels used by shipping companies that owned a handful of ships (rather than the fleets characteristic of firms like Maersk, which features in both the aforementioned films), and crewed almost entirely by seafarers from places like India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. In many a horrifying instance, the ships'

19. Abdi Ismail Samatar, Mark Lindberg and Basil Mahayni, 'The Dialectics of Piracy in Somalia: the Rich versus the Poor', *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 8 (2010): 1377-94.

owners simply disavowed their ships abandoning the officers and crew to their fate, with their families scrambling to assemble a ransom, often in vain. In other instances, the ships were recovered but the crew remained captive, sometimes for years, with a number of seafarers dying in captivity from disease and malnutrition. The negotiations happened over secure internet connections between managers in far-away air-conditioned offices, while the working-class seafarers and the exploited fishermen-cum-pirates had to cope with dwindling hopes and inadequate food.²⁰

The other consequence of such captivity at sea has of course been the proliferation of a whole slew of businesses hiring out naval mercenaries to accompany ships, but also larger security firms providing insurance. Erik Prince of Blackwater fame, for example, has established a firm of ‘frontier security’ which not only places armed guards aboard ships but also engages in securing logistical support lines on land and selling insurance to cover it.²¹ The penetration of security firms into the insurance business is concomitant with the insurance industry’s further securitisation. As Luis Lobo-Guerrero has written, this process entails ‘market entities like the Joint War Committee of the Lloyd’s Market Association becom[ing] important actors within a global security apparatus’ through setting rates, but also determining the meaning and extent of a conflict.²²

This co-imbrication of capital accumulation and securitisation is of course not a new phenomenon. Scholarly works on corporate sovereigns such as the East India Company have shown that the process of extraction of resources requires simultaneous deployment of violence and commercial exploitation.²³ We already know because of the extraordinary work of abolitionist scholars and historians of policing that policing emerged and was consolidated in many parts of the world as part of a colonial process which applied coercion to racialised bodies afar and at home. Policing served (and serves) not only to discipline populations, but also to guarantee (or contain) the circulation. In his *Security, Territory, Population*, Michel Foucault writes:

the last object of police is circulation, the circulation of goods, of the products of men’s activity. [. . .] By “circulation” we should understand not only this material network that allows the circulation of goods and possibly of men, but also [. . .] the set of regulations, constraints, and limits, or the facilities and encouragements that will allow the circulation of men and things in the kingdom and possibly beyond its borders. From this stem those typical police regulations, some of which seek to suppress vagrancy, others to facilitate the circulation of goods in this or that direction, [and] others that want to prevent qualified workers from leaving their place of

20. See Rose George, *Deep Sea and Foreign Going: Inside Shipping, the Invisible Industry that Brings You 90% of Everything* (London: Portobello Books, 2013); Jatin Dua, *Captured at Sea: Piracy and Protection in the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

21. Charles Clover and Don Weinland, ‘Blackwater Founder Erik Prince Eyes Opportunities with China’, *Financial Times*, 10 April 2017.

22. Luis Lobo-Guerrero, ‘Lloyd’s and the Moral Economy of Insuring Against Piracy: Towards a Politicisation of Marine War Risks Insurance’, *The Journal of Cultural Economy* 5, no. 1 (2012): 67-83.

23. Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

work, or especially the kingdom. After health and the objects of bare necessity, after the population itself, this whole field of circulation will become the object of police.²⁴

The ways in which the violence of policing seems to be bound up with circulation, which brings with it not only the materiality of capital accumulation but also racialised hierarchies and the violence of law and regulation has been the subject of this article. Even where countervailing forces – of pirates and migration-facilitators – have challenged the policing of circulation, the unintended consequence has been an expansion of policing. In the aftermath of the Cold War, when ‘war, mass exodus, environmental disaster’ had become the ordinary context of politics, Allan Sekula reflected on Alfred T. Mahan’s 19th century imperialist discussion of sea-power and how ‘military control follows upon trade for its furtherance and protection’. Sekula then added,

The sea is money. The imperial bluntness of Mahan’s economism is worth recalling in an age in which Cold War ideological justifications for gigantic naval fleets no longer hold, and maritime conflicts are more likely to be nakedly – that is, overtly rather than covertly – economic in character.²⁵

Although the US still has the most powerful navy in the world, the rules and regulatory apparatuses established by the US and its North Atlantic allies determine the shape of trade, commerce, and territorialisation of the sea even more powerfully. Further, the locations from which capital can emanate have spread to other shores. This universalised and racialised process of capital accumulation and extraction of value is now naked, and overt. And captivity at sea is another less visible and unspoken instance of violence against migrants, labourers, seafarers, and pirates who are so often the victims of those who aim to control and profit from the vast deeps.

The author declared that an earlier, and shorter, version of this article was published in the catalogue for the *Allan Sekula: Okeanos* exhibition, edited by Cory Scozzari and Daniela Zyman, published in 2017 by Thyssen Bornemisza Art Contemporary; Vienna, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; & Sternberg Press, Berlin.

Funding

The research for this article was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant Ref: ES/L002833/1).

ORCID iD

Laleh Khalili  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8226-037X>

24. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977-78*. Trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 325-26.

25. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 107-9.