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At Home in the World?:

The Ornamental Life of Sailors in Victorian Sailortown

Emily Cuming

1. Introduction: sailors, sea shells and oceanic studies

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) opens with the mystery and intrigue surrounding sailors not at sea or on a desert island, but within the tenuous domestic confines of the Admiral Benbow Inn which perches on a cliff-edge. Within a few pages, the unwelcome guest, Billy Bones, lies dead on the parlour floor, with only his clothes, body and trunk offering clues to the mystery surrounding the scarred and dishevelled seafarer. Locating the key hanging from a piece of tarry string around the sailor's neck, Jim and his mother open the mariner's sea chest which has been hot-ironed with a "B" for Bill on its lid. Inside they find an odd "miscellany" of things, including an unworn and neatly folded suit, a few compasses and "five or six curious West Indian shells" (Stevenson 27). The real revelation, of course, will center on the treasure map in its oilcloth bundle lying underneath an old boat-cloak at the bottom of the trunk. Yet in a fleeting parenthetical remark, Jim admits: "I have often wondered since why he should have carried about these shells with him in his wandering, guilty, and hunted life" (27). The meaning of Billy Bones's collection of shells, which give Jim pause for thought, will serve as a prompt in this article for a consideration of a number of issues that cluster around the figure of the nineteenth-century sailor on shore, including the relationship between the domestic and the global, and the role of the ornamental as it functions in the sailor's *terraqueous* life.¹

Sailors occupy a peculiar relationship to the idea of home as a group whose lived experience has often been seen to emblemize the roaming life away from terrestrial and national boundaries. Existing scholarship has shown how, as "a numerous and diverse body

of people who shared a common identity” (Gilje 6), sailors were a group whose labor and way of life allowed them to lead a uniquely transnational and transcultural existence.ⁱⁱ Yet, paradoxically, the romantic notion of “The Sailor’s Return”, a popular subject of nineteenth-century British art and popular culture, suggests that the image of the global sailor was framed by the notion that the sailor had a rooted home to which he would eventually return – one secured by the heteronormative domestic ties of a wife or sweetheart who awaited this homecoming. This essay seeks to reconfigure some of the conventional understandings of the domestic and the global as antithetical through a closer look at representations of the Victorian mariner and his experience of hospitality in the amorphous urban zone popularly known as “sailortown”. “Sailortown” was the name given to dock areas which catered to the sailor on shore, providing shelter and hospitality – as well as the possibilities of pleasure and various forms of “liberty” – until he set sail again.ⁱⁱⁱ This article proposes that sailortown functioned as an urban setting which could offer the travelling or returning sailor an attractive sense of homeliness that was paradoxically based around the promotion of a collective and global belonging. This sense of a global or “worldly” belonging was partly articulated through the discourse that identified this region of the city as an exotic and “other” place – a strange and colorful edge space that marked the boundaries of the nation and yet existed at a tangent to its dominant practices. The essay proposes that the discursive way in which sailortown was conceived of as an exotic and global space can also be traced through an attention to material culture, including the decorative visual display of a nautical and transnational iconography that signalled aspects of the seafarer’s life in these parts. Linked to this, it explores the way in which this ornamental principle also extends to the question of the sailor’s own portable and exchangeable property – curios, trinkets, and shells – that evoke the oceanic and transnational sphere of the maritime sailor.

This study shows that attending to the ornamental characteristics of the sailor's life, as it emerges through the discursive description surrounding this figure as well as the material culture of sailortown, highlights the paradoxes and rich ambivalences that underscore the sailor's sense of home and belonging while on shore in sailortown. It is important to think about both the discursive and material forms, since, as theorists of domestic culture acknowledge, home is "both material and imaginative, a site *and* a set of meanings/emotions [...] a *relation* between material and imaginative realms and processes" (Blunt and Dowling 22) (emphasis original). In and of themselves, ornaments can offer a range of often incongruous meanings, encompassing personal possessions that are imbued with deep personal and symbolic significance, as well as items or trinkets that function more superficially as mere "decoration" or "embellishment" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). And as aesthetic embellishments on the interior and exterior surfaces of buildings, elaborate ornamental effects can significantly work to gild or deflect attention away from the underlying structure (to describe something as "mere ornament" is to highlight its gestural or compensatory function). Reading for ornament, then, in the context of maritime culture, may appear to have paradoxical resonance in its demand for a "surface reading" of the life of the deep-sea sailor who, as the moniker suggests, is more commonly associated with the natural depths of the oceanic world.^{iv} The aim here is to demonstrate how the context of sailortown invites a reconceptualization of the cultural priorities of surface and depth, ornament and structure; the urban-maritime culture under examination here shows these poles to be complex and shifting in an environment that was itself defined by mobility and flux.

This essay adds to recent work in oceanic studies – such as that by Margaret Cohen and Hester Blum – which envisages the sea as providing "a new epistemology – a new dimension" (Blum, "Introduction" 151), based on paradigms of circulation rather than linearity, transnationalism in place of land-locked nationalism, and collective, affiliative and relational

sociality over and against normative family formations. The reorienting of the figure of the sailor in oceanic studies is an important legacy of this scholarship, since both Cohen and Blum show that it is necessary to look beyond longstanding caricatures in popular culture in order to locate the sailor as a laborer whose life contained a significant aesthetic dimension, and who exerted more agency and cultural self-governance than has generally been presumed.^v My analysis builds on this work by exploring the sailor on shore through the insights of oceanic studies, in a way that might appear contradictory, since the work of Cohen, Blum and others has convincingly argued for the need to shift scholarly focus towards a recognition of the significance of the watery world in the critical tradition that has frequently taken the city as the representative site of modernity.^{vi} But the intention of this article is to show that the methodologies of oceanic studies can produce rich and complex readings of British sailortown in the Victorian period, raising questions, for example, about the interrelations of forms of affiliative kinship, domesticity, aesthetics and material culture in the context of sailors' lives on shore. Attending to the context of sailors in sailortown is thus an example of the peripheral modernities described by Mary Louise Pratt, phenomena that serve to challenge metropolitan centrism by offering "relations of contradiction, complementarity, and differentiation with those of the center" ("Modernity and Periphery" 42), and revealing modes of social organisation and an aesthetic system that can expand understandings of the relations of sea, shore, home, and global space. Throughout this analysis, therefore, the real, imagined and improvised forms of worldliness are interpreted by attending to the semiotics of sailortown and the sailor's ornamental tendencies and ornamental possessions – including seashells – that articulate a distinctive mode of maritime modernity on shore.

2. "Everything has a nautical adaptation": navigating Victorian sailortown

This essay is concerned specifically with the situation and experiences of the British merchant sailor on shore – “Jack Number Two”, as he was sometimes labelled, in contradistinction to the “true Jack, the seaman of the royal navy” (“Jack Ashore” 222). Merchant sailors worked aboard ships that moved trade around the globe, and often had to provide for themselves with respect to accommodation when they landed in port cities. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines one sense of “worldly” as meaning “sophisticated, experienced, cosmopolitan; worldly-wise”, a set of classed terms not commonly attributed to sailors in this period who were more frequently characterized in Victorian discourse as naive, pleasure-seeking men, defined by a brawny manliness rather than any cosmopolitan sensibility. And while merchant sailors’ lives were international in the sense that they had great freedom to travel, at the same time this “maritime working class” and group of “free wage labourers” (Rediker 8) had little access to the economic privileges of global imperialism. Yet studies by Rediker, Gilje, Blum and Cohen, among others, have helped to show that sailors might in fact be viewed as “worldly” in the more nuanced senses of that term: sailors possessed specialist knowledge and technical experience, were inveterate travellers and observers of places, and accumulated essential survival skills in order to navigate their lives in precarious conditions both at sea and on shore. The article therefore expands on received definitions of “worldliness” to include sailors whose lives were framed around mobility and travel and whose internal culture promoted a common language of transnational affiliation and a complex sense of being at home in the world.

While implicated in the nineteenth-century British global economy, serving as the labor force that moved goods across the world, sailors also occupied a prominent and decorative role and visibility within British material culture. The stock image of “The Sailor’s Return” was one of the best-selling prints sold on London streets in the mid-Victorian period (Mayhew, *London Labour* 304) and the sailor’s likeness featured on a range of other domestic ornaments – including figurines, crockery, prints, ceramic tiles and needlework – that furnished both the

bourgeois and working-class home.^{vii} By the end of the nineteenth century, the sailor's garb would also be a popular choice of dress up for young children. In writing, sailors were the protagonists of romance fiction, celebrated in novels by James Fenimore Cooper and Captain Frederick Marryat, but also the more riotous subjects of city sketches and accounts by social explorers. The romantic and decorative image of the sailor therefore coexisted with a cultural discourse that acknowledged the grittier elements of his life and labor. Thus while Patrick Brantlinger notes in relation to nineteenth-century literature that "adventure and domesticity, romance and realism, are the seemingly opposite poles of a single system of discourse" (12), the mariner, as a historical and literary figure, occupies these forms in distinctive ways all of his own.

As "Jack Ashore" – journalese for the presence of the seafare in British port cities – the sailor was by definition set apart from the maritime environment and laboring role which determined him, taking shelter in that amorphous place known as "sailortown," described by one of its twentieth-century chroniclers as "a world in, but not of, that of the landsman" (Hugill xviii). Recent scholarship of sailortown has productively conceived it as an edge space: at once a crucial part of the city as a gateway for trade, movements of people and flows of capital, and a locus for counter-cultural, transcultural and deviant practices.^{viii} Sailortowns were thus local and global at the same time, as the writer and poet Cicely Fox Smith succinctly opined: "Dockland, strictly speaking, is of no country – or rather it is of all countries" (cited in Hugill 72). What is striking and notably modern about sailortown was its self-referential performance of its worldly and urban-nautical nature. For it was not just a place of global encounter, where people of different nationalities and trades might meet – it also self-consciously advertized itself as such, in an early spatial branding exercise, through the names and signage of establishments that included shops, public houses and lodging-houses catering for the mariner. In doing so, it presented a concept of the "world," and the sailor's relation to it, through an

aesthetic form which merged maritime romance with urban commerce. Sailortown at once told the mariner that he belonged in these transglobal parts, while using modes of visual and ornamental appeal – signs, iconography and symbols – to ensure that the sailor parted with his money.

The language used by social explorers to describe these locations reflects a certain pleasure taken in the exploration of this urban-maritime environment. For example, in his account of “maritime London” – or “the Pool” – the journalist George Augustus Sala set out to trace the “saline existence” of the sailor in the “very muddy, tarry, salt-water-smelling portion of the metropolis” (42). Another writer surveying the sailortown area of London’s Ratcliffe Highway, Ewan Ritchie, also observed of these parts that “[e]verything has a nautical adaptation. . . . Every few yards we come to a beer-shop or a public-house decorated as gaudily as possible, rejoicing in some nautical sign” (171-2). As the term “nautical adaptation” suggests, sailortown was based on the principle of translation, whereby a form of maritime alchemy could seemingly transform drab shops and boarding houses into a more fanciful network of signifying spaces. And this nautical aspect worked in the way of ornament more generally, as a surface effect which is “both functional and contextual [serving] to relate one thing to another” (Snodin and Howard, *Ornament* 11), thus enabling the sailor to feel “at home” when he was on shore (though with the key implication that his real home was at sea). Furthermore, like architectural ornament more generally – one function of which is to “disguise the joins between masonry or brickwork in order to provide a coherence of design” (Snodin and Howard 63) – this “nautical adaptation” could serve to compensate the sailor with a “homely” kind of decoration while also being used more cynically to lure him onto premises.

This type of Victorian commentary indicated the foreign or other-worldly dimensions of sailortown which gave the appearance of an exotic space contained within national borders: a form of internal orient. Indeed, as Brad Beaven has argued, sailortown and its institutions

were places replete with carnivalesque aspects, in which civic norms of metropolitan society appeared to be overlaid with “an alternative economic infrastructure and a dynamic sub-culture that was separate and cut adrift from the rest of civilized society” (84). And in the context of the American waterfront in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Paul Gilje has highlighted the paradoxical nature of the sailor’s “liberty” ashore: a form of liberty that allowed him to indulge in drinking and general carousing and yet laid him open to “economic exploitation that curtailed his own freedom in the marketplace”. For all its counter-cultural and anti-authoritarian aspects, as Gilje continues, “life on the waterfront was often cruel and nasty” (14). Dan Walden has also noted the “inherently contradictory space” of American port cities, whereby these places “are the entry points for the goods and wealth that drive the expanding American economy, but the waterfront regions of those cities contain the most pathetic abject poverty in the country. Port cities border the ocean, an expansive, limitless, and free realm, but the waterfront is often cramped, dark, and squalid” (“Ships and Crypts” 108). The coarse attributes of British sailortown, that were equally places of working-class poverty, disease and violence, can in fact be traced through its more demotic nicknames recorded by Hugill – “The Guts, Cages, Numbers, Rags, Shit Streets, Bluffs, and Rows” (73). Like its compound name, sailortown thus welded diverse aspects together: urban poverty and oriental otherness; bonhomie and violence; commerce and mythology; the grit of the city with the fluid horizon of the sea.

The dual nature of sailortown was also apparent in the social commentary that described and narrated it. Contemporary newspaper reports veered between presenting port environs as an orientalist paradise, full of alluring pleasures for the shore-starved sailor, and a place of violence and entrapment, ruled by hosts of scheming “crimps” and “harpies” lying in wait for Jack. The distinctive dangers of this strange place are articulated in an urban-maritime analogy that commentators sometimes used to describe the sailor’s predicament ashore. In a *Household*

Words article, for example, nautical metaphors are used to describe the crimps' "plunder" of Jack, whereby the "abominable scoundrels" treat each landed sailor "like a stranded whale, to be cut up for the sake of the blubber, and picked clean as unscrupulously as possible" ("The Sailors' Home" 612), while another account notes that "sailors are indeed fish out of water, when on dry land" (Ritchie 173).

Thus in a posited contrast to the sailor's nautical prowess at sea, where he exhibited "know how" and "craft" in the expansive senses of the latter term that include "courage, composure, applied knowledge, adroitness, collected execution" (Cohen, *The Novel* 139-40) – the sailor on shore was characterized as dispossessed of both self-governance and his sense of vocation, thereby shedding more of his romantic mystique in the process.^{ix} Indeed as a report on charitable institutions for sailors concluded in 1868: "Jack ashore loses much of the heroic character with which he is endowed when afloat, contending with the elements" (Davies 5). Temporarily released from his work and "natural" environment aboard ship, the craft-less (in both senses of the word) sailor was viewed by non-seafaring observers as a stranger on land, regardless of his nationality, in a way that confirmed his supranational identity. As a former midshipman explains, using the orientalist modes noted earlier: "when a fellow lives the greater part of his life afloat, all land is to him, more or less, fairy land. . . . He feels when he gets on shore as a respectable man would, who had been miraculously detained a year or so in a balloon. Hence, he can scarcely be called *compos*, but wanders like an Eastern in an enchanted valley, and requires protection!" ("The Sailors' Home" 613). Drawing on the more materialist sense of "worldliness", an earlier report further made clear that "it is not only the wild passions of these men which operate to their ruin, but their ignorance of the world, and particularly their ignorance of the value of money" ("Visit to the Sailors' Home" 233).

Released from his well-defined role as a manly laborer at sea, the sailor in sailortown was repositioned by this commentary as a child, thus disrupting dominant mid-Victorian

notions of development, temporality and maturation. In his sensationalising portrayal of “spoony modern Jack Ashore” (191) the journalist Jack Greenwood thus dismisses him as “a big helpless baby” (193), while other commentators more sympathetically conceded that “sailors, as a class, are little better than children when ashore, and require to be providently cared for” (“Sailors’ Homes” 153). This was perhaps symptomatic of an ambivalent public attitude, which recognized both “the value of sailors, and their paradoxical lack of sovereignty” (Blum, “Prospect” 671). Circumstantially remote from the domestic roles of father or husband, and set apart from the discipline and hierarchy of the ship, the sailor in sailortown was thus presented as having a childlike status that rendered him vulnerable, but also pleurably susceptible, to the enchantments of this urban “fairy land”.

But alongside moralizing platitudes about the dangers and temptations of sailortown, many accounts of this place which appeared in popular periodicals display a keen documentation of, and fascination with, the exotic qualities of this urban enclave which fringed the metropolitan center. Writers could produce ample copy by chronicling its urban deceits or embellishments, and much of the commentary surveys the tricks of sailortown: the gin bearing the distinct taste of tap water; “sailors’ wives” who were prostitutes, low boarding house Madams who went by the name “Mother”; “turnpike sailors” who donned the mariner’s garb to solicit money and “duffers” who peddled smuggled goods to seamen; shops selling life-buoys stuffed with a cheap straw that made them guaranteed to sink; lodging houses with interconnecting panels leading to brothels; and forms of slang that artfully coded the quotidian. As one entry for *Household Words* notes of the “nautical regions” east of the Tower of London: “even the policeman is not the stern composed guardian of the constitution familiar to Regent Street; he is too often an easy *dégagé* man, with loose belt and wildish air” (“The Sailors’ Home” 613). It was therefore not only the sailor who was said to find pleasure in these parts:

nineteenth-century writers also indulged themselves by visiting and describing this idiosyncratic place where things were not quite as they seemed on the surface.

3. “His dictionary of ornament”: the maritime semiotics of home

Sailortown was thus constructed as a world apart – with its own look, rules, modes of behavior and dangers. It provided mariners away from the ship with another form of imagined community, based not only around national identity but also by a network of cultural markers connoting a maritime aesthetic and a sense of belonging to a wider world that lay beyond the streets of any specific place. The decorated signboards outside sailor taverns, for example, provided a heterogeneous semiotic field of harpoons, mermaids, “exotic” peoples, ships and crowns. Rather than indexing the names of local places, these signs of maritime hospitality expressed references that were both transnational and mythological. Examples from the lists provided by Stan Hugill’s study include “Jolly Tar,” “Mare Nostrum,” “The Pacific,” “The Atlantic,” “The Flying Cloud,” “The East Indiamen,” “Bucket of Blood,” “Flags of All Nations,” “House of All Nations,” “The Spyglass,” “Arctic Whaler,” “London Bar,” and “Liverpool House” (74-75). This articulation of a transnational and *terraqueous* belonging to both land and sea that appeared on the exteriors of buildings also inflected the interiors of lodging establishments that filled the alleys of these districts and constituted one of its main forms of commerce. For some of the boarding houses in sailortown, like the drinking taverns, were decorated in such a way as to provide a distinctive form of maritime domesticity. Hugill, for example, notes that “a few of the boarding-houses had their rooms built in imitation of a ship’s fo’c’sle, to make Jack feel at home” (85), while Graeme J. Milne observes how descriptions of these lodgings emphasised the “maritime theme of decor and fittings” and “nautical paraphernalia” (149).^x

There may have been distinctly practical reasons for the prevalence of this surface register of ornamental signs and symbols. While scholarship by Harry Robert Skallerup and Blum have compellingly revealed the extent of sailors' literacy and their involvement in cultures of reading and writing, it is nonetheless clear that ornamental signs performed an important function in sailor districts that appealed to a transnational and polyglot population. Visual signs of nautical and global symbols operated as a semiotic *lingua franca* and served to mark the informal boundaries of areas catering to sailors' needs and desires. In boarding houses or institutional Sailors' Homes, for example, maritime ornament and nautical design combined to mark the establishment as place of hospitality for the sailor and aimed to put him at ease.

This maritime style was not always sophisticated or wholly convincing. Herman Melville's fictionalized autobiographical account of his first trip as sailor includes a memorable visit to the port city of Liverpool – a place known in the nineteenth century as the “gateway to Empire”. In *Redburn, His First Voyage* (1849), the eponymous young sailor spends his first night in Liverpool at a boarding house bearing a sign of a Baltimore clipper, one of an array of such lodging places, “each distinguished by gilded emblems outside – an anchor, a crown, a ship, a windlass, or a dolphin” (Melville 240). Alone in his room within the boarding house, Redburn meditates on the fact that he is finally “seated upon an English bench, under an English roof, in an English tavern, forming an integral part of the English empire” (Melville 170), but the interior surroundings quickly serve to deflate any sense of cosmopolitan arrival. For what he sees before him is “a long, narrow, little room, with one small arched window with red curtains, looking out upon a smoky, untidy yard, bounded by a dingy brick-wall, the top of which was horrible with pieces of broken old bottles stuck into mortar” (Melville 171). Representations of maritime worldliness decorate the place but in a rough improvised form: from a “dull lamp . . . placed in a wooden ship suspended from the ceiling,” to the wallpaper featuring “an endless succession of vessels of all nations continually circumnavigating the

apartment,” to a map “representing in faded colors the flags of all nations” (Melville 171). Upstairs the communal dining room presents “smoky walls, of what had once been sea-blue, covered with sailor-scravls of foul anchors, lovers’ sonnets, and ocean ditties,” while playing cards of Jack, the knave, are pinned across the wainscot (Melville 172). The familiar maritime iconography that characterized some of the places of sailortown is rendered here in a decidedly down-at-heel form. Yet this episode from *Redburn* underlines the sense by which even the lowliest place of hospitality could be imprinted with a series of markers and signs that reinforced the sense (however illusory or fanciful) of sailors’ common identity forged through the experience of a seafaring life. Matt Lodder’s exploration of the cultural significance of sailors’ tattoos and art further serves to underline how the form of crude iconography that features in Melville’s depiction of a Liverpool boarding house – including scrawled graffiti and faded flags – might be seen as part of the more ephemeral traces that sailors left on land. These cultural markings work more broadly in the manner of maritime iconography, the latter described by Lodder as ‘bind[ing] the individual to the community through shared emotional and symbolic expression, and a web of common imagery’ (200).

It was not just the boarding houses and inns that attempted to cultivate a form of maritime comfort and identification through their distinctive names, symbols and décor. The provision of a type of maritime homeliness – with the tacit acknowledgement that a sailor’s shelter on shore needed to conform to his other, perhaps more familiar, “home” on board ship – extended to the philanthropic attempts to provide safe shelter for the mariner in the form of institutional Sailors’ Homes. In order to encourage sailors to feel equally at home in these places as they might be in the more insalubrious boarding houses, the interiors of these privately-funded Homes invoked the spatial layout and markers of ship-board life. In the London Home in Well Street that was opened in 1835, for example, a large reception room and communal hall featured a large ship’s bell in one corner “used for the purpose of sounding the

hours, according to the fashion followed on board ships at sea” (“Visit to the Sailors’ Home” 233). According to Henry Mayhew’s description in his *Morning Chronicle* survey, the central hall of the Home was filled with sailors “newly ‘rigged out’ . . . smoking and chatting together . . . while others, in couples, pace half across the hall, backwards and forwards, as if still upon the deck” (*Morning Chronicle* 107). Likewise, the structural arrangement of the inside of the Liverpool Sailors’ Home, on the corner of Paradise Street, provided shared common spaces along with the privacy of lockable rooms or “cribs.” One writer, on the occasion of a fire that destroyed the interior of the home in 1860, describes the distinctive “ornamental turrets” that existed on the building’s exterior and notes how this “peculiar style” extended to the inside of the building: “The interior arrangements were also of a novel character, intended to meet the tastes of seamen, and, as far as possible, to imitate the interior of a man-of-war. With this object, the sailors’ department was in the form of an amphitheatre, the ground floor being used as a general assembly room, whilst the rows of galleries at every ten or twelve feet, were set apart as dormitories, each man having a small room, something like a cabin” (“Terrific Fire” 8). The dormitories in the Well Street home in London were similarly described as having a “very snug, cleanly, ‘ship-shape’ appearance” (“The Sailors’ Home” 614). And while the boarding houses of sailortown invoked the idea of the “world” through quasi-geographical names and signs, the Well Street home interior made explicit the imperial dimension of this imagining. Dormitories were named after ships and the port cities of empire, including “The Royal Adelaide,” “City of London,” “The City of Edinburgh,” “Madras,” and “Canton” (Mayhew, *Morning Chronicle* 108).

As well as referencing imperial ports, institutional Sailors’ Homes also cultivated the symbolic iconography of sea and world that, as noted earlier, was characteristic of sailortown quarters. An example can be observed in the ornamental ironwork that comprised the balcony structure of the Liverpool Sailors’ Home, replicated in the famous gates that stood outside the

institution. As observed by Paul Dobraszczyk: “The extravagant ornamentation in the upper part of the gates mirrored the motifs in the sandstone carvings above the building’s entrance and included a welter of nautical motifs – sails, entwined fish, scallops and shells, ropes, horns, and wheels – crowned by a Liver bird, the most familiar heraldic motif of the city. Below, the ornament mirrored that of the balcony railings inside the Home with their exotic double-tailed mermaids supporting tridents and anchors and surrounded by a lattice network of rope” (“Death by Ornament”, n. p.). Iron ornament itself, according to Dobraszczyk, created what was believed to be a “new, modern architectural language that drew on both history and modernity” (*Iron* 3), striking some critics – most famously John Ruskin – as having a vulgar, sham gaudiness, while others’ responses to this new and hybrid “iron style” were “couched in a sense of the enchanted” (*Iron* 21). Thus while the iron ornament adorning the Liverpool home was the product of modern modes of industrial production, it was deployed in the representation of fantastical designs evoking mythological motifs and a sense of other-worldliness. In the case of the Liverpool gates, Melusine, the twin-tailed mermaid (a doubling of an already dual figure) gave the compound nature of the sailor’s world a distinctive symbolic – and erotic – expression. Melusine’s twin tails, signifying the binaries of earth and water, body and soul, could also evoke by association the mariner’s sense of a dual belonging to sea and shore, romance and realism – and, more broadly, might be seen to signify the duality and paradoxes that attended the spaces of Victorian sailortown.

In addition to the decorative exteriors and interiors of establishments in sailortown, the ornamental principle can also be seen to apply to the sailor’s own practices, property and outward appearance. As Lodder puts it, “From the early days of sail through the Second World War to the present day, sailors have creatively moulded their environments, their possessions and their bodies alike” (199). In their rich exploration of maritime culture and seafarer’s crafts, Timmermann and Winslow evocatively note that, “Life around [the sailor] constituted his

dictionary of ornament – the knots in the rigging; the stars in the heavens above him; the figurehead and the stern board of his ship; the fish of the sea; whales, birds, sails, boats, casks, bells; the wheel, the anchor and similar symbols” (264) (emphasis mine).^{xi} With only a body and a trunk to carry his possessions and forms of identification, the sailor necessarily compressed all kinds of information into portable, symbolic forms. Appropriately, then, for a group who lacked a regular domestic abode, sailors often carried their decorative display around with them in the form of charms hanging on ribbons worn around the neck, tattoos, or on and within the appendage of the sea-chest.^{xii} Indeed, written observations from this period note the fact that sailors seemed drawn towards or defined by ornamental things, whether through the decoration of self through distinctive clothes, jewellery and tattoos, as collectors of curios and souvenirs, or as consumers of gifts for family members. In *The Wild Tribes of London* (1855), for instance, the Hoxton-born writer Watts Phillips describes the shops of Ratcliffe Highway which “purchase of, as well as from, Jack” (35). One is “as full of parrots as a tropical forest,” stocking birds as a fashionable accessory, while in another, Phillips notes how “numerous shells adorn these shop-windows – shells resting on a bed of moss; some large enough to have cradled a sleeping Venus; others, horn-like and twisted in their shape, like those through which the Tritons blew their songs of welcome to Neptune’s bright-haired queen; shells, pleasing to look upon, whose rosy-lipped loveliness takes the thought far away, till we forget the filth and misery all around” (35).

This ornamental inclination is also remarked upon by Charles Dickens in one of his *Uncommercial Traveller* articles serialized in the periodical *All the Year Round*. In a sketch titled “Poor Mercantile Jack” (1860), based on his excursion accompanying the Liverpool Police Force in an investigation of the dangers of sailortown, Dickens describes exploring “a strange world, where nobody ever goes to bed, but everybody is eternally sitting up, waiting for Jack” (Dickens 47). Groping his way through the courts and alleys of this district in the

urban investigator's familiar manner, Dickens enters various lodging houses and comments that, "Not one of the whole number we visited, was without its show of prints and ornamental crockery; the quantity of the latter set forth on little shelves and in little cases, in otherwise wretched rooms, indicating that Mercantile Jack must have an extraordinary fondness for crockery, to necessitate so much of that bait in his traps" (Dickens 47). Inspecting the parlour of a lodging house presided over by an elderly landlady who is "waiting for Jack", he notes that on "a draped chest of drawers masking the staircase, was such a profusion of ornamental crockery, that it would have furnished forth a handsome sale-booth at a fair" (Dickens 50).

Mayhew similarly took note of this ornamental aspect, in the context of his visit and inspection of a London "seamen's boarding-house (of the best class)" (*Morning Chronicle* 113). Reporting on this Home for "single men, or those whose wives, home, or friends, are in other ports," he observes:

The grand staple of the furniture of the house I speak of was shells. They were in every room, as if the owner of the house were studying the conchology of the East. They had been presented to him as little tokens of respect or remembrance by his guests. Some nautilus shells were specimens of exquisite beauty, while other shells were remarkable for their size, or for the delicacy, richness and iridescence of their colours. Mixed with the shells were [masses] of coral in different forms. In one of the best rooms, where the lodgers could resort to write the letters, or where they could see any visitors, the grate was filled with a large mass of coral and shells, and curiosities of all kinds covered the mantelpiece and side-tables. With these, too, were mixed the teeth of the whale, on some of which were carved, or scratched, drawings relative to a seaman's life. (Mayhew, *Morning Chronicle* 114)

Having visited other boarding houses, all of the "better class," he concludes that this idiosyncratic domesticity is the rule rather than the exception: "shells, and other sea curiosities,

were the chief ornaments, with live parrots and cockatoos, some of them noisy enough” (Mayhew, *Morning Chronicle* 114). In a private Sailors’ Home on the East-India road, he goes on to note that here the pay office even doubled as a “Museum.” It is described as a room “stocked, or rather crammed, with an infinity of curiosities from the Indies, the South Sea, and China. There were flying foxes in glass cases, Bengalee shoes of Nabobs, snouts of saw-fish, penguins’ skins . . . a little world of knick-knackereries, each linked with a thousand curious associations, that carried the mind half over the globe as you walked round the room” (Mayhew, *Morning Chronicle* 119-20).

While collections of objects within domestic space were common in – if not characteristic of – the Victorian home, what is particularly notable in the context of sailors’ homes (of all kinds) is that they staged a display of souvenirs and gifts for a predominantly laboring, working-class male gaze within a clearly-defined homosocial domestic space. In addition, the expression of homeliness here is markedly dependent not on the idea of a fixed place of origin to which the sailor hopes to return, but outwards towards the sailor’s imagined community of worldly circumnavigation and knowledge. These small collections of objects thus speak in enigmatic ways of the complex alliances forged through the hospitable encounters of sailortown, where a global network of boarding and lodging establishments drew on the mariner’s transnational “dictionary of ornament” to accommodate the sailor on shore.

4. Conclusion

As Pratt has argued, the Victorian “world historical subject” (*Imperial Eyes* 30) was defined as a lettered and bourgeois male individual whose posited opposite was the sailor. In this regard, she cites an epigraph from Daniel Defoe’s *The Compleat English Gentleman* (1730) which pronounces that the English gentleman may “make a tour of the world in books, he may make himself master of the geography of the universe in the maps, atlases, and measurements of our

mathematicians. . . . and kno' a thousand times more doing it than all those illiterate sailors” (qtd. in Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 15). While this paradigm is based around a binary of landsman/sailor and literacy/illiteracy, it is clear that the nineteenth-century “cosmopolite” sailor (Sala 50), shifting between land and shore, embodied and projected a complex and peculiar form of worldliness which disrupts this earlier model. Sailors on shore, as they were represented across different genres of writing, compelled an expansive and even paradoxical sense of what it was to be at home in the world. It is for this reason that this essay contends that the sailor’s tangential relation to the dominant order – as a well-travelled male who is not part of the imperial elite, and a figure who is marginal to centers of power and yet integral to the nation’s maritime identity – can provide a conduit to new knowledge and paradigms. As Blum notes, “acknowledging the sailor”, in a broad sense, allows for the alternative perspectives afforded by oceanic studies, including the insight that “freedom from national belonging can make possible other ways of understanding affiliation, citizenship, mobility, rights, and sovereignty” (671). In this way, the sailors’ modes of cultural life on shore provide vital ways of thinking about “peripheral” urban spaces, working-class homosociality, and modes of hospitality in cities that depend on forms of exchange, negotiation and sociality that lie outside of dominant and normative structures.^{xiii}

The principle way in which the sailor has been explored in this article is through the governing concept of ornament, as a material feature of the urban spaces that the sailor inhabited, a characteristic aspect of his outward appearance and cultural practice, and also as a *form* that articulates the sailor’s peripheral and yet symbolic role in the wider culture of the nineteenth century. In line with the work of oceanic studies that includes a recalibration of the scales and values of surfaces and depths in the context of the maritime world, this essay has argued that ornament can be viewed as an important signifying trait in the environment of sailortown and a seafaring culture which “necessarily took shape without firm geographic

boundaries or stable residence” (Rediker 159).^{xiv} Thus while sailors were collectors of ornamental objects and curios that might fall under Susan Stewart’s designation of the souvenir (such as the sea shell), they lie outside of her categorisation of the Victorian collecting subject: the child, the hunter, the bourgeois individual at home, the anthropologist, or the explorer. Indeed, the sailor’s gathering of objects into a form of collection, a practice James Clifford describes as “an exercise in how to make the world one’s own” (218), takes on a different resonance in the context of maritime life. Sailors’ portable property – emblemized through the object of the seashell, the ornamental chest and fashionable garb – are expressive of a form of worldliness and being at home in the world but without the privilege, ownership and entitlement inherent to that phrase. Being at home in the world, for the sailor, was both a romantic myth and a more prosaic mode of necessity and survival (recalling the semantic linkage of the word *mundus* with the *mundane*).

The sailor’s worldliness in this context is at a remove from the fantasies of global penetration deployed by nineteenth-century travellers, imperialists and anthropologists; indeed, these modes of ornamentation are distinguished by their surface effects (for example, in instances of decorated shop signs, cheap curios and souvenirs, scrawled graffiti, decorated sea-chests, fashionable clothing, skin tattoos). The sea shell in particular – an object and motif that recurs in sailor accounts (and throughout this essay) – has qualities that resonate for the figure of the modern sailor. It is an aquatic object, defined by its surface, that has been washed up on shore to take its new place as a cultural artefact prized for its exotic qualities. As a collector’s item, its value is predominantly personal, signifying a place visited and acting as a souvenir. But as a symbol, it typically gestures towards the cocooning properties of homeliness and shelter while paradoxically also connoting a sense of oceanic boundlessness – as rendered by the child’s practice of putting a shell to the ear and hearing the roar of the sea. As a recurring form and trope that above all signifies the maritime world, the sailor’s shell – as possession,

gift, and curio – raises the possibility of thinking outside the terms of landlocked modernity, often centered around concepts of nationalism, bourgeois individualism and the domestic sphere. The collected seashell as a possession thus contributes, in its own small way, to the expansive ambition of the current thrust of oceanic studies, which can inflect our reading of the Victorian metropolis in order to “derive new forms of relatedness from the necessarily unbounded examples provided in the maritime world” (Blum, “Prospect” 671). As a travelling object with transcultural significance, one that is deeply embedded in a natural world and a part of urban-maritime material culture, the sea-shell emblemizes the rich crossings, exchanges and shapes that animate the *terraqueous* world of sailors. For although shells are revealing in one sense, providing insight into the collective life of seafaring men, they also allude to the secret life of the Victorian deep-sea sailor who, as Marcus Rediker notes of his eighteenth-century forbear, “is still by and large an unknown man” (5), and one who for reasons of mobility, bureaucracy and life-span, leaves fewer permanent traces than land-based citizens. It seems appropriate then that, as Jim Hawkins discovers, the meaning of the sailor’s portable collection of small global artefacts remains both strikingly evocative and elusive.

ⁱ The term *terraqueous* (meaning “formed of land and water”) is borrowed from Cohen’s discussion of “terraqueous geographies” and her compelling proposition that a consideration of the maritime world can supplement and revise the frames and forms through which modernity is imagined (“Literary Studies,” 657-62).

ⁱⁱ On the transnational and affiliative nature of sailors lives and labor, see Rediker, *Between the Devil*; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Blum, *The View from the Masthead*; and Mack, *The Sea*.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Gilje’s *Liberty on the Waterfront* for a nuanced analysis of the diverse and variegated forms of the “sailor’s liberty” which existed for him both at sea and on shore.

^{iv} See Schmidt’s suggestive analysis of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* which illuminates the way in which “surface reading” – and the related methodologies of “literal” or “denotative” reading – takes on a marked resonance in the context of maritime fiction. “The surface is the new depth,” he notes, “which is to say not only that surface reading asks us to relocate our interpretive activity from the depth to the surface but also and more significantly that surface reading understands the surface as promising what depths used to promise: the surprise attendant on an unveiling” (15).

^v See Blum “The Prospect of Oceanic Studies” and *The View from the Masthead*, and Cohen’s *The Novel and the Sea*.

^{vi} For a discussion of the ocean as a site of modernity and materiality, see Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*, and Steinberg, “Of Other Seas”. For recent work addressing the way in which oceanic studies may frame urban or coastal fictions, see Roeger, “The Ocean and the Urban”; and Walden, “Ships and Crypts,” and “A False Phantom.” Land’s historical work on what he terms “coastal history” and the diverse manifestations of the “urban amphibious” (the cultural landscape of coastal regions) is also instructive; see “Tidal Waves” and “The Urban Amphibious”.

^{vii} Begiato's "Tears and the Manly Sailor" explores how the domestication of the Jack Tar from the end of the eighteenth century manifested itself through material and popular culture (see especially 117-22).

^{viii} For historical and geographical accounts of the British oceanic waterfront and its relations to urban culture see Beaven, "Resilience of Sailortown"; Milne, *People, Place*; Burton, "Boundaries and Identities"; and the collection of essays in Beaven, Bell and James, *Port Towns*.

^{ix} For a fuller account of the range of the sailor's "craft", see Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea*, 15-58. An interesting contemporary disquisition on the range of practical skills, scientific learning and depth of knowledge of the natural world possessed by the Victorian sailor is given in "The Learned Sailor" (1854), in which the *Household Words* writer concludes: "Certainly there is no profession embracing a higher kind of knowledge than that of the seaman" (460).

^x Sala, for example, comments on Stepney's "queer little public-houses like ship-cuddies" (51).

^{xi} See Welles Henderson and Carlisle's *Marine Art* for a beautifully detailed account of the broad and diverse nature of British and American sailors' crafts.

^{xii} Bradley's work provides a broader analysis of tattoos in Victorian working-class culture, noting the way in which the link between tattooing and sailors emerges as "a minor trope in Victorian literature" ("Body Commodification," 141).

^{xiii} As a mobile, working-class homosocial formation, sailors provide a resourceful context for thinking about the complex matrix of masculinity and domesticity in the nineteenth century. Following Furneaux's work, the social and cultural life of sailors provide a rich opportunity for research into "other forms of intimacy, affinity, and family formation," away from the reductive binaries of "supposed normativity and transgression" (*Queer Dickens*, 10).

^{xiv} Cohen, for example, illustrates how the maritime perspective gives rise to new "spatial scales" and "imaginary geographies" ("Literary Studies," 658).

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