Borders and Confinement in Seafarers' Realities

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Introduction

Seafarers' everyday lives are practised within structures of enclosure. These comprise the ship, and a vast array of neoliberal, regulatory and legal frameworks. Yet, the romanticised idea of a 'sailor's life' (in many films, novels and so on) often depicts seafaring mobility as a free ride across the globe, where rugged men work hard, while their ships are passing by an ever-changing exotic oceanic scenery, and where they disembark in ports that offer a good time ashore. This stereotype imagines seafarers as masculine, adventurous, rough and hardy, mobile subjects. It also assumes that there are enjoyable hours of time-off periods at shore. Today, ship crews are indeed still dominated by a mobile masculine work culture (Sampson, 2021, 2024), where women are in a strong minority (Kitada, 2021). Nonetheless, the notion of enclosure persists. Historically, sailors could be trapped in seafaring work,

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press-ganged into time at sea (Ogborn, 2008). Today, forced or enslaved labour is known to continue to exist off-shore (Urbina, 2019). But even 'regular' working conditions are enclosing seafarers. Indeed, in contemporary times of capitalist-driven globalisation, free periods on ships and options to spend time ashore are severely restricted. Embedded in the ever-competitive maritime trading system, seafarers are conditioned by both the apparent freedoms of crossing a changing ocean-scape and the un-freedoms of the restraints of work-life worlds on ships, which are determined by deep-seated postcolonial structures that continue under a neoliberal market system. For the shipping industry to operate well its essential needs are of uninterrupted trade flows that promptly fulfil contract arrangements. Seafarers are expected to perform towards the end goal of securing global trade needs. Within these expectations, the hierarchical ship-setting controls all work. Seafarers must be readily available for 24/7 activities that subordinate the ship-based workforce under the demands of global trade.

The challenges this uneven system continues to generate reached a peak during 2020 after the World Health Organisation declared the spread of COVID-19 as a global pandemic (WHO, 2023). Starting in March 2020, in response to the pandemic, most countries across the globe closed their borders. These global lockdowns forced ships to a temporary standstill. Unable to access shore, more than 400,000 seafarers were left stranded (IMO, 2022). This crisis was recognised as a humanitarian issue. It had 'turned ships into "floating prisons"' (Luchenko & Georgiievskyi, 2021: 8), where seafarers were unable to meet their basic needs or have access to health care. At the same time, it was not possible for companies to replace those aboard that had reached the end of their contracts with others, affecting seafarers who were waiting ashore (Slišković, 2020; Banta & Pratt, 2023). Astonishingly, it was this crew change crisis that highlighted how seafarers had never been recognised as essential workers, although they were offering essential services by transporting products from places of production to sites of consumption for centuries.

This chapter illustrates how seafarers' realities are influenced by factors and decisions outside their power, predisposed by uneven global structures (Harvey, 2015), and how these factors and decisions had immobilising effects for seafarers servicing the global economy. These unequal global transport conditions (Sheller, 2018a), and the marginalised placing of seafarers within uneven politics of movement (Kotef, 2015), are a core recognition in this chapter. The main argument throughout is based on Sheller's concept of mobility (in)justice and explores the oxymoron of seafarers as both drivers (agents) and servants (subordinates) of global trade simultaneously. Seafarers must continuingly negotiate their agency within these systems. The chapter expands Sheller's concept in the next section and considers mobility (in)justice in relation to oceanic bordering. It then turns to the border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect on how pandemic governance enacted new forms of ocean governance on seafaring mobilities.

A Ship Culture of (Im)Mobilities Through the Lens of Mobility Justice

Almost 90% of global trade is transported by ship, involving a complex network along ship and shore (ICS, 2021). Operating within the 'forgotten space' of a capitalist global system, which functions by 'idealising the erasure of distance', as Steinberg (2015: 40) phrased it, the demands of the shipping industry normalise seafarers as mobile beings. Without seafarers, globalisation would not be possible (Borovnik, 2011b, 2022; Markkula, 2021). And yet, despite their vital role in the transport sector, seafarers are dealing with precarious issues that are (re)produced by 'dominant mobile regimes' (Sheller, 2023: 435). Sheller (2018a, 2018b, 2023) explains that (im)mobilities are intrinsically entwined with unequal power relations, which have their roots in different forms of racial and imperial-colonial informed capitalist structures. These mobility regimes continue (re)producing unequal networks, relations and 'regimes' on different scales.

Recognising the uneven power relations implicated in all movements, Sheller (2018a, 2018b, 2023) identifies mobility and immobility as

intrinsically political. The politics of mobility are connected with the complexities of social relations (Cresswell, 2010), which are fluid (Urry, 2008: 14), (re)produce social inequalities and 'reinforce social difference' (Cook & Butz, 2018: 5). Sheller (2018b: 32) explains that a mobility justice approach focuses on the multiple intersections, refractions and intensifications of 'cross-cutting problems of the politics of uneven (im)mobilities' and resulting injustices. A mobility justice approach addresses these issues on different scales by using a mobile ontology—which expands our thoughts beyond a containerised notion of mobilities that is determined by the space within which they operate (Sheller, 2018b; Verlinghieri & Schwanen, 2020). By centring on mobilities, and all the complexities involved, and paying attention to the intersection of postcolonial insights to global (im)mobilities, a mobility justice approach offers one common framework that connects with other justice approaches (Sheller, 2018a, 2020) and intersects these mobility injustices with embodied racial and gendered experiences (Sheller, 2020: 33). In this sense, mobility justice serves as a multifaceted, intersectional framework around the embodied and entangled power relations that play out on both micro- and macro-scales (Harada, 2023). These include (or exclude) humans, resources, things, information and ideas, that enable or disable access, or the ability to engage in movement (Cook & Butz, 2020: xx; Sheller, 2023: 436). Shipping as a mobile assemblage of networks can serve as a vivid example that shows how these entangled relations and social processes play out. It is also useful to consider Soja's argument that 'no social process takes place uniformly over space; there will always be some unevenness in the geographies we produce' and therefore, inequalities arise (2010: 71). A mobility justice framework seeks to address these inequalities, which include the continuing 'practices of borders and borderings' that 'have contributed to this twenty-first century silencing discourse of global coloniality' (Wemyss, 2023: 1).

Such bordering issues are a continuation of colonial structures, fostered by enclosures that result in 'uneven access to movement and mobility space' (Sheller, 2023: 435), including control mechanisms and devices that constrain or restrict the movement of people and goods (Gallez, 2023: 38). There are perhaps two angles from which we can view restrictive bordering practices in a seafaring context: first, the limited

ability to access ships and seafaring work; and second, the regulated (in)ability to access shore during contracts on ships. Both draw on immigration and visa status and both use border control mechanisms. Both are influenced by 'top-down', 'power-over' relationships, where some countries produce visas that allow more access across borders than others. Both also rely on nation states' compliances with international agreements, such as human rights declarations and the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC). These underlying structures are uneven and determine 'who can travel, when, where, and how', as is acknowledged in mobilities research (Adey et al., 2021: 2).

As mentioned earlier, this unequal access to movement is influenced by racial, gendered and postcolonial systems. To address the underlying power structures, Cresswell stresses the entanglements that 'constellate' mobilities within their social relations and histories as they determine how movement is represented and practised (2010: 19). Indeed, elaborating on complex mobilities power systems or 'constellations', Cresswell (2010: 27, drawing on Torpey, 2000) shows that disparities that regulate, define and control 'legitimate' movement also began well before the establishment of nation states borders and the use of passports. Mobility norms often rest on narratives of liberty, with mobility associated with being progressive, and with transgressive mobilities linked to those moving in ways other than in what would be socially deemed 'acceptable' (i.e. the movement of vagrants, see Cresswell, 2001, 2016). The equation of mobility as a resource of liberty for those moving within accepted parameters (i.e. for tourism) has fitted well with those who are financially affluent and able to move at their leisure, but not so much with those who are struggling economically, and who are either restricted or forced to move. As Gallez (2023: 40) notes mobility can be either 'claimed as a right or denounced as oppression'. These discriminations have continued with the demands of labour mobilities that allow loose contract commitments, which are evident in freight and shipping companies, and demand extreme availabilities and flexibilities by seafarers. Ironically, within these requirements, seafarers' freedom of movement has been increasingly restricted.

Limiting seafarers' mobilities is linked with the necessity for efficiency in the shipping sector. Cost-saving practices by shipping companies

use ‘flagging out’ procedures, which by the 1980s have become mainstream (Alderton et al., 2004).[1] Shipping companies may use a flag in agreement with foreign nations that allow relatively lenient employment standards. Using a foreign flag, what is also labelled as a ‘flag of convenience’, enables companies to employ crews outside their own nation state. This practice has resulted in recruiting multinational ship crews, of which a majority are from the Global South (Baum-Talmor, 2021). Seafarers from these areas appreciate the employment opportunities that the global shipping industry offers. Chances presented by the international maritime sector allow much needed financial support for seafarers’ families, as jobs in home countries can be often difficult to obtain and wages in international seafaring employment are usually higher than local earnings (Baum-Talmor, 2021; Markkula, 2021). Employment under flags of convenience, however, comes with a cost and seafarers must endure contracts that offer less security and longer time-periods away from home. Indeed, the freedom of movement that is linked with access to employment for many is also restricted by regulations and recruitment requirements (Markkula, 2021). Sheller (2018b: 27), referring to both Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, contemplates the notion of ‘freedom of movement as a capability’. The capability to move makes it possible for people to access goods and services (and in this case, work); but then again, and depending on the external or social structures, a person’s functioning may be constrained. In a seafarer context, there are obvious ambiguities. Seafarers from the Global South can access work in the global shipping sector. Yet access within the ship space itself is hierarchically ordered. Access to shore depends on status and visa permits. And even though basic needs are covered during employment on ships, it is often difficult to attain goods beyond basic needs or even to access health services. Therefore, it is not only important to emphasise freedom of access to mobility, but also to look at equality of movement (Harada, 2023: 425), and the quality of a seafarers’ functioning. Foreign flags allow the shipping sector to work at lower costs and with higher

[1] Using foreign flags had also been practiced during war times early on in the nineteenth century in order to avoid being entangled in conflict, but from the 1980s onwards this practice started to gain strong momentum.

profitability.[2] To stay afloat in an extremely competitive world market such efficiency measures are necessary for companies (Borovnik, 2011b). And yet, these longer contracts can place seafarers within tiresome and monotonous situations (Borovnik, 2011a), where there is little escape from the confinements of the relatively narrow ship space.

During economic recession (for example during 2008 and 2009),[3] efficiency measures also witnessed the shrinkage of crews, keeping crew numbers at a minimum. This has further restricted options for time off and relaxation. While ships are unloading, loading or at bunker, the duration and frequency of watch-keeping has increased. The extraordinary stressful and physically demanding work that seafarers conduct daily would normally require rest-time—except that relaxation is now a rare reality for seafarers. When anchored at port, duties today take up so much time that shore leave is limited or impossible. With the introduction of containerships, ports have become specialised with high-capacity technology to offer efficient and fast turnaround. The combined effects of remoteness of high-functioning containership ports, the abbreviated opportunities for shore leave and increased security and port control measures have jointly enacted new temporal and regulatory borders causing seafarers to stay aboard their vessels. In these current circumstances, some might never go ashore during their entire time of contract, as their duties keep them so busy that they need any free minute for rest. And so, for seafarers today, freedom of movement is severely limited. It is limited by a multiplicity of mobility bordering strategies, both tangible and more abstract, from the specific regulatory landscape of ship flagging, ports and border controls, to the hazy, yet very real impacts of the just-in-time economy, and market dynamics.

Yet freedom of movement has been recognised as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), specifically the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and

[2] One example provided by De Beukelaer (2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic was Panama's flag allowing first up to 14 months, then even to 17 months extension of on-board time for seafarers.

[3] Recession was ongoing in 2009, when I spent time on a containership. It was very kind of the shipping company to allow me to spend a month with minimum crew towards the end of 2009 and January 2010.

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (UN, n.d.). However, the actual liberalist idea of freedom must be approached with some caution. Schubert (2021) in his analysis on Foucault's interpretation of freedom as an inadvertent component of power explains neoliberal power as repressive. Freedom can subtly subject individuals to 'power-over' predicaments. By 'creating incentives to become free and even resistant' against 'inefficient structures', individuals are steered towards progress and innovation, useful for neoliberal, market-driven agendas, simultaneously keeping them trapped within systems of control (2021: 643). As such, the free market continues to shape uneven spatial, racial and gender/sexual relations (Sheller, 2018b: 28). Within neoliberal subjectification freedom appears murky and resistance against neoliberal government is not actually possible, which makes neoliberal-driven freedom questionable, unjust and undesirable (Schubert, 2021: 643).

The freedom promoted by neoliberal global free market systems actually immobilises seafarers, who, as the essential drivers of these systems, are simultaneously subjected to and enclosed within regulating structures that are determined by external decision-makers (Borovnik, 2022; Sampson, 2024). Neoliberally driven globalisation, therefore, is not only facilitated by seafarers—it drives their subjectification and creates mobility borders for them. Seafarers, while operating the vast majority of global trade, are instantaneously enclosed in repetitive loops of (im)mobilities. Sheller (2020) has suggested focusing on the different scales of mobility regimes, which is valuable in the seafarers' context, where the global neoliberal mobilities regime has direct effects on the embodied scale. In this sense the romanticised idea of seafarers as extraordinarily tough and hardy is taken advantage of, their resilience is drawn on to continue the unequal economic regimes and social relations in which they operate. As seafarers enter the global job market to provide for their families at home, they will simultaneously take on the disadvantage of arduous hard work on ever-moving ships, in which they share a comprised living space over prolonged time with others. These tough circumstances become even more gruelling under extenuating conditions, such as when merchant ships have to cross piracy or war conflicted zones or as was recently the case with the prolonged crew change crisis

that started at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the next section will draw attention to.

Border Closures and (Un)Freedoms at Shore and Sea

A burst of global acknowledgement dealt with the immobilising effects for seafarers soon after the COVID-19 pandemic peaked in 2020, which resulted in a crew change crisis that affected 400,000 seafarers who were stuck on ships (Bailey et al., 2021; ICS, 2021; IMO, 2021a–d; UNCTAD, 2020), and a similarly high number of seafarers stuck at home (De Beukelaer, 2021; IMO, 2021d). In October 2020, at the peak of the crisis, 43 states and territories closed their borders for crew change and, during 2021, 24 states still had their borders closed (De Beukelaer, 2021: 2). This humanitarian crisis distinctively highlighted the ongoing—and overlooked—issues of uneven global transport conditions seafarers were facing while steadily and 'tirelessly' continuing to support 'the often invisible global logistics chain' (UN Secretary-General António Guterres in UNRCCA, 2020), well beyond their normal contracts and with even more prohibitive restrictions to shore access. For many seafarers an end to their trapped situation on vessels during the pandemic felt dreadfully uncertain. They felt they were serving 'an unwanted prison sentence' (SeafarerHelp, 2020: n.p.), unable to leave their ships.

Identifying the toll the crew change crisis had on seafarers, in September 2020, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres, stressed that seafarers needed recognition as key workers to 'ensure safe crew changes' and 'allowing stranded seafarers to be repatriated and others to join ships' (UNRCCA, 2020). Led by a Seafarers Crisis Action Team (SCAT), the international community launched several initiatives towards negotiating seafarers' rights and reminding countries of their obligations to provide basic services to crews, including port access, medical treatment and the ability to leave the constraints of ship space. Despite these efforts, the crisis continued to worsen throughout 2021, when globally, 'seafarers stuck aboard ships beyond the expiry of their contracts rose from 5.8% in May 2021 to 8.8% in July

2021' (Shipping Australia, 2021: n.p.). In 2022, there were still 200,000 (or approximately 2.7% of the global seafarer workforce) stranded (ILO, IMO, UNCTAD and WHO, 2022; Schuler, 2023). Intensifying this situation, the war in Ukraine had added to this crisis, necessitating the replacement of about 2000 officers from Russia and Ukraine during the same year (Foley, 2022; Human Rights at Sea, 2022; Safety4sea, 2022). Considering these complexities, the IMO implemented a resolution to evacuate seafarers from war zones bordering the Black Sea and the Sea of Azof (UNCTAD, 2022).

On an international scale, dominated by these COVID-19 preventative border closures, the response and call for safe crew changes was cooperative, mostly driven by the urgency to continue the flow of global supply chains and smooth operations for shipping companies (De Beukelaer, 2021). Yet, the crisis revealed 'governance mechanisms at different scales … demonstrating problems of coordination, uneven capacities and claims of authority', which affected 'countries and communities differently, due to different levels of preparedness of their health, social security systems and infrastructure capacity' (Blanco & Rosales, 2020, in Doumbia-Henry, 2020: 5). De Beukelaer (2021: 2) observed that even when borders had begun to open there were numerous obstacles that kept seafarers immobilised, where 'shipping companies were faced with costly crew changes, due to the limited availability of flights through much of 2020', and where some chartered vessels began to be 'using 'no crew change' clauses, particularly with bulk carriers, for fear that crew change may lead to bringing COVID-19 aboard'. In De Beukelaer's view, those practices served as an 'excuse to violate MLC, 2006 regulations' (2021: 2). During 2021, crew changes remained difficult but were possible by using alternative routes, and obliging with long quarantine arrangements for crews, and high flight costs because of irregular flight availabilities (De Beukelaer, 2021). Moreover, Devereux and Wadsworth (2022) have highlighted how seafarers, depending on their employment situation and length of contract time, may not necessarily have had access to social protection and those in precarious situations were affected by poorer health and financial adversity. In other words, the COVID-19 crew change crisis revealed challenges on the global, national and embodied scale of Sheller's mobility justice regime, where

states operated from different vantage points while dealing with the social and economic consequences of this crisis, where the shipping industry continued finding strategies to balancing their international crewing agreements with economic costs, and where seafarers were on the bottom of everybody's priority lists, despite their important role as drivers of the global market.

On these different scales, the consequences of continuing interruptions were felt by suppliers and consumers who were facing disruptions and delays. The world started realising the crucial role of seafarers as key workers—transporting consumer goods across the globe—when these commodities did not arrive (Markkula, 2021; Munoz, 2022). In Graham's (2022: n.p.) opinion, seafarers were so obviously essential to global trade that it seemed ironic how consumers ashore only began noticing them when a shortage of goods was pending, and that seafarers 'are expected to be safety, security and humanitarian operatives while at sea, and trusted to bring cargo to ports; yet, ironically, in many ways they are thought of and treated as threats at borders'. With the advocacy by the UN Secretary-General, the analysis by SCAT, and the media highlighting their situation, seafarers were, at last, officially supported by the Neptun Declaration, which was signed by 850 organisations towards facilitating crew changes (Global Maritime Forum, 2023). Despite these efforts, authors, such as Banta and Pratt (2023), highlight the extended, ongoing immobilities and precarities of seafarers, who remain(ed) undervalued (ILO, 2023; Munoz, 2022), and whose voices continue(d) to be silenced, during and beyond the pandemic (Wemyss, 2023). Despite everybody at least temporarily acknowledging the key role of seafarers, Graham (2022) noted not only a hesitancy of states in signing the essential workers designation; there was also reluctance with providing vaccinations to seafarers in ports. When states started opening borders in 2022, and began 'to return to normal', Graham found that 'the special treatment that some countries afforded seafarers [to be] waning' (2022: n.p.), which was, in her observation, quite in contrast to the aviation industry, where workers were treated with higher priority.

The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly underlined the importance of looking more deeply into the occupational risks that being trapped on ships implicate. The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) found in

their Seafarer Shore Leave Principles report published in April 2022 that 'governmental restrictions imposed to reduce risk of potential infection has had severe consequences on the ability of seafarers to take shore leave when in port' (ICS, 2022: 2). A number of publications have underlined the impacts on mental, physical and social well-being for those who were stuck on ships (Brooks & Greenberg, 2022; Jonglertmontree et al., 2023; Lucas et al., 2021; Slišković, 2020). In her profound study, Ana Slišković (2020) conducted a qualitative analysis with 750 COVID-19 affected seafarers of different nationalities and found that seafarers felt exhausted, deserted and forgotten, as these example responses show: 'We are already tired and our body and mind has reached its limits, but the shipping company doesn't understand us. We are not safe here in the vessel'. Others said: 'Feel like in jail!' or 'I feel abandoned by society; that I am good only like a slave but not as part of human community' or 'They forgot us' (Slišković, 2020: 804). Human Rights at Sea had conducted a study with I-Kiribati seafarers. One had joined his vessel in October 2020, saying that when joining the ship, he had to keep in mind that because of the pandemic:

> …we don't have any place to go ashore anymore as seafarers, because every country has restricted seafarers from having shore leave. You're still working every day from morning till evening, and it's like you are in a prison. Getting off from the ship is always the first thing on our mind that we're always waiting for. (Williams & Nicholls, 2021: 15)

Referring to the International Transport Federation, De Beukelaer (2021) noted that seafarers fear being blacklisted (losing job opportunities) if they would speak up about ship safety being impacted because of physical or mental health issues. While many seafarers stranded on ships have felt abandoned and overlooked by society, Slišković (2020) also noted that those who were stuck at home, waiting for new job opportunities and not able to travel for their usual crew turnover were also stressed about their economic well-being and not being able to supply their families with financial means.

The following two examples will highlight some details about the effects of border closures and limited access to shore on seafarers

during the COVID-19 crisis. The first example looks at New Zealand seafarers. New Zealand does not have its own merchant fleet and seafarers are instead working for international shipping companies. Some are employed in the cruise ship sector, others on floating rigs, or hired by yachting charterers. The second example considers seafarers from the Republic of Kiribati, an Island nation state in the Central Pacific that, despite this remote location, has had well-established contracts with international shipping companies specialised in merchant trade since the late 1960s, and from the mid-1980s also in the fishing industry.

New Zealand's Managed Isolation and Quarantine System Hindering Repatriation and Flexible Crew Turnaround

In April 2021, initiated by their 'seafarers are essential' campaign (Change.org, 2021), a group of New Zealand seafarers started a public Facebook group (facebook.com/NZSeafarers/ [2021]),[4] encouraging others to sign up to their campaign and to share their stories on Facebook. A media release by Change.org explained that, despite New Zealand's support of designating seafarers as key workers and their commitment to the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006, seafarers were not on the list of persons prioritised for vaccinations by New Zealand port authorities. This decision affected seafarers' options to take on jobs that required vaccines. Without these vaccines, seafarers were not able 'to transit in and out of ports', nor to return easily to their families once they signed off (NZSeafarers, 2021: n.p.). Vaccine priorities were not the only issue: the most burning problem, according to the Change.org campaign, was the difficulties of accessing Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) placing. This MIQ system was introduced on 26 March 2020, immediately after New Zealand had closed its borders. The Maritime Border Order required this MIQ time for anyone when entering the country until 2 May 2022, when the Order

[4] Just before the actual publication of this chapter, this Facebook page has been closed for public viewing.

was removed[5] (MBIE, n.d.). One of the spokespersons of NZSeafarers described on 12 April 2021 that there was an urgency for the government, as a signatory of the IMO designation, to recognise seafarers as key workers, to put their support to seafarers into practice and treat them equal to other essential workers, such as air crew members, in prioritising MIQ spaces for them. This was urgent, the spokesperson exclaimed, because many seafarers were in prolonged shipboard or precarious transitory situations (RNZ, 2021).

Yet the difficulty for seafarers to secure MIQ for themselves symbolises the abovementioned constraints of ship work. There is extremely limited internet on ships, if at all. Internet access is usually only available when ships are nearing ports. Using the internet is also normally volatile and quite expensive. These uncertainties of internet use have constricted seafarers' probabilities of accessing MIQ spaces, as they had to compete with hundreds of others queuing up for the small numbers of MIQ placings available. Seafarers were disadvantaged when internet coverage suddenly ran out and they had to start applying again from the back of the MIQ queue. As a consequence, many had to extend their time on ships or had to disembark in countries without an appropriate visa, in which case they had to wait for their return in quarantined environments, often grouped with seafarers from other nationalities in hotels and youth hostels, with very limited access to the outside. Even though many employers were understanding for a while, some decided not to renew contracts as a consequence of these uncertainties (Personal Conversations, November 2023). The following two paraphrased narratives,[6] chosen as typical examples, were uploaded by seafarers on the NZSeafarers Facebook page.

One seafarer had left New Zealand in early October 2020 expecting to be home for Christmas. By the time of posting on Facebook he had hoped to return home by early June 2021. He explained how much he missed his family and many friends who were quite supportive during the time he had been 'basically locked out' of New Zealand. He then

[5] On 1st July 2023 national quarantine and isolation requirements were transferred back to the national health system.

[6] For privacy reasons I have removed names of seafarers and have paraphrased their Facebook entries.

explains how much he regretted: not being home when his wife was in hospital after a car accident, not being able to visit his elderly mother, who was placed in dementia care, and not being available for all 'the important people in my life' (posted 11 April 2021). Another seafarer had also left home in October 2020 and was due home towards the end of July 2021. He wrote that he missed being involved in his family's day-to-day lives, such as making coffee for his wife in the morning, taking the kids to school, picking them up in the afternoon and taking them to their sports. When he left, he had expected to be away for about three months which would have included the isolation periods (posted 15 April 2021). These personal accounts show that New Zealand seafarers (as well as their families) suffered with the extended time away from their loved ones, as they were not used to prolong times off-shore.

During New Zealand's border closures, seafarers were misunderstood by the New Zealand COVID-19 team at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE, n. d.), which did not allow the flexibility that would have been required to fairly accommodating their needs. MBIE had not considered the difficulties that the constraints and mobilities of the ship space presented, of which the volatile and limited internet access was only one problem. The other occupational challenge impacting on MIQ access was that seafarers could never predict exactly at what time they would arrive at a particular port, because the nature of shipping depends on weather conditions, availability of pilots at ports and waiting times that delay cargo turnarounds or other unexpected events that may delay a ship's journey. As a consequence, seafarers might arrive in their home countries several days later than anticipated. Flight bookings are kept flexible to accommodate these frequently occurring delays. During the COVID-19 restrictions, MIQ space allocation needed to be organised using an adaptable approach and be flexible in order to assist these occupational circumstances. Yet, under great pressure to accommodate the multiple requests by travelling citizens returning home, the Ministry decided *against* the option to keep MIQ flexible for seafarers. Instead, others were prioritised. MBIE did not realise how these decisions had contradicted New Zealand government's signature in support of seafarers as essential workers designation nor how the global trade chain was impacted. On 12 August 2021—within only

three months—the Change.org campaign on 'Seafarers ARE essential' had already received 3006 signatures; on this same day the NZSeafarers Facebook page of their campaign promotion had recorded 40,384 views and 719 shares. Here, governing the pandemic led to the further governing of seafarer mobilities through detrimental bordering practices, exacerbated by the operation of MIQ.

Kiribati's Zero COVID-19 Policy Affecting Repatriation with the Consequence of Loss of Employers

Kiribati is a Pacific Island nation of 32 atolls and one high-lying island, which is dispersed over 3.5 million square kilometres across the central Pacific ocean, with a land area of only 810.5 square kilometres and a population of approximately 215,000 (CIA, 2023). Until the South Pacific Marine Services (SPMS)—the employer of Kiribati's merchant seafarers—closed their offices at the beginning of 2022, merchant seafarers were the main contributors of remittances received by Kiribati for more than 50 years. Remittances in 2019 contributed to 11.3% of GDP, but this number had fallen to 6.7% in 2022 (The World Bank, 2023). This financial drop reflects the impacts of the crew change crisis on I-Kiribati seafarers between March 2020 and December 2021. Kiribati closed their border in late-March 2020 and remained free of COVID-19 until August 2021. With consideration of the vulnerability of the island population facing insufficient capacity to deal with an outbreak of the pandemic, the country had decided to keep their borders closed during 2020 and 2021, facilitating repatriation selectively (Borovnik, 2024; Borovnik et al., 2021; Williams & Nicholls, 2021). As a consequence, many seafarers remained stranded overseas, some for up to two years, and without appropriate visa they were bound to their hotel or youth hostel accommodation with limited mobility. Shipping companies of the SPMS conglomerate took care of their basic needs and supplied vaccinations (Borovnik et al., 2021), urging the Kiribati government to facilitate transport for seafarers to return home.

In September 2021, Human Rights at Sea, published an independent case review, noting that

> over 250 I-Kiribati seafarers have been discharged from their ships, isolated, and then left waiting across several countries, including Australia, pending repatriation. Most have completed their legal contracts with many having been away from their homes for over two years with periods up to eight months living in a local hotel somewhere around the globe, far from their homes and families. Given the average contract under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006 of a Kiribati seafarer is 11 months, this additional delay in their returning home is having a significant physical and emotional impact on the seafarer, their families and their communities, with no end in sight. (Williams & Nicholls, 2021: 4)

Kiribati had returned in total 210 seafarers since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Williams & Nicholls, 2021), but in April 2021 a COVID-19 outbreak in Fiji caused a lockdown and standstill of air travel out of Fiji. Consequently, 159 I-Kiribati were stranded in a small hotel in Nadi, while another 105 were waiting for repatriation in Australia, South Korea, Indonesia and Germany (Borovnik et al., 2021). Many of these men had already been spending months in lockdown waiting in diverse locations before reaching these last destinations. For example, one person told me that he was stranded in a hotel in Spain in 2020 for about a month, where he spent his time with a group of seafarers of all sorts of different backgrounds. They were only allowed to go for short walks outside the hotel. After this time, he joined a ship to Australia and spent approximately three months in Brisbane before he joined the group who had to endure the lockdown in Fiji. Other seafarers told me that they had been either in Denmark or Germany for several months before they landed in Fiji.[7] Seafarers were feeling low and concerned about their wives and family:

[7] During two visits to Kiribati in November 2022 and June 2023, I had the opportunity to talk to several seafarers. Official research to understand the different perspectives involved during the COVID-19 border closure, however, will yet to be undertaken and my research application is in progress.

> My son's birthday is coming in this month. I hope he will get maybe only one cake, but that's all. No presents or anything like this. If I was there already, I would work a little bit more, like fishing and getting some other kind of food that we can get, and then we could use some money to buy the kids presents for their birthday. But now, those things will slip away a little bit. (Williams & Nicholls, 2021: 16)
> We have kids who go to school, some of our seamen lost their wives, they went for another husband… it's a very sad thing, sitting down here doing nothing, earning nothing, and all the time you've occupied with problems. (Wasuka, 2021: n.p.)

In August 2021, the two largest shipping companies of the SPMS conglomerate,[8] Hamburg Süd and Maersk, notified their I-Kiribati employees that they had left the SPMS because of the prolonged difficulties with repatriation. As a consequence, the SPMS 'terminated their contract with the Kiribati government' (Williams & Nicholls, 2021: 11). Kiribati had extended their border closure until 31 December 2021 and seafarers waiting to be repatriated were now not only affected by their prolonged separation from families, but they also had to deal with the ongoing economic uncertainty of losing future employment:

> But [I also worry about] when the companies change their minds to stop our salaries, that I will have to stay in Brisbane or in Fiji until further notice. Our country is still in lockdown, and we still don't know when they will open the border for us. The biggest thing I worry about is my family, and if someone will feed them when my salary stops. I am worried about my kids' education, and if someone will support them because their father is far away from them. (Williams & Nicholls, 2021: 17)

The Human Rights at Sea study has contained many more statements of the difficult thoughts that have been occupying I-Kiribati seafarers' minds. Unfortunately, reality struck when the SPMS offices closed, and

[8] The South Pacific Marine Services was established in 1969, after Hamburg Süd had seen opportunities in Kiribati, and was first a conglomerate of British and German companies; before the disestablishment at the end of 2021 (after 52 years), the Danish Maersk, which at this time had also owned Hamburg Süd, and five German companies were part of the SPMS.

approximately between 600 and 800 seafarers have had to look for alternative employment (Personal communication in Kiribati, June 2023). It is striking to compare these two examples, the situations of I-Kiribati with those from New Zealand. Family- and financial-related concerns were at the forefront for all seafarers who unexpectedly had to be separated from their homes over longer times. Yet, the effects of financial withdrawal for the I-Kiribati seafarers created further border complexities and resulted in much more prolonged and severe times of 'unwanted imprisonment' during lockdown, than for most other seafarers.

Conclusion

A sailor went to sea, sea, sea,
To see what he could see, see, see
But all that he could see, see, see
Was the bottom of the deep blue, sea, sea, sea.

This playful nursery rhyme horrifically became a reality for more than 400,000 seafarers who were deeply impacted by the crew change crisis. This humanitarian crisis was triggered by world-wide border closures as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Seafarers had to endure what seemed an unending captivity on ships and extremely constraint living conditions. Ships are vulnerable spaces exposed to weather and sea currents and under normal procedures, seafaring is regarded as one of the most dangerous occupations (Sampson, 2024). It is also an occupation that borders mobile workforces considerably through a variety of neoliberal, regulatory and legal apparatus. Yet, the pandemic exacerbated these already constraining and enclosing conditions (Borovnik, 2024). Where shore leave was difficult to attain under usual operations, it became impossible with locked down border regulations. During the pandemic, while stuck aboard ships, not only were crews unable to access shore they could also not transit or be repatriated. Consequently, many seafarers felt deserted by wider society, including some shipping companies, and even in some cases their own nation states. This chapter has

unpacked the mobility injustices that were exacerbated by the pandemic. The already existing uneven power structures that had placed seafarers on the bottom of hierarchies, and at the periphery of global attention, became even more obvious with this global humanitarian crisis.

The COVID-19-related crew change crisis worsened symptoms of what has been the norm for seafarers who are operating in the 'forgotten spaces' of global capitalism (Steinberg, 2015: 40), where they are entangled in systems of social and economic inequalities, which are intensified by uneven global mobilities injustices (Sheller, 2020: 32). Bordering practices—including decisions that were made on global and national scale during the pandemic (from the MIQ in New Zealand to pandemic border closures in Kiribati)—continue to selectively prioritise who will be allowed to enter shores, and whose repatriation will be prioritised. In this sense, the pandemic has resulted in a continuation of objectifying and silencing processes for seafarers, maintaining their placing on the bottom of hierarchies with enormous impacts on their physical, mental, social and economic well-being (De Beukelaer, 2021; Slišković, 2020; Wemyss, 2023; Williams & Nicholls, 2021). This conclusion is surprising when there has been much talk about seafarers' role as essential workers at least during the pandemic. Yet, only 63 nations have signed the designation that acknowledged seafarers as 'key workers' (Safety4Sea, 2022). Graham (2022) had compared the treatment of seafarers with those of the higher prioritised aviation crews, which was also pointed out by NZSeafarers on Facebook. It must be asked why seafarers feel as though they are threats, *why they are constructed as threats* or, what one person told me in November 2022, that they are discriminated as 'very dangerous people'—because, their highly mobile status, in spite of their ship-based enclosure and numerous exposures to control and testing, had them regarded as people who carry infectious diseases.

This chapter started with questioning the idea of a 'sailor's life', with its reputation as a life of freedom and high mobility. This chapter has shown how the realities of seafarers are determined by the demands of a free global market, which is repressive and immobilising and subjectifies seafarers under the demands of trade—and consumers. During the COVID-19 pandemic where hundreds of thousands of seafarers were stuck, both on ships and at home, the resilience of seafarers

was applauded. As Secretary-General António Guterres outlined, they had 'continued to tirelessly support the often invisible logistics chain', even though 'exhausted [and] away from their families and loved ones' (UNCTAD, 2020: n.p.). Despite this appreciation of seafarers as continuing global market workforce, they had to face even more restrictive bordering practices, and efforts to aid seafarers during the pandemic were falling painfully short. Choosing to continue their lives at sea is usually the only option for a majority of global seafarers, and especially those who come from backgrounds where remittances contribute significantly to a country's national income and the well-being of families left behind. In contrast to the subjectification (or objectification) of seafarers as mere trade facilitators, the narratives in this chapter have brought a human face to maritime worlds. While shipping companies and nation states were wrangling with economic, political and civil responsibilities—closing borders and enacting a governance of the pandemic that was also a governance of the oceans—these human beings were left worried and despaired, felt encaged and without hope.

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