

# Containing mobilities

## Changing time and space of maritime labor

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*Abstract:* This article uses ethnography from onboard container ships to show how seafarers as a workforce at the center of global capital circulation are increasingly confined inside their mobile worksites. Drawing on theories of the transformation of time and space as internal to the logic of globalization and capitalism, the article argues that the increased mobility of goods, as facilitated by developments in maritime logistics, has decreased the mobility of the seafarers in charge of moving these goods across the world. The article proposes “containing mobilities” as a term for thinking through the particular contradictions and inequalities of mobility that shape the everyday life of the workers at the heart of the global system of mobility and transport that constitutes the maritime supply chain.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, global capitalism, maritime labor, mobility, shipping, time-space compression

I'm not happy. I'm not happy with this kind of life. I have been in so many countries: Brazil, America, India. I've been almost all over the world, but I wasn't enjoying my life. People used to say that if you are a seaman you enjoy your life because you see the world. But no! You go to France. You stay there 24 hours. You go ashore for one hour. Nothing. Night time. Cannot see the beautiful places of France. And going back to the ship, you see only the sky, the sea, nothing! You go to Persian Gulf, you cannot go alongside. You stay in the middle of the sea. You are only floating there, ship to ship. A small ship goes to our ship and takes our cargo, and then another ship comes and takes it. Still, we cannot go ashore. I feel like a prisoner.

—Santiago<sup>1</sup>

Santiago was working as a fitter on board *Argonautica*, a cargo ship on which I carried out fieldwork in 2009. He was in his mid-forties at the time, and had worked at sea for nearly half of his life. When I visited his home on the island of Panay in the central Philippines a few months

after we had worked together onboard, he showed me the souvenirs he had collected from around the world during his years of sailing.

Santiago's wife, Rose, loved pink, and nearly everything in the house, including the walls and curtains, ranged in color from baby pink





FIGURE 1. Souvenirs on display from Santiago's work at sea. Photo by Johanna Markkula.

to bright magenta. The house was in a permanent state of construction, with each salary from Santiago's ship work improving and adding to it. While most houses in the village were small, Santiago's house was made of concrete and stood two stories tall on a hill, surrounded by fruit plantations of *rambutan*, *lansones*, and *durian*. Santiago supported a large network of family members, both his own and Rose's, as well as two of his neighbors' children who lived with Rose when he was out at sea. He had grown up poor, the eighth of ten siblings, and proudly told me how he had paid for his schooling with the help of a female pig and some chickens by selling eggs and the piglets his sow birthed. He had been able to pay for a maritime course in college and eventually to find work at sea. When asked why he had chosen to go to sea, he told me what many other seafarers have told me as well, that he had wanted to make a better life for his family and also to "see the world for free."

But, as he told me many times, he was not happy with his life as a sailor. He felt like a prisoner.

I open with Santiago's story to highlight three issues that are central to this article. First, Santiago's description of the short port stays and the transfer of cargo out at sea points to a set of transformations in maritime shipping where the increased mobility of goods, ships, and labor has entailed the reduced mobility of seafarers as traveling persons. Second, two different kinds of mobility motivated Santiago to go to sea. One was the geographical mobility expressed in his aspirations to travel the world. The other was social mobility by earning money to improve life for his family. Third, Santiago's expectations of the geographical mobility promised by his occupation contrasted sharply with his lived experience of immobility.

In this article, I use "containing mobilities" to capture how these multiple mobilities in maritime shipping articulate with different dynam-

ics of containing. I link the mobility of goods, ships, and labor that is central to the production of value in global capitalism to the uneven and contradictory experiences of mobility, and the way people involved as workers in “container economies” (Leivestad and Markkula, this issue) make sense of, and give value to, their experiences.

Empirically, I explore how transformations of time and space through the accelerated circulation of ships, goods, capital, and labor across the world are experienced by a key group of workers who have been central to these processes, yet largely peripheral to scholarly discussions thereof.<sup>2</sup> More concretely, I connect the technological, political, and economic shifts in maritime transport over the past few decades, such as containerization, the automation of cargo handling, and the increased securitization of ports, to the changing experiences of time and space for seafarers onboard cargo ships. I do so through ethnographic material from participant observation carried out while working for six months as a crewmember onboard four cargo ships of various flags and different crew constellations. This ethnography is part of a decade-long research engagement with the maritime industry and with seafarers from various backgrounds, which itself has grown out of a lifelong involvement with containerized shipping as the daughter of a container ship captain.

Theoretically, I situate this ethnography in conversation with David Harvey’s (1989) notion of time-space compression, and his attempt to link larger shifts in political economy and changing technologies with a cultural shift in how we experience time and space. I also heed Doreen Massey’s (1994: 147) call to ask questions “about time-space compression itself,” in particular, her insistence that time-space compression “raises questions of politics,” especially a “politics of mobility” (1994: 150). This politics of mobility “is not simply a question of unequal distribution, that some people move more than others, and that some have more control than others. It is that the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people.

Differential mobility can weaken the leverage of the already weak. The time-space compression of some groups can undermine the power of others” (1994: 150).

I argue that the privileged circulation of goods, ships, and labor that need to happen for the accumulation of capital to take place in container economies does not just produce but also depends on containing the mobility of the people whose very labor sustains cargo circulation. “Containing mobilities,” then, refers to both the “cargomobilities” (Birtchnell et al. 2015) that containerized shipping enables as well as the ways in which these cargo mobilities “contain” workers’ own mobilities onboard ships, as previously described by Santiago. Finally, I suggest that the social mobility enabled by seafarers’ labor in container economies captures these workers in cycles of consumption and webs of dependency at home that make it difficult for them to stop moving their labor to sea. In this sense, the social mobility is another “containing” force in seafarers’ lived experiences of time-space compression.

### **A sea-change: Time-space compression in maritime shipping**

“There has been a sea-change,” Harvey writes, “in cultural as well as political-economic practices since around 1972. This sea-change is bound up with the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time” (1989: vii). In his seminal text, *The condition of postmodernity* (1989), Harvey argues that a series of shifts in the way global capitalism operates—characterized by an acceleration of the movement of goods, capital, and labor across the world, processes of flexible accumulation through outsourcing of production, and the circulation of exchange—has produced a change in how we experience time and space, which he refers to as “time-space compression.”

Central to this “sea-change” is the sea itself. Although not explicitly discussed in Harvey’s work, the sea, as well as the ships and the sail-

ors traveling upon it, are key elements of the transformations of the global political economy that Harvey describes. In many ways, the sea is the ultimate flexible capitalist space. Nautical highways can be easily rerouted, forcing the construction of new ports, while terminals are expanded, port basins dredged and deepened (Leivestad, this issue), and canals widened (Carse 2014, 2020) to accommodate the ever larger vessels that are being built (Carse 2020, see also Schober, this issue), while leaving others to abandonment in a dynamic that can be described in terms of Harvey's notion of "spatial fix" (Harvey 2006). Moreover, the ships that shuttle between these ports are both flexible infrastructures and means of production for capital circulation and accumulation. They are deterritorialized sites of production where that which is produced through the labor of sailors is not goods for sale but the actual movement of these goods that allow them to be sold at a higher value (Cowen 2014; Harvey 2013; Marx 1967; see also Leivestad, this issue). Finally, the ships themselves constitute forms of capital that are both fixed and mobile (Sibilia 2019).

Maritime transport has of course been central to the development of global capitalism also historically through violent and extractive projects such as colonialism, imperialism, and international trade (Braudel 1995; Fulcher 2004; Hegel 1991; Steinberg 2001; Wallerstein 1991). Key developments in maritime technologies and politics throughout history, such as the solution to the problem of longitude, maritime insurance, the shift from sail to steam, to mention just a few, have all shaped the world system and the different forms of global capitalism enormously (Fulcher 2004; Sloterdijk 2013; Steinberg 2001). However, when Harvey situates his sea-change "around the year of 1972," he draws our attention to the particular political and economic shifts of this more recent period of time-space compression as well as the cultural changes produced by them. The unequal development and global differences, which post-Fordist/postmodern capitalism both depends on and reproduces, are only made possible through

what scholars have referred to as "the logistics revolution" (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Cowen 2014). By using the term "revolution," these authors draw attention to the watershed in history brought about by developments in technologies and organizational logics of transport, arguing that "logistics has been crucial in the process of time-space compression that has remade geographies of capitalist production and distribution at a global scale" (Cowen 2014: 10). The emerging container economies, described in the introduction to this special issue (Leivestad and Markkula, this issue), are one key element of this revolution. Beginning in the 1950s in the context of the Vietnam War, the development of containerization is itself inseparable from military and imperial projects (Cowen 2014; Levinson 2006). It transformed the system of ports, terminals, and canals over the next few decades as well as completely changed the way global trade was conducted and "gradually remade the global economy" (Cowen 2014: 6).

While these transformations of the political economy through logistics have been amply discussed by scholars such as Bonacich and Wilson (2008), Levinson (2006), Cowen (2014), and Chua (2017), my focus in this article is rather on the lived experiences of a key group of people at the center of these transformations. Building on Harvey's insights and following Massey's insistence that "time-space compression needs differentiating socially" and that "this is not just a moral or political point about inequality . . . it is also a conceptual point" (1994: 148), I argue that the privileging of the mobility of goods, ships, capital, and labor stands in a diametrically oppositional and causal relation to the mobility of seafarers in the context of containerized shipping, who experience these changes as incarcerating and immobilizing. As the goods travel faster and smoother, the mobility of sailors has become an inconvenience, a disturbance to the movement of things, ships, and capital. Of course, as "labor," a commodified abstraction of people as workers, seafarers are mobile, with crewmembers being sourced from a variety of countries depending on where

the best quality/price rapport is found. However, as traveling persons, seafarers' mobility has been increasingly constrained, and their dreams of traveling the world significantly curbed. This is what I refer to as "containing mobilities."

In what follows, ethnographic vignettes and interviews with seafarers show transformations in maritime shipping associated with time-space compression as they are experienced by sailors onboard ships. The first vignette takes us through a port city and its container terminal to board a container ship. It shows that while ports have expanded and ships have become bigger, for seafarers the spaces they experience are more constrained as their living areas onboard the ships are compressed. At the same time, their time in ports are shortened and they are unable to go ashore. The second vignette shows the effects of changing mobility politics and border regimes—in particular, the securitization of ports—on seafarers' movements. The third and final section takes the crew change crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme example of already existing dynamics of containing seafarers' mobilities for the sake of cargo mobilities, while highlighting the "differential mobility" (Massey 1994: 150) of this

labor force. It ends by bringing us back to the aspirations to social and geographical mobility expressed by Santiago to see how these articulate with one another in the context of container economies.

### A tale of two ports: Changing infrastructures of maritime logistics

She wasn't the most beautiful ship I had seen, but she was impressive. Steel gray hull, stretching over three hundred meters along the quay and towering high above me, she was a fortress in an asphalt field of colorful containers. I had spotted her already from the highway. A friend had offered to give me a ride to the port, but when I spoke to the ship's agent on the phone, I was told that no private cars could enter the terminal and that a van designated for crew transport would pick me up in town instead. My friend was surprised. "I go to the port all the time," he said. "I don't understand what the problem is."

As it turns out, there were two ports in the southern Italian town of Cagliari. The one my friend was familiar with was where the ferries



FIGURE 2. Screenshot from GoogleMap.com of the city of Cagliari, Italy, with its two ports.

and cruise ships docked. This port was right in the center of town, and people could stroll along the quays and watch the yachts in the marina while enjoying a gelato on one of the many terraces. Passengers disembarked the cruise ships to go for *passeggiata* in the old town. Young people clustered with their Vespas in the warm evening sun. It was a people port. A pleasure port.

The port I was going to was of a different kind. Situated at the outskirts of town, it was separated from the residential areas first by a highway, then by an estuary, and finally by a fenced area with a gated entry, behind which stretched an asphalted terminal with stacks of containers and gantry cranes. The port was connected to the town by a narrow land bridge across the estuary along which ran a road that only trucks seemed to frequent. Trucks, and the black van that shuttled crewmembers from the airport to the ships when signing on at the start of a contract, or from the ships to the airport when signing off at their contract's end.

Prior to containerization, ports used to be the beating heart of towns in shipping circuits (Levinson 2006). They were lively spaces of commerce, with bustling bars, brothels, and boarding houses. Sailors on shore leave or between assignments, waiting for their next ship, were an integral part of the port scenery and economy. The movement of goods, ships, and people to and from the ships through the ports, produced social spaces that were overflowing with commercial activity and with many services catering to seafarers and the traders who gathered there.

By contrast, today's commercial ports are usually situated far from city centers (Levinson 2006). The volumes of freight that pass through these ports, though often efficiently packed in containers, require space, and so do the ships, which tend to be built larger and larger (see Schober, this issue). Terminals for containers, liquefied natural gas, oil, and cars all require a lot of space. This is inconvenient and expensive in city centers and consequently most cargo terminals are situated kilometers away from the closest residential or commercial areas. More-

over, while well connected to the hinterlands in terms of freight trains and highways, they are usually less connected in terms of public transport. Some ports, like the Port of Algeciras described by Leivestad (this issue), are transshipment hubs, meaning that the cargo only gets transferred there from one ship to another and does not enter the economy beyond the port.

In addition, containerization and automation have meant that many ports are remarkably emptied of people. In ports like Rotterdam, containers shuttle about on driverless trucks and are loaded onto ships by automated gantry cranes. Moreover, containerization and automation have reduced not only the need for workers in the ports (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Cowen 2014) but also onboard the ships. Crews today are small, averaging between 15 and 20 persons on larger container ships and during port stays work intensely in six-hour shifts to meet the pressed schedules and depart on time.

The effectivization of shipping and cargo handling through technological achievements such as containerization and automation in ports has further meant that the turnaround times of ships have become significantly shorter (Borovnik 2004; Khavecic 1999), compressed if you will. If ships in the past could stay for days, even weeks, in a port to complete loading and unloading, vessels today are typically in and out of a port in a matter of hours. Berthing space and cargo operations are expensive, so the speed of turnaround times is essential for the accumulation of capital. All of this—the separation of ports from city centers, the reduced crew sizes, the fast turnaround times—has led to seafarers finding it increasingly difficult to access visits ashore.

On the other hand, whereas the ports and the ships have become larger, the living spaces onboard the ships have not. As a child, I traveled on container ships built in the early 1980s at Kockums shipyard in Malmö, Sweden, one of the four shipyards that produced more than 90 percent of Swedish tonnage at the height of Swedish shipbuilding (Karlsson 2017). These ships, built just before the decline of the Swed-



FIGURE 3. Driverless trucks in one of Rotterdam's container terminals. Photo by Johanna Markkula.

ish shipbuilding industry (Varela et al. 2017), had very spacious crew accommodations. Their large cabins and social spaces, such as gym, bar, library, TV room, sports hall, swimming pool with sauna and spa, were part of a geographically and historically specific period in shipbuilding when gains in workers' rights ashore were adopted on ships too and reflected in the design of the ships' interiors.

However, most ships built after this brief "golden age" of shipbuilding have much more limited accommodation spaces. This was an often-remarked-upon observation by sailors who had previously worked on more generously spaced older vessels. During a conversation with Ivan, a Ukrainian officer, about the smallness of the accommodation on the ship we were on, built in Taiwan in 2009, he said with nostalgia: "Back in the 80s, the companies made ships for the people onboard, for the seamen. Before they cared about the ship. Now the accommodation is one 'bay.'<sup>3</sup> Before they made the accommodation very nice. They had sauna, gym, place for parties, big cabins. Not anymore." Similarly,

on an even newer vessel built in China in 2011, Lauri, an Estonian engineer, explained to me:

This ship is not built for people, only for workers. This is a cheap building. It used to be different. Now everything is China, China, China. . . . But twenty, thirty years ago, when cargo ships were built in places like Finland, there was quality, not quantity. . . . Companies now just want cheaper and cheaper and cheaper. To run, run, run. . . . Only earning money, money, money, every day.

In this quote, Lauri passionately connects the speeding up of transport with the impoverished materiality of the ship itself as not being "built for people." While Lauri's comment may read as anti-Chinese, it was more likely intended as a critique of the shift in shipbuilding practices accompanied by a shift in location from West to East (Varela et al. 2017, see also Schober, this issue). The move of shipbuilding centers from Germany or Sweden to cheaper sites of produc-



**FIGURE 4.** Meme sent by crew to author to depict the “cutting” into sailors’ space on ships.

tion in China, South Korea and the Philippines (Schober 2016) is part of a general strategy of shipping companies to save on operational costs by outsourcing labor to East Asia, where salaries are lower and labor regulations less strict. These attempts to save costs are also reflected in the investment the shipowners make in the material aspects of the ships, such as crew accommodation. As I have argued elsewhere (Markkula 2018), these two developments are related. Many national crews in the 1980s had stable employment, they often returned to the same ship for years on end and had substantial organizational power. By contrast, the present recruitment of seafarers from East and Southeast Asia on temporary and flexible contracts means that companies are less likely to invest in building ships that are comfortable and “homey.”

### **The failed shore leave: Securitization of borders and unequal mobilities**

The lower decks of the accommodation tower smelled of cologne. The men were dressed up in clean jeans, sneakers, and crisp polo shirts.

We had just finished mooring operations in Cagliari, the same port in southern Italy where I had signed on the ship two months earlier. We had arrived from Mundra, India, via Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, through the Suez Canal. The ship, with a carrying capacity of 6589 TEU (standard-sized 20-foot container), had a lot of containers to discharge and load in this port before our next 10-day-long sea leg to Hamburg, Germany, and for once we were scheduled to stay overnight. The part of the crew who was not on duty for the present six-hour shift finally saw a chance to go ashore after months of “impossible ports.” Dreams of phone cards, internet access, and maybe even pizza (non-ship food!) and a drink at a nice bar fueled the anticipation. Some of the guys had been onboard for ten months without having been ashore even once. Now they only needed “Immigration” to come onboard to complete the arrival procedures and approve their shore leave, and they would be good to go.

The ship trembled lightly as containers were picked up by gantry cranes and lowered onto the quay. Chief Mate sat in front of his computer screen with the cargo plan in front of him, checking in on the VHF<sup>4</sup> with his men on deck. The engine cadet had gangway duty and reported to Chief each time someone came onboard: the agent, customs, stevedores. But, the hours passed and Immigration failed to show. The men’s mood dwindled. Every few minutes, one of the guys passed by the gangway to ask if the authorities had arrived yet. “It’s so unfair,” they lamented. “Fucking Italians. It’s the same every time. They don’t come, or they come just before departure when there is no time for us to go ashore.” Eventually, Mihai, the Romanian Third Mate, and I went ashore without the others. With our EU passports, we did not need Immigration’s approval. We called the agent, who called the driver of the black van used for crew transport. Ten minutes later, the van showed up by the gangway to pick us up for a fee of 20 euros per trip. After showing our ID cards at the gate and having our names checked on the crew list, we continued into town. The pizzas and



phone cards we brought back to the ship were a meager consolation for the non-EU crew.

It is not only the transformation of the physical and spatial maritime infrastructures that hinders seafarers from leaving their vessels. The increased securitization of ports has made the interface between ship and port considerably less porous. The International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS) was created as an addendum to the SOLAS<sup>5</sup> convention in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. In November that same year, only a couple of months after the attacks, the member states of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) gathered in the meeting halls of its headquarters in London for its biennial Assembly, during which it was decided that the industry should take action to make sure that ships were not used as missiles, like the airplanes in the 9/11 attacks. The ISPS Code was the result, and it went into force in 2004.

While the explicit purpose of the ISPS Code was to prevent maritime-related terrorism, it had other important consequences, spillover effects if you will, which have forever changed the nature of work and everyday lives of maritime workers. If the aim of the ISPS Code was to “protect” the supply chain (Cowen 2014), a casualty of this protection were the supply chain workers themselves. Cowen writes about Supply Chain Security, of which the ISPS is a key element, that “the complex transnational networks of people, places and infrastructures that constitute that system cannot ever be fully controlled; the seamless global circulation of stuff is a project, not a reality, but it is nevertheless a project with definite effects” (Cowen 2014: 90).

One of these effects has been the increased incarceration of seafarers onboard ships. As Ralph, a retired US Coast Guard officer who was involved from the start with implementing the Code, told me in an interview: “I think that a lot of seafarers have a different life now than they did before the Code. The implication of this code around the world had big effects, both on shipboard people and port people. It affected every aspect of people coming and going to the

port. It hugely impacted the way things were done.” For seafarers, as the ports became more securitized, it became increasingly difficult to go ashore.

Although it is stated in the IMO’s regulations that all seafarers have the right to shore leave, this, like so many other regulations, was often true only on paper. Those in charge of implementing the rules were aware of this. Ralph confirmed my impressions and recounted his experience of being in charge of inspecting ports for ISPS compliance:

In some instances, I’ve known that the port authority may not allow the crewmembers to debark the ship, which is actually illegal under the IMO rules. They have to be able to get off the ship to have shore leave. But they make it so complicated to get off that they in effect don’t let them off. The captains will just let things stand. Let it slip. That puts the mariners in the awkward position that they are almost confined on the ship for their voyages.

In interviews with seafarers, many indeed identified the ISPS Code as a turning point that had fundamentally changed for the worse the mobility they were able to enjoy. Ovidiu, a Romanian ship electrician in his early fifties, when asked how life onboard had changed since he started working at sea, pointed mainly to the differences in access to shore leave:

We don’t have internet before. That is true. But you could go ashore, which is much better than to be on the internet. If you go for five or six hours ashore, it is a hundred times better than to stay for 24 hours on the internet. You can relax, you can drink a beer, eat a pizza. But most of all, you discharge the mind. But now, on the container vessel, there is no shore leave. The rules changed. The world changed.

Ovidiu identified the ISPS Code as a key catalyst of this shift: “From 2001 it starts. After Septem-

ber 11 of USA. Okay, not really from September, but a few months after, there started to be new rules, ISPS rules and, and you feel like you are a terrorist.”

### **COVID-19, the failed crew change, and no end to circulation**

The confinement of seafarers onboard ships described in the previous section has been dramatically brought to light during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ships were propelled into the lime-light early on in the crisis with viral outbreaks on cruise ships such as the *Diamond Princess*, which for some time had its own “entry” on the list of nations with the highest numbers of infections (Khalili 2020). However, as passengers were repatriated and countries across the world faced their own climbing rates of infection, these death ships/traps faded out of sight, out of mind again, although over one hundred thousand cruise ship workers remained stranded onboard for months after (Devereux 2020; ITF 2020a).

However, if cruises and passenger travel came to a halt, for the cargo vessels that bring goods, food, fuel, and gas from port to port, the circulation continued. As borders closed for people to pass, governments across the world insisted that the borders must remain open for the transport of goods. In a circular letter issued on May 5, 2020, the IMO stated that “G20 Governments, at their recent emergency meetings, have committed to minimizing disruptions to trade and global supply chains, and have identified the need to prioritize keeping air and sea logistics networks open and functioning efficiently” (IMO 2020: 2).

While I have argued in this article that container mobilities are dependent on both the mobility of seafarers as labor and the immobility of seafarers as traveling persons, during the pandemic, the mobility of labor was halted too. With borders closing and flights being canceled across the world in attempts to contain the spread of the virus, crew changes on many of the world’s ships were indefinitely delayed. At

the time of writing, it is estimated that more than four hundred thousand crewmembers are stuck onboard, with an equal number of sailors unemployed at home, waiting to go onboard (ITF 2020b). Throughout the course of the pandemic, I have been in regular contact with former shipmates and research participants in both situations. For example, Makulay, a Filipino able seaman<sup>6</sup> working on a Greek vessel, told me in a phone call in September 2020 that he had been onboard for 16 months and that he was feeling extremely tired and losing hope. Two months later, in November 2020, Makulay was still onboard and severely depressed, having spent 18 months onboard, double the time of his original nine-month contract. Some crewmembers on his ship had been relieved, however, as there had been a crew change for several Ukrainian crewmembers in Réunion.

While the global pandemic of COVID-19 is an exceptional situation, in the context of maritime shipping, it rather reveals and exacerbates the already existing dynamic of “containing mobilities” that I have argued characterizes the relationship between the global supply chains and maritime labor. The global movement of goods must continue at all costs, while the seafarers who do the work of moving the goods are held hostage in order to ensure the continued operations of ships. To return to Massey’s (1994) call to focus on differential mobility in time-space compression and to ask how the mobility of some is dependent on the immobilization of others, in the COVID-19 case, but also in the business-as-usual in shipping, we see clearly how the mobility of goods is dependent on, and even produces, the immobilization of seafarers.

Yet, even seafarers’ mobility needs differentiating. Sailors’ experiences of time and space are not uniform (Turgo 2020). The relative mobility of seafarers depends on a number of variables, such as the type of vessel they are working on, the kinds of ports their ships call, as well as the nationality of the seafarers themselves. Santiago’s example of working on a tanker in the Persian Gulf in the opening quote of this article was extreme in that the ship did not even go into the

ports but was loaded and unloaded out at sea. On two smaller-sized ships, on which I sailed in 2015 and in 2019, crewmembers were able to walk out of the port without any security checks or with minimal checking of names on a crew list in the port's gate.

Such ease of movement was unimaginable, however, on the larger container ship in the ethnographic vignettes in this article. Several of the crewmembers on this vessel had not been ashore at all during their 10-month contracts. Shore leave was hard to obtain, and sailors needed passes with signatures from both the Master and local authorities. Walking in and out of these larger container terminals was unthinkable. In Cagliari, Mihai and I were able to go ashore only because we had European passports, while the non-European crew were stuck onboard. Finally, on Makulay's ship in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a crew change for the Ukrainian crewmembers—"Europeans

are never more than a year onboard," Makulay said—whereas he and several other Filipino crew were still onboard nine months after the expiration of their original nine-month contracts.

Before ending, let's return for a moment to the other mobility that seafarers aspired to, which Santiago also referred to in the opening quote. Many of the sailors whom I interviewed during my research told me that, besides wanting to "see the world for free," their main reason for their occupational choice was to make a better life for their families (cf. Mannov, this issue). Such aspirations to social mobility were for many their main motivation for "going to sea." Many also said that they had an intention to work intensely for a limited number of years in order to save enough to make an early retirement and were planning to start, or had already started, small businesses at home.

Seafarers often worked with concrete goals in mind, of which building a family house and



FIGURE 5. Seafarer's Sari-Sari store in Quezon City, Philippines. Photo by Johanna Markkula.

getting their children through school were typical examples, saying that once they would have achieved these goals, they intended to quit working at sea. However, these plans of working only for a few years rarely materialized. As the sailors, and their families, adjusted to a certain income, they found it difficult to suddenly stop working. With many people economically dependent on their income, there was a lot of external pressure on seafarers to keep going to sea and to keep the money coming in (Lamvik 2002). In addition, some seafarers complained that their partners were not considerate with their money, and that already upon their return home at the end of a contract, very little of the remittances they had sent home during their months at sea remained.

This was a recurring conflict in some families. For example, Santiago felt that his family, by not saving and investing wisely, was prolonging his work time and forced him back to sea too soon. He felt that they did not care about his desire to retire from the sea, that his only role in the family was to send money home for his relatives to spend, and that he was superfluous as a family member at home, and only valuable as a provider far away. Needless to say, this feeling of alienation contributed to his lack of enjoyment and motivation to work, and he was struggling to make sense of his time spent making a living. In this sense, the social mobility of seafarers, and the way their work enables them to provide for their families at home, may add yet another layer to “containing mobilities” in that it captures sailors in nets of dependency, making it difficult for them to stop working at sea.

However, it is not impossible. Ten years have passed since Santiago and I worked together onboard my first field ship and I first visited his home in the Philippines. Santiago has since succeeded to leave his shipboard work and has moved to Australia where he now works as a mechanic. Santiago managed to mobilize his labor mobility to extract himself, first from the poverty experienced in his childhood, and later also from the cycles of work and remittances that his labor at sea had caught him in. Besides

the money, he also mobilized the cultural and social capital gained from working at sea, such as English-language skills and work experience, in his successful effort to emigrate.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how, at the very core of larger developments of the time-space compression described by Harvey and others, there are uneven and contradictory processes and experiences taking place. As Massey writes, “ethnicity and gender, to mention only the two most obvious . . . axes, are also deeply implicated in the ways in which we inhabit and experience space and place, and the ways in which we are located in the new relations of time-space compression” (1994: 164). Seafarers’ experiences of changing time and space are not uniform but depend on a number of factors, such as the ports visited, the types of ships sailed on, the ownership and registry of the vessels, as well as the nationality of the seafarers. The capitalist project of global transport is dependent on inequalities of mobility that are structured along such lines of difference. The racialized and differentiated maritime labor is mobile in the sense that workers are drawn from a range of countries and flown to ports where they sign on their respective vessels. Once onboard, however, they are effectively contained for the duration of their contracts, where their labor is mobilized and harnessed to ensure the smooth, just-in-time movement of goods across the world.

This complex and contradictory dynamic of seafarers as commoditized mobile labor onboard moving worksites, on the one hand, and the immobility they experience and express in the context of containerized shipping, on the other, is what I have referred to as “containing mobilities.” This concept highlights the differential mobilities that are “being contained,” the multiple ways in which different mobilities are themselves doing the work of “containing,” as well as the ways in which the logistical work to ensure the mobility of goods depends on, and

even produces, the immobility of logistical workers such as seafarers.

In the circular letter issued by the IMO on May 5, 2020, recommending protocols for “ensuring safe ship crew changes and travel during the COVID-19 pandemic,” the organization urged governments to “designate professional seafarers and marine personnel . . . as ‘key workers’ providing an essential service” (IMO 2020: 2). But what is this “essential service” they provide, and why is it essential? Global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, both highlight our dependencies on this mobile maritime labor force and reveal the vulnerabilities of the system. In other words, they show the simultaneous importance of maritime workers to global capitalism, and—ironically enough—their unimportance. In bringing together the theoretical claims about time-space compression—and the technological and spatial transformations of an industry that is key to the dynamics of global capitalism that these theories seek to illuminate—with the localized experiences of the global workforce that enables it, this article insists that seafarers’ differential experiences of time and space are, indeed, essential.

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### Notes

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. For a recent exception, see Turgo 2020 on temporal experiences of seafarers.
3. A bay on a container ship is a stowage section corresponding to the length of one container.
4. Marine VHF radios are two-way radio transceivers on ships.
5. The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea.
6. Able Seaman, or AB, is an experienced deck rating (non-officer) on a ship.

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