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HISTORY BELOW DECK: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCUS REDIKER

JEFFREY J. WILLIAMS

The factory, whether in the Midlands of England making cloth or the Midwest of the U.S. making steel, seems the quintessential institution of the rise of capitalism, and those toiling in it the archetypical worker. Marcus Rediker calls attention to a less visible realm of labor, the sea, telling about those who worked on ships, particularly sailors and pirates, during the age of sail on the Atlantic. Rediker first staked out this history in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (1987), and expanded it in *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, co-authored with Peter Linebaugh (2000). Alongside those, he also collaborated on *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 1 (1990), which shifted the focus from founding fathers in conventional histories to the movements of working people who shaped history.

Rediker's investigation of the age of sail led to his pathbreaking account of the vehicle that made slavery possible, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), which describes the various people who staffed, invested in, and were human cargo on those seagoing "factories of capitalism," as he puts it. Complementing that book, in *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (2012), he unpacks one of the few successful resistances of those enslaved.

Throughout, Rediker has foregrounded such moments of resistance. His *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (2004) and *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (2014) focus especially on pirates, and *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (2017), shines light on an unlikely eighteenth-century pacifist hero. In addition, Rediker has co-edited two books on the Atlantic during the age of sail, and written a film, *Ghosts Of Amistad: In The Footsteps Of The Rebels*, with Tony Buba (2014).

Born in 1951, Rediker attended Vanderbilt University and Virginia Commonwealth University (BA, 1976), doing his graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania (PhD, 1982). He has taught at Georgetown and the University of Pittsburgh, where he is a Distinguished Professor of Atlantic History.

This interview, conducted and edited by Jeffrey J. Williams, took place in Pittsburgh, PA, on June 6 and 12, 2019.

Jeffrey J. Williams: How would you encapsulate the kind of history that you do?

Marcus Rediker: I do “history from below.” It focuses on the people who have been left out of the narratives of the past, especially those based on the nation-state. It’s not just a matter of having sympathy for their lives but about how ordinary working people have made history and how their collective actions have frequently shaped history.

A lot of the history I write has been hidden. I try to recapture lost voices and get close to the experience of unknown, frequently anonymous people. The great difficulty of doing this kind of history is that the people I study didn’t usually create any documents of their own, so this work requires reading many different kinds of documents that were usually produced by the ruling classes and their allies, and reading them against the grain. Sometimes you’re reading the archive of repression, but I’m especially interested in the active agency of unknown people in shaping both the archive and history.

JJW: Your first book, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, gives an account of sailors and sets out your project. It’s a history of the working class, but it’s not about a factory as we usually think of them. One of your points is that we conceive of the sea as an empty space, but the sea was the prime conduit of capitalism as it developed in that era, and sailors were its chief workers. How were you drawn to study sailors instead of other workers?

MR: Actually, when I went to graduate school in 1976, I intended to be a historian of slavery. I went to University of Pennsylvania to study with Richard S. Dunn, who had written an important book on Caribbean slavery, *Sugar and Slaves* (1972). That was what I wanted to do. I had grown up in a working-class family in the South and was very conscious of issues of race and class from an early age; that shaped my interest because the legacy of slavery was all around me.

But when I got to graduate school and began to think about research subjects, I came across a book called *Albion’s Fatal Tree* that E. P. Thompson, Peter Linebaugh, and a group of people working together at the University of Warwick had produced in the early 1970s. It was on crime and law in the 18th century, and they used legal documents to tell the stories of working people and their resistance, which involved going into legal archives and

reading sources creatively and from below. I thought, “That’s the kind of work I want to do.”

In my very first research seminar, I looked for a group of people who had generated a lot of legal documentation, and I settled on pirates because I knew that big show trials were held every time a group of pirates were captured in the early 18th century. These would result in hangings, where the entire city of Charleston, New York, or Boston would come out to watch the drama. Looking from below, I started asking simple questions: What did the people who turned pirates think they were doing? Why did they do it? What were their working lives like that led them to make that choice?

I realized that I needed to understand the world of work that these pirates emerged from—merchant seafaring, the Royal Navy, even privateering. These were seafaring people, and I was interested in the class relations of production aboard ships. This led me eventually to argue that the ship was a proto-factory, where all kinds of labor was brought together and synchronized within a big machine. The ship was probably the most important machine of the early modern era. That slowly became my dissertation and then my first book, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, which is about working sailors in the North Atlantic in the first half of the 18th century.

JJW: So legal documents gave some evidence. How did you identify your archive?

MR: When I decided to write my dissertation on deep-sea sailors, all of the wise old heads at the University of Pennsylvania said to me, “You’ll never find any sources.” They knew I could find sources about pirates, who created a spectacle and a great deal of reporting. But finding sources for the larger world of the working sailors on merchant and naval ships would be much tougher, and a lot of people discouraged me. But I was hardheaded and off I went to the archives.

I identified a source that had been little used: there was a huge body of documents in the High Court of Admiralty papers—in the now-called National Archives but then-called the Public Record Office of Great Britain. I went not knowing exactly what these documents would teach me, but as it happened they were unbelievably rich sources for my purposes. These records were about piracy, wage disputes, mutiny, and murder, featuring testimony by sailors who had witnessed what had happened. A court scribe took down verbatim the testimony of sailors, most of whom never left any sources of their own. But here they were, speaking in court about why a mutiny happened, or what happened when their vessel was captured by a group of pirates, or what happened when a captain didn’t pay them their wages in Port Royal, Jamaica. I used these rich ethnographic sources to reconstruct the world of the deep-sea sailor. I ended up studying about 2,200 court cases, which constituted the evidentiary basis of *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*.

One can literally hear in the depositions how sailors talked and how they thought. They would tell you what went wrong in the governance of that ship—what did the captain do that caused certain people to turn against him? These were often vivid descriptions of the dramas playing out on the decks of ships.

JJW: How were you able to go and do that research? Did you have fellowships?

MR: I had fellowships at the University of Pennsylvania, some that provided the opportunity to go to London for extended periods of time to work on these documents. These records were not available in microfilm, so I had to go there and sit down in the old PRO and go through them box after box. The archivists once brought me a box in which a long, black something or other lay on top of a stack of documents. I couldn't make out what it was, so I put it aside and started reading. The very first case was brought by a sailor who had been beaten almost to death by his captain. The unknown thing was an 18-inch piece of rope, black with his blood, and had somehow remained in a box of documents for more than two centuries. This was an electrifying moment in the archives: if you want to understand the nature of social life on board a ship, here was a weapon a captain had used to nearly murder a sailor!

JJW: In that book, you talk about the different facets of sailing life—their work conditions, the language they used, their wages, how many sailors there were. You mentioned ethnography, and in a way you were trying to produce a composite picture of what Atlantic sailing life was like.

MR: This was happening when social history, or history from below, was ascendant, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, the women's movement, all of which demanded new kinds of history in the 1960s and 1970s. Many people were doing social history at that time, and I was one of them. My training at Penn emphasized history and anthropology, so I was especially interested in ethnography and how one would write the history of the ship as a kind of social and cultural system. How did it work as a system? What was the nature of authority? What was the nature of resistance? What kinds of bonds did intensive collective work create under these dangerous circumstances?

That is one of the things I found to be important in the culture of common sailor: there's a high level of solidarity among seamen because they trusted their lives to each other on a daily basis. Coal miners are similar—they work under perilous circumstances and developed a very strong collective culture. I wanted to understand how sailors themselves built that culture, what it meant to them, what functions it served, how it protected them, and how it enabled their resistance. I called it a "culture of opposition," embedded in

the power relations in which the deep-sea ship captain has almost unchecked authority. Sailors had to build a culture of resistance in order simply to survive.

JJW: After that book, you worked on the textbook *Who Built America?*, which tells the history of workers in America. It carries out social history from below, based not in the history of presidents or founding fathers that we still learn in school, but from the range of working people. Did you feel like you were part of a movement in Anglo-American history?

MR: There was a deep feeling in my generation that we needed an entirely new history of America because the Cold War histories were white-washes, lies. We needed a history of people's struggles; we needed a history from below, of people fighting for their rights. My work on seafaring was part of that. In *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, I wanted to expand the notion of what the working class was. At that time the working class was seen almost uniformly as white, male, industrial workers, so I wanted to push the boundaries of labor history to include seafaring workers, whose labor connected many other kinds of workers.

I was one among many doing this kind of work. *Who Built America?* came from a team of faculty and students around Herbert Gutman at the City University of New York Graduate Center. Gutman was busy rethinking American history from below, and he got a grant to write a history of America for trade union education. The inspiration drew on the anthem of Brecht's famous poem, "A Worker Reads History": "Who built the seven gates of Thebes? The books are filled with the names of kings. But was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?" So we asked, "Who built America?" The answer included enslaved people, indentured servants, and others who were not considered part of labor history at that time.

JJW: How did you come to work on early American history?

MR: I concentrated on early American history because of an inspirational teacher I had at Virginia Commonwealth University, Alan V. Briceland. I took several courses with him and he opened my eyes to what history actually was, the importance of interpretation, and how research was done. He invited me into projects he was working on. It was really his example that moved me to want to become a historian. Before I met him, I never knew it was an option. People ask, "Did you always know you wanted to be a historian?" I didn't really know that it was a possibility until I was about 24, 25-years old.

Then I faced a dilemma, because early American history at that time—and still to this day to a considerable extent—is a very conservative field. It attracts scholars of a certain cast of mind, especially those who have a great interest in the Founding Fathers. And I wanted to study slavery and

working people. I was drawn to the tradition in England of writing history from below, particularly to the work of Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson, so I migrated toward the English tradition of writing history from below in writing early American history. At the same time, I remained very interested in African American history from below, especially people like C.L.R. James and Walter Rodney, two great figures. It became a major goal to put those two traditions together in writing *The Many Headed Hydra* with Peter Linebaugh.

JJW: *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* is focused on sailors, whereas *The Many Headed Hydra* is a more expansive book, giving a wide history of the Atlantic, covering the systems of trade linking early America with Britain and also the Caribbean and Africa. How did that book come about?

MR: Peter Linebaugh and I first met when I was working on *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, and Peter was writing a book called *The London Hanged*. He was teaching at the University of Rochester at the time, and we decided pretty early on that we wanted to collaborate, so we organized a conference in 1981 called "The World Turned Upside Down: Working People in England and America from 1660 to 1790." Here's how we set it up: Christopher Hill, in *The World Turned Upside Down*, writes about the radicalism of the English Revolution in 1640s and 1650s, but was driven underground with the Restoration. In 1790, E. P. Thompson picks up the story with the French Revolution and the Jacobin left in London, the community of radical artisans and new industrial workers in the revolutionary decade in the 1790s. Peter and I decided that we wanted to study what happened between the time when Hill left off the story of radicalism in 1660 and Thompson picked it back up in 1790.

We were critical that both told primarily an English story, even though the people and events they studied were part of international currents. We held the conference in Philadelphia, and Peter gave a paper on the British side and I gave a paper on the American side, both transatlantic and transnational, exploring the oceanic currents of radicalism. That conference and those two papers were the origin of *The Many Headed Hydra*.

Christopher Hill happened to be at Rutgers University at the time and came over for the meeting, and he generously encouraged us to pursue this work even though in some ways it challenged his own approach. He saw the potential of expanding the study of radicalism into the Atlantic. I had already been doing Atlantic history by studying sailors, and we began to think of the Atlantic as a theater for history-making. Enslaved people, indentured servants, and laborers of all kinds, men and women, sailors, dockworkers—what were the connections? Ships were the crucial mechanism that connected workers in London to workers in Boston to workers in Bridgetown, Barbados. You are right to say that the scale and subject of *The Many Headed Hydra* is rather grand: the book covers almost two and a half

centuries, from roughly 1600 to 1835, studying a wide variety of workers over a long period of time. It took us a long time to write that book.

JJW: How long did it take you?

MR: We had the conference in 1981, after which the work germinated and percolated. We kept writing to each other, adding new materials. We started working on the book full-time in 1988. It took us about 12 years to complete it.

JJW: What was it like to collaborate on a project? It must have been hard, simply to coordinate everything.

MR: It's hard because we are trained to be artisans who control the entire production process as individuals from beginning to end. But for us, collaborating was as much a political choice as an intellectual one, because we wanted to challenge ourselves to write history in a new way. Peter is trained in British history and I am trained in early American history, so we complemented each other. We both had to study Caribbean and West African history and to expand our knowledge of a vast expanse of time and space.

JJW: Did you alternate chapters or sections?

MR: We approached the chapters in almost every conceivable way. "I'll write the first draft of this one; you write the second draft." "For this chapter, I'll write sections 1, 2, and 5; you write sections 3, 4, and 6; then we'll swap." One time, we locked ourselves in a room and wrote sentence by sentence together. We tried everything, and I think collaboration requires that kind of experimental approach. The book eventually grew to about 2000 pages; it got totally out of hand. So we started cutting it back. I've taken some pride in the fact that hardly anybody has been able to guess which of the two authors wrote which chapters.

The act of creating with someone else is difficult, but I can tell you I wouldn't give up that experience for anything. The work was a joy for me. I learned a tremendous amount in working with Peter, who is a very gifted and imaginative historian. We ended up with a book that neither of us could have written alone. I think we're both very happy we did it.

JJW: I want to ask you about theory. You come out of a kind of Marxist historiography, but you don't really announce it, as people often do in literary studies, where the account follows from the theoretical position they announce; it's more inductive from the empirical material you have.

MR: I think one of the strengths of our teachers, E. P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, and Eric Hobsbawm, among others, was that they believed

theory had to be closely linked to empirical evidence. The power of theory is expressed through the ordering and interpretation of evidence, rather than something that is *a priori* valuable in itself. I use theory to pose questions I want to investigate, but when it comes time to write the history, I want to highlight the people I'm studying, not theoretical talking heads. I don't put the theoretical framework first. I am committed to working with real, live, breathing, working, fighting human beings from the past. Part of my project has always been to humanize the subject of history as much as I could, to see subjects as real people in real material circumstances. What were their choices under those circumstances? How did those circumstances come to be? How did people find themselves on the lower deck of a slave ship? Who were the decision makers who created that reality? In some cases they're thousands of miles away from the west coast of Africa, so you need the capitalists in London, you need plantation owners in Virginia, and you need ship owners and captains and all the rest. You need local client states who are going to deliver the enslaved bodies to the ships.

I'm interested in structural explanations, which are always in some way or other theoretical. I teach theory and I want my students to think about it. But, in my view, the truth of the theory will be expressed through stories about people. Telling human stories about the past is the most powerful way to present history from below.

JJW: In the opposite direction, how did you learn to write your kind of crossover history?

MR: One of the greatest influences in my life was my grandfather, Fred Robertson, who was a Kentucky coalminer and a master storyteller; he was the first, and in some ways the most profound, influence on my life decision to do history from below. As a child, I sat at the kitchen table and begged for his gripping tales. He smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes and drank Maxwell House coffee, and I knew a tale was coming when he put the cigarette in the ashtray, pushed the coffee aside, and raised his hands. His miner's hands were a thing to see—he had coal dust in the calluses. It could never be entirely washed out after years in the mines.

He told funny stories and terrifying stories; sometimes animals talked in the stories. He was the master of a gripping Appalachian cultural form. There's a wonderful essay by Walter Benjamin called "The Storyteller" about the two fundamental kinds of storytellers, the peasant storyteller with rich knowledge of everything local, and the sailor storyteller, who brings a tale from afar. Benjamin writes about how stories always teach something practical to the listener. My grandfather was a local storyteller, and I ended up studying the other kind of storyteller, those who came from afar.

Sailors had a powerful storytelling tradition. They would sit for hours and spin what they called yarns. I find this a good way to present history:

you don't have to have specialized knowledge to understand a story, which at its best is immediate, intense, and human. People can relate to it.

JJW: You tell illuminating stories of sailors and others who traversed the seas. But I wondered if you idealize them and their culture. Some sailors were probably bad people (I learned from your books that they weren't all guys), and in some ways they were the police officers or jailers of slave ships. How do you guard against romanticizing them?

MR: This is a criticism I've received my entire career. If the charge is that I have romanticized—falsified—history, I always challenge critics to show me precisely how, because everything I write is carefully documented. But there are other meanings of romanticism to which I am sympathetic. One is finding noble ideals in low places, and in that sense, yes, the history can sometimes be considered romantic. Others imply that these dirty, rough, violent people don't deserve the sympathetic treatment I try to give them in my studies. I say, "Yes, sailors were violent. They lived in a violent world. Sailors on slave ships were prison guards, but the working class takes many forms. Sometimes sailors acted on the principles of class solidarity, and sometimes they acted on the principles of racial hierarchy."

You can see this in the life of Olaudah Equiano, the 18th century African sailor. He notes in his autobiography that some sailors wanted to re-enslave him; they acted on an oppressive principle of race. But other white sailors defended him because he was their "brother tar"; they acted on a principle of class solidarity. I was curious to find out if sailors would connect to enslaved people on slave ships, and I found that this relationship was effectively policed by ship captains. Even black sailors on slave ships—and there were a number of them—would fight hard to put down any slave insurrection that broke out. They identified with the crew, not the enslaved. In contrast, pirates, in setting up ships in a completely different way than in the merchant shipping industry and the Royal Navy, built an egalitarian, democratic, multiracial social order.

I talk about the dark side as well as the hopes that people had. Pirates, for example, sometimes engaged in slave trading, but more frequently they liberated enslaved Africans to join their crews. We need to know both stories and how things happened under different circumstances. "The many headed hydra" is a good metaphor because sometimes hydra heads bit each other. The class had many internal conflicts. *The Many Headed Hydra* is not the story of a unified, culturally-based class. It's a much more complex, disorderly formation of an Atlantic proletariat, which is unified by its experience of cooperative work. Without that work, the global capitalist economy doesn't operate.

JJW: In *Villains of All Nations*, you center on pirates, or the sailors who became pirates. I can see how it follows from your previous work, but how did that book come about?

MR: I wrote and published an article about pirates in 1981, and so help me, the phone has not stopped ringing ever since. Everyone loves pirates. I got calls from novelists, playwrights, and treasure hunters, who wanted to know if I found maps and could I please help them find buried treasure? When they asked me that, I knew they hadn't read my work because I say explicitly that pirates didn't bury treasure. They spent it—they would go into town, drink the taverns dry, and go back to sea dead broke. The impact of that book has a lot to do with the way pirates are popular culture heroes. The popular fascination with them seems as boundless as the ocean, and I wrote *Villains* to answer the interest in them.

JJW: One thing that strikes me in *Villains of All Nations* and your subsequent books is that you become more of a trade writer. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* has a very readable style, but it is more academic in providing substantial documentation and making arguments more inside the field. You still rely on deep scholarly research, but since 2000 you've written several crossover books. How did you develop that style?

MR: I studied History and English at VCU. I was always interested in fiction, literature, and writing. After I began studying history more seriously, I was drawn to strong prose stylists who wrote for non-specialist audiences. The writing didn't make any assumptions about what knowledge you needed to have in order to read it. This was on my mind, for example, in writing *The Many Headed Hydra*, which covers so much time and space, and so many topics. It was a real challenge to write it for a trade press. The strategy we had to pursue was to explain everything. What is the English Revolution? You have to offer quick explanations about the time period and the struggles therein. I wanted to write for a broader audience, and learning how to do that is something that I've worked at very hard over the years.

JJW: How did you learn how to do it? What does it entail?

MR: We are trained in specialized scholarly languages to write for a very small number of people, and that is rewarded in the American university system. You can have a very successful career and a happy life by writing about a subject that only ten people in the world care about. It is crucial to scholarship to have very refined studies of specific subjects. I admire medievalists who have great language skills to study one part of one document intensively. That work is important to scholarship, but that's not what I wanted to do.

I wanted to tell stories with lessons for us in the present to as many people as I could. Writing for broader audiences is a challenge, but you don't have to dumb anything down. You just have to explain as you go. It is an art to do that without getting into long digressions. I also think writers frequently underestimate general readers and what they might want to learn.

JJW: In *The Slave Ship*, you turn to focus on slavery. It brings in what you know about the Atlantic and seafaring, but it's a different direction. The slave ship is an amazing and horrific transport device, and it's a factory as well as a jail. You give a historical panorama of the people who owned them as well as the people who were entrapped in them, and the sailors who worked in them. You mentioned that you had thought of working on slavery when you started out, but how did you come to do that book?

MR: The idea came to me while I was sitting in a visitor's room on death row at SCI Greene, the correctional institution, visiting Mumia Abu Jamal around 1998. We were talking about how the experience of race has been an experience of terror for many people. He related to me a moment when he was in his cell and a guard slipped in through a slot in the door a signed death warrant. It was meant to be a moment of terror. It occurred to me that the connection between race and terror began on the slave ship, and that race was actually being created on the slave ship. Many multiethnic Africans were transformed through that voyage into members of a "Negro race." Violence was instrumental to that process.

At the time I had already spent about thirty years in maritime archives, and a lot of the material I had already gathered. For example, those 2200 court cases I mentioned contained evidence about what happened on slave ships, so I had a flying head start. But two issues held me back: One was the realization that writing about the slave ship came with a tremendous moral responsibility. If you're going to do history from below, you have to feel that you can do some justice to the lives of the people who were on the lower decks of those ships. That's a heavy responsibility – millions of people whose lives were undocumented. The systematic annihilation of their African identities was part of the violent process.

The other issue was, Did I want to live with this subject for several years? Writing this history would require living with the horror of what it was like for people on those ships. The book would have to explore the most extreme kind of violence – people smothered to death because they couldn't get enough oxygen; tubs full of excrement tipping over in the rough seas; epidemics sweeping through the lower decks; and people who fought back getting chopped up into bits by the captain as a kind of public lesson of intimidation to all other enslaved people on the ship. If you imagine life on this nightmarish ship, it will deeply affect your life, even your dreams.

The slave ship was an intimidating subject to take on, but I felt it would be better to try and fail to write this book than not to try at all. We live with the legacy of the slave trade every day in this country.

JJW: What did writing it entail?

MR: I had to make the research systematic, and I had to travel to all of the main slave trading ports in Britain and the United States and dig into the local archives to see who the slave traders were and what kinds of documents existed. The Atlantic slave trade was a very big business, so the amount of documentation is quite staggering. There are thousands and thousands of business records that document the voyages. All this, by the way, is now summarized in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database (www.slavevoyages.org), which has records on 36,000 voyages from 1502 to 1867.

I had to go to Charleston, New York, Philadelphia, Rhode Island, London, Liverpool, and Bristol. I spent four years fulltime just doing archival research for that book. Even though I had a head start, there was so much evidence to be gathered. I had to learn about West Africa and its 3,000 different ethnic groups, nationalities and languages, and the many regionally specific forms of slave trading.

JJW: In the book, you trace the process of how those who were enslaved got to port in the first place. It's a long process, from capture to port, and then there were transfers at various different points around the Atlantic, in the Caribbean or Charleston or other ports.

MR: Within that process, one sees massive death at every stage, in the wars of the interior in Africa, in the marches to the coast, in the people waiting on the coast for the European ships, in the Middle Passage. In my estimate more than 5-6 million died, in addition to those who made it to the New World alive. This bloodshed went on for hundreds of years and was of course augmented by more disciplinary violence on the plantations.

JJW: I was struck by how you constructed the book. You fill in a panorama of the way slavery works and who it encompasses, starting with individuals who work the sea, from captains to sailors to slaves, giving short sketches of the various participants. You also describe the travel that people indigenous to Africa would have gone through to get to the coast, as well as to places in the colonies. How did you decide to organize it?

MR: The structure of the book was visible to me almost from the first moment I decided to write it. I wanted to describe the experiences of all people on the ship, starting with the men, women, and children who had been enslaved in West Africa. I wanted to describe the sailors' experience, and I also wanted to explore the captains and their power, then link them to

the port-city merchants and the larger capitalist system. The first chapter is a mosaic of the people who found themselves, for very different reasons, on board slave ships in the 18th century.

I also knew immediately that I wanted to deal with the ship as a technology. The ship was built to contain resistance, so I wrote about that in the second chapter. For example, the barricado was a defensive bulwark built on the main deck of every slave ship to give the sailors a place to retreat in case of an uprising, and they had mounted guns that allowed them to fire down on the people who had risen up. The merchants and captains expected revolt and planned for it. They also put up nettings around the rails of the ship because they knew Africans would try to commit suicide by jumping overboard. There was a common West African belief that if one died under these horrible circumstances, your soul would “go home to Guinea,” as they put it. Slave ship captains devised ways to protect what they considered to be a capital investment in these bodies to be sold in the New World.

Then came the big challenge of describing the variety of slaving systems on the coast of West and West-Central Africa: how it worked in the Senegambia region compared to how it worked on the Gold Coast region (presently Ghana) or Congo-Angola. Thereafter the writing of the book got easier because I knew I wanted to write mini-biographies of an enslaved person, Olaudah Equiano; a sailor, James Field Stanfield; and a captain, John Newton. I then treated captains, sailors, and the enslaved as collective groups, to balance individual and group portraits.

At the end I returned to the image of the slave ship, especially the engraving of the *Brooks*, which became a major piece of abolitionist propaganda. I argue in the book that it was one of the most powerful pieces of propaganda any social movement has ever produced, showing these tightly packed bodies on a lower deck of extreme misery. To get at the consciousness of the people who were thrown onto those vessels was a tremendous challenge because of the limited number of first-person accounts.

JJW: You also talk about how the ship is the technology for capitalism, literally the vehicle for it but also a moveable factory itself. We usually think of factories as immovable structures, but it gives an alternative view of a factory.

MR: The malevolent genius of the slave ship is that it was one part warship, one part floating prison, and one part factory. The factory part of it created labor power as people were moved through time and space to the plantation system, and it created categories of race during the voyage. The ship as a machine is, I think, one of the most important themes that I’ve written about because it was the technology that allowed Europe to conquer the world. If you look at the global distribution of languages and how many peoples speak English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, it’s staggering – and inconceivable without this machine called the deep-sea sailing ship.

JJW: What was it before? One pictures Viking rowing ships.

MR: Seafaring nations had different kinds of ships of much more limited capacity for sailing long distances. In the Mediterranean, they had the galley, which relied on human labor and rowing. But the Northern European deep-sea sailing ship harnessed wind power, and also added cannon power in a way that made it a fast, fearsome machine of destruction. This ship was astonishing to people. In West Africa, people said that, "The white men showed up on floating islands." Those ships, sometimes with several hundred people aboard, were a floating town or city. The vessels were big and complex, and they connected the world. The labor of sailors made it possible for those ships to produce living linkages among all of the world's continents.

JJW: Alongside sailors, you talk about some of the workers on ship, like carpenters and sewers for the sails.

MR: The ship had to be reproduced. In a wooden world, things were always rotting and breaking down, so it's constant work to keep it going. The ship had a complex division of labor.

JJW: I hadn't realized how significant the ships were not only to transport slaves, but as warships. You note how British ships were commissioned at certain points to attack or capture Spanish ships.

MR: They were a component part of deep, violent European rivalries. Europeans also built huge fortresses on the coast of West and West-Central Africa, not only to shield themselves from the indigenous people but to protect their investment in the slave trade from other European empires that craved the black gold obtainable through the trade in human beings. These fortresses, or factories as they were originally called, changed hands numerous times, from the Portuguese to the Dutch to the French and the English.

JJW: That bears on the case you narrate in your next book, *The Amistad Rebellion*. The *Amistad* Africans based their legal case for freedom on the argument that Spanish control was not valid. That book follows from *The Slave Ship* in giving a case study of a specific ship, but it also seems a departure in showing a successful rebellion. That seems to be a motif of your most recent books: what effectual resistance looks like.

MR: That does represent a departure. As I worked on *The Slave Ship*, one of the really gruesome features of that history is the way that insurrections by the enslaved Africans were so brutally put down. The decks of these ships would literally be awash in blood after the rebellions failed, and they almost all failed. In the aftermath, the ringleaders would be tortured, butchered,

their body parts passed around among the other enslaved people who were required to come on deck to watch the torture and dismemberment, the message being, "This is what we'll do to you if you resist us." It was the deliberate inculcation of terror.

So I asked, "How did the people on the *Amistad* succeed, when almost all the other revolts failed?" After *The Slave Ship* was published I was looking to write a tale of resistance with a better ending. The *Amistad* rebellion has been studied for a long time, but the treatments had focused on the court case after the rebels had been captured and jailed in Connecticut. I asked: How did the Africans actually manage to capture the ship? And how did they manage to sail it to a place where they could then win their freedom in a legal battle? All other historians had diminished the importance of the uprising itself. Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* depicted the struggle against slavery as one of noble white abolitionists rescuing poor benighted Africans. I wanted to emphasize the African side of the story and treat the white abolitionists who enter the story later, as allies.

JJW: As I learned from your account, they had to sail the ship to Long Island to be in a northern jurisdiction, or they might have been returned.

MR: Right: first you've got to capture the ship, which was very hard to do, but then you've got to sail it 1600 miles! An extraordinary achievement. How did they know how to sail it? That's a question I had to wrestle with. During the uprising, the African rebels killed the captain and one sailor, a black seaman named Celestino who had made the mistake of taunting Cinqué, the leader of the rebels, telling him that he was going to be eaten alive by the white men. Many Africans thought white people were cannibals because millions of people disappeared from their homeland and never came back. In a way, that metaphor is apt because people were indeed eaten alive by the plantation system.

On the *Amistad*, the rebels kept two people alive, one of whom had been a ship captain, to sail the ship. But the rebels were the ones who had to set the sails and figure out how to get from one place to another. On the voyage from Cuba to the northern end of Long Island, the rebels stopped 30 times, as the captured Spanish captain testified, for water and food and to get information. They were assisted by the Gulf winds and tides, which will carry a vessel up the eastern coast of the United States, but what they did in sailing the ship bespeaks a high level of competence. The captain wanted to take the rebels into Charleston, South Carolina, where they would have quickly been re-enslaved and sent back to Cuba on the next boat. They sniffed it out somehow; maybe they went ashore outside Charleston and talked to enslaved people. They kept sailing north and finally got to New York, where slavery had been abolished in 1827. This gave them the chance to win their case in court.

To come back full circle, the court case had become the centerpiece of the *Amistad* story. I wanted to make the uprising the central event of the story. That makes the African rebels on the *Amistad* the heroes of their own story, as opposed to the white abolitionists, judges, and politicians, particularly John Quincy Adams. I wanted to tell a different story, a story of self-emancipation. That led me to the history of Sierra Leone, where all the *Amistad* Africans came from, and their training as warriors to defend against marauders who tried to enslave them. All 49 men aboard the *Amistad* knew how to fight; they had a leader in Cinqué, a gifted warrior. He was the one who convinced the rest to fight: "It's better to fight and die than to be the white man's slave."

JJW: Another element that you unfold was how the rebellion was so prominent in the culture at the time.

MR: That was surprising to me. For example, a popular play about the *Amistad* case was performed in New York just a few days after the ship came ashore. Artists went into the jail to draw portraits of the *Amistad* Africans. One man created 29 life-size wax figures, an important art form at the time. He used them to re-enact the uprising and charged admission to people who wanted to see them. A lot of these depictions were extremely sympathetic, another remarkable thing. Everyone talked about the *Amistad* case: preachers gave sermons about it; newspapers dispatched correspondents to write about it; artists created images of it. People visited the Africans in jail, talked to them, and wrote letters about the experience.

One of the things we've learned over the last generation about Northern society in the antebellum period is that racism was pervasive. That included abolitionists—some were colonizationists who wanted to export all freed people back to Africa because they believed that white people and black people could not live together. Lincoln was a colonizationist early in his political career. I think the sympathetic depictions and meetings had a powerful effect on the public perception of the case. Hundreds of people made contributions to the *Amistad* Committee—tiny donations came in from schoolchildren, workers in a tannery pit, a woman's group at church. The *Amistad* affair wasn't just a court case, it was a movement, and that shaped the way the court case unfolded.

JJW: The *Amistad* Rebellion seems like a righteous rebellion, but there was a lot of violence and killing. But as with pirates, you hold the rebels up. How do you balance the violence with justice?

MR: I would go back to one of the big themes of *The Many Headed Hydra*, which is the centrality of violence to the formation of Atlantic capitalism. The people who end up onboard ships, for example on slave ships, are the victims of extraordinary acts of violence. The sailors are also selling their labor in port cities because they too have been expropriated from the land, and many

of them are aboard slave ships because they were taken out of jails and put there. Different kinds of expropriated people meet in the slave ship.

It is not surprising that, as these people struggle to survive, as they struggle to imagine something better, they employ violence in their solutions. Slave revolts are violent uprisings; sailors' mutinies are usually violent uprisings; urban riots can be violent uprisings. But I don't think the scales are equivalent. The deep systemic violence required to disconnect tens of millions of people from their ancestral landholdings in order to create modern capitalism is violence on a scale that totally dwarfs what happened in uprisings from below, including the Haitian Revolution. I want to talk about ordinary people as makers of history, not as saints. They embodied the contradictions of their day but nonetheless fought for something different from what they had been born or forced into.

To go back to the example of pirates, yes, many of them were violent thugs. They lived by capturing ships, but there was a method to how they worked. For example, most people don't know it but a large percentage of pirate crews were African American—runaways from plantation systems or black sailors who couldn't go anywhere else. What mattered on the pirate ship was not the color of your skin but whether you could fight, and African warriors were great fighters. There was a kind of rough equality on that ship, where they elected their officers and divided up their loot in a strikingly egalitarian way. Poor people didn't have the power to elect anybody anywhere in the world at that time. So let's have a full picture and look at expressions of how people struggled to create something new. Pirates were a threat to the imperial governments not just because of their attacks on property; they also challenged power through the social experiment of running a ship in a different way.

JJW: Your next book, *Outlaws of the Atlantic*, is a kind of retrospective of your work to that point. Is there a theme that would draw from it?

MR: The idea I wanted to showcase in that book was a kind of bias, which had occluded our vision of how history happens at sea. I came up with a new word to describe it, "terracentrism," which includes an unspoken assumption that history happens only on land. Linked to the rise of the nation state as a modality of power in the 19th century, terracentrism tends to make the vast oceanic surfaces of the world appear to be unreal places between the spaces that are real and landed and national. I had long been thinking about these oceans and seas of the world as places where history happened: where class formation took place; where racial categories were formed; where the history of capitalism evolved through a powerful machine called the deep-sea sailing ship. It is true that a couple of kinds of history are not terracentric—the history of exploration, for example, and naval history. But most histories are quite content to be national and landed and thereby disguise the importance of water and maritime workers. I wanted to show that by shedding this

terracentric blinder, one can see world history connected by ships and by the labor of sailors.

JJW: You go in a different direction with your most recent book, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay*. It looks at dissent and resistance, but he's precisely a nonviolent hero. He's a Quaker.

MR: I got interested in Benjamin Lay when Peter Linebaugh and I were writing *The Many Headed Hydra*, looking at cycles of resistance. The 1730s witnessed an eruption of resistance—slave revolts, uprisings of indentured servants. This happened again in the 1760s, the 1790s, and the 1830s. We wondered: did these struggles against the slavery from below generate new abolitionist ideas and writings? Benjamin Lay wrote an unusual book, *All Slave-Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates* in 1738. He was paying attention to these rebellions, saying to his fellow Quakers: "You see that enslaved people resist and rightly so. They have the right to resist because you have unjustly enslaved them. You used violence to enslave these people and now you're producing new violence and death through their revolts." He challenged Quakers about one of their highest ideals: pacifism. Quakers took the Peace Testimony after the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660, partly in a defensive effort to keep him from attacking them. Some Quakers had been part of the earlier radical movement that had participated in executing his father, King Charles I. Benjamin Lay writes this book at a time most people in Europe and around the world accepted the institution of slavery, two full generations before the anti-slavery movement emerged.

He was not a gradualist: "You must abolish slavery, and you must abolish it now." He used wild tactics of guerilla theater to make his point. When I learned about him, I thought, "This man deserves his own book," but I put the project aside to write other books. In 2014 I realized that this class-conscious, race-conscious, gender-conscious, environmentally-conscious ultra-radical would be an important historical figure for our times, someone who refused violence against animals and was a committed vegetarian. He was doing all this in the 1730s! He was marginalized in historical study because his beliefs were so radical. We have much to learn from him.

JJW: Lay also connects to your concern about prisons. One can imagine looking back and seeing prisons the way we now see slavery.

MR: Benjamin Lay was also interested in, as they called it at that time, penology, and the Quakers had a great deal to do with the invention of the penitentiary, which was meant to be a place where people would go and think about the things they had done wrong, then emerge to rejoin society. But of course that's not what happened. Lay had opposed capital punishment and other violent uses of state power, including the slave legal codes.

Prison activism has shaped all of the work that I do. My involvement in the campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal was for many years central to my political education. As I was finishing *The Many Headed Hydra*, I was visiting Mumia frequently on death row on SCI Greene. That experience and those conversations shaped my understanding of the violence of capitalism. That was the context in which I decided to start working on *The Slave Ship*. The early association of race and terror reappears later in the modern carceral system.

JJW: How do you see your activism in relation to your academic work? Are they separate?

MR: My attitude is that activism is essential to scholarship. It helps one to ask new and different questions about the past, for example about the role of violence and incarceration in the making of capitalism. I spoke to prisoners at Auburn Prison in upstate New York, in a course that was part of the Cornell Prison Education Project, about pirates and then about *The Slave Ship*. Someone said to me, “You do know that we call this place the modern slave ship?” When I spoke on the subject, people translated everything I said into a politically charged understanding of their own circumstances. I got really smart, tough, penetrating questions about the role of incarceration in American history.

JJW: How did you first get involved with prison activism?

MR: In the 1990s, in the Free Mumia movement. I was living in Philadelphia when Mumia was arrested in 1981. I was at Penn in the late 1970s and early ‘80s, when Mumia was a radio personality and the most radical journalist in the city. I had talked to members of the MOVE organization, who at that time lived in Powelton Village, not far from the Penn campus. After MOVE’s first confrontation with the Philadelphia police in 1978, Mumia took the side of MOVE and showed up at a city press conference to ask tough questions. Mayor Frank Rizzo threatened him by saying, “You’re gonna pay for asking questions like that.” Mumia had been a Black Panther and he was already an enemy of the Philadelphia Police Department.

I left Philadelphia in ‘82 and went to teach at Georgetown, but when I came to Pitt in the early ‘90s, I met an activist who was working on the Mumia case, and I got involved. I had thought all along that there was a very good chance that the police had fabricated evidence in charging him with the murder of a police officer. I think it has now been proven that they did. I got involved and did a lot of public speaking on the case. I got to know Mumia and visited him at SCI Greene quite frequently. We did a lot of organizing around that case. That was a formative experience for me. The standard advice for young scholars is, “Stay away from activism,” but my advice is

the opposite. It's a rich opportunity to learn about and to listen to people, to learn about real struggles, and to enrich your work through them.

JJW: Recently, you've been doing work on films and other public things. Do you see that public dimension as part of your role?

MR: I do. In the last six or seven years, my main interest has been to explore new ways to present history to the general public and to specific groups of people within that—for example, to activists who want knowledge about traditions of resistance. I've made a documentary film with Tony Buba, *Ghosts Of Amistad: In The Footsteps Of The Rebels*, I've written a play, and I'm working now on a graphic novel and an art exhibit on J.M.W. Turner at Tate Britain. These represent other ways to present history from below.

JJW: Do you have any models for how to do that kind of work?

MR: One model I found useful was developed by Staughton Lynd, who has talked about how academics and other middle-class people can take part in movements from below—not as leaders who have all the answers, but through what he calls “accompaniment.” The idea comes out of liberation theology in El Salvador. People from relatively privileged backgrounds bring the skills they have and try to accompany and assist movements from below, leaving their organic leadership in place, and trying to find ways to be useful. Staughton developed this idea in his own life as a scholar-activist. He was bounced out of Yale in 1966 for his role as a leader of the movement against the war in Vietnam. He had travelled to Vietnam with Tom Hayden and declared peace with the people of North Vietnam. The president of Yale considered this treasonous, and then Yale administrators blackballed him from the profession of history, causing him to be denied at the decanal level five different university positions he was subsequently offered. Staughton reinvented himself as an attorney, so when he's in a meeting with steelworkers in Youngstown, Ohio, and somebody says, “Who's that guy?” the answer is, “He's our lawyer.” This effort to join movements and to learn to listen is really important. To me, that is what the best historians from below do: they learn to listen to their documents to discover alternative ways of thinking and being. I think that the ability to imagine another world depends on new ideas that will come out of struggles from below past, present, and future.