

# White in the Deep Blue

## Greek Shipping, Racial Capitalism, and Decolonization at Sea

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Cheryl Harris begins her influential essay “Whiteness as Property” (1993) with the story of her grandmother living under Jim Crow in the southern United States of the 1930s. Harris describes her grandmother “passing” as white to secure a secretary’s job in an inner-city office and returning after work to her impoverished neighborhood where she became “Black” again. This story is arguably reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s formula that “race is the modality through which class is lived” (Hall et al. 1978: 394). Browsing through historical court cases, Harris demonstrates that in the settler colonies that later became the United States of America, property was racialized from the very beginning. White European settlers created and acquired property through a dual system of oppression: seizure and appropriation of Black labor on the one hand, and seizure and appropriation of native Indigenous land on the other. Both were enacted by force and subsequently sanctioned by law and science. Thus, institutionalized racism made white identity the subject of privilege, property, and protection; its absence meant being property itself. Harris insists that not only was the privilege of property here “white,” but that whiteness was also the property of free human beings.

The grandmother’s “passage” as white in the racialized economies of the Americas was preceded by the brutal Middle Passage of her ancestors transported from Africa as slaves. This violent mass removal of human beings was part of the “triangular trade” that uprooted and enslaved millions of Africans for 350 years.<sup>1</sup> Renisa

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1. Between 1514 and 1866, approximately 12.5 million women, men, and children were transported from the west coast of Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean, North America, and South America (Grandin 2014). About 1.8 million people died during the journey of twenty-one to ninety days in suffocatingly packed holds of European-owned ships.

Mawani (2022: 62) conceptualizes passage as more than simply an oceanic voyage; rather it is “the structuring link between expropriation in one geographic setting and exploitation in another.”

Crossing the sea in chains turned part of humanity into property in the Americas. Conquering the sea and establishing shipping routes provided the bedrock of modern property-making throughout the world. Colonial control of the oceans laid the foundation for the global spread of racial capitalism and associated doctrines of property. The domination of the sea facilitated an archipelago of legal, political, and economic (infra)structures on which today’s capitalist world still rests (Khalili 2022). Domination at sea was primarily unleashed via the cannons, cargos, and cabins of colonial ships. These floating infrastructures brought waves of conquest and commodification, spreading the contours of racial capitalism with unparalleled fervor. Historians have aptly documented the significance of the ship in fomenting the colonial world. Nonetheless, analyzing the ship as a harbinger of capitalist conquest in postcolonial times remains a rather uncharted territory. This article suggests a possible route of inquiry, which I take with the help of Harris and other Black Marxists such as Cedric Robinson and Oliver Cox.

Robinson (2005), inspired by Cox (1959), claimed that capitalism was born out of racialism and its consequences, not vice versa. Thus, with its origins in racialized Venetian society, all stages of capitalism were deeply racial. Building on Robinson, Jodi Melamed (2015: 77) asserts that the production and exploitation of “unequal differentiation of human value” in racial capitalism is the necessary condition through which capital can accumulate and be productive. Majarpa in turn describes a “specific new characteristic” in the emerging empires beginning in the 1400s, namely that “capitalist interests sought to drive the principle of profit-making deeper and deeper into the realm of life by using racial differentiations” (Manjara 2020: 12). In the argument that unfolds, I follow the Black Marxist thought in navigating the contemporary seas, while charting Greek-owned merchant shipping as my analytical vehicle. I ask, How can the contours of racial capitalism at sea be charted today? How is “the unequal differentiation of human value” on and via the ship reproduces racial capitalist relations at sea and on land? Can answers to these questions help theorize contemporary capitalism and resistances against it? My considered response is that Greek ships, especially tankers, are not only sites of unbridled racial capitalism in terms of labor, but also vehicles that help concoct new forms of neo-colonial power at sea and capital accumulation on land, frequently protected by “open registries” (a.k.a. under flags of convenience) and stashed away in offshore companies.

## Ship as Method: Navigating Racial Capitalism at Sea

Imperial ships from the fifteenth century onward were agents for the expansion of the legal-economic and biopolitical system of colonial capitalism. The imperial ship, this “great instrument of economic development” (Foucault 1986: 27), moved merchants and their merchandise in the form of products and people through the fluid vastness. This force, coupled with the ship’s function as the “greatest reserve of the imagination” (Foucault 1986: 27), helped concoct the foundations of a new global order. As floating “laboratories of colonial legality” (Mawani 2016: 109), ships—and their shipwrecks—paved the path for systems of land registry, patents, and insurance (Martin 2012). For W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), the slave ship was the inaugural location for the “tangle of thought and afterthought” in which the critical ethical and political questions of the age must be decided; Paul Gilroy (1995: 16) recognized these ships as the “micropolitical and micro-cultural vehicles of modernity.” Historical materialist approaches attribute the development of capitalism to a protagonist role of the sea and the ships that crossed it (Hohman 1952). Following Fernand Braudel (1995), Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás (2021) define capitalism as a world system emerging from maritime trade during the “long sixteenth century” (1450–1650).

This emergence did not occur without opposition, manifest in numerous “‘pauses’ or ‘arrests’” of capital accumulation (Linebaugh 1982: 92). Not surprisingly, the same ships often transformed into primary sites of mutiny, radicalism, and slave rebellion (Anderson, van Voss, and Rediker 2013; Rediker 2013). The global traditions jammed together on board the imperial ship turned it into “an extraordinary forcing house of internationalism” (Linebaugh 1982: 102). Contestations of the maritime world order signaled a “revolutionary Atlantic” (Linebaugh and Rediker 2013) welded together by sailors and maroons whose voices and actions were amplified through what Julius Scott coined as the “Common Wind” (Scott 2020): the onboard Afro-American currents and communication channels encouraged by the first successful slave revolution in Haiti (1792–1804). This literature argues convincingly that the oceans provide a novel approach to understanding the origins of colonial capitalism and the contestations and challenges that it faced. I seek to advance the argument that contemporary ships allow unique insight into the current state of what Indigenous scholars describe as “colonial racial capitalism” (Koshy et al. 2022).

In navigating the postcolonial present at sea, I draw from the historically oriented literature on racial capitalism and racialized property, suggesting that its conceptual apparatus and political implications are relevant in understanding the significance of shipping in the present. The case of Greek shipping in the second half of

the twentieth century serves as an example that could be read in parallel with protocols and concepts articulated in advance. I focus on the tanker and the seas it roams, emphasizing the lack of critical research on the “neocolonial ship.” Rather than analyzing Greek shipping specifically, I offer possible avenues through which to theorize (racial) capitalism through the concrete—albeit constantly moving—sites of its reproduction.

### **Beware of Greeks Bearing Oil? A Black Marxist Lens on the Leading Shipping Force**

Greece leads the world in shipping power. According to the Union of Greek Shipowners, their 5,514 vessels currently constitute approximately 21 percent of the world fleet in terms of tonnage. Since 2014, the total tonnage of the Greek-owned fleet increased by 45.8 percent. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, tonnage increased by 7.4 percent. Currently 15.60 percent of the global chemical and petroleum product fleet, 25.01 percent of the global dry bulk fleet, and 9.33 percent of the global container fleet are in Greek hands. More crucially, Greek shipping controls the global arteries of fossil fuel transport: Greek-owned ships make up 31.78 percent of the global fleet of oil tankers, 22.35 percent of the world’s liquefied natural gas transport fleet, and 13.85 percent of the global liquefied petroleum gas fleet.

Greek shipping’s role in the global political economies of energy is a strategic, but as yet uncharted force on contemporary oceans.<sup>2</sup> Anthropological and sociological studies on Greek shipowners are scarce, especially regarding the prominent role of Greek shipping in the global political economy.<sup>3</sup> Historians have researched shipping mostly through frameworks of national industry or family entrepreneurship (Harlaftis 2005, 2007, 2019) and of piracy, technological development, and seafarers’ lives (Delis 2016, 2014, 2020). A Black Marxist perspective on Greek-owned ships could highlight Greek shipping as an important yet forgotten factor in global racial capitalism, thereby resuming the critical research thread abruptly and paradoxically interrupted in the early 1980s. My approach here invokes the Greek-owned tanker

2. For an eye-opening study of the link between fossil fuel technologies and racism, see Malm and Zettkin Collective (2021).

3. A recent ethnography (Tsimouris 2021), perhaps the only book-length anthropological study on Greek shipping, adopts a Marxist lens on labor. It is titled *Emeis Oi Naytikoi, Mparkarismenoi Kai Ksemparkoi—Mia anthropologiki Proseggisi (We the Sailors, Boarded and Disembarked: An Anthropological Approach)*. The main binary relation of unequal value is that of the shipowner and the “sailors,” but it is sedimented through the racial hierarchy between Greek captains and Asian sailors, especially Filipinos, who now make up most crews on Greek-owned merchant ships.

in relation to contemporary racial capitalism in threefold distinct ways. First, as a geopolitical counter-revolutionary tool which the postcolonial powers of the world employed—among other things—in response to Third World’s decolonization of oil by national liberation forces and their “worldmaking” (Getachew 2019) projects of economic independence. Second, as a deterritorialized financial device that produces and expands “hierarchies of global space” (Koshy et al. 2022: 7) through processes of flagging-out, offshoring, and labor racialization. Tankers—among other ships—propel the accumulation of private property, shielding it from national jurisdictions and transferring it to protectorates, neocolonies, and the postcolonial jurisdiction of the open seas. Third, as the physical site where increasingly invisible structures of racial capitalism, mainly in terms of labor, remain in place.<sup>4</sup>

### **Tankers: The Greek-Owned Arteries of Neocolonial Oceans**

In his April 1955 opening speech at the Non-aligned Movement’s conference in Bandung, the president of Indonesia and a member of the movement, Sukarno described the world’s seas as “poison pipes” and the “main arteries of imperialism” (Esmeir 2017: 81). He went on to say that extending “from the Straits of Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Sea of Japan,” peoples and countries were colonized, their lives and futures mortgaged to colonialists. For Sukarno, the destructiveness of colonialism in Asia and Africa came via these sea routes. Colonialism “was not yet dead,” Sukarno added, recalling not only the many enslaved countries of Africa and Asia at the time but also the new modern guises of colonialism: economic, political, physical.

Since the time that Sukarno condemned the seas as the arteries of neocolonialism, specifically between 1952 and 1977, the Greek-owned fleet increased more than tenfold in the same poisoned seas. Gelina Harlaftis, the leading historian of Greek shipping, notes that Greeks were among the “new men,” together with Norwegians, Danes, Americans, Japanese, and Hong Kong shippers, who replaced the British Empire’s shipowner class to lead world shipping in the era of American domination (Harlaftis 2019). Serafetinidis et al. (1981) further explain how, within Cold War

4. Due to lack of space here I will not expand on this point, which has been, however, fairly well documented by others (e.g., Tsimouris 2021). About 20 percent of all merchant seafarers come from the Philippines, making it the largest single supply nation in the world’s merchant fleet. Despite perceived competition from other supplying states, the number of Filipino seafarers on board is increasing. According to government sources, in 2006 there were 260,084 Filipino sailors deployed on board. This figure represents an increase of 4.9 percent over 2005.

geo-strategic maps, Greece was perceived as a maritime bastion against the looming independence of Arab countries and the nationalization of their rich oil reserves, which, from the period of decolonization onward, threatened Western influence in the Near and Middle East. These Marxist political economists make the further claim that since Greek-owned tankers carried a large part of the transported US-owned oil, the possible decolonization and nationalization of Arab-Iranian oil could be detrimental to both Greek shipping interests and the United States's global position. In an effort to build a postwar maritime architecture under its hegemony, the United States provided Greek and other allied shipowners with hundreds of war-produced vessels ("Liberty Ships") at bargain prices (Psaropoulos 2018) and with favorable opportunities to participate in the global shipping trade.

Serafetinidis et al. (1981) emphasize that during the 1950s and early 1960s the growth and power of American imperialism worldwide also meant economic growth and prosperity for Greek shipowners. This compatibility and reciprocity between the most powerful and dynamic part of the Greek bourgeoisie and the leading imperialist nation facilitated the development and consolidation of a postwar Greek state pursuing policies that fulfilled the mutual interests of both partners (Serafetinidis et al. 1981: 305). Indicatively, early in that period (1952), the Greek Parliament passed the Markezini Law, constitutionally enshrining the protection of shipowners (globally unique and valid to this day) and offering tax exemptions and incentives to US and Western European capital investments in Greece.

Nonetheless, the relationship of Greek shipowners and the North Atlantic hegemony of the Cold War world was not always so rosy. In cases where the United States perceived Greek shipowners as moving against or not fully conforming to US strategic choices, such as in the Korean War, in the transfer of Soviet oil, or in the Onassis-Saudi Aramco oil deal (Khalili 2021), their response was to enforce discipline through FBI surveillance, termination of trade contracts, seizure of ships, and boycott of Greek shipping companies. Nonetheless, Greek shipowners generally constituted important partners for the United States as they provided low-cost sea transport for US foreign trade (Harlaftis 2019), especially oil.

Aristotle Onassis's choice to invest in the construction of tankers and megatankers before the start of World War II proved prophetic in this regard. Following Onassis, other Greek shipowners, such as Niarchos, proceeded to construct tankers, giving them a pioneering position in the new era. Thus, Greek shipowners managed to control the transport of most of the world's main form of energy, oil, which fueled the Western geopolitical hegemony after World War II. The tanker symbolically marked the gap between a postcolonial and a neocolonial world when in 1955 Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of Egypt and founding member of the Non-aligned

Movement, closed the Suez Canal, thereby leading shipowners, mainly Greek, to innovate and invent the very large crude carriers to bypass Suez by circumnavigating Africa. The tanker, the quintessential postcolonial vessel, continued to transport the new lifeline of the world economy through the “arteries of imperialism,” even when some sea lanes were closed because of anticolonial struggles.<sup>5</sup>

If, on the one hand, the tanker helped remove opportunities for sea passages to turn into levers of decolonization and national independence, it helped, on the other, to create new neocolonial forms for accumulating property outside state control and national jurisdictions. The tanker, sailing in the maritime footsteps of its colonial predecessor, the imperial merchant ship, contributed to new legal and economic forms to deterritorialize wealth and transform it into private property away from the public eye. The tanker emerged as a financial instrument helping to found and facilitate the wide use of infrastructures of offshore corporations, flags of convenience, and chartered loans outside national territories, accountabilities, and democratic controls.

Onassis was not only the first to invest massively in tankers; he was the first non-US shipowner to involve US banks in international tanker financing (Harlaftis 2019). Greek tankers, American banks, and American oil companies formed a financial triangle through which tankers could be built or purchased from bank loans and ship mortgages, secured by time charters and based on expected oil revenues. Further, Onassis was one of the first shipowners to merge the management and the ship-owning company into one. This move was facilitated by creating offshore companies in “tax havens” originally established by US oil companies in the protectorates of Panama, Liberia, and the “banana republics” of Central America. The same neocolonies became the breeding ground for “open registries” or the so-called flags of convenience. Greek shipowners, such as Niarchos and Onassis, as well as US trading groups like United Fruit, flagged and continue to “flag” their ships away from regimes of regulated labor rights and taxation, allowing them to avoid taxes and environmental controls while accumulating profit. This loophole also allows them to squeeze seafarers’ wages, disarm labor unions, and spread precarious employment conditions across the oceans while siphoning profits to neocolonial protectorates without fiscal sovereignty or the financial infrastructure of potent states. At sea, the tanker provided the connecting link for the transition from a colonial to a neocolonial (Nkrumah 1965) global political economy.

5. This move is reminiscent of Mitchell’s invocation of how the shift from carbon to oil reduced the negotiating power of organized labor unions in their struggle for economic, social, and political rights, thereby eroding the democratic institutions in the West and allowing for the proliferation of authoritarian regimes in the oil-producing countries of the Global South (Mitchell 2011).

## “Sea Back”: Community Waters, Reparations, Decolonization

On April 10, 2010, a group of Somali boatmen boarded and seized the Greek-owned, Panamanian-flagged (FOC) bulk carrier VOC *Daisy*, demanding ransom for the release of the ship and its sailors.<sup>6</sup> All twenty-one of VOC *Daisy*'s crew were from the Philippines, a constant trait of racialized labor aboard Greek-owned transoceanic vehicles (Tsimouris 2021). Given the imposing position of Greek-owned ships in the global maritime trade, it should not come as a surprise that they frequently became targets of piratical attacks off the Somali coast and worldwide (Al Jazeera 2009; RFI 2010; *Hindu* 2011; Guled 2012; Interpol 2012).

In a story about the security of trade flows off Somalia, the channel France 24, after covering the piracy story, presented an “isolated incident” in which Somalis on boats seized a Taiwanese fishing vessel off the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. By considering each of these stories separately, our understanding of the causes and origins of piracy is distorted. Critical scholars of piracy describe an ambiguous field of contestation over maritime property definitions, suggesting that piracy on merchant ships and the seizure of fishing vessels must also be understood as “practices and acts that emerge in zones where the construction and definition of property is ambiguous, contested or both” (Fredriksson and Arvanitakis 2017b: x).

In the case of the Somali Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, piratical practices are directly related to communal suffering and loss of resources that occurred when these waters became strategic waterways for the merchant ships, megatankers, industrial fishing parks, and marine waste dumps of the Global North and the new emerging powers in the Global South, China and India. Apart from the overwhelming marine traffic off the coast of Somalia in the mid-2000s, industrial trawlers from Europe and Asia began removing yellowfin tuna illegally from the same waters. Simultaneously, international organizations confirmed that European companies and international shipping were using the waters as a toxic waste dump. Initially, Somali fishermen took to the sea to protest and to prevent the destruction of communal waters and the livelihood of coastal communities. This led to the first instance of maritime piracy, which, not coincidentally, involved an industrial trawler and marked the beginning of a piracy saga resulting in the militarization of the Somali waters and merchant shipping in general.<sup>7</sup>

6. According to Ruben Pater (2012), the ship was owned by Samarzis Maritime Enterprises based in Piraeus and had P&I coverage at the Swedish Club. Ioannis Samartzis's company, Middleburg Properties Ltd., the official owner of the ship, is registered in Monrovia, Liberia.

7. Couper, Smith, and Ciceri (2015: 198) note that spokespeople for the fishery communities in Somalia claim that waste dumping and overfishing by foreign trawlers led them to take “protective measures” reenacting



The response of the major powers in international trade took the form of an unprecedented militarization of the waters between Oman and the Red Sea. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) organized two subsequent military campaigns, the Allied Protector and the Ocean Shield, while the European Union launched its first naval alliance, the military operation Atalanta. China, Russia, and Iran also dispatched their navies to suppress pirate fishermen. Seamen's trade unions condemned their actions and demanded protection. Western parliaments hastily ratified the military missions, calibrated in antiterrorism rhetoric, recalling the historically timeless image of the pirate as the enemy of our common humanity: *hostis humani generis*. Deborah Cowen (2014) notes the historical parallels between the early colonial era in which the figure of the Atlantic or the Berber pirate played a key role in crafting international law, and describes how contemporary representations of the "Somali pirate" are crucial in reshaping the global governance of the oceans.

Should we choose to ignore for an instant the efforts to securitize against piracy and demonize the pirate, we might hear the Somalis rejecting the criminal guise and instead identifying as a communal "coast guard" protecting natural resources and livelihoods from theft, destruction, and neocolonization (Couper et al 2015). In capturing this complexity, anthropologist Jatin Dua (2019) suggests that Somalis perceive the sea as a *pastoral commons*, a space in need of communal protection and a source of goods and their redistribution. This mode of creating and defending commons is arguably antithetical to capitalist property making. Unlike modern distinctions between land and sea on one hand and the natural law division of the commons between property and dominion on the other, the Somalis perceive the sea as a set of desert paths traversed on boats (Dua 2019). Sophie Bloemen and David Hammerstein (2015: 13) define the commons as "shared resources, the communities that manage them, and the specific rules, practices and traditions that those communities devise." This definition conveys the multidimensionality of the concept, indicating that the commons can be a *resource*, a *community*, a *normative system* and, by extension, a *practice* (Arvanitakis and Fredriksson 2017a: 25). Conceptual diversity allows "Somali piracy" to have plural registers. Rather than a criminal activity per se, it can be viewed also as a communally organized practice of "compensation in the absence of punishment" (Gilmer 2017) and of securing reparations for the devastation and ongoing colonization of communal marine waters. Without condoning

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the disbanded "National Coast Guard of Somalia," which may also have included the remnants of the collapsed state institution. Boarding their own vessels, they demanded taxes from the foreign boats, threatening them with arrest if they don't comply. Subsequently, refusing vessels were attacked, leading foreign vessels and states to designate these actions as "piracy." Couper, Smith, and Ciceri maintain that local fishers saw these actions as justified attempts at protection to deter the stealing of their fish.

acts of violence, and taking into consideration seamen trade unions' calls to protect labor on board from such conflicts, we cannot deny that Somali piracy "presents us with alternative property rights regimes, including the re-establishment of the commons" (Arvanitakis and Fredriksson 2017a: 32).<sup>8</sup>

This view of Somali piracy arguably invokes a materialist approach to decolonization. In an influential article, Indigenous scholars Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) lament liberal appropriations of decolonization through its use as a metaphor, noting that the easy adoption of the language of decolonization within our discourses is no substitute for doing the work needed to effect change. In the context of settler colonialism, Tuck and Yang (2012: 7) argue that decolonization "must involve the repatriation of land while recognizing how land and community relations to land are understood and enacted differently. In other words, return of all the land, and not just symbolically."<sup>9</sup>

By centering materialist terms of restitution and compensation, radical decolonial theorists seek to define "what decolonization is not" (Césaire [1955] 1972: 32). It is not the transformation of Indigenous politics into a liberal doctrine of cosmopolitanism, just as it is not philanthropic "aid" and relief to populations in danger, nor is it a metonym for social justice struggles in general. In contrast, decolonization specifically requires the return of territory and the restoration of the material living conditions to Indigenous people. This is precisely why decolonization is of necessity a shockingly subversive process. "Decolonization never goes unnoticed" (Fanon 1963: 36), Tuck and Yang (2012: 7) remind us, adding that "settler colonialism and its decolonization involve and upset everyone." Applying these ideas to the sea means rethinking Somali piracy within the frame of reparations, restitution of territory, and material decolonization. Current Indigenous demands for reparations are often summarized in the slogan "Land Back" (Inwood, Brand, and Quinn 2021; Ramirez 2020; Tomiak 2022). The protesting coastal communities of Somalia, faced with increasing colonization of their communal marine environments, might embody the maritime equivalent of decolonization: "Sea back!"

8. However, ultimately these self-protective measures extended to abuses of merchant seafarers with demands for ransoms for their release and the takeover of communal protection by transnational criminal conglomerates and local warlords (Couper, Smith, and Ciceri 2015).

9. The full quote refers to the settler colonial context: "Decolonisation in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically" (Tuck and Yang 2012: 7).

## Epilogue

Although the ship has been a key location through which to theorize the history of colonial and racial capitalism, as in the slave trade, the plantation economies, and the age of piracy, little research exists on the ship as an analytical indicator for the persistence and distinctiveness of contemporary postcolonial racial capitalism. This article argued that Greek shipping offers an as yet uncharted inroad for exploring neocolonial capitalism at sea. Empirically, Greece is important because of its dominant role in global shipping and global shipping's role is key in maintaining and expanding racial capitalist relations and neocolonial arrangements at sea.

In exploring this uncharted territory, the article suggests a possible roadmap to navigate property making (and unmaking) at sea and, through maritime trade, flagging out and outsourced financialization on land. Such a roadmap is necessarily global and tenuous as the oceans constitute a peculiar territory in terms of property. Where maritime territory is increasingly claimed by nation-states, the flexibility that the fluid materiality of oceanic spaces conveys to goods-carrying and property-making ships often allows them to elude state control and democratic oversight, reminiscent of the colonial era's "freedom of the seas."

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