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‘The Great Event of the Fortnight’: Steamship Rhythms and Colonial Communication

ABSTRACT

This paper engages with Tim Cresswell’s ‘contellations of mobility’ in order to contribute some understanding of historical maritime rhythms. The empirical focus is upon a steamship mail service in the post-emancipation Caribbean. In examining this communications network, it is stressed that while those managing the network valorised predictable efficiency, ‘friction’ was prized by mercantile groups at the steamers’ ports of call. Thus the different aspects of mobility signified differently across the network, and this historical case study reinforces the resonance of slowness and stoppage time. The synchronization of steamship arrivals with socio-cultural norms in the Caribbean colonies also necessitated the adaptation of mail service rhythms. Through a focus on shipping operations, this paper proposes to temper our understanding of the role of steamship technology in empire. The influence of colonies on the metropole encompassed an alteration of the rhythms of imperial circulation, and it is within the maritime arena that these realities came into sharp focus.

KEYWORDS: Caribbean, empire, maritime, communications, nineteenth century

The Royal Mail steam Packet Company’s RMS Dee departed from Valparaiso in late May 1848 and stopped at Panama before proceeding to Jamaica, Cuba, and several of the Windward and Leeward Islands. The vessel subsequently called at St Thomas in the Danish West Indies on 15 July (The Standard, 5 August 1848). The Dee arrived in Southampton almost three weeks later on 4 August 1848, bringing with it the usual news despatches. These were published in newspapers in England the following day.

On the occasion of this particular journey, the RMS Dee brought to British shores a combination of news and lurid rumours. The Examiner of London reported:

On the 10th July a slave insurrection took place in St Croix, one of the Danish Antilles. They demanded their freedom, which was granted, deposed the governor, Von Scholten, rescued the prisoners from prison, and set fire to and

destroyed an immense deal of property all over the island. Part of the town was fired (The Examiner, 5 August 1848).

The Hampshire Advertiser alternatively recounted:

The whole of the property of the Danish Island of St. Croix has been destroyed, owing to an insurrection of the Negroes, who deposed the Governor and demanded and obtained their emancipation. About 5000 men were at one time in arms. The insurgents committed frightful excesses; to infuriate themselves they mixed hogs' blood with rum and drank it to excess (Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian, 5 August 1848).

In fact, the events reported in the newspapers had been gathering force since the beginning of July 1848, when the enslaved population in St Croix had begun to revolt and make demands for their freedom (Hall 1992, 208–209). As the August newspaper accounts illustrate, the arrival of the mail steamer was an integral part of imperial communications, since these vessels brought news – in this case dramatic news that struck a particular chord in the long wake of the Haitian Revolution (Geggus 1985, 113) – from Caribbean colonies to European spaces.

The arrival and departure of steamers between colonies proved particularly important to the circulation of information. When news of the insurrection reached St Thomas on 6 July, military support was dispatched from that island. From St Thomas, the Royal Mail steamer *Eagle* proceeded to Puerto Rico, where the Captain General dispatched infantry and artillery within five hours of receiving the intelligence (The Standard, 5 August 1848). However, contrary winds prevented these troops from reaching St Croix until the uprising had largely subsided and the troops only arrived on the island on Saturday 8 July (*ibid.*). Thus during the first two weeks of the month, revolutionary impulses swept through St Croix, with enslaved individuals gathering, marching, rioting and claiming freedom. Yet the island's incorporation into the steamship network brought a counter-revolutionary impulse. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's (RMSPC's) steamships, in this case, carried news of revolt to Puerto Rico and in this way facilitated a military mobilization that conflicted with enslaved people's claims to freedom. The case of St Croix starkly illustrates the significance of the steamship timetable and the rhythms of arrivals and departures

within the Caribbean region. These arrivals and departures - the concern of this article - mattered to island lives, and notably to the mercantile community. Firstly, I discuss the significance of historical oceanic rhythms and suggest that the ocean, as a different kind of material space (Peters 2012) produced a set of rhythms which strained against those of the land. This had particular kinds of consequences for projects of empire, which became frustrated and were necessarily altered within watery spaces. Secondly, in 'Smoothing the steamship timetable', my focus is upon the establishment of these steamship rhythms. Subsequently in 'Steamship pauses' and 'The great event of the fortnight', I turn to the intersection between rhythms at sea and those on shore. As these sections will indicate, steamship rhythms prompted island responses and necessary negotiations at mundane as much as at exceptional moments in the nineteenth-century Caribbean. Phillip Vannini has examined on the maritime rhythms of 'everyday life' through a contemporary focus on ferry mobilities (Vannini 2012). Within an historical context, the maritime rhythms of imperial projects betray continual negotiation between metropolitan and colonial spaces.

Time-space compression, much discussed in the context of the twenty-first century, has been historically applied to consideration of nineteenth-century technologies (Cresswell 2006, 4). Thomas Eriksen, for example, highlights that steamers and the telegraph were 'innovations [that] changed the perception of space and distance' (Eriksen 2007, 1-2). Such effects bore particular significance for projects of empire; writing of steamboats, Daniel Headrick stresses that 'Few inventions of the nineteenth century were as important in the history of imperialism' (Headrick 1981, 7). The age of steam brought hopes of faster and predictable timetabled journeys as steamers were welcomed partly for their promise of passages of even duration. My focus on the steamship rhythms of one particular company (the RMSPC), and a shift of perspective to its Caribbean ports of call serves as a reminder that past rhythms of communication were largely negotiated. If the 'different temporal experiences of urban life need to be insisted upon and seen at the heart of accounts of modernity', this surely holds for colonial as much as other spaces (Highmore 2002, 173). Through an examination of how steamers became one of 'multiple quotidian rhythms' folded into nineteenth-century life at colonial ports, the articulation of colonial relations and socio-cultural norms through the integration of this new communications network becomes apparent (Edensor 2010: 2).

Consideration of steamship rhythms invites comparison with the contemporaneous rhythms of trains, which seemed, in the nineteenth century, to promise the '[a]nnihilation of space and time' (Schivelbusch 1977, 41). Like train carriages, steamship decks and saloons 'blurred boundaries' between public and private space (Bissell 2009, 55). While for elite passengers making the transatlantic crossing, such journeys could be unusual and noted undertakings, the arrival of post and passengers by steamer at island ports of call was 'intimately woven into everyday routine' in colonial port towns (Bissell 2009, 42). Steamships formed part of Caribbean 'island time' in the nineteenth century (Vannini 2010, 101). Crucially, maritime rhythms folded together those of metropolitan and colonial spaces, and thus exploration of historical rhythms of the maritime world allows for a consideration of the workings of empire. This paper's historical focus on 'island time' - both in Britain and the Caribbean allows for analysis of the working realities of imperial projects such as transport services. As Vannini stresses, '[d]ifferent places move at different paces', and the infrastructural challenges that this posed led to revision of imperial projects.

In highlighting the rhythms of steam, I contend firstly that steamship rhythms were negotiated across spaces; and secondly that different aspects of steamship mobility were valorised differently across the network. I stress that despite the rhetoric of the RMSPC's managers situated in Southampton and London, at ports of call across the network, stoppage time and steamers' pauses were highly valued alongside the potential for speedy journeys. I suggest that a focus on the rhythms of steamship travel helps to nuance our understanding of speed and communication in colonial contexts and highlights that this was more complex an historical process than a linear trajectory towards annihilating distance with speed. Although mindful of the fact that attention to historical rhythms 'means being limited to observing observations', in examining this maritime activity, my analysis of the RMSPC's service contributes to a necessary 'awareness of the mobilities of the past' (Highmore 2002, 176; Cresswell 2011, 168)

The RMSPC had its origins in imperial concerns, as the transition of the British West Indies from slavery to freedom prompted anti-abolitionist James MacQueen to argue for improved communication between Britain and the Caribbean colonies (Lambert 2008; MacQueen 1838). MacQueen had lived in Grenada managing a sugar estate during the late eighteenth century (Lambert 2008). In the

wake of abolition in 1833, MacQueen's concerns for the British West Indies were in alignment with those of planters, who faced the prospect of trying to maintain levels of sugar production with a labour force that they feared would dwindle (Hall 1971, 23). Within the context of anxious debate over the future of the British West Indian colonies, MacQueen secured a British Government mail contract. The mail contract's initial value of £240,000 per year rose to £270,000 when the Company branched into South American operations. Holding high hopes for the transformative power of this shipping network, MacQueen argued that 'The West Indies everywhere want a little European energy and regularity infused into them, – and this is one efficient, perhaps the simplest and most efficient way to do it' (MacQueen 1838, 56). His reference to 'energy and regularity' invites some consideration of the RMSPC's rhythms and their reception in the Caribbean. His words, after all, seem to chime with a view of modernity as 'an insistent and ferocious rhythm' (Highmore 2002, 171). MacQueen hoped, through the steamship service, to contribute to the 'regular, normative rhythms' of the Caribbean (Edensor 2010, 4).

Without being explicitly named as such, mobilities have been a long-standing theme in post-emancipation Caribbean historiography, particularly through scholars' focus on the so-called 'flight' from the estates, or the withdrawal of enslaved workers from plantation spaces after abolition (Hall 1993). For the formerly enslaved, rights over their own movements were an important meaning of freedom, and as O. Nigel Bolland highlights, '[f]reedom of movement was vital, for its symbolic value and also because former slaves sought to be reunited with family members and friends' (Bolland 2001, 25). Verene Shepherd stresses a gendered dimension to this negotiation by arguing that mobility was a key means through which low income women expressed agency in the post-slavery Anglophone Caribbean (Shepherd 2007, 157). Yet recourse to mobility could equally be a strategy for a degree of economic empowerment enabling the formerly enslaved better to establish land-based roots. Immobility and stasis were thus significant in planter attempts to control labour as well as in positive relationships between the formerly enslaved and the land. Ultimately the struggle to control mobility in the post-emancipation Caribbean was bound up in conflicting definitions of freedom held by different social groups. While it should be recognised that the mobility of labouring bodies was a singularly important dynamic in the post-emancipation era, my focus here is with external (im)mobilities and flows of information –specifically steamship mail service

interactions with the region during this period. As illustrated at the start of this article, this form of mobility also shaped island histories. The focus here on Caribbean maritime mobilities forms part of a necessary consideration of historical, and also ‘non-metropolitan practices’ (Vannini 2011, 297).

The RMSPC’s steamers entered full service in 1842, carrying post, people and high-value goods across the Atlantic and around the Caribbean archipelago. In organising the schedule, the logistics of timetabling departures and arrivals across an extensive Atlantic network necessitated a large measure of negotiation to mesh the needs of this large-scale transportation infrastructure with everyday rhythms at the various ports of call; the desired ‘regularity’ of the steamship service had to be modified in line with the habitual rhythms of Caribbean islands. Thus this paper is concerned both with a trans-imperial network that had globalising tendencies and the ‘local’ of its ports of call. This is entirely in keeping with the fact that, as Jonathan Rigg suggests, ‘just at the time when globalisation has become the defining process of the age [...] there has emerged a vibrant concern for the minutiae and distinctiveness of the “everyday” and, by association, the local’ (Rigg 2007, 10–11). Tim Edensor (2010, 1) draws on Lefebvre to underscore the significance of rhythms for understandings of place. For coastal and port town spaces, maritime rhythms of course have a particular import. The rhythms of the RMSPC’s service in the Caribbean were negotiated through the local and the everyday, a scale at which, as Edensor stresses, ‘regulatory processes pervade and are resisted or ignored’ (Edensor 2010, 2). The incorporation of and resistance to steamship rhythms at the local scale becomes apparent through a focus on ‘the banal moments of travel’ (Watts 2008, 713).

Smoothing the steamship timetable

During the 1830s, MacQueen wrote of the predictability of steamship rhythms as a great attraction of the proposed new service. Although packet boats carried mail between Britain and the West Indies prior to the establishment of the RMSPC, this pre-existing operation was subject to disruptions (MacQueen 1838, 43). Concerning the government packet system, MacQueen lamented, ‘Every thing at present is in a state of uncertainty and confusion. The sailing packets arriving at Barbadoes in unequal times and the Government steamers here being of unequal powers there is no

dependence on the time of their arrival or departure at any one place and consequently neither the merchants nor passengers know how to regulate themselves' (NMM RMS 7/1, 15 March 1841). Advocating for the RMSPC, MacQueen stressed that steamship connections with the Caribbean would constitute a marked improvement upon the rhythms of government ships. Such claims tied into the 'science of energy' in the nineteenth century (Smith 1998). Crosbie Smith illustrates how networks of scientists and engineers worked to build the 'public credibility' of steam engines (Smith 1998, 5) and in contrast to the 'uneven' rhythms of sailing packets – perceived as being unfortunately tied to unpredictable natural rhythms – the RMSPC's steamers apparently promised journeys of consistent duration. Tim Edensor notes that 'Journeys have a particular rhythmic shape' (Edensor 2010, 6). In this case, the rhythmic consistency of steamship journeys was highly desirable in that it would allow for smoother trading and faster communications with the colonies (MacQueen 1838). MacQueen was able to make such claims for the new service on the basis of the public trust in steam technology carefully built by scientists and engineers.

As these new 'regular' rhythms were deemed to be a distinct advantage of steamship communications, considerable work went into constructing the steamship timetable, or 'scheme of routes'. The scheme of routes, as a series of expectations, presented the 'measure' rather than the rhythms of steamship operations (Lefebvre 2004, 8). For Lefebvre, measure is 'law, calculated and expected obligation, a project'; the scheme of routes was both an ambitious and carefully calculated project (*ibid.*). In 1840, armed with letters of introduction from the Foreign Office, MacQueen travelled to the West Indies to investigate the requisite logistics of the operation (NMM RMS 7/1, 31 October 1840). On the basis of this trip and extensive negotiations with the Admiralty, a scheme of routes was drawn up, albeit one which demanded revisions and adaptations. By 1843, the Company had a transatlantic steamer running from Southampton to Barbados and Grenada, via Madeira. There were also various branch routes travelling from Grenada, St Thomas and Jamaica across the Caribbean (NMM RMS 36/3). Throughout the decades, the scheme of routes was re-negotiated as the printed ordering of the service played out against habits, events and needs at vessels' ports of call. Following Lefebvre, we can recognise the steamship timetable as constituting a series of 'impersonal laws', which were modified by 'actors, ideas, realities' on the ground in the Caribbean (Lefebvre 2004, 6).

The RMSPC's early service offered two transatlantic passages from Southampton a month. By 1845, the Company was advertising vessels departing on the 2nd and 17th of each month 'taking a limited quantity of goods, for the following places: – Barbadoes, Demerara, Grenada, Trinidad, Jamaica, St. Vincent, St. Thomas, and Bermuda' (The Times, 25 February 1845). However early on during its service, the RMSPC sought to respond to a slight inconsistency in its timetabled journeys. It was a source of concern that there were uneven monthly 'measures' in the early timetable. Thus the Company lamented that 'owing to the inequality in time which the dispatch of the mails from England on the 1st and 15th of each month creates; and that owing to there being only 28 days in the month of February the inequality adverted to which leaves but 14 days between the arrival in course of the mails is continued as regards the mail of the 16th of February, 1st March and 15th March successively. This brings these mails to Barbados one day earlier than at other times' (NMM RMS 6/1, 15. My emphasis). To overcome this problem of journeys of uneven duration, Captain Chapman was instructed to ensure speedy fuelling at the island of St Thomas and minimal stoppage time at the inter-colonial ports of call, allowing the RMS Actaeon to return to Barbados in a timely manner in February and March. This very specific RMSPC concern indicates the Company's broader ambitions to achieve even rhythms in its timetable to the greatest possible extent.

The presence of steamship operations in the nineteenth-century Caribbean created service hubs, particularly at St Thomas, and later Barbados, which were key sites of departure for the RMSPC's branch routes through the colonies. Furthermore, the routine connections provided between colonies facilitated patterns of migration. Maritime migration was one of several mobile strategies adopted by the formerly enslaved in the negotiation of their freedom (Richardson 1985), and in this respect, steamship mobilities were significant. As well as setting people in motion, steamship operations tied people to place, particularly through coaling operations. The steamship coaling workforce was predominantly comprised of women, and the RMSPC relied on immobilising strategies to secure a reliable labour source to keep their steamships moving in accordance with the timetable. Thus coaling created a crucial intersection between steamship rhythms and the 'corporeal rhythms' of daily work (Mels 2004, 6).

Given the complications involved in seeking to deliver even and predictable journeys and the timely delivery of the mail, numerous 'modifications respecting the

route of the Packets' were necessary before a workable timetable was stabilised (NMM RMS 7/1, 1 December 1840). Furthermore any stability achieved was always only temporary, as the RMSPC's scheme of routes was constantly re-worked. Thus in addition to formal revisions of the 1841 timetable in 1843 and 1851, the timetables were constantly altered and corrected. A corrected version of the 1851 scheme of routes was produced in May 1858, for example, and a corrected version of the January 1864 scheme of routes was produced in November of that year (NMM RMS 36/2; NMM RMS 36/3; NMM RMS 36/4). Even from an official Company perspective, the steamship timetables (and thus the rhythms of individual journeys) were worked and re-worked.

The logistics of the service presented numerous mundane realities that mitigated against the production of such even rhythms. Amongst these challenges, the steamer's arrival at night posed particular logistical problems. Admiralty Agents, men with naval backgrounds, oversaw the delivery of the mail and reported to the Admiralty (to whom the Company was accountable) on the RMSPC's performance. As one such Agent, Bellairs, complained at several islands there were 'no lights exhibited retarding the mail service and occasioning considerable risk of life' (NMM RMS 6/3, 12 May 1845). Even where light was available, harbours were not necessarily safe for navigation, for example it was deemed unsafe for the Company's larger vessels to enter English Harbour, Antigua, at night (NMM RMS 7/2, 5 February 1846). The need for safe navigation caused friction in the steamship timetable as vessels were forced to negotiate nocturnal arrivals by slowing or pausing their journeys.

Even the logistical reality of achieving regular daily rhythms proved elusive. Although the Company initially estimated that the journey from Falmouth to St Thomas could be made in nineteen days and six hours, by January 1843 the time allowed had been revised to twenty-two days to 'cover contingencies', particularly those relating to the weather (NMM RMS 7/1, 9 January 1843). The kind of early teething problems experienced by the RMSPC were illustrated when the Company received news from Jamaica in March 1842 that since the RMS Tweed had not returned to Jamaica when timetabled to do so and 'Much time had... [passed] since any mails from England had been received at this Island', Captain Elliot of HMS Spartan had brought the waiting mail from St Thomas to Jamaica (NMM RMS 6/1, 46). It later came to light that the Tweed, so long overdue at Jamaica, had been delayed when the vessel ran short of coal (NMM RMS 6/1, 68). This instance of a

missing mail steamer and the need for a non-RMS vessel to intervene was a far cry from the regular and comprehensive system of communication to which the Company aspired.

Weather, navigational challenges and local logistics all made a 'regular' service hard to deliver. When the RMS Tay was delayed en route to the Caribbean, it was reported that the vessel:

made Barbados exactly at the end of 17 days, but the weather being hazy, and night coming on she lay to off, and drifted past the island during the night. In making up to it again and taking in some very indifferent coals she lost 38 hours. At Grenada she lost nearly two days owing to the coal depots not being so well prepared as it ought to have been, but chiefly because the Negro labourers refused to work at even high wages especially during the night. At St Thomas's she lost more than one day, from the same cause, and from a cause hitherto unexplained, she has lost above another day between St Thomas and Havana (NMM RMS 7/1, 210–211)

In this instance, a combination of bad weather and contested labour arrangements slowed the steamer's progress. Tim Cresswell has outlined six elements of mobility: motive force, speed, rhythm, route, experience and friction (Cresswell 2010). It must be stressed that the rhythms of coaling labour were often significant to the workings of the overall service, causing 'friction' within steamers' trajectories. For example, on the RMS Tay's journey in January 1842, the vessel remained at Barbados three and a half hours longer than scheduled; at Grenada the Tay waited almost a full day longer than timetabled in order for coaling to take place (NMM RMS 6/1, 21). Coal was also the cause of delays to the Teviot in 1842, although in this latter instance it was coal supplies rather than problems with coaling labour that slowed the vessel's progress. The vessel remained at Havana sixty-seven and a half hours longer than the timetable allowed because the Company had 'no coal in store' (NMM 6/1, 83).

Aside from these particular journeys, the frequently uneven rhythms of the RMSPC's early steamship service are evident from Admiralty Agent reports. The Agent on board the RMS Clyde indicated that far from adhering to the printed timetable, the vessel's movements in 1842 were characterised by delays. Thus at Antigua where one and a half hours were allowed for the delivery of the mails

according to the scheme, three hours and fifty–seven minutes were instead ‘required for this purpose’. At St Vincent, where two hours were allowed by the timetable, the Admiralty Agent noted that he ‘stayed five hours after the mails were on board’ (NMM 6/1, 25). At Grenada the mail was ‘further detained in consequence of the men again ‘striking work’ (NMM RMS 6/1, 25). Due to the need for coaling and coaling labour, reliance on steam power, which promised predictable rhythms and even journeys, brought its own challenges that often made the rhythms of steamship journeys as varied as those under sail. ‘Friction’ proved as significant to the steamship service in the mid-nineteenth century as any new-found ‘velocity’ (Cresswell 2010).

Conflicts between employees could prove equally disruptive to the timetable. When the RMS Teviot left Vera Cruz almost fifteen hours behind time, the delay was attributed to a running dispute between the captain of the steamship and the Admiralty Agent. The captain set out to sea without waiting for the return of the Admiralty Agent and the mail boat, reportedly because of his determination to ‘give the mail Agent a sweat of it’ (NMM RMS 6/1, 83. *Emphasis in original*). This case of poor relations between the captain and the Admiralty Agent was by no means an isolated one. In 1842, the Company’s secretary suggested removing Admiralty Agents from the steamers given the ‘constant interruptions and delays arising from differences between the mail agents placed on board by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty and the Captains appointed by the Court of Directors’ (NMM RMS 7/1, 29 August 1842). Admiralty Agents had a tendency to ‘interfere with the ships course or the length of stoppage at any place’, which altered the rhythms of individual steamship journeys (*ibid.*).

The production of smooth rhythms in the delivery of the mail demanded a high level of cooperation between Admiralty agents and individuals based on shore. Dominica was one of the many islands at which lighting was reportedly problematic. Although ‘a lanthorn’ was maintained on the island, this was infrequently lit to aid the steamers’ arrivals (*ibid.*) Agent Bellairs recounted his experience of arriving at Dominica at 9pm where he fired gun signals and rockets, seeking to attract the attention of those on shore. When this was met with no response, he set out in the mail boat and ‘pulled in various directions to find the town, but would not find a single object to guide me, at last [he] fell in with a brig at anchor where [he] received information how to steer for the town, and arrived there 11.10pm’ (*ibid.*). Bellairs claimed that upon landing, he was told by an army officer that he had been ‘seen by

several of the merchants who had been watching the boat rowing about without the slightest effort to guide or assist [him]'. According to Bellairs, even the RMSPC's agent on the island had witnessed the scene but had not attempted to help (*ibid.*). Similarly, the Admiralty Agent serving on board the RMS Clyde reported that on one occasion he was forced to leave the post on board a brig at Nevis because nobody on shore was willing to assist him (NMM RMS 6/3, 18 February 1845). As in more recent contexts (Vannini 2012), smooth steamship rhythms could be produced only through collaborative working and harmonious rhythms between ship and shore.

Relations between various shipboard employees – not only the captain and the Admiralty Agent – caused such delays. On one of the Clyde's journeys through the Caribbean, the vessel was delayed at Grenada for two hours and forty-five minutes because of 'the men refusing to get the steam up having struck work' (NMM RMS 7/1, 24 March 1842). In response, 'several' of the crew were 'discharged and sent to England' (*ibid.*). As these various journeys suggest, both the negotiation of labour between ship and shore and relationships between employees on board altered the rhythms of steamship journeys. Thus the efficient journeys documented within the printed timetable were re-negotiated on board ship and in port into more idiosyncratic rhythms constituted by the priorities and personalities of those working on and around the steamships. Relations between members of the crew and between shipboard and shore-based labourers ensured that slow mobility was as significant to steamship travel as speed.

Steamship pauses

Not only was the steamship service characterised by 'friction' (Cresswell 2010, 17), but this friction was actively promoted by some service users. The RMSPC's steamship journeys indicate that although those managing the steamship network were concerned to achieve even and predictable journeys, it was the steamers' pauses that were often highly prized at ports of call, particularly for those very 'merchants' to whom MacQueen referred when arguing for the service (NMM RMS 7/1, 161–162). As B.W. Higman indicates, in managing plantations 'communication with England was the vital link, for governors, traders and planters' (Higman 2005, 121). Prior to the steamship service, various packet boat systems of correspondence with the West Indies were attempted and there was also the option of sending letters on merchant

ships. Merchant ships in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century typically made a round trip to the Caribbean in over one hundred days (Higman 2005, 131). However merchant shipping was also bound up in seasonal rhythms. As noted by Higman, such vessels were more readily found during favourable sailing conditions and when sugar was ready for export but were harder to find during the hurricane period (Higman 2005, 129).

The packet boat system that preceded the RMSPC drew occasional complaints and, at least in one location, ‘the Kingston merchants were willing to use their influence to delay the departure of the packet boat when it suited’ (Higman 2005, 130). These patterns continued into the era of steam. When steamers failed to stay for their full scheduled stoppage time, it frequently provoked a response. When the RMS Avon arrived at Bermuda from St Thomas at 6pm on 21 February 1845 and departed twelve hours later instead of the scheduled twenty–four hours in an attempt to make up time, it provoked a ‘very general complaint among the merchants and others’ who had insufficient time to respond to letters (NMM RMS 6/3, 5 April 1845). These merchants in Bermuda had trading interests with other colonies in the Americas and for those engaged in commerce, the steamers’ pauses were as valued as each vessel’s potential for speed. Thus the mercantile community was preoccupied with steamship ‘friction’ rather than ‘velocity’ (Cresswell 2010, 17). ‘Service delays’, so easily associated with passenger anxiety in the context of contemporary travel, provided for the needs of merchants as these were better suited to their rhythms of letter writing (Bissell 2009, 66-67).

Revising the scheme of routes in 1843, the Company sought to respond to this need for suitable pauses, particularly at the larger colonies. The RMSPC explained that in the proposed timetable for 1843, ‘the main object has been to remove all cause of complaint by affording to the important colonies of Jamaica, Barbadoes, Trinidad, Demerara & Berbice longer time for replying to correspondence’ (NMM RMS 7/1, 1 April 1843. My emphasis.) While those managing the network stressed the potential for speed afforded by steamship technology, only significant pauses between the journeys made the service useful to those situated in the colonies.

When steamers entirely neglected given islands, the RMSPC inevitably faced a backlash from the mercantile community. The RMS Derwent’s failure to call at Tortola en route from St Thomas to the Windward islands in September 1850 provoked complaint from merchant John Craddock, who explained that the steamer’s

absence had caused him ‘serious inconvenience and pecuniary loss’ particularly given that there were ‘few means of communication with the sister colonies other than by packet’ (NMM RMS 6/6, 30 August 1850). As well as occasional instances of missing steamers, routinely curtailed stoppage time drew complaints. In May 1849, merchants from St Jago de Cuba wrote to explain their frustration with the working realities of the service. Although the printed timetable allowed for the steamer’s arrival at 6pm on the 18th of the month followed by departure at 6am on the 20th of the month, merchants often found the packet ‘sailing the same afternoon of her arrival’ (NMM RMS 6/5, 22 May 1849). On the return leg of the journey, where forty–eight hours were officially allowed for answering correspondence, the merchants lamented that ‘the most that is generally now conceded is 24 hours’ of stoppage time (*ibid.*).

Worse than such one–off instances of steamers failing to pause on their journey were timetable changes that eliminated stoppage time altogether. The RMSPC’s new timetable of 1850 allowed for only one call a month at Jacmel, with the first steamer of the month passing Jacmel on the way to Jamaica without pausing. In contrast to the RMSPC’s concerns with speedy passages, residents of Jacmel desired a ‘few hours’ detention at Jacmel’ (NMM RMS 6/6, enclosure dated 18 November 1850 in 23 July 1849). While communication between colonies was prized alongside that with European ports, the moment of the steamship’s pause was crucial to allow for the preparation of communications. Whereas captains at times sought to shorten their time in port to allow them to stay on schedule or make up for delays and were concerned to deliver the ‘regularity’ promised by the printed timetable, the steamer’s pause was particularly prized by the mercantile community in the Caribbean region. Highmore (2002, 175) stresses the ways in which ‘Against the frantic circulation and accumulation of money, certain cultural practices have defined (and continue to do so) their alternative and oppositional status in relation to their slowness’, however in this case it was precisely the ‘accumulation of money’ that prompted calls for stasis. Responses to the RMSPC’s service suggest that friction was highly significant to nineteenth–century mobilities not only as a working reality of new communications technologies but also as a facet of mobility that was positively represented and valorised, in this case by elite interest groups seeking to maximise the profitability of their undertakings. Despite a rhetoric that ‘place[d] greater value on high speeds’, slow did not imply ‘inferiority’ for all groups reliant on the steamship

service (Jain 2011, 1017). The case study of the RMSPC indicates that we might extend the notion of ‘travel time as a gift’ to encompass even requisite infrastructural delays, since in this case, the pause required to allow delivery of the mail and refuelling was beneficial to a core group of service users (Jain and Lyons 2008, 88). In this case ‘slowing down’ was not simply a ‘feasible compromise’ for merchants, but rather, in their view, formed a necessary component of efficient communications (Vannini 2012, 103-4).

‘The great event of the fortnight’: steamers and social rhythms

Lefebvre underscores the relational significance of rhythms: ‘We know that a rhythm is slow or lively only in relation to other rhythms’ (Lefebvre 2004, 10). In the development of the RMSPC’s service, the relationship between steamship rhythms and social rhythms at colonial ports of call proved significant. The case of Jamaica demonstrates how the relation between the steamship’s rhythms and the ‘sociotemporal order’ in the Caribbean necessitated a negotiation, and a resolution of the two (Zerubavel 1981, xii).

Jamaica’s status amongst the British Caribbean colonies ensured that Kingston was an important port of call in the RMSPC’s service. The Company’s 1885 timetable included a fortnightly route from Southampton to Barbados, Jacmel, Jamaica and Colon. The rhythms of the steamship service had to be re-negotiated when the timetable of 1885 brought the steamer to Kingston with inappropriate timing. Although the timetable of 1885 scheduled the transatlantic steamer to arrive in Jamaica on a Monday morning, in practice, the mail steamer usually arrived at Kingston on a Sunday. This proved problematic in that the steamers’ arrival clashed with the ‘cyclical ordering which organises, apports, schedules and coordinates activities’ - in this case the ordering of the Jamaican Sabbath (Edensor 2010, 8). The rhythms of this oceanic service had to be carefully intertwined with the weekly markers on shore, since Sunday was a ‘most salient marker of time’ and a ‘milieu de mémoire’ (McCrossen 2005, 25-26). While it was understood that the extra time allowed more letters to be answered, the ship-to-shore rhythm of the delivery of the mail nevertheless provoked ‘great dissatisfaction’ in Kingston.

The Governor of Jamaica pointed out that ‘the arrival of the mail steamer from Southampton is the great event of the fortnight and when it comes in on Sunday there

is a general interruption in Kingston of the quiet and rest of the Sabbath' (TNA CO 137/522 28 July 1885, enclosure dated 3 September 1885). Since the postal and customs departments had to work, a special train was run on the railway, and 'the cart men and drivers of public conveyances' were required to labour, the arrival of the mail steamer gave the city 'a regular week day appearance' (ibid.). A memorial on the subject was addressed to the Governor, presented by a deputation of ministers of different religious denominations, and bearing four hundred and ninety-six signatures (ibid.). While the memorial was led by the actions of religious ministers, these men claimed that 'even those who do not object on religious grounds still feel that it is undesirable to have a fortnightly disturbance of the ordinary Sunday quiet' (ibid.). The petitioners here demonstrated a determination to bestow upon the seven-day week 'an aura of sanctity' (McCrosen 2005, 31). In this way, the socio-cultural rhythms of Kingston – and specifically the observance of the Sabbath – were disrupted by those of the industrialized oceanic transport network. In this instance, different kinds of rhythms became inappropriately intertwined, however the objections of colonial elites ensured that the transportation network was forced to adapt in deference to religious observance. This comprised an instance of 'overarching discourses such as those of [...] religion, or tradition' shaping the negotiation of a 'public time-space' (Mels 2004, 6).

The Anglican clergy in Jamaica had traditionally been aligned with planters' interests and had made little attempt to evangelise the enslaved population, however Robert Stewart argues that the creation of the bishopric of Jamaica with effect from 1824 aimed to bring the enslaved into the Anglican church (Stewart 1992, 1). In contrast to the Anglican Church, Protestant nonconformist groups such as Moravians, Methodists and Baptists generally distanced themselves from the elite planter lifestyle and interacted more systematically with the black Jamaican population (Stewart 1992, 12-20). Baptists had particular political involvement, and sought to exert their influence for 'the well-being of the ex-slave' (Stewart 1992, 21). It is within this multi-denominational landscape containing groups that interacted more and less closely with the formerly enslaved that objections to steamers' Sunday arrivals were advanced. After all, as already indicated, steamship arrivals required labour to land and load mail, cargo and passengers, but were also often accompanied by the labour-intensive undertaking of coaling vessels.

When the RMSPC responded to Jamaican complaints by instructing vessels not to arrive at Jamaica until the timetabled day (Monday at 8am), the Company was subjected to further outcry, on the grounds that this left insufficient time before the departure of the outward mail (TNA CO 137/523 12 November 1885). While the Sunday arrival was ‘objected to’, the altered arrangement which brought the steamers in on schedule on Monday mornings was ‘even more strongly objected to’ as providing insufficient time to answer correspondence (TNA CO 137/523, 23 October 1885). Once again in this instance the mercantile, but also the wider community valorised friction in the form of steamship pauses. The RMSPC informed the colonists that their complaints would be considered when the timetable was next subject to alteration (TNA CO 137/523 12 November 1885). The problem was rectified, but only during the course of the next mail contract. The timetable of 1890 brought the transatlantic steamer to Jamaica on a Friday, and this vessel left Jamaica on a Saturday. Unlike the 1885 timetable, the 1890 scheme of routes did not schedule any arrivals or departures in the Americas on Sundays (NMM RMS 36/4 Tables of routes for the packets of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company commencing from Southampton 9th July 1890). The Jamaican case illustrates that the rhythms of steamship services had to be negotiated and meshed with colonial norms and socio-cultural values at individual ports of call. The ‘weaving’ of steamship rhythms into the ‘urban daily reality’ of Kingston (Jiron 2010, 143) necessitated a re-negotiation of an imperial project within a colonial space. Not only was there a need for ‘compatibility’ with ‘local work routines’, but maritime rhythms proved particularly thorny in that they collapsed oceanic work routines onto those of metropolitan and colonial spaces (Stein 2001, 117)

Conclusion

Steamship rhythms were negotiated with those on shore in a variety of ways. Aside from the logistical and infrastructural support required to smooth the steamship timetable, distances could only be ‘annihilated’ with faster communications insofar as individuals on shore were willing to cooperate to enable fast turnaround times in port or facilitate the delivery of the mail. The experiences of Admiralty Agents suggest that such ship-to-shore cooperation could not be taken for granted, and ‘friction’ characterised steamship operations as much as ‘velocity’ (Cresswell 2010). The

rhythms of the service were also perceived differently in various contexts, so that the mercantile community emphasised the duration of pauses to enable efficient correspondence rather than the speed of steamship communications, while in the case of Kingston religious concerns shaped the response to the steamer's arrivals and departures and promoted arguments against velocity when it disrupted the Sabbath. The logistical, commercial and socio-cultural negotiations of steamship rhythms outlined here serve to underscore how we might understand past rhythms of communication not as straightforwardly annihilating distance with speed, but rather as negotiated and balanced between the financial, social and cultural interests of groups situated at various ports of call.

The steamship service was negotiated into rhythms that were variously accelerated or slowed down: these were 'uneven rhythms' adapted to their Caribbean contexts (Highmore 2002). Furthermore, this case study indicates the fractured responses to different facets of mobility across spaces. Although from the managerial centre of the steamship network, velocity was valued and deemed to promote trade, it was rather the steamer's pause that allowed for effective commerce across the network. For merchants, the working rhythms of the service produced 'friction' not as a hindrance, but rather as an aid to efficiency. For those seeking to protect the Sabbath, velocity resulting in early arrivals produced a rhythmic efficiency that was equally problematic. The differentiated nature of responses to what constituted productive 'modern' rhythms in colonial port towns is perhaps suggestive for thinking forward comparatively into postcolonial urban contexts.

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