

*'Alien Seamen' or 'Imperial Family'? Race, Belonging and British Sailors of Colour in the Royal Navy, 1939–47**

His Majesty's Government have decided that any Colonial British subjects and British protected persons in this country, who are not of pure European descent, are to be on the same footing as British subjects of pure European descent as regards voluntary enlistment in the armed forces and as regards eligibility to be considered for the grant of emergency commissions in those forces.¹

On 19 October 1939, the British government lifted an official 'colour bar' to enlistment and commission in His Majesty's armed forces for the duration of hostilities. Multiple factors fed into this decision, including military manpower requirements; maintaining control in British colonies; and bolstering Britain's image as a self-proclaimed liberal democracy and moral antithesis of Nazi Germany's programme of racial superiority. In practice, however, as Wendy Webster has explained, during the Second World War the image of imperial unity and common cause portrayed through government propaganda and media messaging of a 'people's empire' was mostly a chimera. Notwithstanding the Colonial Office's endeavours to market convincingly the concept of a racially unified wartime 'imperial community of allies' across the metropole and the colonies, Webster has shown that a range of wartime ministerial departments in Britain continued to pursue racist policies through increasingly covert private discussions and documents rather than more visible formal state policies.² Despite the October 1939 proclamation, Britain's wartime armed forces remained tainted by entrenched systemic racial discrimination, and Tony Kushner and Gavin Schaffer have discussed at length how the Air Ministry and War Office continued to exhibit and implement racial discrimination in the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Army throughout the Second World War.³

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1. Kew, The National Archives [hereafter TNA], ADM 1/10818, 'Recruitment of British Subjects from the Colonies in the Armed Forces of the Crown', 1939. Until the British Nationality Act (1948) formally codified 'citizenship', imperial belonging was articulated through the nomenclature of 'subjecthood', which emphasised a shared loyalty to the British Crown. See K.H. Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2016).

2. W. Webster, *Mixing It: Diversity in World War Two Britain* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 112–13.

3. T. Kushner, "'Without Intending Any of the Most Undesirable Features of a Colour Bar': Race Science, Europeaness and the British Armed Forces during the Twentieth Century', *Patterns of Prejudice*, xlvii (2012), pp. 339–74; G. Schaffer, 'Fighting Racism: Black Soldiers and Workers in Britain during the Second World War', *Immigrants and Minorities*, xxviii (2010), pp. 246–65.

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The Royal Navy (RN), however, displayed a distinctive and peculiarly hostile approach towards the recruitment and commission of 'non-white' Britons which demands closer socio-cultural analysis than it has so far received.

Questions remain as to why the Navy embraced such acute resistance to opening up naval service to otherwise eligible British men of colour, and whether the Second World War wrought any significant and long-lasting change to the nature and practices of systemic naval racism in Britain. Uncovering how racism was institutionally hidden, performed and embedded within the Navy during the nation's 'finest' hours, this article adopts two key areas of focus. First, it investigates how senior naval commanders and politicians in the Admiralty (the government office in charge of naval affairs) made a concerted effort to circumvent the lifting of the state's restrictions on entry to the RN while maintaining a public stance that naval service remained open to all. It shows how, between the temporary removal of the formal colour bar to military service in 1939 and its permanent abolition eight years later, the RN enacted a series of complicated covert mechanisms that were designed to shut out men of colour by stealth as far as possible. Following this line of enquiry, the article interrogates the Second World War as a turning point for a significant shift from a codified *de jure* structure of racial exclusion in pre-war naval regulations to a more informal system that was rooted in a complex and diffuse web of *de facto* racist practices in recruiting policy. Many of these forms of racism had certainly been in circulation throughout the Navy's pre-war history, but this article contends that the Second World War period drove the administrative operationalisation of naval racism more deeply under cover and ratified furtive, oblique performances of racial discrimination into key pillars of naval recruiting policy in the 1940s. This article therefore considers the Second World War as a catalyst in the RN's institutional transformation of concrete official racial barriers into the clandestine endorsement of subterranean pathways of prejudice, many of which lingered into the later twentieth century. Secondly, the Navy's enduring biases did not go unchallenged in wartime British society, attracting considerable anger from the families and communities of men who were rejected for naval service on the grounds of racial heritage. Some of these people, including colonial subjects of Black African descent in the British Caribbean and people of Black African, Indian and Maltese heritage living in Britain, wrote to the Admiralty to protest against the continued performance of racial oppression in the wartime RN. Through examining this correspondence, this article endeavours to understand more about what impact institutional discourses and practices of racial exclusion exerted on the identities, lives and emotions of men and women of colour who wished to join Britain's armed forces between 1939 and 1945. The following research highlights how complex and contested meanings of race and national identity were invested

in Britain's Second World War Navy and how wartime individual, community and institutional selfhoods were fashioned in connection to the service. Ultimately this study extends and complicates a broader picture of what British naval service meant to different groups of Britons during the Second World War.

Training fresh sights on wartime Admiralty records held in the National Archives, this article analyses intersecting constructions of 'race', naval identity and national 'belonging' in internal and external naval correspondence, memos, regulations and responses to proposed policy changes. These documents also reveal the Admiralty's attempts to reinstate official policies of racial exclusion from British naval service in the two years immediately following the war. Consequently, this article extends its focus into the mid- to late 1940s in order to establish how far significant changes and continuities in the Admiralty's wartime discursive and institutional practices of racial discrimination set the scene for a new chapter in the naval politics of race in post-war Britain. A great debt is owed here to Marika Sherwood, who brought attention to the relevant Admiralty files in the 1980s and has written multiple works that outline the broad contours of institutional racism among naval top brass during the Second World War.⁴ Building on Sherwood's foundations, this article proffers a closer, more granular reading of contemporary ideas about 'race' and 'Britishness' in the wartime archive and develops a recent scholarly focus on the remaking of racial paradigms within colonial contexts across the world between 1939 and 1945.⁵ The Second World War marked a major point of inflection in the transformation of global empires and economies based on racialised social and political order. The demands of total war forced imperial regimes to create new strategies and optics of confronting racial discrimination in order to manage racialised populations and recruit colonial subjects to meet military manpower requirements. For many militaries the war thus represented an extraordinary global moment of racial integration amid the race-based hierarchies of an imperial world. Takashi Fujitani's study of the United States' recruitment of Nisei Japanese and Japanese recruitment of Koreans during the Second World War underlines, for instance, that the exigencies of fighting a total war compelled the modification of previously formalised racial hierarchies and prejudices in both military institutions and the national communities they served.

4. M. Sherwood, 'Blacks in the Royal Navy', *Black and Asian Studies Association Newsletter*, xxiii (1999), pp. 13–15; M. Sherwood, 'The Multi-ethnic Royal Navy and Merchant Marine, from the Seventeenth Century Onwards', *Topmasts: The Quarterly Newsletter of the Society for Nautical Research*, xxvii (2018), pp. 10–13. See also M. Sherwood, *World War II: Colonies and Colonialism* (Oare, 2013) and M. Sherwood, *Many Struggles: West Indian Workers and Service Personnel in Britain, 1939–1945* (London, 1985).

5. See, for example, J. Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2012); T. Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Los Angeles, CA, 2011); Y. Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (London, 2015); J.P. Smith, 'Race and Hospitality: Allied Troops of Colour on the South African Home Front during the Second World War', *War and Society*, xxxix (2020), pp. 155–70.

Within both the US and Japanese wartime militaries, a ‘complex recalibration’ of attitudes towards different ethnic groups occurred, a process that Fujitani identifies as an important transition from ‘vulgar’ overt discrimination to a ‘polite’ racism which appeared less violent and more inclusionary.⁶ As this article establishes, similar mutations of ‘acceptable’ official racism were embedded in wartime British naval recruiting practices and attitudes, institutionalising surreptitious forms of racial discrimination that profoundly shaped the Navy’s post-war peacetime profile.

Generally speaking, well-publicised shifts in official approaches to harnessing the military manpower of racialised subjects did very little to erase entrenched racial hierarchies, which military officers in different armies across the globe were frequently determined to maintain so far as possible. As historians of Britain’s wartime colonial forces have pointed out, despite the British government liberally coating colonial military recruitment and advancement in a glossy veneer of multicultural inclusivity and equality of opportunity, widespread racial prejudices continued to inform how those military hierarchies operated in practice. David Killingray, Tarak Barkawi and Daniel Owen Spence have illustrated that colonial military leaderships engaged in a variety of gambits to avoid white servicemen having to serve alongside, or be commanded by, indigenous personnel.⁷ Britain’s Royal Navy was thus only one of many military organisations that waged an imperial war in the context of official assurances of multi-racial solidarity while stealthily maintaining informal colour bars. Nevertheless, with one or two exceptions, the RN remains unaccountably confined to the footnotes of the wider scholarship.⁸ By putting forward new understandings of the distinctive reasoning, mechanisms and tactics by which Britain’s Navy sought to remain a chiefly ‘whites only’ institution in a conflict that was popularly billed as levelling and unifying British society, this article pushes forward the developing field of ‘new naval history’, using ‘the prism of naval affairs’ to examine wider themes of imperialism, nationhood, society and culture.⁹ In so doing, it also critically advances a recently and rapidly growing scholarship that emphasises the contribution of British subjects from the British Isles, colonies and Commonwealth countries to the nation’s armed services between 1939 and 1945. This literature challenges an effective whitewashing of

6. Fujitani, *Race for Empire*, p. 25.

7. D. Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Rochester, NY, 2010); T. Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Soldiers in World War II* (Cambridge, 2017); D.O. Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture and British Imperialism, 1922–67* (Manchester, 2015).

8. See Sherwood, *Many Struggles*, pp. 3–25, and R. Costello, *Black Salt: Seafarers of African Descent on British Ships* (Liverpool, 2012). The Navy also receives brief attention in Kushner, “Without Intending Any of the Most Undesirable Features of a Colour Bar”, and Schaffer, ‘Fighting Racism’.

9. Q. Colville and J. Davey, eds, *A New Naval History* (Manchester, 2019).

historical portrayals and popular memories of the 'People's War'.¹⁰ In thus helping to reorient wider historical analysis of the Second World War as a multi-racial, multi-ethnic enterprise, this article offers an intervention in the history of racial and ethnic presence, diversity and belonging in Britain's mid-twentieth century armed services.

Sections I and III explore how the Admiralty's militant opposition to both temporary and permanent removal of a colour bar to Britain's armed services created a long-lasting collective of insidious mechanisms of policing the racial boundaries to naval service. Section I identifies the production of a range of backdoor practices during the early war years to limit the numbers of men of colour who were able to enlist for naval service. These included the use of weaponised racial humour; the deployment of racialised gradations of 'Blackness' and 'whiteness'; and a tacit reliance on ingrained racial prejudice among naval recruiting authorities and officers recommending candidates for commissions. In addition, there were articulations of pseudo-concern for the emotional well-being of the sailor of colour, who was identified as an automatic target of racial abuse on the lower deck. Section III considers how, between 1944 and 1947, in an effort to reinstate formalised racially prohibitive pre-1939 naval recruiting regulations, the Admiralty yoked together emerging geopolitical anxieties about Britain's deteriorating colonial power, fears of damage to the Service's reputation and fighting efficiency, and racialised assumptions about the psychological and command capabilities of commissioned officers of colour.

These sections on Admiralty structures and practices bracket a discussion of more individual perspectives on wartime naval racism. In her pioneering work on archives and race in Britain, Caroline Bressey emphasises the importance of historical researchers finding new 'pathways' to trace the presence, identity and stories of people whose ethnicity was not necessarily included in the archives on which historians conventionally rely.¹¹ Section II thus approaches the wartime Navy's informal colour bar from a fresh angle, opening up different ways of reading the presence of Britons of colour in the official naval archive and recovering the reactions and emotions of those who were excluded from joining the Service. Statistical evidence recording the

10. See, for example, Webster, *Mixing It*; A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006); D. Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London, 2016); S. Bourne, *The Motherland Calls: Britain's Black Servicemen and Women, 1939–45* (Stroud, 2012); S. Bourne, *Mother Country: Britain's Black Community on the Home Front, 1939–45* (Stroud, 2010); J. Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2019). In this context, I am using the phrase 'People's War' in reference to a culturally loaded term signifying the celebration of national togetherness that became established in much post-war historiography and popular memories of the Second World War. For a challenging discussion of whether such framing of the Second World War as a 'people's war' ought to be regarded as an invention of 1960s and 1970s historiography rather than a phrase in popular wartime usage, see D. Edgerton, 'The Nationalisation of British History: Historians, Nationalism and the Myths of 1940', *English Historical Review*, cxxxvi (2021), pp. 950–85.

11. C. Bressey, 'Looking for Blackness: Considerations of a Researcher's Paradox', *Ethics, Place and Environment*, vi (2003), pp. 217–24.

number of British sailors from the Indian subcontinent and African diaspora in the wartime RN is notoriously elusive, not least because even the Navy itself claimed not to know the precise figures. Some records appear to have been disposed of altogether.¹² This archival silencing in the official wartime naval records reflects a longer-term late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century disaggregation of men of colour from the service and history of the Navy, conveying a misleading impression that British-born and colonial subjects of colour had little stake in Britain's Second World War naval project. In fact, as Section II establishes, this was far from the case. During the research process, five forceful letters were unearthed from these files, written to the Admiralty on behalf of Black West Indian, Maltese and Anglo-Indian men who were denied entry to the service. Frustratingly, since these letters advocated on behalf of others, we cannot, and do not, hear the voice of the seafaring subaltern himself speaking from the Admiralty records. Nevertheless, this correspondence stands testament to the desire of many British men of Asian and African heritage to enlist for naval service. These letters of protest and entreaty are therefore analysed, not just as evidence of the continued performance of racially discriminatory practices at British naval recruiting offices during the war years, but also as a means of accessing hitherto neglected responses and challenges to naval racism from the rejected sailor's family and friends. These epistolary challenges to discriminatory naval recruitment practices are read here individually and collectively as meaningful acts of racial and gendered agency, opposition to naval race-based discrimination, and assertions of selfhood that complicate understandings of race relations and Britain's wartime armed services.

Throughout this article, the term 'race' is approached as an unstable social construct and discursive category. This, as Laura Tabili suggests, enables the analysis of an 'opportunistic flexibility' with which various historical actors created and employed racial categorisation.¹³ Tracking key pillars in the Admiralty's racially discriminatory perceptions of the sailor of colour from 1939 to 1947 highlights the ways in which a distinctive nautical investment in early twentieth-century 'race science' underpinned official naval reluctance to admit men of 'non-European descent' into the Service. Throughout the British Army, RAF, and RN during the war, there was considerable cross-fertilisation of ideas drawn from a pseudo-racially scientific discourse which shaped the broad enactment of exclusionary principles against 'a wide range of minorities and nationalities deemed to be insufficiently white'.¹⁴ However, the wartime Navy presents a unique and instructive case-study of the

12. Sherwood, *Many Struggles*, p. 42; Sherwood, 'Blacks in the Royal Navy', pp. 13–15.

13. L. Tabili, 'The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxiii (1994), pp. 94–5.

14. Kushner, "'Without Intending Any of the Most Undesirable Features of a Colour Bar'", p. 340.

creation and implementation of new social technologies of racial control and strategies of managing servicemen of colour within Britain's mid-twentieth-century armed forces. Wartime RN recruiting regulations may have been broadly aligned with the mechanisms of 'racially scientific' discrimination that the other services operated, but naval officials fashioned their own constructions of race within the maritime world, creating and performing specific stealthy strategies to oppose widespread racial inclusivity in the Senior Service. Discourses belonging to an imperial 'seafaring race theory' played a key role in shaping wartime naval recruitment strategies, and Spence has shown how Britain's recruitment and management of male personnel for colonial navies drew heavily on pseudo-scientific preconceptions of racial suitability for naval service.¹⁵ Some wartime recruitment of men from colonial coastal and river communities into Britain's Navy did occur, but the inclusion of 'non-Europeans' for naval service continued to be considered as desirable only under highly restricted and localised circumstances. Men of colour from the metropole were given very little encouragement to enlist at all. In the wartime process of establishing a revised set of racial border controls at the gateway to the RN community, the Admiralty regularly pleaded that the Navy represented a unique case and deserved special privileges to operate racially exclusionary policies in terms of enlistment and commissions. Their tactics consistently demonstrated the performance of Tabili's 'opportunistic flexibility' in the racial categorisation of who was granted access to Britain's naval community. As this article explores, the British wartime naval gaze allocated men of colour to specific, highly limited roles within the economy of naval labour in a warship and firmly consigned the sailor of colour to a place on a geographical and cultural 'imperial periphery'.

It is argued here that the wartime Navy serves as a prism through which to examine different discourses surrounding national belonging in relation to race and military service in mid-twentieth-century Britain. The language in which 'race' and 'belonging' were connected and articulated was manipulated in many different ways. Under the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act (1914), the common status of British subject applied to any person born within 'His Majesty's dominions and allegiance'. This status left considerable room for different groups and actors to interpret and claim Britishness and national belonging along a flexible range of political, cultural, geographical and racial lines. Like many of their contemporaries, various members of the Admiralty employed 'British' as a synonym for 'English', which was invariably equated with whiteness. The labels 'black' and 'coloured' were also used inconsistently and interchangeably in the wartime Admiralty files. In the period under discussion here, many people living in Britain tended to use the term

15. Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture*.

'coloured' to refer to anyone who was not considered to be 'pure' white European, including persons of Black African, West Indian, Asian, Maltese and mixed-race descent. Furthermore, the term 'native' was used to label persons identified as indigenous to colonial lands (even when this was inaccurate) and was often used commensurately with 'coloured' as a code for communicating an implicit cultural status of 'non-Britishness'. Within this 'larger racialized discourse of disenfranchisement' and framework of racial differentiation, Britons of colour continued to live largely outside the symbolic and linguistic boundaries of the white imagination in the metropole during the Second World War.¹⁶

In examining the wider fashioning of a distinctly white official naval selfhood in these Admiralty files, this article advances a literature that examines historical processes of remaking the modern sailor in the Royal Navy as racially white. It builds on the scholarship of Mary Conley and Isaac Land, who identify the increasing conflation of concepts of male 'Britishness' and 'whiteness' with an imagined national right to serve and belong in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Navy, confirming that these ideas also critically shaped naval recruiting and commissioning policy in the 1940s.¹⁷ To some extent, the Admiralty's attitudes towards creating a racially desirable community of white sailors during the war were not particularly new. A lengthy historical process of creating an increasingly 'hostile environment' for men of colour in the British navy while simultaneously promoting the RN as a literal and metaphorical figurehead of white British manhood, national identity and imperial power dates back to at least the early nineteenth century.¹⁸ Notwithstanding a short interregnum in which colour lines were temporarily blurred to meet the exigencies of the First World War, in this sense the 1939–45 conflict represents only a more recent chapter in a longer story of refashioning ideas of the British seaman as racially white in the modern RN.¹⁹ However, the fundamental change that the Second World War chapter of this story brought about was the British state's formal (if decidedly flimsy) prohibition of racial discrimination in the armed services. Rather than softening Admiralty views towards racial inclusivity, what Kennetta Hammond Perry conceptualises as the 'mystique' of the state's anti-racist policy had the effect of both

16. Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, p. 22.

17. M. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870–1918* (Manchester, 2009); I. Land, *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750–1850* (New York, 2009).

18. I. Land, 'Customs of the Sea: Flogging, Empire, and the "True British Seaman", 1770 to 1870', *Interventions*, iii (2001), pp. 170–82.

19. See, for example, D. Killingray, 'A Good West Indian, a Good African, and, in Short, a Good Britisher': Black and British in a Colour Conscious Empire, 1760–1950', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, xxxvi (2008), pp. 363–81; J. Jenkinson, 'All in the Same Uniform'? The Participation of Black Colonial Residents in the British Armed Forces in the First World War', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, xl (2012), pp. 207–30.

disguising and crystallising Admiralty determination to covertly institutionalise racial exclusion in the wartime and post-war Navy.²⁰

Against ideas of the racially desirable white British sailor, the emergence of the 'coloured' seaman as a source of social, cultural, economic and political anxiety in the early twentieth century maritime workforce also fed into the Admiralty's construction of the sailor of African or Asian descent as a problem figure in the Second World War Navy. On the whole, despite the 'seafaring race theory' that created gradations in the Admiralty's beliefs in the usefulness of some racial groups to the Navy's war effort, Admiralty discussions between 1939 and 1947 primarily articulated discourses of the 'non-European' sailor as inherently undesirable in general naval service. Official objections to regularising the inclusion of 'coloured' sailors in warships were, as Schaffer observes and as this article fleshes out, mostly rooted more in practical than ideological concerns.²¹ In specific ways, however, the practical and the ideological collide and entwine in the Admiralty archive. Racial discrimination in the wartime Navy must be read against a wider milieu in which the labour demands of the inter-war shipping industry had shifted and redefined ideas of racial difference in Britain.²² Inter-war assumptions that increasingly associated any seaman who possessed black or brown skin with a legal and cultural status as 'alien', and as the source of unfair competition with white men for jobs, implicitly informed and underpinned the wartime Admiralty's discussions surrounding the inclusion of sailors of colour on an equal footing in the elite national community of the RN. The net effect of hostile inter-war government legislation such as the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act (1919) and the Coloured Alien Seamen Order (1925) was to knot together more tightly racialised and 'alien' identities. This served to define Black and minority ethnic seamen in Britain collectively as 'presumptive aliens' and to create a loose second-tier form of British national belonging which was detached from white 'Englishness'.²³ Nevertheless, the trope of an imperial 'family' of British subjects pulling together in common endeavour was heavily tied into Britain's martial efforts in two world wars, and was not easy for the Admiralty during the Second World War to discard.²⁴ With its privileged status as a British

20. This is the term Perry coins to describe collective myths that have bolstered perceptions of Britain as a liberal, benevolent and tolerant state with regard to race. See Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, p. 92.

21. Schaffer, 'Fighting Racism', p. 250.

22. See, for example, J. Jenkinson, 'Black Sailors on Red Clydeside: Rioting, Reactionary Trade Unionism and Conflicting Notions of "Britishness" Following the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, xix (2008), pp. 29–60; L. Tabili, *"We Ask for British Justice": Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); K. Lunn, ed., *Race and Labour in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1985); D. Frost, ed., *Ethnic Labour and British Imperial Trade: A History of Ethnic Seafarers in the UK* (London, 1995).

23. Tabili, 'Construction of Racial Difference', pp. 93, 70.

24. W. Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford, 2007), p. 25.

national emblem of global pride and power, the twentieth-century Royal Navy was also closely tied into an imperial 'family' concept and had been deployed to propagate a binding sense of belonging and Britishness across the Empire since the late nineteenth century. Pre-1939 recruiting regulations made quite clear, however, that this sense of being 'family' stopped short of men of 'non-European descent' being allowed to join the Service on the same terms as white men. Thus framed by complex, tangled concepts which painted sailors of colour as both 'alien seamen' and 'imperial family' in wartime Britain, this article approaches these terms as two ambiguous and negotiated points on a shared continuum of discourse. This discourse critically shaped constructions of 'race', ethnicity and national 'belonging' in the Admiralty's debates over who should be included in the wartime RN, and by implication in the wider national and imperial community that the institution served and symbolised.

I

On 30 September 1939, a senior naval officer announced that 'there is no need for us to take coloured men residing in England who may show a preference for the R.N.'²⁵ When war broke out, it had been the Navy's intention under the Military Training Bill (May 1939) and National Service (Armed Forces) Act (September 1939) to reject any man of colour in Britain who stated a preference to join the navy. As a result of government pressure, however, by early October, the Admiralty had been forced to revise its position, deeming it 'politically expedient' to follow the Air Ministry and War Office in lifting the official colour bar as an emergency measure for the duration of hostilities.²⁶ Anxious about the risk of agitation across Britain's colonies, Malcolm MacDonald, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and the Marquess of Zetland, the Secretary of State for India, applied pressure on the armed forces to remove racial barriers to Britain's military services temporarily. Responding to a specific enquiry about the inclusion of men of Indian heritage in the RN, on 14 October, the Admiralty grudgingly announced a change of direction:

There must be no discrimination on grounds of race or colour. In practice much inconvenience would arise if this theoretical equality had many examples. Each case must be judged on its merits, from the point of view of smooth administration. I cannot see any objection to Indians serving on H.M. Ships where they are qualified and needed, or if their virtues so deserve rising to be Admirals of the Fleet. But not too many of them, please.²⁷

25. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute to Parliamentary Secretary, 30 Sept. 1939.

26. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute to First Lord, 11 Oct. 1939.

27. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Memorandum, 14 Oct. 1939.

The rather mendacious dualism exhibited here set the tone for the ensuing years of Admiralty discussions surrounding racial inclusivity in the Navy. Indicative use of the phrase ‘theoretical equality’ established a clear sense of intended naval resistance towards the proposed relaxation of rules on race and place in the Navy. This document also embodies Tabili’s ‘opportunistic flexibility’, switching back and forth between public acceptance of racially inclusive recruitment regulations and private imposition of conditions on and limitations to the service of men of colour. This two-faced attitude firmly underpinned the range of backdoor codes and strategies that the wartime Admiralty devised to deploy against candidates of colour.

Wartime Britain housed unprecedented numbers of new arrivals who formed a multi-national, multi-ethnic imperial community of allies, and the trope of a ‘family’ of Britons uniting across the colonial world to fight fascism was broadcast throughout the metropole and the colonies.²⁸ The Admiralty, however, did not subscribe to discourses that encouraged colonial peoples to identify themselves as ‘British’ and to consider themselves ‘at home’ in Britain, and vehemently opposed any suggestion of encouraging colonial men of colour to travel to Britain to join the Navy. Instead, the Admiralty preferred to expand existing colonial navies or create new ones, such as the Trinidad Naval Volunteer Force, inaugurated in October 1939, in order to prevent a racial open door recruitment policy:

If the coloured races in our Colonial Empire wish to volunteer ... the proper course seems to be for the colony concerned to raise an entirely coloured force, that is with coloured Officers commanding their own men, speaking their own language who they understand.²⁹

The prejudiced belief that men of colour from the colonies were psychologically, culturally and linguistically unfit for service alongside white British seamen was further articulated in Admiralty discussions which advised that, with the exception of ‘those limited spheres of employment where native races are specially suitable’, the Navy should continue to ‘set its face against’ any widening of entrance to the service.³⁰ Specific colonial coastal societies or localised riverine communities, such as the Kru people of West Africa or Muslim sailors from the Swahili coast known as ‘Seedies’, had long been deemed by the British to possess qualities that made them inherently superior to other non-seafaring populations for limited naval service. For several centuries, traditions of fishing and maritime trade among the Kru and the ‘Seedies’ had been harnessed by the British imperial power to legitimise its authority and to promote global naval superiority.³¹

28. See Webster, *Mixing It*.

29. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute to Parliamentary Secretary, 30 Sept. 1939.

30. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute, 26 Sept. 1939.

31. Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture*, pp. 6–7. See also Costello, *Black Salt*.

Throughout the war, the RN continued this long tradition of accepting men of 'non-European' descent for limited, local service in places such as the Mediterranean, the West Indies, East Asia and Africa. A distinctive, racially linked index of shipboard roles frequently operated, in which seamen of Black African, Maltese, Chinese and Indian heritage were traditionally allocated domestic roles such as stewards and cooks, or occupations which kept them below decks as stokers. Separate messing and sleeping arrangements were usually made for ratings of colour on local colonial stations.

Official naval opinion thus deemed that the 'rightful' place of colonial naval recruits of colour was to serve limited engagements on selected stations within their own 'natural' environment. In this way, the body of the colonial seaman of colour could be kept static, literally, figuratively and collectively restricted from accessing positions of power, and his employment would offer no threat to the labour of white British sailors. In addition to this clear adherence to separate spheres of naval service as delineated by racial and environmental borders, there was a distinct hierarchy of naval service in Britain's wartime naval forces. In subscribing to 'seafaring race theory', the Admiralty perceived that the so-called 'native races' were biologically unsuited to general naval service and lacked 'the qualities which are required in a Naval rating'.³² This stance was partially connected to long-running assumptions that climate determined biological suitability for localised naval service. From the eighteenth century, Enlightenment arguments that northern Europeans possessed superior morals and intelligence because of the temperate climate in which they lived were used to justify British colonial rule over peoples who inhabited hot or humid climates, which purportedly sapped morality and incited uncontrollable passions.³³ These ideas of 'racial suitability' for naval service resonated throughout official recruitment policies for the RN. As Spence notes, it was believed that a 'lack of imagination' rendered men of colour innately more 'suitable for monotonous work'.³⁴ The Admiralty's preferred colonial naval strategy was thus to allocate more mundane tasks such as anti-submarine patrols, harbour defence, minesweeping and local convoy escort duty to the colonial naval reserves, leaving the RN free to sweep out to engage the enemy in battle on the high seas.

Gradations of 'colour' were also fashioned in opposition to the supposed virtues of 'pure' white European heritage as a mechanism for filtering out racially undesirable groups of sailors from joining the elite naval community of the RN. 'Seafaring race theory' heavily conditioned the Admiralty's views of what one senior naval officer described as 'the borderline races', a category of people whom he deemed unsatisfactory

32. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute, 26 Sept. 1939.

33. Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture*, pp. 42–3.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

for naval service, in which he included 'near-whites' such as men of Turkish, Armenian, Syrian and Maltese descent.³⁵ With regard to the latter, the Admiralty had long denigrated the suitability of the Maltese for naval service. Maltese requests to join the inter-war RN had been firmly restricted to non-continuous (short) Service engagements and local deployments in the Mediterranean on the grounds of:

the unfitness of the Maltese for responsibility ... their dislike for service away from the Mediterranean and the family problems which would arise if they served on any other station; their ignorance of English; and, above all, their poor fighting qualities, which had been repeatedly emphasised, and had led to the opinion that the Maltese would be a weak spot in any ship.³⁶

This attitude continued to shape Admiralty responses towards hopeful applicants of Maltese origin throughout the war. Maltese sailors were racially categorised at the point of intersection where gradations of 'Blackness' and white 'Europeanness' met. As Simon Jenkins observes, 1930s and 1940s racialised constructions of the Maltese highlight the ways in which men from the Mediterranean area were bequeathed an 'in-between' racial status which was not fully white British, but nor were they entirely aligned with those of Black African descent.³⁷ Jenkins suggests that this 'in-between' status reflected both Malta's geographic and linguistic middle ground between Europe and North Africa, while perceptions of racial difference between Maltese and white British seamen were heightened by a hierarchical political economy of labour on naval ships in which, like most West African and West Indian sailors, Maltese ratings tended to be employed as stokers, stewards or cooks. Again, this conflation of racial groups and roles aboard ship produced and reinforced racialised hierarchies of naval service. From the perspective of enlistment and commissioning into the wartime Navy, the Maltese were expediently construed as racially more aligned with North Africa than with Europe, thus providing a means of restricting the longevity, nature and geography of these seamen's service.

Although the presence of African sailors in the RN can be traced back for several centuries, the Second World War confirmed the modern British naval gaze as decidedly white.³⁸ The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century 'cult of the navy' in British imperial culture fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between navy and society, tethering together national and imperial identities to shape a distinctive sense of Britishness that was symbolised by the Royal Navy.³⁹ As protector and promoter of Empire, the pre-1914 Fleet became a

35. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute from Head of CWII, 18 Jan. 1945.

36. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Extract from Board Minutes, 4 July 1938.

37. S. Jenkins, 'Inherent Vice? Maltese Men and the Organization of Prostitution in Interwar Cardiff', *Journal of Social History*, xlix (2016), p. 243.

38. Costello, *Black Salt*.

39. J. Rüger, 'Nation, Empire and Navy: Identity Politics in the United Kingdom, 1887–1914', *Past and Present*, no. 185 (2004), pp.162, 173.

potent national icon of imperial strength and naval men came to be represented as ‘defenders not only of British interests abroad but also of Britishness’ itself.⁴⁰ In so doing, it squeezed sailors of colour out of the wider cultural narrative. Despite the Navy’s appalling losses at Jutland in 1916, and drastic inter-war cutbacks to the service, elements of this naval ‘cult’ continued to shape social and cultural images of the prestige of naval men throughout the Second World War. Patriotic Britishness was frequently linked to the nation’s long-standing relationship with, and mastery of, the maritime environment. Conley highlights the creation of a distinctive ‘model of naval manhood’ that ‘served to inculcate British patriotism by constructing a shared British heritage based on freedom, whiteness and admiralty of the seas’.⁴¹ Increasingly, this ‘cult of the navy’ aligned itself with what Bill Schwarz describes as ‘racial whiteness’.⁴² Since white skin was viewed as ‘the norm’ in Britain and thus provided a means of defining ‘Britons’ against racialised ‘Others’, Schwarz notes that modes of transmission of whiteness rarely needed to be made explicit.⁴³ These Admiralty files contain only the most fleeting overt references to their preference for white recruits; rather, articulations of desirable ‘racial whiteness’ are found in the substitution of the word ‘British’ for ‘white’ and the racialisation of belonging in the nation’s navy. One discussion about the rules for entering naval ratings for permanent service ascertained that the entry of ‘Maltese or men of Colour’ for other than local service must be ‘subject to special Admiralty sanction’. ‘In practice’, the statement continued, ‘the cases that come up are usually those of half-breeds, and the decision depends mainly on the “Britishness” of the man’s appearance and habits’.⁴⁴ Acceptance for long-term or career service in the Navy thus depended upon the individual’s countenance and performance of racial whiteness under the guise of ‘British’ qualities perceived in his physical appearance, speech and behaviours during his interview with naval recruiting authorities. The Admiralty used constructions of identity, largely based around ideas of white Europeaness, to create a racially bordered pool of recruits for the service. This ‘racial community’ of acceptable naval recruits remained more or less sealed by a colour bar on the grounds that ‘the wider the nationality door is thrown open’, the greater the ‘competition’ to enter the Navy and ‘many Englishmen will perforce have to be rejected for naval service’.⁴⁵ This speaks to the powerful legacy of inter-war anti-alien discourses that were bonded to skin colour and viewed the Black or brown sailor as poaching in the preserves of white Britons. As an

40. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*, p. 125.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

42. B. Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, I: The White Man’s World* (Oxford, 2011), p. 10.

43. *Ibid.*

44. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Item 50 (ii) of Minutes of 14th P.P.O.C. Meeting held on 16/4, n.d.

45. For discussion of Britain’s imperial white wartime ‘racial community’, see Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, pp. 3–4; TNA, ADM 1/10418, Minute, 18 Aug. 1940.

extension of a racially white elite national community, the wartime Admiralty regarded naval service as the rightful privilege of the white British male.

The Admiralty's desire to maintain, as far as possible, a racially white community of seamen below decks is again articulated in a further flimsy justification for excluding recruits of colour. Admiralty discussions in October 1939 referred to 'the well-known difficulties we have in associating coloured men with British ratings on the Lower Decks of His Majesty's ships'.⁴⁶ No mention was made, however, of precise evidence or salient details of the 'difficulties' which are referred to here. Instead, these discussions were glossed over in general tropes of physical and cultural difference and assimilation which drew directly upon older imperial constructions of a so-called 'science of race' that synthesised phrenology, eugenics and crude 'social Darwinism'. Contemplating the 'problem' of including men of colour as naval recruits, subsequent internal consultations remarked that 'a rating who is not as the other men on board are is liable to be uncomfortable and a source of discomfort to the rest of the ship's company'.⁴⁷ Claiming a shared official knowledge that non-white ratings posed a risk to morale and discipline, thereby endangering the fighting efficiency of a ship, enabled the Admiralty to demand a special privilege to exercise practices of racial discrimination:

Conditions in the Navy are very different to those in the other Services; men have to live under much closer and intimate conditions; a man can choose his friends but he cannot get away from those who wish to be unfriendly ...⁴⁸

A distinctive brand of naval racism based on the intimacy of the shipboard environment and the necessity of maintaining a 'happy ship' in order to maximise fighting efficiency thus emerges from these files. Pseudo-paternalistic concern for the individual man of colour attempting to 'fit in' with a white ship's company offered a key mechanism for maintaining racial barriers to wartime naval service. Conjecture that the lower decks would not accept a rating of colour was propagated as received wisdom by naval authorities. Objections were raised to the inclusion of men of colour for naval service 'principally because they would not mix with the lower deck generally'.⁴⁹ Doubts were also expressed about how the meaning 'of pure European descent' might be applied to recruitment procedures: 'The Admiralty view has been that it should be interpreted as excluding persons whom the Lower Deck would be likely to class as "n****rs"'.⁵⁰ Such conscious marketing of racism as the natural preserve of the lower deck, rather than that of

46. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute to First Lord, 11 Oct. 1939.

47. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute, 15 Nov. 1944.

48. TNA, ADM 1/14149, Minute from D.P.S., 6 Mar. 1943.

49. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute, 26 Sept. 1939.

50. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute from Head of C.W.I., Nov. 1944. Asterisks added.

the officer class and ‘top brass’, offered senior naval officials a means of refusing ‘coloured’ sailors while proclaiming institutional commitment to racial equality and fair play.

Assertions of racialised humour below decks offered a further strategy for denying Britons of colour the opportunity to serve in the Navy. Frequently expressed official ‘concerns’ for the welfare of the sailor of colour insisted that he would be an automatic butt of racist jokes from his white comrades. Proclamations that ‘a coloured man might suffer from the gibes of those who still object to the coloured persons being received “into our midst”⁵¹ and ‘Any pronounced native feature would be a constant source of amusement which would be unfair to the man’ were common in the official naval archive.⁵² This presumption that the lower deck would immediately make the sailor of colour a target of malicious amusement on the grounds of physical difference not only inadvertently reveals a sense of class prejudice against the predominantly working-class lower deck, but also exposes another articulation of racial whiteness in the form of perceived working-class naval humour. In 1943, the Director of the Admiralty’s Press Division commented that if a recruit did not possess a ‘predominantly European’ appearance, he would be ‘likely to attract attention and comment from their shipmates, which however good humoured, is likely to cause distress and resentment if the person concerned is at all sensitive’.⁵³ There are echoes here of the twenty-first century concept of ‘banter’, in which teasing is regarded as ‘a means of performing masculinity, male bonding and creating boundaries to inform in-group acceptance and out-group rejection’.⁵⁴ By the early twentieth century, the bawdy ‘Jolly Jack Tar’ persona of the naval rating had been reworked into something more domesticated, decent, kindly and cheerful.⁵⁵ Desirable naval masculinity was fundamentally rooted in ‘good humour’ but these Admiralty documents suggest that the ‘good humour’ of the naval rating was enclosed by racialised boundaries. For ‘banter’ to be successful, there is an imperative to meet a ‘humour requirement’.⁵⁶ In manipulating an assumption that the racialised recipient of such banter would not accept the situation in the requisite spirit of ‘humorous and comradely’ tolerance, the Admiralty’s preconception of the non-white sailor’s response structure to teasing threw the onus of responsibility for maintaining harmonious working relations below deck onto him.⁵⁷ This wartime form of ‘victim blaming’ thus set up a binary in which

51. ‘Minute from D.P.S.’, 6 Mar. 1943.

52. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute, 26 Sept. 1939.

53. TNA, ADM 1/16775, C. Brooking to Honor Balfour, 10 Feb. 1943.

54. J. Whittle, D. Elder-Vass and K. Lumsden, “‘There’s a Bit of Banter’: How Male Teenagers “Do Boy” on Social Networking Sites”, in K. Lumsden and E. Harmer, eds, *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web* (Basingstoke, 2019), pp. 165–86.

55. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*, p. 3.

56. Whittle, et al., “‘There’s a Bit of Banter’”, p. 180.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

the white Tar was full of genial humour and bonhomie whereas the sailor of colour was positioned as primitive and volatile, and 'flunked every test of masculine respectability', including the ability to take a joke.⁵⁸ Under the guise of concern for the emotional welfare of the rating of colour, racialised humour was weaponised by naval 'top brass' as a tool to shut him out of the Navy.

Tacit reliance on ingrained racial prejudice among naval recruiting authorities and officers recommending candidates for commissions offered a further means of preventing large numbers of men of colour from either entering or progressing in the Navy. While the Admiralty may have been grudgingly forced to comply with the government's October 1939 lifting of racial barriers to the armed services, it nevertheless took advantage of multiple workings of institutionalised discrimination to quietly shut anybody considered not sufficiently white out of the Navy as far as possible. Theoretically, from October 1939, the colour bar on temporary commissions had been lifted for the duration of the emergency, yet the Admiralty remained quite adamant that they did not want 'non-Europeans' in command of white ratings. Should the war continue for long enough, it was accepted that some 'Hostilities Only' ratings would have to be commissioned in order to meet manpower requirements. However, there were still mechanisms by which the upper deck could continue to remain white. Candidates from the lower deck who wished to apply for a commission required the approval of their commanding officer; 'it is most unlikely', reflected one member of the Admiralty, 'that Commanding Officers will recommend for commissions any of the coloured ratings'.⁵⁹ The Admiralty maintained its two-faced approach towards racial inclusivity in the wartime RN through reliance on an implicit shared set of racist structural attitudes on the upper deck and in its recruiting offices to keep prospective officers and ratings of colour out of the Navy. At the beginning of the war, a view was expressed that 'hard and fast' collective regulations were required to deal with the issue of recruitment of men of colour for naval service. This view was rationalised on the grounds that it would be 'an unfair responsibility to place upon recruiters generally, to ask them to exercise discretion between a native whose intelligence might be such as to enable him to overcome the natural disadvantages of his race and a native without such qualities'.⁶⁰ Publicly, however, the Admiralty maintained the position that each applicant would be treated on his individual merits, and a few weeks later, the Director of Naval Recruiting was informed that 'it would seem desirable to notify to recruiting authorities the change in policy involved in the above

58. Marcus Collins demonstrates that this attitude critically shaped broader mid-twentieth-century race relations in Britain: M. Collins, 'Pride and Prejudice: West Indian Men in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, xl (2001), p. 398.

59. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute to First Lord, 11 Oct. 1939.

60. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Minute, 26 Sept. 1939.

decision so that they shall not refuse entry out-right to men who are barred from entry by the present regulations against men of colour'.⁶¹ In the event, this deliberately left naval recruiting authorities considerable scope to exercise their own judgement as to what the 'merits' of the individual applicant actually were. Some recruiting officers were clearly open to supporting the applications of men of colour. Others were distinctly less so.

II

Residues of the emotional impact of this informal colour bar can be found in the disparate surviving handful of letters that were written to the naval authorities on behalf of Britons of colour (including British Isles-born and colonial subjects) whose hopes of serving in the wartime RN had been dashed. Pulling together this fragmented range of 'ephemeral archival presences' to read more closely along the naval 'archival grain' enables the location, albeit at second hand, of some sense of the rejected candidates' experiences and feelings—and those of their families and communities—at being denied entry to the Navy on the grounds of ethnicity.⁶² While writing from within a vast global spectrum of different experiences and responses to British colonial rule, collectively these letter-writers tend to emphasise a shared belief in the service as an institutional branch of Britain's 'imperial family', both among British subjects living in the colonies and in the British Isles (though whether this expressed belief was genuinely held or more strategically leveraged is impossible to discern). Although penned from very different social, cultural, political, economic, colonial, familial and ethno-racial backgrounds, and from very different physical and emotional proximities to hegemonic white British national identity, these letters are read collectively here as anti-racist acts of protest against naval discrimination. They offer a fleeting glimpse into the subjectivities of the author, proffering deeply intimate expressions of selfhood that contrast with what Ann Stoler calls 'the sober formulaics of officialese' in the archive, and complicating understandings of race relations and Britain's armed forces during the Second World War.⁶³ Arguably, the content and existence of these letters in the administrative records, providing living evidence of racial discrimination in the Navy, somewhat destabilise the official naval archive and its accompanying narrative of racial whiteness as the ultimate signifier of 'Britishness' and national belonging.

61. TNA, ADM 1/10818, John Gerald Lang to Albert St. Clair-Morford, Director of Naval Recruiting, 22 Nov. 1939.

62. A.L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2008); M.J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016), p. 1.

63. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, p. 2.

An early voice of anger and disappointment at the wartime Navy's practices of racial exclusion pours out of a letter written in February 1940, penned by a Mrs J. Lepine from Surrey to the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. In her letter, Lepine sought to enquire into the Navy's recruitment policies for Anglo-Indians on behalf of her son, whom she was sure had been rejected for enlistment because of his racial heritage. Expressing considerable frustration that her previous communication to Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, had been 'ignored', Lepine challenged Chamberlain that she was 'anxious to know if you also are prejudiced against Anglo-Indians being accepted in the Navy'.⁶⁴ The letter clearly registers the lady's dismay and censure that her son had been refused entry for naval service on what she perceived to be a basis of racial prejudice: 'It puzzles me why the Navy should take this attitude'. As we shall see, like other letter-writers, Lepine used her correspondence to launch a blistering broadside in protest against racist naval recruitment policies, contending that it was 'unfair and senseless to condemn any race from sheer prejudice' and making an appeal for equitable treatment, remonstrating that 'This doesn't go to prove British justice'.

Echoing this letter's appeal to an imagined, idealised sense of 'British justice', a similar challenge was also launched in a letter received by the Admiralty in January 1943. On this occasion, the letter-writer was an unnamed white English mother of a young man aged between 14 and 15. Despite being 'very keen' to join the Navy, the youngster suffered the disappointment of being turned away from a recruiting centre in Bristol because his father was a Black West Indian.⁶⁵ Due to his age, the young man had hoped to enter for naval training as a boy seaman and thus to embark on a professional career in the service. Unfortunately, this route of entry came under the category of 'Continuous Service', for which the Admiralty had specifically refused to relax its regulations governing recruits of colour. Much of this letter communicated the boy's mother's outrage at the racist attitudes she and her son had encountered at the recruiting office. In particular, she reported that 'I was told that my son would probably not be acceptable because he has black hair and eyes, and an olive complexion. "If only he was lighter-skinned" was one remark'. As the mother of several sons, her letter emphasised the distress that these social and systemic practices of racial discrimination based on shade and tone of skin colour and 'un-English appearance' could cause within a family unit. The letter-writer also communicated a feeling of bitter irony that her son was not deemed suitable to make his career in regular naval service because of his skin colour but in a few years 'he would be called up in any case—so he would be considered

64. TNA, ADM 116/6208, J. Lepine to Neville Chamberlain, 16 Feb. 1940.

65. TNA, ADM 1/16775, Honor Balfour to C. Brooking, 18 Jan. 1943.

acceptable to fight, and perhaps die for his country'. Upon contending that since Britain was fighting to preserve the Commonwealth it was downright unjust that her son was ineligible to enter the Navy, the mother claimed to have received the following response from the naval recruiters:

technically there is no 'colour bar' for entrance to the navy, but simply ... my boy would not be able to 'get on'. He could sit for entrance as an apprentice it appears, but would be up against an intangible social bar: I was told that I should have appreciated this difficulty.⁶⁶

Once again the Navy denied allegations of outright discrimination. The Bristol recruiting centre seemingly maintained the official line that there was no 'colour bar' to the wartime armed services, although the discussion of the youngster's lack of 'pure European' appearance somewhat undermines this stance. Again, backdoor strategies of racial exclusion are evident in the recruiter's deployment of a claim that a 'social bar' that would inhibit his professional prospects and make his life afloat a misery in order to prevent the boy's entry to the Navy. This provides a clear example of putting naval two-faced paternalism into practice, invoking the pretence of doing the boy a kindness to discourage him from pursuing his application. The letter-writer was clearly dismayed and angry at this rejection, noting that her son had been 'decently educated and is fit and keen, but because of racial prejudice would be handicapped from the start'. The timing of this letter is particularly significant, as it was written only a matter of weeks after the publication of the Beveridge Report in November 1942, which offered a blueprint for a new, more equitable post-war society. Echoing some of the contemporary wider discussions that were in circulation about what the post-war reconstruction of British society would look like, the mother introduced both imperial and racial factors into the debate: 'Does this attitude give hope of real understanding between the peoples of our Empire—or of justice within these Islands? Should not social reconstruction start now—and not wait upon some problematical future day?'

In asserting her son's rights to join the Navy, this letter-writer articulates a clear belief that the naval institution should be reflective of Britain as a multi-racial democracy in both the wartime present and a peacetime future. The correspondent chose to send her letter to the Admiralty by way of the photojournalistic magazine, *Picture Post*, which was known for its liberal editorial views. Harnessing the power of a popular magazine proved an effective method of combating the Admiralty's *de facto* racism. When the Editorial Department at the magazine passed the letter on to the Admiralty, asking for their comments on the matter, some consternation was clearly caused in

66. Ibid.

various Admiralty departments. In February, the Director of the Press Division replied to *Picture Post* with a strong affirmation that there was ‘no colour bar as such’ against entry to the Navy but repeating all the familiar cautions that it was not in the individual candidate’s best interests to apply unless they were of ‘predominantly European’ appearance.⁶⁷ In a transparent endeavour to prevent unwelcome publicity, the Admiralty asked *Picture Post* to inform the boy’s mother that in this particular instance, arrangements could be made for her son to attend an interview at the Charing Cross Road recruiting office in London. However, clearly fearing a rush of hopeful applicants of colour, firm instructions were issued to the magazine that this information was to be shared with the correspondent only and was categorically not to be included for publication and public consumption. Within her epistolary assertion of power from below, this letter-writer deployed a range of tools to advocate for her son, including the emotive invocation of maternal outrage, familial disruption, appeals to ‘British justice’, and her own cultural capital as a white British woman. The records do not show whether the youngster was eventually admitted to the Navy, but what this letter does demonstrate is that, when threatened with reputational damage, the Admiralty was not prepared to risk making public its covert racist recruiting strategies. As a corollary to this incident, it is also worth noting that the boy’s mother commented on the fact that one of the original recruiters at the Bristol centre had ‘told me not to accept his word as final—there *might* be exceptions’.⁶⁸ This presents a working example of the levels of discretion invested in recruiting offices to decide individual cases on their ‘merits’, and the fact that entrance to the Navy for any length of service could be subject entirely to the prejudices of the recruiter on duty on any given day.

Challenges to the Admiralty’s attitude that the borders of Britain’s ‘imperial family’ stopped short of the RN were also launched from the colonial periphery. In her analysis of the responses of West Indian peoples to the outbreak of war, Anne Spry Rush highlights that many experienced a surge of affectionate desire to support Britain as the ‘mother country’.⁶⁹ Within the Caribbean region, many people identified—albeit for differing religious, social, political and economic reasons, and in different ways—with an identity as ‘imperial Britons’. This enabled colonial subjects to conceptualise, negotiate and manipulate a sense of ‘Britishness’ alongside more localised identities.⁷⁰ Determined early twentieth-century endeavours to promote the navy throughout the Empire as an agent of imperial strength, unity and

67. TNA, ADM 1/16775, Brooking to Balfour, 10 Feb. 1943.

68. TNA, ADM 1/16775, Balfour to Brooking, 18 Jan. 1943. Emphasis original.

69. A.S. Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization* (Oxford, 2011).

70. A.S. Rush, ‘Imperial Identity in Colonial Minds: Harold Moody and the League of Coloured Peoples’, *Twentieth Century British History*, xiii (2002), p. 360.

'Britishness' had also sought to distribute the 'cult of the navy' to colonised as well as colonisers, with varying degrees of receptivity.⁷¹ One of the letters in the Admiralty files demonstrates how a young Black Bermudan woman invested a complex range of emotions including hope, anger, disappointment and hero-worship in the institution of the RN. On 16 March 1943, a Miss Robinson penned a furious letter to the First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound.⁷² This letter provided a detailed account of an incident earlier that day in which the author's brother had presented himself at the Royal Naval Dockyard in Bermuda in the hopes of joining up as a Wireless Operator but had been rejected. Upon being called to appear before the secretary to the Commander of the Dockyard, Robinson recorded, her brother was flatly refused entry: 'one word "coloured" kept that boy from joining the British Navy'. According to Robinson, the secretary explained her brother's rejection on the grounds of 'naval orders', although it is unclear whether these 'orders' pertained to the Admiralty's instructions to prevent men of colour from travelling to Britain to serve in the Navy, the naval strategy of funnelling men from the colonies into colonial naval forces, or the wider backdoor colour bar which operated through the Navy's administrative and recruitment practices. In any case, Robinson clearly believed that her brother had been prevented from joining the navy on the grounds of his skin colour alone. Her letter professed to blame localised racism in the island of her birth as the culprit for her brother's rejection rather than to accept that such institutional racism was being directed all the way from the metropole. Alluding to a local culture steeped in centuries of racial discrimination, she contended that:

it is my idea that such orders must have been made in this confoundedly crooked little island—surely they could not have come from London!—It seems to me that I heard that any man regardless of race, colour or creed could join any of H.M. Forces ... I have suffered enough in twenty one years through being born with a 'lick of the tar brush'.

Bitterness and disbelief that additional racial discrimination to that already suffered by Robinson and her family could be channelled through naval recruitment procedures is poured into this letter. Written only hours after her brother's rejection from naval service, Robinson's strength of feeling is communicated through the ferocious dashes which punctuate her letter. This epistle speaks not only of her brother's humiliation and disappointment, it also testifies to her own pain and feeling of racial rejection at the hands of the Navy:

From early girlhood, I have always had the greatest love and admiration for H.M. Navy—and have heatedly defended it on many an occasion ... For

71. Rüger, 'Nation, Empire and Navy', p. 173.

72. TNA, ADM 1/16775, Miss Robinson to Sir Dudley Pound, 16 Mar. 1943.

nights since the war began I have knitted comforts for British sailors and love and prayers for their safety have gone into every one—is this reward?

A fascinating and complicated set of meanings attached by Robinson to the Navy emerges here. Although the RN had long been a chief vehicle of colonial power across the British West Indies, her letter does not articulate explicit connections between the Service and the historical legacies of racial oppression it helped to facilitate in Bermuda. Instead, like the previous letter-writer, she deploys an emotional appeal that lays claims to a wider status of personal ‘belonging’ in both the naval institution and the British imperial communities it served. Perry’s ‘mystique of British anti-racism’ is invoked here through the author’s semi-wishful, semi-accusatory construction of ‘Britain’ as a land of racial tolerance, equality and fair play.⁷³ It is certainly possible that the letter-writer deliberately employed these strategic discourses in the hopes of creating space for her family’s economic opportunity and professional mobility within the naval institution. In any case, this letter was intended to convey the disappointment of a woman who had treasured an idealistic image of the RN, had physically and emotionally invested in the institution as a beacon of personal opportunity, and who now felt that her place in that ‘imperial family’ which she so valued had been fundamentally threatened. Like many British colonial subjects in the Caribbean region, Robinson seemingly identified with an invented ideal of imperial Britishness that was bound up in impossibly inflated ideas of racial equality and fairness. In addition to the emotional distress that she describes her brother as experiencing, this letter communicates that the Navy’s racist recruitment policies also punctured her own sense of identity, self and status within this imaginary British Empire of decency and paternalistic justice.⁷⁴

Robinson’s letter ended on a personal plea, assuring Pound that:

I have not just written this letter in a fit of bad temper but am merely asking for justice, of which I know the island Home on which you live, is built.—If any of my phrases seem sharp please believe me, I mean no impertinence; but when one receives a blow from something that has been held dear—perhaps you know the feeling.

There is a distinct, perhaps calculated, poignancy in her direct emotive appeal, which affirms a sense of inherent trust in the First Sea Lord’s desire and ability to recognise the injustice of her family’s situation. Mary Chamberlain’s interviews with Caribbean women have highlighted kinship as a powerful, dynamic force in constructions of selfhood, a theme which emerges strongly in Robinson’s letter.⁷⁵ In her fury, she

73. Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, p. 92.

74. Rush, *Bonds of Empire*, p. 118.

75. M. Chamberlain, ‘The Global Self: Narratives of Caribbean Migrant Women’, in T. Coslett, C. Lury and P. Summerfield, eds, *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London, 2000), pp. 159–60.

implores and challenges the institution's hierarchy of command to acknowledge her brother's mistreatment, but also to recognise the legitimacy of her own anger and sense of personal disappointment in the Navy's racist attitude.

Collectively, these letters exude sadness and dismay at male relatives' experiences of racism meted out by the wartime Navy, a sense of hurt which also impinged upon the authors' own lives. Nevertheless, these are not victims' letters. They are powerful, angry, and rather brave indictments of the Navy's racist recruitment policies. In disputing the rejection of beloved sons and brothers for naval service on racialised grounds, these 'archival fragments' offer snippets of clear protest against ingrained racial discrimination within the armed services, and within the archive itself. As epistolary challenges posed by women to masculine power structures within the male-dominated naval institution, these letters also operate as an intriguing form of domestic anti-racist activity in wartime. In fighting for racial justice and equality on behalf of loved ones, they constitute both clear acts of maternal and sororal female agency, and assertions of private gendered and racial selfhoods and power. However, these texts are also layered with multiple contradictory dimensions and complexities which simultaneously enrich and complicate analysis. As Sherry Ortner reflects in her classic essay on the 'problem of ethnographic refusal', by uncritically slotting personal narratives like these letters into a monolithic framework of 'resistance' we risk obscuring their subjective 'ambivalences and ambiguities' and social complexities.⁷⁶ In entreating the Admiralty to permit their sons and brothers to enlist in the Navy, the letter-writers essentially pleaded for their men to be allowed to fight an inter-imperial war, highlighting some challenging ambivalences between the authors' commitment to anti-racism and stringent expressions of militarist and imperialist identities in these letters. The maternal agency expressed in the Lepine letter also articulates clear class-based prejudice, with the writer contending that her son deserved privileged consideration for enlistment in the Navy due to his family's high social status:

My father was an Inspector of Police for 26 years, he has even officiated as Dewan of an Indian State. His father was a doctor, yet a dustman's son has a prior right to the Navy than my son.⁷⁷

Through highlighting these challenging and intersectional subjectivities in British women's wartime anti-racist protests, these letters thus provide an important reminder of Ortner's warning of the need to introduce 'complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction into our view of the subject'.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, despite their many-layered dimensions and subjective

76. S. Ortner, 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xxxvii (1995), p. 190.

77. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Lepine to Chamberlain, 16 Feb. 1940.

78. Ortner, 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', p. 184.

ambivalences, these epistles help us to locate previously hidden voices of women of colour, and white mothers who bore sons of colour in interracial relationships, claiming and mediating their own identities and stories alongside those of the male relatives on whose behalf they speak.

Two other letters that engaged the Admiralty in battle were written by non-familial representatives of the wider communities of men of colour who wished to serve in the wartime Navy. In June 1940, A.V. Agius, Trade Commissioner for Malta, passed along to the Admiralty, via the Colonial Office, a request he had received regarding the hopes of Maltese seamen living in Cardiff to undertake naval service. He included a letter penned by Michael Camilleri, who kept a boarding house in Cardiff and looked after the best interests of Maltese seamen in the local community. Camilleri had written to ask for Agius's assistance in making enquiry of the Admiralty whether these men might be able to join British naval defence efforts in the Mediterranean. 'The Maltese of Cardiff', explained Camilleri, were keen to offer their services as 'The air-raids on Malta have encouraged the Maltese Seamen to do all they can to help the British Empire to keep the Union Jack flying over our Island'.⁷⁹ Agius added his own postscript, noting meaningfully that 'a large number of Maltese have already offered their services for H.M. Minesweepers, but it has not yet been possible to absorb all of them'.⁸⁰ Pointedly emphasising the contribution of Maltese sailors to the recent heroic feats of the Navy at Dunkirk, he reported that approximately ten Maltese naval ratings had seen action in the minesweeper HMS *Devonia*. The Maltese sailors' request to play their rightful part in the naval defence of a home that they understood as both nationally Maltese and imperially British contains clear echoes of the Bermudan letter's sentiments. Inevitably, though, the Navy's reply indicated that the Maltese seamen's contention that they were a valued part of a wider imperial family was not shared by naval command. On 4 July 1940, the Admiralty responded with the familiar bland official statement regarding the eligibility of all British sons of British parentage to apply to join the service for the duration. The Admiralty files, however, contain a rather more revealing 'fragment', an abrasive note that was clearly intended for internal purposes which states that the 'proper sphere' of the Maltese seamen was in the Merchant Navy and they would be 'rendering the best service by remaining there'.⁸¹ This again testifies to the longevity and performance of prejudices about the Maltese sailor's perceived lack of racial fitness for naval discipline, and underscores ways in which Maltese access to the RN was restricted during the war.

Finally, active national Black African and Indian political organisations also exerted a powerful influence on the government's

79. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Office of Trade Commissioner to A.B. Acheson, 19 June 1940.

80. Ibid.

81. TNA, ADM 1/10818, Note from D. of S.T., 16 July 1940.

undertaking to remove racial discrimination in the wartime military. The League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), a Black civil rights group established in Britain by Dr Harold Moody in 1931, fought particularly hard to change pre-war rules governing race and enlistment in the British armed services. In 1939 the LCP joined forces with the International African Service Bureau (IASB) and the West African Students' Union (WASU) to lobby the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and his counterpart in the India Office, to dismantle racially prohibitive military restrictions. Throughout the war, Moody and the LCP frequently challenged the Services' continuing racist recruitment practices, lobbying MPs and taking up the cases of individuals who had experienced racism.⁸² The final letter analysed here illuminates the solid determination of members of Britain's Black community to secure the lasting removal of the colour bar to military service after the war. A letter dated April 1941, written by Moody in his capacity as leader of the LCP, constituted one of numerous epistolary challenges launched by the organisation against Service recruitment policies. This letter is particularly significant as it communicates the LCP's deep concern about the re-imposition of a colour bar once hostilities had ended and desire to build a more racially equitable post-war military in Britain.⁸³ Warning that 'already measures have been taken to ensure a status quo ante after the war', Moody reported that one LCP member who was currently serving with the forces had recently received 'a printed notice about re-enlistment in the Services after the war, in which it specifically states that applicants must be of pure European parentage'. The Director of Naval Recruiting denied any knowledge of the existence of such a notice but the challenge to the post-war profile of the Navy was not so easy to quieten.⁸⁴ Although the Admiralty managed to shelve the question of race and post-war enlistment for a couple more years by claiming that it was impossible to make such decisions while the war was still raging, by 1944 this challenge could no longer be ignored.

III

From 1944, the Army, Navy and RAF began to consider what Britain's post-war armed forces would look like. All three armed services demonstrated a 'grim determination' to return to a pre-war status quo of racially exclusionary policy.⁸⁵ Under the guise of recognising the wartime loyalty, bravery, ability and sacrifice of West Indian aircrew, the Air Ministry led the way in openly pushing for a lifting of the colour bar

82. For further discussion of the LCP's wartime activities, see Rush, 'Imperial Identity in Colonial Minds', pp. 356–83.

83. TNA, ADM 116/6208, League of Coloured Peoples to Lord Moyne, 24 Apr. 1941.

84. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute from DNR, 19 July 1941.

85. Kushner, "'Without Intending Any of the Most Undesirable Features of a Colour Bar'", p. 362.

to peacetime service while quietly pulling the door to enlistment shut a little tighter through more informal means.⁸⁶ The Admiralty fought particularly hard to roll recruitment regulations back to September 1939, and between 1944 and 1947 numerous discussions about the racial makeup of the post-war Navy demonstrated the service's commitment to ensuring that the naval community afloat remained racially white. Although opposition to racial integration in the army and air force was also voiced, the Admiralty once again contended that the Navy possessed a special legitimacy for maintaining racially exclusionary regulations, on the grounds that unique practical 'difficulties' must be taken into consideration. In this way, arguments that were used to communicate the undesirability of allowing 'coloured' volunteers to enlist as ratings or receive commissions as officers during the war also found expression in discussions that sought to mould the post-war service along racially white lines. Indeed, in July 1946, the Admiralty informed the Cabinet that reasons for 'maintaining pre-war practice apply with even greater force to the Royal Navy':

Officers and ratings spend much of their time in ships where living conditions are often uncomfortable and very restricted. For men thus brought together in confined living spaces there is an undeniable reaction against the presence of other races ... Life afloat entails a sacrifice of privacy and the acceptance of an intimacy which have no counterpart in shore life. It would be far more difficult successfully to absorb coloured officers and men into H.M. Ships than it would be to absorb them into a land based Service.⁸⁷

The Admiralty also retained clear beliefs in a pseudo-scientific racial hierarchy, at the top of which the white European sailor remained with his perceived innately superior skills and abilities. As the post-war era dawned, the Admiralty's enduring attitude that white sailors were economically and martially preferable to the 'coloured' sailor for regular naval service invoked older anxieties that a highly skilled class of African and Indian sailors might deprive white British men of privileged employment and status in the Navy. Admiralty suspicion that fewer resources would be allocated to the peacetime Navy thus became an additional plea for reintroducing legal codes of racial prohibition. In September 1945 it was contended that lack of funding would make it difficult to maintain the size of post-war Navy that the Admiralty argued was necessary to secure the national interest. The rationale for renewed formal codification of racial exclusion was thus based in a claim that it was 'essential that every man recruited is of the highest possible calibre capable of being used in any ship or establishment to which he may be sent and rising to whatever level in Naval service his

86. *Ibid.*

87. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Memorandum by First Lord of the Admiralty, 23 July 1946.

88. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute, 25 Sept. 1945.

qualities may permit'. Dire warnings predicted that 'it would not be in the interests of efficiency to accept men of colour'.⁸⁸

As in the army and air force, the key focus of debates about the post-war composition of the Navy concentrated largely on the question of granting peacetime commissions. In 1944 the Secretaries of State for India and the Colonies increased pressure on the services to remove permanently the stipulation that regular commissions could only be granted to officers of 'pure' European descent. Warnings that the colour bar to commissions in the armed forces represented a clear threat to the future of the British imperial project deepened. The Navy, however, remained stubbornly resistant to pressure from the Colonial and India Offices, expressing a trenchant view in November 1944 that British colonial policy of non-discrimination against men of colour was 'more suited to Utopia than to the world as it is to-day'.⁸⁹ Until 1947, when forced to accept at least the *de jure* principle of racial equality in commissioning officers, the RN renewed its assertion that 'white lower deck personnel are averse to serving under coloured officers'.⁹⁰ Discourses claiming that 'coloured' officers were unsuited to command white ratings had underpinned naval recruitment policies since long before the war, but they attained a new level of vehemence as discussions about the post-war Navy gathered pace. In 1944, an internal minute stated that:

to expect a United Kingdom rating to take orders from a coloured man holding either Petty Officer rank or commissioned rank is putting a strain on discipline which in these days of relative slacker discipline is undesirable.⁹¹

Extending this line of argument, in 1946 the Admiralty expressed concerns that the inclusion of 'coloured' officers in ships would adversely impact on deployment abroad:

The Royal Navy is more liable than the other two Services to come into contact with the Dominions and with other countries. In many places the presence of non-Europeans in the complement of one of H.M. Ships, especially as officers, would be in the highest degree embarrassing for the Service, for the individual and for the authorities on the other side.⁹²

South Africa was frequently identified as one place where 'difficulties and unpleasantness' may be experienced on the basis that 'conditions ashore, are such that the coloured officer would be debarred from enjoying many of the amenities available to white officers'.⁹³ The Admiralty also opined that imperial policy and national pride would suffer from a racially inclusive service, arguing in early 1947 that if

89. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute, 15 Nov. 1944.

90. TNA, ADM 116/6208, 'Memorandum: The Colour Bar', n.d.

91. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute, 15 Nov. 1944.

92. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Memorandum by First Lord of the Admiralty, 23 July 1946.

93. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute to First Lord, 2 Feb. 1945.

the king should visit South Africa, the presence of naval personnel of colour would prove politically embarrassing and inhibit ceremonies in the Dominions: 'We could hardly allow a coloured officer to be present on such an occasion nor would it be wise to have coloured ratings mixed with white, on any ceremonial parade etc'.⁹⁴ The Admiralty were also quick to harness shifting colonial situations to their arguments, especially once Indian and Burman independence began to loom large on the imperial horizon. In February 1947, anxieties about the end of British rule in India and Burma were presented as justifying continued blanket racial discrimination in Naval recruitment:

Until the future can be more clearly seen, it appears unwise to admit them on permanent engagements, and if this is accepted, undesirable to modify the present regulations at all at the present time, since any discrimination between Indians and Burmese on the one hand and Colonial subjects on the other would surely cause great difficulty.⁹⁵

Security concerns that men from these nations might be entered for regular service in the Navy and then find themselves in a conflicted situation should India or Burma become a hostile, or even allied, power were cemented as key pillars of the Admiralty's unyielding position.

Again yoking expressions of pseudo-concern for the individual sailor's happiness to the wider plea that the peacetime Navy ought to receive special dispensation to retain a colour bar, in July 1946 the First Lord of the Admiralty informed the Cabinet that 'The welfare of the R.N. is planned on the basis that the United Kingdom is "home"'. For instance all sailors have a right to expect to spend some part of their time within reach of their families'.⁹⁶ Explaining that the Admiralty was mindful of the need to strike an effective balance between time spent ashore and time at sea for the sailor's morale and health, he reasoned that

It does not follow because a non-European was living in the United Kingdom at the time of his enlistment that his family and connections would be here. The opposite is more likely. It would not then be possible under the existing schemes of naval drafting for him to be given enough time with this family for his own well-being.⁹⁷

Once again, the concept that a prospective recruit of colour could conceivably possess African, Asian, or other racial heritage and simultaneously be entitled to identify himself as 'British' and regard Britain as 'home' was entirely ignored.

Kushner describes the route to the eventual removal of the colour bar in the armed services in 1947 as a 'tortured path'.⁹⁸ Nowhere is

94. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute from Head of CW, 1 Feb. 1947.

95. *Ibid.*

96. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Memorandum by First Lord of the Admiralty, 23 July 1946.

97. *Ibid.*

98. Kushner, "Without Intending Any of the Most Undesirable Features of a Colour Bar", p. 361.

this description more apt than in the Navy's professed commitment to maintaining a transparent and fair-handed approach to decision-making about post-war regulations and racial discrimination. Having been informed of the impending decision to lift the pre-war regulations concerning 'non-Europeans' in the air force, the Navy expressed deep concern that, should it be obliged to adopt the RAF's approach, convenient *de facto* loopholes, such as the nebulous and subjective terrain of personal 'character', by which candidates of colour could currently be refused entry to the RN, would be sealed off. The Admiralty files document deep anxieties that 'if a coloured candidate were given no marks for interview he could still be on the successful list if his educational marks were good enough'.⁹⁹ Furthermore, there is a strong implication in these records that if proposals to remove the colour bar were to be adopted, the Navy's usual backdoor mechanisms of unobtrusively avoiding the selection of 'coloured' entrants would no longer function so effectively: 'it is difficult to believe that the Service Depts. could indefinitely "blackball" every Indian, for example, who applied for a commission'. 'Sooner or later', one senior naval officer cautioned, 'the hidden-hand would become obvious, and the political complications would then probably be worse than now exist under the clear-cut and publicly-stated ban'.¹⁰⁰ Prospective political and publicity risks of being *seen* to be operating mendacious backdoor strategies of racial discrimination, as opposed to a 'cleaner' overt colour bar, were further outlined in a pompous warning of the inevitability that:

the charge of hypocrisy would be added to that of unfair discrimination. It would be almost as dangerous to appear to constrict the application of the principle by administrative action; for if figures were produced showing that a high proportion of non-European candidates had been unsuccessful it might not be entirely convincing to reply that in all cases they were below the standard for Europeans.¹⁰¹

General foreign policy and security concerns were also expediently roped into this discourse of specious reasoning. In early 1947, George Hall, the First Lord of the Admiralty, contended that 'Commonwealth interests would be injured more severely if some years after relaxing our entry regulations it was disclosed that no coloured officers had in fact been entered'.¹⁰² This self-confident certainty that no officers of colour would enter the Navy may be read as tantamount to full admission that informal practices of racial discrimination would indubitably be used to maintain the colour bar in peacetime regular service. With appreciable hypocrisy, however, the Admiralty claimed that 'Whatever we do

99. TNA, ADM 116/6208, Minute from Head of CW II, 30 Sept. 1945.

100. *Ibid.*

101. TNA, ADM 116/6208, 'Memorandum: The Colour Bar'.

102. TNA, ADM 116/6208, 'Admission of Non-European Personnel into the U.K. Forces: Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty', [early 1947].

103. TNA, ADM 116/6208, 'Memorandum: The Colour Bar'.

must be honest and open'.¹⁰³ Clearly, therefore, the Navy's primary moral imperative in the immediate post-war period was to avoid the appearance, rather than the actual practice, of racial discrimination.

Nevertheless, despite such trenchant opposition to removal of the colour bar for entry to naval service, in early June 1947 the Cabinet concluded that 'it would be difficult to justify the retention of an admitted ban on the entry of non-Europeans' in Britain's armed forces.¹⁰⁴ Arguing that there would be 'no need to give wide publicity' to the Government's decision to lift the formal colour bar, on 5 June 1947 the Cabinet agreed to follow the example of the RAF in so far as:

British subjects and British protected persons of non-European race should be admitted to the Royal Navy and the British Army, provided that they attained the requisite standards, were resident in this country, and could satisfy the selection authorities that they were likely to mix with other entrants and hold their own in the corporate life of the Services.¹⁰⁵

This was not remotely the equitable open-door policy of racial inclusion into Britain's armed services for which civil rights organisations such as the LCP, and the letter-writers discussed earlier, had fought. It continued to leave vast room for 'opportunistic flexibility' in the exercise of racism in recruitment and enlistment practices. As Sherwood notes, although the colour bar was finally removed from naval recruiting instructions in 1948, ultimately there is no way of knowing how frequently this 'new administrative ploy' of rejecting candidates of colour on the tenuous grounds that they might not mix well with other white ratings or officers was employed.¹⁰⁶

IV

In twenty-first-century Britain a cultural narrative has sprung up around the idea that the Second World War brought a 'redemptive ending' to racial discrimination in the armed forces.¹⁰⁷ Yet the story of racial exclusion and discrimination in the Royal Navy did not end with the lifting of restrictions to wartime service in 1939 or peacetime service in 1947. While the removal of a formal, codified colour bar prohibiting entry to the RN marked an important moment in British race relations, the diffuse system of clandestine naval racism that replaced it became more difficult to challenge openly after the war. The Admiralty archive of 1939–47 emphasises that racial discrimination continued to have an impact on enlistment and commissioning in the wartime and post-war Navy in multiple covert ways. The Navy's

104. TNA, ADM 116/6208, 'Extract of Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet', 3 June 1947.

105. *Ibid.*

106. Sherwood, *Many Struggles*, p. 25.

107. Kushner, "Without Intending Any of the Most Undesirable Features of a Colour Bar", p. 344.

ongoing endeavour to circumvent both the 1939 lifting of the colour bar to wartime service and its permanent counterpart in 1947, at the same time as publicly proclaiming the institution's commitment to equality of opportunity, epitomises Tabili's 'opportunistic flexibility' in the historical construction and application of 'race' as a mode of categorisation. Resorting to the creation of a plethora of evasive and shadowy strategies to prevent Britons of colour from joining the service, the Admiralty sought to maintain the mid-twentieth century Navy as a racially white community as far as possible. Synthesising language and ideas from inter-war maritime labour unrest, 'seafaring race theory', class prejudice, imperial anxiety and the 'cult of the navy', the Admiralty refined an exclusionary discourse that sought to impose severe limits on the service of seamen whom they considered not 'white' enough. In this way, the Admiralty sought to embed a shared knowledge of the unsuitability of some racial groups for naval service in wartime and early post-war recruitment in the RN. Pleading a special privilege to operate racially exclusionary policies, the Navy shrouded its fierce resistance to the inclusion of ratings of colour in a language of concern for the well-being of these men in a shipboard environment. Under the guise of caring for the rights and protection of the 'coloured' rating, this generated a vicious circuit of 'victim blaming' discourse which locked the 'non-European' sailor into an entrenched status as complicit in his own experiences of racism below decks. What emerges from the archive, therefore, is a two-faced paternalism in the Admiralty that weaponised a language of equality and fairness as a means of tacitly upholding the colour bar and reinforcing practices of racial discrimination in naval recruitment. Wartime naval recruitment of colonial manpower on a massive scale may well, as Spence suggests, have forced some broader 'cultural change in British attitudes towards colonial subjects and their "racial" suitability for naval service' in the colonial navies.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, this 'cultural change' was not total, and it certainly did not extend to promoting racial inclusivity in Britain's domestic Navy.

Throughout the Second World War era of global imperial flux, the Royal Navy's opposition to racial inclusivity and equality, and its institutionalisation of covert forms of racial discrimination in naval recruitment, spotlights wider contemporary disputes that were playing out in constructions of 'British' selfhoods. Internal discussions about the profile of the post-war Navy were held against a backdrop of increasingly heated wider political debates about imperial decline, migration from the Commonwealth, demographic change, and nationality laws. By the 1950s a 'veritable crisis of national self-representation' had unfolded in

108. Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture*, p. 1.

109. C. Waters, "'Dark Strangers' in our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1963", *Journal of British Studies*, xxxvi (1997), p. 208.

Britain; yet, as the Admiralty files underscore, this 'crisis' began brewing well before 1945.¹⁰⁹ Debates over rights to serve in the Royal Navy between 1939 and 1947 saw the deployment of conflicting discourses of national 'belonging' both by naval authorities who were determined to maintain some form of racial barrier to naval service, and by people of colour who protested against the Navy's racist recruiting practices as being inherently 'un-British'. The Admiralty's race-based 'politics of belonging' that shaped entrance to, and career progression in, the RN undoubtedly formed part of a wider 'political project' to police the racial boundaries of the British nation in the pre-Windrush era. Yet such systemic racism in naval enlistment and commissioning during the Second World War did not go uncontested. Epistolary challenges sent to the Admiralty by relatives and representatives of men who were rejected on the grounds of racial heritage challenged the racially white 'cult of the navy' to which the Admiralty subscribed, offering competing definitions of Britishness, national belonging, and the right to serve. As the letters from the families and communities of men of Maltese, West Indian and Anglo-Indian British subjects testify, different racial and ethnic groups both in Britain and the colonies during the Second World War articulated a sense of imperial British identity through constructions of the RN as an institution that symbolised the best of 'British' might and justice across the globe. Expressions of desire to 'belong' in the Navy represented part of a dynamic process of identity creation and emotional investment in the nation. Asserting the legitimate claim of people of colour to inhabit naval space and culture during this period was also fundamentally a discussion about feeling 'at home' in Britain and, in Perry's phraseology, strategically 'leveraging claims to imperial belonging and citizenship'.¹¹⁰ In challenging the right of their menfolk to serve in the wartime Royal Navy, therefore, these letter-writers fundamentally contested the wider right of persons of colour to belong as accepted Britons and to consider Britain as 'home' in the pre-Windrush era.

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110. Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, p. 27.