Constructing the Identity of the Popular Pirate

The Outlaw, Marginal Identities, and Utopia in
Black Sails (2014-2017) and *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013)

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how the Golden Age of piracy and the identity of pirates is reconstructed in the recent popular television series *Black Sails*, and the videogame *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. By building upon recent literature on the connection between pirates in popular culture and history, it asks: How is the identity of the popular pirate constructed in the recent television series *Black Sails* (2014-2017) and the videogame *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013)? In order to answer this question, this thesis is divided into three chapters which elaborate on the following three themes: outlaw identity, gender and ethnicity, and utopia. Each theme will be discussed in relation to pirates in popular representations by providing a discussion of (recent) literature, and a subsequent application of the discussed ideas on both *Black Sails* and *Assassin's Creed IV* by elaborating on a few key moments. Discussing the way pirates are represented in popular media grants insights into the way the past is invented on screen, how pirates are idealized, and how videogame- and filmmakers alike create and maintain a sense of believability in stories which mix (historical) fact with fiction. As the appeal of the outlaw and the pirate outlaw is widespread, they have been interpreted in countless (fictional) stories, and this, in turn, has created a persistent image of a mythical pirate, which is even further articulated because of the fact that so little is known about the historical pirates of the Golden Age. Yet this scarcity also offers videogame- and filmmakers the freedom to paint their own idealized picture of Golden Age pirates, and it adds to the fabricated status of pirates on screen. As I have argued in this thesis, the idealization and contemporary nature of the pirate in *Black Sails* and *AC4* is evident in the way they represent a more desirable version of the past, in which current societal issues, such as the representation of marginal identities, play a significant role in the establishment of a story which is supposed to appeal to a twenty-first century audience. Recent representations of Golden Age pirates thus indicate that, even if they seem to depart from more caricatured versions of pirates, they still pertain to utopian ideas expressed not only in their narratives, but also in their visual and musical aspects.

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Introduction

The Golden Age of piracy (1650s – 1720s) inspired many popular representations of the pirate in recent media. In these stories, much of what constitutes the pirate is based on myth rather than actual history. Like other outlawed characters in popular stories, the pirate is a highly idealized figure, in the sense that much of his life is invented and made to appear better compared to his historical counterparts, yet this is not strange, considering the extreme scarcity of reliable historical sources. Instead, the pirate is defined by the way he is constructed through recurring popular images, and this is also why, when thinking of the term 'pirates', we tend to visualize a particular type of pirate based on pirates from the Golden Age. More than just an outlaw, the pirate is perceived as a special type of criminal who gained the status of being an 'enemy of all mankind,' making him a particularly useful 'archetype' for the creation of thrilling and adventurous stories. Next to his rebellious and adventurous nature, the pirate may be such an attractive figure in popular stories precisely because of this status, and in many popular representations he embodies a more desirable, or even 'utopian' way of life, free from the constraints of the civilized world. Above all, the pirate is a highly ambivalent figure, in the sense that he is a criminal, but also a figure who fights oppressive forces. The complexity of the pirate, and his deviating lifestyle, is one of the foremost reasons why he continues to appear in popular adaptations of the Golden Age era, and as so much of the historical pirates of the Golden Age is unknown, videogame- and filmmakers alike rely on inventions.

In this thesis, I explore the identity of the popular pirate as derived from the Golden Age of piracy in a variety of ways: by investigating his popular appeal in connection to his status as outlaw, by discussing possible alternative representations of pirates in terms of gender and ethnicity, and by discussing the way pirate identities on screen are shaped by utopian ideas. Taken together, these three perspectives may tell us something about the way the popular pirate is constructed, and more specifically, the way he is constructed in the recent television series *Black Sails* (2014-2017) and the videogame *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013), here abbreviated to *AC4*. To summarize this aim, I have formed the following question: How is the identity of the popular pirate constructed in the recent television series *Black Sails* (2014-2017) and the videogame *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013)? I have chosen these two titles because of the following reasons. First of all, these titles both attempt to recreate the last phase of the Golden Age of piracy (from ca.

1715-1720s) including similar representations of historical places and pirate figures, such as Anne Bonny and Woodes Rogers[1]. Secondly, media such as *Black Sails* and *AC4* have an impact on the way Golden Age pirates, and the early eighteenth century Caribbean as a whole, are interpreted by a contemporary audience, because the consumption of these media is widespread – *Black Sails* is currently part of Netflix's catalogue, and *AC4* has sold over 11 million copies since its release in October 2013.[2] Finally, both *Black Sails* and *AC4* are known for suggesting a more historically 'accurate' and gritty version of pirates,[3] which raises the question whether these titles provide an alternative take on this particular piece of history, certainly when considering that sources from the Golden Age itself are scarce. By investigating the construction of the identity of the popular pirate, that is, the recurring idealized figure who is supposed to be derived from actual Golden Age pirates, we may gain a better understanding of the way popular historical events and persons are being dealt with in contemporary media, and how recent popular media such as *Black Sails* and *AC4* attempt to present a more diverse array of identities and ideals – portrayals which pertain to a strikingly contemporary mindset.

Recent academic literature on the topic of Golden Age pirates in history and popular culture such as Antonio Sanna et. al's compelling *Pirates in History and Popular Culture* (2018) demonstrates that the Golden Age pirate, due to its ongoing popularity and the various ways in which he is represented, remains a relevant topic. Sanna's *Pirates in History* provides a variety of essays which not only illustrate how the popular or 'mythicized' pirate continues to be intertwined with ideas about the past, but also how much of a contemporary construction the popular pirate actually is. *Pirates in History* offers a multitude of case studies, ranging from novels to cinematic representations, including one essay by Jessica Walker on *Black Sails*' representations of queer sexualities – an essay which, like Srividhya Swaminathan's collection of essays in *The Cinematic Eighteenth Century* (2018), shows that the way the pirate and the eighteenth century are played with on screen attests to concerns with the representation of identities. While Walker focuses on the queer sexualities within

[1] The story of *Black Sails* tells of the events prior to Robert Louis Stevenson's fictional *Treasure Island* (1882), including representations of Stevenson's invented characters such as James Flint, Billy Bones, and John Silver. Both *AC4* and *Black Sails* mix fictional characters with representations of some well-known historical persons of the Golden Age, including Anny Bonny, Mary Read, Charles Vane, 'Calico' Jack Rackham, Benjamin Hornigold, Woodes Rogers, and Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach.
[2] Evan Campbell, ''Assassin's Creed 4 Ships 11 Million Copies,'' *IGN*, last modified August 8, 2018. https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/05/15/assassins-creed-4-ships-11-million-copies.
[3] Richard George, ''The Dawn of Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag,'' *IGN*, last modified March 4, 2013. https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/03/04/the-dawn-of-assassins-creed-iv-black-flag.

Black Sails, Swaminathan discusses *Black Sails*' attempts at portraying more diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, and race in *The New Cinematic Piracy.*[4] These collections demonstrate that, while it may be easy to dismiss such films because of their (historical) inaccuracies, they remain valuable subjects of study because of the fact that they provide an alternative means of engaging with the past, which to many contemporary consumers may be much more entertaining, accessible and relevant than reading a book. Sanna's *Pirates in History* does not include an essay relating pirates to videogames; a scarcity which is odd, considering the immense popularity of (historical) videogames these days.[5] When it comes to academic research on popular media, it appears historians still have a tendency to overlook videogames, which may not come as a surprise, considering the fact that it is a relatively recent type of medium compared to, for example, films. However, the past decade has seen a growth in the attention paid to videogames in relation to history, and this is a trend I intend to contribute to.

When it comes to videogames, recent academic works, such as Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History* (2016) and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott's (eds.) *Playing with the Past* (2013), indicate a growing interest in the study of historical videogames, that is, videogames which attempt to represent a historical setting. Following Kapell and Elliott, historical videogames provide a means of looking at how the past is played out in the present, especially when it comes to the way 'modern values, meanings, and motivations'[6] are imposed upon these reconstructions. Although there is hardly any academic literature to be found on *AC4* specifically, with the exception of a brief discussion of *AC4* in Eugen Pfister's article[7] and Emil Lundedal Hammar's article on *AC4*'s side-story *Freedom Cry*,[8] the *Assassin's Creed* franchise has often been discussed by historians who study videogames during the past decade. *AC4* is part of the immensely popular *Assassin's Creed* action-adventure videogame series. Each instalment offers players the ability to explore digital recreations of historical settings, such as Renaissance Italy, the French and

[4] Srividhya Swaminathan, ''The New Cinematic Piracy: *Crossbones* and *Black Sails*,'' in *The Cinematic Eighteenth Century: History, Culture, and Adaptation*, eds. Srividhya Swaminathan, and Steven W. Thomas (London: Routledge, 2017), 151.
[5] Historically-themed videogames such as Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2007-) , and Electronic Arts' *Battlefield* series (2002-) have sold over 50 million copies according to *Video Game Sales Wiki*. https://vgsales.fandom.com/wiki/Best_selling_game_franchises.
[6] Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, and Andrew B.R. Elliott, ''Introduction,'' in *Playing with the past: Digital games and the simulation of history*, eds. Kapell and Elliott (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7.
[7] Eugen Pfister, '' 'In a world without gold, we might have been heroes!' Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games,'' *FIAR* 11.2 (Sep. 2018) 30-43.
[8] Emil Lundedal Hammar, ''Counter-hegemonic commemorative play: Marginalized pasts and the politics of memory in the digital game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry,'' *Rethinking History* 21.3 (2017): 372-395.

American revolutions, and ancient Greece. The digital environments in these videogames are rife with detailed reconstructions of historical architecture, clothing, weaponry, and so on, suggesting a sense of verisimilitude to an audience which may come to associate these videogames with history, especially if these media provide first-time encounters with a representation of a particular setting of the past. Although the *Assassin's Creed* videogames are inspired by history, they include an overarching fictional 'conspiracy' plot, in which the brotherhood of 'assassins' are essentially the 'good' guys, as they have to prevent the 'Templars' from obtaining powerful artefacts. Although the first instalment of *Assassin's Creed* takes the Crusades and the Holy Lands during the 12th century as its setting, the assassins and Templars are to be found in each *Assassin's Creed* videogame, regardless of the historical period it attempts to represent. This is why we find 'assassins' and 'Templars' in the early eighteenth century Caribbean setting of *AC4*: the original meaning of these (religious) denominations has been completely distorted in the process. The publishers of the *Assassin's Creed* videogames emphasize that these videogames are works of fiction,[9] which may be a clever way to avoid criticism, or simply because they so clearly mix historical settings with a fictional plot.

The *Assassin's Creed* videogames have been approached by historians in a variety of ways, ranging from perspectives dealing with the virtual recreations of past settings, how artefacts and architecture are reconstructed and how this adds to a sense of authenticity, how videogames can be used to teach history, but also how gameplay mechanics and narratives lean towards one ideology or another.[10] These examples show that videogames can offer insights into the way the past is reconstructed in the present, even if the primary motivations behind the creation of these videogames are commerce and entertainment. Videogames such as *AC4* and television series such as *Black Sails* are not created by or for historians, although they do promote the involvement of historians in the progress of developing these stories: suggesting authenticity has become a way to attract consumers. In a video on the

[9] Ubisoft's disclaimer, which is implemented in every *Assassin's Creed* videogame, explicitly states the idea that, even though the *Assassin's Creed* videogames are inspired by history, they are works of fiction which attempt to incorporate a sense of diversity as to minimize potential criticism: ''*Inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs.*'' (Ubisoft 2007).

[10] Some noteworthy discussions of the *Assassin's Creed* videogames include:
Adrienne Shaw, ''The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in Assassin's Creed III,'' *Loading...* 9, no. 14 (2015), which includes a discussion on the representation of marginal identities in *Assassin's Creed III* and Jonathan Westin, and Ragnar Hedlund, ''Polychronia: Negotiating the popular representation of a common past in Assassin's Creed,'' *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 8, no. 1 (2016): 3-20, which provides an account of the first instalment of *Assassin's Creed*, as seen through the eyes of scholars from different cultures.

development of *AC4*, scriptwriter Darby McDevitt noted that, next to *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724), the journalist Colin Woodard was consulted, who is famous for his popular history book *Republic of Pirates* (2007).[11] *A General History of the Pyrates*, first published as early as 1724, was said to have been written by Daniel Defoe, although some scholars have attributed the work to a certain Captain Charles Johnson. Not much is known about Johnson, and the reliability of the work itself has been disputed as well.[12] *A General History* has nevertheless become an indispensable source in many accounts of Golden Age piracy in historical research, and perhaps even more so in representations of pirates in popular stories.

The television series *Black Sails*, and the videogame *AC4*, are the main primary sources of this thesis. As previously mentioned, these media are quite similar in the way they both present reconstructions of the latter part of the Golden Age of Piracy (ca. 1715-1720s), and they include multiple representations of historical persons, places, and events. Videogames do, however, differ from films, in terms of the way they offer a different type of engagement, because of the nature of the medium itself, and because their target audience is different. Whereas the consumption of films is often perceived as a passive activity, videogames provide players with the ability to interact with a digital environment, and within the boundaries of the videogame itself, they are able to play out their own story. Yet, as I will further discuss in chapter two, *Black Sails* has the advantage when it comes to portraying more depth-of-character, in the sense that in a television series like *Black Sails*, it is easier to switch between different character perspectives and (sub-)plots.

Keeping in mind these different underlying qualities, I shall look at the way the pirate identity is represented on screen by discussing instances when such identities are explicitly played out. These discussions are built upon secondary literature of pirates in history and popular culture, but also more specifically in film series and videogames, as I have previously mentioned. In essence, the discussions of *Black Sails* and *AC4* are built upon close readings, but they also sketch a broader view of the construction of pirate identities in recent media. In the case of *Black Sails*, which comprises of 38 episodes with a duration of 38 hours in total, I have chosen a few different episodes (marked with Roman numerals in

[11] Ubisoft, ‘‘The Black Flag Diaries #2: A Diverse Open World - Assassin's Creed 4 Black Flag [UK],’’ YouTube Video, 3:05, September 9, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGTGHn_ZOP0&t= .
[12] Frank Richard Prassel, ‘‘Chapter 2: The Pirate,’’ in *The Great American Outlaw: A Legacy of Fact and Fiction* (Norman; London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 36-37.

the text), as an analysis of all episodes would simply be too much to cover. The same idea applies to *AC4*, in which I have zoomed in onto a few different moments in the story, as the main story takes about the same amount of time to complete as watching all episodes of *Black Sails*. Each chapter of this thesis comprises of a historiographical discussion of its sub-theme, its connection to representations of pirates in popular media, and an analysis of the way this is played out in the two primary sources. This thesis is not about the history of the Golden Age pirates themselves, nor does it delve too much into the question how a general audience perceives them. Rather, it is an investigation of the way the identity of a historical figure is constructed in twenty-first century popular media, what this may tell us about the way the past is idealized, and how current concerns with representing diverse identities are implemented in these stories.

Chapter one discusses the appeal of the outlaw in stories and on screen, and consecutively connects the appeal of the outlaw to the pirate. As I will argue in this chapter, the pirate is a specific type of outlaw, who, due to his special status and other appealing traits, remains an intriguing character in popular stories, as he has been imagined and re-imagined over and again during the last two centuries, and perhaps even further back. The following sub-question guides this chapter: Which factors make the outlaw, in particular the pirate outlaw, a popular character, and how is this reflected in *Black Sails* and *AC4*? The focus of the analysis is centred around the way the pirates describe themselves in these titles, and how this affects the way they are perceived. In the case of *AC4*, it is also a matter of accommodating the perspective of the player: in order to 'succeed' at the videogame, players must 'dispose' of many enemies.

Chapter two explores the ways in which *Black Sails* and *AC4* subvert and confirm established ideas about gender and ethnicity in connection to the image of pirates. The discussion of representing more diversity, that is, identities which do not conform to the norm of white, male, and heteronormative identities, is based on an exploration of what Caribbean diversity might mean, how recent studies of historical films and videogames have turned to the concept of identity, and what this may mean for the representation of marginal identities. The chapter's focus is centred around the following sub-question: To what extent do *Black Sails* and *AC4* represent marginal identities, and in particular gender and ethnicity? The analysis of gender and ethnicity in *Black Sails* and *AC4* is divided in two parts: the first part discusses the representation of the female pirates Mary Read and Anne Bonny, and the second part focuses on the inclusions of runaway slaves (Maroons) and what part they play in these stories.

Chapter three complements the two foregoing chapters by discussing the idealization of the pirate space as a whole. In this chapter, I elaborate on the following sub-question: In what ways are utopian ideas reflected in the construction of the popular pirate, and more specifically in *Black Sails* and *AC4*? This chapter draws upon the concept of utopia as examined by Ruth Levitas. Following her threefold framework, I focus on the way representations of Golden Age piracy can be approached as utopian descriptions, and more specifically, utopian imaginations which are imposed upon the past. In the case of *Black Sails* and *AC4*, I argue that Nassau represents the ultimate utopian pirate space, as it is placed in opposition of all they do not wish to be part of: the constrained, civilized, and oppressive colonial society. To further indicate the idealization of the pirate life as is done in *Black Sails* and *AC4*, I have included a discussion of the way the visual and auditory spectacle of these media play a significant role in the establishment of a romantic pirate and a desirable way of representing the Golden Age of piracy.

Chapter One

The Romantic Outlaw and the Construction of the Popular Pirate

If anything, the idea that pirates are 'romantic' or even heroic outlaws is a persistent one. There is something vastly appealing about those fictive characters whose main occupation is to live life according to their own rules, whether it is out of self-interest or to help out those in need. In popular stories, we find an abundant amount of characters who live outside the law, and the pirate outlaw is one of these recurring types. Using the outlaw archetype remains a particularly popular narrative tool, although the way they are portrayed differs. The outlaw represents good to some, and evil to others. Above all, the outlaw is a highly ambivalent character, in both history and myth.

In this chapter, I intend to answer the following question: Which factors make the outlaw, in particular the pirate outlaw, a popular character, and how is this reflected in *Black Sails* and *AC4*? I will investigate the ways in which the popular image of the pirate on screen is constructed through its ties with the outlaw archetype. By doing so, I argue that the pirate on screen is a narrative type which is based on the outlaw archetypal hero, but that he also deviates from the 'traditional' outlaw hero who helps out the poor. First, I will consider the concept of the outlaw in historiography and how it relates to pirates. Then, I will turn to a discussion of the popularity of the outlaw and outlaw pirates in popular media. Lastly, I will discuss how the outlaw figure is represented in *Black Sails* and *AC4*, and how these representations contribute to the idealization of pirates and their outlaw lives. Eventually, the appeal of the popular pirate, which is based on the pirates of the Golden Age, is not only grounded in his status as an outlaw character, but also in the ways he differs from other outlaws, such as the popular outlaws of the Wild-West film genre: the pirate finds himself in an exotic world in which he is an 'enemy of all mankind.'

Outlaw identity and the outlaw pirate

In its simplest definition, 'outlaw' refers to a person who lives outside the law, often as a punishment for certain crimes.[13] Historically, not all criminals are outlaws, but the pirates of the Golden Age of Piracy, on the other hand, were certainly perceived as outlaws. In this thesis, I define 'pirate' as a type of outlaw which has penetrated the popular imagination

[13] Graham Seal, ''Chapter 1: Introduction: The Outlawed Hero,'' in *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2011), 4.

well into our own time. Popular ideas of the pirate, that is, ideas which circulate throughout a broad audience, have a tendency to be based on highly mythicized stories and images of historical figures. The Golden Age of Piracy, which roughly dates from the 1650s to the 1720s when piracy thrived in the Caribbean world, is the historical period from which most contemporary representations of piracy take their inspiration.[14] Although the term 'pirate' itself is often confused with similar denominations such as buccaneers, corsairs, and privateers, I maintain the term 'pirate' to indicate the broader cultural construct of the mythical pirate as inspired by the Golden Age of Piracy and the early eighteenth-century Caribbean or West Indies. In the following section, I turn to a discussion of the concept of the outlaw, and more specifically the outlaw in relation to popular stories and history, and lastly, the outlaw pirate on screen.

As mentioned in the introduction, the popularity of pirate stories continued to rise during the nineteenth century and events from the Golden Age of Piracy inspired popular writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson and J.M. Barrie, known for *Treasure Island* (1882) and *Peter Pan* (1902) respectively. David Cordingly noted that the nineteenth century had a great impact on changing 'the public perception of pirates,' in which their preceding threat subsided and their romantic status advanced.[15] Literary works such as Byron's *Corsair* (1814) or Stevenson's *Treasure Island* have been influential in the idealization of the image of the popular pirate, yet he is not necessarily a product of the nineteenth century. Instead, I argue that the supposed 'romance' of the pirates can be traced back not only to nineteenth-century Romanticism, in which nostalgia, idealizations of the past, and adventure manifested themselves in many of its intellectual and artistic ideas, but also to earlier literary traditions in which the outlawed hero was already a recurring narrative type. The Middle Ages, for example, produced mythical outlaws such as Robin Hood, one of the most well-known characters of the English-speaking world, and the deceptive mythical figure Reynard the Fox, who is the main character of a cycle of fables written in French and Middle Dutch dating back as far as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The famous image and motives of Robin Hood contributed greatly to the idea of a heroic outlaw archetype, but this type is not exceptional to the Western world. Following Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits* (2000), and Graham Seal's introduction of *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History* (2011), we find an abundant amount of outlaw heroes spread across different cultures and times. More recent outlaw

[14] David Cordingly, ''Introduction,'' in *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates* (New York: Random House Incorporated, 2006), xxvii.
[15] Cordingly, xx.

'heroes' of history include, for example, the Indian 'Bandit Queen' Phoolan Devi, who turned to banditry to enact revenge on the gang who had violated her. Although she was a criminal, the media transformed her image into a Robin Hood-like helper of the poor; a woman who fights to survive.[16] As is the case with Devi, historical outlaws have frequently been mythicized: they are made into more desirable figures than they actually were. Devi's example would suggest that the idealization of the outlaw seems to occur in many different cultures, but the outlaw of Western cultures presents its own set of ideas and morals which do not necessarily correspond to opinions on outlawry within non-Western cultures.

In his extensive study of outlaw heroes in history and myth, Seal has demonstrated that the outlaw is in fact a global archetype, and although his circumstances differ, he reappears over and over again whenever 'social, political and economic power conflicts'[17] are involved. In contrast to Richard Meyer's argument that the outlaw is a typical American character, Seal emphasizes the universality of the outlaw hero, as he investigates the ways different cultures across the world have produced similar outlaw heroes. Outlaws are inevitably connected to violence, but they are also 'something more than simple criminals.'[18] Seal's statement resonates in Hobsbawm's account of bandits, as he noted that banditry, like outlawry, 'cannot therefore exist outside socio-economic and political orders which can be so challenged.' As Hobsbawm rightly stated, 'they only become outlaws, and punishable as such, where they are judged by a criterion of public law and order which is not theirs.'[19] Clearly, the 'law' in 'outlaw' is not the same in all places and times. Definitions of outlawry may not be the same in all places, yet the popularity of the outlaw character is widespread. The outlaw has manifested itself in the story worlds of pirates, and like other depictions of outlaws in popular media, they are coated in a thick layer of idealization.

Constructing the outlaw pirate on screen

According to Meyer, many famous American outlaws of the nineteenth century contributed to an increasing appeal of outlaw characters in literature and their subsequent role in visual media. In his article on American outlaw narratives, Meyer argued that the outlaw is a

[16] Mary Anne Weaver, ''India's Bandit Queen: A saga of revenge—and the making of a legend of "the real India",'' *The Atlantic* (November 1996). https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/11/indias-bandit-queen/304890/.
[17] Seal, 2.
[18] Seal, 6.
[19] Eric Hobsbawm, ''Bandits, States and Power,'' in *Bandits* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 8.

distinctive, though not exclusive, American type of folk hero.[20] He recognizes twelve recurring features of outlaws in (American) literature, such as their apparent generosity, cunning, bravery, and above all, a recurring 'Robin-Hood' theme: stealing from the rich to give to the poor.[21] Meyer argues that, when attempting to disseminate the reasons why the outlaw is such a strong character within the popular imagination, one should look further than folklore or literature: the outlaw should be connected to 'history, sociology and psychology.'[22] Following Meyer's argument, the outlaw is not just a popular literary character, but also a character which is embedded in deeper cultural layers, as he embodies certain desirable ways of life – a life rife with adventure, excitement, and freedom from the constraints of the civilized world. These are typical features which are articulated over and over again in (popular) stories. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter three, the outlawed life of a pirate is used as a canvas for a certain utopian type of dreaming, even though the pirates' utopia is severely limited by their struggles to survive as outlaws.

It is clear that popular ideas of pirates rely more on invention than on actual history, and as Eric Jay Dolin stated, 'movies have had an even larger impact than books and plays in creating the pirate craze.'[23] Although little is known about the actual history of the lives of pirates during their Golden Age due to the scarcity of historical accounts by the pirates themselves, images of pirates set in an exotic, dangerous, and adventurous Caribbean thrive in popular culture, and 'are still an integral and popular part of our narrative repertoire: from novels to movies to videogames.'[24] The scarcity of (reliable) historical sources may also be one of the primary reasons why so many representations of pirates rely largely on inventions, adding to the myth of pirate lives. Popular representations of pirates are undoubtedly rooted in an image which articulates more fiction than fact, and some recent pirate stories, such as Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* (here abbreviated to *PotC*) have reinvigorated the popularity of the mythicized pirates even more. Due to its ground-breaking success, films such as *PotC* may even have created a persistent image of pirates for years to come. According to Anne Petersen, the *PotC* movies contributed to a 'textual closure'[25] of the

[20] Richard E. Meyer, ''The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype,'' *Journal of Folklore Research* 17, no. 2 (1980): 94.
[21] Meyer, 101.
[22] Ibid., 115.
[23] Eric Jay Dolin, ''Epilogue: Yo-ho-ho, and a Bottle of Rum!,'' in *Black Flags, Blue Waters: The Epic History of America's Most Notorious Pirates* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 306.
[24] Eugen Pfister, '' 'In a world without gold, we might have been heroes!' Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games,'' *FIAR* 11, no. 2 (Sep. 2018): 30.
[25] Anne Petersen, ''"You Believe in Pirates, Of Course...": Disney's Commodification and "Closure" vs. Johnny Depp's Aesthetic Piracy of "Pirates of the Caribbean",'' *Studies in Popular Culture* 29, no. 2 (2007): 79.

image of the pirate, meaning that the image a general audience has of the pirate has become fixed because of the way this particular franchise portrays them, perhaps most notably in the shape of Johnny Depp's eccentric performance of Captain Jack Sparrow. However, I argue that the transformation of the historical pirate into a mythicized figure happened long before the appearance of *PotC*. Peterson's article would suggest that *PotC* has left an enormous mark on recent ideas of what constitutes a pirate, but I argue that the pirate as seen in contemporary films and videogames is actually a cultural construct which draws its inspiration from an older literary and imaginary tradition, in which Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724) proved to be the groundwork for many consecutive interpretations of pirates, however questionable the reliability of this source is. Disney's *PotC* has certainly reinvigorated the popularity of the cinematic pirate in the early twenty-first century, but other than Sparrow's quirkiness and status as antihero, its story is formed around an established, mythicized idea of the pirate. This idea has been fostered through numerous previous depictions of pirates, going back as far as *Captain Blood* (1935), alongside other movies such as the multiple interpretations of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1934; 1950; 1972; 2012), and numerous appearances in children's stories, from comic books such as *Asterix* (1959-), to the stories of *Pippi Longstocking* (1945). The popular pirate is, so to say, embedded in our cultural memory: ideas about this particular part of history are generated in the collective imagination. According to Astrid Erll, fictional history films 'are characterized by their power to shape the collective imagination of the past,'[26] and this is one of the primary reasons why the popularized figure of the pirate overrules a more historically accurate representation. Even though a pirate could roughly be defined as 'someone who robs and plunders on the sea,'[27] I argue that it is actually the broader, collective idea of what constitutes a pirate which has constructed its popular definition. In this sense, the original meaning of the pirate has become distorted through a strong, yet not entirely fixed, popular perception.

According to Seal, the outlaw in media representations is 'a flawed but romantic figure.'[28] The romance of the outlaw is strongly connected to his ambivalent stature, in which he is both perceived as bad (in other words, as an actual criminal who commits acts of violence), but also as someone who symbolizes certain values, such as fighting oppressive

[26] Astrid Erll, ''Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory,'' in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll, and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter), 2008.
[27] Cordingly, xvii.
[28] Seal, 12.

powers, pursuing (individual) freedom, and as a symbol of anything but a dull life. The outlaw mentality is not only recognisable in the more obvious outlaw stories of the Wild-West film genre: it also resonates in recent visual media depicting a vast array of historical periods. The immense popularity of recent television series such as *Peaky Blinders* (2013-), *Vikings* (2013-), and *Narcos* (2015-2017) not only indicates the intriguing appeal of crime and violence inspired by different historical times on screen, but also the ways in which these characters' perspectives are treated and idealized. Popular perceptions of the pirate, too, have been shaped by the transformation of actual criminals into romantic antiheroes – but it is this popular presentation which has persisted well into the twentieth century and further, and it echoes throughout many popular depictions of outlawry, including *Black Sails* and *AC4.*

The appeal of pirates is not only articulated in popular media. In the modern Caribbean, early modern countercultures, such as the pirates and the Maroons, continue to inspire modern subcultures. In her article *Welcome the Outlaw* (2005), Erin Mackie provides a compelling investigation of the interconnection between early modern icons of resistance in the Caribbean (most notably pirates and Maroons), and more recent subcultures in the Caribbean, namely the Rastafari subculture in Jamaica, and the Yardies subculture. According to Mackie, these subcultures take their inspiration from rebellious figures from history in order to re-imagine a utopian place in which the idea of resistance and (individual) autonomy comes to the fore.[29] She notes that pirates already had an iconic status during their Golden Age,[30] which implies that they were already entering the cultural memory lane during the time they lived. Mackie connects these 'outlaw' cultures to a nostalgia for earlier manifestations of resistance, which she perceives as being both subcultures and countercultures, although the latter is 'more complex, though one often granted to both the pirates and the Maroons.'[31] One of the primary reasons for this complexity is the idea that these outlaws do not simply oppose dominant institutions; their reality was more hybrid, and there is no such thing as a 'pure and absolute autonomy from the dominant institution.'[32] Turning to pirates in popular stories, then, may tell us whether these stories also represent this hybridity, or whether they are inclined to present a more black-and-white scenario.

As previously stated, the appeal of the outlaw is one that is by no means limited to one specific period in history, and as Meyer rightly argued, the outlaw continues to appear

[29] Erin Mackie, ''Welcome the Outlaw: Pirates, Maroons, and Caribbean Countercultures,'' *Cultural Critique* 59 (2005): 24-25.
[30] Ibid., 32.
[31] Ibid., 33.
[32] Ibid., 35.

in contemporary storytelling, albeit in modified form, in which he reflects more recent political and social concerns[33] - concerns which touch upon discussions of (the representation of) cultures, ideologies, and identities. When it comes to *Black Sails* and *AC4*, this is certainly the case as well, as their stories pertain to a particularly contemporary and seemingly socially justified representation of (pirate) identities. This tendency fits within recent trends within the humanities as well, as historians have increasingly turned to issues concerning the concept and construction of identity since the late twentieth century.[34] Considering the identity of pirates, I now turn to a discussion of the way the pirates' status as outlaws in *Black Sails* and *AC4* plays a part in constructing their identity.

Hostis humani generis: the outlaw in *Black Sails* and *AC4*

''The laws of every civilized nation declare them *hostis humani generis.* Enemies of all mankind.''[35] (I) Right at the start of the first season of *Black Sails*, the pirates are introduced as *hostis humani generis*, a term which, according to Christopher Harding, granted them a 'special status'[36]: they were viewed as criminals whose jurisdiction crossed all national boundaries, and it attributed to them a 'distinctive form of criminal behaviour.'[37] *Hostis humanis generis* used to be 'a widespread designation for the devil in the medieval period,'[38] but during the eighteenth century, it was more commonly used to refer to 'the savage or brigand.'[39] In early modern history, *hostis humani generis* was also used to specifically refer to pirates.[40] In essence, it dehumanizes those who have turned to piracy, and this is precisely what James Flint (Toby Stephens), one of the main characters of *Black Sails*, points out in the first episode: ''When a king brands us pirates, he doesn't mean to make us adversaries. He doesn't mean to make us criminals. He means to make us monsters.''[41] (I) The pirates in *Black Sails* are aware of the fact that the civilized world strips them off their humanity, as they are perceived as something worse than criminals: they are devils of the high seas. At first glance, the pirates do not seem to be heroic outlaws who befriend the poor or the

[33] Meyer, 119.
[34] Simon Gunn, ''Identity,'' in *History and Cultural Theory* (New York; Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 130.
[35] *Black Sails,* season 1 episode 1, ''I,'' directed by Neil Marshall, aired January 24, 2014, on Starz.
[36] Christopher Harding, '' 'Hostis Humani Generis'—The Pirate as Outlaw in the Early Modern Law of the Sea,'' in *Pirates? The Politics of Plunder, 1550–1650* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 20.
[37] Ibid., 20.
[38] Dan Edelstein, ''Prologue: *Hostis Humanis Generis*,'' in *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 31-32.
[39] Ibid., 31-32.
[40] Ibid., 30.
[41] *Black Sails,* ''I.''

oppressed, contrasting the Robin-Hood archetypical outlaw. Rather, they are antiheroes whose only care is their own fame and fortune. According to Clint Jones, the outlaw is, as noted in the previous section of this chapter, indeed a character who somehow manages 'to generate public support,'[42] but this could hardly be deemed true for Golden Age pirates, whose notoriety places them in opposition of all that was deemed civilized. The us-versus-them scenario in which the pirates of *Black Sails* find themselves is clearly measured out by the way characters such as Flint perceive themselves and their enemies, but also by the way their opposition to the civilized is narrated and emphasized: ''…the pirates adhere to a doctrine of their own… war against the world.''[43] (I) This means that, no matter how many character perspectives are expressed in the story of *Black Sails*, there seems to be an inclination towards a simplified representation of the pirates and their enemies, even though pirates may just as well be perceived as products of their socio-economic circumstances, instead of mere antagonists. However, what *Black Sails* does represent is a diverse cast of outlaws (see figure 1.1 below), whose constant and desperate need to survive in a hostile world and their obsession with accumulating wealth amounts to the believability and depth of their stories.

fig. 1.1 John Silver (with pistol) standing next to James Flint in *Black Sails*. (Starz 2017)

In between the search for the lost riches of a Spanish treasure galleon in the first season, *Black Sails* presents a story in which the outlaw pirates are faced with threats from within their own pirate societies, but also from threats of the civilized world as a whole, as is once again measured out by Flint: ''Civilization is coming…and it means to exterminate

[42] Clint Jones, ''Piratical Societies as the Blueprint for Social Utopia,'' in *Pirates in History and Popular Culture*, ed. Antonio Sanna (Jefferson: McFarland), 26.
[43] *Black Sails,* ''I.''

us.''[44] (I) The pirates' status as outlaws facing certain death is further underlined by Benjamin Hornigold (Patrick Lyster), a character who is based on the historical pirate of the same name. In episode three of the first season, Hornigold points at the doom that lay ahead of the pirates: ''No matter how many lies we tell ourselves or how many stories we convince ourselves we're part of…we're all just thieves awaiting a noose.''[45] (III) Hornigold is one of the masterminds behind the 'Republic of Pirates,' in which the 'pirate code' was supposed to provide an agreement concerning the division of spoils.[46] However egalitarian such a code may seem, pirates developed their own hierarchies, which is perhaps most obviously expressed in the status of the captain of a crew. Although character Billy Bones (Tom Hopper) noted in the very first episode that ''every man is equal here,''[47] both history and the narrative of the series itself show that such a claim is far from reality. Amongst different layers of the characters in *Black Sails,* tensions and rivalry occur, and not just between them and the civilized world.

As *Black Sails* revolves around the lives and the perspectives of pirates operating from 1715 and onwards, the pirates are shown in a humane light, however violent or aggressive they can be. This humanity is needed in order to create an emotional connection with the viewer, in such a way that it becomes 'a personal, experiential way of knowing.'[48] Opting for a humane portrayal of pirates is all the more necessary if one considers historical settings to be somewhat of a foreign country. As co-creator Jon Steinberg noted in an interview, the goal was to make the pirate world of *Black Sails* feel real, and to portray the characters as actual 'human beings experiencing this.'[49] As is mentioned in the previous quotes from the series, the pirates are well aware how the outside world perceives them, but *Black Sails* seeks to represent a more nuanced set of motivations and desires amongst the pirates. In the second season, for example, Abigail Ashe (Meganne Young), daughter of a lord, is captured by pirates (IX), but later taken prisoner in Nassau's fort. During her time in captivity, her perception of the pirates changes. In her diary, she writes that: ''It would seem these monsters are men…''[50] (XVI) Such instances indicate the ways in which *Black Sails* attempts to create a more nuanced, humanized image of the pirate, instead of only

[44] Ibid., ''I.''
[45] *Black Sails*, season 1 episode 3, ''III,'' directed by Neil Marshall, aired February 8, 2014, on Starz.
[46] Cordingly, ''Storms, Shipwrecks, and Life at Sea,'' 97.
[47] *Black Sails,* ''I.''.
[48] Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 27.
[49] David Crow, ''Interview with Black Sails Co-Creator Jon Steinberg,'' *Den of Geek*, October 14, 2013. https://www.denofgeek.com/us/tv/black-sails/209608/interview-with-black-sails-co-creator-jon-steinberg.
[50] *Black Sails,* season 2 episode 16, ''XVI,'' directed by Steve Boyum, aired March 14, 2015, on Starz.

representing them as 'enemies of all mankind.' To say the least, it would be challenging to make such a connection if these characters did not express a sense of decency, as is done by the 'Robin-Hood' type of outlaw who steals from the rich only. This is one of the primary reasons why the outlaw on screen is often made to appear more humane, and thus more 'romantic': the romantic outlaw's way of life and aims are idealized. This idealization comes to the fore in having a certain amount of morale, which is expressed in a fight against oppression. If the oppressor is dehumanized, the romantic outlaw's aggression and violence is justified – he is not a mindless killer, but an outcast whose intentions and ideals are aimed at a greater good. In *AC4*, too, the 'us-versus-them' scenario is generated by presenting an unrefined depiction of enemy forces, which makes it easier to justify and perform violent gameplay, certainly when the majority of the gameplay is based on combat and defeating enemies (see figure 1.2 below).

fig. 1.2 Edward Kenway facing British 'redcoats' in *AC4*. (Ubisoft 2013)

In the case of both *Black Sails* and *AC4*, enemy forces are presented as the oppressors of a seemingly more just and 'free' way of life – a theme which I will further discuss in chapter three. As Seal rightly stated, these outlaw characters 'represent a struggle against power greater than themselves and those who support them.'[51] Still, as Dolin rightly noted, pirates from history 'rarely had to resort to force,' as this would endanger both their potential prizes and their own crew,[52] but when provoked, they could be ruthless. In this sense, a videogame like *AC4* perfectly complements the pirates' ruthlessness, as a great amount of its gameplay is based on combat, but it also contradicts the historical pirates' preference of intimidation over violence. Within the constraints of the videogame itself, players are able

[51] Seal, 2.
[52] Dolin, 170.

to enact their own preferred playstyle: they may choose to avoid enemy forces by opting for stealth gameplay. However, in order to progress the videogame and obtain valuable items, there is no other way but to kill enemy forces. The videogame's suggested freedom thus seems to be rather constrained, but Edward Kenway's thuggish and piratical appearance, complete with scars and tattoos (see figure 1.2 below), does not automatically provoke his enemies. Only in 'restricted areas,' which are marked as a red zone on the map, will Edward be attacked on sight.

fig. 1.3 Edward Kenway in *AC4.* (Ubisoft 2013)

The contrast, or perhaps 'depth' within Edward's character, lies in the transformation he undergoes during the story. At first, he is a mere British lad who seeks his fortune in the Caribbean by becoming a pirate. Although players are able to free troubled pirates from colonial soldiers in what may seem a noble gesture, from the perspective of Edward, this is done to fortify the Jackdaw (Edward's ship) – it is essentially one of the many ways in which players advance the videogame. Yet, Edward's involvement with the more 'noble' and freedom-loving brotherhood of assassins turns him into an outlaw who seems to have greater concerns than his own purse. In this sense, the outlaw in the shape of Edward in *AC4* is both a pirate in the sense that he robs, plunders, and murders for his own personal gain, but he may just as well be perceived as a 'heroic' outlaw whose exploits are bound to a greater cause, namely, to prevent an evil organization from gaining too much power. Edward, who is both a pirate and an assassin in *AC4*, is thus an ambivalent character, whose conflicting aims and motivations make him into something more than a mere thief. By infusing pirates with such ideals, *AC4* represents them in a such a way that players will automatically favour the perspective of the pirates, the assassins, and thus Edward himself. The idealization of pirates on screen is not only a matter of making their humane side stand out; it is also

necessary when it comes to creating a sense of identification with a twenty-first century audience, and thus a more captivating and successful story.

The question which factors contribute to the popularity of the pirate can thus be summarized as follows. First of all, the outlaw has been a particularly popular figure in stories since the Middle Ages, and perhaps even further back. Secondly, the attraction of the outlaw lies in his resistance to dominant forces and the idea that they somehow resemble a more 'free' and desirable way of life as opposed to the civilized world. The pirate is also a special type of outlaw: unlike other criminals, he is an 'enemy of all mankind.' What *Black Sails* and *AC4* reveal is that the pirates' status as outlaws 'against the world,' and the fact that so little is known about the actual pirates of the Golden Age, make for an excellent 'blank slate' on which videogame- and filmmakers can express their own ideas and idealizations of pirates.

Chapter Two

A Motley Crew? Marginal Pirate Identities on Screen

This chapter looks at the way media representations attempt to be more inclusive in terms of representing the various cultures and peoples which inhabited the Caribbean islands at the time of the Golden Age of Piracy, and how these contribute to the formation of the identity of the popular pirate on screen. The central question to this chapter is: To what extent do *Black Sails* and *AC4* represent marginal identities, and in particular gender and ethnicity? In this chapter, I argue that *Black Sails* provides more pluralistic ideas on (gender) identities, in which the early eighteenth-century Caribbean, and specifically the town of Nassau, is represented as a libertine society compared to the more monotonous, heteronormative story world of *AC4*. These different takes on the piratical past are not in the least due to the fact that we are dealing with two different types of media, which both adhere to different audiences and different modes of storytelling. Although they may represent a few deviating identities, the overarching ambience of these piratical stories is built upon an idea of the past in which masculinity is the normalized type of behaviour, to both male pirates and female pirates. As will be highlighted in discussion of *Black Sails* and *AC4*, the inclusion of marginal identities, that is, identities which differ from the normalized gender or ethnicity in these presentations, speak of an agenda in which these inclusions reflect 'socially justified' concerns. In light of the seemingly noble and socially correct aim of representing different identities, it must be kept in mind, however, that players of videogames and viewers of television series alike do not necessarily need to identify themselves with fictional characters in order to become immersed in a story world.[53] What matters more, then, is the question whether a diversified representation of identities contribute to a more believable representation of Caribbean pirates. However, it must be kept in mind that, throughout both the story world of popular pirates and academia, idealizations about the past are bound to occur.

Caribbean diversity in history and on screen

In general, representations of pirates in popular media are centred around a male, white and heteronormative image of the pirate. Although few historical sources mention the existence

[53] Adrienne Shaw, ''Introduction. Clichés versus Women: Moving beyond Sexy Sidekicks and Damsels in Distress,'' in *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 10.

of pirate women, with the exception of Johnson's popular but dubious account of the infamous Mary Read and Anne Bonny, a large part of the pirate crews of the Golden Age were (former) slaves of African descent.[54] This would suggest that the average pirate crew of the Caribbean Golden Age was indeed a motley crew, and as David Cordingly noted, there was 'no sense of national identity to unite them.'[55] Although numerous depictions of Golden Age pirates point at the fact that many pirates who operated in the Caribbean were of Western European descent, scholars such as Srividhya Swaminathan have argued that recent depictions of pirates on screen attest to an increasing interest in 'characters from historically marginalized communities,'[56] such as Maroons (communities of runaway slaves who settled in the islands of the Bahamas), and female (pirate) characters who express impressive strength of character. Such inclusions are, according to Swaminathan, a sign of recent attempts to make for a more diverse representation of history on screen,[57] which gives the impression that such inclusions express a certain resistance against the overtly masculine, heteronormative, and Western make-up of the Caribbean pirate world in popular media. Other authors, such as Erin Mackie, have also pointed at the masculinity of the world of Caribbean piracy, which, she argues, has inspired more recent subcultures of the Caribbean, such as the 1960s Jamaican 'rude boys' subculture.[58] The question that arises, then, is whether 'deviating' pirate identities on screen, such as female pirates or pirates of colour, offer a counterweight to those masculine and white story worlds. Such inclusions may also be perceived as a seemingly socially justified attempt to portray more diversity, but, like the fabulation which occurs when representing outlaws on screen, they are fabrications which make these recent depictions more 'suitable' for an educated Western twenty-first century audience. However, it must be noted that the people of the Caribbean of the eighteenth-century were of various nationalities and ethnicities;[59] a fact which could also give rise to the idea that recent depictions of the eighteenth-century Caribbean aspire to portray more historical realism. According to Carrie Gibson, the Caribbean world at this time was shaped by the interactions between different peoples: 'European, African, Amerindian, Asian, North

[54] David Cordingly, ''Wooden legs and parrots,'' in *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates* (New York: Random House Incorporated, 2006), 12.
[55] Cordingly, 12.
[56] Srividhya Swaminathan, ''Introduction: Representing and Repositioning the Eighteenth Century on Screen,'' in *The Cinematic Eighteenth Century: History, Culture, and Adaptation*, eds. Srividhya Swaminathan, and Steven W. Thomas (New York; Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 1.
[57] Ibid., 1.
[58] Erin Mackie, ''Welcome the Outlaw: Pirates, Maroons, and Caribbean Countercultures,'' *Cultural Critique* 59 (2005): 25.
[59] Carrie Gibson, ''Introduction,'' in *Empire's Crossroads: A New History of the Caribbean*. (London: Pan Macmillan, 2014), xxviii.

American,'[60] making the Caribbean world a complex region of conflict and oppression, but also one of 'cooperation, and assimilation.'[61] Historically, the world of Caribbean pirates thus represents a great amount of hybridity, from which follows that contemporary choices to represent more diversity on screen do not have to be based solely on the idea that this is done in the name of current demands for more diversity. To further discuss the representation of gender and ethnicity of the mythical pirate on screen, I now turn to the concept of identity.

Identity and marginalization on screen

In her introduction on the cinematic eighteenth century, Swaminathan notes that the amount of films representing the eighteenth century 'indicates a public interest not only in the cinematic spectacle of the eighteenth century, but also in the complex ways that issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation might represented on screen.'[62] Swaminathan substantiates the apparent public interest in these aspects as she recognizes a development within historical films, which, she argues, now portray more diversity in terms of race, gender, and nationalities compared to earlier pirate movies.[63] In terms of recent historical research's concerns with identity, Swaminathan's statement fits within the broader 'emancipatory' turn of the humanities, that is, the turn to marginalized identities and issues of gender and ethnicity, amongst other categories. However, whether these issues are also discussed outside academia remains debatable. After all, the primary attraction of television series such as *Black Sails*, and videogames such as *AC4*, is to provide an entertaining and captivating story. One could question whether the average consumer of series such as *Black Sails* and videogames such as *AC4* actually worries about the representation of certain identities, or whether they 'just' want to enjoy a captivating story. Still, it is too simple to view consumers of history as only consumers. As Jerome De Groot has suggested, engagements with the past through popular media 'are hybrid and complex, and in this teeming diversity lies the challenge and the concern for historians.'[64] The 'concern' for historians lies not in the question whether popular media represent an 'accurate' or even plausible interpretation of the past. Rather, it lies with the question how these popular stories

[60] Ibid., xxviii.
[61] Ibid., xx.
[62] Swaminathan, 1.
[63] Simon Gunn, ''Identity,'' in *History and Cultural Theory* (New York; Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 140.
[64] Jerome de Groot, ''Conclusions,'' in *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 312.

deal with contemporary concerns relating to representational issues, and how videogame- and filmmakers intertwine these aspects with suggested historical realism and entertainment.

According to Simon Gunn, the humanities have seen an influential turn to the concept and discourse of identity during the second half of the twentieth century, which is perhaps most noticeable in the advance of postcolonial and gender studies.[65] In light of the various emancipatory struggles of the previous century, such as the black rights movement and feminist waves, issues concerning identity, and the way we perceive ourselves and others, are still crucial themes in historical research, as 'history is concerned with identity since so much of historical study is about the changing identifications of people in the past,..'[66] However, the concept of identity is not easily defined, nor is it fixed. Simply put, 'identity' indicates what sets an individual or group apart, but it also refers to their commonalities.[67] In terms of recent depictions of history on screen, one could similarly argue that, to investigate the way different identities are represented (or left out) on screen may tell us something about the way the past is appropriated to make for a seemingly more diverse world in which marginalized identities are taken into account. By 'marginalized,' I indicate the way some groups of people are made to embody the Other, in the sense that they are de-valorised in comparison to the dominant, normalized groups.[68] Discussions of identity and marginalization hinge on specific categories such as ethnicity and gender, which relate to the way an individual or a group is perceived. Although these categories are by no means exhaustive, they constitute the main axes for a discussion of the representation of identities in *Black Sails* and *AC4*, to which I will later turn.

Considering the representations of eighteenth-century identities, Gunn argued that normative ideas about gender roles and the sexes became more pronounced during the eighteenth century, which would have a lasting impact on ideas about the sexes during the last two centuries.[69] Complementary to Swaminathan's ideas on the pluralism of gender identities in the early eighteenth century, Gunn refers to libertinism, which, he argues, is in contrast with later cultural developments in the eighteenth century, when 'compulsory heterosexuality' grew.[70] His discussion on the shifting cultural constructions of gender roles during the eighteenth century would suggest that Swaminathan's idea on the fluidity of these

[65] Gunn, 131.
[66] Ibid., 132.
[67] Ibid., 133.
[68] Emil Lundedal Hammar, ''Ethical recognition of marginalized Groups in digital games culture,'' *Proceedings of DiGRA 2015: Diversity of play: Games – Cultures – Identities* (2015), 4.
[69] Gunn, 143-144.
[70] Ibid., 145.

roles in this historical period is a reasonable interpretation. However, as Gunn rightly stated, there are some shortcomings to this interpretation, as it is largely based on a description of a metropolitan and elite populace[71] – categories which could hardly be deemed applicable to the world of Caribbean pirates and the Caribbean as a region. Above all, the majority of the Golden Age pirates of the West Indies were far from being elite; most of them were common sailors who were previously employed by, for example, the Royal Navy, and many were (former) slaves.[72] Although Marcus Rediker was right to note that sailors had many reasons to exclude women from their seagoing vessels, such as the sheer physical demands necessary for sailing, he did point at the popularity of pirate women Read and Bonny, who 'represented not the typical, but the strongest side of popular womanhood.'[73] What becomes clear, then, is that any contemporary ideas about pirates in which gender roles are more diverse would be hard to find in the early eighteenth-century Caribbean, but Read's and Bonny's exploits and consecutive notoriety 'offered a powerful alternative image of womanhood for the future.'[74] The idealization, or even admiration, of these women lies not in a mimicry of their violent male counterparts, but in the impression that women, too, can be courageous, adventurous and strong-willed.

Representing gender and ethnicity in *Black Sails* and *AC4*

The case of Mary Read and Anne Bonny

In her article on Caribbean countercultures, Mackie notes that the popularity of the frontier outlaw, such as the pirate, is partly due to the fact that it resembles 'a kind of fully licensed machismo already becoming outdated by the turn of the eighteenth century and yet one that still, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, remains active in fantasies of masculinity.'[75] Compared to Swaminathan's idealized perception of the eighteenth-century world of piracy, Mackie's argument presents a more plausible idea, in which traditional heteronormative and masculine behaviour dominated (and continues to dominate) the islands of the Caribbean. The question that remains, then, is whether the pirates of *AC4* and *Black Sails* continue to reinforce the monotonous machismo culture of the pirate world, or whether they also provide different performances of gender identities in their story worlds.

[71] Ibid., 146.
[72] Cordingly, 10.
[73] Marcus Rediker, ''When Women Pirates Sailed the Seas,'' *The Wilson Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1993): 107.
[74] Ibid., 108.
[75] Mackie, 24-25.

At first glance, *AC4* is a videogame with yet another white, heterosexual, and masculine protagonist (Edward Kenway) who is surrounded by similar types of men. As I mentioned in the introduction, the attention being paid to the lives of women in television series such as *Black Sails* attests to the producers' attempt to portray a pirate world in which women are not only present, but also active in pursuing their goals. One could question to what extent a videogame like *AC4* puts effort into representing this diversity, or whether they turn to a simpler 'black-and-white' scenario in which gameplay overrides a more critical take on representing diverse identities. In terms of a traditional expressions of gender roles, both *Black Sails* and *AC4* provide moments when such roles are altered, but they are hardly subverted, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

fig. 2.1 The pirates Edward Kenway and Anne Bonny in *AC4.* (Ubisoft 2013)

In the story of *AC4*, amongst a lack of strong women characters we do find a fictionalized representation of the historical figure Mary Read who, for a long time, disguises herself as a boy by the name of James Kidd. In the story of *AC4,* Read belongs to the brotherhood of assassins, and helps Edward to get acquainted with them and their creed. In contrast to Edward, Read assumes a more humble, but clever attitude. She provides a counterweight to the arrogance of Edward, who, initially, is only led by greed, but who later turns to the more noble and 'liberating' creed of the assassins. In the story of *AC4*, Read is made into something more than a female pirate: she is a woman with a greater cause. Her disguise offers her the possibility to not only be amongst the pirates, but also to speak and be taken seriously. Once Read revealed her 'true' identity to Edward, she is not being frowned upon by him. Rather, they continue to develop a bond. Traces of Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates* resonate throughout the story of Read, who, next to Anne Bonny, manages to evade the noose by proclaiming her pregnancy. Edward manages to get

her out of prison, where she died of a fever. Bonny survives, and she becomes the quartermaster of Edward's ship. Compared to Read, Bonny is dressed in an even more explicitly feminine manner, complete with a bodice accentuating her figure, flowers in her hair, and make-up (see figure 2.1 above). The fact that Bonny radiates a suspiciously contemporary type of 'prettiness' could be explained by Shaw's notion that videogames are tailored to suit a predominantly male, white and Western audience. Although Bonny, as represented in *AC4*, is an assertive and leading figure, she may just as well be viewed as a 'sexy sidekick.'[76] Bonny and Read take up active roles in *AC4*, in which they seem to be just as adventurous and strong-willed as the pirate men, but they are 'prettified,' in the sense that any prominent woman character in *AC4* still needs to adhere to the expectations of a predominantly male audience. *AC4* is thus a videogame which is still tailored to normalized expectations of male/female behaviour and appearances, and many other possible identities, such as non-heteronormative identities, or inclusions of women of colour who are not just part of the decor, are typically left out of the story, even though such inclusions may enrich the story world of *AC4.* The confidence of Read and Bonny in *AC4* seems to resemble their historical counterparts, but subverting gender roles is never fully the case, especially in the case of Bonny, whose status as attractive side-character overshadows the empowerment that is given to her.

fig. 2.2 Anny Bonny in *Black Sails*, as portrayed by Clara Paget. (Starz 2014)

The way Bonny is represented in *AC4* is in stark contrast with a representation of the same historical figure in *Black Sails* (see figure 2.2 above). In *Black Sails*, Bonny (Clara Paget) wears neutral garments suitable for fighting with pistol and sword. Behind her veil of toughness lies a character who, at different points in the story, reveals a more vulnerable side

[76] Shaw, 1.

– Bonny is not portrayed as a one-dimensional murderess, nor is she 'just' a sidekick of her lover, John 'Calico Jack' Rackham (Toby Schmitz). Her genderbending attitude allows her to protect the ones she loves, most notably Rackham and Max (Jessica Parker Kennedy), in her own way, which, unlike most women characters in *Black Sails*, relies for a large part on physical aggression. In *Black Sails*' Bonny, Swaminathan recognizes a 'role reversal,'[77] in the sense that she portrays the opposite of Rackham's more verbally inclined and 'feminine' behaviour. Compared to *AC4*'s Bonny, *Black Sails*' Bonny represents an identity which is much more fluid; not only in the way she dresses, but also in the ways she has adopted a seemingly 'masculine' type of behaviour: she chooses to not only love a man, but also a woman, she is prone to use violence, and she swears when she sees fit. As Swaminathan has rightly noted, the world of the pirates in *Black Sails* is a (hyper)masculine space[78] - a space in which each woman attempts to survive by assuming an attitude which will allow her to survive. Although other prominent women characters of *Black Sails*, such as Eleanor Guthrie (Hannah New) and Max, also attempt to maintain their composure amongst the masculine and dangerous world of pirates, it is Bonny who seems to articulate the most clear-cut impression of female agency and empowerment. One could even argue that she is not strong because she is a woman, but because she is a woman who is able to diminish her feminine 'vulnerability' by adopting an aggressive attitude in order to protect herself from degenerate men.

Writer Jon Steinberg noted that he could not have envisaged the absence of (powerful) women in the male-dominated world of *Black Sails*. When discussing Eleanor's character, he noted that 'she is driven, she is smart and she is exploiting an opportunity, which she wouldn't have anywhere in the world at that point in time, to have power.'[79] In *Black Sails*, the Caribbean setting, and especially the 'liberated' pirate town of Nassau seems to have provided the perfect imaginary, and even 'emancipatory' backdrop. However, this assumption seems somewhat naïve when considering the idea that many men (and women) shared the same (discriminatory) prejudices as anyone else at the time. Instead, I argue that, because of their status as outlaws, the female pirates in *Black Sails* are 'allowed' to be free from restraint, whether it comes to manners (of speech), sexuality, and way of life. Although the female pirates of *Black Sails* seem to radiate libertine ideals such as being morally

[77] Swaminathan, 150.
[78] Ibid., 144.
[79] David Crow, ''Interview with Black Sails Co-Creator Jon Steinberg,'' *Den of Geek*, October 14, 2013. https://www.denofgeek.com/us/tv/black-sails/209608/interview-with-black-sails-co-creator-jon-steinberg.

unrestrained and more fluid in terms of non-conforming relationships, as is previously illustrated by the example of Bonny, I argue that the women protagonists of *Black Sails* do have to conform to a much more masculine stature, in the sense that they have to overcome their sex and gender by adopting an attitude which, at least by contemporary standards, is perceived as masculine – an attitude which is overwhelmingly assertive, resolute, and brave. Amidst the harsh and sexist reality of their story worlds, *Black Sails* makes its women stand tall - a depiction of women which, according to Srividhya Swaminathan, seems 'suspiciously contemporary.'[80] Swaminathan argues that it nevertheless reflects the fluidity of 'gender roles that characterize the eighteenth century Caribbean.'[81] Compared to *AC4*, *Black Sails* pays much more attention to the lives and perspectives of women, but the idea that a place like Nassau is free from judgment or constraint is, however, also an idealization constructed in our own contemporary views of a utopian pirate society. In Swaminathan's ideas on the representational pluralism of *Black Sails* lurks yet another idealization of the past. Romantic ideas about the past are thus by no means exclusive to the realm of historical fiction. To find out how different ethnicities are dealt with in *Black Sails* and *AC4*, I now turn to the representations of Maroons and other ethnicities in these two titles.

Maroons and assassins

Following Darby McDevitt's statement in an interview conducted by Colin Campbell, controversial topics such as slavery are touched upon in *AC4*, but they are not thoroughly examined, as that would be too 'sensational.'[82] By 'sensational,' Campbell may have pointed at possible criticisms or debates on the in- or exclusion of controversial themes, which could, in turn, have an impact on the popularity and sales of the videogame. Racist language hardly comes to the fore in *AC4*, and although *AC4* includes numerous representations of slave plantations, the attention being paid to the lives of slaves is minimal. The choice to leave out controversial topics may well be due to the nature of the medium itself. In *AC4*, players embody the British pirate captain Edward, and it is not possible to experience the perspective of the story through other eyes, with the exception of *AC4*'s standalone side-story, *Freedom Cry. Black Sails*, on the other hand, has an advantage in the way its story switches between more complex character interactions and perspectives, and although it is consumed in a more

[80] Swaminathan, ''The New Cinematic Piracy: *Crossbones* and *Black Sails*,'' 151.
[81] Id., 151.
[82] Colin Campbell, ''Truth and fantasy in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag.'' *Polygon*, July 22, 2013. https://www.polygon.com/2013/7/22/4543968/truth-and-fantasy-in-assassins-creed-4-black-flag.

'passive' manner compared to an interactive videogame like *AC4*, it does provide a story which suggests a more diverse approach to the experiences of different identities.

AC4 attempts to add slight touches of controversy to its eighteenth-century Caribbean setting, which is perhaps most explicitly expressed in the way it implements the theme of sugar plantations. In the third sequence of the main questline of *AC4*, we get to enter one such plantation. Edward seeks to gain profit by intercepting the cargo of a sugar plantation. When pursuing the enemy ship, Edward's quartermaster Adéwalé recounts the times he worked at a sugar plantation, noting how dangerous this work was. Once on land, Edward scans the area of the plantation as he looks for the key to the warehouse. Although the plantation shows several slaves working, they hardly interact with Edward. His main goal lies with the loot, and for this reason he does not seem to be concerned with the slaves. In *AC4*, slaves are not part of tradeable cargo. Instead, they are part of the environment, and considering pirates' roles in the Atlantic slave trade, this choice reflects a morally justified approach to the representation of history, which far outweighs attempts at historical realism.[83] The exclusion of a more pronounced interaction with slavery and racism in *AC4* is, on the one hand, perhaps a missed opportunity, but on the other hand, it matches Edward's piratical behaviour in the sense that, at this point in the story, he is not interested in being a hero. Heroism is left to Adéwalé, who, in *Freedom Cry*, becomes a liberator of slaves in the Caribbean. The inclusion of the story of slavery in the West Indies is but a minor detail in the main videogame, but taking into account Edward's identity as a British pirate, this may be a way *AC4* avoids the issues that arise when pressing the role of a liberator of slaves onto a British pirate character, although he does liberate fellow pirates in general.

By joining the assassin brotherhood, Edward becomes a liberator in a more general sense – the brotherhood seeks to subdue the constant threat of the (fictional) Templars. Through his devotion to the brotherhood, Edward's story is also connected to the Caribbean's native history – the assassin brotherhood of the Caribbean is closely connected to indigenous (Mayan) people. There are but few appearances of Mayans in *AC4*, but a man of Mayan ancestry named Ah Tabai is their leader. As the assassins 'work in the dark to serve the light,'[84] such ethnical representations are literally pushed back into the shadows, far from the civilized world, but also on the margins of the pirate world. In *AC4*, Mayan

[83] Seth Rudy, ''Gaming the Golden Age of Piracy: Atlantic Slavery and Ludic Freedom,'' *Digital Defoe*, Issue 7.1 (2015), http://digitaldefoe.org/2015/11/04/gaming-the-golden-age-of-piracy-atlantic-slavery-and-ludic-freedom/.
[84] Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed II*, Ubisoft Montreal, 2009. Videogame.

culture is aligned with the creed of the assassins. Simply put, the Templars portray the evil, corrupted, and 'white' oppressors, while the assassins are connected to freedom-loving pirates such as Edward, but also to the oppressed and marginalized peoples of the Caribbean, as is represented through the character of Tabai.

fig. 2.3. Flint faces the Maroon Queen on Maroon island. (Starz 2016)

Although there are few appearances of indigenous peoples in *AC4*, in *Black Sails* they are completely absent. Instead, *Black Sails* offers a detailed representation of a community of Maroons – 'slaves who left plantations and lived in remote areas – mountains, forests, and jungles – out of the reach of planters.'[85] Along the story of the third season, Flint's crew stumbles upon an island inhabited by a community of Maroons (see figure 2.3 above). The pirates are soon captured by the Maroons and taken to their hidden village. (XXII) Along the way, one of the pirate members notes that they have freed slaves before, and he expects the Maroons to somehow be more generous to them (the pirates) because of this. However, his companion Billy Bones noted that 'we've sold more than we've freed, and they know it.'[86] Bones' observation is sure to remind the audience of the fact that pirates sold slaves, and his comment emphasizes the confrontation and distrust between the Maroons and the pirates, which is further outlined in the episodes thereafter. The Maroon community on the island is ruled by the Maroon Queen (Moshidi Motshegwa), a woman who strongly refuses to see the pirates in a different light than what they really are: a threat to the freedom and safety of her people. In a discussion with her daughter, the Maroon Queen noted: 'The men in that cage are deceitful men…I have worked so hard to ensure that you've

[85] Gibson, ''The Rise of Slavery,'' 117.
[86] *Black Sails*, season 3, ''XXII,'' Starz.

never had to see these things'.[87] (XXII) Her daughter Madi (Zethu Dlomo) was born free, and clearly has a different opinion on the matter whether Flint's crew should be kept imprisoned and killed. Now that Nassau has been captured by Woodes Rogers, the Maroons' hideout is also under threat of being discovered, as their secret trade line with Nassau (Mr. Scott, the right-hand of Guthrie who is also Madi's father) has been broken. Eventually, Flint and Silver manage to convince the Maroon Queen to form an alliance, but it is Madi who is the true intermediary. Madi confides in Silver, and as their relationship develops, she becomes the new leader of the Maroons. Although the alliance between the Maroons and the pirates is not always peaceful, they manage to work together in what could be perceived as a rebellion against the British forces who attempt to keep control of Nassau. The inclusion of a Maroon community in *Black Sails* shows that, in this story, the pirates' and Maroons' common enemy is one of the primary reasons for their alliance, although their differences still remain a threat to their peace. *Black Sails* represents a pirate world in which these different identities are not only present, but also actively incorporated into their storylines. The cooperation between the Maroons and the pirates is one way *Black Sails* offers an alternative take on history, in which diversity is used as a means of reinforcing historical realism, but also as a means of exploring the different possible encounters between different people.

In this chapter, I have discussed how *Black Sails* and *AC4* represent pirate identities in terms of gender and ethnicity. I have connected the pirates' supposed 'motley' characteristics to the idea that the early eighteenth-century Caribbean presented a lot of diversity in terms of people originating from different places, yet I have argued that masculinity is still the dominating type of behaviour, even in stories in recent media which attempt to empower, for example, female pirates or pirates of non-white backgrounds. In terms of representing diversity, both *AC4* and *Black Sails* articulate a few instances when identities other than the normalized white male identity come to the fore and are given a voice. Such interpretations of the past mimic the supposed diversity of the early eighteenth-century Caribbean world up until a small extent, but they are, most of all, grounded in an idealized version of the past.

[87] Ibid., episode XXII.

Chapter Three

Taking the Shot: Utopia and the Creation of the Pirate Space

According to Ruth Levitas, 'utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being.'[88] To many seamen of the Golden Age, turning to piracy meant taking a shot at a better life, both literally and figuratively. However small the chances at fortune actually were, the pirates of the Golden Age took the risk by choosing to become outlaws. This is why Clint Jones has referred to Golden Age piracy as a manifestation of 'social utopia.'[89] Many features of the lives of (historical) Golden Age pirates seem to revolve around utopian ideas – ideas which represent them as fighters of oppressive (colonial) powers, as a group of people who exhibited a seemingly 'ideal' and egalitarian 'shipboard democracy,'[90] and above all, they represent the desire for a better and alternative way of living. Such ideas are, like the utopian imaginations of the role of minority identities in pirate societies as pointed at out in the previous chapter, strongly impacted by a romantic perception of this past, in which idealizations are not only reserved for representations of the past in popular fictions, but which also resonate through (academic) literature on the lives of Golden Age pirates. As I will argue in this chapter, pirates in both history and in contemporary representations do not fit well into common definitions of utopia, that is, a utopia based on an ideal, peaceful and harmonious place. Instead, the utopia of pirates is ambiguous: they are at once freedom-loving adventurers, but their freedom comes at the price of uncertainty, danger, and violence. However, there is one significant aspect of the concept of utopia which does align with pirates: they showcase an alternative way of living by attempting to find a way to become better in their socio-economic circumstances. The idea that pirates represent an alternative way of living in opposition to the established and dominant powers may well be one of the most vital reasons they remain popular in our own time. In this sense, the popular pirate has not only become a symbol of utopian life, but a utopian life which is connected to a nostalgia for the past.

The main question of this chapter is as follows: In what ways are utopian ideas reflected in the construction of the popular pirate, and more specifically in *Black Sails* and *AC4*? I will pay special attention to the way the concept of utopia resonates throughout both

[88] Ruth Levitas, ''Introduction,'' in *The Concept of Utopia* (New York; London: Philip Allan, 1990), 8.
[89] Clint Jones, ''Piratical Societies as the Blueprint for Social Utopia,'' in *Pirates in History and Popular Culture*, ed. Antonio Sanna (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018), 25.
[90] Shannon Lee Dawdy, and Joe Bonni, ''Towards a General Theory of Piracy,'' *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2012): 680.

historical examples of Golden Age pirates, as is evidenced by Jones, but also throughout constructions of the (ideal) pirate world in popular fictions, in which pirates have become symbols of resisting the supposedly restrained and civilized world. The idea of a utopian life in the shape of Golden Age piracy and their 'unruly' undertakings has, in turn, left its imprint on contemporary collective ideas about the past, and more specifically on ideas about the early eighteenth-century Caribbean. Like the pirate outlaw and marginal pirate identities as discussed in the first and second chapters, connecting the pirate to ideas of utopia involves a great amount of idealization – an idealization which establishes the pirate in popular culture as a utopian construct.

The concept of utopia in relation to Golden Age pirates

In her book *The Concept of Utopia* (1990), Levitas discusses the diverse ways and disciplines in which utopia has been discussed, as she seeks to redefine the concept of utopia. Indicating the universal appeal and significance of the concept, Levitas argues that 'the construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another in many cultures.'[91] Levitas explores the scope of the concept of utopia by dividing it into three overarching aspects of content, form, and function.[92] The contents of utopia, that is, the question of what an ideal or good society would look like, is an especially problematic aspect, as opinions on such matters vary widely. The aspect of form is, as Levitas argues, clearer: it refers to a description of the ideal or 'good' society,[93] which is perhaps most clearly exemplified by Thomas More's famous satire *Utopia* (1516), which introduced and popularized the term. Finally, Levitas' third aspect of function refers to the usefulness or uselessness of utopia, in which the former is often related to ideas of progress:[94] the imagination of a better future would, then, be one of the uses of utopia. Taken together, these three aspects revolve around the idea that utopia is an expression of desire,[95] and this is one of the reasons why the concept could be connected to Golden Age pirates.

Although utopia seems to differ vastly from the morally ambiguous societies of pirates in both history and in contemporary popular depictions, I argue that there is one interpretation of utopia derived from Levitas' definitions which is especially relevant to Golden Age pirates: the way utopia refers to imagining and desiring an alternative way of

[91] Levitas, 1.
[92] Ibid., 4.
[93] Ibid., 5.
[94] Ibid., 5.
[95] Ibid., 8.

life. In this sense, piratical utopia does not refer to the desire to become good men in a good society in morally 'just' ways. Rather, it refers to the choice to risk-it-all in order to escape to a more desirable life, especially considering the fact that, even when aiming for a better and wealthier life, the pirate life was undoubtedly a life of hardships and danger - full of difficulties, rather than one which promised peace and prosperity. This is also one of the main reasons why some scholars reject the idea that Golden Age pirates were utopians. According to Shannon Lee Dawdy and Joe Bonni, 'the Golden Age was hardly a socialist utopia.'[96] Instead, they view Golden Age pirates as a counterculture and a form of economic protest, as the pirates 'caused a major, and deliberate, disruption in capitalist trade in the 1710s and 1720s,..'[97] which, they argue, followed from the strict mercantilist economy of the time which made 'economic survival in colonies even more difficult,..'[98] If a counterculture could be defined by viewing it as a group 'in value-conflict with the dominant society,'[99] Golden Age pirates would surely fit within this definition, yet they may also be perceived as products of a capitalist system, instead of mere opponents. Other than subcultures, countercultures 'reject the norms and values which unite the dominant culture,'[100] which is exemplified by the well-known hippie movement of the 1960s, but the term is also applied to older phenomena such as nineteenth-century bohemianism. I argue that viewing Golden Age pirates as a counterculture does not mean their utopian qualities are out of the question. Dawdy and Bonni's emphasis on the hardships of pirate society would seem to exclude them from utopian notions. But, as I have previously noted, the way utopia refers to an alternative take on life fits well within the historical picture of Golden Age pirates, but even more so in their contemporary recreations on screen. As I will illustrate in the following section, contemporary re-imaginations of Golden Age pirates can be approached by viewing them as utopian descriptions.

Defining piratical utopia by referring to its alternative approach to life is most fitting in Levitas' second aspect of form. By viewing piratical utopia as an alternative, escapist lifestyle, we can consecutively view contemporary stories, sounds and images in popular media as descriptions of such alternative realities. The idea that pirates are 'alternatives to the modern state'[101] may be one of the primary sources of their popularity: they portray a

[96] Dawdy and Bonni, 681.
[97] Ibid., 681.
[98] Ibid., 681
[99] Keith A. Roberts, ''Toward a Generic Concept of Counter-Culture,'' *Sociological Focus* 11, no. 2 (1978): 111.
[100] Ibid., 113.
[101] Jones, 28.

wholly different lifestyle. Golden Age pirates' utopia does not, however, refer to the present, nor does it refer to the future: it refers to a time long past on which an idealized alternative way of life is bestowed. Eighteenth-century Caribbean piracy proves time and again to be the perfect canvas for a portrait of an alternative way of life: a life which, as Jones noted, 'must have looked rather enticing.'[102] Jones' argument would suggest that the lives and motivations of pirates of the Golden Age itself exhibited a great deal of idealization, not unlike their contemporary representations on screen. In piracy of the Golden Age, he recognizes 'fanciful and romantic ideas that overshadowed the realities.'[103] Pirates exhibited a great amount of opportunism, and it is in the choice to seek opportunities that Golden Age pirates exemplify what Jones calls 'utopian dreaming.'[104] Although Jones rightly argued that, if utopia is defined by referring to its resistive and alternative components, it is indeed a workable concept for a clarification of the Golden Age pirates' lives and motives, I argue that, in light of present-day popular pirate stories, it can be approached as a 'backwards' utopia: a *nostalgic* utopia, in which the past is used as a canvas to paint an idealized picture of the pirates of the Golden Age.

Utopia in retrospective: Golden Age pirates and nostalgia

In her introduction of a collection of essays on the connection between media and nostalgia, Katharina Niemeyer argues that the desire for an irretrievable past is omnipresent in contemporary media.[105] Niemeyer recognizes 'an increase in expressions of nostalgia,'[106] which, in a time when modern technologies continue to expand and impact our daily lives, speak of a certain longing for a lost past, and perhaps even a reaction to modernity itself. Such expressions can be found in a vast array of re-uses of past designs, as is done in numerous fashion trends, musical styles, and in visual media, such as films and videogames which attempt to represent a historical setting. Nostalgia is of such an abundancy in recent media, because they have the capacity to evoke a powerful connection to images and sounds which represent the past. Niemeyer does, however, point at the limits of approaching nostalgia as an aspect of popular culture. Instead, she argues that nostalgia should be connected to its 'critical context of historical, social, political, economic and aesthetic

[102] Jones, 28.
[103] Ibid., 28.
[104] Ibid., 29.
[105] Katharina Niemeyer, ''Introduction,'' in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. Katharina Niemeyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 2-3.
[106] Ibid., 1.

considerations.'[107] According to Niemeyer, media have the power to 'cure' nostalgic yearning, albeit only for a moment.[108] Eventually, nostalgia is connected to a desire for a different time in the shape of a representation of the past as an alternative to the present. Presenting an alternative lifestyle on the grounds that it represents something more desirable is one of the primary reasons why the concept of utopia connects to, and sometimes overlaps with, nostalgia. Of course, utopian representations could equally be derived from present settings or by means of inventing idealized future settings, but as the past has already 'taken place,' it may be easier for a contemporary audience to comprehend it and fantasize about it: it is both 'alien,' and thus a space for exploration, and 'familiar.'

As I previously mentioned, utopian dreaming does not necessarily have to reflect on the present or the future. The idealization of Golden Age pirates can be approached by viewing them as utopians in retrospective. According to Niemeyer, media represent 'spaces and times for nostalgia.'[109] In light of recent interests in representing Golden Age of pirates on screen, such cultures could also be approached as spaces of desire and nostalgia, as Erin Mackie has rightly suggested.[110] In the case of Golden Age pirates on screen, nostalgic utopias are played out by representing an alternative to established powers in the shape of unruly and resistive behaviour (as is measured out in the first chapter), and as an opposition of normalized gender roles and ethnic identities (as is discussed in the previous chapter). Overall, the popular pirate embodies an identity which reflects values that are of a particularly contemporary and Western nature – values which are centred around ideas of resisting oppressive powers, of portraying individual strength and cunning, of attempting to be more egalitarian, and of suggesting an acceptance of a heterogenous society. Because these ideas are so heavily impacted by an idealization of the past, I argue that the Golden Age pirates, as represented in *Black Sails* and *AC4,* are infused with both nostalgia; in the sense that the past on screen is made to represent more romance than reality, and with utopia; in the sense that popular pirates provide an alternative take are on present-day life. Ultimately, as Leigh Schwartz noted, these media are 'culturally constructed spaces of entertainment and communication,'[111] which means that they communicate certain values and representations which may override other possible ideas of pirate life or society. Such

[107] Niemeyer, 6.
[108] Ibid., 9.
[109] Ibid., 5.
[110] Erin Mackie, ''Welcome the Outlaw: Pirates, Maroons, and Caribbean Countercultures,'' *Cultural Critique* 59 (2005): 24.
[111] Leigh Schwartz, ''Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games,'' *Space and culture* 9, no. 3 (2006): 313.

values and representations are not only communicated through the way the pirates speak about themselves or others, but also more indirectly through the way a utopian space is visually and audially created.

In the case of Golden Age piracy on screen, the town of Nassau on New Providence Island perhaps best symbolizes the ultimate utopian pirate society. In recent media representations, Nassau is likened to the legendary and supposedly non-existent 'Libertatia' (or Libertalia); a town in Madagascar which was supposed to have been a pirate haven near the end of the seventeenth century.[112] According to Frank Sherry, the mythical story of Libertatia tells of 'an ideal pirate colony on Madagascar,.. which was run on socialistic principles with all property held in common under a democratic government.'[113] Sherry rightly notes that, however much of a fantasy the story of Libertatia may have been, it symbolized 'the freedom inherent in a pirate's life that attracted them to the outlaw nation.'[114] Similarly, representations of Golden Age Nassau can be perceived as an implementation of the imagined, utopian town of Libertatia into a real-life town. In the case of popular representations of Nassau, Libertatia can be viewed as the ultimate template for an ideal and utopian way of life: a pirate nation united under the Jolly Roger. Nassau symbolizes the ultimate the utopian space of the pirates on screen, as I will further discuss in the following section.

Spaces of utopia in *Black Sails* and *AC4*

Nassau as a symbol for utopia

In contemporary representations, pirates are utopian characters. As Jones argued, given the fact that the pirate life was an extremely risky undertaking, the promises of riches and a chance for a better life, however small these were, must have been vivid in the minds of the pirates.[115] Following Jones' argument, I argue that these utopian ideas can be applied to contemporary reconstructions of pirates as well. In *Black Sails*, utopian sentiments come to the fore perhaps most obviously as its various pirate crews set their eyes on lost riches, but also in their attempt to maintain and defend the pirates' republic in Nassau. In both *Black Sails* and *AC4*, Nassau represents the pirates' triumph over British rule. The town is represented in similar ways in both titles, complete with palm trees, bustling streets, taverns,

[112] Frank Sherry, ''The Outlaw Nation,'' in *Raiders and Rebels: A History of the Golden Age of Piracy* (New York; London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 99.
[113] Ibid., 99.
[114] Ibid., 99.
[115] Jones, 26-27.

and a fort (see figure 3.1 below). Both titles represent a story in which Nassau has become the capital of the pirates' republic; the place where they feel at 'home', and a place where they can retreat to. But Nassau, how much of a pirate dream it appears to be, is under continuous threat by the British, who, throughout both *Black Sails* and *AC4*, attempt to recapture it. The assault on Nassau is eventually led by Woodes Rogers, who is based on the historical person by the same name. In this section, I argue that the idea of a pirate utopia is strengthened by juxtaposing it with colonial powers, which, in both *Black Sails* and *AC4*, usually refers to the British empire. In addition to portraying imperial forces as the ultimate enemy, *AC4* interweaves the pirates' struggle with an additional thread: the fictional Templars of *AC4* mimic oppressive colonial forces, and the pirate Edward Kenway aligns himself with the assassin brotherhood.

fig. 3.1 The port of Nassau and one of its brothels as depicted in *Black Sails*. (Starz 2014)

In the third season of *Black Sails*, Rogers becomes a nemesis of Flint, telling him that: ''I am reasonable in seeking peace, but if you insist on making me your villain, I will play the part.''[116] (XXV) After earlier attempts to issue pardons for the pirates of the Bahamas, Rogers decides it is time to take drastic measures instead: the pirates would be hunted down. Flint and the other pirates' dream of keeping Nassau free from the influence of the Crown is but a naïve dream, but because their visions of a free Nassau are so crucial to their lives and undertakings, Nassau can be perceived as the pirates' ultimate utopian space. Characters such as Rogers represent all the pirates do not wish to be part of: the civilized and oppressive world. Rogers automatically becomes the pirates' enemy, precisely because he opposes their idealized state of being, and in a way, he symbolizes their demise.

In *AC4*, Rogers' villainy is, unsurprisingly but also conveniently, emphasized through his affiliation with the Templar order, which automatically makes him an enemy to

[116] *Black Sails*, season 3 episode 25, ''XXV,'' directed by Rob Bailey, aired March 5, 2016, on Starz.

both the assassins and the pirates: he is an enemy to Edward Kenway in more than one way. Like the representation of Rogers in *Black Sails*, he is depicted as an arch enemy to the pirates' freedom and lifestyle. However, in *AC4*, his connection to the Templars means that there is no other way but to view him as an enemy. The historical figure of Rogers is merged with the franchises' fictional conspiracy plot, in which Edward's perspective as both an assassin and a pirate only reinforce the black-and-white scenario in which Rogers finds himself. Furthermore, the Templars, as is illustrated by the character of Rogers, are made into enemies of the utopia of the pirates, but also the utopia of the assassins, as both pertain a strikingly similar creed of liberty and brotherhood – slogans which strike a chord with revolutionary and enlightened ideals. Ultimately, the connection between the Templars and the colonial powers, and the assassins and the pirates, permeates a narrative in which there is but slight room for a more nuanced picture of either side. Eventually, the history of the Golden Age pirates tells us that their lifestyle is something which is unattainable and unrealistic, making the civilized world the ultimate victors, and the pirates the antiheroes of that represented era on screen. However, knowing the pirates will eventually fail to keep Nassau and all it stands for also reinforces the delusory status of utopia itself – it is desirable, but not achievable.

Pirate utopia in images and sounds

As previously mentioned, media, and especially media such as videogames and films which are centred around an audio-visual experience, are powerful tools to evoke feelings of nostalgia. To many Western viewers of *Black Sails* and players of *AC4*, the tropical and colourful environments of the Caribbean are spaces which communicate a deep-seated desire for the exotic and the unknown. As I will illustrate in this section, the idea of a pirate utopia is enhanced through the construction of a story world in which an idealized image of the Caribbean, which is expressed in sound and picture, plays a major role in the representation of a desirable and exciting portrayal of the past. Although *Black Sails* and *AC4* are two different types of media which offer a different type of engagement, they show (strikingly) similar ways in which the pirate utopia is expressed. Not only are the musical choices in both titles overwhelmingly anachronistic, they also enhance the idealization of the pirate world precisely because of their associative qualities.

Both *Black Sails* and *AC4* show similar choices in terms of the way the Caribbean world, and the idea of a pirate utopia, is enhanced through its visual and aural aspects. In terms of music, they rely on an older, established film music tradition, in which Romantic-

style orchestral music is used to enhance the narrative and the emotions of the consumers themselves. These soundtracks are not only based on the film music tradition as is influenced by famous composers of the twentieth century, such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold and John Williams; they also include musical styles and instrumentations which are typically associated with pirates. Such clichés, or 'tropes,' work in such a way that the setting is made to be more believable because a general audience associates them with particular settings and people. In both *Black Sails* and *AC4*, there is a special role for the fiddle, which is used to reflect the unruly and 'folk-like' way of life, as opposed to the civilized world. The way the fiddle is played in various tracks of *Black Sails* and *AC4* mimics their unsophisticated status; the fiddle is played more freely compared to the violin. Such details, however small they may appear at first, add greatly to the creation of a believable utopian pirate space, as are the inclusions of guitars which ofttimes indicate Spanish presence, and other tropes, such as the use of drums, folk songs and/or sea shanties (work songs).[117] Although there are only minor parallels to be found between these tropes and the historical pirates of the Golden Age, these tropes 'work' in connection to the representation of pirates on screen, because they are built upon later constructions of what the Caribbean pirate world should look and sound like. In this sense, the past is 'invented' by prioritizing later imaginations of what constitutes the ideal pirate world, such as Stevenson's ''Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!'' – an invented shanty which nevertheless appeals to popular imagination because of the frequency in which it has appeared in popular pirate stories, including *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Finally, the influence of *PotC* on the 'sound' of pirates in recent representations cannot be overestimated. The soundtrack of *AC4*, employs and continues clichés which are derived from an older filmic tradition, in which the sound of the string section and strong percussion is strikingly similar to the sound of *PotC*.

[117] For examples of music from the soundtracks of *Black Sails* and *AC4* in which the fiddle is prominently featured, see
Soundtrack Planet, ''All Saints,'' YouTube video, 2:20, February 4, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HplgMsGVag. *Black Sails* official soundtrack composed by Bear McReary, and
Ubisoft Music UBILOUD, ''Assassin's Creed IV Black Flag - The Fortune of Edward Kenway (Track 05),'' YouTube video, 1:59, October 30, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC5_qTuDlMw. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* official soundtrack composed by Brian Tyler.

fig. 3.2 The richly detailed digital environment of *AC4.* (Ubisoft 2013)

In *Black Sails* and *AC4*, sound and image work together to create a believable and immersive experience. The images of the Caribbean in these titles show a world which may be perceived as a paradise in the eyes of many Westerners; they are unlike the landscapes that are to be found in present-day Western societies (see figure 3.2 above). As Carrie Gibson rightfully stated, ideas about the Caribbean are constructed in the Western world in such a way that the Caribbean has come to be associated with ideas of 'paradise,'[118] and these ideas are only strengthened by the way the Caribbean world is represented in popular media. The way the pirate is represented has thus manifested itself not only in an idealization of the pirate figure and the ideals that are bestowed upon him; it is also a matter of the way he is connected to a particularly appealing visual world, which is strengthened by music that has come to be associated with pirates. Because these associations go back much further than *AC4*, *Black Sails*, or *PotC* for that matter, they are likely to linger on for a while longer. Although the way pirates in are represented in recent and future media may differ, they are ultimately grounded in an utopian idealization of the pirate world, in which even the reduction of the most obvious clichés cannot hide their contemporary nature.

In this chapter, I have argued that *Black Sails* and *AC4* can be perceived as utopian descriptions, in which an irretrievable past is used to paint a picture of an ideal and alternative way of life. The town of Nassau, which is represented in lush detail in both *Black Sails* and *AC4*, can be viewed as the ultimate utopian space, which opposes the pirates' ultimate enemy: civilization. The utopia of the pirate is present not only in the narratives of *Black Sails* and *AC4*, but also in the way these media convey an image and sound of paradise.

[118] Carrie Gibson, ''Invented Paradise,'' in *Empire's Crossroads: A New History of the Caribbean*. (London: Pan Macmillan, 2014), 348-349.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, popular representations of Golden Age pirates pertain to more fantasy than historical truth, which comes as no surprise, considering the fact that many popular stories inspired by historical events are shrouded in myth and romance. In this thesis, I have sought to explain how the idealization of the pirate is a crucial factor in constructing its identity in popular media. Central to this thesis was the question in which ways the identity of the popular pirate is constructed in the recent media *Black Sails* and *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. By questioning the nature of the identity of pirates in these recent representations, I intended to figure out how the Golden Age of piracy is constructed on screen, what it may tell us about recent concerns relating to the representation of (historical) identities, and if and how these representations offer an alternative perspective on this particular part of history compared to a more stereotypical take on pirates. I have argued that the pirate is a particularly appealing character in popular fictions not only because of his status as a defiant outlaw who is cast out of society, but also because he embodies a very specific type of outlaw; an 'enemy of all mankind,' whose villainy crosses all national boundaries. The pirate is entangled with a set of aspects which are idealized in the imaginations of pirates on screen: they are antiheroes who nevertheless embody a desirable life – a life which, ideally, is free from the constraints of civilization, and connected to a place which many will perceive to be an exotic paradise: a Caribbean region full of sunbathed beaches, palm-trees, and the promises of fame and fortune. The recurrence of pirates in contemporary stories could be ascribed to these attractive features, but also to their ambivalence; they are both criminals capable of ruthless violence, but also personalities who are praised for the idea that they choose a life of risk and danger at the chance of becoming wealthier and better, instead of succumbing to the oppression of the civilized world.

In all three chapters of this thesis, I have measured out how this idealization comes to the fore in *Black Sails* and *AC4*. In both titles, the pirates' perspectives are placed in opposition of civilization and colonial powers, and their perspectives are also made to appear more humane, that is, their motivations seem to be more than treasure and plunder. As I have argued in chapter two, *Black Sails* attempted to create more depth of character by imposing downright contemporary ideas on the role of (pirate) women in the Golden Age: they are empowered, and some characters, such as Anne Bonny and Eleanor Guthrie, portray just as much ferocity as their male counterparts. The way female characters are represented in *Black*

Sails and *AC4*, and how much of a voice they are given, also depends on the medium itself. As *AC4*'s story is played through the perspective of one pirate, it diminishes other possible explorations of pirate identities, whereas *Black Sails* includes a subplot in which the pirates get to cooperate with an isolated Maroon community, led by woman. Although some authors have argued that the early eighteenth century amounted to more fluidity in terms of gender roles compared to the more strict heterogenous norms thereafter, I have argued that the fluidity and diversity as represented in *Black Sails* and *AC4* is of a particularly contemporary nature, even if the narratives themselves do present a predominantly white and masculine space. A lack of talking parrots, walking-the-plank, and eyepatches notwithstanding, the identity of the pirate in these popular representations is shaped after contemporary and socially justified concerns and idealizations, in what I have termed a nostalgic utopia, in the sense that the Golden Age of piracy is used to represent a more desirable and alternative way of life. I have argued that the concept of utopia not only comes to the fore in the idealization of the pirates' aims and lifestyles or their entanglement with marginal identities, but also throughout the creation of a utopian space itself. This is particularly noticeable in the pirate town of Nassau and all it stands for, and in terms of the way the Caribbean as a whole is made to look like paradise. The visual appeal of the pirate world of *AC4* and *Black Sails* is further enhanced by the types of music it employs: the use of grand orchestral sounds derived from a Romantic-style film music tradition aggrandizes the pirates' exploits in these stories, while touches of folk music and sea shanties, and the sound of the fiddle in particular, suggest a sense of authenticity, as they symbolize the free and unruly lives of the pirates.

Because the media consumption of *Black Sails* and *AC4* is far-reaching, they may have an impact on the way this particular era (the Golden Age of Piracy), and setting (the Caribbean) are imagined by a contemporary audience, but more importantly, they tell us something about the way the past is reconstructed in the present. Although a few academic articles and books on history in contemporary media have included *AC4* and *Black Sails* in their discussion, they have not considered comparing these two different media. Aspects such as music are often overlooked by historians of film and videogames alike, which brings me to an initiation of suggestions for future research. The pirate in popular representations could be related to other concepts within social and cultural history, such as anarchy and counter-culture – concepts which are usually applied within the context of the twentieth century, but which may nevertheless provide new perspectives on older phenomena. In terms of the audio-visual dimension of the pirate setting, one could investigate the ways in which clichéd themes and tropes recur across different titles and media, and, considering the role

of the historian, when and where these tropes have originated, and how they shape the way the past is perceived by a contemporary audience. Although gender, ethnicity, and sexuality in relation to popular pirates have been discussed before, further research might include other categories, such as class, and the ways in which this particular category creates diversity (or divisions) within the story worlds of pirates.

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In-text images

Figure 1.1
Starz. *John Silver (with pistol) standing next to James Flint in Black Sails*. Posted by Liz Calvario. Digital Image. October 8, 2016. Starz 2016. Retrieved August 2, 2019. https://www.indiewire.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/black-sails.jpg?resize=800,450.

Figure 1.2
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Figure 3.2

left Ubisoft. *The richly detailed digital environment of AC4.* Digital Image. Ubisoft 2013. Retrieved August 2, 2019. https://cdn.wccftech.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/assassins-creed-iv-black-flag-pc-screenshot-04.png.

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