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Slavery under the British Flag: Representations of the Pacific Labour Trade in the
Anti-Slavery Reporter, 1867–1901

On 1 August 1884, Charles Allen—secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) and editor of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*—gave an interview to commemorate the jubilee anniversary of the Slavery Abolition Act. ‘August 1, 1834, was a great day for England and for humanity,’ Allen recalled. In those days, Allen observed, slavery was a ‘terrible reality’ to Britain. Now, however, it was half a century later and public opinion had shifted. According to Allen, the British people believed slavery to be extinct, such that Britain need no longer ‘carry “the civilizing torch of freedom” among the nations of the earth’. On the contrary, Allen pressed, cast one’s eyes across the globe and one could ‘hardly fail to see some territory blighted by some form of slavery’. In closing the interview, Allen drew attention to what he termed ‘the labour traffic of the Southern Seas’. As Allen explained, ‘There under the British flag Englishmen have established a system of labour-recruiting which in many respects is identical with the Slave-trade’.¹

It is this depiction of the Pacific labour trade as slavery that this paper interrogates. Using the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* as a case study, this paper explores how one group of British observers imagined the traffic in Pacific Islanders of the late nineteenth century. Unpacking these depictions of the labour trade as slavery, I will show how the editors of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* cast British colonials as slavery’s perpetrators and Pacific Islanders as their enslaved victims. These representations, I contend, reveal deep-rooted anxieties of self and otherness that attest to the contested nature of British identities in the late Victorian era.

¹ ‘The Anti-Slavery Jubilee: an Interview with the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (October, 1884), pp. 189-190.

The *Anti-Slavery Reporter* was the official publication of the BFASS and its chief means of connecting with its largely middle-class membership.² Formed in London in 1839—the year after emancipation took effect—the BFASS had a strong imperial focus.³ But its ambitions were not confined to Britain and its colonial territories: according to its objectives, the BFASS was devoted to achieving ‘the extinction of the slave-trade by means of the *universal* abolition of slavery’.⁴ This global outlook was reflected in the pages of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. Drawing from a transnational network of informants—from philanthropic and evangelical associations to antislavery sympathisers in the Pacific—its pages presented a vast catalogue of atrocities committed by slave traders and owners around the world.⁵

The system of trafficking Pacific Islander labourers represented one such locus for slavery. Generally, labourers were taken from islands in Melanesia and transported to plantations, farms, mines and fisheries in European-controlled territories in the Pacific.

² The *Anti-Slavery Reporter* was first published by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society’s precursor, the Anti-Slavery Society: see Mike Kaye, ‘The Development of the Anti-Slavery Movement after 1807’, *Parliamentary History*, vol. 26 Supplement no. 1, (2007), pp. 240-241. For general accounts of the BFASS, see Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: a History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 267-285; Howard Temperley, *British Antislavery, 1833–1870* (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 62-84; Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century: the Evolution of a Global Pattern* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 7-12; Andrew Porter, ‘Trusteeship, Anti-Slavery and Humanitarianism’, in William Roger Louis, et al. (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 215; Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 12-15.

³ See, for example, ‘The Anti-Slavery Jubilee: an Interview with the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society’, p. 190.

⁴ ‘Sixty Years Against Slavery: a Brief Record of the Work and Aims of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society 1839-1899. With an Article on the Abolition of the Legal Status of Slavery by Joseph G. Alexander’, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1900), p. 2; emphasis added. Such global ambitions were very much reflective of the trans-Atlantic antislavery movement post-1834: see Christine Bolt, *The Anti-Slavery Movement and Reconstruction: a Study in Anglo-American Co-operation, 1833–77* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 2; Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), p. 34; Simon Morgan, ‘The Political as Personal: Transatlantic Abolitionism c. 1833–67’, in William Mulligan and Maurice J. Bric (eds.), *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 78.

⁵ For analyses of the transnational character of antislavery activity in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Zoë Laidlaw, ‘“Justice to India—Prosperity to England—Freedom to the Slave!” Humanitarian and Moral Reform Campaigns on India, Aborigines and American Slavery’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 22 no. 2, (2012), pp. 299-324; Richard Huzzey, ‘Minding Civilisation and Humanity in 1867: A Case Study in British Imperial Culture and Victorian Anti-Slavery’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 40 no. 5, (2012), pp. 807-825; Daniel Laqua, ‘The Tensions of Internationalism: Transnational Anti-Slavery in the 1880s and 1890s’, *International History Review*, vol. 33 no. 4, (2011), pp. 705-726; David Brown, ‘William Lloyd Garrison, Transatlantic Abolitionism and Colonisation in the Mid Nineteenth Century: the Revival of the Peculiar Solution?’, *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 33 no. 2, (2012), pp. 233-250.

The political status of these destinations was mixed: some—Fiji and British New Guinea, for instance—were under British control, while others were subject to French—in the case of New Caledonia—or German—as with German New Guinea—authority.⁶ For many British antislavery reformers of the late nineteenth century, the involvement of colonial Queensland in the labour trade was particularly alarming. Queensland was unique among British territories embroiled in the labour trade in its status as a self-governing white settler colony.⁷ And Queensland's participation in the trade was extensive: from the first Islander labourers imported in the 1860s until the cessation of arrivals in 1904, more than 62,000 Islanders were transplanted to Queensland.⁸ For the editors of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, the spectre of slavery in Queensland highlighted Britain's complicity in the slave trade, exposing faultlines of tension between colony and metropole in the British world.

Historians have largely focused on determining the realities of the Pacific labour trade, in particular methods of recruitment and life on colonial plantations.⁹ Debate has centred on whether Islander involvement in the traffic was voluntary or coerced; a dichotomy has opened up between revisionists who stress the voluntary, cooperative nature of the labour trade and counter-revisionists who characterise the traffic in Islander labour as intrinsically violent and coercive.¹⁰ It is a central argument of this paper that

⁶ 'Empires of the Coral Sea', in Robert Aldrich and Kirsten McKenzie (eds.), *The Routledge History of Western Empires* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 154-155.

⁷ Kay Saunders, 'The Workers' Paradox: Indentured Labour in the Queensland Sugar Industry to 1920', in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 220.

⁸ Clive Moore, *Kanaka: a History of Melanesian Mackay* (Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1985), p. 24.

⁹ Tracey Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: the Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), p. 10.

¹⁰ The cleaving of historical scholarship on the Queensland-Pacific labour trade into revisionist and counter-revisionist schools of thought is done for the sake of clarity of argument and is not intended to deny the considerable diversity within the historiographical debate: see Clive Moore, 'Revising the Revisionists: The Historiography of Immigrant Melanesians in Australia', *Pacific Studies*, vol. 15 no. 2, (1992), p. 62.. For the most comprehensive, if somewhat dated, mapping of the historiographical divisions, see Doug Munro, 'The Labor Trade in Melanesians to Queensland: An Historiographic Essay', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 28 no. 3, (1995), pp. 609-627. For revisionist and neo-revisionist interpretations, see Deryck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: a History of the Western Pacific High Commission, 1877-1914* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1967); Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: a History of Solomon*

this focus on historical veracity has led historians to overlook a rich body of discursive representations of the labour trade. Lamenting this polarisation within the historiography, historian Tracey Banivanua-Mar has drawn attention to the ways in which colonial officials in Queensland represented Islander labourers.¹¹ In the same vein as Banivanua-Mar, this paper contends that approaching the Pacific labour trade through discursive representations offers a means of moving beyond the voluntary/coercive dichotomy.

A Clandestine Slave Trade: the Pacific Labour Trade as Slavery

From when the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* first publicised the kidnappings of Pacific Islanders in the 1860s, the traffic in Pacific labourers was portrayed as a veiled slave trade. Writers alternately characterised the traffic as ‘a clandestine Slave-trade’, ‘worse than real Slavery’ and ‘slavery in disguise’.¹² Excerpts from local newspapers decried the

Islands Labour Migration, 1870–1914 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1973); Dorothy Shineberg, *They Came for Sandalwood; a Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the South-West Pacific, 1830–1865* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Moore, *Kanaka: a History of Melanesian Mackay*; Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Markets for Indentured and Time-Expired Melanesian Labour in Queensland, 1863–1906’, *The Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 16 no. 2, (1981), pp. 70-91; Kerry R. Howe, *Where the Waves Fall: a New South Sea Islands History From First Settlement to Colonial Rule* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991); Moore, ‘Revising the Revisionists: The Historiography of Immigrant Melanesians in Australia’, pp. 61-86; Charles A. Price and Elizabeth Baker, ‘Origins of Pacific Island Labourers in Queensland, 1863–1904: A Research Note’, *The Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 11 no. 2, (1976); Nicholas Thomas, *Islanders: the Pacific in the age of empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 214-225. For counter-revisionist rejoinders to the revisionist orthodoxy, see Kay Saunders, *Workers in Bondage: the Origins and Bases of Unfree Labour in Queensland, 1824–1916* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982); ‘The Workers’ Paradox: Indentured Labour in the Queensland Sugar Industry to 1920’; Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: the Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade*; Dorothy Shineberg, *The People Trade: Pacific Island Laborers and New Caledonia, 1865–1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999); Adrian Graves, *Cane and Labour: the Political Economy of the Queensland Sugar Industry, 1862–1906* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Banivanua-Mar employs the idea of a discursive tradition of ‘Melanesianism’ to argue that Islanders were depicted as ‘a colonisable, oppressable and exploitable object’. For Banivanua-Mar, this was intimately related to the project of legitimising colonial hierarchies of power: see Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: the Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade*, pp. 16-17, 171-172, 180-182; ‘Consolidating Violence and Colonial Rule: Discipline and Protection in Colonial Queensland’, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 8 no. 3, (2005), pp. 303-319.

¹² ‘Kidnapping in the South Seas’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (30 September, 1870), pp. 68-70; ‘Slavery in the South Seas’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (July & August, 1890), p. 183; ‘Queensland and the Polynesian Labour Traffic’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (January & February, 1894), p. 24. See also ‘Captain Coates of the *Jason*, Convicted of Kidnapping South-Sea Islanders, and Punished’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (30 March, 1872), p. 12;

duplicitous tactics of ‘blackbirders’;¹³ sailors’ testimonies bore witness to the immorality of the trade; and letters from resident missionaries exposed the brutal reality of life on colonial plantations.¹⁴ Nor was the Pacific labour trade looked at in isolation. Writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* routinely drew connections with the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁵ In 1870, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* reminded its audience that it was ‘within the memory of living men that the great cotton culture of the Southern States of America’ had developed. Using graphic and macabre imagery designed to shock the sensibilities of middle-class Britons, the author recalled how ‘Negro Slavery struck deep its accursed roots and extended its poisonous branches, until all sacred things drooped and all but died beneath its withering shade’.¹⁶ Anecdotes such as these suggest that antislavery writers of the Victorian era used Gothic imagery to demonise slavery.¹⁷

Evoking memories of the cotton plantations of the American South did more than paint a menacing portrait of colonial plantations in the Pacific; it also undermined ideas of British supremacy central to conceptions of self in Victorian Britain. A number of historians—Linda Colley, James Walvin and David Turley, among others—have documented how British superiority came to be equated with the abolitionist cause in the

‘The Polynesian Labour Traffic’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (November & December, 1893), p. 336-339; ‘Polynesian Kidnapping’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (30 March, 1872), p. 15.

¹³ The term ‘blackbirding’ was used by contemporaries to describe the nineteenth-century practice of kidnapping Pacific Islanders for the purposes of overseas employment: see I. C. Campbell, *A History of the Pacific Islands* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1990), p. 101.

¹⁴ See ‘Kidnapping in the South Seas’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (15 July, 1867), p. 167; ‘South Sea Coolie Trade’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (October-December, 1868), pp. 143-144; ‘The Queensland Labour Traffic in Children’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 April, 1873), pp. 142; ‘Inhumanity of the South Pacific Labour Traffic’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 January, 1876), pp. 22; ‘The Slave-Trade in the South Seas’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 April, 1871), pp. 125; ‘The Sad Fate of Fourteen Kanakas in Queensland’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (15 May, 1876), pp. 78-79; ‘The Polynesian Slave Trade’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 April, 1873), pp. 141-142; ‘Slavery in the South Seas’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (July & August, 1890), pp. 181-184; ‘Kidnapping in the South Seas’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (30 September, 1870), pp. 68-70.

¹⁵ See ‘Slavery in the Pacific’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 April, 1869), p. 198; ‘Regulation of the Coloured Labour Traffic - Kidnapping in China and the South Sea Islands’, p. 223; ‘Polynesian Kidnapping’ (30 March, 1872), p. 15; ‘Another Victim of South Sea Labour Traffic’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 November, 1875), p. 237; ‘Slavery in the South Seas’, p. 183; ‘The Queensland Labour Traffic’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (November & December, 1892), p. 337.

¹⁶ ‘The Polynesian Slave-Trade’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (31 December, 1870), p. 100.

¹⁷ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 45.

Victorian era.¹⁸ Contributors to the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* carried on the legacy of this tradition by identifying British supremacy with Britain's commitment to freedom.¹⁹ Reverend John G. Paton, a British missionary in the New Hebrides, portrayed Britain as 'the land of Wilberforce ... whose blood and treasure has been freely sacrificed to enable to her to assume the proud honour of a nation that never owns a Slave'.²⁰ Likening the Pacific labour trade to transatlantic slavery incriminated the British Empire in slavery's perpetuation. Britain's commitment to abolitionism was being called into question.

Images of the Pacific labour trade as the transatlantic slave trade reincarnate resonated with late nineteenth-century anxieties over the future of the British Empire.²¹ Writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* feared Britain's moral legitimacy was being eclipsed.²² One anonymous contributor, for instance, explained that 'Englishmen speak much about freedom, and it is our boast that no Slaves exist in any part of the British Empire.' But 'there is too much tendency to empty talk of past achievement', the author cautioned. In the eyes of the author, the remembrance of abolitionism was blinding Britons to the persistence of slavery's evils. As the author concluded, slavery in the Pacific was 'bringing disgrace upon the British name'.²³

¹⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 359; Maurice J. Bric, 'Debating Slavery and Empire: The United States, Britain and the World's Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840', in William Mulligan and Maurice J. Bric (eds.), *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 59–77; David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 18, 46; James Walvin, *Slavery and British Society 1776–1846* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 25; David Lambert and Alan Lester, 'Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 28 no. 3, (2004), pp. 320–341; Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759–1815* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 180–181.

¹⁹ See, for example, 'The Anti-Slavery Jubilee: an Interview with the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society', p. 189; 'Slavery and the Slave Trade in Australia', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (June, 1883), p. 162.

²⁰ 'Queensland and the Polynesian Labour Traffic', p. 32.

²¹ Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860*, p. 46.

²² See, for example, 'The Anti-Slavery Jubilee: an Interview with the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society', p. 189; 'Queensland and the Polynesian Labour Traffic', p. 32.

²³ 'Slavery and the Slave Trade in Australia', p. 162.

The British Empire is Even Now Dishonoured: Queensland Colonials as Slavery's Perpetrators

By framing the Pacific labour trade as a disgrace upon the British name, contributors to the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* linked Britishness with abolitionism. Alan Lester argues that early nineteenth-century humanitarians in the British metropole duelled with British settler societies over the nature of Britishness itself. While British humanitarians classified '[f]reedom-loving, Protestant Britons' as 'proper' Britons, they portrayed British colonials as 'aberrant Britons'.²⁴ The authors of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* enacted a similar distinction in their representations of the Queensland-Pacific labour trade. Opponents of the slave trade were commonly presented in glowing terms as model Britons.²⁵ Writing in 1873, Reverend W. G. Lawes recounted the recent landing of an English vessel on his Pacific island home of Nieu. As Lawes recorded, the 'honourable captain of an English brig' enquired as to whether any of the Islander residents wished to volunteer as labourers. Discovering that none were willing to do so, the English captain—a 'man of magnanimity and candour'—remarked that he would respect the Islanders' wishes and refused to kidnap them. In recalling the captain's departure, Lawes lingered on the vessel's British insignia: the captain 'dipped his British ensign (!) and made sail'.²⁶ From the pages of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* emerged an image of the ideal Briton as being steadfastly opposed to slavery.

In stark contrast to these model Britons, writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* castigated those implicated in the Pacific slave trade for bringing the name of the British

²⁴ Lester, 'British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire', pp. 25-27, 39-40. See also Catherine Hall, 'What did the British World Mean to the British? Reflections on the Nineteenth-Century', in Phillip A. Buckner and R. D. Francis (eds.), *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), p. 23.

²⁵ See, for example, 'Regulation of the Coloured Labour Traffic - Kidnapping in China and the South Sea Islands', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (31 December, 1871), pp. 222-233; 'The Polynesian Slave Trade', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 April, 1873), pp. 141-142; 'The Brothers', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 October, 1873), p. 182.

²⁶ 'The Polynesian Slave Trade' (1 April, 1873), pp. 141-142.

Empire into disrepute.²⁷ Writing to the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Reverend John G. Paton emphatically claimed that the traffic was ‘a curse and a degradation to all engaged in it—a disgrace to the Colony that legalizes it—and a blot on the fair name of Britain’.²⁸ That the participation of Britons in the labour trade was degrading to Britain as a whole was made clear to readers of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. In a speech to Parliament in 1872, Queen Victoria troubled over the involvement of ‘some’ of her subjects in the ‘nefarious practices’ of the labour trade. ‘[I]n the South Sea Islands the name of the British Empire is even now dishonoured,’ Queen Victoria lamented.²⁹ Isolating ‘some’ British subjects from the majority implied that the former were somehow aberrant; but it also underscored the deleterious effect they had on Britain’s reputation as whole.

Commentators in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* frequently associated this image of the aberrant Briton with British settlers in the Pacific. The violence and chicanery used by blackbirders to ‘recruit’ Islanders as labourers formed a recurring theme in the articles of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*.³⁰ While the editors often obscured the identity of the slave traders, they made clear that British colonials were implicated in this duplicity.³¹ In an 1870 issue of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, for example, an anonymous missionary recounted the recent visit of a slave trader to the island of Tau. The captain of the vessel was said to have invited some two hundred natives to dine on board with him. Once on board, however, the captain had them all ‘forcibly detained’. A slave trade, the editors

²⁷ See, for example, ‘The Slave-Trade in the South Seas’, p. 127; ‘The Polynesian Slave Question’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (January-May, 1895), p. 61; ‘A Movement in the Right Quarter—A Memorial From the Brisbane Municipal Council’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (30 March, 1872), p. 16. See also Kirsten McKenzie, ‘Discourses of Scandal: Bourgeois Respectability and the End of Slavery and Transportation at the Cape and New South Wales’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 4 no. 3, (2003), pp. 1-56; *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney & Cape Town, 1820–1850* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2004), pp. 124, 184.

²⁸ ‘Queensland and the Polynesian Labour Traffic’, p. 31.

²⁹ ‘The Queen’s Message of South Sea Kidnapping’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (30 March, 1872), p. 15; ‘The Queensland Labour Traffic’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (July & August, 1892), p. 178.

³⁰ See, for example, ‘The Press on the Murder of Bishop Patteson and the New Slave-Trade’, p. 216.

³¹ See, for example, ‘The Slave-Trade in the South Seas’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 April, 1871), p. 125-127; ‘The Press on the Murder of Bishop Patteson and the New Slave-Trade’, pp. 214-217; ‘Slavery and the Slave Trade in Australia’, pp. 162-164.

concluded, was being ‘gradually established by British speculators for the benefit of British settlers’.³² In the minds of members of the BFASS, British colonials were profiting from the deceit of blackbirders.

Writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* also focused on the harsh treatment Islander labourers were subjected to on colonial plantations in the Pacific.³³ Reverend W. G. Lawes, for instance, warned that Islanders were often ‘at the mercy of ignorant, drunken overseers’. Even in cases of unintentional misconduct, the Reverend observed, ‘the offenders are punished in modes that forbid description, and with a severity unjust and uncalled for’.³⁴ For contributors to the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, such barbarous mistreatment recalled Queensland settlers’ treatment of the indigenous population.³⁵ ‘From its earliest days,’ one commentator sniped, ‘the Queensland Government has disgraced itself by a savage ill treatment of the native races’.³⁶ By describing the actions of colonials in Queensland as ‘savage’, antislavery activists subverted traditional distinctions between civilised and savage cultures, Briton and other. In the pages of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, Britishness was decoupled from civilisation, and deeds—rather than race—were determinant of one’s civility and decency. The aberrant status of colonials in Queensland appeared as a direct result of their mistreatment of native races.³⁷

³² ‘Kidnapping in the South Seas’ (30 September, 1870), pp. 69-70.

³³ See, for example, ‘Queensland and the Polynesian Slave Trade’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (2 October, 1871), pp. 189-190.

³⁴ ‘The Polynesian Slave Trade’ (1 April, 1873), p. 141.

³⁵ ‘Slavery and the Slave Trade in Australia’, p. 164.

³⁶ ‘Slavery in the Pacific’, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 April, 1869), p. 198.

³⁷ Historian Philip Gould advances a similar argument in relation to the subversion of traditional distinctions between ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’ in eighteenth-century abolitionist writings: see Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 47-48.

Those Defenceless Peoples: Pacific Islanders as Enslaved Victims

Representations of British colonials as aberrant Britons relied on sentimentalised images of Islanders as enslaved victims. Historian Elizabeth Clark argues that abolitionist literature in late-antebellum America focused on the suffering that slaves endured. By selecting graphic tales of physical deprivation and emotional torment, American abolitionist authors fostered ‘the feeling that a direct line of physical sensation linked [the reader] to the slave’.³⁸ Like their American contemporaries, writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* used the trope of the suffering slave to evoke compassion among readers for the Islanders’ plight. Reverend W. G. Lawes, for instance, conjured up the haunting image of an Islander who had ‘died alone, and was not found until his body was partially eaten by rats!’³⁹ Another contributor reported in 1879 that mortality rates were as much as 92 per 1000 on some plantations in Queensland; in England, by contrast, the death rate of the adult male population was said to be 9 per 1000.⁴⁰ To the British readership of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, comparing Islander mortality with that of Englishmen imbued these accounts with a sense of proximity otherwise denied to the far-flung colonies of the Antipodes.

Sentimentalising Islander labourers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* also served to infantilise Islanders. One contributor commented that their ‘childish simplicity and natural ignorance render them quite incapable of availing themselves of the laws made

³⁸ Elizabeth B. Clark, ‘“The Sacred Rights of the Weak”: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America’, *The Journal of American History*, vol. 82 no. 2, (1995), pp. 467-470, 481, 483. See also Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp. 2-4, 45; Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender, and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Lynn Festa, ‘Sentimental Visions of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Studies’, *Literature Compass*, vol. 6 no. 1, (2009), pp. 31-33; Carol Lasser, ‘Voyeuristic Abolitionism: Sex, Gender, and the Transformation of Antislavery Rhetoric’, *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 28 no. 1, (2008), pp. 92-95.

³⁹ ‘The Polynesian Slave Trade’ (1 April, 1873), p. 141. See also ‘Inhumanity of the South Pacific Labour Traffic’, p. 22.

⁴⁰ ‘Slavery and the Slave Trade in Australia’, p. 163; ‘The Queensland Labour Traffic’ (July & August, 1892), p. 177; Queensland and the Polynesian Labour Traffic’, p. 32.

for their protection'.⁴¹ Likewise, Reverend John G. Paton portrayed Islanders as 'defenceless people' who had just emerged 'from the long, black midnight of gross heathenism and cannibalism'. Instead of protecting them, Paton wrote, British subjects in the Pacific were participating in a system that would lead to 'abuse, bloodshed and God-dishonouring cruelty, little short of that accursed thing called Slavery!'⁴² By infantilising Islander labourers, anti-slavery writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* underscored the perceived moral failures of British colonials in the Pacific.

Prevailing theories of race also shaped depictions of Islander labourers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. Historians Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin argue that ideas of race in Britain underwent a radical shift in the nineteenth century so that by 1850 'racial difference was considered to be both essential and immutable'.⁴³ Supporters of the labour trade in Queensland used polygenist theories of race to legitimise the importation of Islander labourers into Queensland.⁴⁴ The *Anti-Slavery Reporter* sometimes gave voice to these ideas of racial distinction. One contributor from Queensland, for instance, complained that 'white men' were 'wholly unsuitable to work in the broiling sun of the plantations'.⁴⁵ In contrast, Pacific Islanders were said to be innately suited to the rigours of labouring in Queensland's tropical climate. Historian Warwick Anderson is therefore correct to note that biological theories of man's place in nature provided the intellectual framework for justifying the importation of Pacific Islanders into Queensland.⁴⁶

⁴¹ 'The "Daily News" on the Queensland Labour Traffic', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (July & August, 1892), p. 189.

⁴² 'Queensland and the Polynesian Labour Traffic' (January & February, 1894), p. 32.

⁴³ Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin, 'How Race Became Everything: Australia and Polygenism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 31 no. 5, (2008), pp. 962-964. See also Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain*, pp. 198-200.

⁴⁴ Kay Saunders, 'Masters and Servants: The Queensland Sugar Workers' Strike 1911', in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1978), p. 98; 'The Workers' Paradox: Indentured Labour in the Queensland Sugar Industry to 1920', p. 219.

⁴⁵ 'The "Daily News" on the Queensland Labour Traffic', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (July & August 1892), p. 185. See also 'Slavery in the Pacific', p. 198.

⁴⁶ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2005), pp. 85-86.

Biological distinctions between Islander and settler were, however, not above reproach. Writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* could co-opt racial orthodoxies in articulating their case against the need for Islander labourers.⁴⁷ One contributor, for example, admitted that ‘Europeans cannot work on the plantations’ but was ‘equally sure that the South Sea Islanders are unfit to serve as substitutes’. According to the author, Islanders were ‘inferior in physique’ and ‘totally unaccustomed to continuous labour’.⁴⁸ By dissolving traditional racial distinctions between Islander and settler, the author reinforced the aberrant status of British colonials in the Pacific.

Children of the Homeland: Reforming British Colonials

If writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* depicted British colonials in the Pacific as aberrant Britons, they were loath to dismiss them as beyond redemption. Instead, antislavery authors infantilised settlers in a manner that underscored their capacity to be reformed. Contributors to the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* framed the relationship between colony and metropole in paternalistic terms. In 1894, for instance, Reverend John G. Paton cried that the ‘children’ of his ‘own loved home-land...must not...disgrace her name by playing with a deadly system...little short of that accursed thing called Slavery’.⁴⁹ Similarly, one commentator wrote in haughty terms that as ‘long as infant colonies are allowed to run before they can walk...so long will these deeds of blood be perpetrated’.⁵⁰ By casting settlers as the disobedient progeny of the metropole, authors in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* emphasised settlers’ need for guidance from Britain.

For writers in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, British intervention in the labour trade offered the means of reforming these aberrant Britons. Sometimes, antislavery authors

⁴⁷ See, for example, ‘Queensland and the Polynesian Slave Trade’, p. 189-190.

⁴⁸ ‘The “Daily News” on the Queensland Labour Traffic’, pp. 185-187.

⁴⁹ ‘Queensland and the Polynesian Labour Traffic’ (January & February, 1894), pp. 31-32.

⁵⁰ ‘Another Victim of South Sea Labour Traffic’, p. 236.

petitioned the British government to regulate the labour trade.⁵¹ For example, Sir Arthur Gordon, former High Commissioner in the Pacific, advocated that supervision of recruitment 'be placed in the hands of officers of the Imperial Government'.⁵² More often than not, contributors to the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* pressed for the abolition of the trade. A deputation by BFASS to the Colonial Office was reported to have urged upon the government 'the necessity of adopting immediate and energetic measures'. According to the editors of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, the deputation believed that 'nothing short of suppression would be effective'.⁵³ For many contributors to the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, suppressing the labour trade offered the only means for reform of British colonials in the Pacific.

Conclusion

This paper has illuminated some of the ways in which observers in the British metropole depicted the Pacific labour trade. I have argued that the BFASS perceived the labour trade as a threat to Britishness. Responding to this threat, the authors of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* chose to represent the labour trade as slavery; colonial settlers in Queensland as its perpetrators; and Pacific Islanders as its victims.

In focusing on historical actuality, historians of the Pacific labour trade have overlooked a rich set of discursive representations. This paper suggests the study of these representations has important implications for the historiography. First, these depictions give us cause to reconsider the significance of British antislavery organisations in shaping governmental responses to the traffic in Islander labourers. In attempting to unpack the

⁵¹ See, for example, 'Book Review: *Kidnapping in the South Seas; Being a Narrative of a Three Months' Cruise of H. M. Ship Rosario*', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 July, 1871), pp. 176-177; 'Regulation of the Coloured Labour Traffic - Kidnapping in China and the South Sea Islands', pp. 222-223.

⁵² 'Polynesian Labour in Queensland', *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (January & February, 1893), p. 51.

⁵³ 'Polynesian Kidnapping' (30 March, 1872), p. 14-15.

anxieties embedded in depictions of the labour trade as slavery, this essay also feeds into the work of new imperial historians on the formation of British identities in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Finally, the transnational scope of this paper invites reflection on what we miss in confining the historiography of the labour trade to the Pacific. The Pacific labour trade was enmeshed in a colonial system that stretched from the Pacific to the British metropole. If we are to capture the transnational dimensions of this system, historians of the Pacific labour trade will need to venture beyond the Pacific.⁵⁵

Word count: 3000

⁵⁴ See, for example, Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); 'What did the British World Mean to the British? Reflections on the Nineteenth-Century', pp. 21-37; Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, 'Between Metropole and Colony', in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1-37; Kathleen Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵⁵ Historians have advanced similar arguments in relation to the British Caribbean: see, for example, Christer Petley, 'New Perspectives on Slavery and Emancipation in the British Caribbean', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 54 no. 3, (2011), p. 855; Brychan Carey, 'Introduction: Slavery and Antislavery', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 31 no. 2, (2008), p. 192.

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