Introduction

Violence, Language, and Colonial Dialogue

FROM 1863 AROUND sixty thousand men, women, and children from diverse islands in the southwestern Pacific labored for bonded periods of at least three years in the burgeoning sugar industry of the young British colony of Queensland. In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, these laborers provided the essential cost-neutral, coercible, and colored labor that was deemed essential to the economic viability of white settlement in the tropical belt of Britain’s Australian colonies. As such the trade continued for forty-odd years until, at the turn of the twentieth century, amidst the determined and defensive efforts of the Australian colonies to federate as a white nation, the trade was abolished. From 1906 the majority of the ten thousand Islanders resident in Queensland were deported. In the time they had been there, these Islanders, who came from coastal and inland populations of islands in the Solomons, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and even Kanaky/New Caledonia and Fiji, managed to plant the seeds of a newly forged community. Theirs is a vast story of displacement and diaspora that itself is only part of the much larger story of the catastrophe of colonialism in the Australian and western Pacific region. The following study could be introduced through reference to any one of the thousands of fragmented life stories in colonial archives that distill in a single person’s experience the myriad impacts of this catastrophe. The story of Kelah, from Epi Island in Vanuatu, is just one.

On 12 October 1874 an inquest into the death of “a Polynesian Labourer” called Compan, who had last been seen in the company of “Keelah (Polynesian)”, found his cause of death to have been a “blow from an axe”. Kelah was tried and convicted for Compan’s murder the day after the inquest and was sentenced to death. By 11 November he was in Brisbane Gaol awaiting his sentence. Confined alone in his tiny cell, Kelah’s distress and illness concerned even the hardened jail officers who complained that, amongst other things, Kelah was “in the habit of screaming out frequently”. When the sheriff visited Kelah in his cell, he “endeavoured to get [Kelah] to speak, and found that the only word he could say was ‘yes’—He appeared excited, and not very well and it seemed to me as if he wished to make me understand something but was unable to do so”.2
Kelah had been in Queensland only a few days and had been convicted, sentenced, and imprisoned without an interpreter. After his visit on 11 November, the sheriff placed Kelah under daily medical observation and wrote to Alfred Davidson, a local campaigner for the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Societies, telling him of Kelah’s distress and “requesting him to endeavor to get some Polynesian who could converse with Kelah, as I thought he wished to say something”. Three days later Davidson was able to find an interpreter who did not speak Kelah’s language but “could converse a little and through this imperfect medium some information was procured”. Davidson was told what he had expected to hear, that “in their own country the prisoner would have killed and eaten [the interpreter] if he could”. It was this, he explained, that caused Kelah’s crime, for “through fear . . . and not being able to speak to the Santo men [on his plantation] he became much afraid of them and took his island mode of defence by a first stroke”. This imperfect translation offered Kelah, for the first time, some explanation for his confinement. What it was he had appeared to want to communicate, however, was never recovered.

Following his visit, Davidson petitioned the Queensland government to reduce Kelah’s sentence, arguing that Kelah was a “Cannibal Savage with no knowledge of moral responsibility and holding human life so cheap as to kill men simply for food is entitled to much consideration when his crime is to be tested by the light of our knowledge”. In this “unknown jurisdiction” Kelah had not been able to learn soon enough that killing was an offense. Hanging him would act as no moral message to other cannibal savages, but a lifetime of hard labor and solitary confinement, by imposing prolonged suffering, would act as an ongoing “caution and warning”. The colonial secretary’s office agreed with Davidson’s logic, and by July the following year Kelah’s death sentence had been commuted to a life of penal servitude. The last that is heard of Kelah was during a visit by the colony’s immigration agent and four interpreters, after two months of solitary confinement. By this time, his screaming and agitation had given way to a silent, immobile stillness, and “he could not be induced to open his lips, but seemed to treat everything said to him with a stolid indifference, and did nothing but gaze vacantly round his cell”.

In this glimpse of Kelah’s life we see reflections of the undertows that brought him to Queensland and ultimately to Brisbane Gaol. These are the subject of the following study of the structures and imperatives of settler-colonial rule on the one hand and an interspersed account of the multidimensional autonomy of emergent South Sea Islander communities on the other. The connecting theme of this twofold scrutiny is violence, both as a physical impact and as a discursive presence that distorts our attempts to recover South Sea Islanders from the past. Just as Kelah’s words and behavior were explained and interpreted
with reference to his status as a cannibal savage, the majority of the historical fragments of Islanders' lives that made their way into extensive colonial archives similarly did so through obscuring and distorting discourses of violence. Demographic and descriptive material that captured glimpses of Islanders' responses and adjustments in Queensland often emerged only through discussions of their colonial caricature, the so-called “Kanaka menace”, and the racially prescribed physical and moral dangers that they were seen to pose to the colony. So, too, individuals like Kelah often spoke most freely through corollary inquests and court cases that, for reasons that will be explored, were commonly for charges of assault, grievous bodily harm, murder, and other such violence-related offenses. This tendency is hardly surprising. The labor trade took place in the western Pacific, or Melanesia, in the traditional site of South Sea pirates, seafaring yarns filled with savage cannibals and island women, and the violent romps of the Pacific's Kurtz figures like Asterisk and Charlie Savage, who had “gone native” under the seductive powers of the western Pacific's imagined savagery. The indentured labor trade was easily integrated into this literary tradition. Infamous captains like Bully Hayes and the notorious incidents we will consider in this study (such as the Carl in 1871, the Jason in 1875, and the Hopeful in 1884) were readily combined with the supposed savagery of Islander recruits to promise exciting tales of “cannibal cargoes”.

Western Pacific Islanders, whether as “Polynesians”, “Melanesians”, or “Kanakas”, have been wedded to violence in colonial records and the story of the labor trade by a common discursive tradition. This tradition, which we could call Melanesianism for the sake of clarity, was arguably as total in its representational and social impacts as any Orientalism. To speak of Melanesianism is not just for the sake of finding a shorthand way of talking about this resilient literary and administrative discourse. The term also encompasses the connected constructions that were common to the varied names applied to western Pacific Islanders. It signifies that representations of Islanders as black, savage, tribal, violent, and physical were intimately related to the colonial project of constructing and containing a colonizable, oppresable, and exploitable object and were more than just a set of haphazardly similar constructions. Finally, Melanesianism emphasizes the structural logic and continuity of representations across geographic and temporal change. Being alert to this helps us to locate, dust off, and identify the filters through which can be viewed the stories and experiences of the first generation of Islanders in nineteenth-century Queensland. To underscore what this might achieve, we can return to the communicative inadequacies underpinning Kelah's distress in 1874, for these act as both insight and metaphor. After his sentence was commuted to life in July 1875, Kelah's trace in this archive abruptly ceases, and we are left knowing little of his fate or his
past. Context tells us he was brought to Queensland to work a fledgling colonial industry. But we do not know under what circumstances he was brought—whether he was kidnapped, coerced, tricked, or merely transported at his own request. Had he known what he would experience in Queensland or why he was there? What and who had he left behind in the Islands, and did he mourn this loss, or was it a relief? If his recorded words in 1874 are true to those that actually came out of his mouth, what scared him in Queensland? What caused his distress in Brisbane, and what did he think as he “gazed vacantly” around his cell? Finally, how did he survive the months of solitary confinement? Had he had any prior knowledge, had he seen or heard of an industrial prison before he was confined to one? Although Kelah could have answered all these questions, the colonial world, with all its reams of paper and wells of ink, when it mattered was incapable of recording or hearing his story and was not equipped with the language and words to do so.

Colonialism’s archives and disciplines of knowledge have notoriously obscured access to the voices and histories of colonized peoples such as Kelah. But, as is demonstrated by the glimpses of this one person about whom we know so little, the voices of colonized peoples, while perhaps not always recorded, were never silent. Distorted and fragmented though their voices may be, piecemeal grabs of their interpreted presence nevertheless pepper colonial records. In Kelah’s case, while he could not talk in jail, his actions could. His distress and agitation suggest in the broadest of terms an individualized legacy of colonial demands on the labor, land, and resources of the western Pacific. His actions were what led to the flurry of colonial correspondence that revolved around the issue of the unrealized potential of his uninterpreted words. In a way his agitation and violent behavior became a communicative channel through which an imperfect medium confirmed, as perhaps was inevitable, the colonial knowledge of Kelah’s cannibal savagery. The imperfect structures bridging the gap between Kelah’s actions and colonial administrators’ understanding of it were composed of woven-together pidgin notions and knowledge of Islanders that was constituted by a language, Melanesianism, whose concepts and words have continued to speak for histories of the trade. As such, language, and in particular the imperfect medium of so-called Pidgin, is an appropriate metaphor for the conceptual arrangement of the following study.

Pidgin languages, which developed as a functional means of communication between colonizers and colonized, have the capacity to communicate and represent, as well as construct and reflect, social structures and relations of power. Such a recognition of the role of language in the transmission and reflection of culture and society is not new. Indeed, indigenous languages have long been reduced in their colonial renditions to gibberish or dialects, implying,
in direct reflection of the social forms they were seen to communicate, a lack of complexity, structure, and dynamism. In addition, the languages or jargons of colonial exploitation were called and ridiculed as “pidgin”, or second-rate and crude imitations that lacked the complexity of the imperial language. In Queensland the language Islanders spoke in communication with white society was also taken as an informative indication of that essence. Widely seen as radically simplified imitations of the colonizer’s language, pidgins provided many chroniclers with a means of lampooning, vilifying, and caricaturing Islanders as imperfect recipients of white virtue and vice. In 1892, for example, B. F. S. Baden-Powell wrote in a brief description of the social effects on, and incompatibility of, Islanders with British civilization that “[i]t is very comical to hear them being instructed in their ‘pigeon’ English . . . and most difficult it is to keep one’s serious aspect when one hears the reverend Instructor referring to the Creator of all things as ‘Him Big-Fellow Master’.”

With origins as a jargon whose terms were limited to concepts of physicality and material exchange, Pidgin was often seen to mirror, in its apparent lack of the linguistic virtues of refinement, spirituality, and poetry, the natives who necessitated its creation. Its communicative value lay only insofar as it taught natives the pragmatic economy of speech, and as Florence Young despaired in her memoirs of time as a missionary: “The only possible method of reaching [Islanders] in Queensland was in the jargon known as ‘Pidgin English’ . . . How could deep spiritual truths be taught, when the only words available were those used in the crudest necessities of daily life?”

At the heart of the problems that plagued Young lies both the metaphoric and methodological significance of pidgin languages in the context of this study. On Queensland’s plantations and recruiting vessels, and in the Pacific’s sandalwood trade before that, Pidgin emerged as a language that made available the crudest necessities of daily communication in colonial relations and trade. As such, its capacity to communicate information to European chroniclers on subjects beyond basic material and physical realities was effectively limited by European notions of the Kanaka. Even when trade jargons developed the subtleties and complexities of language, they became unintelligible to English speakers and needed to be simplified and translated to their elementary form. When Islanders spoke in the records, therefore, they were recorded in the most functional of Pidgin’s words and concepts by English-speaking scribes. For example, as we will see in chapter 2, when Islanders gave evidence to the Kidnapping Royal Commission of 1885, their expressions of depression, grief, sadness, anger, and fear were filtered through layers of translation. From the Pidgin of the translator to the anglicized Pidgin of the commissioners who listened, expressions of emotive responses were stripped to raw and understated emo-
tion. “I cry”, for example, was modulated only by “I too much cry”, and anger and resentment over what they had experienced was limited to being “angry” or “cross”. Fortunately in 1885 the commissioners atypically let interviewees speak fairly freely by asking the open-ended question at the end of an interview, “Do you have anything you want to say?” They also recorded nonlinguistic communications, such as one interviewee’s “expressive pantomime of grief”, an articulate expression of his feelings about his own recruitment. These rare interviewing techniques meant in this instance that people had slightly more communicative possibilities than were generally on offer in the limited word capacity of the labor trade’s language. That they were atypical techniques underscores the communicative limitations of the colonial divide, where the underlying depth and meaning of Islanders’ spoken words as they appear translated and recorded was often lost or diluted. Just as linguistic communication was reduced to its elemental level in communicating with white Queensland, shaped as it was by the perceived simplicities of Kanakas, so, too, was the behavior of Islanders interpreted through the language and concepts of existing colonial discourses. As such, what appears in existing records is potentially only the superficial expression of layered depths and meanings.

While the growth of Pidgin as a language alerts us to imposed limitations, restrictions, or distortions, it also reflects the growth, expansion, and experiences of Islander communities. As a linguistic gauge of colonial relations, Pidgin’s social properties were initially fixed along the “vertical (master-servant)” axis of communicated power relations. Hence “bulimæn” for police, “hard-work” for sugar, and “master” for employer, when viewed in conjunction with their English derivatives, implicate the vertical social context of the development of the language. But Pidgin developed into a language on a horizontal axis. Its speakers were mostly Islanders, and Pidgin stabilized and expanded in Queensland by the 1880s along the same trajectory as colonial languages like Tok Pisin and Bislama in the Pacific. Through its use as a horizontal form of communication between Islander laborers, a language emerged with “more complex grammatical structures, stable lexical core, [and] social conventions concerning linguistic correctness” and a capacity to act as “a means of social identity”, “social cohesion”, and “self-expression”. It also emerged from the same sites, and at the same time, that the Islander population was coming together as communities, and it both facilitated and reflected this process. The development of Pidgin therefore distills the story told in the following study. Just as Pidgin emerged by the 1880s as a language in its own right and was galvanized by social and historical circumstances, so, too, did a distinct and new expression of community identity begin to emerge from the broadly diverse island groups in Queensland. Hence to hear Pidgin spoken clarifies that while it had origins in English, its development is tempered by the lengthened vowels, softened con-
sonants, and steady rhythmic motion of Island languages. Islanders' Pidgin in Australia, like the South Sea Islander communities who spoke it, was not the exclusive product of colonization, nor of any of the individual Island languages that contributed to its development. Its rhythm and life as a language came from the first languages of the majority of its speakers, and as an autonomous collection of all these it exceeded its origins as a colonial jargon. The same was true of the horizontal histories that Islanders forged in Queensland by 1906.

The notion of the vertical and horizontal social properties of a language is mirrored in the conceptual arrangement of this study. As previously discussed, the colonial record tended to contain Islanders' words only in anglicized or elementary Pidgin, rather than the richer and more developed language. In other words, the horizontal range of the language remained only partially visible from the vertical view provided by colonial records. This had its social parallel. Returning to Kelah, he appears to us through the simplified vertical structures of colonial communication and gaze. This narrow vertical channel merely dropped in on a segment of Kelah's horizontal reality, but his experiences of recruitment, his reasons for attacking Compan (if he did), and the range of circumstances that led to his distress in jail remain out of view. Like tunnel vision, the vertical channel recorded only a fragment and did not encompass the breadth of the horizontal scope of Kelah's reality. This study thus seeks to patch such fragmented views as an impression of the horizontal breadth and depth of Islanders' worlds in nineteenth-century Queensland. It seeks to do this by scrutinizing the texture of the vertical structures under which people lived. In this way, a dialogue between the vertical and horizontal is attempted where Islanders' agency, resistance, and consciousness can be celebrated, but not at the expense of minimizing scrutiny on the violent capabilities of colonization. This is a balancing act that adds to existing attempts by historians of the labor trade and colonialism more generally. A survey of such scholarship serves as a convenient means of elaborating on the structure of this study through which the suggested dialogue is approached.

**Viewing the Vertical: Violence and Colonial Society**

Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

The violence that attended the vertical structures of Islanders' worlds, and which occurred on the beaches of Pacific islands and in the cane fields of Queensland's sugar districts, cannot be considered in isolation from the concurrent pio-
neering violence of Australian settler-colonialism. As is developed more fully in chapter 3, the exploitation of Islanders’ labor was predicated on the dispossession and removal of Aboriginal people in Queensland, which cleared their land for European industries. In Queensland, as in the Pacific, the violence of the initial frontier periods of colonization was a topic of wide discussion and moralization. An account of this is not only contextual, but also points to the wider applicability and relevance of the questions with which this study engages.

Established as a colony of settlement at the end of 1859, the rapidity and brutality with which Queensland’s frontiers were cleared of indigenous peoples, colonial industries established, and statehood acquired by 1901 intensified and clarified discussions of violence. During the identity-building process of the turn of the century, violence was often evoked as the inevitable symptom of the initial stages of invasion. The pioneers celebrated as the true grit of Queensland’s settlement were classically those who had “rafted over rivers alive with alligators, fought with hostile blacks, starved and thirsted and come narrowly out of Death’s jaw more than once”. In colonial literature, violence underlay the affectionate humor of nostalgic reminiscences of the grog-soaked, rough-as-guts pioneer. “His” world was one of wild pub brawls that spilled into the streets, with levels of grog consumption that killed the tough and fortified the toughest, amidst eccentric social customs and hardships of a colonial existence. These cathartic drunken brawls, in the sugar towns at least, were frequently of a racial character: “Black and white are generally together on a Saturday night” and “those boys are continuously kicking up a row with the Coolies in the streets”. As Boolomal, an Islander who was a regular recipient of these attacks, stated, this “kicking up a row” consisted of “[t]he white boys every Saturday evening pelt[ing] the Polynesians with dirt, bones, eggs and “rotten liver”.

Such larrkinism, as it came to be known and celebrated, had a very colonial character in its assertions of whiteness and ownership.

Violence had something of an atmospheric quality in Queensland that seeped in from its frontiers, which were steadily and violently expanding across indigenous peoples’ lands. George Carrington, an appalled new arrival in Queensland, wrote in 1871 that on one of Queensland’s frontier roads, “for more than a mile the air was tainted with the putrefaction of corpses, which lay all along the ridges, just as they had fallen”, and he had seen “large pits, covered with branches and . . . secured by a few stones, and the pits themselves were full of dead blackfellows, of all ages and of both sexes”. The private letters and diaries of settlers were scattered with references to, and observations of, this violence. Exemplary was settler George Cain’s comment, in a courting letter to Rebecca Miles before they married, that when Aborigines were euphemistically “dispersed”, the “beggars here don’t rot; they dry like mummies and
precious queer looking articles they look too: dry and grinning. Well, they don’t cost me a moment’s uneasiness.” Violence was therefore understood and talked about in Queensland through a network of moralizing and through such euphemisms as “dispersals” and “dispersal raids” for massacres and killings. This is evident in the thinly veiled closing comments of Edward Kennedy’s autobiographical reminiscences of his “official work and personal adventures” with Queensland’s Native Mounted Police.

Now I bring to an end these old-time events. Some experiences which befell me . . . cannot be published [like] the survivor of an old-time fearful massacre by the blacks . . . Old Queenslanders will recognise the allusion when I state that a terrible vengeance was inflicted on the black fiends, and almost entirely by one man.30

Kennedy’s feigned obfuscation in this passage informs his twentieth-century reader of the “old times” of Queensland’s settlement, when morality was coded differently by circumstances that made men tougher and harder and made right and wrong merely an equation of surviving, or punishing the “black fiends”. “Old-time” travel narratives, social commentary, and parliamentary debates and discussion recognized violence as central to the pioneer’s trade. Imbued with a siege mentality, many evoked the hostility of the very land that settlers were attempting to occupy, while openly acknowledging and discussing the rights and wrongs of the “war” being waged by, and against, its owners. The climate, the bush, the distances, the droughts, floods, cyclones, sun, diseases, and indigenous, indentured, and immigrant nonwhites in Queensland were often evoked as that against which a constant battle must be waged and won. While this gave rise to a sense of triumphalism, based on the success of settling whites in the tropics, this cockiness was consistently interspersed with heightened insecurities and tensions about the physical and moral safety, sanctity, purity, and hygiene of bodily and racial integrity. As is developed in chapter 3, periodic swellings of anxiety in various districts characterized much of Queensland’s colonial period. District by district, this fear accompanied the first moments of European occupation. After the establishment of industry and perceived permanence, fears and anxieties shifted to such nebulous focal points as the existence of the so-called Aboriginal remnant on the fringes of colonial towns, the Chinatowns and Kanakatowns in the heart of colonial towns, the shifting “Kanaka menace,” indefinable miscegenation, disease and contagion, economic depression, and a host of other threats.

It is with the siege mentality of this tropical settler-colonialism in mind that the moralities and legalities of violence, such as were expressed by jour-
nalist Spencer Browne in 1927, might be approached: “It is hard to say when shooting is or is not justifiable. . . . In the wilderness, when it comes to a question of fighting for life, we cannot temporise [sic] with Exeter Hall”. Browne’s frontier morality was based on a common colonial theme: violence and colonialism were naturally intertwined and co-dependent, and colonialism was violence. As we will see, this was commonly implied in relation not simply to indigenous/non-indigenous relations, but also to Islanders, and most visibly through such predominant narratives as that of the fatal impact. This perceived necessity for violence, or its conceptual inescapability in colonial relations, is explored more closely in this study’s inquiries into the colonial imperatives, ideologies, fears, and fantasies that drove, governed, and sustained colonial force. In doing so we can draw upon compelling insights of existing analyses of colonialism’s violence.

Frantz Fanon’s statement from The Wretched of the Earth, cited at the start of this section, also evokes colonialism as violence. To elaborate, he wrote that the agents of colonial government “speak the language of pure force . . . [as] the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the Native”, and violence generally “has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world [and] has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms”. The maintenance of power in his colonial world was dependent on the construction of a Manichean world, or a world of absolute opposites, whose dichotomies of good and bad and white and black were divided and policed along fault lines of raw, unfettered, and pure force. This theme of the central role of violence in the construction, homogenization, and elevation to power of internally diverse groups is particularly germane in this study. Fanon’s model draws out the crude functionality and ubiquity of colonial violence. But like Browne’s moral statement, such a model helps to mystify the existence of violence by rendering it inevitable beyond analysis, and self-evident, self-explanatory, and in need of little treatment beyond a description of its effects. The interactions of individual and state violence in the colonial regime, however, could be further explored. For as compelling as is the acceptance of the possibilities for violence necessitated by the model of a Manichean world of fat-bellied white quarters and emaciated black quarters, the role of human agency must be historicized, for violence surely cannot exist outside human activity.

Michael Taussig’s “cultures of terror” and “spaces of death”, on the other hand, focus much more on individuals, helping to extend our understanding of the violent impact of discourses of alterity. Taussig dealt particularly with the pathological liminality of violence on these frontiers or spaces of death. Colonial violence, he states, is a product of “epistemic murk”—or spaces where mimicry, imaginings, silences, mythologies, and magic release humanity’s dark-
est essence and concrete realms of reality are replaced with mystical ones. This epistemic murk epitomizes the space of colonial relations where the terrors of each side of the dichotomous colonial world clash, and where violence operates according to “long-standing cultural logics of meaning—structures of feeling—whose basis lies in a symbolic world and not in one of rationalism”.33 Crudely stated, it was the discourses of the other and the colonized, with all their illusory qualities that were brought from the old world to its peripheries, that informed the colonial project and lay at the heart of colonialism’s talent for violence. This is certainly a model that resonates with colonial frontiers elsewhere, as Barry Morris has shown in relation to the frontiers of New South Wales.34 But while Morris and Taussig bring us closer to understanding how individuals commit acts of horror in ways that are not necessarily specific to colonialism, as is argued in chapter 1 in relation to examples of violence on the frontiers of the Pacific labor trade, the notion of a space of death can amplify the unspeakable and incomprehensible nature of such violence, rendering it a little socially and historically nonspecific. As such, a concentration on unfettered individuals freed by their fear from social moralities and legal boundaries has the potential to limit our analytical attention to the untamed frontier and the killing times so that continuity into the mundane, crudely functional, and enabling violence of colonialism’s more settled phases is lost. Chapters 1, 3, and 5 argue, therefore, that the violence of colonialism operated in ways that changed modalities and form, but which was essentially structural in nature and was therefore reasoned and rationalized and neither natural nor mystical. Queensland’s indentured labor trade is of course exemplary.

The point of origin for most histories of the Queensland-Pacific labor trade tends to be Queensland, 1863, the time of the young colony’s acute labor shortage and efforts to establish, with a minimum of expense, an agricultural industry in a tropical climate considered fatal to European labor. This period of discussion, legislative attempts, and the eventual importation by Capt. Robert Towns of sixty-seven Islanders in 1863 and the eventual abolition of the trade and deportation of Islanders after 1906 have been chronological bookends. Between these markers, the gradual bureaucratization and regulation of the trade, beginning with the 1868 Polynesian Labourers Act, and the increasing momentum of importation and indenture, with its lulls and suspensions, have tended to mirror conventional colonial narratives where violence exploded with ferocity in the early days but dissipated as a lack of laws and morality gave way to administration.

In earlier histories of the trade, narratives were very much focused on European pioneering endeavors in Queensland and the material impact of capitalist exploitation in the Pacific. Islanders often played the role in these histories of
circumstantial facilitators of an indictment on the processes of colonial intrusion into the pristine precolonial, or prehistorical, western Pacific. It must be added that these histories were written against the amnesia of earlier Australian and Queensland histories, whose whitewash often wrote out of Queensland’s settlement the existence of indentured labor in any substantial form. Hence O. W. Parnaby’s *Britain and the Labor Trade in the Southwest Pacific* (1964), G. Bolton’s *Planters and Pacific Islanders* (1967), and E. Docker’s *The Blackbirders* (1970), in which Islanders played incidental roles, at least brought the trade to some level of popular recognition. After the 1970s more nuanced histories were produced that consciously sought to construct political and economic histories around Islander laborers themselves. Notable are Clive Moore, Adrian Graves, Peter Corris, Ralph Shlomowitz, and Kay Saunders, who concentrated on the conditions of recruitment, labor, and accommodation; the Queensland government’s various legislative responses to the fluctuating population of indentured, time-expired, and ticket-holding Islanders; and the quantification of economic and demographic aspects of the trade. Extending the tale beyond the simple “man-catching...of Stone Age cannibals” of versions such as Holt-house’s *Cannibal Cargoes* and Docker’s *The Blackbirders* (1970), they have placed Islanders at the center of histories of colonial activity in the western Pacific.

Labeled revisionist, these developments have controversially reduced the focus on kidnapping and forced recruitment and attempted to emphasize the agency of Islander recruits. Any historiographical development that places Islanders in the center of their own histories is obviously a good one. But for all the exercise of agency on the part of Islanders, the labor trade was not, as many have written, a benign labor migration. It was a trade in labor. Searching for signs of historical agency should not preclude the ongoing recognition that the labor trade was premised on a determination to be profitable, which ultimately rendered negligible (unless profitable) the existence of agency. In other words, and in relation to current debates over the appropriateness of slavery as a description for the labor trade, resistance or agency take their meaning only from the oppressive context against which they are asserted. In the end, surely some measure of the “damage” inflicted can derive from the number of times we feel we must assert that people were resisting agents.

The indentured labor trade did not have to consist exclusively of abductions and massacres to earn the label of violent and exploitative, for it was a system in which violence was embedded. It regulated the right to take mainly young men away from their homes for three years of coerced labor in a tropical industry considered fatal to white labor, with standards of accommodation that were too frequently fatal for Islanders, and with a standard of care that was systemically negligent. As is explored in chapter 5, throughout the life of the trade
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the death rate of Islanders far exceeded that of the entire European population, young and old, and male and female. At its worst, it was as high as 60 percent between 1883 to 1885 on the Colonial Sugar Refining Company’s Goondi estate. On the day-to-day level conditions on the plantations, without the supplemented diets Islanders would in time provide themselves, aided the spread and intensity of diseases from which they suffered terribly, such as whooping cough, tuberculosis, influenza, and dysentery. Inadequate diet, appalling sanitation, swampy and unhealthy living quarters, and negligent treatment of the sick and the dying, all in the context of the harsh conditions of labor in a climate acknowledged as being life threatening, were the legal and regulated standards that contributed greatly to Islanders’ bloated mortality. Sustained high mortality rates were therefore a regulated standard. Throughout the nineteenth century, the trade was subject to ever-increasing bureaucratic surveillance and regulation under the legislative folds of both Queensland and Britain, and by 1904, when the indenture trade in Queensland ended, it had been intensely scrutinized during the 1880s, suspended between 1890 and 1892, and regulated by “seven Acts of Parliament, eighteen Schedules, fifty-four Regulations, and thirty-eight Instructions to Government Agents.”

Many of these changes were the outcome of periods of intense interest in incoming reports of atrocities, murders, and kidnappings in the Pacific and of domestic reports on endemic violence on the plantations. Such periods of interest and inquiry, as we will see, assisted the process of institutionalizing and regulating into acceptance the mundane violence of the everyday.

The structural presence of the violence of the labor trade becomes transparent in those economic histories focused on painting a picture of labor migration. Taking historical account of this regulated context, however, allows for more nuanced accounts of Islanders’ agency. For it allows the telling of the history of the traumatic impact of the trade on individuals whose stories, like Kelah’s, told of a quiet impact that did not attract the sensational cry of atrocity, kidnapping, or massacre and for whom debates about voluntary recruitment might seem ludicrously irrelevant. A telling example of this quiet impact is the story of Wandro from Aurora (Maewo) Island in Vanuatu, who in 1881 died, like many others in Queensland, from dysentery. The coronial inquest ruled that this was “probably aggravated by grief at the death of his brother Warraka, and by superstitious fear”. Those who knew him said he died of grief. Wandro was eighteen and was in Queensland with his younger brother Joe Warraka, who also died from dysentery. The day his brother died, Wandro became ill, and “he stop outside along grass, he sleep along grass, he plenty sing out, he wanted Warraka”. According to Frances Atkinson, who was in charge of his care, on “Saturday he told me that Warraka was calling him plenty on Friday night.” Wandro died
in the cane fields three days after his brother. His story contains no shocking violence, no obvious villains, and, as the inquest reported, his death was due to disease with “no signs of violence”. But his death was one that resulted from a system whose dynamics, and the ideology that drove it, were subtly and overtly violent.

The dynamics of colonialism’s violence are developed in the chapters that follow through three concentric sites of colonial interaction and through the threads of violence that link them. These include the frontiers on the beaches and shallows of the western Pacific (chapter 1), the borders and fringes of so-called “inside” or “settled” districts in Queensland (chapter 3), and the administrative heart of the inside districts, where we consider such wider underpinning philosophies as that of the civilizing mission (chapter 5). The argument that emerges is that colonialism was not a system of total violence. Rather, colonial violence was the product of an interplay between the purely functional of economic imperatives and land grabs and the deeply psychological of Tausig’s culture of terror. Beyond the increasingly recognized killing times of the frontier, the stabilizing colonial context allowed and necessitated more subtle modalities for violence. This account of the vertical context of the world that Islanders negotiated throws suggestive light on the traces they left in the archives throughout the nineteenth century. I hope that this will enable us to dissolve the discursive and racial mythologies that have continued to interpret Islanders’ histories.

Deciphering the Horizontal: Islanders’ Worlds in Colonial Context

The analysis of the vertical colonial world discussed above will be firmly anchored in peoples’ experiences of it through interspersed chapters (chapters 2, 4, and 6) that look more closely at Islanders’ worlds up to and including deportation in 1906. As stories unfold it becomes very clear that Islanders did not simply survive the traumas of, at worst, kidnapping and years of abuse and, at best, alienation and exploitation. Although contained and constrained, they generated autonomous communities in Queensland that constantly shifted and adjusted to new or intensifying pressures from the colonial world. This story is not, however, being told for the first time. People like Faith Bandler, Noel Fatnowna, Mabel Edmond, and the contributors to oral history collections have produced personal or local histories from the 1970s onwards that are richly textured with detail and experience. So, too, a significant body of work emerged from the same period that focused on recovering social and cultural aspects of Islanders’ community histories. Of particular significance is the pioneering work of Clive Moore, Kay Saunders, Peter Corris, and Patricia Mercer. Their
intent and value was to center Islanders’ agency, autonomy, and cultural integrity in the history of the Queensland cane fields and to bring important tales of survival and adjustment to economic histories. While I do not wish to disregard or displace this latter body of work, it is a body of scholarship that is not unproblematic.

Historians inherited, as a tool of analysis and interpretation, the idea or epistemology of “Melanesia”, which reaches well “into the intellectual and even theological traditions” of European colonial practices in Australia and the Pacific. As such, and to varying degrees of subtlety, Melanesianism has continued to provide the language that has spoken these histories. A cursory scan of publication titles gives some indication of this and of the way people tended to be described persistently and meaningfully as Melanesians. On the one hand, this tendency was contemporaneous with the emergence in the 1970s and 1980s of the strategic essentialism of “the Melanesian Way” and the appropriation by Islanders of “Melanesia” as culture, indigeneity, and kastom or a principle means of defining postcolonial identities. The persistent signifying of people as Melanesians by historians may therefore be partly respectful of this. However, these histories were not accompanied by a matching re-inscription or scrutiny of the colonial connotations that automatically accompany the idea of Melanesia. Nomenclature, then, is superficially indicative of an underlying implication that Melanesian ethnic and cultural differences determined social accommodation, resistance, and adjustment. In the following excerpts from Saunders and Moore (respectively), for example, peoples’ resistance to plantation conditions were explained in passing as retaliation against the humiliation of being beaten or coerced by overseers and owners “which they felt sorely, for their own societies stressed the dignity of physical prowess, warfare and combat for men”.

Similarly, the abuse of alcohol in Islander communities towards the end of the nineteenth century was explained as being due in part to being “‘niggers’ shunned by Europeans” in Queensland, a fact “[t]hey can only have resented” because “Melanesians are a proud race with a warrior tradition”. Here, people’s reactions to being humiliated, beaten, coerced, or shunned are placed firmly in the context of a Melanesian’s warrior- and pride-driven response to such social circumstances. In these instances the reference to the idea of Melanesia hardly seems to matter. Indeed, the reference to people’s former status serves to effectively underscore the extent of colonialism’s infantalization of adults. But it nevertheless flags a discursive slippage into existing frames of reference asserted by the term “Melanesia”.

While the mentioned references were fleeting, with little apparent impact on their deeper historical substance regarding resistance and countercultures, such unqualified references to warrior pride, warfare, combat, and physical
prowess draw authority from colonial discourses on Melanesia, and in the process perpetuate them. These were subtle examples of more overt statements such as Moore’s “[p]hysical violence and recalcitrant behavior are typical Melanesian responses to aggravation”, and that in “seeking deaths in compensation for deaths, Melanesians did not feel obliged to kill the person they thought directly responsible [and were often] satisfied with any death”. These statements are unrefereenced and therefore self-authorizing. As such they recapitulate discursive types and intensities of violence that were seen as inherent Melanesian characteristics. As casual and unrefereenced statements they imply an ethnic reflex as the self-evident source of people’s behavior. In so doing the potential is there for social and historical conditions to be rendered as simply ethnological experiences.

Themes of Islanders’ natural tendency towards unbridled revenge, murderous brutality, and violent irrationality have been more often communicated through metonymic references that are more subtle and enduring. A most persistent example of this includes accounts of violence within the Islander community that have been unquestioningly presented as intertribal warfare and feuding. As will be discussed in chapters 4 and 6, notions of tribalism have readily been adopted as explanations for questions whose answers, as chapter 6 explores, might just as well be economically, socially, and historically located. Melanesianism’s trope of tribalism, for example, has authorized and made credible such unrefereenced assertions as Moore’s: “[t]he next year two more Islanders were killed near Alexandra; one of them was cooked and eaten. Similar violent skirmishes took place all through the nineteenth century for a variety of reasons”. Repetition provides authority for this statement. Although this study does question the extent to which intragroup violence within Queensland’s Islander community has been proportionately situated in its historical and social context, questioning the claims is not my point. Rather, my point is that it was not deemed necessary to provide explanation, qualification, or evidence for such an extraordinary and sweeping statement. Presented within a context of Melanesian intertribal violence, the attending savagery of habitually cooking and eating victims had already been authorized for reader and author alike by generations of a colonial knowledge that was developed in direct consult with colonial acts of violence.

My critique is not intended as an attack on the work of previous generations of historians to whose pioneering efforts this study is indebted. Rather, it is a critique of the way we inherit, reference, and perpetuate colonial knowledge. Here the enduring insights of Ranajit Guha, Lata Mani, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and others are clearly relevant. In the absence of scrutiny on the discursive and physical conditions of oppression under which available information on
the colonial past was deposited, we run the risk of repeating those conditions by staying within the established paradigms of knowledge on which such oppression was founded. In other words, the historical notion that Melanesians, or Kanakas, were essentially driven and motivated by the base instincts of tribalism, primitivism, and savage violence was an idea that dehistoricized people's physical actions and essentialized Islanders' violence in a way that displaced it from its social context. Melanesianism in a sense provided for an effective "prose of counter-insurgency" that contributed endlessly to their imposed condition as black, indentured, and inferior. Without interrogation of the function of this knowledge we run the risk of not only repeating it, but also recapitulating the structural conditions of its creation. Hence my focus in the above critique is not so much a dismissal of the work on which this study builds, and to this I will return. It also constitutes a more general analysis of the strength and resilience of colonial knowledge and the historical contribution that representations of Islanders as being exclusively motivated by physicality and violence has made to the colonial mechanisms of their oppression.

Viewing Islanders' histories within the constraining parameters of Melanesianism is ahistorical and casts Islanders' social and cultural adjustments in Queensland in a culturally retentive or deterministic way. And yet, in contrast to earlier populist histories like Holthouse’s *Cannibal Cargoes*, which regurgitated existing racial images, the empirical rigor of revisionist histories like Moore’s, Saunders’, and others’, and their intent and alignment with the contemporary political struggles of South Sea Islander people at the time of their research, is their most instructive element. Their will to conduct careful and revisionist research actually highlights the powerfully persistent discourses that attend our efforts to decolonize history. Our attempts to reconstruct colonized histories from the sources that originally contributed to the colonization and containment of indigenous peoples are frustrated continually by the discursive limitations and filters left by their colonial authors. In the face of this, the question remains whether, as a result of such a critique, there is anything that eludes this contamination and whether or not we can gather anything from the colonial record beyond an insight into discursive production. I think there is and I think we can. If we strip records of their identified overtones and undertones and scrutinize discursive filters, we are able to capture evocative glimpses and “countersigns” of Islanders’ lives in the sugar districts. Like other mediums of colonial imagery, we can read colonial observations so that the overlaid interpretations that prescribed meaning can be tentatively separated from the concrete observation. Colonial imagery, after all, whether visual or textual, remains a record not just of how things were viewed, but of what was viewed.

Given the limited detail and depth in records that Islanders were able to
leave in the nineteenth century, every image based on concrete observations, such as Kelah’s physical behavior in Brisbane Gaol is invaluable. His behavior, though at first indecipherable to the colonial record, became the symptom of what would be exclusively interpreted as cannibal savagery by Alfred Davidson. In the discursive context of the colonial world, Islanders’ innate cannibalism, savagery, bloodthirstiness, infanticide, and head hunting were an automatic association and did not need to be seen to be observed. Symptoms were more than enough, and these symptoms, because they were recorded, remain a valuable historical detail. Hence when seeing through the eyes of those who chronicled a world they already knew, we are not necessarily doomed to being blinded by what they thought they saw, or blind to what they did not know they saw. That Kelah was in jail and both silent and agitated is a fragment from which we can learn, and the method used in the following chapters is that of keeping this substance while distancing its interpretation for separate scrutiny. In attempting to read against the dominant discursive grain, we can find cumulative value in every “trace of independent initiative” and every resonant trace of Islanders’ voices or presence in the records. Locating these leaves a collection of detail that can be placed together in relation to one another and their historical context. As such, this study does not seek to merely fill gaps in a narrative whose terms of communication, after all, have not shifted. Instead, the composite picture that emerges from chapters 2, 4, and 6 is a “rough-textured and deeply streaked” impression of Islanders’ worlds that, without closure or claim to totality, makes its own fracturing and the structure of oppression that fractured it the underlying topic of scrutiny.

The first of the three horizontal chapters consists of a consideration of Islanders’ immediate experiences of and adjustments to the labor trade and sugar districts. Chapter 4 examines the colonial record for expressions from individuals and communities, of emergent identities, consciousness, and other socially cohesive movements. Chapter 6 considers to what extent so-called intertribal violence and violent behavior amongst Islanders in Queensland can be shaken loose of the powerful containments of colonial discourse and repositioned within the physical and historical context established in previous chapters. While it is clear from existing historical work that Islanders maintained, to differing degrees, the cultural practices, languages, and histories they brought with them to Queensland, these chapters argue strongly for understanding Islanders’ construction of a new and old social world in terms of maintenance and articulation rather than merely cultural retention. The difference is more than semantic and is explored more fully in chapters 4 and 6. Most simply put, articulation talks about social change in a way that steps out of the confines of the twin demons that plague attempts to discuss indigenous and
colonized peoples’ identities: racial or ethnic essentialism on the one hand and “repressive authenticity” on the other. As such, it is hoped that these horizontal chapters will be brought into dialogue or conversation with the vertical context in a meaningful way. This brings me again to this study’s conceptual framing. Rather than assuming two sides to this story—that of the colonizer and the colonized—the conceptual framework adopted in this study, through the linguistic metaphors of the vertical and horizontal social world, is that of two interlocked perspectives. These are defined more by the relations of power that shape them than by traditional dichotomies of black and white or colonizer and colonized. My hope is that the intermittent dialogue between the vertical and horizontal plains of Islanders’ world will provide a chance to re-view and re-frame what has been told in existing histories.

This study draws partially on new material and partially on what has been considered by other historians, but asks of it new questions, for it is in the reformulation of new questions for old sources, rather than just the uncovering of new information to fill in gaps of “compensatory histories”, that historical understanding can advance. Parliamentary and archival records, published memoirs and journals, colonial press, written histories, and the Black Oral History Collection recorded by Clive Moore and Patricia Mercer in the 1970s, and by Matthew Peacock for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, have all been closely considered in this study. The study limits itself to the records, and occasionally the existing memories, of those people who lived through the period preceding deportation in 1906. For this was the loose period within which the historical foundations of Australian South Sea Islander communities were laid. The history of how the community recovered from the losses of deportation and survived and thrived during the years of the White Australia Policy, the Depression, and their emergence as full Australian citizens in the 1960s is a distinct and sequential volume in the story of the South Sea Island peoples’ struggles and survival, and one that must be told in dedicated volumes. It is my hope that this study will add to our understanding of the sheer breadth and depth of the impact of colonialism in the nineteenth century, on Islanders specifically and colonized peoples more generally. In addition, in returning to Kelah, it is also hoped that an awareness is maintained throughout these chapters that every story and detail that is told, every individual whose story is plucked from the records, represents only the outer edge of an enormous realm of experiences that were not recorded and are not recoverable from the colonial world.