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A Different Kind of Hybridity—An Early British Depiction of Pitcairn Islanders

ABSTRACT This article analyzes early British construction of the Pitcairn Islanders' cultural-colonial hybridity as depicted in John Shillibeer's (1817) *Narrative of the Briton's Voyage to Pitcairn's Island*. The supposedly surprising encounter between the British and the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and Tahitian women had a tremendous impact on the creation of Pitcairn inhabitants' myth as an exemplary Anglo-Tahitian community. The critical analysis of the historical account highlights and scrutinizes such conceptualization of their identity as an act of colonial epistemic violence. This critique is conducted through reading of the primary source a postcolonial reinterpretation of Arnold van Gennep's concepts of liminality and Homi Bhabha's cultural hybridity. Shillibeer depicted Pitcairn Islanders' mixed ancestry as an amalgamation of British cultural-colonial tropes enabled in the Empire's "liminal space." Scrutinizing this amalgamation, this article considers its four pillars: Islanders' English language proficiency, Anglican religious piety, exemplary moral behavior, and supposed political affiliation with the British Empire.

KEYWORDS Pitcairn Island, Pacific, hybridity, identity, Englishness

Introduction

The culturally widespread Western perception of the Pacific Ocean as an empty space represents an ongoing epistemic struggle between the still very present colonial-imperial narratives and the counter-narratives of the Indigenous *Islanders* contesting these biased discourses. As R. Gerard Ward states, the Europeans "viewed it as empty, and acted accordingly. Pacific Islanders have seen it as a mosaic of islands and interconnections" (Ward 1989, 235)—a situation also identified by Epeli Hau'ofa in "Our Sea of Islands" (Hau'ofa 1994, 148). However, there are spaces in the Pacific

that were in the past neither empty nor connected. Presenting the contradictions in the epistemes of salt water, this article zooms in on one such space—Pitcairn Island—and aims at taking a small step in decolonizing the knowledge and perception of its inhabitants' history.

On September 17, 1814, HMS *Briton* and HMS *Tagus* approached Pitcairn Island after their crews had seen signs of recent habitation. The island, wrongly charted on the maps by its (re)discoverer[1] British Captain Philip Carteret, was thought to be void of human habitation. A settlement had already been discovered on Pitcairn in 1808 by the American whaling ship *Topaz*, whose captain, Mayhew Folger, informed the British Royal Navy about it in a letter. It seems that the lack of sufficient communication resulted in this information not reaching the two ships: the approaching Englishmen were surprised to find that the island was in fact inhabited.

John Shillibeer, a Royal Marines Lieutenant on board HMS *Briton*, witnessed the first encounter and described it in his *Narrative of Briton's Voyage to Pitcairn's [sic] Island*.[2] The Islanders were "launching their little canoes through the surf," while the English "prepared to ask them some questions in the language of those people [they] had so recently left" (Shillibeer 1817, 81). The author meant that they would need the services of an Indigenous Tahitian interpreter, referred to in the British Navy's jargon as "Otaheitean Jack" and defined in a footnote as a "Native of Otaheite, who had been taught a little English by the Missionaries" (Shillibeer 1817, 44). However, as the Pitcairn inhabitants approached the *Briton*, the British were "hailed in perfect English" (Shillibeer 1817, 81), which initially resulted in a cognitive dissonance caused by the fact that the Islanders' physique and apparel did not match their language proficiency.[3]

As the questioning of two young men from Pitcairn revealed, they were sons of the mutineers from HMS *Bounty*. After rebelling against their commanding officer Captain William Bligh, the mutineers had abducted Tahitian women and men, trying to escape the inevitable pursuit by the Royal Navy. Fletcher Christian, the leader of the mutineers, unsuccessfully tried to settle on one of the inhabited islands in the vicinity

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1 I opt for the term (re)discoverer to show the dichotomy between the British assumption that they were the first to "discover" the island and that of the Polynesians who inhabited the island before the British (at the time of the arrival of the *Bounty* they were already gone).

2 Though Shillibeer mentions Pitcairn Island in the title, he devotes only one chapter of his work to it. The island was neither the destination of the *Tagus* and the *Briton*, nor was its description the climax of the Lieutenant's narrative.

3 Their clothes caught Shillibeer's particular attention, as they resembled those of Marquesans (Shillibeer 1817, 96).

of the Marquesas. Having been driven off by its Indigenous inhabitants, he finally opted for Pitcairn, which was charted as uninhabited. After landing on the island in 1790, he ordered the *Bounty* to be burned, to conceal their presence, but also to make it impossible for the outlaws to leave the island. The tensions between the mutineers and their Tahitian male servants were steadily rising; they were finally to erupt sometime in 1793 or 1794. The servants revolted against their oppressors when one of the Englishmen "demanded and obtained the wife of one of the native men" after his own "wife" had died in an accident (Young 1894, 25). The outcome of this rebellion was the killing of all Tahitian men and most of the Englishmen, while another three English survivors died within a short period of time. By 1814 the island was inhabited by the mutineers' descendants, the Tahitian women and the last of the original mutineers, John Adams.

In this article, I discuss the approach of the British (re)discoverers of the settlement as it was presented in Shillibeer's narrative, which was published three years after his contact with the Islanders. The significance of his depiction of the encounter lies in the way he described the inhabitants of Pitcairn to his readers, using a well-known European trope of the Pacific as a "paradise" inhabited by "children of nature" and suturing it with an image of Islanders as perfect cultural-colonial hybrids within the British Empire's liminal space. This notion seems to be connected to the mixed English–Tahitian ancestry of the Islanders born on Pitcairn, which is mentioned throughout Shillibeer's work. Conveniently for his goal of presenting these people as "perfect," this is not discussed by him in terms of racial differences. Though Homi K. Bhabha describes the notion of cultural hybridity "from the minority perspective" (Bhabha 1994, 2), it is crucial to stress that this concept will not be applied to analyzing the Pitcairn Islanders' own identity claims, as it is impossible to unequivocally discern them in the Lieutenant's biased imperial discourse. Rather, the concept will be considered from the point of view of the British colonizer, Shillibeer, who in this first encounter with the Islanders invented and imposed a new cultural-colonial hybrid identity upon them.[4]

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4 After studying the history of Pitcairn Islanders, I have concluded that an attempt at describing and / or analyzing their own perception of their identity / identities might result in an act of epistemic (post)colonial violence. Therefore, the notions of liminality and cultural-colonial hybridity will be applied only in reference to the British colonizers' depictions of the Islanders in order to subject them to critical scrutiny.

Hybridity and Liminality

In *The Rites of Passage,* Arnold van Gennep focuses on describing religious rituals that constituted the rites of passage which represented a threshold that the participants were to cross in order to ascend into higher social levels in their society (van Gennep [1909] 1993, 3). This threshold is known in anthropology as a liminal space "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1995, 95).

From the perspective of the Pitcairn Islanders, it is impossible to provide an unbiased historical statement that could illuminate us contemporary scholars as to how they perceived themselves. However, the analysis of Shillibeer's work as, crucially, describing *the first* encounter between them and the Englishmen hints at how he himself classified the position of this island's inhabitants within the areas of British expansion in the Pacific. The Lieutenant's depiction located the Islanders in another sort of liminal space—at the fringes where British culture meets Rousseau's trope of the "noble savage." Whilst the actual phrase was originally used by John Dryden, the notion of a human being enjoying a natural and noble existence until corrupted by civilization is generally attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had a tremendous influence on the European perception of Pacific Islanders in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The performances of British culture by Pitcairn inhabitants described by Shillibeer—their perfect command of the English language, their Anglican piety, morality, and association with British political rule—constituted a novelty to his readers and a point where cultural-colonial hybridity emerges and "noble savages" become agents of "nature in its most simple state" (Shillibeer 1817, 88).

Shillibeer could not entirely place the Islanders either within the tropes relating to Pacific Islanders or, through their perfect performances of Englishness, as his "countrymen."[5] This "interstitial passage between fixed identifications open[ed] up a possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertain[ed] difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 1994, 4). Throughout his narrative, the author mixed the two aspects, unable to point to one single identification that could help him and his readers to pin Pitcairn inhabitants down to one cultural trope or the other. However, this is precisely where, contrary to Bhabha's description of the "interstitial passage" as being "without an assumed or imposed hierarchy,"

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5 The notion of "countrymen" is discussed at some length in a later section of this article titled "Why, King George to be sure"—Colonial Politics.

Shillibeer placed Pitcairn Islanders in the colonizer's hierarchy above other Pacific Islanders, but below the British. Therefore, the Lieutenant diverged from what the modern scholar could denote as Turner's and van Gennep's identification of liminality as the "middle passage" (Turner 1995, 95)[6] and from Bhabha's notion of a cultural hybridity that includes no hierarchies. Instead, he invents an amalgamation—a hybridity of British cultural-colonial tropes—resulting in what he presents as a perfect community within a perpetual liminal space, geographically remote and outside the sphere of influence of Indigenous Pacific Islanders and the British Empire alike.

"Always English"—Language

The first pillar in Shillibeer's construction of the Pitcairn inhabitants' cultural-colonial hybridity was the language they spoke. For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British society "language was an index of intelligence and reflected human mentality, knowledge, memory, imagination, sensibility" (Chitnis 1976, iii). The linguistic intelligibility of the people encountered had a noticeable impact on how they were perceived by the colonizer. This idea is elaborated by eighteenth-century British "orientalist" John Richardson, who writes that a language "may be considered as one great barometer of the barbarity or civilization of a people. A poverty of dialect is generally accompanied by savageness and ignorance […] No authority can, at the same time, so decisively fix the peculiar habits and pursuits of a nation as the sounds by which they articulate their ideas" (Richardson 1778, 2); consequently, when the British expanded their political-colonial influence around the world, the local populations' command of the English language was considered not merely a means of communication, but also an indicator of the level of their "civilization."

The previously mentioned "Otaheitean Jacks" furnished only a limited degree of assistance in the communication, due to their own linguistic limits. Therefore, when Pitcairn Islanders approaching the British ships "hailed [them] in perfect English" (Shillibeer 1817, 81), it was clear that this random encounter would differ significantly from the standard modes of contact practiced so far in the Pacific. The Islanders determined, to the

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6 In context of this article and Pitcairn Islanders, the "middle passage" does not at all refer to the Atlantic middle passage and the slave trade. It is a reference to a state "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1995, 95), in which a passenger "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1995, 94).

Englishmen's greatest surprise, that the discourse between them would be held in their common language, and thus the issue of the "poverty of dialect" denoting "savageness" (Richardson 1778, 2) was quite simply not an issue. Astounded, the English proceeded to inquire:

> —What language do you commonly speak?
> —Always English.
> —But you understand the Otahetian [*sic*]?
> —Yes, but not so well.
> —Do the old women speak English?
> —Yes, but not so well as they understand it, their pronunciation is not good.
>   (Shillibeer 1817, 86)

Having established the Islanders' language proficiency and the historical reason why these people spoke it, the British wanted to investigate in what context English was used in this small settlement. By declaring that they always spoke English, Pitcairn's inhabitants suggested to Shillibeer's readers that this language was more important than or maybe even superior to Tahitian, the language of their mothers. This is supported by the Lieutenant when he invokes their dismissive assertion that these "old women" from Tahiti did not understand English as well as their children did, nor could they properly pronounce it. Hence, from the beginning the young Islanders were portrayed as distancing themselves from, at the very least, their *linguistic* Tahitian heritage.

The exchange of information between Pitcairn inhabitants and the Englishmen achieved two main goals. Firstly, the colonizer presented it as a partial dissociation of native Pitcairn inhabitants from their Tahitian ancestry. Secondly, as in Britain at the time "language was […] central to assimilation and advancement" (Wheeler 2000, 198) of peoples, Shillibeer pronounced them "performers" of British culture. Considering that "precision in spoken and written English became more central to a metropolitan English identity over the eighteenth century" (Wheeler 2000, 198), its exceptional presentation in this distant place made a tremendous first impression on the colonizers. At the same time, the author points to their partial Tahitianness, when in a dialogue transcribed by him, they admitted understanding their mothers' tongue. Though dismissing the physical aspects of it, he did not ignore the European cultural construct that their mixed racial ancestry elicited. He utilized the colonial trope of the Pacific as "paradise," which Tahitianness still evoked in Britain, to amplify his depiction of them as perfect examples of cultural-colonial hybrids. This was attainable with the English–Tahitian community as "[culture] has always

carried […] antagonistic forms of inner dissonance within it" and "even 'Englishness' has always been riven by its own alterity" (Young 1996, xii). Such understanding of Englishness allowed Shillibeer to establish a new image of the social discrepancies between the Islanders and the supposed English standard. Their Tahitian "admixture" enabled "the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction" (Bhabha 1994, 3). This "vision and construction" was not an intrinsic property of the Pitcairn Islanders, but a notion conceived by Shillibeer, whose epistemic influence created a biased colonial representation of their identity / identities.

"Nature in its most simple state"—Religion

The second pillar in Shillibeer's construct was the Pitcairn Islanders' reverence for the Anglican religion. Ever since medieval times, "what it meant to be a Christian in a Christian nation […] was integral to Britons' everyday lives, and this notion appears in travel accounts and novels" (Wheeler 2000, 9) even in the nineteenth century. Christianity, or more specifically Anglicanism, became inextricably connected to the notion of English cultural and national identity and spread around the world as British influence grew. As early as during James Cook's voyages around the Pacific, "the conversion of the South Sea islanders […] became a *cause célèbre* in evangelical circles that sparked the formation of a new spate of missionary societies geared towards saving the debased savages from heathenism and French Enlightenment alike" (Wilson 2003, 80–1). Considering the British–French colonial rivalry in the Pacific, establishing which religion had the most influence on the island was paramount to the newly arrived Englishmen.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, &c." (Shillibeer 1817, 85), answered one of the Islanders after being asked to clarify their belief in the first exchange when the young Pitcairn men boarded the ship. This declaration of faith, also called the Apostles' Creed, constituted the identification of a co-believer, providing a first important hint to the Englishmen. At this point it was not clear, though, which of the many Christian denominations the Islanders belonged to. Over the period of European colonization of the Pacific some of the Indigenous people were converted and then reconverted according to the changing political situation and fluctuations in local influence of one European colonial power or the other. Further inquiry as to who had taught them this belief revealed that: "John Adams says it was first by F. Christian's order, and that he likewise caused a prayer to be said every day at noon" (Shillibeer 1817, 85–6). This information led

the Englishmen to understand that, as Christian and Adams were Anglican, so must have been their teachings of the young Pitcairn Islanders.

The "British evangelical missionary work was held up by its proponents as the crucial bulwark for national survival and international order, stamping out simultaneously French and heathen infidelity and idolatry in Europe and the world" (Wilson 2003, 81). It was also regarded as an essential factor in "civilizing" the Pacific Islanders and thus expanding the "enlightened" British rule over them. Adams, as Christian's successor, was presented by Shillibeer as an agent of this Christianizing force on Pitcairn. In British eyes, his story was the parable of a repentant sinner, who had redeemed himself through his fervent preaching. For the British colonizers it was obvious that the Islanders' religious zeal that they subsequently experienced derived from the old mutineer's work. In Shillibeer's narrative, the Islanders' Anglican beliefs were of particular significance in the subsequent conversations and constituted an important part of the Lieutenant's general portrayal of Pitcairn inhabitants to his British audience.

The author specifically emphasized one situation when the Islanders' behavior was supposed to awe the Englishmen. They were asked to join the *Briton*'s crew for a meal. Shillibeer depicted the interesting scene that followed:

> I blushed when I saw nature in its most simple state, offer that tribute of respect to the Omnipotent Creator, which from an education I did not perform, nor from society had been taught its necessity. 'Ere [*sic*] they began to eat; on their knees and with hands uplifted did they implore permission to partake in peace what was set before them, and when they had eaten heartily, resuming their former attitude, offered a fervent prayer of thanksgiving for the indulgence they had just experienced. (Shillibeer 1817, 88)

In his opinion, this incident further validated their claim to Anglicanism and even showed their piety to be exceeding that of the English. Such superiority ascribed to them by Shillibeer caused not only astonishment, but even embarrassment. Aside from the Islanders' behavior, the Englishman's own reaction to it made him feel uncomfortable, as in polite English society blushing was an attribute of young women (Trusler 1810, 71) rather than of a gentleman and hence could be considered unmanly. From the English point of view, this was problematic as "[gender] was one of the most obvious and telling means of fixing the differences between Europeans and others. There is a long tradition of representing the primitive cultures as feminine and child-like, with civilization as masculine and patriarchal.

In Byron, and more generally Romantic tradition of South Pacific representation, Polynesian culture is coded as feminine" (Edmond 1997, 74). By reacting in supposedly unmasculine way, Shillibeer briefly (and from the colonizer's standpoint, dangerously) reversed these colonial conventions. The Englishman's uneasiness around the Islanders continued:

> Our omission of this ceremony did not escape their notice, for Christian asked me whether it was not customary with us also. Here nature was triumphant, for I should do myself an irreparable injustice, did I not with candour acknowledge, I was both embarrassed and wholly at a loss for a sound reply, and evaded this poor fellow's question by drawing his attention to the cow. (Shillibeer 1817, 88)

Shillibeer praised the "nature" that elicited the correct sense of religiousness in the Islanders, but at the same time received Christian's[7] inquiry as unintentional criticism of the British lack of piety. In his view, the English dominance was questioned by the people whom they regarded as being of lower status. Hence, he debased Christian in the eyes of his readers by calling him a "poor fellow." What is more, aside from ignoring the question, he pointed at the cow on board the ship not merely to amuse the supposedly ignorant Pitcairn Islanders, but also to reverse the position of superiority in favor of the British as the ones in possession of an animal unknown to the Islanders.

British superiority was also implied when Shillibeer suggested that the Pitcairn inhabitants' behavior was not innate, but rather stemmed from the work of John Adams. The former mutineer "was greatly respected, insomuch that no one acted in opposition to his wishes" (Shillibeer 1817, 96), accepting him not only as a leader, but even as a patriarchal figure. Adams as a father-like figure was used by the English to place Pitcairn Islanders within the broader context of the European image of the Pacific, in which Pacific Islanders were presented as "child-like" (cf. Rousseau's "children of nature") and in need of European patriarchal "guidance." The author's repeated highlighting of this aspect brings to mind Turner's description of people in a liminal space as "unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (Turner 1995, 96). There is no evidence from either Pitcairn Islanders or Shillibeer concerning their "state of transition," which in Turner's words had to be surmounted by the consummation of the ritual

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7 Thursday October Christian, son of Fletcher Christian the mutineer.

passage (Turner 1995, 94–5). However, the Englishman constructed his depiction of them as exemplifying some of the principles of this passage, like that quoted above. Indeed, the Pitcairn inhabitants' cultural-colonial hybridity is presented by the Lieutenant as attainable through their position at the thresholds of British *and* Tahitian cultural tropes. It could be argued that Shillibeer, being afraid of how an unconstrued perception of their identity could impact the core of colonial Englishness itself, established them in a *limen*. This can be supported by Young's argument that "Englishness […] has never been successfully characterized by an essential, core identity from which the other is excluded" (Young 1996, 3). Was it possible then, that the Pitcairn Other could attain a British identity? A certain anxiety might have entered Shillibeer's mind had he pondered upon such a question, "an uncertainty that afflicts the discourse of power, an uncertainty that estranges the familiar symbol of English 'national' authority and emerges from its colonial appropriation as a sign of its difference" (Bhabha 1994, 113).

To prevent such an eventuality, Shillibeer disengaged the Islanders' Anglican piety from Englishness. In his view, it was the notion of "nature in its most simple state" (Shillibeer 1817, 88) rather than education or membership of English polite society that enabled such zealous practice of Anglicanism. His reference to nature in the context of the encounters with the Pacific peoples was closely connected to the previously mentioned concept of the "noble savage," which "arises in the eighteenth century as a European nostalgia for a simple, pure, idyllic state of the natural, posed against rising industrialism and the notion of overcomplications and sophistications of European urban society" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000, 193). However, the Lieutenant, who established Pitcairn Islanders as culturally superior to Indigenous Pacific populations ("noble," yet in his mind still "savages") likened the inhabitants of Pitcairn to the British romantic trope of "nature" as unrefined and morally pure, nearly biblical "paradise." Although the author did not openly use this term, frequent evocations of Islanders living "close to nature" constituted an obvious parallel to other descriptions of Pacific Islanders in which the simplicity of their lives was compared to "the poetical fables of Arcadia" (Cook et al. 1821, 88).

The "cultural refinement" and the "natural simplicity" constituted a divide, a contrast, which applied in Europe initially in popular culture, as the "new Orient" in the Pacific stirred interests particularly in France and Great Britain. A product of this divide was the "colonial desire, whose attractions and fantasies were no doubt complicit with colonialism itself" (Young 1996, 3). This desire further enabled the colonizers to claim lands under the doctrine of discovery, which they used to establish and reinforce

their rule over people in the subjugated lands as a process necessary to "civilize" them. The "positive" literary tropes did not obliterate, but arguably even further supported the age-old European notion invoked in order to colonize lands under the pretense of proselytization. As early as the fifteenth century, the European nations claimed "that converting the infidel natives was justified because, allegedly, they did not have a common religion or laws, lived like animals, and lacked normal social intercourse, money, metal, writing, and European style clothing" (Miller et al. 2010, 10). Pacific Islanders, in the British view, were yet another instance of these "infidel natives."

Matsuda perfectly summarizes the European "endeavors" in the Pacific:

> The French and the British were not interested merely in "discoveries". They meant to map out trading and strategic routes that would give them commercial and naval advantages, and significant political prestige. Remarkably, their early journals and logs instead created an indelible vision of Pacific islands as places to ponder paradises and lost elysian worlds. (Matsuda 2012, 133)

Considering the Pitcairn inhabitants' Anglican piety, the parallel to the symbol of paradise would be even more obvious than in the case of Indigenous Pacific peoples.

"Minds and manners were […] pure and innocent"—Morality

The third pillar in the Lieutenant's cultural-colonial hybridity construct was the Pitcairn inhabitants' morality and behavior. At the time of publication, there were two predominant ways in which the morality of the Pacific Islanders was represented in British literature. The first was that practiced by secular authors, explorers, and scientists, and based on the aforementioned trope of the "noble savage," which in itself did not directly invoke Christian doctrines. The second originated in British religious organizations such as the London Missionary Society (LMS), which had "a vision to 'spread knowledge of Christ among heathen and unenlightened nations' […] [as the] church groups eagerly read shocking tales of island immorality" (Matsuda 2012, 145). They criticized the Islanders' customs and behavior, especially their "indolence" (Ellis 1830, 450) or "inveterate idleness" (Prout 1843, 44), as the two LMS missionaries complained.

Being a layman himself, Shillibeer was one of the secular authors, distinguishing the Pitcairn inhabitants' piety from moral aspects of their behavior. In his narrative, he constantly compared the inhabitants of Pitcairn and the Indigenous Pacific peoples, contrasting the exemplary morality of the former with the latter's lack thereof, and thus reinforcing the European colonial misconceptions of nature / culture and savageness / civilization dichotomies. He was particularly focusing on the women, as at the time their "appropriate" behavior was regarded in European societies as a sign of civilized culture. Remembering that the Pitcairn Islanders were half Tahitian, the Lieutenant wrote that the local women's "minds and manners were as pure and innocent, as [his] first impression indicated. No lascivious looks, or any loose, forward manners, which so much distinguish the characters of the females of the other Islands" (Shillibeer 1817, 94). His perception of their morality approximated them to English women, who were expected to exemplify chastity, following the "civilized" social norms. The reason for his emphasis on this stemmed from the fact that a lack of chastity was considered by the British to be vulgar and immoral. In one of the earliest published accounts of Cook's second voyage to the Pacific, John Marra described Tahitians as an "effeminate race, intoxicated with pleasure, and enfeebled by indulgence" (Marra 1775, 54). This was due to the position and behavior of women in Tahitian society—in the European colonizer's perception "the potential for corruption increased in nations where women had too much power or too little chastity" (Wilson 2003, 25). Aside from that, Pacific women regarded as "uncivilized" were prone to vulgarity; they were "the antithesis of femininity [...]—that is, the commonness, impropriety, licentiousness, and depravity that femininity is liable to degenerate into in its lowest and most savage state" (Wilson 2003, 25). Shillibeer attempted to separate the image of females on Pitcairn from that of other Pacific women, which was prevalent at the time, and which was exemplified mainly in the accounts of embittered missionaries excusing their failures to establish missions on Pacific islands by blaming the Indigenous populations' morality.

Intriguingly, in ranking the Pitcairn women's morality above "females of the other Islands" (Shillibeer 1817, 94), Shillibeer was echoing Johann Forster. A naturalist on Cook's second voyage to the Pacific, Forster wrote of Tahitian manners and behavior that: "they are infinitely superior to the before mentioned [Pacific] tribes" (Forster 1778, 295). Contrary to Marra, the naturalist notably did not write, in this context, about the Islanders' unchaste conduct. So, what Shillibeer was doing was synthesizing Marra's reference to promiscuity with Forster's elevation of one people above others.

The Lieutenant derided Islanders other than those born on Pitcairn for a specific purpose—to enable him to depict the latter as cultural-colonial hybrids. To avoid the imperial anxiety of "pollution," which their mixed ancestry evoked in the colonizers' minds, they had "to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions" (Turner 1995, 95). Their position, designated by Shillibeer as a perpetual *limen* on the fringes of Indigenous Pacific and British imperial influences, had to be fixed in this space to make the whole account of the meeting acceptable to his potential readers. This issue is evinced by Turner in his paraphrase of anthropologist Mary Douglas: "that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as 'polluting' and 'dangerous'" (Turner 1995, 109). By constructing the image of the Pitcairn Islanders' cultural-colonial hybridity, the Lieutenant aimed at attenuating such apprehensions in the British metropole. Shillibeer's construct can be further summarized with Edmond's ironic commentary on Mary Russell Mitford's epic poem about Pitcairn:[8] "Europe is tainted [...], Tahiti has failed to meet the promise of its first reports, but Pitcairn can be different from either of these. It will be predominantly European but remote from the accumulated historical guilt of that continent. Paradise is being rewon" (Edmond 1997, 82). Just as in Mitford's work, this remoteness or perpetual liminality enabled the Lieutenant to praise the imagined identity/identities of Pitcairn Islanders. The Pitcairn Islanders' intermediate position regarding their behavior and cultural-religious performances is also present in Shillibeer's depiction of the Islanders' assertion of British political identity.

"Why, King George to be sure"—Colonial Politics

The fourth and last aspect of his perception of Pitcairn Islanders was their claim concerning their supposed political affiliation with the British Empire. Experience of the revolutionary turmoil in Europe and North America reinforced the British need for national pride in their political system. Therefore, when expanding their colonial possessions, they were predisposed to acknowledge systems resembling their own or based on similar values, but to dismiss dissimilar ones.

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8 *Christina, the maid of the South seas; a poem* was published in 1811, describing a fictional history of the first encounter between Anglo-US American sailors and Pitcairn Islanders.

When exploring new lands and expanding their influence over them, the English "justified their claims to sovereignty and governmental and property rights over these territories and the Indigenous inhabitants with the Discovery Doctrine" (Miller et al. 2010, 2). This multifaceted doctrine required the British to gather information about the people who were to be colonized in order to present the entitlement in European colonial-diplomatic circles to avoid tensions due to "unjust" claims. The procedure of "questioning" the local population concerning their system of political rule is also discernible in the inquiry of Pitcairn Islanders recounted by the Lieutenant.

Shillibeer reported that the Islanders were asked who their king was, to which they answered "Why, King George to be sure" (Shillibeer 1817, 86). This brief and apparently self-assured response was an example of a reversal of standard procedure whereby upon claiming a land the colonizers would impose their European political rule over the Indigenous people. Here, Pitcairn Islanders put the Englishmen in a peculiar, even uncomfortable, situation when the Crown's authority over Pitcairn was declared by its inhabitants and not the colonizers. Similarly to their unexpected display of exemplary Christian piety, the Lieutenant lacked a social-cultural blueprint for what he experienced; he could not clearly classify them and being aware of this, he could not fully cope with this revelation. The rest of the crew were equally baffled, and in their confusion and discomfort did not pursue this particular topic any further.

Another aspect of the inquiry Shillibeer found important was the notion of "countrymen." The significance of the Islanders' affiliation with the English was emphasized by the author when he described them as "our half countrymen as they styled themselves" (Shillibeer 1817, 87). By phrasing it like that, he made sure to emphasize that this was the Pitcairn inhabitants' own self-characterization, unacknowledged by the British.[9] Denoting them as "half-countrymen" stemmed from the Pitcairn inhabitants' claim that they were "[h]alf English, and half Otaheite" (Shillibeer 1817, 86), hence acknowledging their mixed ancestry. It is impossible to ascertain how they understood the concept, but there can be little doubt that in their secluded community terms like "nation" or "countrymen" must have been abstract ideas. Although the Islanders supposedly emphasized their Englishness, Shillibeer was not willing entirely to overlook their

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9 Pitcairn Island was only annexed by the British in 1838, but official British governance was not lawfully extended over it until 1898 (Allen 2012, 1153). Recognizing the assertions at this early stage (1817) could have caused a political outcry in Britain.

Tahitian ancestry, especially given their appearance and apparel, which to him displayed their Pacific roots. His construct allowed him to create a new type of hybrid "hyphenated identity" "which [had] no affiliation to the nation-state form" (Kalra et al. 2005, 33).

Considering this situation within a broader frame of what could constitute the English identity, such an attitude was not the only course of action open to Shillibeer. Should the Lieutenant have decided to acknowledge the Islanders as English, it would have been acceptable within certain philosophical frameworks. One such framework was provided by Samuel Johnson, who defined a nation as "a people distinguished from another people; generally by language, original [*sic*] or government" (Johnson 1799, n.p.). Shillibeer did indeed distinguish Pitcairn Islanders from other Pacific peoples, praised their perfect English language skills, described their (half-)English ancestry and their claims to be subjects of the British Crown. Yet he resisted fully embracing them as fellow "countrymen."

One explanation for this caution could have been Shillibeer's possible fear of an uncolonized cultural hybridity as "tainting" the British paradigm of their "enlightened" civilization. Being of English-Tahitian ancestry and openly acknowledging both elements meant that "the terms either side of the hyphen [were] not constituent parts, but rather what might be called a co-constituting—and often unstable, in-translation, interactive—entity" (Kalra et al. 2005, 89). The colonial social "order" demanded of Shillibeer to be cautious in such instances; the transition ought to stem from the Empire and not its peripheries. Moreover, at the time some Indigenous people started to adopt British cultural tropes in order to survive as biological and political entities, instead of being forcefully assimilated or even exterminated. "Englishness became a performance of non-English and even non-British peoples, a trope of white civilization, maintained through social and theatricalized practices and displays at all levels, that attempted to set off its performers from 'indigenous' savagery" (Wilson 2003, 17). Aware of this and faced with the cognitive dissonance mentioned above between the Islanders' British performance and their Indigenous appearance, Shillibeer was unwilling to fully recognize the authenticity of their behavior.

The Lieutenant's amalgamation of cultural-colonial hybridity with perpetual liminality was not without risk for Englishness. At the same time, from Shillibeer's imperialistic perspective, the idea of Islanders dwelling "'in the beyond' [was] part of a revisionary time" (Bhabha 1994, 7), but not a remodeling of their own "cultural contemporaneity" (Bhabha 1994, 7) as Bhabha notes; rather, the revision of "the beyond" served to reinvigorate

and reinvent the colonial image of Pacific islands as paradise. As "the Eden ideal had worn off [and] the benevolent state of nature was now fallen paradise" (Matsuda 2012, 145), in the eyes of the colonizers Pitcairn and its inhabitants remained symbols of a perfect arcadian community for a span of over twenty years after the arrival of HMS *Briton* and HMS *Tagus*.

"[A] unique community"—Conclusion

When the Englishmen met Pitcairn Islanders for the first time, neither group knew what significance this first contact would have for them. For the former, the Islanders quickly became symbols of perfect morality, an epitome of Anglican virtues and Pacific "children of nature," "a unique community of Anglo-Tahitian descent which turned a naval mutiny into a celebrated romance" ("Pitcairn's History," n.p.). Although some vague information about the settlement had reached the British public before 1814, it was Shillibeer's narrative, the account of an eyewitness, that to a great extent validated the colonial perceptions of the Islanders.

Shillibeer's description of Pitcairn's (re)discovery reflects his constant astonishment, but also expresses a certain degree of mental discomfort that the British experienced. The Islanders' language fluency might have determined how they were perceived by the colonizer over the course of this event, and in future interactions. However, though the crews of the *Briton* and the *Tagus* did not need Indigenous intermediaries, the perception of Pitcairn inhabitants was contained within an imperial-colonial construct, which was advertised and sold to British society with its own self-righteous opinions on people with whom it had never had contact. Although it is impossible to discern how much of Shillibeer's narrative conveyed facts concerning, particularly, the conversation with young Islanders, his depiction of them was undoubtedly biased, aimed at preserving the waning imperial image of the Pacific "paradise." It is only possible to maintain this image within a contained space, a perpetual *limen*, where the invention of cultural-colonial hybridity is feasible, and where it can be kept "untainted" by the Pacific Indigeneity but is also not able to "pollute" the revered Englishness itself.

Shillibeer openly acknowledges the Islanders' piety, which exceeded that of the colonizer and embarrassed him. Their practice of religion sets them apart from the English not as inferior, but indeed as superior, leading the author to divert his readers' attention towards reinstating British superiority. Whereas religion distinguished them from the British, their sense

of morality distinguished them from other Pacific Islanders. Following in the footsteps of Forster, praising Tahitians over other ethnic groups, Shillibeer presents the example of Pitcairn Islanders as the most chaste and virtuous people. At the same time, he is cautious not to compare or fully align them with the British.

Colonial politics was at the center of Shillibeer's "uncertainty that afflicts the discourse of power, an uncertainty that estranges the familiar symbol of English 'national' authority and emerges from its colonial appropriation as a sign of its difference" (Bhabha 1994, 113). The hyphenated Anglo-Tahitian identity proclaimed by Pitcairn Islanders epitomized this uncertainty or even anxiety. This is why these people had to be contained in a space "betwixt and between"—to avoid intermixing either with the British or with Indigenous Pacific peoples. In his report, the Lieutenant depicts his imagined "emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction" (Bhabha 1994, 3), which had a tremendous influence on the further history of Pitcairn Islanders. As previous portrayals of Pacific peoples faded over time, so did the romantic image picturing Pitcairn inhabitants as embodying all virtues; it was forgotten, changing the general British view of them from utmost positive to very negative. The racist discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century led to the capture of one of the Islanders who, when visiting Great Britain, was "secured as a highly prized specimen of the human species, to be exhibited in the Westminster Aquarium" (Young 1894, 219).

It is with the aquarium, essentially a container of water, that I return to the Pacific Ocean. The European imperial projections of this ocean space as vast and empty, and of its human inhabitants as distant objects of colonial desire had a tremendous impact on the history of Pitcairn Islanders. Just like the remoteness of the Island itself, modern postcolonial scholars' investigation of its history is still only on the outer fringes of academic discourse. Analyzing the contradictions in liminal-hybrid-colonial constructs in John Shillibeer's narrative, the forgotten epistemes of salt water, constitutes a step towards lessening this neglect and exposing the colonizer's epistemic violence.

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