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Sold and Stolen: Domestic “slaves” and the rhetoric of “protection” in Darwin and Singapore during the 1920s and 1930s.

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Introduction

This paper contemplates the similarities in the working lives of two very different girls.¹ It focuses on part descent Aboriginal girls of Darwin working as domestic servants in European homes, and the mui tsai or girl slaves² of Singapore working for Chinese families. These girls share the common experience of being removed from their families, trafficked a great distance from their homes and forced into domestic service. This paper will consider the common governmental responses to these girls in terms of “protection”. For the mui tsai protection involved potential rescue from forced domestic service. For part-Aboriginal girls, protection resulted in enlistment into forced domestic service. The reasons behind the strikingly different outcomes of protection in Singapore and Darwin in the 1920s and 1930s can be attributed to the different issues which the administrators in Darwin and Singapore faced, culminating out their distinct colonial experiences.

Two Colonial Sites: Darwin and Singapore

The comparison of Darwin and Singapore within the realm of postcolonial studies may at first appear peculiar. These sites are certainly very different, one a settler colony, the other a

¹ This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June – 29 June 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.
² This translation has been disputed. See (Cheng, 1979; 59).
The Northern Territory of Australia has a very different history to the rest of the country. Even during the 1920s and 1930s it was considered a “frontier”, still a long way off being “settled” (McGrath, 1980; 237). The relationships in this part of Australia were still very much colonial. As with Singapore, the colonial elite, a white minority, exercised authority over a non-white majority. Historians of the Northern Territory have argued that Darwin had features of a Southeast Asian colony (Reynolds, 2003; viii; Martinez 1999; 152 -158). Historically, there were important connections between these sites. Darwin and Singapore, are geographically very close, both a part of the Southeast Asian region. As a result, Darwin was far more connected to Singapore than Sydney, Melbourne or Perth (Reynolds, 2004; x). Goods, people and ideas flowed constantly between the sites. Initially, Darwin was established as a port city to revival Singapore (Powell, 1996; 45). This is supported by the comments of author and colonist of the Northern Territory Alfred Searcy. In 1906 Searcy predicted: “So sure as tomorrow follows to-day this magnificent harbour will be the Singapore of Australia” (Searcy, 1984; 70). The colonists of Darwin aspired to replicate the comforts of British “civilisation” and the colonial social structure entrenched in Singapore (Herbert, 1987; 32). Significantly, Singapore and Darwin share a tropical climate, the nature of which fuelled demands of white colonists for certain standards of living. In both sites, this involved an entourage of servants (Allen, 1983; Martinez, 1999; 152 - 157; Grenfell Price, 1930; 47).

**Comparative Postcolonial Projects.**

The value of comparative colonial work has recently been the subject of debate in postcolonial studies. Scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler have emphasised the importance of understanding both the general patterns of colonialism and its specific manifestations (Stoler, 1989). For a discussion of the differences between settler and conquest colonies see (Denoon, 1983). Xavier Herbert makes this point in his 1938 novel *Capricornia* (Herbert, 1987; 32). In contrast to the comparative approach, some postcolonial scholars have emphasised the value of projects which deal with colonialism at a local and particular level, investigating one site in detail. This approach is a reaction against the homogenising and generalising tendencies of postcolonial scholarship and its propensity to treat all colonial situations as one and the same (Young, 1995; 164; Gouda and Clancy-Smith, 1998; 15). This paper argues that comparative work has the capacity to deal with both the local features of colonialism and its common patterns.
Stoler has sought to understand colonialism at global and local levels (Stoler and Cooper, 1997; 28). She has outlined the value of comparative work in achieving this (Stoler, 2002; 209 – 210). In line with Stoler’s work, the comparison of Darwin and Singapore is directed at revealing the common features of British colonialism as well as its specific local features and flavours. In addition, the comparison of Darwin and Singapore seeks to explore the historical and colonial connections between Australia and Asia so often ignored by nationally bound historiography. Such an approach reflects a renewed interest in the parallels between Australian and Southeast Asian experiences of colonialism, and a preparedness to look at the parallels between settler and conquest colonies (Lowrie, 2005; Edwards, 2004; 41 – 61). This is not comparison in a traditional sense, treating the sites of Darwin and Singapore as separate and distinct. Rather, this paper embraces a dynamic comparative approach which is concerned with the movement, interconnectedness and interaction between the sites of Darwin and Singapore. By focusing on the realm of the home and domestic servants within it an understanding of British colonialism in the distinct yet connected sites of Darwin and Singapore can be achieved.

**Colonialism and Domestic Service.**

The home is the ideal site from which to explore the complex interplay between gender, race, sexuality and class in the management of empire (Busia, 1986; 362; Perera, 1991; 8). The home was a highly charged political site crucial to colonial projects (Locher-Scholten, 1998; 151; Stoler, 2002; 8). Relationships within the home were colonial relationships. Here, coloniser and the colonised collided, mainly through the domestic service relationship. Colonial authorities exerted much energy controlling relationships within the home. This is illustrated forcefully in the case of the mui tsai and Aboriginal girl servants. The home was often imagined as a symbol of the colony. For white colonists the health and vitality of the home was a measure of civilisation and imperial achievement (Locher-Scholten, 1998; 139 –

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6 National bound historiography has recently come under challenge in Australia. Comparative projects looking at the parallels between Australia and Southeast East are gaining credibility. Penny Edwards has initiated this process in her analysis of the representations and policing of ‘half-caste’ women in Burma, Australia and Indo-China (Edwards, 2004). Edward’s work provides a good example of a new direction which is comparative, looking at distinct colonial sites, and transnational, looking at connections and movements between these sites.  
7 For a discussion of new comparative approaches see (Paisley, 2001; 275).  
8 The benefits of work which is not merely comparative but transnational has recently captured the attention of postcolonial scholars. A transnational approach promises to balance both the general and specific as well as focus on movement and interconnectedness (Wollacot, 2004). There are, however, considerable problems with the transnational approach. Thus, I have avoided the term for the purposes of this paper.
Overall, the home and the relationships within were instrumental in terms of how colonialism was played out and power exercised.

**Experiences of “slavery”**

There are striking parallels between the life and experience of the *mui tsai* in Singapore and part-Aboriginal girls in Darwin. In their oral history accounts, autobiographies and memoirs, the way these women recount their experiences as children is similar. Most strikingly, both the former *mui tsai* and the Aboriginal girl servants remember their working lives in terms of slavery. As Australian historian Jackie Huggins explains: “The word ‘slave’ is synonymous with domestic service testimonies” (Huggins, 1995: 195). Nonetheless, there was and continues to be a great deal of debate concerning the question of slavery and the nature of the working conditions of these girls.⁹ In the context of Hong Kong, Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, observe two opposing perspectives on the *mui tsai*. They differentiate between those who saw the *mui tsai* as exploited slaves and those who argued that their employment benefitted both the girls and society (Jaschok and Miers, 1994). In Australia as well as Singapore, this dichotomy, that between viewing child servitude as a exploitative versus mutually beneficial, remains the means through which the experience of child servitude is understood, justified and made sense of.

Not surprisingly, employers of both the *mui tsai* and Aboriginal girls spoke in terms of altruism, love and family rather than slavery. They argued that employment of *mui tsai* and Aboriginal girls was philanthropic rather than exploitative. In terms of the *mui tsai* system, the colonial governments in Hong Kong and Singapore were unsure how to treat the practice. The following comment from the Secretary for the State for the Colonies illustrates this uncertainty: “I am not at all satisfied…that this institution does not involve the slightest element of compulsory employment (which is the essence of slavery)” (1929; 3). In her memoir, Irene Cheng, whose family employed *mui tsai* in Hong Kong repudiates such claims. Cheng maintains that “the system has been much misunderstood and misinterpreted by Westerners, who refer to the young sisters as slave girls” when in fact they were more like “sisters” (Cheng, 1979; 59). These kinds of arguments had an effect on some European

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⁹ In the context of Singapore, for example, Si Jing’s story highlights the fine line between being a “foster daughter” and being a “slave”. (Si, 2004; 4) Constable discusses in detail the question of slavery in terms of Hong Kong’s *mujai* (Constable, 1997; 42 – 45). For a discussion of slavery in an Australian context see (Robinson, 2003; 169 – 172).
observers. Lucia Bach, who was involved in the care of abused *mui tsai* in the 1920s and 1930s, had this to say: “It was just the usual treatment of the usual customs of China that my English mind was not accustomed to...they sold their children...because very often it was giving them a better chance in life” (Bach, 1983). Certainly in Australia, arguments that domestic employment was to the benefit of young Aboriginal girls were thoroughly entrenched. Chief Inspector of Aboriginals in Western Australia, A. O. Neville maintained, living in “a good home with a kindly mistress’ was “heaven to a coloured girl” (Sabbioni, 1993; 17).

While ambiguity and contestation surrounded and continues to surround the perspectives of employers, the public and government, for the women themselves, their experience as children was unequivocally a case of slavery. Janet Lim, for example, forcefully recounts her experience in Singapore as one of slavery: “It is very difficult for people to understand what it means to be a slave, to be bargained for and sold like merchandise, to suffer shame and the whips of one’s master and mistress” (Lim, 2004; 38). In an Australia context, former Aboriginal servant, Mary Griffin recalls her experience in a similar way. Here too, the motif of slavery is mobilised: “I used to wait on em’ hand and foot, wait on em’ like a slave. They had a little to bell to ring, for me to go in to clear off the table...couldn’t eat with them, not in those days. That was slavery days” (Walden, 1995: 197).

In general, both the former *mui tsai* and Aboriginal girl servants, remember their working lives as involving the complete control and ownership of their bodies (Constable, 1997; 45). Nowhere is this more marked than in their discussion of sexual exploitation. Domestic work and sex work went hand in hand for these girls. Janet Lim describes the mentality in Chinese households in Singapore. She illuminates the expectations of her male master: “Because the slave had been purchased, the master could do whatever he pleased with her...In my case it appeared I was to be his slave as well as his concubine” (Lim, 2004; 35, 42). Similarly in Australia, white men claimed their rights over Aboriginal girls in the way of a “feudal lord” (McGrath, 1980; 251). Mrs Huggins provides an example in reference to the

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10 In his report on the International Settlements in Shanghai and Kulangsu, Sir William George Maxwell argued that the *mui tsai* practice both within China and in the colonies was motivated by both humanitarianism and self-interest (Maxwell, 1935; 1).

11 The label “slave” is used in the context of the compulsion to work, the lack of a genuine wage, the backbreaking conditions, the high level of surveillance and control and the low status of the job (Jascok and Miers, 1994).

12 Si Jing’s account of her life as a foster daughter of a *mai jie* in a leisure house highlights the interconnectedness between domestic work and sex work in Singapore (Si, 2004; 13). James Warren’s work also touches on these connections (Warren, 1993).
expectations of European men: “Because they had the right to our services, they believed this excused them to attempt to use our bodies too” (Huggins, 1987; 17).

Sold versus Stolen

While there are commonalities in experiences of these girls and the way they remember, the origins of their indenture are quite different. In one case, girls were sold by their families. In the other, they were stolen from their families. In Darwin from the 1920s, the removal of Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal children became systemic and widespread (Cummings, 1990; 14). While benevolent motivations were cited, the girls who were removed created a massive labour pool which could be used to address a long lamented shortage of domestic servants (Cummings, 1990; 14; Masson, 1915; 42 – 50; Robinson, 2003; 167). Mrs Gilruth, wife of the Northern Territory Administrator, outlined the problem in 1913: “I always feel sorry for the white woman” Mrs Gilruth commented, “as its so hard to get domestic help” (Gilruth, 1913). There was, however, a simple solution. According to Mrs Gilruth, with adequate training and supervision “the lubra can be made a good domestic” (Gilruth, 1913). The children who were removed from their families and communities to form this labour force were deeply traumatised by the experience. The next extract is taken from Alec Kruger, a boy who was removed and taken to Darwin in the 1920s. His account elucidates the trauma of removal: “They just come down and say, ‘We taking these kids.’ They just take you out of your mother’s arms. That’s what they done to me. I was still at my mother’s breast when they took me” (MacDonald, 1995; 15).

In contrast to Australia, the girls who served in Chinese families in Singapore were the result of a long Chinese tradition (Lai, 1986; 45; Lim, 2004; 36; Jaschok, 1994). Poverty and established ideas regarding the inferiority of females, compelled families in Southern China and parts of Malaya to sell their daughters (Lai, 1986; 46; Lim, 2004; 36). Lucia Bach outlines one child’s experience. In common with accounts from Aboriginal children in Australia, the trauma of the experience is observable: “She remembered that her mother had been paid $20, a piece of pork and a bag of rice for her. She remembered being sold and she was afraid” (Bach, 1983).

13 For an exhaustive study of child removal and its effects across Australia see the Bringing them Home Report. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997)
14 The boys who were removed were trained as manual labourers. See (MacDonald, 1995; Austin, 1997; Cummings, 1990). In the case of Singapore it is possible the mui tsai also had male counterparts. Sir William Maxwell contemplates this possibility in his report (Maxwell, 1935)
Admittedly then, administrations in Darwin and Singapore played very different roles in terms of the procurement of the girls. Unlike the administration in Darwin, the Straits Settlement government in Singapore was not directly involved in the procurement of these girls. Nonetheless, both governments would take responsibility and embrace the role of ‘protector’ at the request of the broader white public in Britain, Australia and Malaya.

**Humanitarianism: 1920s and 1930s**

In the 1920s and 1930s a tide of humanitarianism was sweeping over the British colonies and ex-colonies. Both Singapore and Australia felt the pressure from Britain in terms of the welfare of colonial subjects. The spotlight fell particularly on the condition of women and girls. International feminist organisations were largely responsible for capturing the public’s attention. They cited maternalistic and Christian values in targeting ‘male sexual power’ and exploitation in the colonies (Pederson, 2001; 165). White women in Britain and the Empire felt a responsibility to rescue and ‘uplift’ women and children in the colonies (Pederson, 2001; 164). In the case of the *mui tsai*, this culminated in an international controversy (Pederson, 2001; 163; Constable, 1997; 46). The British government was accused of ‘tolerating’ and ‘profiting’ from slavery (Pederson, 2001; 163). The anti-slavery society labelled the *mui tsai* practice: “a disgrace and scandal under the British flag, and the colony ought to be freed from it” (Pederson, 2001; 168). The *mui tsai* controversy was targeted alongside, and seen as connected with, prostitution in the colonies (Si Jing, 2004; 13; Lim, 2004; 11).^{15}

As with Singapore, in Australia the focus of national and international media fell on the exploitation of Aboriginal people, especially related to sexual exploitation of Aboriginal girls (Austin, 1997; 3; Cummings, 1990; 8; McGrath, 1980; 257). However, opinion was divided between those who viewed these girls as victims of sexual exploitation and those who viewed them as dangerous sexual predators.^{16} In contrast to Chinese girls Singapore, the sexual exploitation of part-Aboriginal young girls in Darwin presented a further complication for colonial authorities. Since the beginning of Australia’s colonisation, sex between Aboriginal

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^{15} See (Warren, 1993) for a discussion of prostitution and governmental responses to it in Singapore.

^{16} This was especially marked in relation to “half caste girls”. In his landmark book *Australia’s Coloured Minority*, A. O. Neville outlined and challenged the view that such girls were a “potential danger to all men” (Neville, 1947; 183). In contrast to the attitude that these girls were sexual predators, a letter to the editor of the *Northern Territory Times* reported on “young lubras forced to cohabit with white men against their wills” (Karula, 1918).
women and European men resulted in growing numbers of children of mixed parentage. This created the so-called “half-caste problem” (Austin, 1997; 3). The extent of this perceived problem is revealed by The Sydney Sun’s description of the “half-caste” in 1933 as “Australia’s Tragedy” (MacDonald, 1995; 24). In 1924, the Adelaide Advertiser discussed children of mixed parentage as a national dilemma: “There are few questions of greater difficulty and delicacy affecting the Northern Territory than the condition of half-caste children...The offspring of that sexual relation that civilisation always and everywhere condemns” (MacDonald, 1995; 24). Miscegenation on the northern frontier created a serious problem for a new nation founded on the principles of a “white” Australia.

**To Protect and Civilise**

In both Australia and Singapore, the response of the government to the intense public criticism and debate regarding both the mui tsai and so called “half-caste” Aboriginal girls was one of paternalistic “protection”. In both cases, protection consisted of control, surveillance and disciplining (Lai, 1986; 49; McGrath, 1980; 257). This form of protection targeted the girls themselves, their employers and men more generally (Lai, 1986; 49; McGrath, 1980; 257). The governmental response was not entirely motivated by benevolence. For the Straits Settlement government in Singapore and the Commonwealth government in Darwin, more than victims, these girls were a menace in terms of colonial legitimacy. The attention drawn to their plight exposed the contradictions of colonialism. This was a system which created or benefited from exploitation while claiming to deliver the benefits of so called “civilisation”. By promising to protect these girls, the administrations were safeguarding their own interests. They sought to resolve concerns regarding their own legitimacy by pursuing the ultimate achievement in terms of colonisation – that of “civilising” these girls. Thus, Singapore’s government moved from a position of tolerance and indifference to this “Chinese social evil”, toward one of control, outlawing and rescue (Lai, 1986; 49). In Darwin too, the mission to protect and civilise also involved far more direct

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17 Interracial relationships were certainly not confined to Australia’s colonial experience. In Australia, however, the dream of a white Australia made it an especially pressing issue (Elder, 1999). I have written elsewhere on interracial liaisons in Australia and colonial Malaya see (Lowrie, 2003).

18 Writers of the time, such as Susannah Katherine Prichard attempted to challenge notions of the “half-caste problem”. For Prichard the progeny resulting from the sexual union between a white man and an Aboriginal woman presented the possibility of perfection and resolution of Australia’s violent colonisation (Lowrie, 2005). Prichard illustrates this idea in the novel Coonardoo. In this book the mixed race character Winni possesses “white man’s intelligence and reasoning” and the “instinctive wisdom” of the Aboriginal people (Prichard, 1979; 133). Rather than a problem he is the culmination of “the best of both worlds” (Elder, 1999; 45).
control over the lives and work of colonised women and children. The government moved to “rescue” part descent Aboriginal girls from “degradation” in Aboriginal camps and introduce them to the “superior” colonising culture (Bleakley, 1929; Neville, 1947).

The tools of Protection

The administrations in Singapore and Darwin employed three key tools in their mission to protect and civilize. These were legislation, inspection and institutionalisation. In Singapore, the *Mui Tsai Ordinance* of 1932 was the key piece of legislation. The Ordinance demanded the registration of all existing *mui tsai*, the payment of a small wage and regular inspections of their working conditions. In Darwin the *Aboriginals Ordinance of 1911* was reinforced and expanded from 1918 (Cummings, 1990; 8). The Ordinance put in place a system of protectors with a Chief Protector at the top responsible for the movements, employment and wages of part Aboriginal girls (Cummings, 1990; 8; Austin, 1997; 4-5).

Along with legislation, both these governments enlisted the help of European ‘protectors’ with powers of inspection. However, the responsibilities of the protectors were entirely the reverse. In Singapore, protectors were responsible for removing girls from conditions akin to slavery. In Darwin, the protectors were responsible for removing Aboriginal children from their families and communities with the ultimate aim of making them serve for white families. Interestingly, in both cases, white women were considered especially important. Notions of Imperial motherhood reigned supreme (Pederson, 2001; 165). In the case of Singapore it was Chinese Protectorate’s Lady Inspectors who fulfilled this role. European Lady protectors were responsible for overseeing the state of affairs in Chinese homes. Janet Lim strikingly illustrates the maternalistic undertones of the Lady Inspector’s role: “She told me she would visit our house at regular intervals and that we were to let her know if we were badly treated. She told us to think of her as a mother” (Lim, 2004; 45). In Australia, the white mistress was the perfect maternal influence. In his report on the Northern Territory, J. W. Bleakley expressed this idea. He argued that through domestic service these girls could obtain “a good home” in which the white mistress would provide “motherly care and domestic training” (Huggins, 1988; 11). In Singapore and Darwin, the white women, as either mistress or inspector, was seen as the ultimate protective and civilising influence.

In both Singapore and Darwin, the governments created institutions with the aim of protecting, rehabilitating and civilizing these girls in order to introduce them into respectable society. In Singapore, the Po Leung Kuk, a home for the *mui tsai* removed from Chinese families, served this purpose (Paul, 1990; i). In Darwin, the Kahlin Half-Caste Girls Home by
the late 1920s had become vastly overcrowded with children “rescued” from Aboriginal families (Macdonald, 1995; 26). Both the Po Leung Kuk and the Kahlin Home aimed to “uplift” girls through training in domestic service (McGrath, 1980; 246; Paul, 1990; 27). It was hoped such training would help the girls find suitable employment as domestic servants and ultimately make them into respectable women worthy of marriage (Macdonald, 1990; 43, Paul, 1990; 27). In the case of part Aboriginal girls though, such middle class ambitions were infused with a racial dimension. It was hoped these girls would be transformed into wives for working class white men (McGrath, 1980; 245). In contrast to Singapore, where the aim was merely the achievement of respectability, the aim in the Northern Territory was to “breed out” colour (Macdonald, 1995; 27). The continuance of sexual relationships between European and Aboriginal people meant the only solution to “remove the stain” was further sexual contact. Chief Protector in the Northern Territory C. E. Cook, was a particular champion of this approach. He explained the policy thus: “We are endeavouring to bring these girls up in such a way that they will be good wives to the class of white man they are likely to marry” (McGrath, 1980; 245). In this way, the dream of a white Australia might be realised.

**Shared Colonial Ideology / Different Colonial Contexts**

In both Singapore and Darwin, the rhetoric of protection and notions of civilisation were evoked in relation to Chinese and Aboriginal girls. The policies directed at these girls were imbued with the same ideas and employed similar tactics. In both cases, the administrations were looking to resolve questions of colonial legitimacy and perhaps more deeply survival. Both sought to do this by governing relationships within the home. In terms of policy and practice, however, the governments of Singapore and Darwin responded in completely opposite ways. At the same time as the British colonial government was removing girls from conditions of slavery in Singapore, the Australian government was enlisting girls into forced domestic labour. The vastly different outcomes are symptomatic of the different colonial contexts and the problems they faced.

In Darwin, concern was associated with the “half-caste problem” and the dream of a white Australia. The following extract from the Administrators Report of 1933 elucidates this concern: “In the Northern Territory, the half-caste coloured aliens constitute a perennial, economic and social problem and their multiplication throughout the North of the continent is likely to be attended by grave consequences to Australia as a nation” (Administrator, 1933). In the Straits Settlements and Malaya, concern was centred on reputation of the British Empire and the blot of slavery. The South China Post expressed this concern in 1930: “It is
absolutely necessary that we should be freed from the accusation of slavery. As a British colony it is unthinkable that we should continue the system as at present” (1930; 9).

**Conclusion**

By telling the story of the *mui tsai* and Aboriginal girl servants, this paper has sought to illuminate the common features of colonialism and its different manifestations. The key point of this paper is to show how the same colonial ideology, representations and tools can be used to produce completely different outcomes. It has shown how the same notions of protection were used to rescue girls from an experience of slavery in one colonial site and condemn girls to slavery in another. The different needs, intentions and motivations of the colonial contexts determined the different outcomes these girls faced.
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