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Racial Capitalism and the Workhouse–Plantation Nexus in the Atlantic World

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Abstract: This paper re-examines the British workhouse within the framework of racial capitalism and the Atlantic world. Traditionally understood as a domestic mechanism for managing poverty and labour in an era of industrial capitalism, we argue the workhouse was deeply intertwined with global systems of racial exploitation and accumulation from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Tracing the workhouse's connections to Britain's colonial plantations, the transatlantic slave trade, and the circulation of finance, goods, ideas, and people in the Atlantic world, the paper challenges understandings of the workhouse's purely domestic function. Instead, the workhouse and plantation are understood as constitutively interlinked—forming a "workhouse–plantation nexus" which operated as a key component in shifting articulations of racial capitalism. Understanding this nexus reconfigures understandings of welfare histories that continue to shape racialised welfare systems and racial capitalism more broadly and is crucial for reparative justice.

Resumen: Este artículo reexamina la *workhouse* británica en el marco del capitalismo racial y el mundo atlántico. Tradicionalmente entendida como un mecanismo doméstico para gestionar la pobreza y el desempleo en una era de capitalismo industrial, nosotros argüimos que la *workhouse* estaba profundamente entrelazada con los sistemas globales de explotación racial y acumulación desde el siglo XVII hasta el XIX. Al rastrear las conexiones de la *workhouse* con las plantaciones coloniales de Gran Bretaña, el comercio transatlántico de esclavos y la circulación de finanzas, bienes, ideas y personas en el mundo atlántico, el artículo desafía la concepción de una función puramente doméstica de la *workhouse*. Por el contrario, interpretamos que la *workhouse* y las plantaciones están inherentemente entrelazadas, formando un "nexo *workhouse*–plantación" que operó como un componente clave en las articulaciones cambiantes del capitalismo racial. Comprender este nexo reconfigura el entendimiento predominante de las secuelas del pasado que continúan moldeando sistemas racializados de asistencia social, y el capitalismo racial en general, en el presente. Y esto es crucial para una justicia reparadora.

Keywords: welfare, racial capitalism, workhouse, plantation, slavery
Palabras clave: asistencia social, capitalismo racial, workhouse, plantación, esclavitud

Introduction: The Workhouse in the Atlantic World

In 1601, successive attempts to rationalise almsgiving in Britain were crystallised in the Elizabethan Poor Law, consolidating a system of poor relief that was to shape Britain's welfare apparatus for the next 400 years. The Act made parishes responsible for the collection of taxes to support the poor and differentiated between the "impotent poor" (people unable to work to be given food, clothing, and money or cared for in alms-houses), the "able-bodied poor" (people who were willing but unable to find work and who were be set to work in a House of Industry, or "workhouse"), and the "undeserving", "vagrant", or "idle poor" (people who refused work and were sent to a House of Correction or prison). Parish overseers were responsible for collecting a poor rate on local households, and determined the level at which relief was set (resulting in significant variation between parishes) and to whom it should be provided. To deter the movement of paupers, subsequent legislation further restricted eligibility on grounds of "settlement" (local connection) and sought to curtail outdoor relief through the use of "workhouse tests". In 1834 a new centralised system of Poor Law administration was established with the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act. This saw parishes grouped into Poor Law Unions, and a national network of workhouses built characterised by deliberately harsh conditions, forced labour, and family separation, all underpinned by the principle that life inside the workhouse should be less desirable than the lowest-paid work outside. Over several centuries, the Poor Law—and its key institution, the workhouse—helped instil a work ethic in Britain's "labouring classes" and provided a ready supply of surplus labour for the expansion of mercantile and subsequently of industrial capitalism. The Poor Law itself was formally abolished with the passing of the 1948 National Assistance Act, and the post-war period saw an expanding welfare state allied to policies of spatial Keynesianism aimed at reducing income inequalities and class antagonism. But key elements of the Poor Law system—such as the distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, local eligibility, and fears of dependency—persisted (Lowe 1997) and continue to shape several aspects of contemporary British welfare (Williams and May 2022).

In this paper, we draw upon and further develop scholarship showing that far from a national invention, the British workhouse, and other institutions of punishment for vagrancy and correction for the work-shy, were products of wider circulations of knowledge within and between Britain and its colonies, and that the global expansion of this disciplinary-welfare apparatus constituted a key mechanism by which the state regulated the changing and spatially variable class antagonisms produced by enclosure, industrialisation, market liberalisation, and colonial systems of subjugation and dispossession (Nally 2008, 2011).[1] Adding to the rich historiography on the British workhouse (Boyer 2019; Crowther 2016; Driver 1995; Higginbotham 2012; Hitchcock 1985, 1987; Hitchcock 2021; Longmate 2003; Tomkins 2021), the paper presents new evidence of the constitutive interconnections between the early modern workhouse in Britain and the penal-welfare and labour apparatus of Britain's colonies and plantations.

In doing so we also contribute to a small but growing body of scholarship that has examined the racialisation of "pauperism" (O'Connell 2009a; also see

Griffin 2020:179–206), including the ways both proponents and critics of the Poor Law drew upon stigmatised analogies of the Black slave (Shilliam 2018) and the recursive development of practices of penal stigmatisation and classification (badging, branding, tattoos) between Britain and its plantations (Tyler 2020). Extending this work, we introduce the notion of the "workhouse–plantation nexus" to better capture the wider *circulation* of finance, goods, ideas, and people central to the production of both the workhouse and plantation in the Atlantic world of the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries.

We begin by examining the role of the workhouse–plantation nexus in the development of racialised systems of mercantile capitalism (a system of capitalism focused on national wealth accumulation through trade and colonial expansion) before documenting its role in the emergence and consolidation of industrialised capitalism. We hope doing so will advance understandings of early modern British welfare which, we argue, must be conceptualised as doing more than only securing capital accumulation and managing class antagonisms, but as shaped by and helping to secure varied and changing geographical formations of racial capitalism.

The Workhouse and Racial Capitalism: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations

Scholarship on racial capitalism has proliferated in recent years, with growing debate over the term's precision and utility (Go 2021, 2024). Debate hinges, in part, on different understandings of the meaning and origins of race, as well as the relationships between race, slavery, and capitalism (see the exchange between Wacquant [2023], Subrahmanyam [2023], and Bhambra and Holmwood [2023]). For Cedric Robinson (2000), some notion of "racial" difference based upon blood relations pre-existed the transition of feudalism to mercantile capitalism and the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade, and became central to the growth of both in the 16th and 17th centuries when racialised hierarchies came to be dominated by essentialist dualisms of white Europeans and African "Negro" (Ogborn 2023:86). In contrast, for Eric Williams (2021) and others "race" and racism emerged out of the African slave trade, with the transatlantic trade the first form of slavery in which only Black people were enslaved (Lester 2024:34).

Indeed, historians have identified the emergence of "race" at a variety of points in European history, leading scholars to decry the "endless debate" (and underpinning tautologies) as to when "a given idea may be said to have 'really emerged'" (Lovejoy 1940:8, cited in Seth 2020:348). For the current argument, more important is that whilst the plantations of Britain's North American colonies (which initially used a variety of labour including convicted paupers as well as slaves) were key to the expansion of mercantile capitalism, the transatlantic slave trade was central to the transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism and to the latter's expansion and dominance. Enslaved labour produced many of the raw materials and much of the wealth underpinning the industrial revolution (Heblich et al. 2022) and helped to cement several key technologies of an emergent modern capitalist system. In plantation society, slaves not only provided the labour

power to produce commodities but themselves functioned as a form of capital—their bodies subject to forced reproduction and used as loan collateral "allowing the expansion of estates and the acquisition of yet more productive bodies" with "slaves exploited twice: their freedom and labour stolen from them, their captured 'economic value' leveraged by cutting edge financial instruments" (Roscoe 2020:n.p.). These instruments included the widespread use of private credit in the form of bills of exchange and the use of insurance as a means of guaranteeing the financial value of the commodities being traded (whether sugar, cotton, or people) and were instrumental in the development of Britain's provincial banking system and in the expansion of racialised financial capitalism globally in the US Deep South and British Empire (Inikori 2002; Kish and Leroy 2015).

But it is also important to recognise that the "trajectory of British industrialization involved specific entanglements with slavery and other forms of servile labour over the course of more than two centuries" (Harvey 2019:67). As such British "industrial capitalism was not constituted by wage labour versus slavery … [so much as] by diverse … configurations and reconfigurations of historically novel regimes of exploitation … [creating] racial hierarchies of inequality and exploitation across the globe" (Harvey 2019:84) "in a trans-Atlantic relational configuration" (Harvey 2019:79). Whether racial differentiation (however defined) is considered an inherent and necessary logic of capitalism (all capitalism is racial capitalism) (Bledsoe and Wright 2019; Gilmore 2017:225; Kelley 2017; Melamed 2015:77; Robinson 2000), or a historically contingent but highly durable tendency that is contextually specific and conjunctural rather than essentialist (not all capitalism is necessarily racial) (Bhattacharyya 2018; Go 2024; Hall 2019), there was—and is—therefore no "one form" of "racial capitalism" (Paret and Levenson 2024). As Ogborn (2023:84) has noted, for Williams himself "one of the key characteristics of capitalism's historical geography was its spatial differentiation" and "several historians have taken on the task of delineating the particular forms … [racial capitalism] has assumed in different periods and places" (Ogborn 2023:89).

Here we take on a similar task with regards to the historical geographies of racial capitalism and the workhouse–plantation nexus. In so doing, we recognise that the workhouse system was also a variable and contingent formation. For example, in Britain there were significant differences between workhouses pre and post the New Poor Law, and though the New Poor Law resulted in the creation of hundreds of new workhouses, the location, style, internal layout, schedules of tasks, and governance of these also varied according to the nature and scale of pauperism, the position of paupers in local society, and local cultures of charity at the time (Newman 2014; Williams 2020). In Jamaica, workhouses played quite different roles pre and post abolition, whilst they were not established in India until the 1870s when they were reserved for the detaining of European "loafers" and vagrants rather than for the relief of Indians (Fischer-Tiné 2005).[2] The historical geographies of state welfare in Britain and its overseas possessions thus articulates the same dynamics of the wider systems of racial capitalism of which it was a part: "seizing upon colonial divisions, identifying particular regions for

production and others for neglect, certain populations for exploitation and others for disposal" (Lowe 2015:150, cited in Ogborn 2023:82).

With regards to method, to construct our account we systematically identified and traced the names of individuals, organisations, and finances through and between a range of archives, including: the minutes of workhouse meetings and other Poor Law documentation available via National Archives (https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/); the annals and historical records held by local record offices in the slaving port cities of Bristol, Liverpool, and London (see Blease 1908; Butcher 1972; Latimer 1900; McGrath 1955; Picton 1875) to identify workhouse administrators (e.g. governors, overseers, trustees) and financial structures potentially linked to colonial ventures; and the writings and memoirs of key figures in early workhouses (for instance, Thomas Firmin and John Cary) to ascertain motivations, networks, and financial interests. Given the extensive records, we adopted a phased approach, initially focusing on key workhouses in Bristol, Liverpool, and London (in the late 17th to early 18th centuries) and subsequently tracing individuals and financial links across broader Poor Law administrations, extending analysis to include shipping records of convicts and paupers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Throughout we utilised the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/search/) and the SlaveVoyages Database (https://www.slavevoyages.org/) to identify named individuals who were slave owners, compensation claimants/recipients, or connected to the slave trade (e.g. ship owners or merchants in slave-produced goods). Source evaluation considered the inherent biases of administrative records and personal narratives; for example, the self-justification and selective claims made by workhouse protagonists. To mitigate these biases, a strategy of data triangulation was employed, cross-referencing information from administrative records, database entries, and biographical sources to establish concrete connections between workhouse administration and Britian's colonial plantations.

Though our account is by no means exhaustive, we hope that by re-evaluating the nature and significance of the workhouse–plantation nexus in the Atlantic world the paper makes several contributions to the wider geographical literatures on racial capitalism, welfare, and reparative justice. Firstly, much of the debate on the philanthropic legacies of the transatlantic slave trade (Draper 2018; Hall et al. 2014) has focused on prominent philanthropists whose slave-derived wealth flowed into the development of alms-houses,[3] beneficent funds, schools, hospitals, universities, church charities, and other "worthy" causes. Whilst many of these still operate today, focusing only on grand donations to charity risks underplaying the more capillaceous and unspectacular relations of racial capitalism that underpinned state welfare and poor relief in this period. Relatedly, while critical scholars have documented how 20th century welfare states in Europe were financed through colonial taxation and extraction (see Bhambra 2021), much less attention has been paid to state welfare in earlier periods.

Secondly, our focus on the British Atlantic world should not be taken as overlooking the interconnected and polycentric character of early modern empires (Gould 2007) concerning workhouse and penal mobilities (Anderson 2022),[4] nor does it minimise other sources of colonial wealth that were also important to

British welfare in this period (see, for example, Joiner's [1971] account of the philanthropy of the East India Company).[5] Rather, our intention is to challenge the "methodological nationalism" that has characterised much social policy and geographical writings on the workhouse to date (Crowther 2016; Driver 1995) and the "colonial aphasia" (Stoler 2011) that has led to "whitened" histories of the old and new Poor Law. As we show in our conclusion, re-inserting what has effectively been written out from histories of British welfare and re-examining the durability of "racial thinking and poverty in our past and present social policies" (O'Connell 2009b:98) can also help build analytical connections that inform contemporary political struggle.

Thirdly, examining the workhouse–plantation nexus underscores the significance of welfare histories in the making of contemporary geographies of racial capitalism. The logic of "charity" and "welfare" in various guises (humanitarianism, advancement, civilisation) has long been deployed to serve imperialist interests past and present (Reid-Henry 2015), but it is important to trace the integral role the British workhouse–plantation nexus played in reinforcing racial domination across the Atlantic world, especially in the United States (Loiacono 2013; Quigley 1997). There the workhouse system and colonial vagrancy laws—imported from England—were instrumentalised to police and discipline Black people into plantation labour, something that continued in various legislative guises in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Not only were European workhouses the architectural template for early US penitentiaries (Drago and Melnick 1981) and the subsequent expansion of the racial incarceration complex (Gilmore 2007), but the colonial workhouse itself was an anchor institution reinforcing the violence of racial capitalism: a site for the outsourced punishment of enslaved Africans (Yuhl 2013); a prison for captured runaway slaves (Strickland 2021); a holding pen for slaves awaiting sale and an auction block for unclaimed captives (Palmer 2009).[6] "Vagrancy" and "settlement" clauses—adapted from English Poor Laws—were used by Overseers of the Poor to regulate Black (im)mobility, banishing free African Americans to the town of their birth (Loiacono 2021), and underpinned many of the Black Codes that sought to retain plantation power by forcing freed Black people back on the field (Woods 2017).[7]

Fourthly, the harsh experience endured by "British" paupers in the 19th century workhouse—as too of white indentured servants transported overseas, or forced child "apprentices" in Britain's cotton mills, factories, and mines—remains a popular retort to notions of "white privilege"; used to downplay calls for slavery reparations to be made by British taxpayers. Reparations—if considered—are framed as the responsibility of an "elite" class whose slave links can be easily traced, rather than the "general public" whose benefit from the slave economy and its formative role in British industrial development is disavowed. Indeed, the workhouse has become a site of iconic signification for the construction of white victimhood, and it is a political necessity to disrupt the ways notions of "white slavery" are deployed to diminish the unique horrors of racialised chattel slavery and its ongoing legacies (Handler and Reilly 2017; Lester 2023).[8] By tracing the historical connections between workhouses and chattel slavery, we hope to

contribute to the global reparations movement by challenging these misleading narratives (Araujo 2023).

Lastly, by demonstrating the multi-scalar and relational geographies co-constituting the seemingly distinct spaces of plantation and workhouse, we contribute to a growing body of work examining how Black lives have been shaped by the "spatial logics and conditions of colonialism, enslavement and white supremacy under the unequal environmental and territorial conditions of racial capitalism", but also the negotiation and transformation of these logics through autonomous and liberatory spatial practices (Noxolo 2022:1233; see also Hawthorne 2019; McKittrick 2017). For reasons of space, in this paper we can do no more than acknowledge the slave uprisings and workhouse rebellions (Gopal 2016; Strickland 2021) that challenged the workhouse–plantation nexus, and the less spectacular but pervasive tactics of collective care that animate specific Black senses of place: for instance, the often overlooked histories of Black-organised charity and mutual aid in British West Indies 1834–1938 (Johnston 2021), the longstanding contributions of Black women in the welfare rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1970s (Nadasen 2004), or the work of Black churches as social and organising hubs (Du Bois 2003; Eaves 2017; McCutcheon 2016; Woods 2017) including securing the release of African American migrants detained in workhouses during the Great Migration (Sernett 1997:126, cited in Newsome-Camara 2012:60). While we certainly do not intend to reproduce epistemologies of domination/resistance in ways that normalise Black suffering (McKittrick 2011), documenting the detailed histories of welfare that centre Black spatial practices and thought in ways that strengthen Black senses of place is a task we must leave to others. Instead, by expanding on the interconnectedness of welfare and racial capitalism, this paper makes a broader contribution to geographical scholarship, one that resonates with the broader project of Black Geographies by addressing the omission and erasure of Black lives in histories of the British workhouse.

Mercantile Capitalism and Improvement on the Plantation and in the Workhouse

British workhouses were intimately bound up with slavery and imperialism throughout the early modern period: in the ideas that underpinned them and the wider workhouse system, their funding, in the commodities they produced, and in the networks of people that connected workhouse and plantation.

For example, one of Britain's first "Corporation of the Poor", and a model for future Poor Law Unions, was established in the slaving port of Bristol in 1696 by John Cary MP (1649–1722) and others. The corporation bought together 18 parishes for the provision of a workhouse run by paid officers with the aim of reducing indiscriminate giving and rationalising relief in the city and for the "training" of pauper children (Tomkins 2021). A significant part of Bristol's wealth was derived from the slave trade, and when in 1713 the Royal African Company threatened again to gain control of the trade, city authorities sent a petition to the government, stating:

> Bristolians depend for their subsistence on their West Indies [Caribbean] and African Trade which employed greater numbers of people in shipyards and in the manufacture of wool, iron, tin, copper, brass etc. a considerable part whereof is exported to Africa for the buying of Negroes [Africans]. (Nicholls and Talor 1882:165, cited in Dresser 2016:32)

Cary himself was descended from a family of merchants, and his father—a sugar trader in the Iberian Peninsula and West Indies (Reinert 2011)—had partnered with John Knight Jr and Sir John Knight to open Bristol's first sugar refinery in 1657 to process the growing quantities of sugar from Caribbean slave plantations arriving in Bristol since 1653 (Morgan 1998).[9] John Cary was also a sugar merchant and a firm advocate for the slave trade, even criticising the Royal African Company for not permitting Bristol ships a fair share of the lucrative trade. Records indicate he had children and relatives in Virginia and Jamaica (McGrath 1955:xvii), and a John Cary is listed as co-owning land in Antigua and Barbados (Dresser 2016) and as one of five co-owners of *Mary*, a slave ship that left London on 19 December 1700 to an unspecified African port and trafficked 243 enslaved Africans to the Americas (from which only 195 disembarked) (Voyage ID: 24244).[10] When it opened in 1696, the costs of the workhouse scheme far exceeded the £2,308 raised by ratepayers[11] and to supplement its income the Bristol Corporation for the Poor established a subscription model to cover any deficit. The *Annals of Bristol* document its leading supporters raised "£1,800, of which Sir John Duddleston, Sir William Daines, Samuel Wallis, Edward Tyson, M.D., Edward Martindale, Robert Yate, Thomas Edwards, George Mason, R. Bayly, Abraham Elton, Thomas Callowhill, William Swymmer, Peter Saunders, and Edward Colston contributed £100 each" (Latimer 1900:482).

Whereas earlier experiments to employ Bristol's poor in workhouses in 1623 and 1679 had failed due to a lack of public finances or unprofitable manufactured goods (Latimer 1900), Cary's workhouse experiment thus succeeded in large part due to the wealth of its subscribers—the majority of whom were prominent slave traders and merchants.[12] By 1712, the Corporation received £2,376, 16 shillings, and five pence from local ratepayers, which vastly "fallen Short in Supplying the wants of the Poor who must have layn under extream difficulties had not the Benefactions and Severall Summes borrow'd been employd to make good the defficiencyes each year" (Latimer 1900:89). At the date of this petition, these gifts totalled £4,240 and a house on High Street. In 1713, a £4,360 and 15 shillings donation was made by the charitable benefactors to the Corporation "with intent that the interest only Should be annually applyed for the better maintainance of the poor" (Latimer 1900:90). The maximum annual levy the Corporation could raise increased in 1714 to £3,500, but according to Latimer (1900:8) continued to make a loss (with the exception of the 1750–1760s, 1789–1792, and 1800 when the corporation employed a contractor) and thus relied on charitable benefactors who regularly contributed twice as much as the poor rate.

Beyond these financial ties, early modern workhouses were connected to the slave trade through the goods they manufactured: including linens and woollens, and oakum (made from the fibres stripped from old ropes which were then mixed

with tar and used for "caulking" Britain's expanding mercantile slave fleet). Before it was converted into a workhouse, Bristol's workhouse building had been a Mint (owned by Edward Colston, Richard Beecham, Sir Thomas Day, and Captain Nathaniel Day, all prominent slave traders described as business partners and key figures in Bristol's Corporation of the Poor [Latimer 1900]) and before that a "sugar house". In 1700, Cary recounted the profits to be made from its most recent iteration in which workhouse inmates produced goods made from finer wool—a key commodity manufactured for the triangular trade:

> we had Sale for our fine Yarn as fast as we could make it, and they [manufacturers] gave us from Eight pence to Two shillings per pound for spinning the same Goods, for which a little before they paid but Eight pence, and were very well pleased with it, because they were now able to distinguish between the fine and coarse Yarn, and to apply each sort to the use for which it was most proper. (Cary 1700:15)[13]

In London, prominent slave trader, plantation owner, and Member of Parliament, Sir Robert Clayton (1629–1707) was a strong supporter and vice-president of a workhouse erected in 1676 by Thomas Firmin (1632–1697) and—alongside other shareholders in the Royal Africa Company (William Hedges, Daniel Dorville) and tobacco and sugar merchants (Edward Haistwell, Micaiah Perry, Daniel Dorville, Robert Knight, and John Bellers)—served as vice-governor and financer of London's first Corporation of the Poor workhouse in 1699 (see Marhsall 2019:199). It is no coincidence that Clayton and Firmin had together formed the Royal Lustring Company, which received chartered status by parliament in 1697 for interweaving fine wool and silk (Marhsall 2019:187). Marshall (2019:193) notes the "products of Firmin's workhouse were given away to the poor; others were sold to the Royal African Company, in which Clayton was a major figure in the 1680s, and which was for decades among Firmin's most significant clients, purchasing linen products from him from the 1670s to the 1690s". Firmin's own account in 1681 praises the East India and Guinea Company (Company of Adventurers of London Trading to the Ports of Africa) whose "kindness … took off some of the Commodities I made at the price they cost me", saved the workhouse excess losses, and gave Firmin "encouragement to make their *Allabas* Cloths and course *Canvas* for their Pepper-Baggs, which in former times they use to have from other Countreys" (Firmin 1681:45). Similar evidence of workhouse–plantation connections can be found for other cities (for example, Liverpool).[14]

The early modern workhouse and plantation were tightly interconnected at the discursive level too: most notably, through discourses of "improvement", which for wealthy slave-owning dynasties rendered the establishment of workhouses, alms-houses, and largesse contributions to poor relief at home in this period not only dependent upon but entirely compatible with enslavement overseas (see Donington 2019:266–267). For experimental philosophers like Sir Thomas Pope Blunt (1649–1697), the poor were viewed as wholly lacking in reason—being "but Descarte's automata, moving frames and figures of men [with] … nothing but their outsides to justify their titles to rationality"—a threat if not contained, and certainly lacking the intellect or morals to contribute to the economic growth and wellbeing of the nation that was a central aim of mercantile capitalism (Pope

1693, quoted in Otremba 2012:168). As such, one of the tasks of philosophers and reformers was to integrate the poor, by force if necessary, into various projects for their "improvement". The workhouse emerged as the institution through which it was hoped this transformation might best be bought about, and "throughout the century, experimental philosophers of all political stripes came forward to both Parliament and the public with a series of proposals for gathering up England's dispersed poor and collecting them into central repositories … [where their] decentralized labor energies could be made productive by bending it towards collective economic tasks" (Otremba 2012:184).

John Locke's (1632–1704) proposals for a national workhouse system in 1697 envisioned workhouses as taking up surplus labour from the countryside and putting it to work in an organised and rational manner, with production organised around a segmented labour force working strictly timed routines (rather than task as in the then "putting out" system) to produce outputs of uniform quality on a regular basis. Like others, his preferred sector for driving economic reform was the wool industry and though wool production was only "consolidated gradually, irregularly, and never entirely", Locke's ideas have been credited with articulating a model of rural proto-industrialisation that was "instrumental" to industrial expansion and "fundamentally affected the course of early modern capitalism in England and its colonies" (Pinheiro 2022:5–6).

Ideas of improvement depended upon the close relationship of workhouse and plantation, and these relationships were evident in the boardrooms in which they were formulated. As founding member of and secretary to the Board of Trade and Plantations (1696–1700), Locke's purview was to "design measures to improve English trade, assist English plantations and devise methods for employment of the poor" (Marshall 2019). He was in personal correspondence with both John Cary (of Bristol) and Thomas Firmin (of London), asking them to testify about Poor Laws and workhouses in 1696 and 1699 (Marshall 2019; see also Hitchcock 1987). Whilst Cary sought to profit from putting workhouse inmates to work producing fine yarn for the triangular trade, framing the requirement to build workhouses and expand slavery through a mercantile discourse of "national prosperity", it was Locke's colonial administrative experience as secretary to the Carolina Company, and secretary and treasurer to English Council of Trade and Plantations (1673–1674) (the precursor to the Board of Trade and Plantations responsible for administrating English colonies in the New World) that helped support these ventures (Arneil 1994; Corcoran 2018).

The workhouse–plantation nexus was thus envisioned as playing a central role in the expansion of Britain's mercantile economy: with the workhouse providing a focus for the productive use of surplus agricultural labour, and producing goods to support the trafficking and clothing of enslaved plantation workers; the plantation providing a proving ground for philosophical experimentation in horticultural and experiments in the management of labour, a market for manufactured goods, and a further "sink" for British surplus labour. The ideas of improvement underpinning this system were "unique to neither Europe nor America, but … [truly] transatlantic in scope … developed via inter-oceanic correspondence,

migration to and from America (both forced and unforced), and … [the] transport of colonial goods". As Otremba continues:

> In England, natural philosophers admired a host of planter activities and were captivated by America's horticultural potential for increasing both empiric knowledge and imperial profit. In the Caribbean, planters kept abreast of the latest scientific practices … while daily practices on sugar estates were informed by novel discourses on efficiency and progress. (Otremba 2012:30)

The logic of improvement also came to play an important part in early justifications for the enslavement of African people. Establishing what was to become a familiar refrain over the coming century, writing in 1660, for example, Sir Balthazar Gerbier argued that in trafficking people from Africa to the Caribbean, Europeans were in fact improving slaves' lives by rescuing them from paganism and setting them amongst Christians from whom they might "by education and good example [be] changed from brutes into rationals" (Gerbier 1660:n.p., cited in Otremba 2012:268). Such ideas went on to justify a system of violence that clearly separates the disciplinary and labour regimes of the plantation from the workhouse. But, as Otremba documents, there were clear connections between the two. In both, the slave and the pauper were seen as commodities to be "marshalled, developed, and profited from" whilst both spaces "utilized spatial restrictions, involved close control over daily tasks, orchestrated the oversight of bodily movements, and produced goods for empire … [and] national growth" (Otremba 2012:31, 203).

Locke and social reformers argued the slave and pauper lacked the discipline and habit of industry, and time discipline and the redemptive power of coerced work were posited as corrective devices for both, with innovative systems of accounting, calculation, and quantification travelling across the Atlantic, percolating into factory, workhouse, and plantation management (Roberts 2013; see also Baptist 2014). Thomas Holt (1992:38) argues "so much of the paraphernalia of the new industrial discipline bore … a striking resemblance to that of the slave plantation. Centralized surveillance, regimentation, division of labor, strictly controlled work pace, written rules and regulations were all standards pursued by every planter" (cited in Whittaker 2023:n.p.).[15] Roberts (2013:51) writes:

> Planters directly associated slaves with criminals and the working poor. [Samuel] Martin, for example, compared slaves at the outset of his proslavery pamphlet to "the poor Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland" [Martin 1775:1]. Some plantation manuals directly modelled their advice for how to feed and manage slaves on European poor law policies [Smith 2006:276–278]. The increasing emphasis on the morally redemptive aspects of work, the use of coerced labor as a tool in European social reform for criminals and the underclasses, and the associations between slaves and criminals or the working poor combined to give slaveholders' cultural and moral legitimacy for increasing working hours.

Other technologies of surveillance and control used in these spaces also travelled the Atlantic. Clayton is said to have supported Firmin's proposals for badging those "uncapable" of work, a practice adopted by some parishes in the 1670s,

and which became national legislation in 1697 (Marhsall 2019:193). Taking inspiration from the plantations, Samuel Hartlib (1600–1662), who founded a London workhouse in 1648, suggested the poor should be required to carry a card identifying their place of employment and parish, with those without a card or outside of their parish incarcerated in a House of Correction until such time as they could be transported overseas to work on a plantation (Hartlib 1650:4, cited in Otremba 2012:221). Branding was deployed across the Atlantic world as a mark of both punishment and ownership: with British paupers found guilty of vagrancy under the 1547 Act branded with a letter V and indentured for two years; and plantation slaves commonly branded with the initials of their owner's name. According to Roberts (2023), the management of slave and pauper were so interreferential that the same disciplinary technologies were considered normal and necessary elements of the disciplining of Britain's "unruly poor" and plantation slaves alike, with Firmin's proposals for his London workhouse also including whipping posts, stocks, and thumbscrews commonly used on plantations.

Criminal Justice, Poor Relief, Pauper Transportation, and the Colonial Workhouse

The workhouse and plantation were connected through significant flows of people too. From the 17th to the late 19th century, prisons and workhouses were regularly "emptied" as the transportation of paupers, vagrants and the "criminal poor" was utilised to relieve burdens on parish relief whilst boosting the labour of plantations and colonies (Coldham 1992; Hitchcock 2018). With parishes hoping the initial cost of transportation would result in longer term savings, poor children were bound to apprenticeships in cotton mills, "pauper farms" (Murphy 2002), overseas plantations, and "at sea" to work on merchant and slave ships. For example, in 1619, 99 poor children were shipped from London to work as pauper apprentices in Virginia—with the London Privy Council using the threat of losing poor relief to ease parents of their burden (Johnson 1970, cited in Meyer 2011:114). Under pressure from ratepayers, in 1648 Liverpool Common Council forcibly deported beggars and pauper children to the Caribbean as indentured servants, and in 1704 parliamentary legislation permitted overseers of the poor to apprentice poor boys at sea until the age of 21 with ship masters paying a £10 penalty on refusal. The 1717 Transportation Act did not only transport "convicts": the statute stipulated that "offenders, as also such offenders in any workhouse, as aforesaid, shall be sent as soon as conveniently may be, to some of his Majesty's colonies and plantations in America for the space of seven years".[16]

Between 1615 and 1789 it is estimated 69,100 "convicts" were shipped from Britain and Ireland to the Americas, including Bermuda and the Caribbean islands (part of the 378,783 transported convicts "journeyed" around the plantations, penal settlements, and penal colonies of the wider British Empire between 1615 and 1939) (Anderson 2016), and by the early 18th century systems of criminal justice and poor relief in Britain had become so administratively and ideologically interlocked that they essentially treated "the poor and the criminal as one"

(Hitchcock and Shoemaker 2020:n.p.). Writing in 1658, Jamaican governor Edward D'Oyley wrote of the mutual benefits such movements could secure for both Britain and her colonies alike: "'I know of no place better to tame restless spirits as this', he wrote … 'There would be much benifet accrue; the nation would be rid of such turbulent men, the island here supplied with their chief want'" (cited in Otremba 2012:193). Penal transportation and indenture became framed as a "charity of reprieve" (Hitchcock 2018) offering the criminal, vagrant, and "undeserving poor" the "redemptive opportunity of labor abroad as a cure for their idleness" (Hitchcock 2018:202), which simultaneously served the interests of Empire by constituting a "steady, seemingly inexhaustible source of cheap labor, disposed of according to the preferences of governmental, judicial, and mercantile elites" (Hitchcock 2018:214). Further underlining the recursive relationships between pauper and slave, indentured labour served as entry-level investment for planters lacking capital to buy slaves (Ekirch 1987:130–131); means to generate sufficient capital to purchase slaves (Johnson 2004); and helped cement systems of credit that fuelled the growth of chattel slavery (see Priest 2021).

Convicts and paupers were also deployed to maintain and defend the wider infrastructure of slavery: for example, fortifying the slave forts of West Africa's Gold Coast (Maxwell-Stewart 2010), or sequestered into the Royal Navy which was given powers to set quotas for the supply of fighting men from workhouses (Howley 2008). Our research has revealed that in at least two cases the start-up capital used to establish transportation companies came from earlier profits from the slave trade.[17] It also shows that, though the assumption has been only a few companies who transported paupers and criminals also carried slaves, there are in fact several examples of profits from the slave trade financing the further expansion and accumulation of capital for merchants and companies engaged in both trades (e.g. Jonathan Forward; James Gildart; Samuel Sedgley; William Randolph; Duncan Campbell; Stevenson, Randolph & Cheston).[18]

Rather than in parallel, the early modern workhouse and plantation, and wider systems of labour discipline in both Britain and its colonies, developed recursively in the spaces of the British Atlantic and wider Empire. Nonetheless, workhouses were also established in British colonies in the Caribbean and Americas where they sometimes took on a rather different form and function to their counterparts in Britain. In pre-abolition Jamaica, workhouses were used mainly for the incarceration of convicted free Black people and runaway and convicted slaves, whilst gaols were used for the colony's white settlers and indentured workers (Paton 2004; see also Donington 2019). In both Jamaica and Barbados, English Poor Law more widely was used to secure white supremacy and solidarity. In particular, as O'Connell (2009b:95) documents, poor relief programmes were used to police sexual conduct, maintain "White supremacy and the legitimacy of the slavocracy … and limit the size of the free non-White group" with poor white women "suspected of sexual or conjugal unions with Black men" facing immediate disqualification from poor relief while "Black men faced dismemberment, castration and execution".

Despite claims that "workhouses and local colonial charities were awarded compensation money in [only] a small number of cases" (Draper 2007:88) the

Legacies of British Slavery Database also reveals that many slave owners were close associates of their local workhouses, often serving as magistrates, on workhouse committees, and, in several cases, as workhouse supervisors. Before taking on ownership of Alscott Estate (1809–1817), Charles McKnight was supervisor of the workhouse in St Elizabeth (1802–1808) with attorney, estate and plantation owner James Daly serving as president. Daly was awarded £718 10s 2d for 27 enslaved people in the workhouse, in addition to a further £4,223 8s 4d awarded as compensation as owner-in-fee of 194 enslaved persons, and over £1,960 as awardee for 87 enslaved persons. George Edwards, supervisor of Clarendon Workhouse, was awarded £863 15s 3d for a total of 36 enslaved persons (including the 25 enslaved residents of the workhouse). The executors of the will of slave-owner James Clayton, former president of Portland Workhouse, claimed £3,013 1s 6d compensation for 172 enslaved persons. Less prominent workhouse supervisors also received compensation. Myer Benjamin, a supervisor of the workhouse in Port Royal (1829–1832) was awarded £59 8s 6d in 1835 as compensation for a total of two enslaved persons in Port Royal, and James McDonald, a supervisor of Morant Bay Workhouse (and with Francis McDonald, co-owner of 90 enslaved persons) received £348 0s 4d in 1835 as compensation for 12 enslaved in St Thomas-in-the-East.

Industrial Capitalism, Industrial Pauperism, and Slavery

Against a backdrop of slave rebellions in Virginia and Jamaica, revolutions in Europe, and social unrest at home, by the early 1830s pressure was growing for a "reform" of Britain's Poor Law to suppress and secure labour (Griffin 2012). In 1830, thousands of agricultural workers rioted, burning barns, destroying agricultural machinery, and attacking workhouses in the largest movement of social unrest in 19th century England (Griffin 2012). What became known as the "Swing Riots" had several causes, both longstanding (enclosure, casualisation, and the steady impoverishment of agricultural workers over the previous 50 years) and more immediate (including mechanisation, poor harvests, low wages, and an influx of cheaper Irish labour).

The riots were also a response to the changing dynamics of the plantation economy. Following a series of trade embargos between Britain and the United States, and the emergence of more competitive textile manufacturers in New England, by 1830 the export market for Britain's plantation woollens had plummeted, and significant numbers of woollen workers were destitute (Evans 2010). In the aftermath of the riots, 19 men were executed, 644 imprisoned, and 505 transported as convict labour to Tasmania and New South Wales, Australia. With the growing number of paupers pushing the existing system of poor relief near the point of collapse (Driver 1995), and fearing further unrest, the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act sought to "rationalise" relief for the poor. By 1841, 320 new workhouses had been built (rising to 520 by 1870) spread across 630 new Poor Law Unions in England and Wales, and relieving officers were charged with the implementation of a much harsher "workhouse test" designed to deter all but the most desperate from seeking relief (Williams et al. 2020).[19]

The redesign and expansion of the workhouse system also owed much to the slave economy—discursively, financially, and with regards to their commission and management. Pushing for reform, in the 1820s and 1830s New Poor Law Commissioners claimed the existing Poor Law had "induced slave-like characteristics within the rural population, namely idleness, licentiousness and poor parenting" (Shilliam 2018:11). Nassau William Senior (1790–1864), political economist and member of the Royal Commission whose report resulted in the 1834 Act, came from a known slave-owning family but argued against the "inefficiencies" of slavery and old Poor Law systems alike;[20] advocating instead for the reintroduction of the "workhouse test",[21] claiming that poor relief gave the labourer "all the slave's security for subsistence without his ability for punishment" (Driver 1995:24). Meanwhile critics of the New Poor Law, such as Tory "radical" and pamphleteer William Cobbett (1763–1835),[22] used these same analogies to defend the old Poor Law system and its paternalistic order, suggesting that reform would see rural labours reduced to "land slaves" whose "compulsion to enter the workhouse … would turn deserving English poor into blackened slaves and transform the rural idyll into a plantation more despotic than the Caribbean" (Shilliam 2018:27).

The architects of the New Poor Law were also strongly influenced by the work of Jeremy Bentham (Williams 2020) whose ideas for the panopticon were influenced by his brother's experience of managing serf labour in Russia (Tyler 2020), but also perhaps by his friendships with members of the plantation class; for instance, with Sir Philip Gibbs Bart (1731–1815), chair of West India Planters' and Merchants' Association, co-author of *Instructions for the Management of a Plantation in Barbados and for the Treatment of Negroes* (1786) and anonymous author of *Instruction for the Treatment of Negros* (1786), the second edition of which drew on the new ideas on European pauperism with which Bentham was so closely associated (Legacies of British Slavery Database 2022; see also Arneil 2021). Tyler (2020) highlights the discursive interconnections between the colonial plantation and Bentham's proposals for "domestic colonies" centred on "industry houses" with adjoining plantations managed by a new joint-stock company, the National Charity Company, similar to the East India Company. Bentham's plans had wider imperialist overtones too. In his essay "Outline of a Work Entitled Pauper Management Improved" of 1798, the workhouse was reconceived as "a natural nursery for the Navy" (Bentham 1798:421), training the poor in ropemaking and ship carpentry, managing forests for shipbuilding, and providing ready militia for war.

Members of the plantation class also helped secure funding for the new workhouses and took up prominent positions in them. Charles Bosanquet was chairman of the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB) and a stockholder in Royal Exchange Assurance (see Webster 2015:103), both of which lent substantial sums of money to Poor Law Unions to build workhouses—including £800 to the Llanfyllin Union for completion of the workhouse in 1841.[23] Royal Exchange Assurance began in 1720 and made significant monies underwriting ships and transporting slaves and slave-produced goods (Pearson and Richardson 2019). In 1865, Charles Manning (1799–1880), also a West India merchant and beneficiary

of slave compensation, became deputy governor of Royal Exchange Assurance and other directors—for example, William Tetlow Hibbert (1792–1881) and William Davidson (1808–1894)—also came from wealthy slave-owning dynasties. Although the PWLB remained the main source of capital investment for workhouse construction, Poor Law Unions regularly turned to insurance companies such as Royal Exchange Assurance when PWLB funds dwindled. Between 1835 and 1844, £461,000 was provided by insurance companies (16%) towards the building of workhouses, compared with £1,718,000 by PWLB (61%), £238,000 by individuals (8%), and only £328,000 by poor rate (12%) itself (Webster 2015).

Other members of the plantation class were involved in the management of workhouses. Colonel Charles Ashe A'Court Esq (1785–1861)—Tory MP for Heytesbury—received a share of £2,944 4s 6d in compensation for 174 enslaved Africans in St Kitts. Active in the suppression of the Swing Riots, he later took on the role of Assistant Poor Law Commissioner in Southampton, overseeing the building of the new workhouse in Andover (Farrell and Fisher 2009). The Andover Workhouse was allegedly run like a penal colony, and in 1845 was the focus of scandal when inmates were left so hungry that they were reported as having resorted to gnawing on the bones they were supposed to be crushing for fertiliser in a desperate attempt to assuage their hunger (Longmate 2003).

Martin Williams Esq (1782–1856) was owner of the Old Hope Pen and Seven Rivers Estates sugar plantations in Jamaica. By 1837, he was living in Wales and appointed local magistrate and Chairman of Guardians for the Llanfyllin Poor Law Union (1837–1856), which operated one of the new workhouses built to provide relief to workers impoverished by the collapse of the plantation wool trade. The workhouse was the object of significant working-class opposition and on 13 April 1837 a crowd of almost 400 attacked the Relieving Officer and Poor Law Guardians (including Williams) as part of what became known as the Llanfair Riot. In 1839, Chartists damaged the nearby Newtown and Llanidloes Union Workhouse (Hainsworth 2004). Also spurred on by the growing crisis in the local woollen industry, protestors mobilised around racist stereotypes of prosperous newly emancipated Caribbean slaves whose condition was compared to the inhumane treatment and starvation of local workers.[24]

Whilst agricultural workers in Britain protested the impacts of the restructuring of the plantation economy on their livelihoods, in Jamaica the previously enslaved bore the response of planters preoccupied with the need to mitigate labour shortages following abolition. The 1833 Act also abolished the right of planters to punish their former workers, and the apprenticeship system introduced in 1834 limited the working day to an average of eight and a half hours, rather than the 16 and a half hours people had endured when slaves. As a result, Jamaica's sugar crop declined by 10% (Altink 2001). The solution of Jamaican authorities was to repurpose the island's workhouses, allowing planters to pay a fee to send workers to be whipped and incarcerated in a parish workhouse without needing to provide a reason for doing so and without any limit on the time inmates were held (see also Paton 2004). For Altink (2001), the apprenticeship system the workhouse underpinned was in effect "slavery by another name".

The Abolition Act and Poor Law Amendment Act, which also passed into law in the British West Indies in 1834, were thus "ideologically bound" as "promoting industry became the clarion call not only directed at the manumitted populations of the West Indies but also to the poor in England" (Johnston 2021:22–23). In the Caribbean, this "industry" was assured through the near simultaneous implementation of a series of Orders of Council issued by the British government introducing other—older—elements of British Poor Law designed to manage labour through the regulation of the rights and duties of Masters and Servants, and the punishment and suppression of Vagrancy. By the early 1840s, Acts relating to both had been passed in Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, British Guiana, St Kitts, St Lucia, Trinidad, and Tobago. Covering not only plantation work but any waged labour, Masters and Servants Acts criminalised the breaking of work contracts, whilst Vagrancy Acts helped in the breaking up of public meetings in which workers might share ideas and organise, and potentially criminalised "persons moving about seeking labour, while anti-immigration laws prevented them from moving between neighbouring colonies in search of work" (Johnston 2021:34).

For Locke, the early modern workhouse was conceived as sitting at the centre of a proto-industrial rural economy he hoped would unlock economic growth in Britain through the production of goods for export to its plantations overseas. By the 1830s, they were being used to regulate and discipline newly emancipated labour in Caribbean plantation societies and fuel the ranks, and re-enforce the work ethic, of an urban industrial working class in Britain. There it was hoped an ethos of "less eligibility" would reduce the demand for relief, and the strictly regimented routines of the workhouse itself ensure those who entered became "accustomed to hard work, instead of idleness" (Emsley 2005:270, cited in Williams 2020:768). Whilst for Locke workhouses were envisaged as centralising a dispersed rural labour force, Marx reported on manufacturers lobbying Poor Law Commissioners in the 1830s to "send the 'surplus-population' of the agricultural districts to the north" (1887:180) and of practices of "child-stealing and child-slavery", with agents "procuring apprentices from the different parish workhouses of London, Birmingham, and elsewhere" to feed the mills in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Lancashire (1887:535) where children were "harassed to the brink of death by excess of labour … flogged, fettered and tortured in the most exquisite refinement of cruelty … [and] in many cases starved to the bone while flogged to their work" (1887:536) to feed their overseers' ravenous appetite for profit.

In *Capital, Volume 1* Marx also famously noted the symbiotic relationship between class exploitation in Britain's industrial factory system and racial exploitation on the plantation overseas, though by this time it was the plantations of the United States rather than Britain that he was referring to:

> Whilst the cotton industry introduced child-slavery in England, it gave in the United States a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery, into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world. (Marx 1887:536)

The rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of 19th century Britain was accompanied by an equally rapid growth in the number of poor. Despite concerns that Poor Law Unions were not administering the workhouse test evenly or with sufficient rigour, and a troubling expansion in the charitable provision of "outdoor relief" (Williams and May 2022), the workhouse system continued to expand and by 1872–1873 more was being spent on the provisioning of workhouses (£1.5 million) than was spent on "the India service, prisons, police, lighthouses or Post Office" with only the Army (£3.6 million) and Navy (£2.0 million) spending more (Brown 2016:38). Though workhouses never became meaningful centres of manufacture as 18th century reformers envisaged, their provisioning provided an important market for local businesses and in London at least a small number of businesses dominated the market for different goods (for example, clothing, grocers, or general provisions), with one business often supplying multiple Poor Law Unions (Brown 2016).

More significantly, where British woollens had once clothed enslaved Africans on the plantations of the British West Indies, "by 1830 cotton clothing had become the cheapest and primary clothing purchased to distribute to the indigent poor under parish relief" in Britain (Harvey 2019:70), with the primary source of cotton the plantations of the American South. For Harvey, it is "difficult to overstate the synergy between the textile industrial revolution in Britain and the cotton slave economy of the American Deep South", with the number of slaves engaged in this trade growing "in direct proportion to the export of cotton to Britain" (2019:79) to the extent indeed that "British industrial capitalism after emancipation in the British Empire depended more on slave labour, and on a larger scale, than it ever did on its own sugar plantation regimes" (2019:67).

Conclusions

In contrast to earlier scholarship that conceptualised the British workhouse as a domestic mechanism for managing poverty and labour in an era of industrial capitalism, and more recent scholarship on the interconnections between empire, slavery, and charitable welfare in 18th and 19th century Britain, this paper has traced the contours of a workhouse–plantation nexus in the Atlantic world from the early 18th to the mid 19th century. In doing so, it makes five contributions to existing and future scholarship on welfare, racial capitalism, and reparative justice.

First, we have shown that rather than parallel but separate developments, early modern workhouses and the colonial plantation were constitutively interlinked—financially, ideologically, materially, and administratively. From their initial formulation as ancillary institutions of mercantile capitalism, workhouse coffers were underwritten by slavery-derived wealth—be it donations from wealthy slavers or the unspectacular but no less significant poor rates paid by indirect beneficiaries of the wider slave economy. With the transition to industrialised capitalism, the development of new workhouses was intricately tied to infrastructures of slavery: marine insurance firms provided loans for building new workhouses; the disciplinary-welfare apparatus guaranteed a ready supply of cheap labour to both factory and plantation; and underpinned the wider factory system and its

insatiable appetite for the raw materials of the plantation. Indeed, the financial feasibility of the workhouse system relied on the deportation of paupers, "criminals", and "socially undesirable" populations throughout the 17th to 19th centuries. What was a cost-saving exercise for the workhouse effectively became a source of cheap indentured labour through which colonial planters could accumulate sufficient capital to purchase chattel slave labour. This reading of the workhouse–plantation nexus challenges "methodological nationalism" characteristic of previous accounts of the British workhouse (Crowther 2016; Driver 1995; Hitchcock 1987) and the "colonial aphasia" (Stoler 2011) that has "whitened" histories of the Poor Law.

Second, we hope our account can serve as a staging post from which to develop more extended genealogies of the workhouse–plantation nexus and its multiple geographies in and beyond the Atlantic world. Besides examining the relationships between the workhouses and colonial plantations of other European powers, this could entail extending accounts of how the legislative and disciplinary-welfare apparatus of European poor laws laid the groundwork for the racialised prison-industrial complex in the US and elsewhere (Gilmore 2007). It might also explore how technologies of the workhouse circulated globally, as prototypes for famine relief and forced labour camps in places like India and Southern Africa (Forth 2015), or as sites of containment for "vagrants" in China and Taiwan (Chen 2012; Rusenko 2024).

Third, here we have explored the workhouse–plantation nexus in relation to specific articulations of mercantile and industrialised capitalism. But the evidence invites further research to examine how the financing of state and charitable welfare—both past and present—has been predicated upon different varieties of racial dispossession across different scales and regimes of (in)visibility. For example, whilst the impacts of the neoliberalisation, marketisation, and downgrading of welfare in the current era are clearly racialised—with Black people simultaneously subject to "organised abandonment" (Gilmore 2007) and state neglect on the one hand, and the terrors of surveillance and intensified bordering practices on the other (Bhattacharya et al. 2021)—the restructuring of "welfare" has also provided an opportunity for racialised capital accumulation across a range of sites from care homes (Horton 2021; Shutes and Chiatti 2012), to immigration detention centres and electronic surveillance and benefit payment systems (Coddington et al. 2020; Darling 2016). Similarly, confronting the capillaceous relations of racial capitalism in today's "philanthropic-charity" complex is essential in postwelfare times (Fuentenebro et al. 2024) and should be considered necessary work towards abolition, repair, and reparations (Inwood et al. 2021).

Fourth, we hope our examination of the workhouse–plantation nexus contributes to advancing epistemological justice of reparation, citizenship, and entitlement (Bhambra 2021) and pushes the horizon of understanding of actual and potential political struggle against ongoing racial injustice today. Our purpose in this paper was to challenge all too narrow readings of the British workhouse that underpin white denialism: as spatially removed from, and comparable to, the horrors of the plantation. While no moral equivalence can be made between systems of labour exploitation—indentured or otherwise—and racialised chattel slavery,

both systems were ideologically, financially, administratively, and materially bound. Such an argument does not undermine calls for slavery reparations, but insists even the horrific conditions in early modern workhouses were built atop of, and operated in symbiotic relationship with, chattel slavery (see Johnson 2004:306). Rather than pitting one struggle against another, tracing the interconnectedness of these histories is an important step towards developing a reparative, translocal, and liberatory politics that strengthens global class-based, anti-racist, and anti-colonial movements (Featherstone 2012; Hall 2018; Narayan 2019).

Finally, by addressing the omission and erasure of Blackness in histories of the British workhouse, we contribute to a growing body of work documenting Black lives in histories of the British welfare (El-Enany 2020). Whilst here we have mainly traced the connections between Black lives on the plantation and the predominantly white spaces of British workhouses, more recent work has documented the oft overlooked Black presence in Victorian workhouses (Bressey 2011; Crymble 2022). Building on this, future work should continue to foreground Black and Indigenous agency in subjugated welfare histories; from maroon geographies (Winston 2021), collective organising (McCutcheon 2019), to the more quotidian acts of freedom, care, and mutual aid (Bruno 2024), all of which know Black life and futurity differently (McKittrick 2017).

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available. Sources and repository details can be found in the reference list.

Endnotes

[1] See also Schrauwers (2020) and Tomkins (2021) on social reformer visits to prisons, workhouses, and "pauper farms" in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and France. The Dutch pauper colonies in Frederiksoord, Willemsoord, and Wilhelminaoord (est. 1818–20) that inspired many English social reformers drew significantly from their founder General Johannes van der Bosch's (1780–1844) experience as a colonial administrator in the East Indies (Schrauwers 2001).

[2] Despite the fact that income derived from India (in the form of both colonial taxation and a proportion of the revenue paid on shares to middle-class households subsequently paid out in local poor rates) was crucial to the provision of relief for the poor in later 19th century Britain, the British Raj provided little or no regular relief to the Indian poor (Bhambra 2021). Here the British workhouse served instead as a prototype for famine relief camps (Forth 2015). Wealth extracted from India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (in the form of colonial taxation) and post-war period (as a result of the restructuring of Britain's debts to the newly independent nation) also helped finance the British welfare state in the early and mid 20th century (Bhambra 2021).

[3] Edward Colston, the Bristol Merchants, Robert Geffrye, the Hibberts (Clapham, London est. 1859), Eleanora Atherton (1782–1870), Charles McGarel (1788–1876) are some of the better-known examples of "philanthropists" whose slave-derived wealth helped build almshouses.

[4] For example, to ward off slave uprisings, enslaved "rebels" including escaped workhouse inmates in Jamacia were deported and resold to work in mines in the Spanish territories of New Granada, Puerto Rico, and Cuba (see Anderson 2022:103, 105). Following the abolition of slavery in British territories, city financiers and South Wales industrialists established the Cobre Company and the Santiago Company to extract copper ore from the El Cobre mine, Cuba, 1835–1869. These companies used enslaved African and indentured Chinese labour to supply the Swansea smelter's demand for copper ore (Evans 2014). By 1840, Cobre ore amounted to over half of the foreign ores entering Britain (ibid.).

[5] For example, Joiner's (1971) account of the philanthropic activity of the East India Company (EIC) 1784–1834 highlights the wide-ranging involvement of EIC directors in charity schools, alms-houses, and hospitals, as well as in apprenticeship schemes for "delinquent" boys to work on Royal Navy and EIC ships. From 1812 to 1832, EIC directors made frequent subscriptions of £100 to the Spitalfields Soup Society (est. 1798) in response to "memorials representing the distress of the populace" (Joiner 1971:137). The Society ran out of a shop in Brick Lane in East London and supplied food to the poor at low prices. The EIC's apparent benevolence was not simply about asserting moral authority. It was also a means of averting social unrest: with gifts explicitly tied to specific parishes where there was a threat to the "security of company property" (Joiner 1971:140) and in years of economic crisis (1816, 1826, 1832) EIC directors made contributions of £1,000 to poor relief and chaired the Metropolitan Relief Committee (1832).

[6] Palmer's (2009) analysis of South Carolina's workhouse operations from 1763 to 1776 reveals a practice of remunerating white individuals for the apprehension of Black people—slave or free—who could be detained within the workhouse, without trial, for up to 18 months if they lacked documentation. If, subsequently, no one "claimed ownership", detainees would be auctioned to the highest bidder. Palmer (2009:218) writes that "[f]ree blacks, thus, always had to live in a kind of legal limbo, never having any guarantee that their freedom would last or be upheld if questioned".

[7] The "Black codes" in Mississippi, for example, "required blacks to enter into wage contracts and punished those without employment as vagrants … Those who left work could be arrested as vagrants and hired out to white employers to perform involuntary labor" (Hirota 2017:142). In his account of the Mississippi Delta, Clyde Woods (2017) gives the example of how the Works Progress Administration (WPA) not only made unequal payments to white and Black workers but dismissed Black workers during harvest time. Those who refused to "work in the fields", Woods (2017:128) explains, "found their food allotment cut by the WPA and Mississippi welfare agencies. They were then jailed as vagrants and forced into the fields under armed guard".

[8] Although chattel slavery and indentured servitude were "concretely intertwined and ideologically symbiotic elements of a larger unified though internally diversified structure of exploitation" (Johnson 2004:306), chattel slavery was qualitatively distinct on numerous grounds: in its brutal racialisation and sub-humanisation; sexual violence and forced reproduction; its permanence and hereditary status; and its scale (approximately 12.5 million enslaved Africans forcibly transported to the Americas compared to 320,000 indentured servants). McKittrick's (2011:953) argument the "geographic management of blackness, race, and racial difference (and thus nonblackness) hinges on a longstanding but unacknowledged plantation past" underscores a crucial point in the reparations debate: that the racialised legacies of chattel slavery, as further evidenced by Pulido (2017), continue to structure the lives of Black people in vastly different ways than white descendants of indentured, convict, or workhouse labourers.

[9] Bristol's first sugar refinery was built in 1616 by Sir Robert Aldworth to process imported sugar produced on slave plantations in Spanish and Portuguese territories of Madeira, Brazil, Azores, São Tomé, and the Canary Islands (see Morgan 1998:140–142).

[10] Voyage IDs refer to https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database.

[11] Latimer (1900:480) notes that "in June [1696] it was reported that the poor-rate assessments during the three previous years had averaged £2,230 per annum, which was about £180 less than the expenditure, and the assessment on the city was soon afterwards fixed at £44 8s per week, or £2,308 per annum".

[12] Beyond Edward Colston's well-documented involvement with the Royal African Company (1680–1692), which trafficked an estimated 84,000 enslaved Africans to the Americas, other prominent charitable subscribers to Bristol's Corporation of the Poor included wealthy sugar merchants Sir John Duddleston, William Swymmer, and Robert Yate (Jones 1994). Sir William Daines (1647–1724), the son of a Virginian plantation owner, was a prominent Bristol tobacco merchant and served as Warden (1692–1693) and Master (1698–1700) with the Merchant Adventurers of Bristol. Sir Abraham Elton 1st Baronet (1654–1727), whose brass works produced goods for trade on slaving voyages to Africa (Dresser 2016), also directly invested in the slave trade: co-owning the *Jason Galley* (Voyage ID: 16077) and supporting the slaving ventures of his sons: Abraham Elton Jr 2nd Baronet (Voyage IDs: 16084, 16100, 16200), Issac Elton (Voyage IDs: 16189, 16269), and Jacob Elton (Voyage IDs: 16039, 16068, 16097, 16133). George Mason, another Corporation of the Poor subscriber, co-owned five slave ships (Voyage IDs: 16027, 16063, 16065, 16071, 16089).

[13] Such profits were not always immediate, as the Corporation books in 1700 show unsold stock of £137 and debts due to the Corporation totalling £105 (Butcher 1972:5–6).

[14] In Liverpool, demand for poor relief in the 1720s "outstripped the capacity" of the existing poor house and the overseers' procured lodgings for inmates in different parts of the city (Blease 1908:106), including renting 36 cottages owned by Bryan Blundell (1675–1756), a tobacco merchant, privateer, and slave ship owner (Picton 1875:150–151) who with his son, Bryan Blundell Junior, was responsible for trafficking 6,049 enslaved Africans on 27 slave voyages (Girvan 2022). As part of the Vestry's abandonment of expensive "outdoor relief", Liverpool's first workhouse was built by Blundell's Blue Coat Charity School in 1732 on land leased by the Corporation. Blease (1908:110) notes "the [Vestry's] difficulty of raising the necessary capital [to build a workhouse] was overcome in the same way as before. The trustees [of the Charity School] undertook to build a house, and to let it to the parish at a rent amounting to 5 per cent, on the capital expenditure". Its first overseers were John Brookes (Brooks) and his partner Thomas Cockshutt. Brooks became city Bailiff in 1733 and Mayor in 1743, and later joined his sons Joseph and Jonathan as owners of three privateers, including the *Neptune* (built 1748) that trafficked 335 enslaved Africans from Calabar to plantations in Barbados—though by the time the ship docked only 275 remained alive (Voyage ID 90283). In 1744, the role of Superintendent of Liverpool Workhouse passed to Mr Charles Goore (Gore) (1701–1783), a prominent merchant in slave-produced Chesapeake tobacco. In 1747, Gore was appointed Bailiff of Liverpool, and Mayor of Liverpool in 1754 and again in 1768 during which time he expanded his interests in the slave trade. Having accrued an "affluent fortune" as a merchant and a slaver, in 1768 John Brookes' son Joseph (1706–1788) became Treasurer of the Parish and between 1769 and 1772 oversaw the building of a new "House of Industry" in the city (Blease 1908:124). Joseph, who had begun slaving in 1748, was later joined by family members, including his nephew Joseph Brooks Junior (1746–1823) who, alongside being Bailiff of Liverpool in 1784 and 1802, was involved in 43 slave voyages between 1770 and 1790 and owned the slaving ship *Brooks* (built 1781), a replica of which was later used by abolitionists to highlight the brutality of the Middle Passage. In Liverpool too, the labour of workhouse inmates was closely tied to both local and transnational trade: cotton-pickers, wool-spinners, cotton-spinners, knitters and seamstresses, smiths, alongside boatbuilders, swineherds, nurses, and yeomen of the smithies (Treasurer's Report of 1794, cited in Blease 1908:129). In his 1797 survey of the State of the Poor, Sir Fredrick Eden reported that the Liverpool Workhouse had a capacity of 600, with the majority of children employed "picking cotton", picking oakum for caulking ships, or apprenticed to work in Lancashire cotton mills.

[15] See also Rosenthal (2018) and Fiori (2020) on circulation of plantation management guides and accountancy and industry innovation.

[16] See https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/eighteenth-century/1717-4-george-1-c-11-the-transportation-act/ (last accessed 15 May 2025).

[17] Sedgley & Co. (1749–1768) and Stevenson, Randolph & Cheston (1768–1775) were two major companies in convict transportation to the Americas. Described as "a prosperous slave trader and owner of a small fleet of ships" (Coldham 1992:82), Samuel Sedgley (Sedgly) served as Sheriff of Bristol in 1790 and is listed in the SlaveVoyages Database as co-owner of five slave ships—*Eugene*, *Chester*, *Brew Packet*, *Antelope*, and *Constantine*—which trafficked a total of 2,229 enslaved people in seven voyages to the Caribbean (Voyage IDs: 17312, 17336, 17360, 17390, 17640, 17662, 17665). Only 1870 disembarked. - Bristol-based William Randolph (formerly of Sedgley & Co) was owner and co-owner of no less than four slave ships—*Hornet* (Voyage ID: 17934), *Antelope* (Voyage ID: 17662), *Little Hornet* (Voyage ID: 17939), and *Tryall* (Voyage ID: 17944)—that trafficked 1,305 known enslaved people to plantations in the Kingston, Charleston, and Antonia, with 1,137 disembarking. James Cheston (1747–1798) of Stevenson, Randolph & Cheston was a merchant dealing in convict servants, tobacco, corn, and wheat. He began his career in 1768 in a partnership with Willian Stevenson, his step-brother—and was active in the slave trade, auctioning convicts, and used both enslaved and convict labour on tobacco plantations (see James Cheston letter book 23 April 1771–29 April 1773: https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/r4dv1hc79). Stevenson and Cheston started the business with £1,500 and a vessel valued at £1,000, the *Isabella*—left to them by Daniel Cheston (1712–1754), Sheriff of Kent County, Maryland, tobacco merchant and shipowner. Considerable joint correspondence including a letter requesting insurance on a ship owned by Daniel Cheston and Samuel Sedgley (Sedgly) (see Maryland Historical Society 1930:55–57) makes it highly likely that Daniel is the "Cheston" named as co-owner of the Virginia-built ship *Eugene*, alongside Samuel Sedgley and others. The *Eugene* made two slave voyages in 1752 (Voyage ID: 17312) and 1754 (Voyage ID: 17336) from Calabar to South Carolina and Kingston.

[18] According to Ekirch (1987), the convict transports were of a similar tonnage to English slavers. "At least a few ships", he writes, "were former slavers. Jonathan Forward claimed that his 'Guinea ship', the *Eagle*, was 'most suitable' for convicts. In age, these vessels were well weathered by years plying the Atlantic" (Ekirch 1987:98–99). Convicted paupers were also transported to Australia on the infamous "Second Fleet" of 1790 using private contractors (Camden, Calvert & King) previously engaged in the slave trade (Bateson 1959:74) and who secured the convicts with the "unusually heavy, tight irons from [their] slave ships" (Flynn 2001:68). Anthony Calvert, a London merchant and managing director of Camden, Calvert & King is named in the SlaveVoyages Database as transporting 25,441 enslaved people. Calvert also served as Elder Brethren in Trinity House and an overseer of Trinity's Almshouses (Sturgess and Cozens 2013).

[19] Pauper emigration also continued through the 1830s and 1840s. Peaking in 1852, when 3,271 paupers were sent overseas, between 1835 to 1899, 36,000 poor-law emigrants were "exported" from England and Wales (for a detailed discussion of amendments to the Poor Law and their impact on the export of paupers, orphans, and deserted children, see Higginbotham 2024).

[20] Nassau William Senior was the eldest son of Rev. John Raven Senior (1764–1824), a Church of England clergyman and named owner of 57 enslaved people in Barbados. John Raven Senior was son of Thomas Nassau Senior (1727–1786), a merchant trader who owned Baldrick's, St John, Barbados and Pool's plantation in St Joseph and St Andrew. Nassau Senior's mother—Mary Senior—was daughter of Henry Duke (1730–1780), Solicitor General of Barbados, and owner of slaves in Cross Pen, Jamaica. Nassau Senior's resolve to "reform the English Poor Laws" stemmed from "witnessing the abuse of out-relief in his father's Wiltshire parish" (Longmate 2003:48), and he became a firm advocate for the introduction of the "'workhouse test' as a measure of true destitution and the only means whereby paupers could receive poor relief" (Williams 2020:764).

[21] In the 1820s, the "workhouse test" implemented by Southwell (Nottinghamshire) overseer George Nicholls (1781–1865), a former East India Company ship captain, dramatically reduced poor relief expenditure and led to his appointment as a Poor Law Commissioner in 1834 and later permanent secretary of the Poor Law Board in 1847.

[22] Cobbett, like several other "radicals" such as Richard Carlile and John Cartwright, shared an entrenched anti-Black racism and opposed the abolition of slavery, encouraging a racial chauvinism that dehumanised the "African object of humanitarian intervention" and highlighted the plight of "white slavery" in industrialised Britain (Hanley 2016:121).
[23] National Archives MH 12/16543/263.
[24] See, for example, Baxter's (1841) collation of newspaper reports documenting anti-Poor Law demonstrations at the time. On Chartism's changing relationships with racism and slavery, see Scriven (2022). From the 1840s, Chartist culture and its calls for land reform shifted towards anti-racist and anti-slavery ideology following greater exposure to American abolitionism and "Free Soil" ideology (Scriven 2022).

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