

Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism and the Global Origins of the Post-Emancipation Indentured Labor System

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The origins of the indentured labor system which flourished in the post-emancipation colonial plantation world must be understood in terms of the development of increasingly interconnected free and forced labor trades within and beyond the Indian Ocean during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Recent research reveals that this system took shape a quarter of a century earlier than previously believed, that Chinese rather than Indian workers were the initial focus of the interest in using indentured Asian labor and that the British East India Company played a significant and hitherto unappreciated role in this global migrant labor system's early development.

The historiography of the free and forced labor trades that supplied European plantation colonies with millions of African, Indian, East Asian and other non-western workers between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries is a case study in geographical, chronological and topical compartmentalization. Histories of European slave trading, the attendant African diaspora to the Americas and European abolitionism remain subject to what Edward Alpers aptly characterized more than 15 years ago as the ‘tyranny of the Atlantic’ in slavery studies.¹ As their preoccupation with developments in Britain and the Caribbean attest, studies of the ‘great’ or ‘mighty experiment’ with the use of indentured labor following slave emancipation in the British Empire likewise tend to focus on the Atlantic world despite a long-standing awareness that the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius was the site of the crucial test case for the use of free agricultural laborers working under long-term written contracts and a wealth of demographic data which highlight the Indian Ocean’s importance in the history of a system that scattered more than 2.2 million workers throughout and beyond the colonial plantation world between the 1830s and 1920s.² More indentured laborers landed

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in Mauritius than in any other colony while the total number of such workers who reached European colonies in the Indian Ocean basin surpassed those who arrived in the Caribbean by some 259,000.³ The Indian Ocean's significance in this global labor migration becomes even more pronounced if the 1.5 million or more individuals who emigrated from southern India to plantations in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malaya to work under short-term, often verbal, contracts between the 1840s and the early twentieth century, and the 700,000–750,000 Indian migrants who labored on Assamese plantations between 1870 and 1900 are included in this labor diaspora.⁴

This historiographical tendency to privilege one oceanic world is matched by a propensity to draw a sharp dividing line between the pre- and post-emancipation eras despite widespread acceptance of the argument that the years after 1834 witnessed the creation and institutionalization of a 'new system of slavery' in the colonial plantation world.⁵ Histories of British colonies in the Caribbean and elsewhere usually end with the abolition of slavery in 1834 or occasionally with the termination of the 'apprenticeship' system in 1838, while studies of indentured laborers in these same colonies frequently pay little attention to the slave regimes that preceded them. Debates about conceptualizing and interpreting the indentured experience likewise reflect this tendency to view the colonial plantation world in terms of sharply demarcated pre- and post-1834 eras.⁶

The consequences of this chronological apartheid include an implicit, if not explicit, tendency to view the post-emancipation indentured labor system as a phenomenon separate and distinct unto itself, a notion which is reinforced by the historiographical emphasis on reconstructing the experience of indentured Indians to the exclusion of the hundreds of thousands of African, East Asian, Melanesian and other workers who also migrated throughout and beyond the colonial plantation world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ This Indo-centrism is compounded in turn by a continuing penchant to focus on reconstructing limited aspects of indentured workers' lives, doing so within tightly circumscribed social, economic, political and cultural contexts, and failing to compare local developments with those of indentured workers elsewhere in the colonial plantation world.⁸

These conceptual problems are similar to the pitfalls, especially methodological nationalism and Euro-centrism, identified by those working in the emerging field of global labor history as characteristic features of traditional theories about and interpretations of transnational labor migration.⁹ Recent research on labor migration in the Indian Ocean underscores the fact that a fuller understanding of the labor trades which supplied European colonies with millions of free and forced laborers is contingent upon transcending this preoccupation with the particular. Clare Anderson's perceptive examination of the similar ways in which British officials thought about and processed Indian convicts and indentured laborers during the early nineteenth century, for example, demonstrates that these two labor trades can no longer be viewed in isolation from one another.¹⁰ Other work has established the increasing interconnectedness of the slave, convict and indentured labor trades in the Indian Ocean during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹¹ In so doing, this research reveals that the post-emancipation indentured labor system originated

some 25 years earlier than previously believed, that it took shape on a global stage that stretched from the Caribbean and the banks of the Thames to an obscure island in the South Atlantic and thence across the Indian Ocean to the Malay peninsula and finally to China, and that the British East India Company corporate-state played a significant and hitherto unappreciated role in this global migrant labor system's early development.

The global origins of indentured labor

The migration of 400,000–460,000 or more mostly British indentured ‘servants’ to North America and the Caribbean, especially between the 1640s and 1775, established the precedent for the indentured labor trades that flourished between the mid-1830s and 1920s.¹² While the movement of indentured workers across the Atlantic was closely associated with the establishment of European settler colonies in the Americas, indentured labor migration during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries entailed African, Asian and other non-western peoples journeying to European colonies in Africa, Australasia, the Caribbean, South and Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific to work on plantations and in other enterprises. Unlike their European predecessors, many of these laborers were expected, at least initially, to return to their homeland upon completing their contracts.

The origins of this post-emancipation indentured labor system must be viewed in the context of European slave trading and abolitionism in the Indian Ocean during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The existence of structural links between slavery and the indentured labor trades was proposed by Benedicte Hjejle in her 1967 article on slavery and agricultural bondage in southern India. Hjejle argued more specifically that the recruitment of some indentured Indian laborers cannot be understood without reference to indigenous systems of slavery and that a significant number of the migrant workers who reached Ceylon between 1843 and 1873 came from the ranks of South India's praedial slave population.¹³ Mauritian immigration registers confirm Hjejle's argument, revealing as they do that indentured laborers of southern Indian origin who reached the island during the late 1830s included individuals of ‘slave’ caste status.¹⁴ Similar structural connections between slavery and the indentured labor trades are also a hallmark of the *engagé* system, usually ignored in the Anglophone literature on indentured labor, which entailed the recruitment of 50,000 ostensibly liberated East African and Malagasy slaves and ‘free’ contractual laborers to work on Mayotte in the Comoros, the island of Nosy-Bé off Madagascar's northwest coast, and Réunion following the abolition of slavery in the French empire in 1848.¹⁵

What we now know about European slave trading in the Indian Ocean provides additional, albeit often circumstantial, evidence of such structural links. Europeans traded an estimated minimum of 947,600–1,275,200 East African, Indian, Malagasy and Southeast Asian slaves within and beyond the Indian Ocean basin between 1500 and 1850, with much of this activity concentrated between the 1770s and early 1830s.¹⁶ The Dutch East India Company (VOC) shipped Indian and Southeast

Asian slaves to the Cape of Good Hope and tens of thousands of slaves from India's Malabar and Coromandel coasts to its administrative centers, factories and other establishments in Indonesia, especially during the seventeenth century.¹⁷ In addition to transporting hundreds of thousands of African and Malagasy slaves to the Mascarenes between the late seventeenth century and the early 1830s, French traders exported an estimated 24,000 Indian slaves to Mauritius and Réunion with 75% of these exports occurring between 1770 and 1793 when British occupation of France's Indian possessions following the outbreak of war in Europe effectively ended large-scale European trans-oceanic trafficking in chattel Indian labor.¹⁸ Areas in southern India such as Malabar, Tanjore and Tinnevely nevertheless continued to function as slave trading centers that attracted the attention of British East India Company officials during the 1810s, 1820s and early 1830s.¹⁹ Their concern stemmed, at least in part, from the fact that the mid- and late 1820s witnessed French attempts to recruit free Indian agricultural laborers to work on Réunion, attempts in which the former French slave trading enclaves of Pondichéry, Karikal and Yanam figured prominently.²⁰ As company officials knew only too well from their experience in Malabar province during the early 1790s, kidnapping, enslaving and carrying Indians away from British territories to other European settlements such as the French factory at Mahé and the Dutch establishment at Cochin for export was a well-established practice.²¹

The limited information at our disposal about the details of indentured labor recruitment in India before government regulation of the so-called 'coolie' trades that began in 1842 likewise points to structural connections between the slave and indentured labor trades. Marina Carter notes that the labor exporters who supplied Mauritius with indentured Indians before 1838 tapped indigenous migrant labor systems to do so, and that approximately one-third of the 7000 Indians who arrived in Mauritius during 1837–1838 were *dhangars* or tribal hill people from the Chota Nagpur plateau in southern Bihar, a region that subsequently supplied 250,000 migrant workers for Assam's tea plantations during the latter half of the century.²² Hill tribesmen or aboriginal peoples figured prominently among those who were enslaved in some parts of the subcontinent. An 1811 report on the trafficking of Nepalese slaves into British territories and an 1816 report on the movement of enslaved children from Assamese tribal areas to Bengal, an important source of slave and then indentured labor for the Mascarenes, suggest that the presence of such tribesmen among early indentured immigrants cannot be discounted pending further research.²³ The need for such research is underscored by an 1825 request by the governor general's agent on the northeastern frontier that Assamese who owed state service but could not fulfill their obligations because of the partial famine that had swept the region be allowed to sell themselves into slavery.²⁴ Although the government in Calcutta promptly relinquished its claims to such service, officials on the scene reported that some Assamese had nevertheless 'contracted an obligation to serve private individuals for their lives during the pressure of the late famine.'²⁵

The need to view the indentured experience in broader contexts is highlighted by new insights into these trades' origins. The initial demand for such workers is usually traced to the growing need for agricultural laborers in the Mascarenes

during the second half of the 1820s, a period marked by the rapid expansion of the Mauritian and Réunionnais sugar industries, the decline and demise of the illegal slave trade that funneled an estimated 107,000 East African, Malagasy and Southeast Asian slaves to the Mascarenes between 1811 and the early 1830s, the failure of local slave populations to reproduce themselves, and British attempts to ameliorate slaves' living and working conditions.²⁶ The late 1820s witnessed the recruitment and transportation of some 3100 free Indian workers to Réunion from French establishments in southern India and approximately 1500 Chinese and Indian workers from Calcutta, Madras, Penang and Singapore to Mauritius.²⁷ These attempts to employ free Asian labor faltered, however, in the face of worker resistance to poor living and working conditions with the result that the large-scale introduction of indentured Indians into Mauritius, the event commonly viewed as marking the advent of the modern global system of indentured labor, did not begin in earnest until 1835.

While there can be little doubt that the Mascarenes and Mauritius in particular played a major role in the emergence of indentured labor systems during the 1830s, the archival record reveals that British attempts to use indentured Asian labor predated developments in the Mascarenes by more than two decades. As B.W. Higman noted more than 40 years ago in an article often overlooked by indentured labor historians, the first pan-regional use of indentured Asian agricultural laborers by Europeans dates to 1806 when 200 Chinese reached Britain's recently acquired colony of Trinidad in the Caribbean.²⁸ Imperial officials expected these immigrants to settle on the island and work as agricultural workers, expectations that soon collapsed, however, in the face of these individuals' refusal to accept the conditions under which they were expected to live and work. By 1808, only 22 of the 192 Chinese landed two years earlier remained on the island.

This experiment occurred on a global stage that reached from the Caribbean eastward to southeastern China and involved the British East India Company corporate-state as well as imperial policy-makers in London. The initial proposal for such an undertaking came from a Royal Navy officer with considerable Indian Ocean experience. In July 1802, Lieutenant William Layman prepared a memorandum in which he argued that since importing African slaves was neither an effective nor a morally sustainable option to encourage agriculture in Trinidad, the only way to do so was to introduce Chinese settlers whose 'indefatigable industry and habits of frugality' made them the most fit people 'in the world . . . to transform the woody wastes and drowned parts of Trinidad into rich[,] fertile and productive land'. Those dubious of such an undertaking, Layman continued, had only to observe that

The Islands of Java and Luconia are in great measure indebted to their industry for the superior production of sugar, Indigo, Cotton, Coffee &^c and Pulo Penang or Prince of Wales's Island has in a short period been converted from a jungle or wood into valuable plantations of Pepper, Beetlenut, Nutmegs & other Spices, by Chinese who from the strong motive of acquiring property have been induced to colonize there . . .²⁹

The British cabinet approved Layman's proposal in principle within six weeks of its submission to government.³⁰ The following February, the Colonial Secretary wrote to the governor of Ceylon, who was considering bringing Chinese colonists to that island, to ask his opinion about how best to induce such settlers to come to Trinidad.³¹ Two months later, Kenneth MacQueen, who had extensive experience dealing with Chinese settlers in the East Indies, was appointed to implement the Trinidadian plan under the general egis of the governor general in Bengal who received instructions from the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India, commonly known as the Board of Control, to support MacQueen's endeavors.³²

A striking feature of this endeavor is the role that company personnel, especially at Prince of Wales' Island (Penang), played in its execution. Penang's lieutenant governor, Robert T. Farquhar, who subsequently became the first British governor of Mauritius where he would be actively involved in securing convict labor for and suppressing the illegal slave trade to the colony, figured prominently in this process. In September 1804, Farquhar, who had already procured Chinese craftsmen and artisans for the company's station at Amboina in the Moluccas and would shortly oversee doing the same for the company's factory on Balambangan off the northern tip of Borneo, prepared a memorandum outlining the measures needed to ensure this plan's success.³³ In April 1805 he set the wheels in motion to do so by contracting with Mr Da Campos, a Portuguese merchant with connections in China, to procure as many Chinese workers as possible for 25 Spanish dollars (\$) for each worker delivered to Penang.³⁴ One hundred and forty-seven such individuals sailed from Penang to Calcutta early in January 1806 after signing contracts in which they agreed to work in Trinidad for \$6 a month.³⁵ The services of another 53 Chinese were procured in Calcutta under similar terms, and on 10 May 1806 the 200 men in question left Calcutta for the Caribbean on board the *Fortitude*.³⁶

Despite the Trinidadian experiment's failure, continuing interest in indentured Chinese labor soon led to plans to obtain such workers for St Helena, the company's colony in the South Atlantic. In June 1809, officials on St Helena, pursuant to instructions they had received from the Court of Directors, asked British merchants in Canton to engage 50 able bodied Chinese to work on the island.³⁷ A year later, St Helena's governor reported that the island housed 53 Chinese workers whose presence was deemed so advantageous that the Court was asked to increase their number to 200.³⁸ By 1817, the colony had 643 Chinese residents.³⁹ Like their Trinidadian counterparts, not all of these workers found their new life to be to their liking; in 1814, 20 of them left the island by secreting themselves on board a ship bound for China.⁴⁰

The company's interest in Chinese labor was not new. The Chinese had long had a reputation in British eyes for being an industrious and productive people, qualities which prompted the Court of Directors to instruct officials at Bencoolen (Benkulen, Bengkulu), the company's factory on Sumatra's west coast, as early as 1710 to give 'all fitting protection and encouragement' to as many Chinese as possible to take up residence at the settlement where they could be used to 'improve Plantations and Gardens[, in the] cleansing [of] the Swamps and many other usefull [*sic*] affairs'.⁴¹ Forty-one years later, the Court formally approved the factory's attempts to encourage

Chinese settlement, provided that such efforts did not cost the company any money.⁴² The directors' continuing interest in Chinese workers included 'hinting' to Bencoolen in 1763 that the *Admiral Watson*, soon to sail from England to Sumatra, could be used to procure such laborers as well as Malagasy or other slaves for the settlement.⁴³ That company officials looked so favorably on these workers may also have inspired a 1783 proposal to found a small colony of Chinese settlers at Calcutta.⁴⁴ Three years later, Francis Light, charged with establishing the company's settlement at Penang, reported that the eight (or 11) Chinese laborers he had brought with him from Bengal were 'of infinite Service to us'.⁴⁵ Three and a half weeks later, he asked that an additional 100 such laborers be sent to Penang, adding that if any of these individuals were husbandmen, so much the better since they could occasionally be employed to cultivate the land.⁴⁶

The attractiveness of Chinese labor was further enhanced during the first decade of the nineteenth century by a growing appreciation of the purported benefits that such immigration could bring. In addition to emphasizing that the Chinese were already inured to living and working in a subtropical climate, commentators extolled the social and economic advantages that could flow from the establishment of a class of industrious Chinese husbandmen in the British West Indies.⁴⁷ An 1806 proposal to establish a Chinese colony in Jamaica, for instance, asserted that the moral and civil character of the island's African slaves would be improved by being exposed to the 'examples of domestic life and voluntary industry being everywhere afforded by the Chinese'. Such a development, the proposal continued, would make it 'possible to ameliorate the condition of slavery itself', lessen the amount of capital needed to produce sugar on the island and encourage 'new productions' in the colony, 'some of which may be of great importance in the general balance of our foreign trade'.⁴⁸ As Robert Farquhar observed early in 1805, the existence of a migrant labor system that funneled 10,000–12,000 emigrants from southern China to Southeast Asia each year also made procuring such laborers a relatively easy task. Many of these emigrants, Farquhar noted, pawned themselves for \$20 (£4) to the junk captains who carried them from China to their destination where they borrowed the money needed to pay their passage from relatives 'or from the Cultivators whom they engage to work for, and repay by monthly deductions from their wages'.⁴⁹ The 'credit-ticket' system to which he referred became a hallmark of Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁰

How many Chinese reached British Indian Ocean establishments under company auspices or on their own accord by the early nineteenth century remains to be determined, but the numbers who did so were large enough to attract the attention of company officials and others.⁵¹ Knowledge of the migrant labor system to which Farquhar referred was undoubtedly an important factor behind the proposals to recruit Chinese laborers and/or settlers for Trinidad, St Helena and Ceylon.⁵² However, as the historical record makes clear, India soon supplanted China as the most important source of indentured labor, a development which raises a significant question: how and why did Indians come to be preferred over Chinese during this period?

Our continuing lack of knowledge about the details of indentured labor recruitment in India before 1842 limits our ability to address this question with any certainty, at least for now. A partial explanation may rest, however, with the fact that these early experiments with Chinese laborers and/or settlers often entailed greater expense than officials had anticipated and proved to be less than successful enterprises in other ways. In October 1816, Ceylon's governor Robert Brownrigg reported that two earlier attempts to import such workers into that colony had not had the desired results: 'They became a burthen to Government without benefit and gradually betaking themselves to gambling and profligate Pursuits or idleness, have long ceased to be looked to with any expectation of benefit from their Industry, their knowledge or their Example.'⁵³ Similar sentiments prompted St Helena's governor to argue 10 years later that the company could save £3257 each year by replacing 200 of the 233 Chinese laborers then on the island with 70 hard-working indentured Englishmen of good character since, he opined, the labor of one European worker was equal to that of at least two Chinese.⁵⁴

The growing reliance on Indian rather than Chinese laborers may also be a byproduct of the increasing use of Indian convicts to satisfy the demand for labor in British Indian Ocean establishments during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The VOC's decision to ship Ceylonese, Chinese and Javanese prisoners to the Cape of Good Hope shortly after its settlement in 1652 established the precedent for the transoceanic movement of such labor in this part of the world, a practice which the VOC continued well into the eighteenth century.⁵⁵ British authorities, already versed in shipping some 50,000 convicts to their American colonies between 1718 and 1775, began transporting Indian prisoners to their possessions in the Indian Ocean basin during the late 1780s.⁵⁶ Indian convicts were first sent to Bencoolen in 1787, the same year in which the first of the more than 160,000 convicts who reached Australia between 1788 and 1868 left Britain. While the total number of transported Indians remains a subject of debate, tens of thousands suffered this fate. A minimum of 2000 and perhaps as many as 4000–6000 convicts were sent to Bencoolen between 1787 and 1825 while at least 15,000–20,000 were dispatched to the Straits Settlements (Malacca [Melaka], Penang, Singapore) between 1790 and 1860. Slightly more than 1500 Indian prisoners reached Mauritius between 1815 and 1837, while some 5000–7000 were shipped to Burma from 1828 to 1862. The Andaman Islands, the site of an early unsuccessful attempt (1793–1796) to establish an Indian penal colony in the Bay of Bengal, became the site of another such settlement again in the wake of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1858–1859. British authorities also shipped 1000–1500 or more Ceylonese convicts to Mauritius and the Straits Settlements during the mid-nineteenth century. Overall, at least 74,800 and perhaps as many as 100,000 or more South Asian prisoners were transported overseas between 1787 and 1943.⁵⁷

The growing interest in using Indian labor must also be viewed in terms of increasing abolitionist activity in the British Indian Ocean world during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first hint of such activity dates to 1774 when Governor General Warren Hastings and his council issued orders regulating slave trading in Bengal. The winds of abolitionism began to blow more vigorously in 1786 when

Acting Governor General John MacPherson and his council proposed emancipating those company slaves at Bencoolen capable of supporting themselves, a proposal which the Court of Directors formally approved the following year.⁵⁸ In 1789, Governor General Cornwallis informed the Court that not only had the Calcutta Presidency banned the exportation of slaves to other parts of India or elsewhere, but he was also formulating a plan to abolish slavery in India itself.⁵⁹ Correspondence between British authorities at Madras, which prohibited slave exports from that presidency early in 1790, and their Dutch and French counterparts at Pulicat and Pondichéry (Puduchcheri), respectively, during the early 1790s likewise attests to the depth and extent of these abolitionist sentiments, as do the measures taken to suppress slave trading in Malabar following that province's acquisition in 1792, measures which the Court of Directors formally approved in 1796 with the concurrence of the Board of Control.⁶⁰

The early nineteenth century witnessed additional undertakings along these lines. Early in 1800, officials at St Helena inaugurated a short-lived experiment to emancipate company slaves pursuant to instructions from the Court of Directors to do so.⁶¹ That same year witnessed the issuance of a proclamation in Ceylon, recently captured from the Dutch, regulating domestic slavery on the island and prohibiting slave imports and exports.⁶² In 1805, Robert Farquhar proposed abolishing slavery at Prince of Wales' Island on the grounds that 'It is the greatest of all evils, & the attempt to regulate such an evil is in itself almost absurd.'⁶³ Early in 1807, the company's directors ordered that 'every means' possible should be devoted to abolishing slavery immediately on the island in a way that did not materially injure the public interest.⁶⁴ That December witnessed the drafting of a proclamation which laid out the government's intention to emancipate Penang's bondmen and women on the grounds that slavery was no longer necessary in such a flourishing settlement.⁶⁵

While these early plans to emancipate company slaves all foundered over concern about the potentially deleterious economic and socio-political consequences of such undertakings, company antipathy toward slave trading, if not the institution of slavery itself, continued to manifest itself in various ways during the 1810s and 1820s. In 1811, Calcutta banned the importation of slaves from foreign countries and prohibited the sale of such slaves in all presidency territories.⁶⁶ Two years later, Sir Stamford Raffles recommended the immediate emancipation of all government-owned slaves in Java following that island's conquest from the Dutch.⁶⁷ On 18 August 1818, Governor Sir Hudson Lowe informed the Court of Directors of proposed measures to end slavery gradually on St Helena, beginning with the issuance of a proclamation declaring that as of Christmas Day that year all children born to slaves were to be considered free.⁶⁸ Two days later, Lowe wrote to the Court expressing his hope that this undertaking would meet with their approval especially since, he noted, he had received 'communications . . . through private Channels' that there was a 'general voice among them [the directors] for the Abolition of Slavery in this their only possession . . .'.⁶⁹ Early in 1821, the government of Ceylon passed an ordinance freeing all female slave children of Coria, Nallua and Palla caste status born on or after 24 April 1821 as well as all persons from these castes who had been VOC slaves on the grounds that gradual abolition of slavery on the island was highly desirable.⁷⁰ The following year

and again in 1824, Ceylonese authorities allocated the monies needed to purchase the freedom of 900 Nallua and Palla slaves and their families.⁷¹ In March 1829, the island's governor reported that 2437 slaves had been emancipated in this manner.⁷²

Company possessions in South Asia and the South Atlantic were not the only entities buffeted by the winds of abolitionism during the early nineteenth century. Following their capture by British expeditionary forces in 1806 and 1810, respectively, the Cape Colony and the Mascarenes became subject to the 1807 parliamentary ban on slave trading by British subjects. The British commitment to suppressing this trade turned the southwestern Indian Ocean into a theater of operations for anti-slave trade patrols by the Royal Navy well before the British Government established an independent naval squadron in November 1819 to conduct such patrols off the West African coast. Between December 1808 and December 1816, the vice-admiralty court at the Cape condemned 27 slavers captured by Royal Navy ships.⁷³ The Mascarenes, the site of a notorious illegal trade in slaves that continued after Mauritius and its dependencies were formally ceded to Britain in 1814 by the Treaty of Paris, were also the focus of significant attempts to suppress slave trading.⁷⁴ Colonial and vice-admiralty courts in Mauritius condemned no fewer than 48 captured slavers between 1811 and 1825, 39 of which were seized between 1815 and 1819.⁷⁵ In 1817 and again in 1820, Governor Farquhar negotiated treaties with Radama I, the ruler of the Merina kingdom in Madagascar, banning slave exports from Merina-controlled parts of the Grande Ile. Two years after securing the 1820 Anglo-Merina treaty, Farquhar instructed Captain Fairfax Moresby to negotiate a similar treaty with the sultan of Oman prohibiting the exportation of slaves from the sultan's possessions on the Swahili Coast.⁷⁶ In 1824, Captain W.F.W. Owen of the Royal Navy added yet another chapter to this story when he unilaterally established a protectorate over Mombasa that lasted for two years. Abolition of the local slave trade was a key provision of the agreement which ceded this Swahili Coast port to British control.⁷⁷

The frequent characterization of slave trading, if not the institution of slavery itself, in official correspondence during this era as 'barbarous', 'infamous', 'repugnant' and 'shameful' activity contrary to the 'dictates of humanity' attests to the depth of the humanitarian sentiments that prevailed among many company personnel during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In some instances, these sentiments were closely associated with a well-developed sense of moral opprobrium that children figured prominently among those being enslaved and trafficked in India.⁷⁸ This sense of corporate humanitarianism was not new. As early as January 1713, the Court of Directors had reminded officials at Bencoolen that the men, women and child slaves in their charge were 'humane Creatures'.⁷⁹ Four years later, the Court enjoined officials at St Helena to use their slaves 'humanely' because, they reminded the island's governor and council, 'they are Men'.⁸⁰ Letters to Bencoolen, Fort St David (Tegnapatam, near Cuddalore) and Bombay (Mumbai) during the 1730s and 1750s repeated these sentiments while local officials were often admonished to treat company slaves well, a point reinforced by the company's practice of paying cash bounties to captains, chief mates and ships' surgeons who undertook slaving voyages to Madagascar for every slave they delivered alive to their destination.⁸¹

These sentiments were clearly tempered by a keen appreciation that it was very much in the company's economic self-interest to provide their slaves with adequate food, clothing and shelter, to regulate their working conditions, and to limit abuse. As the Court observed pointedly in its January 1713 letter to Bencoolen, the settlement's slaves were 'likely to be more beneficial to our Affairs the longer they live'.⁸² Such sentiments were reinforced by an incessant desire to control expenses in general and labor costs in particular. The reliance on slave labor at company factories and settlements from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century reflected the firm belief, both in London and in the Indian Ocean, that slaves were much more productive workers than locally recruited craftsmen, artisans and laborers and much less expensive to employ and maintain. By the 1780s, however, company officials increasingly viewed the expense of maintaining factory slaves as outweighing their advantages. Early in 1786, for example, Calcutta characterized the \$26,000 spent to maintain some 800 slaves at Bencoolen and its substations the previous year as 'a very heavy head of Expençe', a state of affairs that prompted a proposal to sell these slaves at public auction and then hire them back as coolies because such a measure would allow the company to pay 'for real Labour only'.⁸³ The following year, London approved a proposal to emancipate those of Bencoolen's slaves capable of supporting themselves 'on the condition of their giving their Labors or furnishing their produce of Pepper to the Company when called upon . . .'.⁸⁴ This concern about the expense of maintaining slave populations continued into the early nineteenth century. The cost of supplying government slaves in Java with a 'most liberal allowance' of rice, coffee, spirits and other comforts as well as a cash stipend every month figured prominently in Sir Stamford Raffles' 1813 recommendation to free these slaves immediately. Such was this expense, Raffles reported, that it could easily be superseded by simply paying local coolies more.⁸⁵ Similar concerns shaped plans in 1820 to emancipate slaves in Ceylon's Jaffna district.⁸⁶

Interest in and support for free labor increased during the late 1780s and 1790s. On 8 May 1790, the Board of Control approved a draft letter from the Court of Directors to Calcutta in which the Court noted that 'Your endeavors to preserve the Ryotts [peasant farmers] in the enjoyment of the fruits of their industry, and for preventing undue exactions on the part of the Contractor or his Agents . . . are entitled to our particular commendations'.⁸⁷ A year later, the Board approved another draft letter in which the Court applauded the attention that officials at Madras were devoting to ensuring that the *ryots* in Guntur district received their due proportion of the crops they produced.⁸⁸ In May 1796, David Scott, the company's chairman, trumpeted the superiority of free labor in a letter in which he observed that India's salt workers must be free, 'for slaves cannot work so cheap as free men, besides we ought to give all our subjects liberty'.⁸⁹ Company officials continued to express similar sentiments early in the nineteenth century. In April 1805, the Court of Directors informed officials at Penang that they wanted free people and not slaves to clear land on the island and cultivate pepper and spices.⁹⁰ Fourteen years later, St Helena's governor-in-council affirmed the value they assigned to free labor when they observed that the island's indentured Chinese workers were 'essential to the progress of internal Improvement

and particularly to the interests of agriculture', a state of affairs which made 'the importance of providing for the proper treatment of these Persons in all respects . . . too obvious to require comment . . .'⁹¹

The recourse to Indian indentured labor becomes even more comprehensible when viewed in light of other significant early nineteenth-century developments. Revision of the company's charter in 1813 opened India to British missionaries, many of whom were evangelicals who decried the horrors of slavery. The tenets of utilitarian liberalism, one of which was a firm belief in free trade, gained increasing credence not only in England, but also in India, especially during the governor generalship of Lord William Bentinck (1828–1835).⁹² For a government committed, at least in principle, to securing the happiness and well-being of its Indian subjects, providing tens of thousands of impoverished men and women with a way in which they could more fully reap the fruits of their own labor while simultaneously safeguarding the social and economic well-being of British colonies was an irresistible combination.

Conclusion

In his excellent survey of indentured labor in the age of imperialism, David Northrup emphasized the need to view the movement of millions of indentured workers throughout and beyond the colonial plantation world not only in the context of its times, but also as a global system that invites comparison with the great European migrations of the day and age.⁹³ Even a cursory survey of published scholarship since the appearance of Northrup's book almost 20 years ago reveals, however, that indentured labor studies remain hobbled by a failure to examine the indentured experience in well-developed local, regional, global and comparative contexts. This historiographical inertia may be traced to various factors: the continuing dominance of the Tinkerian 'new system of slavery' paradigm in both scholarly and public discourse about indentured labor; a corresponding propensity to view this system's origins largely, if not exclusively, through the prism of an Atlantic-centric abolitionism in which the 1834 emancipation of slaves in the British Empire has acquired iconic status; and an Indo-centrism that distracts attention from or obscures work on other indentured populations. Northrup's comments about the origins of the indentured labor trade echo these historiographical preoccupations:

Despite the existence of a few earlier experiments, it is fair to say that the new indentured labor trade arose in direct response to the abolition of slavery in the colonies of Great Britain in the 1830s and to its subsequent abolition or decline in French, Dutch, and Spanish colonies.⁹⁴

Recent research on free and forced labor migration in the Indian Ocean reveals that the early experiments to which Northrup referred were, however, neither few in number nor marginally important to understanding the indentured labor system's origins and subsequent development. This research highlights, moreover, that these experiments occurred in a truly global setting that stretched from the Caribbean to the South Atlantic and across the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia and China. That

this was so should come as no surprise given recent scholarship on the trans-imperial movement of ideas, personnel and news with the British Empire, especially during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹⁵ As P.J. Marshall has trenchantly observed, if there were significant differences between the British experience in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, there were also significant similarities between these two components of a single imperial entity.⁹⁶ Compelling work on the impact that public knowledge about and perceptions of empire had on British politics and identity underscores this point.⁹⁷ So do astute assessments of the limitations inherent in oceanic basin approaches to studying labor migration and maritime history.⁹⁸ Insights provided by the emerging field of global labor history, including case studies such as Jan Lucassen's examination of the VOC's role in the emergence of an international labor market which connected Europe with southern Africa and South and Southeast Asia, further illustrate the need for indentured labor historians to transcend the conceptual parochialism that inhibits the development of a much fuller understanding of this post-emancipation labor system in all of its complexity.⁹⁹ The challenge before us is, accordingly, to probe much more deeply and perceptively into the ways in which the complex dialog within and between these oceanic worlds shaped the nature and dynamics of a global migrant labor system, the legacy of which continues to resonate in our own day and age.

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Notes

Abbreviations: BL, British Library, London; BT, Board of Trade records, British National Archives (BNA), Kew; CO, Colonial Office records, BNA; IOR, India Office Records, BL; MGI, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Moka, Mauritius.

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- [2] On Mauritius as the crucial test case for the use of indentured labor, see I.M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834–1854* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 85. Major studies of the 'great experiment' include William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830–1965* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); and Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- [3] David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 156–61.
- [4] The exact number of workers who reached Ceylon and Malaya is unknown, but various data provide a sense of how many did so. Ceylon's coffee estates absorbed at least 70,000–80,000 workers in 1856 (M.W. Roberts, 'Indian Estate Labour in Ceylon during the Coffee Period, 1830–1880 [Part 1]', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 3, no. 1 [1966]: 15), while the 1871 census reported 193,377 people of Indian birth on the island, 55.5% of whom lived and worked on plantations (Patrick Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* [London: Leicester University Press [2001], 46–47). An estimated 1,186,700 Indian laborers recruited by *kanganis*, trusted estate workers commissioned by their employers to engage workers from their home villages and districts in India, reached Malaya between 1844 and 1938 (Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786–1957)* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969], 89–103, 306–09). On labor migration to Assam, see Rana P. Behal and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, "'Tea and Money versus Human Life": The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations, 1840–1908', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no. 3–4 (1992): 142–72 and Jayeeta Sharma, "'Lazy" Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry', *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (2009): 1287–324.
- [5] Proponents of this argument follow Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974; 2nd ed., London: Hansib, 1993).
- [6] Colin Newbury, 'Labour Migration in the Imperial Phase: An Essay in Interpretation', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 3, no. 2 (1975): 234–56; Shula Marks and Peter Richardson, 'Introduction', in *International Labour Migration: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Shula Marks and Peter Richardson (Hounslow: Maurice Temple Smith, 1984), 1–18; E. Van Den Boogaart and P.C. Emmer, 'Colonialism and Migration: An Overview', in *Colonialism and Migration; Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery*, ed. Pieter C. Emmer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 3–15; Doug Munro, 'The Pacific Islands Labour Trade: Approaches, Methodologies, Debates', *Slavery and Abolition* 14, no. 2 (1993): 87–108; Doug Munro, 'The Labor Trade in Melanesians to Queensland: An Historiographic Essay', *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 3 (1995): 609–27; and Verene A. Shepherd, "'The Other Middle Passage?" Nineteenth-Century Bonded Labour Migration and the Legacy of the Slavery Debate in the British-Colonized Caribbean', in *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Verene A. Shepherd (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 343–75.
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- [10] Clare Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century', *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009): 93–109.
- [11] Richard B. Allen, 'European Slave Trading, Abolitionism, and "New Systems of Slavery" in the Indian Ocean', *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9, no. 2 (2012), <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal>.
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- [35] BT 6/70, Kenneth MacQueen [at Calcutta] to Earl Camden, 10 February 1806. See also BT 6/70, Articles of Agreement between the Honorable the Governor and Council of Prince of Wales' Island on the part of the British Government, and Affat and Awar Chinamen, on the part of several Chinese whose names are hereunto affixed [signed 7 January 1806 by Thomas Raffles, Deputy Secretary to the Government]. The exact provenance of these workers is unknown.
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- [53] CO 54/61, fol. 118, Robert Brownrigg to Rear-Adm. Sir Richard King, 7 October 1816.
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