California Unbound:
Rethinking the “End” of Unfree Labor in the Pacific World and Beyond

ABSTRACT    An enduring focus on African American chattel slavery, the U.S. Civil War, and sharecropping in the South has failed to collectively address the varieties of unfree labor and their abolitions in the trans-Mississippi western United States. By exploring systems of servitude and their termination in California and the wider Pacific World, this essay reframes the Age of Abolition. It describes the rise and fall of labor regimes that bound California Indians, African Americans, Chileans, and Chinese women. Citing Chinese-, English-, and Spanish-language sources from a variety of archives and libraries, this article expands the chronology, geography, and actors of the Age of Abolition. Finally, it suggests trajectories for rethinking this momentous transition from Pacific World and western U.S. vantage points to suggest the need for a global history of abolition.  KEYWORDS: unfree labor, Pacific World, Age of Abolition

It has been called by a great many names and it will call itself by yet another, and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume.

—Frederick Douglass, 1865

FOR MOST OF world history, unfree labor drove economic production. That changed during the much-studied Age of Abolition, which began in 1772 when Britain abolished slavery in England and Wales. Most scholars have framed the Atlantic World as the crucible of the slave trade and the region where unfree labor met its demise, agreeing that the Age of Abolition ended in 1888 when Brazil abolished slavery. However,
unfree labor—defined here as work, either paid or unpaid, without the freedom to quit—assumed many forms. Among historians, a focus on Atlantic World chattel slavery and its aftermath has left other varieties of servitude and their abolitions in the Pacific World collectively understudied, poorly understood, and all but un-theorized.  

This article explores the confluence of four unfree-labor regimes in California to initiate the comparative study of bonded work and its abolition in the Pacific World and beyond. California’s labor market, particularly between 1846 and 1900, was diverse and complex. We describe the rise and fall of the labor regimes that bound California Indians, African Americans, Chileans, and Chinese sex workers. In nineteenth-century California, apprenticeship, debt peonage, convict labor, indenture, captive prostitution, chattel slavery, and other systems of bonded labor coexisted. Describing these forms of servitude in California and the Pacific World, this article reconceptualizes the chronology, spatial contours, and actors in the age of unfree labor. Indeed, California was one node in a vast network of unfree-labor circuits that crisscrossed the world’s largest ocean. This network—often elided by free-labor systems—sprawled across the Pacific World. State and non-state actors used diverse approaches, both violent and nonviolent, to abolish servitude in California and beyond. These women and men included legislators, reformers, activists, and bonded laborers themselves. This article concludes by placing bonded work in a Pacific World context to underscore an ongoing global history of abolition.

In some ways, nineteenth-century Pacific World servitude was like its Atlantic counterpart. Coerced relocation, work without the freedom to quit, confinement, colonialism, racism, and violence characterized both. However, nineteenth-century Pacific World servitude also exhibited tremendous variety and often occurred in the shadows of dominant free-labor systems. Crucially, from the seventeenth century onward, diverse forms of servitude crisscrossed the Pacific, transferring ideologies of bondage while moving men, women, and children far from their homelands in attempts to exploit their labor power. Moreover, while the forced removal of Africans to the Americas anchored the Atlantic World’s “triangular trade,” the Pacific World’s unfree-labor traffic comprised multiple circuits, carrying bonded laborers, servitude systems, and ideologies of work among widely dispersed nodes. Additionally, the Atlantic World’s Age of Abolition—which ultimately banned de jure slavery—has an agreed-upon beginning and end. The terminus of Pacific World servitude remains elusive. With the rise of the democratic ideal, the emergence of strong labor organizations, and the spread of an international human rights regime, many governments abolished de jure unfree labor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were three general exceptions: convict labor, captive prostitution, and guest-worker labor. The struggle to abolish unfree labor in the Pacific World continues.

Like the Atlantic World, the Pacific World is both a useful unit of analysis and a realm of lived experience for millions of people, past and present. The transoceanic circulation of capital, commodities, and human beings unified this region in and around the Pacific Ocean. The lack of any comprehensive study of unfree labor in the Pacific World is unsurprising. This vast region is a zone of tremendous linguistic and cultural diversity, posing major practical and methodological obstacles to its integrated study. One way to address these polylingual, transnational, and multi-archival challenges is to locate and
study times and places where many Pacific peoples coalesced. Since the nineteenth century, California has been a key node of multiple unfree-labor circuits.4

Several scholars have blazed trails by studying unfree labor in the western United States, providing helpful signposts for understanding Pacific World servitude. In 1985, historian Howard Lamar asserted that an unchallenged scholarly focus on African American slavery had generated “a relative lack of emphasis on other forms of slave, bonded or contract labour in this country.” Fifteen years later, historian David Brion Davis emphasized the importance of looking beyond Atlantic World slavery to create a more comprehensive framework for understanding global unfree-labor histories. Davis explained: “Eventually, the Atlantic Slave System did reach across the Pacific and was partially replaced by a Pacific labour system that included Hawaii and the Philippines and that drew on ‘coolie’ labour from India, China, and other parts of Asia.” Despite Lamar’s and Davis’s clarion calls, scholars have paid comparatively little attention to the complicated, protracted, and ongoing attempts to abolish unfree labor in the western United States and the Pacific World. This has occluded our comprehension of servitude both during and after the Age of Abolition. Studying unfree work in California reveals the transnational and diverse character of labor regimes in the western United States and the wider Pacific World. Moreover, this article shows that attempts to terminate unfree labor in California began with Mexican abolition in 1829, endured beyond the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865), and continue today.5

Bonded labor arrangements from around the Pacific flourished in Spanish, Russian, and Mexican California, frequently with official sanction. This continued under U.S. rule. California’s 1849 constitution stated that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, unless for punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated in this State,” and in 1850 the U.S. Congress admitted California to the Union as a free state. Nevertheless, unfree-labor networks ensnared tens of thousands of people in the new state. In 2013, historian D. Michael Bottoms provided a detailed study of race and Reconstruction in California. That same year, historian Stacey L. Smith addressed African American chattel slavery and, to a lesser extent, the unfree work of California Indians, Chinese, and others in the Golden State. However, her study does not explore transpacific unfree-labor systems, nor does it chronicle their protracted abolition. This article expands the temporal and spatial boundaries for the study of servitude well into the twentieth century and across the Pacific, exploring how systems of bondage ensnared four groups.6

Millions of people around the world experienced a prolonged transition from economies reliant on slavery to ones dependent on so-called “free” labor. As historian Seymour Drescher noted, during the nineteenth century, “freedom, not slavery, was the peculiar institution.” The transatlantic abolition movement achieved a seminal legal victory in 1772 when Britain banned slavery in England and Wales. Additional milestones followed. The 1791–1804 Haitian Revolution disrupted slavery in the Caribbean. In 1807, the British Parliament outlawed the importation of enslaved Africans to British colonies. Less than a year later, the U.S. Congress banned the importation of slaves. In 1811, Spain abolished slavery at home and in all Spanish colonies except Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Santo Domingo. These efforts aimed to end the international slave trade but did not terminate the institution. Moreover, they failed to stop other forms of unfree labor. At the same world-
historical moment when the Atlantic slave trade began to decline, systems of servitude continued, metamorphosed, and dramatically expanded in the Pacific World. This literal sea change in the geography of unfree labor provided capitalists and their state sponsors with untapped pools of mobile, on-demand labor power during an era of unprecedented mining booms, agricultural expansion, and railroad construction.7

Historians have often relied on binary portrayals of nineteenth-century servitude, framing our past in terms of slave and free, black and white. Yet two-toned representations have obscured the diverse peoples and varied systems of servitude that existed in the United States and in the Pacific World. Millions of Indigenous people toiled in bondage around the Pacific, but these regimes of servitude, their decline, and their persistence—in attenuated forms—have yet to be collectively analyzed.8

CALIFORNIA INDIAN SERVITUDE

California Indian servitude predated U.S. rule. Spanish, Russian, and Mexican authorities institutionalized bonded Indigenous labor, extending circuits of servitude established by agents of the Russian and Spanish empires. Once the United States assumed control of California in 1846, state and federal policymakers expanded these practices and maintained some of them well after the U.S. Civil War.9

Beginning in the eighteenth century, Spaniards imposed systems of servitude upon California Indians. Between 1769 and 1823, Franciscan missionaries established twenty-one missions along California’s coast, from San Diego in the south to Sonoma in the north. Historian Steven Hackel observed that in Spanish California, “Indian labour took numerous forms and stages between freedom and unfreedom.” Some manifestations, like Indian convict labor, were legal institutions, but the mission labor system primarily relied on force. In 1877, Lorenzo Asisara, a Costanoan man, explained that at Mission Santa Cruz, “the Spanish priests were very cruel with the Indians... and they made them work like slaves.” Missionaries often took California Indians against their will and severely punished captured escapees. María Solares, a Chumash woman of Mission Santa Inés, remembered her grandmother as an “esclava de la misión” who ran away “many, many times, and had been recaptured and whipped till her buttocks crawled with maggots.” This labor regime transplanted de facto traditions of Hispanic servitude to the northernmost reaches of Spain’s Pacific Empire. Indeed, it built upon centuries of Spanish coercion of Indigenous labor. California was thus a new node in a latitudinal Pacific circuit of Hispanic unfree-labor regimes, which ensnared Indigenous people as far south as Patagonia.10

Beginning in the 1830s, the Russian American Company captured and coerced Pomo and Miwok Indian people north of San Francisco for farm and ranch work. Like Spanish labor regimes in California, these practices extended a preexisting system of servitude, this one arcing across the North Pacific from Russia’s Siberian Kamchatka Peninsula to points as far south as Baja California. Russians first extracted coerced labor from Indigenous Siberians during the seventeenth century, then from Alaska Natives starting in the eighteenth century, and from California Indians in the nineteenth century. In 1834, California’s Mexican governor José Figueroa described “how the Russians ‘were using for labour, besides the settlers, some Indians from the villages whom they brought usually
by force.’” According to labor scholar Richard Steven Street: “Sweeping into interior villages, they rounded up entire rancherías at gunpoint and took hostages—women and children—to ensure that the men would labour diligently.” In 1841, the Russians abandoned their attempts to colonize California, but unfree California Indian labor persisted.11

After achieving independence from Spain in 1821, the Mexican government first attempted to abolish slavery north of the Rio Grande by banning the practice throughout its possessions in 1829. This reform proved difficult to enforce. As historian Albert Hurtado noted, “in the 1840s Indians were practically the sole source of agricultural labour and whites used every possible means to obtain their services. Slavery, debt peonage, and wage labour all had a place in Mexican and Anglo California.” Many of California’s vast cattle ranches depended upon coerced California Indian labor. Eyewitnesses described these workers as “legally reduced to servitude,” “the bond-men of the country,” or “little better than serfs.”12

Swiss entrepreneur John Sutter employed between several hundred and a thousand California Indians on his 48,000-acre Sacramento Valley ranch. Although nominally paid, many were unfree. Sutter’s manager, Heinrich Lienhard, recalled: “I had to lock the Indian men and women together in a large room to prevent them from returning to their homes in the mountains at night.” Sutter also traded in human beings. John Chamberlain remembered: “While I was living at the Sacramento [in the 1840s], it was customary for Sutter to buy and sell Indian boys and girls.” Sutter, in turn, noted that it was “common in those days to seize Indian women and children and sell them.”13

After the United States invaded Mexican California in 1846 during the Mexican-American War, military officers abolished Indian slavery there but instituted a legal system reinforcing existing regimes of unfree Indian labor. That September, the commandant of the Northern Department of California, Navy Captain John Montgomery, issued an emancipation proclamation of sorts: “all persons so holding or detaining Indians, shall release them, and permit them to return to their own homes, unless they can make a legal contract with them, which shall be acknowledged before the nearest Justice of the Peace.” Montgomery then undermined his own statement: “The Indian population must not be looked upon in the light of slaves, but it is deemed necessary that the Indians within the settlements, shall have employment with the right of choosing their own master or employer.” Yet, to ensure a stable Indian labor supply for California’s hide, tallow, grain, and grape economy, Montgomery designated unemployed Indians “within the settlements” as vagrants: “All Indians must be required to obtain employment and not permitted to wander about in an idle and dissolute manner, [and] if found so doing, they will be liable to arrest and punishment, by labour on the public works.” Montgomery thus defined Indians as either captive laborers or outlaws.14

In 1847, California’s military secretary of state, Henry Halleck, tightened control over Indians with a statewide pass system reminiscent of Southern laws controlling the movements of African Americans. Halleck’s scheme criminalized all Indians not employed by whites, mandating that “any Indian found beyond the limits of the town or rancho in which he may be employed, without such certificate or pass, will be liable to arrest.” By requiring “any Indian” to obtain a pass from an employer, Halleck made all Indians within
By 1848, with the gold rush underway, many observers reported seeing bonded Californian Indians. A San Francisco correspondent wrote, “The Digger [sic] tribe [Ohlone] being next to us here... are kept in a kind of slavery and bondage by the rancheros.” Another writer concurred: “The Indians on the ranchos in California, are considered as stock, and are sold with it as cattle.” As in some other regions of the Pacific World, free-labor advocates challenged unfree-labor arrangements as immoral threats to the dignity and wage rates of free laborers.

Some delegates to California’s 1849 state constitutional convention wanted to reinvent California’s Indian labor policies. Three times, they sought to enfranchise Indians and thus empower them with political leverage against servitude. Ultimately, the constitution banned slavery in the future state, but allowed the enfranchisement of only specific Indian people by a two-thirds vote of the state legislature. As a result, the new constitution did almost nothing to protect California Indians or their labor rights.

During the mid-1800s, some whites espoused free-labor ideology as a justification for violence against California Indians. The forty-niner William M. Case asserted that the killing of Nisenan Indian people around the Northern California town of Coloma during the gold rush “was rough and terrible” but helped to replace “the old California system of inequality—of proprietors and peons” with “free labour.” Such rhetoric often camouflaged self-interest. As Hurtado observed, many non-Indians “regarded the use of Indians in the diggings as something akin to slavery, which was abhorrent not because Indians were abused but because command over Indian labour was unfair competition with free white men.” Either way, in 1850, proponents of California Indian servitude defeated those who opposed it.

On April 22, 1850, California governor Peter Burnett signed an “Act for the Government and Protection of Indians,” legalizing white custody of Indian minors and Indian convict leasing. Under the act, Indian children could, with the consent of “friends or parents,” be held and worked without pay until age fifteen (if female) or eighteen (if male). The act also empowered whites to arrest Indian adults “found loitering and strolling about,” or “begging, or leading an immoral or profligate course of life.” When a court received such a complaint, the law required officers to capture and lease “such vagrant within twenty-four hours to the best bidder.” Successful bidders could then hold and work such prisoners for up to four months without compensation. “Any white person” could also visit a jailhouse and lease labor by paying “the fine and costs” for any “Indian convicted of an offence... punishable by fine.” Few Indians had sufficient funds to pay such fines. Thus, California jails became vendors of Indian convict labor.

This 1850 act increased the already booming trade in bonded California Indian labor, but it had opponents. In 1852, California’s first Indian Affairs superintendent wrote to the U.S. Indian Affairs commissioner in Washington, D.C., to protest the “new mode of oppression of the Indians, of catching them like cattle and making them work, and turning them out to starve and die when the work-season is over.” Yet rather than abolishing such coercive labor regimes, the state strengthened them.
In 1860, California legislators expanded the 1850 act by legalizing the indenture of “any Indian or Indians.” The act raised the male emancipation age from eighteen to twenty-five, and that of females from fifteen to twenty-one. Males indentured when “over fourteen and under twenty years of age” could now be held “until they attained the age of thirty years; if females, until . . . twenty-five.” Finally, state legislators legalized indenturing minors without the presence of their guardians, facilitating access to Indian child labor. Ultimately, the bill lowered barriers to the acquisition of involuntary servants and expanded indenture

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1.** Unknown artist, “Indienne Californienne du Sud 16 ans du prix d’une livre de poudre de chasse et une bouteille de brandy [sixteen-year-old Southern California Indian female at the price of a pound of gunpowder and a bottle of brandy],” print on paper: engraving, hand colored, 185?. Courtesy of Robert B. Honeyman Jr. Collection, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, BANC PIC 1963.002:1305:F-ALB
terms. Between 1850 and 1863 alone, non-Indians held some 20,000 California Indian people as unfree laborers (Figure 1).²¹

Like other nineteenth-century Pacific World frontiers, California’s vast, poorly surveilled topography facilitated escape. Thus, enforcers of servitude relied on violence. The Wailaki Indian woman Lucy Young, who repeatedly fled servitude, recollected: “Young woman been stole by white people, come back. Shot through lights and liver. Front skin hang down like apron. She tie up with cotton dress. Never die, neither.” Sometimes, enforcers massacred free Indians who harbored runaways. After “George Lane’s squaw” fled “her lord and master” with “his Indian boy” in 1858, a posse murdered some fifteen Indian people on Northern California’s Battle Creek.²²

The U.S. Civil War marked a decisive turning point, as California legislators pledged loyalty to the United States and as the federal government turned against chattel slavery. President Abraham Lincoln initiated the protracted abolition of California Indian servitude by enacting the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. California legislators responded to Lincoln’s policy, which freed African American slaves in rebellious states, by modifying California laws regarding Indian labor. On April 27, Governor Leland Stanford approved an act repealing those portions of the 1850 and 1860 acts that had legalized the indenture of Indians. However, Indian convict leasing remained legal, and illegal California Indian slavery persisted. In August 1865, a journalist concluded that “slavery exists in California in precisely the same condition that it did until lately in the Southern States. There the blacks; here in almost every county Indians are unlawfully held as chattels.”²³

California Indians undermined systems of bondage by hiding, fighting, and running away, while federal intervention accelerated the decline of illegal Indian servitude. On December 19, 1865, California legislators ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery in the United States. Two years later, the U.S. Congress passed the “Act to Abolish and Forever Prohibit the System of Peonage in the Territory of New Mexico and Other Parts of the U.S.,” thus closing the Thirteenth Amendment’s “voluntary servitude” loophole and criminalizing offenses related to peonage and other forms of forced labor. Still, in 1867, a special investigator reported that Indian slavery was “not uncommon” in California.²⁴

State legislators now pursued their own protracted attack on unfree Indian labor. In 1872, they modified California’s criminal code to allow all people capable of perception and communication to serve as witnesses in court. With the support of a California Supreme Court ruling, the law went into effect in 1873. Courts could no longer legally reject the testimony of African Americans, Chinese, Native Americans, or other groups. State lawmakers thereby removed a major structural support for all systems of servitude in California.

Still, unfree California Indian labor persisted. As late as 1874, California booster Charles Nordhoff reported on bonded Indian labor at Northern California’s Round Valley Indian Reservation: “When they need labourers they detail such men or women as they require, and these go out to work. They seldom refuse; if they do, they are sent to the military post, where they are made to saw wood.” It is unclear when Indian convict leasing ended. Only in 1937 did California legislators terminate all remaining elements of the 1850 act, thus abolishing the last form of de jure Californian Indian servitude.²⁵ Yet Native American bondage was hardly the only form of unfree labor in nineteenth-century California.
AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVERY

A few enslaved people of African descent came to California with the Spanish. Historian Theodore Hittell claimed that the first in California was an enslaved fourteen-year-old named Juana, brought from Lima, Peru, to San Francisco in 1825. Twenty-three years later, the gold rush triggered a substantial migration of Southern U.S. slave owners, many of whom transported enslaved African Americans to California. Thus, Pacific and Atlantic circuits of servitude intersected. Most enslaved African Americans in late nineteenth-century California came from the antebellum South, but they entered a region where chattel slavery was hardly new. Historians have estimated that five hundred to “a few thousand” enslaved African Americans came to California during the gold rush.26

Extant primary sources indicate the presence of enslaved African Americans from Los Angeles to Redding and from San Francisco to the Sierra Nevadas. In 1849, a San Francisco correspondent for the Boston-based Liberator reported on “a negro woman and child…bought a month since by a merchant in this town for $1900.” In 1850, San Francisco’s Daily Alta California discussed “a Mississippi planter” who arrived “in California with five slaves, from whose labour in the Placer he expected to obtain broad and beneficial results.” Abolitionists struck back. The Daily Alta California asked, “Why is the arm of the law powerless to expose and punish this invasion of our constitutional rights?” and “How can the evil of slave labour be tolerated in the mines…”27

As news of California’s free-labor constitution spread, Southern slave owners were incredulous. Some envisioned California as slavery’s next frontier. In 1850, an advertisement in the Jackson Mississippian invited planters to establish a “Southern Slave Colony” in the Golden State, estimating “that by the first of May next, the members of the Slave Colony will amount to about five thousand, and the slaves to about ten thousand.” The following year, James Gadson wrote from Charleston, South Carolina, to fellow Southerner and California politician Thomas Green, proposing a California “Colony under my lead” based on “Negro slavery under Educated + Intelligent Masters.” On February 10, 1852, the California State Assembly received a petition from Gadsen and roughly twelve hundred Floridian and South Carolinian colonists requesting “permission to colonize a rural district” with “not less than Two Thousand of their African Domestics” by whose “peculiar labor” they planned to render California soils “productive.” Such slaveholders imagined a major circuit of servitude sustaining a far-western bastion of Atlantic World slavery on the Pacific Rim.28

These malevolent dreams never fully materialized, but the circuitry persisted as enslavers contrived two novel ways of binding African Americans in California. First, they instituted “verbal or written contracts of future conditional manumission.” These contracts specified terms for the purchase of freedom through an agreed-upon sum or a fixed period of labor. Second, they exploited state laws that allowed the continued bondage of enslaved people brought into California before statehood in September 1850. Despite California’s free-state constitution, enslavement and emancipation contracts proved remarkably durable. Antebellum California became a crucible in which pro-slavery and antislavery forces contested the future of U.S. labor relations.29
As with California Indian servitude, the threat of violence comprised the first line of enforcement for African American enslavement in California. Whippings and beatings were common. In 1850, Englishman Richard Ness recorded that Texans, mining in Northern California’s Yuba County, administered two hundred lashes to an enslaved man who had run away. Near Sonora, whites inflicted seven hundred lashes on an elderly African American man who had attempted to escape bondage. Slavers also sometimes shot freedom seekers. On July 18, 1851, “three men came down [a San Francisco] wharf, urging along at a rapid rate a negro... They were armed with revolvers, and the negro was wounded, he having been fired at in his capture... It is said that the negro was a fugitive slave.” Substantial rewards for the capture and return of runaway enslaved people constituted a second line of enforcement (Figure 2).30

The California State Legislature reinforced the institution of African American slavery by adapting the 1850 federal Fugitive Slave Act, a law designed to control enslaved people within and beyond the antebellum South. The federal act stipulated that federal or state agents in free states must assist slave owners pursuing runaway slaves into free states, but only if the escape took place in a slave state. On April 15, 1852, Democratic governor John Bigler signed the California Fugitive Slave Act. It specified that a slave “brought or introduced” into California before September 1850—the date of California statehood—could be arrested, deemed a “fugitive,” and taken to a slave state. The California act became a recurring political flashpoint, much as the federal Fugitive Slave Act was on the national stage. During the 1854 debate over the state law’s extension, New Hampshire–born senator Gilbert W. Colby argued against the law. After the Senate adjourned, one of the law’s supporters, Charles A. Leake—a former Maryland resident turned California state senator—bludgeoned Colby in the head “with a heavy cane belonging to Mr. Hook.” This assault presaged South Carolina representative Preston Brooks’s infamous beating of abolitionist Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner, also with a cane to the head, on the U.S. Senate floor fewer than two years later. These attacks underscored the contested nature of enslavement among U.S. lawmakers. Many California voters supported slavery.31
Likewise, California’s judiciary supported African American slavery, albeit unevenly. In 1849 and 1850, California judges ruled in favor of runaway slaves’ freedom at least twice, asserting “the unshackling tendencies which distinguish the spirit of this age.” The following year, however, a San Jose judge ordered an escaped African American slave “to be shut up in the public prison, to await his master’s orders, and in the meantime to be publicly scourged.” In the landmark 1851 Frank Case, a San Francisco judge ruled that the 1850 Federal Fugitive Slave Act did not apply to instances in which enslaved people escaped in California. In a jubilant response, the Boston-based abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison wrote in The Liberator: “It is gratifying, when the suppliant knee of Boston cringes in the dust before the Slave Power, to know that our sister city on the Pacific stands erect, and that a decision fraught with such beneficent results has been thus early rendered.” Garrison praised California’s vanguard abolitionism, proclaiming: “We hail it as a happy omen that the land whose doors, on golden hinges turning, have opened to every nation, color and tongue, will remain true to the principles of justice and liberty.” Despite Garrison’s exuberance, California legislators passed the 1852 California Fugitive Slave Act described above. Abolitionists challenged it in the courts, but California’s Supreme Court upheld the act in 1852. The following month, San Francisco attorney James Pratt wrote, “I am told that there are at least 1500 Slaves in the State.”

During the 1850s and 1860s, six groups worked to eradicate California’s African American slave-labor regime: abolitionists, enslaved people, legislators, voters, judges, and commissioners. African American and white abolitionists, such as Jeremiah B. Sanderson and John C. Frémont, orchestrated campaigns against African American enslavement, liberated slaves by buying them or helping them escape, and drove away enslavers with threats of violence. California’s 1855, 1856, and 1857 Colored Conventions—arguably the state’s first civil rights conventions—also played important roles, as did California’s African Methodist Episcopal Churches and the state’s Black newspapers: The Elevator, Mirror of the Times, and The Pacific Appeal. Meanwhile, African Americans such as George Washington Dennis, Sowarie Long, Henry Valle, William Pollock, Ellen Mason, Nathaniel Nelson, “Mrs.” Langhorn, Joseph Bathelome, Samuel Shelton, Alvin Coffey, and John Grider (Figure 3) bought their freedom and then paid for the manumission of their relatives. According to the December 4, 1855, edition of the Grass Valley Telegraph, “there are 54 who have purchased their freedom in this county. These persons have paid their former masters in the aggregate, $95,800 in labour, and $16,950 in cash, making a total of $112,750.”

Others defied slavery through escape. Three enslaved people from Tennessee, mining “near Spanish Ravine,” informed their owner, “Dey was now in a free country and slaves no mor.” “The law” refused to help their enslaver enforce his claims of ownership, so he abandoned his quest to re-enslave the trio. Unlike the antebellum South, California’s vast landscape contained thousands of abolitionists and relatively few enforcers of enslavement. One observer noted in 1850: “Some [slaves] remain with their masters, and work with them under indentures; but the large majority find it as easy to dig gold for themselves as for others, and leave for ‘parts unknown’ soon after their arrival.” Four years later, California assemblyman C. H. McKenney claimed that in “our State… slaves, in a large number of instances, had escaped from the persons owning them.” Still, some
judges continued enforcing California’s Fugitive Slave Law. As late as April 1855, the San Jose Telegraph reported: “A colored boy... up before Justice O. H. Allen, arrested under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law.”

That same month, legislators let California’s Fugitive Slave Law lapse, weakening the institution of African American enslavement in California. State residents remained

FIGURE 3. Unknown artist, “John Grider, Color Bearer,” ca. 1849. John Grider came to California from Tennessee in 1845, participated in the 1848 Bear Flag Uprising, worked as a miner, and purchased his own freedom in 1850. Courtesy of the Miriam Matthews Photograph Collection, University of California, Los Angeles Special Collections
bound by federal law to enforce the U.S. Fugitive Slave Act, but California authorities no longer allowed enslavers to deport African Americans whom they had voluntarily brought to the state.

In 1856 and 1858, judges handed down decisions that finally abolished African American chattel slavery in California. On January 21, 1856, the first judge of the Southern District of California, Benjamin Hayes, ruled that Bridget “Biddy” Mason, who had been enslaved to Mississippian Robert Marion Smith for five years in California, was free. The coup de grace came with the landmark 1858 Archy Lee cases. In 1857, with California’s Fugitive Slave Law already defunct, the Mississippian Charles A. Stovall brought his father’s slave, Archy Lee, to Sacramento. After three successive court cases, U.S. commissioner (and Southerner) George Penn Johnston declared “Archy to be no fugitive slave, and therefore a free man, under the laws of the United States.” This was California’s last fugitive slave case. Its resolution severed the servitude circuits that linked California to the antebellum South.35

Nevertheless, struggles for equality continued as African American immigration to California increased. Historian Dwayne Mack noted that by 1862, “California had the largest number of free blacks in the West.” California legislators ratified the Thirteenth Amendment on December 19, 1865, banning slavery. Still, challenges remained. In the 1860s, California was the only state that neither rejected nor ratified the Fourteenth Amendment with its citizenship, due process, and equal protection clauses. On January 28, 1870, California legislators refused to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment and the terms of Reconstruction, thus aligning the state with anti-Reconstruction forces in the South. African American chattel slavery remains California’s best-known example of unfree labor and perhaps the easiest to understand because of its close connections with the Atlantic World slavery paradigm. However, Chilean debt peonage was larger, more widespread, and today is mostly forgotten.36

CHILEAN DEBT PEONAGE

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Chile was strategically positioned along the sea-lane linking the Atlantic to San Francisco, via the Cape Horn Route. The fact that San Francisco was only five thousand nautical miles north of Chile’s main entrepot, Valparaíso, meant that its citizens learned of California gold within months of James Marshall’s January 1848 strike. By August, several ships bearing California gold had reached Chilean ports. Chile soon became overcome with la fiebre de oro (gold fever). The problem for many Chileans was getting to “El Dorado.”37

For most Chileans, the transpacific journey north to San Francisco was prohibitively expensive. As itinerant laborers learned of California’s glittering possibilities, many signed with Chilean companies, contracting to repay their travel expenses by mining for patrones (bosses). Chile formally abolished chattel slavery in 1823, but coercive labor arrangements built upon centuries of seasonal, migratory debt peonage were common throughout Latin America. Peonaje (debt peonage) in California thus extended a centuries-old Hispanic regime of unfree labor to its northernmost limit. This south-north Pacific World circuit of servitude transmitted both ideas and workers. It is difficult to quantify precisely how
many Chilean debt peons sailed to California, because many labor contracts—as noted in the January 8, 1849, edition of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*—were *contratos de palabra*, verbal agreements between Chileans and contract agents.\(^{38}\)

When it trimmed its sails on September 12, 1848, the 290-ton *Virjinia*, chartered by Valparaíso’s wealthiest man, José Waddington, became the first vessel to bring Chilean prospectors to California. By December 1849, ninety-two of Chile’s 119 registered ships languished off San Francisco while their passengers and crews trekked to the mines or tested their entrepreneurial skills in California’s frontier towns. Forty-niner William M. Case was not exaggerating when he recalled that “contract labour from Chili [sic] was also obtained, and it was estimated that by the mid-summer of 1849 as many as five thousand such labourers were at work on the California placers.” Approximately eight thousand Chileans came to California between 1848 and 1853, and more than half of them were debt peons (Figure 4).\(^{39}\)

Most Chilean peons were male. A few worked in California’s cities and towns, but a majority labored in the central and southern mines of the Sierra Nevada foothills. Much as in the case of California Indian servitude, Republican free-labor ideology, a cluster of diverse—and sometimes divergent—ideas, became the banner under which whites rhetorically, legally, and physically attacked Chilean *peonaje*. As early as 1848, some Yankees begrudged upper-class Chilenos who arrived with hundreds of peons. At a time when debates over slavery suffused U.S. national politics, the presence of indentured South Americans—like that of enslaved African Americans—challenged California’s free-state status. Californian editor B. R. Buckelew wrote on March 15, 1848: “We left the slave States because we did not like to bring up a family in a miserable, can’t-help-one’s-self condition; which fate would be inevitable to a family of respectability, surrounded by slavery.”\(^{40}\) The idea that workers and employers could enter into agreements at will was, in the words of labor historian David Brody, “the core legality underpinning a conception of free labor that imagined American labor relations as a universe of independent and equal individuals.”\(^{41}\) The reality of foreign debt peons toiling for their bosses in the diggings conflicted with the ideal of the self-made man.

The successes of Mexican and Chilean miners bred resentments among many white prospectors who deployed unfree-labor rhetoric to attack their perceived economic competitors and racial enemies. U.S. Navy officer Joseph Warren Revere (Paul Revere’s grandson) commented that “the luckiest miners were always the Mexicans and South Americans . . . although lazy, and indeed useless in other employments.” Sharing this prejudice, forty-niner Kimball Webster concluded: “There were also many Mexicans and Chilians [sic] at work in the mines. . . . Many of them were very treacherous, being mixed breeds, and if possible, worse than the Sidney Ducks [Australians] . . . and I believe more treacherous than the North American Indian.”\(^{42}\)

Some whites perceived wealthy Chileans as among the most egregious violators of the Republican free-labor ideology that dominated many of California’s mining districts. José Ramirez and his business partner Juan Sampson used at least ten, but perhaps as many as thirty, Chilean peons to work their Yuba River claims in 1849. Vicente Pérez Rosales, a diplomat and adventurer who chronicled the Chilean role in California’s gold rush, also reported the presence of indentured workers in his group. When departing from
Valparaíso, he related, “four brothers, a brother-in-law, and two trusted servants made up our expedition to California.” Other well-off Chilean prospectors, such as José Antonio Alemparte and Pablo Zorrilla, formed large mining companies, each of which included as many as fifty-one peons. In his diary, the Argentine-Chilean Ramón Gil Navarro referred to eleven separate Chilean mining companies—all using peones—in California.43

Legal registries in Santiago and Valparaíso contain substantial evidence indicating that legions of unfree laborers sailed north for California. On September 12, 1848, eight men—José Bustamante, Felipe Carabajal, Cruz Dias, Juan Ferreira, Bernabé Morales, José Tomás Garrido, Santos Vergara, and José Videla—met with Valparaíso notary public José Felipe Gandara to have their labor contracts notarized. According to Chilean state records, these men became the debt peons of their fancifully named Anglo-American patrón, Don Santiago “James” King of William (Figure 5). They agreed “to work [in California] for the space of one year...obliging themselves to faithfully respect the orders that they will be given.” King of William in turn contracted to purchase passage for his peones, house them, and pay them twelve to thirteen Chilean pesos per month. The party then boarded the Virjinia, joining dozens of San Francisco–bound Chileans. Before sailing for California, hundreds of other Chilean workers signed similar notarized peonaje contracts.44

Chilean peonage in California provoked Anglo-American ire. Interethnic tensions in the mines were already high when the first major confrontation over peonage occurred in December 1849. On the North Fork of the Calaveras River near San Andreas, a Valparaísan entrepreneur was mining a lucrative claim with a large group of Chilean peons. James J. Ayers, one of the Anglo-Americans who participated in the ensuing confrontation, recounted: “Situated on an elevated flat, about two miles from our camp, was a settlement of Chilean miners. One Dr. Concha was the chief and moving spirit in this settlement, supported by some eight or ten lieutenants. The rest of the people consisted of peons whom they had brought from Chile, and who stood in relation to the headmen as dependents, in fact as slaves.” According to Ayers and other nearby whites, Concha routinely staked out choice claims under the name of each peon in his service.45

Aggrieved by what they perceived to be Dr. Concha’s unfair attempts to control a large swath of mineral-rich territory, in late December 1849 Calaveras County whites met en masse, elected a judge named W. Collier, and drafted a resolution ordering all foreigners to leave the county within fifteen days. After Chileans resisted, Anglo-Americans ransacked the Chilean camp, seized several men at gunpoint, and hanged at least one of them.46

In response, a few Chileans packed their mules and left. The indomitable Dr. Concha was not so easily intimidated. He appealed to a regional judge in Stockton named Reynolds who provided a writ for the arrest of the offending whites. When the Chileans tried to serve the writ, violence ensued. Over several days, both sides took prisoners, and at least two whites and two Chileans soon lay dead. Several hundred Anglo-Americans eventually got the upper hand. An impromptu vigilante court hastily condemned three Latino miners. On January 12, 1850, whites hanged two Chileans and a Mexican. In his journal, Gil Navarro transcribed the last words of his countryman, Terán, who cried out, “I only regret not being able to kill two or three more of these bandits before dying.”47
FIGURE 5. Robert H. Vance, “[James King of William (1822–1856)],” ca. 1855. James King of William brought nine Chilean debt peons from Valparaíso to San Francisco in 1848. Upon arrival, six of these men ran away. King of William’s mining fortunes did not pan out. He became a banker and later the editor of the widely circulated San Francisco Bulletin. Political rival and city supervisor James P. Casey murdered King of William on May 14, 1856.

Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, BANC PIC 1905.16242:096-CASE
This violent episode ended with at least half a dozen men dead and no resolution in sight. With a cunning rhetorical twist, California Constitutional Convention delegate Morton McCarver of Sacramento used the example of anti-Chilean violence in the mines to argue against the admission of free African Americans to California. As he told the California Constitutional Convention, “you will see the most fearful collisions that have ever been presented in any country. You will see the same feeling, only to a much greater extent, that has already been manifested against the foreigners of Chili [sic]. It is the duty of the Legislature to provide against these collisions.” Many Chilean debt peons thought otherwise. Instead of waiting for long-overdue government protection, they began undermining the Chilean peonaje system by running away, as did six of King of William’s peons. Others served the duration of their peonage contracts and transitioned to independent mining or other occupations.48

Anglo-American violence also drove many Chileans out of California. On July 15, 1849, a notorious white gang known as the Hounds, or Los Galgos to Spanish speakers, ransacked San Francisco’s Chilecito (Little Chile) in the city’s North Beach neighborhood. Eyewitness Moses Pearson Cogswell wrote that the Hounds looted Chileno dwellings, burned down buildings, murdered several Chilean men, “ravished their women, and committed other shameful outrages.”49

The Hounds’ assault on Chilecito was not an isolated incident. Throughout California, Chileans suffered scores of lynchings, public murders in which vigilantes claimed to kill in the name of popular justice or some higher moral authority. Many historians of the United States associate lynching with white-on-black violence in the South. However, it was a common and decidedly multiracial occurrence in gold rush California. At Stockton in 1849, Anglo-Americans accused twelve Chileans of murdering three whites. A miner wrote of the incident: “Twelve were taken to the murder spot and nine were shot and three were hung without trial.” Such impromptu executions of Latinos were widespread. After examining the records of 162 California lynchings between 1850 and 1855, scholar Ken Gonzales-Day found that the victims included at least sixty-four individuals of Chilean or Mexican heritage. At times, state and federal policymakers played crucial roles in the abolition of California’s systems of servitude. In this case, authorities turned a blind eye to attacks on Latinos.50

Extrajudicial violence drove many Chileans—including debt peons—out of the Golden State. The abolition of Chilean peonaje in California, by 1853, was not the product of legislation or court rulings. Rather, bloodshed impelled a Chilean Exodus, crippling this unfree-labor regime. Hearing reports of assaults against its citizens in California, the Chilean Congress appropriated 40,000 pesos to contract ships for their rescue and safe passage home. “Kip,” an Albany lawyer who spent six months mining in the Mokelumne region, remarked in 1850 that “the Chilians [sic] also have been gradually disappearing, being taken back free in vessels chartered by their own government.” Departing California during the waning days of 1849, Pérez Rosales felt that his golden hopes had been dashed by Yanqui nativism. Even so, the adventurer was contented with the impression that he and his compatriots had made on California’s Anglo-Americans: “We went for wool and, like so many others, we came back shorn, but satisfied because we had steadfastly stood our ground till we had fired our last shot.”51
Even as Chileans sailed south, Chinese journeyed east to Jinshan, or Gold Mountain, as they called the North American West. This double movement severed one Pacific World circuit of servitude even as another emerged. California became one point in a constellation of diasporic southern Chinese communities, which historian Henry Yu has called the “Cantonese Pacific.” Over time, California also became a node in a network of unfree-labor circuits radiating out from southern China, carrying workers and servitude regimes to destinations across the Pacific and beyond. According to historians José Moya and Adam McKeown, some 750,000 Chinese emigrants were indentured between 1840 and 1940, most ending up in Peru, Sumatra, Malaya, the South Pacific, and Cuba. However, despite popular misconceptions, indentured Chinese “coolie” labor did not flourish in California. The hotly debated credit-ticket system—by which Chinese men worked to pay off passage to California—did, but it is not a focal point of this essay. Unfree Chinese sex workers came to California via a new, more coercive, east-west transpacific circuit of bound labor.

Not all Chinese women who arrived in California were unfree. Some found employment as laundresses, seamstresses, and cooks. Others worked in the sex trade. A few Chinese madams ascended San Francisco’s social ladder by selling services to wealthy clients. “The first Chinese courtesan who came to San Francisco was Ah Toy,” wrote Elisha Oscar Crosby. The former New York lawyer continued, “She arrived I think in 1850 and was a very handsome Chinese girl. She was quite select in her associates, was liberally patronized by the white men and made a great amount of money.” Within her first year ashore, she was running her own brothel on Pike Street. Unlike many of her contemporaries, the English-speaking Ah Toy routinely used the court system to assert her professional stature in Chinatown, collect unpaid debts, and sue patrons who tried to swindle her by substituting brass filings for gold.

Despite her early professional successes, Ah Toy’s fortunes deteriorated. On November 19, 1855, the Sacramento Daily Union noted, “MISS AH TOY.—This celebrated Chinese courtesan tried to destroy her life on Thursday night, in San Francisco, by swallowing poison.” Two years later she sailed for China, promising never to come back. Yet business prospects proved too tempting. Ah Toy returned in 1859. San Francisco police soon arrested her for running a “disorderly house.” She spent the remainder of her days in obscurity until her 1928 death in San Jose, three months short of her hundredth birthday.

Ah Toy’s story is revealing for multiple reasons. The date of her return to California and her subsequent arrest coincided with the end of independent Chinese prostitution in the state. By 1859, southern Chinese tongs (secret societies) had usurped the Chinese sex trade in California. These syndicates, whose origins date to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), implemented their coercive system on North America’s western shores. Like unfree American Indian and Chilean labor regimes in California, tong-organized captive prostitution extended preexisting Pacific World patterns of servitude and violence to control unfree workers. An 1859 issue of the Daily Alta California reported:
Yesterday morning, a poor, miserable Chinese woman was found in Sullivans alley, in a state of insensibility. She had slidden [sic] down from the roof of the house, and was probably injured by the fall... [T]hrough an interpreter she informed the officers that she had been cruelly beaten by the keeper of a Chinese brothel, and exhibited the marks of the blows upon her back, which was literally black and blue. She says she was sold in China to the woman who beat her, for $400, and since her arrival here she has been forced to lead a life of prostitution, and when she refused she has met with blows.

In the words of sociologist Lucie Cheng, from this period onward, Chinese prostitution in the United States remained “a semifeudal organization until the twentieth century.” As historian Peggy Pascoe noted, “Chinese prostitutes were particularly powerless; in fact, many were kept in conditions that render some truth to the sensational stereotype of the ‘Chinese slave girl.’ Some were indentured, with few hopes of paying off their contracts; others were virtually enslaved. Most were under the control of tong leaders and their henchmen, many of whom operated with the collusion of white officials (Figure 6).”

The Hip Yee Tong—an international criminal organization—dominated the transpacific trade in Chinese women, importing an estimated six thousand of them to California between 1852 and 1873. For Chinese women held as captive sex workers by San Francisco tongs, a few city blocks demarcated the geography of their confinement. Daily Alta California editors explained in 1855: “A correspondent calls our attention to the Chinese houses of ill-fame lining Dupont street [now Grant Street], between Sacramento and Washington. ... We believe that no other city in the Union is afflicted with more thoroughly degraded specimens of prostitution than San Francisco.” Unlike other sites of San Francisco sex work, Chinatown offered customers a modicum of anonymity and legal impunity. Here, too, local authorities protected and sustained captive Chinese prostitution.

Sacramento legislators, San Francisco officials, and diplomats on both sides of the Pacific eventually moved against this arrangement. In 1866, California legislators passed the “Act to Suppress Chinese Houses of Ill Fame.” The following year, San Francisco’s Chinese community and city officials challenged the importation of Chinese sex workers. In March 1867, the Sacramento Daily Union reported: “Several Chinese girls, who arrived by the Colorado, will be sent back to China, Chinese merchants and Chief Crowley having ascertained that they were to be sold into prostitution.” With the 1868 Treaty of Tianjin (also known as the Burlingame Treaty), China’s Qing government and the U.S. Senate cooperated in an attempt to sever the unfree-labor circuit linking China to California. Yet, by lifting immigration restrictions, the treaty “increased the sale of Chinese women and girls,” according to scholar Jean Pfaelzer. By 1870, almost nine hundred Chinese sex workers lived in the state.

The transpacific trade in Asian females soon became far more arduous. State and federal officials acted upon widespread racist concerns. California legislators passed the 1870 “Act to Prevent Kidnapping and Importation of Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese Females for Criminal or Demoralizing Purposes.” In 1874, a federal circuit court declared this act unconstitutional, citing immigration policy as the federal government’s exclusive
domain. Yet, that same year, California passed an “act to suppress Chinese slavery or involuntary servitude.” Although likely utilizing this issue to justify Chinese exclusion, President Ulysses Grant asserted in 1874 that “the great proportion of the Chinese immigration who come to our shores do not come voluntarily . . . but come under contracts with headmen who own them almost absolutely.” The 1875 Immigration Act, or Page Law, then forbade transporting Asian women into the United States for “lewd and immoral purposes.” Prosecutors soon began employing this new law. In January 1876, the Sacramento Daily Union discussed the U.S. Supreme Court case of Chy Lung, “the owner of twenty-two Chinese women brought to San Francisco,” who had failed to pay the $500 bond required by the Page Act. California’s new 1879 Constitution subsequently promised “to prohibit the introduction into this State of Chinese.”

These laws dramatically curtailed both free and unfree female Chinese immigration to the United States. As ethnic studies professor Ronald Takaki noted, between 1876 and 1882, 68 percent fewer Chinese women entered the United States than had done so during the previous seven years. The federal government’s 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act severely limited the migration of Chinese men and women until its 1943 repeal. Whereas violence drove Chilean debt peons from California, immigration policies barred unfree Chinese women from entry, effectively severing this transpacific circuit of servitude. Nevertheless, campaigns against unfree Chinese sex work in California lasted for decades.

Those who criticized captive Chinese prostitution and the trade in Chinese females included humanitarians, Victorian moralists, and unvarnished racists. Anti-Chinese politicians invoked images of bonded Chinese workers to bolster xenophobic platforms, agendas asserting that servile Chinese, much like Chilean peons, threatened the institution of free white labor. As early as 1854, the Daily Alta California’s editors employed emphatically racist language when announcing the disembarkation of Chinese travelers at San Francisco: “MORE CHINESE.—No less than seven hundred and eighty of the long tailed children of the Celestial Empire arrived here yesterday in the Lord Warriston from Hong Kong. One hundred and forty of this immigration were of those delectable specimens of humanity, Chinese females. This vicious and disgustingly filthy population is growing upon us with great rapidity.” Once again, white supremacists deployed racist rhetoric to serve their own interests.

Despite a barrage of legislation targeting the practice, many Chinese females remained captive sex workers in California. In 1875, “a Chinaman complained at the Police station yesterday afternoon that a Chinese girl was serving as a slave in a den on Spofford alley [in San Francisco’s Chinatown], and she was anxious to be released. Officers Harty and McKeena went after her and rescued the girl. On her person they found the bill of sale, and they succeeded in arresting the woman who sold her, Ah Yet, but as yet they have not found the purchaser. Ko Tie, she who was so tied in bondage, has been sent to the Chinese Mission.”

Recalling an 1887 visit to San Francisco, Ohio writer R. N. Willcox described Chinese prostitutes as “really property” owned “by their master[s].” Although probably exaggerating, Wilcox claimed that “at one time” there were “over 20,000” such women in California. As late as 1901, the San Francisco Call reported on “Ho Ah Yow, a Chinese female slave . . . released from custody.” That year, state legislators passed a law against “brining or landing Chinese or Japanese woman [sic] for the purpose of sale,” as well as
a host of laws related to the abduction of women, including “for purpose of prostitution” (Figure 7). In 1913, California voters ratified the Red Light Abatement and Injunction Act, which outlawed all houses of prostitution and helped suppress sex slavery.64

An array of actors contributed to the decline of captive Chinese sex work in California. Bound Chinese prostitutes played important roles. According to Pfaelzer, “hundreds of Chinese women and prostitutes fled from slavery.” Others facilitated their own rescue or committed suicide. The 1882 Exclusion Act curtailed many human trafficking options for the tongs, while internecine warfare among these secret societies—especially during the
1880s and 1890s—disrupted the sex trade. In addition, Chinatown restaurateurs and merchants who understood the connections among commercial success, moral probity, and social acceptance campaigned to rid their communities of vice. 65

Victorian women’s Christian associations also played a crucial role. Margaret Culbertson’s and Donaldina Cameron’s Presbyterian Mission Home in San Francisco “rescued” Chinese women. Culbertson, Cameron, and others explicitly framed their work as an abolitionist crusade. Methodist evangelist Mary Grace Charlton Edholm wrote, in 1892:

It was generally supposed that slavery was abolished in the United States during the administration of Abraham Lincoln; yet, if the facts were known . . . there exists in this country, wherever the Chinese have obtained a foothold, a slavery so vile and debasing that all the horrors of negro American slavery do not begin to compare with it. . . . In the work of stopping the sale of women and young girls in San Francisco, the hotbed of Chinese slavery, especial [sic] credit is due the Presbyterians and Methodists, who have established homes for the rescue and education of these girls and women.

Cameron claimed to have liberated three thousand captive Chinese females between 1895 and 1914 (Figure 8). Such assertions may have had ideological agendas. Historian Mae Ngai has cautioned, Victorian morality and related efforts to liberate poor and non-white women from servitude were part of a larger attempt to define the Chinese as an immoral race, thereby justifying exclusionary immigration policies. 66

TRANSPACIFIC CIRCUITS OF SERVITUDE

California’s systems of servitude entrapped tens of thousands between 1846 and 1900. They included at least 20,000 California Indians, as many as several thousand African Americans, four thousand or more Chileans, and perhaps thousands of Chinese women and girls, to say nothing of other groups employed without the freedom to quit. Taken together, the people bound by these regimes were the human faces of much larger Pacific World circuits of unfreedom. In California’s history, bonded California Indian labor, African American chattel slavery, Chilean debt peonage, and Chinese captive sex work represented but four nodes on the many circuits that comprised a vast transpacific unfree-labor network.

A variety of actors worked to terminate California’s varied regimes of servitude. They included government officials, activists, and, of course, the very people held against their will. These California abolitions were slow, complex, and differed—in time, place, and process—from the abolition of chattel slavery in the Atlantic World. By 1900, most de jure forms of unfree California labor had ended, with the exceptions of convict work and debt peonage. Meanwhile, some types of de facto servitude, such as illegal captive prostitution, persisted. However, historical treatments of abolition, within and beyond California, have largely overlooked the resilience of servitude. While the number of unfree laborers did decrease as a proportion of the state’s population, such systems continued to ensnare women, men, and children.

Courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, California
In many ways, California was a microcosm of unfree labor in the western United States, where African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, and others worked in a variety of coerced arrangements. These regimes came apart only slowly and unevenly, before, during, and after the U.S. Civil War. Studying the complex and continuing history of California’s unfree-labor systems provides a window into the undoing of servitude in the western United States, the even more diverse history of Pacific World abolitions, and the durability of unfreedom in both zones.

Unfree labor persisted in and around the Pacific well past 1900. Some Latin American countries officially banned chattel slavery earlier than California but allowed other forms of servitude to flourish. Chile abolished slavery in 1823 but officially sanctioned debt peonage well into the twentieth century. By contrast, Peru—with a much larger African slave population—did not abolish chattel slavery until 1854. Two decades later, Peru ended the “coolie” trade, which had brought nearly 100,000 captive Chinese workers to South America’s western shores. Yet, at virtually the same time, California’s most infamous fugitive debtor, Henry Meiggs, innovatively employed the enganche system in Chile and Peru. Between 1868 and 1872, enganchadores, literally “ones who press or trick others into performing a service,” convinced 30,000 Chilean rotos (itinerant landless peasants, literally “ragged men”) to sign debt contracts and travel north to Peru, where they toiled on Meiggs’s trans-Andean railroad. Unfree-labor systems were portable and replicable throughout the Pacific World.

More than seven thousand miles across the South Pacific, British officials forcibly relocated more than 161,000 convict laborers to Australia between 1788 and 1868. Although the last of more than eight hundred convict ships reached Western Australia in 1868, the British government did not abolish penal servitude across its empire until 1948. Indeed, de jure convict labor endured through the twentieth century and beyond.

Various coercive labor arrangements also flourished elsewhere around the Pacific. Between 1885 and 1899, 29,069 Japanese “government-contract emigrants” and 40,230 Japanese “private-contract emigrants” crossed the North Pacific to work on Hawaiian sugar plantations, usually under three-year contracts. In 1898, the United States annexed the islands. Two years later, the Organic Act made U.S. laws effective in Hawai‘i, thus ending these unfree-labor arrangements. In China, it was not until 1909 that Qing officials banned slavery, decades after most scholars deem the Age of Abolition to have ended. Meanwhile, well into the mid-1900s, corvée (unfree) labor underwrote colonial endeavors in the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina.

California’s twentieth-century agricultural expansion also relied on an array of coercive work regimes. In 1917, a California farmer explained his treatment of Mexican workers, noting that “we make them work under armed guards in the fields” and “control them at night behind bolted gates, within a stockade eight feet high, surrounded by barbed wire.” In ensuing decades, federal officials coordinated a transnational migratory circuit, conveying 4.6 million Mexican farmworkers to the United States through the Bracero Program (1942–1964). Laboring far from home as a noncitizen underclass, this “reserve army of labor” faced myriad challenges, from poverty wages and poor working conditions to widespread discrimination and a persistent shortage of social services. U.S. Labor
Department official Lee G. Williams, who supervised the Bracero Program during its last five years, described it as “legalized slavery.” Even today, convict labor systems exist on both sides of the Pacific, from China’s work camps (laogai) to California’s “Golden Gulag” of industrialized prisons.70

In addition to legally sanctioned servitude, circuits of illicit unfree labor persist in the Pacific World, with nodes in California. For example, in 1995, authorities freed seventy-two Thai nationals from an El Monte, California, garment factory. These women and men had toiled for up to eighteen hours a day for little or no pay while contained by razor wire and armed guards. Ensnared by the twentieth-century transpacific unfree-labor trade, some of these workers had been held for up to seven years under threat of retaliation against family members in Thailand.71

A global history of bonded work and its ongoing abolitions remains unwritten. Beyond the Atlantic World, a transnational geography of unfree labor exists. Multiple circuits of servitude—involving the movements of bound people, labor-control practices, and ideologies of work—fLOURISHED, and remain intact, in the Pacific World and beyond. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, between eighteen and twenty-seven million women, men, and children were working under unfree-labor regimes around the globe. Capitalism—the most dominant system of economic organization in world history—has long harbored a plurality of labor relations.72

As historian David Chang has observed, “nodes in global networks sometimes come most clearly into view when we consider sources generated far from the place under consideration.” In California, many disparate circuits of unfreedom converged. Assembling a complete picture of Pacific World unfree-labor regimes—with their unique geographies, varieties, proximity to free labor, violence, and complex circuitry—will require additional detailed case studies. This research agenda can be accelerated by exploring other locations where multiple systems of servitude intersected. Such places include Australia, Chile, Hawai‘i, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, and the Philippines. A global understanding of unfree labor requires expanding our vision beyond chattel slavery to encompass the many regimes that bound—and continue to bind—human beings around the world. Merging the histories of Pacific and Atlantic World servitude will, of course, be difficult. Even so, such a unified history promises a more complex, nuanced, and accurate understanding of that other peculiar institution, unfree labor.73


NOTES

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28. February 24, 1850, advertisement in Jackson Mississippian, in Placer Times (Sacramento), May 1, 1850, 1; James Gadsen to General Thomas Jefferson Green, December 7, 1851, in “William A. Leidesdorff Papers, 1840–1867,” box 6, reel 2, Huntington Library; California, Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the State of California, of the Third Session of the Legislature (San Francisco: G.K. Fitch and V.E. Geiger, 1852), 159; Memorial to the California Legislature in Richards, California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War, 126–127.


40. B. R. Buckelew in California (San Francisco), March 15, 1848, 2.


44. Contrato de peónaje entre Don Santiago King con varios peones, ARNAD, Colección Notarial (Valparaíso), vol. 82, no. 384, folder 372 vta.-373. Also aboard were eight peons: Sepúlveda G., El Trigo Chileno en el Mercado Mundial, 42. For Virginia passengers: “Movimiento Marítimo,” El Comercio de Sepúlveda, September 12, 1848.


47. Navarro, Gold Rush Diary of Ramón Gil Navarro, 79.


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