

Indenture

By Nienke Boer | May 13, 2019

Indenture — the practice of transporting workers to perform labor in a different part of the world for a fixed period of time in return for passage and wages — is a compelling way of thinking through the links between different parts of the Global South. Beginning with laborers from England, Ireland, and Germany migrating to North America in the 17th and 18th centuries and culminating in the mass movement of Chinese and South Asian workers to Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific during the 19th century, the migration of indentured workers profoundly reshaped the social and economic map of the world.

The system of indenture becomes particularly important to the economic growth of European imperial powers after the abolition of the slave trade (1807) and the emancipation of slaves (1834) in the British Empire, when many colonies where slavery had been the main source of labor turn to contracting indentured laborers to perform the same work. While in practice many indentured laborers experienced the same violence and exploitation that marked slavery, indentured laborers in theory had certain legal protections in place that were absent for the enslaved. The system was distinguished from slavery by the existence of the indenture contract. One could thus only contract laborers for a certain period of time and workers were supposed to earn wages. Moreover, one could not be born into indenture: the children of indentured laborers were not indentured.

Indenture as a rubric connects the histories of different parts of the world and thereby allows for productive comparisons of the experience of indenture and its afterlives. Examining both the structure (through laws) and experience (through fictional and autobiographical texts) of indenture is central to understanding the modern experience of global mobility and the constitution of diasporic communities in and from the Global South.

While the term “indenture” initially referred to the practice whereby apprentices were placed with master craftsmen to serve out a period of indenture, this entry concentrates on the development of this practice, starting in the 17th century, in which workers signed indenture contracts to labor for a specific period of time in another part of the world in return for passage. Indenture played a crucial part in the European colonization of North America, as would-be immigrants from particularly England, Scotland, Ireland and Germany signed indenture contracts in order to obtain passage to the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries: more than half of these migrants are estimated to have traveled under some form of indenture contract (Northrup 1995).[\[1\]](#)

In the 19th century, predominantly British but also Spanish, Dutch and French imperial powers sought a cheap, sustainable labor force following the end of the slave trade. This form of indenture, involving primarily South and East Asian laborers, has been described through radically different frameworks, either as a “new system of slavery” — as the title of Hugh

Tinker's influential 1974 study phrases it — or as a form of free labor migration, comparable to earlier systems of European labor migration to the New World.

Both characterizations, however, represent extremes that risk oversimplifying indenture. Tinker, in drawing parallels between slavery and indenture, focuses on the continued mistreatment of indentured laborers in spite of the laws put in place to protect them and the often deceitful means by which they were induced to sign indenture contracts and migrate to new and alienating parts of the world. Other historians, such as Sugata Bose (2015), have challenged this reading of indenture as a “new system of slavery,” a phrase that also circulated in the liberal press of the time, by paying closer attention to systems of indenture that predate the end of slavery, return journeys, and voluntary re-indenture practices. The experience and impact of indenture varied markedly in different parts of the world depending on a number of variables, including the type of labor contract entered into by the laborers, their region of origin and target region, and the imperial power responsible for their transport and welfare. In what follows, I will provide a brief historical outline of two exemplary systems of indenture, Chinese and South Asian, before focusing on some of the potential research avenues opened up by a focus on indenture as a means of approaching the Global South.

The lines of historical continuity between slavery and indenture in the British Empire are most visible when looking at indenture from China and South Asia in the 19th century. It is also worth distinguishing between indenture and the other forms of labor migration, besides slavery, which preceded it. For example, Chinese and South Asian laborers had been transported by the British East India Company to parts of Southeast Asia since the 18th century to work on plantations and perform other kinds of manual labor, but these laborers were not indentured for a fixed period of time and were expected to settle in these places. Then, the first ship transporting Chinese plantation laborers — recruited by the British as “free cultivators and mechanics” and as an alternative to slave labor — arrived in Trinidad in 1806 (Higman 1972, 28). Most of these individuals left the island by 1808, having been provided with free return passage whenever they chose. It is only after emancipation (1834) that the mass transportation of Chinese and South Asian laborers under indenture contracts begins. Through this system, perhaps 500,000 Chinese indentured laborers traveled to Cuba, Mauritius, Peru, Australia, and the Hawaiian Islands in the 1840s; to the Philippines, Siam, and Sumatra later in the 19th century; and, early in the twentieth century, to the Transvaal (South Africa) and France. Chinese indentured migration continued until the 1920s.

The South Asian indentured labor diaspora also emerged after the emancipation of slaves within the British Empire (1834), with the first indentured laborers travelling to Mauritius and its dependent islands in 1835, and the final indenture contracts ending in the 1920s. Around 1.5 million South Asian indentured laborers were transported to British and Dutch Guiana, Trinidad, the French Caribbean, Fiji, British East Africa, Natal, and Réunion. These laborers embarked mainly from Karikal [Karaikal] and Madras [Chennai] in South India, and Calcutta [Kolkata] in the north. A more informal system of labor migration, called *kangany* (“foreman” in Tamil, for the person who served as both recruiter and supervisor) or *maistry* (from the Portuguese for “master”), in Malaya and Burma involved recruiters specifically sent to enlist individuals from their own families or regions. A large number of laborers from mainland British India recruited through these more informal systems of *kangany* or *maistry* were also transported to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). During the period of Chinese and South Asian indenture, a

smaller number of Japanese migrants also travelled to Hawai'i, the United States, Peru and Brazil under indenture contracts.

Even this brief summary of the history of Chinese and South Asian indentured labor suggests that the boundary between indentured and other forms of labor diasporas is somewhat porous, and that drawing a distinction between these migrations based on the legal definitions imposed by British administrators is often quite unsatisfactory. This is one of the arguments made against viewing indenture purely as a successor to slavery — many of these other forms of labor migration predated the end of the slave trade, and persisted during the age of indenture. A nuanced study of indenture has to take into account the multiple origins of this system; such a study would also offer many possibilities for understanding both the past and the present of the Global South.[2]

Beyond providing a snapshot history, I stress the potential of this keyword by listing some of the avenues opened up by considering indenture as a central concept for approaching the Global South. These are as follows:

- Indenture bridges different imperial systems: while it is predominantly associated with the British Empire, indentured laborers from South Asia and China worked in (Spanish) Cuba, (Dutch) Surinam, and (French) Réunion, for example. Laura Doyle (2014) summarizes and expands on calls made by historians and literary theorists for *inter-imperiality*: indenture offers an excellent framework to take up this call.
- Indenture enables us to look specifically at South-South connections, rather than center-periphery connections: by examining the experiences of South Asian laborers traveling from Bihar to British Guiana, for example, we can link these two nodes, “peripheries” within the British Empire, without passing through the imperial metropole. This is exactly what Gaiutra Bahadur does in her biographical study of her great-grandmother, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2014).
- Looking at indentured laborers who remained in their new countries after the end of their indenture contract (as the majority of them did) adds complexity to the colonizer-colonized relationship by introducing a non-European settler population. For instance, in his work on Indian-Zulu interactions in Natal, Jon Soske (2017) introduces the idea of the “also-colonizer other.” In “Settlers and Laborers: The Afterlife of Indenture in Early South African Indian Literature,” meanwhile, I analyze how South Asian migrants to South Africa framed their life narratives as settler writing (Boer 2016).
- Indenture allows us a new comparative perspective to look at other systems of diaspora and mass coerced or unfree migration, such as slavery, penal deportation, war transportation, and contemporary contract labor migration. Many of the existing studies look at comparisons between slavery and indentured labor, and Clare Anderson’s *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (2012), clearly draws out the parallels and overlaps between indenture and penal transportation. These studies pave the way for other comparative frameworks, linking indenture and war transportation, for example, or refugees and indentured laborers. Examining these displacements within new frameworks of comparison brings to light experiences and interconnections which otherwise would remain

invisible.

- Studying and teaching texts about indentured laborers allow us to intervene in debates within both subaltern studies and 'history from below,' as we think about the agency of the indentured laborers. Tinker's argument about indenture as a continuation of slavery, for example, centers partly on the idea that these laborers were coerced into signing indenture contracts, and that they did not have sufficient knowledge about the journeys they were embarking upon to be seen as consenting participants in this system. Lisa Lowe's study examining the connections between European liberalism, the transatlantic slave trade, and indenture in the 18th and 19th centuries, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), unpacks the importance of the figure of the coolie in European and colonial debates about freedom and unfreedom.[3]
- For literary theorists, indenture opens up a wide canon of texts. Vijay Misra, for example, argues for what he calls a "girmit ideology" within the literatures emerging out of South Asian indenture: *girmitiya*, from agreement, being one of the terms by which these indentured laborers became known (Misra 2007: 22). Some of the authors that a study on the literature of indenture and related diasporas might include are: Gaiutra Bahadur (Guyana), Jan Shinebourne (Guyana), Ansuyah R. Singh (South Africa), Deepchand Beeharry (Mauritius), V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Satendra Nandan (Fiji), K.S. Maniam (Malaysia), Gopal Barathan (Singapore), and M.G. Vassanji (Kenya/Tanzania). For more literary studies of indenture (focused on South Asian indenture), see also Pirbhai (2009) as well as Carter and Torabully (2002).
- A hitherto underdeveloped line of inquiry is to trace the afterlife of indenture in China, South Asia, and other countries of origin. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), a novel about a ship, the *Ibis*, carrying indentured laborers, convicts, and lascars, begins to address this issue imaginatively by focusing on the factors in Ghazipur that inspire the protagonists to enlist as *girmitiyas*. Taking indenture as a keyword for studying the Global South can thus also involve studying those who stayed behind, or those who returned.
There are, of course, some shortcomings to using the rubric of indenture to approach the Global South. Indenture produces a coastal bias: islands, coastal colonies, and port cities are disproportionately involved in indenture, with the inland origins of indentured laborers often receding from view. Studying indenture also foregrounds the centrality of empire and imperial laws (and specifically those of the British Empire) in the process of migration, thereby neglecting the numerous forms of migration that took place during this period outside the control of imperial powers. Perhaps most problematic, though, is the danger of reifying the paradigm of mobility as visibility. This problem exists primarily because of the vagaries of the archive: individuals are recorded in the archive when they break the law, or when they are displaced. Indenture produces reams and reams of documentation in the archive -- contracts, identity cards, photographs, complaints, etc. -- resulting in the relative visibility of the indentured laborer at the expense of those who stay in place.

In spite of these limitations, however, indenture offers us a rich window into the past of the Global South: a way to historicize this field as well as anchor contemporary diasporas and their literary and cultural productions in earlier networks of connection. Both as an object of study and a model for studying other historical South-South networks, I believe indenture is a

vital addition to the development of the Global South as an emerging theoretical paradigm.

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[1] For more on indenture in the American colonies in the 17th century, see Tomlins 2010.

[2] For more historical background on 19th century indenture, see Northrup 1995, Tinker 1974, Jung 2006, and the *Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (ed. Robin Cohen, 1995), which has an excellent section on “Asian Indentured and Colonial Migration.”

[3] It is impossible to write about indentured labor without confronting the term “coolie,” a term that follows this form of labor wherever it goes and has a contested etymology. It seems clear that the term started circulating in the late 16th century, by way of Portuguese traders, but it is variously traced back to Tamil, Gujarati, and Chinese. The most often-cited origin is the Tamil word *kuli*, meaning wages or daily hire. Lowe argues that “the great instability and multivalence of the term coolie suggests it was a shifting, historically contingent designation for an intermediary form of Asian labor, used both to define and obscure the boundary between enslavement and freedom, and to normalize both” (2015, 25). Moon-Ho Jung (2014) provides a fascinating reading of the term “coolie” as used in the United States in his *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* entry on this word.

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