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The Cuba Commission Report: A Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba. The Original English-Language Text of 1876 (Introduction by Denise Helly). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. viii + 160 pp. (Paper US\$ 21.95)

Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918. WALTON LOOK LAI. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. xxviii + 370 pp. (Cloth US\$ 39.95)

The world system formed by European mercantile and industrial capitalism and the history of transcontinental labor migrations from Africa to the Americas have been amply documented. The genesis, evolution, and demise of New World slavery are subjects much scrutinized and debated, particularly since the 1960s. Enjoying a less extensive tradition of historiography are the variously devised alternative labor schemes that came on the heels of emancipation: the colonially-orchestrated efforts to contract free and voluntary workers to take the place of slaves in a system of production theoretically the moral antithesis of that earlier "peculiar institution." Yet scholarship on indentured labor systems has consistently revealed that the "freedom" of immigrant workers was merely nominal, the "voluntary" nature of their commitments arguable, and the indenture projects often only ideally a kinder, gentler form of labor extraction.

Not confined to a single locality, the indenture of various populations through labor arrangements bound by contracts of varying duration has occurred for centuries. At times it has formed the foundation for initial colonization, as was the case with European indentured laborers entering

North America and the Caribbean in the 1600s and 1700s. Indenture also has been the basis of early post-emancipation labor experiments that employed freed African, African-American, and European immigrant workers, along with their unindentured counterparts, in, for example, the British West Indies. Organized as state project or private enterprise, the indenture of immigrant workers in the nineteenth-century Americas began in fits and starts; it was, in terms of both policy and practice, amended continuously during its approximately eight decades of predominance; and it irrevocably changed the demographic, cultural, and social terrain – as slavery under an earlier imperialism had before it.

Leaving their towns and villages, Indian and Chinese sojourners were key players in the anguished construction of New World cultures and societies. Yet they have traditionally been accorded peripheral attention. This is partly because, unlike European, African, and Native American populations, Asian peoples have tended to be perceived by scholars and other observers as forming a less salient dimension of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Caribbean, Latin American, or North American ethnic mosaic. Indubitably much less significant demographically, Chinese and Indians in these territories in many instances have been treated as sub-cultures, sometimes as exotics, and therefore as somewhat more marginal to what were deemed critical issues in the history of this part of the world.

Another possible reason for the attenuated focus on New World Asian peoples is located in epistemology. Over the decades, scholars from a number of disciplines have developed an intricate discourse on the distinction between “slavery” and “freedom,” on the very nature of “free” and “unfree” – in philosophical, social, and political-economic terms. In fact, while a “free/unfree” dichotomy ultimately tells us much about Western philosophical traditions (always a dimension of abiding interest in our intellectual heritage), indenture – located outside of this dichotomy – cannot. Forms of labor, including indenture, that fall ambiguously in between in complex ways confound this distinction, and may even challenge it (see, for example, Kale 1992). As clearly important as delineating New World slavery and freedom is, too close an adherence to these as reified categories may diminish the perceived relevance of Asian actors in these contexts.

Thanks to increasing consciousness among scholars about historiographical (and ethnographic) authority, silences, and voice, the florescence of social history over the past two decades, the current reconstitution of “diaspora studies,” and the rise of ethnic – especially Asian-American – studies, there is now a growing body of research on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Asian immigrants to the Western Hemisphere which is

concerned with both interpretive and material dimensions of the indenture experience.

Complex and at times circuitous, the journeys consisted of inter-regional migrations (contracted and “free” Chinese, for example, headed for destinations spanning Canada to Peru and California to Trinidad) and intra-regional migrations (as indentured and formerly indentured Indians, for example, left Trinidad for Guyana, Venezuela, or Suriname). Focusing on Chinese indentured laborers in Cuba and on Indian and Chinese indentured laborers in the British West Indies, Denise Helly and Walton Look Lai make important contributions to our understanding of indentured labor as ideology and institution. They consider indenture as part of a larger continuum of labor mobilization in service of a production system whose organization has changed over time yet whose rationale remains familiar today. Helly and Look Lai also enhance our appreciation of the Americas as being built significantly by a flow of transnational migrant labor that long preceded its contemporary heirs. In doing so they bring into focus the full nuances of indentured labor, revealing, among other things, its dismaying incongruence with the notion of “freedom.”

Both authors are expressly concerned with filling the gaps in the historical record. Among the most frustrating of these lacunae is the nature of the archival material: the perspectives and experiences of the indentured laborers themselves are conspicuously sparse. Although colonial authorities and established creole populations (both white and black) were rarely inclined to conduct ethnographic research, much less cultural conservation, among these populations, there are still sufficient recorded materials to attempt redress of this silence. Helly and Look Lai do this – each in a distinctive way.

Helly edits and introduces a primary document on the single case of Chinese in Cuba, and Look Lai offers a broadly comparative discussion of Chinese and Indians in the British West Indies based on his reading of primary and other documents. Both volumes highlight the intricately linked relations among a complex network of participants: merchant firms, colonial authorities, indigenous authorities, various administrative agencies, diverse local recruiters, and immigrants – a complex “work force” developed around indenture schemes. The broader vulnerability of the countries of origin vis-à-vis colonial objectives is striking. Domestic turmoil was initiated or exacerbated by colonial machinations, such as the disruption of the zamindar (landlord-tenant) system in India and clan organization in China. Even as a sovereign country, China, like India (a British colony), made increasing concessions to colonial demands in response to pressures, for example, to make its ports accessible and to supplant Euro-

pean importation of foreign goods with foreign importation of European manufactures. As both Helly and Look Lai demonstrate, the weakened ability to resist European economic interests and trade demands in a gradually coalescing global system enhanced the involvement of merchant firms in the business of contract labor. It is not surprising, then, to learn that the first Chinese immigrants in Cuba came via Philippine intermediaries working with two English companies in China (Helly, p. 11), or that in an (ultimately unsuccessful) experiment as early as 1806, the British East India Company brought two hundred Chinese to Trinidad from such dispersed localities as Macao, Penang, and Calcutta (Look Lai, pp. 42-43).

In Helly's book, the story of indenture among Chinese immigrants to Cuba is told through more than 1,000 depositions taken in 1873 from the "coolies" themselves, as evidence was gathered by appointees of the Chinese Imperial government in an investigation of the working and living conditions of Chinese nationals in Cuba. Look Lai's contribution is necessarily more removed from this level of experience, although he, like Helly, is concerned with capturing the subjective aspects of indentureship. Viewing Asian immigrants as "both victims and products" of global social forces (p. 20), as "simultaneously Object and Subject" (p. 142), Look Lai acknowledges the agency and variety of responses evinced by indentured laborers.

Look Lai's depiction of immigrants' circumstances seems milder than Helly's, partly because of their respective levels of analysis – macro and micro. But also important is the distinction between the state-sponsored, state-controlled indenture project of Britain and the private enterprise-operated schemes that characterized contract labor to the Hispanophone destinations of Cuba and Peru. What is implicit in Look Lai becomes highlighted when compared with Helly: as dreadful as the indenture system was for the majority of its participants, the latitude with which private interests were able to conduct their enterprise was truly horrific. The contradiction lies not in the two books, but in the systems themselves: as Chinese and Indian laborers realized in rude awakenings upon reaching the plantations, indenture was another kind of peculiar institution – "a civil contract enforceable mainly with criminal sanctions" (Look Lai, p. 62).

In contrast to the British West Indies, indentureship in Cuba existed simultaneously with slavery. Shaped by cultural stereotypes as well as economic exigency, Chinese workers were viewed by creole planters as docile and therefore capable of working alongside enslaved laborers. "We have need of men who will work side by side with the slaves; for this, only the native sons of a country governed by the whip will do. This requisite is

fulfilled by the Chinese” (quoted by Helly, p. 11). The planters’ goal was to extract profits with only nominal acknowledgment of the laborers’ contracts. In addition to the demands of maximizing profit, determining how to treat these foreign non-white people posed a problem, since maintaining the fundamental white/non-white distinction was pivotal to keeping the system of slavery intact. Civil contracts were enforced with criminal sanctions, as the legalities differentiating the status and condition of slave and indentured were routinely ignored, and “slave-based racist logic” resulted in corporal punishment being meted out indiscriminately; “[i]n this regard the Cantonese were doubly maltreated: on one hand as wage laborers, on the other as nonwhite workers” (Helly, p. 22).

It is with direct reference to the criminality of indenture that the Chinese laborers in Cuba were briefly offered a voice for their experiences. Their testimonies suggest their acquiescence to the situation and resistance to it, and allow glimpses of aspirations, disappointments, and expectations – the familiar cultural models against which the unfamiliar was measured and assessed.

The *Report* is organized in three parts. “Despatch to Yamen” presents the commissioners’ outline of their itinerary and summary of their findings. “Replies to Queries” forms the bulk of the text and contains responses to questions concerning the laborers’ comprehension of their circumstances, treatment by employers, experiences after terms of indenture have expired, medical care and causes of death, demographic and social differences among them throughout the island, and so on. “Memorandum and Regulations” presents a brief overview of immigrant legislation in Cuba.

In their responses to questions, laborers do not appear reticent, and convey a sense of their bewilderment as well as fear and frustration. At least three broad themes emerge: a diaspora of betrayal (Khan 1995), a culture of terror (Taussig 1984), and a strategy of divide and rule. Much like their Indian counterparts, the Chinese told of being deceived or coerced into emigrating (p. 39, 77, *passim*). Often forced by planters to re-contract after their terms were completed, unapprised of their rights, and unfamiliar with the language, laborers were kept off balance, and thus more tractable. Shame and humiliation began upon landing, as close physical examinations on the ship’s dock treated laborers “as if an ox or a horse” (p. 48 ff.) Laborers recounted the encouragement of inter-group conflict between “negroes” and “coolies,” of negroes being “urged” to “beat” them (p. 66), and of their puzzlement and anger when they were treated “like a negro slave” (p. 89). Finally, they reported living in a “constant terror of death” and suffering from random searches and seizures by police, described prisons on the plantations that housed stocks, chains, and other

torture devices, and quoted planters, remarking that “it matters not if one is beaten to death as ten others can be bought in his place” (pp. 55, 57, 95). Some asserted that “jail is preferable to the plantation” (p. 70), though they “may be left there two or three years without being tried” (p. 83).

The overview of Spanish and colonial governments’ immigrant legislation in Cuba and its transformation over time highlights the profound disjuncture between real and ideal evinced in the decrees (compare Dayan 1995), and the impact of this contradiction on the lives of the immigrants. For example, one article states that “[i]mmigrants ... may publicly prosecute their employer” (p. 135), and another that while ill, an immigrant cannot be forced to work (p. 137). According to the depositions in Part Two, these recourses were routinely evaded or thwarted by planters and the authorities in sympathy with them. Following the “coolies” reports of systematic abuse, these apparently benign regulations are particularly striking.

Helly’s excellent introduction gives context to text, but readers would have benefited from amplified information – both background and analysis. Many of the rich statements made by the laborers interviewed invite further clarification or contextualization. For example, two men report that they were “disliked” (and therefore mistreated) because they married white women (pp. 86, 115); a third man married a white woman after amassing some wealth, yet was arrested when attempting to leave the island (p. 115). Every individual has a story and certainly each detail cannot be considered. However, mixed “race” unions and social hierarchies have been important phenomena in the Americas as well as in plantation societies in general; given the condition of Chinese in nineteenth-century Cuba, these processes beg some exploration.

The *Report*’s encouragement of further questions, however, attests to the intrinsic interest of this invaluable primary resource. Painful and troubling to read, this compact text is nevertheless essential in our efforts to apprehend the history of those who created the Americas.

The comparison undertaken by Look Lai is two-tiered. He is interested in British West Indian indenture as a “hybrid labor system” (p. 268), where it can be economically central (as it was in Guyana and Trinidad) or peripheral (as in Jamaica). He is also interested in the respective “adjustments” made by Indians and Chinese to their new social environments. Framing these foci is the premise that labor migrations, including the different moments of indenture, reflect a “real structural *interconnection*” among polities globally (p. 266). The main issue in post-emancipation British West Indian society was planter profit and labor control, and

freedpersons' efforts to remain empowered in the plantation work environment. Immigration thus was seen by planters "as a weapon in the class struggle against the newly freed Blacks" (p. 12). Plantation systems during indenture varied but were linked in a political economy. The legacy of a "'native'-immigrant dialectic" (p. 269), where cheap labor is introduced to erode the strength of local labor, has shaped the class and ethnic conflicts common in post-indenture societies.

The book begins by contrasting the factors that influenced emigration from India and China, providing detailed demographic and other quantitative data. It then discusses how the British West Indian indenture system was formally organized and what its main characteristics were, and delves into the problem of labor control and the concomitant protean nature of labor contract construction for Chinese and Indians.

The plantation experience of Chinese, primarily in Trinidad and Guyana, is next considered, in terms of three periods of immigration characterized by demographic shifts, relations with Africans, and the state of sugar production. Of particular interest here are contemporary accounts of Chinese temperament and character that reveal current stereotypes and the cultural hierarchies they informed. Also important were the various forms of resistance ("adjustment" problems [p. 100]) engaged in by the Chinese, from refusal to work, violence against management, and desertion, to joining free settlements, opium abuse, and suicide. As in Cuba, life on the plantation was such that imprisonment was often preferred to "the trials of plantation life" (p. 101).

The book then takes up the plantation experience of Indians, discussing it in terms of three indenture phases and focusing on Trinidad and Guyana. Labor control is the paramount issue here, too, exemplified by the "oft-quoted remark" of British Guianese planters that indentured laborers should be "at work, in hospital, or in gaol" (p. 127). As problems of vagrancy, strikes, mobility of African and Indian workers, and intra-group status differences among Indians grew, the penal sanctions of labor laws became differentially enforced, courts increasingly functioned as instruments of labor discipline, and labor control became the framework within which alleged cultural identities were imagined.

Look Lai next chronicles the critiques of indenture, concentrating on local responses. The perceptions of Indians as victims, co-conspirators, or something in between fluctuated according to particular perspectives. Again, the utility of various cultural stereotypes played a key role in these debates. As others have also noted, Look Lai observes that critics made no distinction between the system and the "nature of the immigrants themselves" (p. 172).

The penultimate chapter focuses on the assimilation of Chinese after indenture. Compared to Indians, these immigrants experienced a rapid move away from agriculture and into trading, though this process took longer in Guyana than in Trinidad given dissimilar enclave economies.

Finally, the book takes up the assimilation of Indians after indenture. Their lives characterized by wide post-indenture options, Indians were “free to choose their own lifestyles after their indenture terms were over” (p. 219). This is an unexpectedly optimistic assessment, though Look Lai does note that certain patterns predominated – notably agriculture.

The book represents massive archival work, and adds much to our study of Asians in the Americas. A next step would be to meditate on why the picture looks the way it does. For example, a number of colonial reports and commentaries are quoted to exemplify particular points. These texts, however, constitute and reflect the ideology of the period; examination of their implicit assumptions would have enhanced the discussion.

The book also betrays some reliance on received wisdom in the scholarship on Indo-Caribbean populations. The pre-eminence of agricultural pursuits far into the twentieth century is said to have been due in part to Indians’ “innate love for and knowledge of the land and its cultivation” (p. 220). Given the data explaining Indo-Caribbeans’ location in ethnically segmented labor markets, mention of this familiar stereotype of inherent propensities is curious. A related idea present is that, essentially, culture acted as a deterrent to “building cultural bridges with the non-Indian colonial labor force” (p. 257). Occupationally and residentially segregated Indians’ “cultural tenacity” rendered the majority “culturally impervious” to “Westernizing forces” (p. 259); they were most preoccupied with “creeping Westernization” into their traditions (p. 257). This is a popular assumption among many observers of Indo-Caribbean populations, where a reified and self-contained “culture” allegedly taints perceptions of the other, prevents non-biased interaction, and encourages self-segregation from the larger society. The significance of structural interconnections that Look Lai rightly emphasizes for the macro level is not always as thoroughly explored on the ground. In everyday social relations as well as conventional wisdom, class position and its attendant cultural valences often get conflated with (implicitly static) depictions of cultural heritage.

This volume raises a number of critical questions. Other than being joined, through a Western lens, as “Asians,” why, how, and when are these populations – Chinese and Indian – comparable? When is “Asian” identity, and thus experience, a given, when is it to be unpacked, and what does this tell us about how we conceive of difference – immigrant, “foreign,” or otherwise? It also poses a question about historiography in the

Americas. The weighting of this volume toward more discussion of Indians than of Chinese, not directly commented on by Look Lai, calls attention to a possible paucity of material on Chinese relative to other immigrant populations. Not likely to be coincidental, this is intriguing.

Given the burgeoning interest in the complexities of colonial political economy and the populations that created the Americas, *The Cuba Commission Report* and *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar* should be required reading for Caribbeanists, scholars of Asian diasporas, and labor historians. In addition, these books should be read by those concerned with the condition and rights of dispersed peoples – past, present, and future.

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