Introduction

As the title of this collection suggests, our aim is to rethink the relationship between the rise of capitalist economic development, Western European expansion in the Atlantic basin, and state mobilization of unfree labor from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. In contrast to much of the scholarship on the Atlantic world, the essays in this collection examine the state as an agent in both imperial and capitalist expansion. Although our framework is largely Atlantic, its implications are global. The main actors in these essays are coerced workers and the officials and institutions of Western European imperial states and their colonies in the Americas. The works presented here help transcend national, imperial, colonial, geographic, and historiographic boundaries by offering comparative insights, both within and across empires, into multiple forms and ideologies of unfree labor as they evolved over more than four centuries of imperial and economic development. We hope these insights will clarify new avenues of research for scholars interested in the histories of coerced workers faced with the growing power of imperial states and capitalism in an evolving Atlantic world.

One innovation in this collection is the emphasis on the state itself as a key actor in the mobilization and employment of unfree labor. Most of the essays highlight people working under varying regimes of coercion who were deployed in both the public and the private sectors in ways that mutually benefited both public and private interests. In fact the boundaries between state and private actors and interests in the recruitment, deployment, and policing of unfree labor over time were always blurred. States routinely collaborated with quasi-state entities, such as chartered trading companies or privateers, and with private entrepreneurs to execute state tasks with unfree labor. State officials often pursued their own private enrichment through state institutions with forced laborers. Thus, the essays in this collection pay particular attention to the many layers of personnel, authority, jurisdiction, and funding that comprised metropolitan, imperial, and colonial branches of administration. We also see the many interconnections between colonial administration, quasi-state institutions, and the various human officials who made and modified state policy.

To date, studies of Atlantic economic and labor history have focused more on the work of colonial subsistence and market production than the work necessary to establish and defend colonies, and build imperial infrastructure.¹ This

¹ For two, earlier collections of essays on unfree labor in the Atlantic world see Colin A. Palmer, ed., The Worlds of Unfree Labour: From Indentured Servitude to Slavery (Aldershot: Ashgate
may be because it is easier to measure aspects of “productive” labor such as efficiency and productivity, or measure its impact over time, if the work results in a product that has value in a market. It is much more difficult to measure the value and productivity of what we might call “constructive” labor, work that built and sustained empires. The extension of empire into the Americas and elsewhere included a range of tasks even broader than those required in the private sector—extracting state-owned resources, building and sustaining settlements, constructing imperial infrastructure (ships, roads, forts, prisons, warehouses, governors’ mansions), transporting trade goods, and defending those settlements on land and at sea. This kind of labor might better be called the reproductive labor of empire, a labor that is often unpaid and unpleasant and therefore requires the state’s forcible expropriation of people’s bodies to extract the political and economic benefits of their labor. States’ efforts to coerce people into doing their work through enslavement, indenture, impressment, and penal servitude sustained European imperialism for centuries, but they also had profound effects on evolving ideas about labor, freedom, and empire itself.

While considering the debates that marked the Loyola conference, it became clear that our volume would need to address the conflicting views historians have brought to bear on the nexus between unfree labor, imperial expansion in the Atlantic, and the political economies of empire that guided such expansion. Most fundamental were debates about defining freedom and unfreedom. Early on it became clear that it was more useful analytically to think of various types of labor on a continuum, rather than as sharply delineated opposites. Yet the analytically comfortable continuum often foundered when we confronted workers’ own responses to the work regimes they were forced to endure. This was especially contentious in our efforts to understand the similarities and differences between indentured labor and slavery.

Chattel slavery became both the metaphor and the reality of the ultimate in unfreedom in Europe and its colonies by the end of the seventeenth century. This equation in part explains why the Atlantic experience of African slavery and its abolition shaped all forms of unfree labor in the Atlantic basin and beyond from the late 1600s onward. The racialization of slavery in the Atlantic world and its consequences for African-descended people marked a key difference between enslavement and other forms of labor coercion. At the same time, however, the labor of indentured workers proved critical in the formation of the Atlantic economy. For instance, indentured servants and