

# INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGES OF A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY

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We all live by robbing Asiatic coolies, and those of us who are “enlightened” all maintain that those coolies ought to be set free; but our standard of living, and hence our “enlightenment” demands that the robbery shall continue.<sup>1</sup>

—*George Orwell*

In a critique of enlightened and liberal attitudes, Orwell once commented upon the ambivalence surrounding the subject of the coolie. In metropolises and colonies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African slave labor and Indian and Chinese coolie labor underwrote the standard of living. It was coolie labor, however, that would effect the world “transition” from slavery to free labor, from premodern to modern production. “Coolie” labor, or Asian indenture, emerged in the midst of contentious debates. British abolitionists decried the inhumanity of indenture; American politicians sought to protect white labor from a coolie invasion; Christian missionaries attempted on-site interventions; and the Chinese government responded with public executions of collaborators in the traffic.<sup>2</sup> The political maneuverings and debates that surrounded the coolie took place in the global theater of abolition, progress, and emergent nationalisms. The politics on all sides were multivalent, multilayered, and globally imbricated. These important multinational debates took place in a context wherein the British and Americans were the leading coolie traffickers to the Americas, along with the French and Spanish. From this maelstrom, a strange lacuna emerges. What did the coolies have to say? How did the coolies narrate their own experiences? How is this related to the ways in which they entered the international scene as mass labor to the Americas during this period? The perspectives of coolies themselves remain spectral and difficult to locate, overshadowed by intersecting discourses of abolition, racial imaginaries, and colonial administrations of knowledge production in the course of those debates. The coolies, ambivalently figured as transitional figures, take their place as helpmates to history.

Though hotly debated, they have been portrayed as having something to do but not having anything to say.

In this study, I examine the perspectives of 2,841 Chinese coolies in Cuba, all of whom left behind stunning accounts of their experiences in written and oral testimonies. They described their particular experiences *within a slave society in the Americas*. These testimonies, in whole and excerpted forms, constitute counternarratives to historical narratives that elided subjectivities of subjugated labor. This is the first time that a critical examination of these original materials is introduced to the scholarly public. My particular interests regard the perspectives and, indeed, *arguments*: those presented by coolies in relation to literary genres and also historical and philosophical debates of slavery and freedom. I propose, through a presentation of the coolies' historical context and their testimonies, that the coolies of Cuba suggested radical critiques of the contract institution, which was proffered by Enlightenment and abolitionist philosophers as the guarantor of free society. Thus, my investigation conducts a dialogue with history (of slavery and freedom), literature (of bondage), and philosophy (of the "contract"). How are concepts of slavery and freedom—the bases of American and Western exceptionalist arguments—challenged by the histories of Asian diasporas in the Americas? Secondly, how do transnational narratives of the first Asians brought to this hemisphere (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) contribute to and revise the legacies of North and South American history and literature? The coolies in Cuba revealed their lives as intensely violent ones and as unrelenting struggles for not only freedom from bondage, but for transcultural practices and strategic language use, and for racialized and collective consciousness. The emergence of a subaltern body politic and their mass mobilization lends an added dimension to antislavery's history, i.e., an Asian resistance against slavery in the West that lasted several decades. Unlike literary-historical genres of the slave narrative and the immigrant narrative, the words of coolies have remained in the margins of literature and history.

I examine the global and local historical contexts that coolie testimonies speak to, and the production processes that shaped and disciplined their forms. I then undertake a close reading and analysis of the testimonies themselves. I argue that these testimonies can be read as "narratives" that display certain tropes and conventions and that also contain certain themes and arguments. Finally, I trace the subsequent submergence and

eclipse of the coolie narratives through a Cuban communal biography. Thus, this study is divided into five main sections. In Chapter One, I provide an historical analysis and overview regarding Chinese coolie labor in Cuba as situated in the matrix of sugar and slavery. It would be impossible (or imprudent) to broach the coolie testimonies without first examining the historical context and significance, and the particularities of economy and Cuba. In this section, I foreground and frame certain historical arguments and comparisons. This synopsis highlights interpretive concerns that address Asian migration in relation to slavery and also offers an historical interpretation (and related data) that contextualizes key themes raised by the coolies in their testimonies. In Chapter Two, I examine the testimonies and writing as resistance. I first attend to the apparatus of production and questions of methodology particular to narratives produced in bondage. I look to methods and problems raised in treatments of testimony from Indian indenture and African slavery. This methodological discussion is followed by the reading and analysis of the testimonies in Chapters Three and Four, with special attention to a series of written testimonies that feature “perversions of the contract” and what I argue are themes regarding “the commodification of freedom.” I present these written testimonies as literary protests that were fashioned within narrative conventions. The testimonies included features of verse, mythological allusions, literary and classical references, metaphorical and figurative speech, and conventions of classical Chinese. Following an examination of the written testimonies is an examination of the verbal testimonies, with focus upon a main theme of “race and resistance.” In Chapter Five, I examine the eclipse of the coolie narrative under exigencies of progress and the next generation of Chinese in Cuba. This second-generation perspective is told via a rare communal biography by an Afro-Chinese author from Cuba, Antonio Chuffat Latour, who dedicated his work to the coolies and framed the overthrow of slavery and Spanish colonialism as an inseparable history of Chinese and African struggle. This critical examination of his text is the first that has been undertaken in any field of scholarship. Chuffat revealed the eclipse of coolie history in nationalist narrations and the rise of the merchant class amid imperatives of modernity and racial exclusion. The role of *los californianos* and American policies in that process would be revealed in his telling. Ultimately, Antonio Chuffat Latour provides a veiled and subversive narrative of color and class, conveyed through his

strategic use of multitextual materials (such as newspaper articles, photographs, and letters) and his underlying tones of irony. Finally, in my conclusion, I examine how these earlier narratives connect to new narratives of global migrant labor and “new slavery.” Included is a brief research note explicating considerations and limitations in these translations of the coolie testimonies (in Chinese) and the translations of the communal biography (in Spanish). Materials for this study have been examined in their original forms and languages, and this presentation of these materials has incurred the significant process of translating the materials into English beforehand, a process which has been naturalized in this study but needs address and an accounting of method. This note acknowledges the impossibility and undesirability of “equivalency” in translation, and acknowledges the process of translation as constituting a “third epistemological body.” I also address special factors and concerns of translation that led to certain conclusions regarding the materials. This endnote also briefly elaborates upon research material and sources, with the intention of aiding others who might wish to undertake further investigation and future directions. The nature of an inaugural study of such materials is that only a few lines of inquiry could be pursued in the initial investigation, but there are a wealth of avenues that could be undertaken and many aspects that could be mined.

For now, I bring the reader’s attention to some technicalities of reading this text. Translations of Chinese person and place names appear in this study in two forms: Wade Giles and pinyin. As needed, I provide both forms, as called for in a study consisting heavily of nineteenth-century materials. However, when only the Wade Giles is known, and no original Chinese is available (from which the pinyin translation can be formulated), then only the Wade Giles is provided. Wade Giles is used as the preferred form in a case where perhaps a famous figure of the nineteenth century has become historically and primarily known by his or her Wade Giles name.

As for translations of Spanish passages, I provide these alongside the Spanish terms, though for a few of the lengthier passages, I provide paraphrases. I have tried to make it easy to distinguish whether a translation or a paraphrase is being provided. Thus, the English-only reader should be entirely comfortable with this multicultural and multilingual text. In some cases, footnotes are provided, which help explain particular terms in the

original testimonies featured in the text. Besides those instances, however, chapter endnotes are provided throughout this book.

## TERMINOLOGY

A study of the coolie subject begs the question of terminology. What do I mean by “coolie”? The term “coolie” has been reclaimed and appreciated as one of deep cultural significance, such as by scholars and writers who have explored the “coolie odyssey” and the diaspora-related history and culture that it formed; but “coolie” has a long history of pejorative connotations.<sup>3</sup> Community histories did not necessarily feature the coolie, partly due to the fact that “coolie” is a classed term. Asian coolies were regarded as lowly laborers. Imagined communities of belonging and institutions of historical preservation were fashioned and supported by merchant societies, which also had the material means to record, preserve, and publicize their histories. On the public platform, coolie was indeed present but as a sensationalist stereotype of Asian labor. Anticoolie and moralist campaigns, along with abolitionist writings against coolie labor, all contributed to negative connotations associated with the term “coolie.”

“Coolie” is also an expansive term, like “Asian” and “labor,” and it has a varied application and etymology. In Spanish, the term *culi* came late in political and social discourses. The Chinese in Cuba were referred to as *los chinos* (the Chinese), *contratados* (contract labor), and *colonos* (settlers or colonists). The term *culi* did not appear in the authoritative Spanish-Chinese dictionary of the time, *Diccionario Español-Chino* (1915),<sup>4</sup> and its etymology neither stems from Iberian nor Latin American discourses but rather was adapted from the English. In 1956 the term made its appearance in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, the authoritative dictionary of Spanish language, which notes its origin in English and Hindi and its use for designating Indian or Chinese labor.<sup>5</sup> Definitions of “coolie” also have been said to emerge or originate from the Tamil, Portuguese (via Gujarati), Chinese, and Fijian.<sup>6</sup>

My use of the term “coolie” is deliberate and strategic. First, I proceed in recognition of a body of scholarly work that precedes and makes possible this work. Studies of nineteenth-century labor include scores of period monographs and recent scholarship devoted to Indian and Chinese “coolies,” indenture, and historical particularities of nineteenth-century

regimes that contextualized indentured labor.<sup>7</sup> Most relevant for this work are the studies of Cuba that focus upon *los coolies chinos*. The term “coolie” is used in this study with respect to a deep and particular history. Second, the term “coolie” is a socially and historically specific designation used here in distinction to the diplomat and merchant, for example, which bring particularized social histories that are classed and racialized in certain ways. Asian migrations were (and are) composed of heterogeneous political and social histories over centuries, including migrations of indentured labor, “credit-ticket” labor, the intellectual elite, the diplomat, war refugees, war brides, the merchant/businessman, the student, the hi-tech and middle-class transnationalist, “astronaut” wives, “parachute” kids, and multiple passport holders.<sup>8</sup> The Chinese coolies of Cuba identified themselves as unfree laborers located in structures of colonialism and extreme exploitation. Third, I use the term as one that calls upon a *racialized* labor history, as “coolies” especially referred to *Asian* bonded labor and no other.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, a certain paradox underlies the usage of the term “coolie” throughout my work. The interpretive basis for understanding Asian migration to the Americas rests most often on notions of “the contract,” with its philosophical complement of consenting relations between equal parties, and a juridical structure of its interpretation. In effect, Western philosophies regarding the contract and individual have overdetermined and predetermined narrations of Asian migration, past and present. The assumptions of social progress, self-ownership, individual freedom, and consensual relations (even if these should lead to consensual exploitation, as Hobbesian philosophers might argue) frame immigrant history and its component of immigrant labor as ultimately “voluntary” movements. In the case of the coolie history of Cuba, I argue that the contract’s particular use was to produce *mobile slaves*. Coolies were marketed, sold, re-sold, rented-out, lent-out, and named and renamed by owners, traders, and police. They were moved to plantations, prisons, depots, railways and listed as dead, disappeared, or hired all at the same time—coolies were owned for life by one and many. Thus, coolie history and its attendant narratives become a conundrum of contradictions: hypermobile yet immobilized, owned by one and owned by many, fluid yet enslaved. The very contradictory nature of their enslaved freedom is depicted by the Chinese coolies as a surreal and panoptic contract state. This was a state in which they were

legally defined by colonial and legal discourses as free, yet were enslaved by (1) the very technologies of “voluntariness” (the contract), (2) the apparatuses of “protection” (the law), and (3) existing technologies of bondage (slavery). Some 10 percent of the testimonies examined in this study are from those who no longer called themselves slaves and who had been freed from bondage. Yet the most intriguing feature of their accounts is exactly what it meant to be “free” in a contract state bent upon enslavement. With this social constitution in mind, the term “coolie labor” here is used to apprehend a particular labor group under veiled institutions and racialized discourses that disciplined them alongside, within, yet *against* institutions and discourses of slavery. This use of “coolie” here posits a radical reexamination of liberal philosophies and assumptions regarding contracts and freedom, positing the coolie not only as comparable to the slave, but also as being enslaved by the very structures of “free” society and “contractual” society based upon concepts of self-ownership.

## WRITING FROM LOCATION

My study, as any study or argument, is delimited by the situation of its author. My intentions, however, are *not* to recuperate the “coolie” of Cuba as a “minority American” subject, which rehearses a kind of cultural imperialism and enacts a naïve homogenization of experience, history, and identity politics in the Americas. Rather, my aim is to excavate and consider perspectives within the global and local context of slavery and nineteenth-century philosophical and political economy. The study, therefore, conjoins several areas of Asian, African, Caribbean, Latin American, and American studies. It is through concerns of racialization, subordination, and colonialism that this study intersects and converses with the interdisciplinary field of Asian American studies and its concerns of immigration, race, labor, citizenship, and empire. Furthermore, Asian American studies has broadened into a field that also looks at Asian “Americas” and that finds methodological currency in “diaspora.”<sup>10</sup> Historian Evelyn Hu-Dehart’s ground-breaking introductions to the Chinese of Latin America began that transformation for Asian American studies.<sup>11</sup> In addition, filmmaker Loni Ding and the scholars who contributed to her work provided a visual touchstone for this broadening with a documentary on Indian and Chinese coolie labor to the Americas.<sup>12</sup> Asian American writers

and artists also have creatively addressed the subject of Asians in the Americas, such as novelist Karen Tei Yamashita who has written on Japanese Brazilians. Hu-Dehart's historical research, Ding's film representation, and Yamashita's creative writings pushed open the boundaries of the field. An increasing flow of work on the subject has been produced from the field of Asian American studies, including essays from people of Asian descent in the Americas in a volume by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Rajini Srikanth, and Leny Mendoza Strobel, and a recent collection on Japanese of the Americas by Lane Hirabayashi, Akemi Kikumura-Yano, and James Hirabayashi.<sup>13</sup> Most recently, Erika Lee has expressed the need for a hemispheric approach to Asian American studies.<sup>14</sup> While acclaiming these authors, artists, and scholarship, this is not to say that work on this subject has not been produced outside of the United States on the subject of Asians of the Americas. Relevant scholarship in this area certainly has been undertaken before, and, in fact, it has been studied for several decades. There is a large body of scholarship on the history and culture of Chinese and South Asians in the Caribbean, particularly regarding Guyana, Trinidad, and Jamaica. As strands of postcolonial histories often extend and cross, these diasporic formations and the related scholarship are often connected across the Americas. Especially germane to this study is the scholarship specifically regarding the Chinese of Cuba, particularly the work of three major scholars who drew from different archives and methods: Cuban scholar Juan Pérez de la Riva (especially *Los culíes chinos en Cuba*), Canadian scholar Denise Helly (especially *Idéologie et ethnicité: Les Chinois Macao à Cuba*), and Australian scholar Yen Ching Hwang (especially *Coolies & Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese*). When considered in tandem, I found them to provide substantive basis for subsequent work on the Chinese of Cuba in both global and local perspectives. I owe a debt to their work and to the long-standing scholarship of Caribbean studies, African slavery, and sugar.

These studies from multiple disciplines and locations share a common attribute, which is the implicit unsettling of binaries that have subsumed multiple histories and representations. Conventionally, the Atlantic and the Pacific are perceived as discrete epistemological geographies. Transatlantic studies traditionally focus upon Caribbean, West Africa, North and South America, and Europe. Yet the dichotomy of "Atlantic-Europe-Africa-America" and "Pacific-Asia" as discrete bodies of knowledge and



art needs to be reconsidered. Stuart Hall once exclaimed, “You *can* find Asia by sailing West, if you know where to look!” (his emphasis).<sup>15</sup> A creative linkage of transatlantic and transpacific epistemes brings to the fore the consideration of Atlantic and Pacific as being discrete yet co-constitutive. Questioning these binaries as they have taken shape over the *longue durée*, historian Gary Okihiro has revealed the deeply tied connections between them, resulting in startling revisions of racial and global histories. He also points out that trade with Asia was directly linked to transatlantic colonial and maritime systems, as does Herbert Klein, who notes that “it was no accident that the two most famous slave trade ports in Europe, that of Nantes in France and Liverpool in England, first achieved importance as international trades through their East Asian trades. It was their supplies of East Asian goods which allowed them to become early and effective competitors in the Africa slave trade.”<sup>16</sup> Maritime records reveal that in fact, many Asians (including coolies) and Asian-based trades also came via transatlantic routes; “transpacific” would actually be a misnomer for essentializing Asian migration.<sup>17</sup> A long-term engagement with the subject of Asians in the Americas involves critical and creative dialogue that queries “Asian” subjects in the context of “African” and “Latin.”

Returning to Hall, he pointed out the Asian presence, yet he also “collapsed” that presence due to limitations of existing cultural models. He remarked that an examination of the Caribbean is based upon “at least three ‘presences’” as suggested by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor’s metaphors: *Présence Africaine*, *Présence Européenne*, *Présence Américaine*. As for the Asian presences, he noted that “I am collapsing, for the moment, the many other cultural ‘presences’ which constitute the complexity of Caribbean identity (Indian, Chinese, Lebanese, etc.)”<sup>18</sup> In profound concepts of cultural formation in the Americas, the subject of Asians and Chinese is thus “collapsed” into models of national cultures and post-slavery histories. In that awkward dissonance of “presence yet absence,” apprehending the Chinese coolie becomes a deep and lengthy process of disclosure, one of unfixing entrenched binaries: slave versus free, black versus white, East versus West, Pacific versus Atlantic. This work contributes to that unfixing and also brings forward narratives that offer vital and fresh perspectives to understandings of the Americas.