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Perspective: The Other Slavery

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In the Western Hemisphere, the very mention of the word *slavery* brings to mind images of Africans transported across the Atlantic, sugar plantations in the Caribbean, or the American Civil War. African slavery was surely a defining aspect of European colonialism in the Americas. But it was not the only one. Native Americans were subjected to a parallel system of bondage as degrading and vast as African slavery, a system that has nonetheless remained hidden and poorly understood. In our hemisphere, Indigenous slavery occurred in every major area, both predating and outlasting its African counterpart. During the four centuries between the arrival of Columbus and the beginning of the twentieth century, some 2.5 to 5 million Native people were enslaved.

All European empires took part in this human traffic: the English, the French, the Dutch, and the Portuguese. But because Spain came to control the richest and most densely populated regions of the Americas at the same time that it lacked African colonies (and thus access to African peoples), it emerged as the greatest enslaver of Indigenous Americans. To extract the hemisphere's wealth, Spain made use of the most abundant labor at its disposal.

Ironically, beginning in Columbian times the Spanish Crown prohibited Indigenous slavery except in a few circumstances. In 1542, it banned the practice entirely, "...so from here on, no Indian can be made into a slave under any circumstance including wars, rebellions, or when ransomed from other Indians."[1] Unlike African slavery, which remained legal and sanctioned by empires around the world for centuries, the enslavement of Native Americans was against the law. Yet this categorical prohibition did not prevent Spanish colonists from taking enslaved Indigenous peoples all over the hemisphere and even importing them from the Philippines. To get around the royal prohibition, Spanish colonists and entrepreneurs, in collusion with some royal officials, resorted to legal subterfuges, carved out exceptions, and devised kaleidoscopic labor arrangements such as *encomiendas*, *repartimientos*, *naborías*, convict leasing, "Indians in deposit," debt peonage, and many others. This legal obfuscation allowed operators to continue forcing Native Americans to toil while giving them minimal or no compensation and is one of the reasons we still struggle today to recognize colonial enslavement practices for what they were.

Indigenous slavery long predated the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. As far back as we can peer into pre-Contact monuments, codices, and archaeological evidence as well as the earliest European accounts, we learn about Indigenous Americans enslaving one another. The Maya and Aztec took captives to use as sacrificial victims, the Iroquois waged "mourning wars" on neighbors to avenge and replace their dead, Native groups along the North Pacific Coast finalized elite marriages by exchanging enslaved people, and so on. These practices of bondage were embedded in specific cultural contexts. Europeans tapped into them and went on to commodify and expand them in ways that would have been unimaginable in earlier times. By the seventeenth century, Mapuche captives from southern Chile were marched to the port of Valparaíso and shipped all the way to Peru, unpaid Apache laborers from northern Mexico were taken as far south as Cuba and as far north as Canada, and enslaved people from Asia were transported across the Pacific to work in cities and mines in North America.

[1] New Laws of 1542. A web-based text of the New Laws can be found at https://www.uv.es/correa/troncal/resources/nuevas1542.pdf

Bonampak mural, Room 2, Chiapas, Mexico, 791 CE. Maya lords standing over defeated (and enslaved) enemies.
GIFT OF THE BONAMPAK DOCUMENTATION PROJECT, ILLUSTRATED BY HEATHER HURST, M. PHIL 2006, PH.D. 2009, AND LEONARD ASHBY. YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY.

Over the centuries, forms of enslavement changed in character from culturally specific Native practices, to broader imperial and seignorial labor arrangements such as encomiendas and repartimientos, to more economic-based forms of bondage such as debt peonage, until the arrangements came to resemble the kinds of human trafficking recognizable to us today. It is tempting to think of Indigenous slavery as a phenomenon of the early colonial period, a set of practices that fell into disuse once Africans were brought to the Americas in sufficient numbers. In reality, Native slavery in its many guises coexisted with African slavery all along and proved nearly impossible to eradicate.

Codex Huexotzingo 1531, drawing number 7. Eight men and twelve women are given as tribute along with feathers and other goods. Notice the *colleras* (wooden shackles) around their necks.
DOC I. HUEXOTZINGO CODEX, HARKNESS COLLECTION, MANUSCRIPT DIVISION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Who exactly were these enslaved Native people? In contrast to African slavery, which targeted adult males, most enslaved Indigenous Americans were women and children. This preference was often reflected in sale prices: Native women could be worth 50 or 60 percent more than men. Sexual exploitation and women's reproductive capabilities were part of the reason for this price premium, which existed in the Caribbean, Chile, and New Mexico and remained in place from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Some sources also point to the convenience of having women rather than men in the domestic sphere. To explain the higher price fetched by Paiute women, for instance, American trapper Daniel W. Jones noted in his 1850 book *Forty Years Among the Indians* that "the girls have the reputation of making better servants than any others."

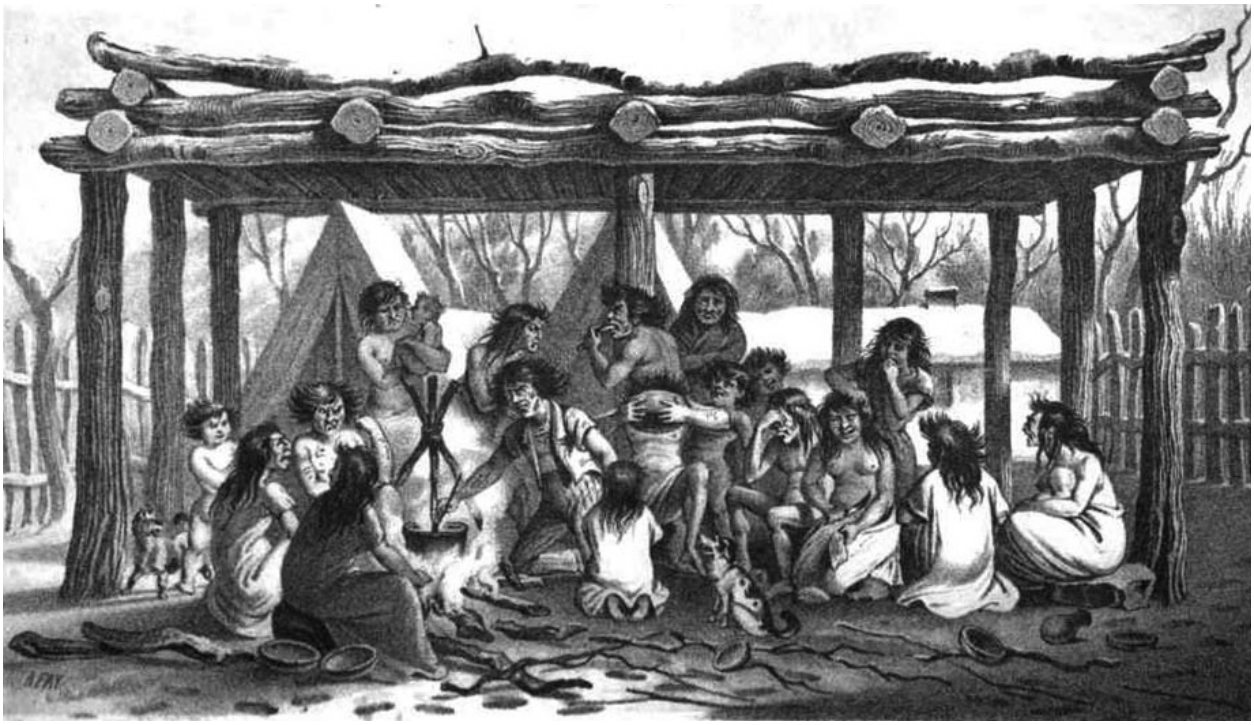
Just as masters wanted docile women, they also showed a clear preference for Native children. Children were more adaptable than grownups, learned languages more easily, and could even come to identify with their captors. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Indigenous slavery is that those held in bondage could eventually join their captors' societies. While for African captives enslavement was often passed down from one generation to the next, for Native people the condition proved more fluid. Its victims could become menials, servants, and with luck attain some independence and a higher status, even over the course of a lifespan.

Gold panning scene, circa 1560. This drawing captures the three tasks involved in panning for gold in the early Caribbean: digging (right figure), carrying dirt in a large wooden pan or *batea* (middle figure), and washing and sifting through the dirt to leave a few grains of gold at the bottom (left figure).
GONZALO FERNÁNDEZ DE OVIEDO Y VALDÉS, *NATURAL Y GENERAL HYSTORIA DE LAS INDIAS, 1539–1548*. VOL. 1. TITLE F. 18V. HM 177, THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY, SAN MARINO, CALIFORNIA.

Although enslaved African and Native people were engaged in a variety of activities in rural and urban settings, they were especially prevalent in the production of certain commodities. Just as enslaved Africans were common on rice, tobacco, coffee, and above all sugar plantations, enslaved Indigenous workers were closely tied to the mining economy, the backbone of colonial Latin America. In Mexico

alone, the mining economy was the equivalent of twelve California Gold Rushes unfolding over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The California Gold Rush attracted some three hundred thousand people from across the world. If Mexico's silver boom had occurred in the nineteenth century, it would similarly have become a worldwide magnet for voluntary laborers. But because this earlier boom predated newspapers, steamboats, and widespread transoceanic travel and unfolded at a time when the Spanish monarchy prohibited foreigners from going to the silver districts, the people of Mexico had to make do with their own resources—especially Native Americans along with African and Asian enslaved people. Indigenous people who lived around the mines were the first to be pulled into "the system." Spanish soldiers and volunteers rounded them up and sold them to the miners for thirty to fifty pesos apiece. Other Native peoples may have arrived voluntarily but were soon ensnared by debt. Still others were compelled to work in the mines in a type of corvée labor known as repartimiento. When the local Indigenous communities became depleted, mining entrepreneurs looked farther afield. The mines of northern Mexico, for instance, imported Native laborers from a catchment area that eventually extended as far north as California, New Mexico, and Texas.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Indigenous slavery is the involvement of Native people themselves. They were part of the slaving enterprise from inception. At first, they offered captives to European explorers and colonists, serving as guides, guardsmen, intermediaries, local providers, and junior partners. But as Native peoples acquired European weaponry and horses, they increased their power and came to control much of the trade. For instance, in the sixteenth century, the Carib Indians



Ute prisoners, 1850. A force of about one hundred Mormons killed several Native men and took about forty prisoners, mostly women and children, in early 1850. According to Captain Howard Stansbury, "They were carried to the city [Salt Lake City] and distributed among the inhabitants, for the purpose of weaning them from their savage pursuits, and bringing them up in the habits of civilized and Christian life."
EXPLORATION AND SURVEY OF THE VALLEY OF THE GREAT SALT LAKE OF UTAH, INCLUDING A RECONNOISSANCE OF A NEW ROUTE THROUGH THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS
BY HOWARD STANSBURY, CAPTAIN, CORPS OF TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS, U.S. ARMY, 1852. HATHITRUST DIGITAL LIBRARY

suffered greatly at the hands of Spanish slavers because they were widely believed to be cannibalistic. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, the Carib had consolidated their position on the *llanos* (plains) of Colombia and Venezuela as the principal suppliers of enslaved laborers to the nearby French, English, and Dutch colonies.

The Ute and Comanche nations occupied the same niche in what is now the American Southwest during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ute bands spent the winter in the mountains to the west and north of New Mexico. In the spring they rode into the Great Basin, fanning out through Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, and other places, where they encountered a people known as the Paiute, who lacked horses. Ute traders thus made the ferrying of horseless Paiute from the Great Basin a part of their seasonal movements, taking their captives to sell at the fairs of New Mexico in the fall, only to recommence the cycle the following year. Comanche traders operated in an even larger area to the east, north, and south of New Mexico, enslaving various Native groups as well as Euro-Americans and Mexicans. For the Ute and Comanche nations, enslaved peoples constituted a very versatile commodity that could be used as an exploited underclass of laborers, as pawns that could be exchanged for kin members captured by other groups, or simply as a form of currency readily accepted throughout the region.

Native slavery engulfed the entire North American continent, but the timing varied by region. By the nineteenth century, it had nearly disappeared on the East Coast. During colonial times, the Carolinas had been a major Native slaving ground; New Englanders had seized rebellious Native people and shipped them to the Caribbean; and French colonists in eastern Canada had enslaved thousands of First Nations people from the interior. Yet during the eighteenth century, the traffic in Native people was largely replaced by African slavery on the Eastern Seaboard, even though practices of Native enslavement remained in some places.

In the American West, however, Native slavery continued to thrive during the nineteenth century. The best evidence comes from the letters and diaries of westbound Americans. In New Mexico, James S. Calhoun, the territory's first Indian agent, could not hide his amazement at the sophistication of the Native slave market. "The value of the captives depends upon age, sex, beauty, and usefulness," wrote Calhoun in 1850, "...good looking females, not having passed the 'sear [sere] and yellow leaf' are valued from $50 to $150 each; males, as they may be useful, one-half less, never more."

Similarly, California may have entered the Union as a "free-soil" state, but American colonists had already discovered that the buying and selling of Native people was a common practice. As early as 1846, the first American commander of San Francisco, Captain John B. Montgomery, acknowledged that "certain persons have been and still are imprisoning and holding to service Indians against their will" and he warned the general public that "the Indian population must not be regarded in the light of slaves." His pleas went unheeded. The first California legislature passed the Indian Act of 1850, authorizing the arrest of "vagrant" Natives who could then be "hired out" to the highest bidder. This act also enabled white persons to go before a justice of the peace to obtain Native children "for indenture."

So persistent and widespread was Native slavery that ending it proved nearly impossible. The Spanish Crown had prohibited Indigenous bondage under all circumstances in 1542. Yet the traffic continued. Another attempt at abolition occurred in the early nineteenth century, when the newly independent Republic of Mexico proscribed all forms of Native enslavement and extended citizenship rights to all Indigenous Mexicans. Still, Native slavery persisted. One more opportunity arose immediately after the Civil War. The United States Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment, which prohibited both "slavery" and "involuntary servitude." This formulation created the possibility of liberating all Native Americans held in bondage in the West. In various rulings during the 1870s and 1880s, however, the Supreme Court opted for a narrow interpretation of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments that applied primarily to African Americans and generally excluded Native Americans. Congress also passed an act abolishing the system known as peonage, defined as "the voluntary or involuntary service or labor of any persons as peons, in liquidation of any debt or obligation that exists in various Western states," which was integral to the system of bondage in New Mexico and elsewhere in the West. The Peonage Act of 1867 was important, but the written word alone was not enough to eliminate deeply entrenched practices. Forms of Native slavery continued through the nineteenth century and, in some remote areas, well into the twentieth century.

Today, tens of millions of people around the world live in some form of modern slavery according to estimates of the Walk Free Foundation and others. Slavery is forbidden all over the world, yet it continues to thrive because its beneficiaries resort to imposing debts, prison sentences, or some other subterfuge to compel people to work under the threat of violence while offering absurdly low or no compensation. In this regard, the four-hundred-year experience of Native peoples with the "other slavery" is the most direct forerunner of the "new" slavery and offers two valuable insights. First, the emphasis on the newness of the contemporary forms of bondage is myopic. Surely, events of the last few decades have shaped particular forms of modern-day enslavement such as the sex trade or minors toiling in sweatshops, but the mechanisms of coercion that underpin such practices are much older. Second, only by contemplating a longer historical trajectory can we take the true measure of the breathtaking dynamism and staying power of this type of slavery and the tremendous difficulties of ending it.

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