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Indigenous Labor and Survival on the Colonial Pacific Coast, 1740-1849

Arenaria Cramer
HIST 121/ Early America
Fall 2023
Born and raised in Eugene, Oregon, I grew up immersed in vague references to pre-settlement Indigenous life. In fourth grade at public school—Camas Ridge elementary, to be precise—I made a poster about the Oregon Trail, studied the life cycle of the salmon, and took field trips to natural historic sites that Lewis and Clark had written about. While this engagement with the region’s relatively recent settlement by Methodist missionaries in the 1830s could have led to a discussion of the nature of the complex relations between the Kalapuya people and early traders and settler of the region, the dynamics of discussion inevitably relegated the Indigenous history of the region to the past; throughout high school, the focus of my history classes moved back to the comfortable colonial history of the moldy old East and the thirteen colonies.

Not until my introductory US History class at Pomona College did I realize that Oregon—and the mouth of the Columbia—had been a valuable trading center for not only trappers from the East but for a booming maritime trade on the Pacific. Not until college did I understand the interconnected nature of ports along the Pacific rim; not until college did I learn that fur hunters from Russian America and scouts from Spanish America alike had traded with the Indigenous people whose names I heard in vague land acknowledgements. In part, this ignorance can be attributed to the lack of physical monuments or relics of the Indigenous culture among the colonial history of Oregon Country; where Californians have the missions, the Pacific Northwest Coast has forests. But living in California, where the classic red roofs and white walls of the Spanish Revival style appear everywhere from resorts along LA beaches to college campuses, has taught me that even the vivid, living history of Spanish colonization built into missions all around us does not translate into any significant mention of the Indigenous presence in the poplar narrative of this region’s history. Instead, the prevailing narrative turns a blind eye to the reality of the historical and ongoing Indigenous presence on the Pacific Coast.
Challenging the comfortable American understanding of that which constitutes colonial history is essential to reframing the American West as a product of collaboration and survival; the lens of labor allows us to read the land itself as a monument to the huge amounts of Indigenous labor required to sustain imperial outposts and early colonial settlements on the Pacific coast. By comparing the organization of labor in the separate colonial projects from the Russian north coast to the English fur trading of the Oregon territory to the California missions, I explore the shared dependence of these otherwise vastly differing colonial projects on Indigenous labor.

This study focuses on Native American labor and survival in the three colonial regions, each a case study for labor relations in its imperial context. As my focus shifts from region to region along some 4,000 miles of coast spanning the Aleutian Islands to Baja California, I consider the labor organization within Russian, British, American, and Spanish imperial projects and the effects of that organization on indigenous lifeways. Following this Pacific shoreline of Indigenous survival, I find that these projects shared a profound reliance on Indigenous labor, each developing in its own way an interdependence between traders, settlers, missionaries, and Indigenous people as they struggled to survive in an ever more connected network of global trade and empire.
Russian America and the Sea Otter Fur Trade

Until 1741, protected from the frigid cold of Pacific waters by their thick fur, around four hundred thousand otters thrived across a wide geographic arc ranging from Baja California to the Sea of Okhotsk. Though *Enhydra lutris* is the smallest marine mammal, it can live its entire life at sea in rafts of linked otters, or floating colonies, thanks to the 650,000 hairs per square inch that make up its protective fur coat.¹ The same silky pelt that protects *Enhydra lutris* from the cold, however, endangered the species in the eighteenth century, when a Pacific fur trade developed and demand for such pelts grew. The Chinese market especially drove this demand, as Manchu upper classes would trim their robes with sea otter fur. The rarity and richness of sea otter fur made it a marker of prestige and nobility.² By 1792, on an expedition with the Russian Navy, the English explorer and naturalist Martin Sauer would write of the Aleutian Islands that “Sea otters are almost forgotten here… [due to the] havoc made among them by the hunters.”³ Despite the near extinction of the species, (and others, such as the fur seal) the Pacific fur trade would drive exploration and colonization of the Pacific rim over the next century. This was especially true in Russian Alaska which, through an extractive model, was to become the only overseas colony of the Russian Empire.⁴

In 1742, Danish Cartographer and explorer Vitus Bering, serving as an officer in the Russian Navy, led the first expedition across the sea that now bears his name. What was left of Bering’s crew returned to Siberia after proving that the Eurasian and American continents were

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indeed separated by water.\(^5\) They carried home the furs of marine mammals the likes of which the promyshlenniki—Russian fur hunters in Siberia—had never seen. These pelts, gathered from sea otters in the Aleutian Islands, would fetch higher prices in Chinese markets than the sable and ermine pelts the promyshlenniki usually traded.\(^6\) By the 1770s, the fur trade would make up around 8 percent of Russia’s total customs revenue, to the devastation of sea otter populations throughout the Aleutian Islands. More irreversibly changed by the Russian fur trade, however, would be the lifeways of the Indigenous peoples who had called the islands home for thousands of years.

Though the Russian conquest of Alaska was an extension of the empire’s previous continental expansion across Siberia, its maritime aspect made it unlike any the empire had previously undertaken. In the eighteenth century, competing groups of promyshlenniki, backed by private capital, had used the Czar’s arms to claim Siberia for the empire, hunting the Siberian sable. But in the mid-eighteenth century, while Russian control over the indigenous Siberian Itelmen remained shaky at best, Russians continued to push east anyhow, seeking more furs and using the Siberian coast as their “home base.” Any ship departing for the American continent had to be built on the Siberian Pacific coast; any manufactured supplies, such as iron nails, had to be transported thousands of miles from Irkutsk in the West to the Kamchatka peninsula to build the boats.\(^7\) Despite their lack of maritime experience and their less-than-adequate sailing vessels, the promyshlenniki began sailing the Siberian-Alaskan route, gathering furs as they island-hopped

\(^5\) The first Russian to pass through the strait was Semyon Dezhnev one hundred years prior, however Bering brought the passage between the Arctic and the Pacific to the attention of Russian imperialists. Orcutt Frost, *Bering: The Russian Discovery of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 213.


\(^7\) Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 31. Vinkovetsky notes that “the crushing of the 1741-41 rebellion effectively brought Kamchatka under more or less stable Russian control—although smaller rebellion and acts of resistance would continue.”
the Aleutian chain. Hunting the sea otter, too, was nothing like hunting the Siberian sable. This new fur trade required skillful navigation of North Pacific waters and boats that were up for the challenge—both of which the Russians lacked.

The Aleutian and Commander Islands

The Indigenous people of the Aleutian Islands had both. As the Russian promyshlenniki pushed farther and farther up the Aleutian chain of islands, they became more and more dependent on Indigenous labor and boats not only for profit, but for survival. The Unangan Aleut people had perfected the construction and use of the iqyax, a 14-foot-long kayak crafted from seal skin stretched masterfully over a bone and cedar frame. Manned by Aleutian hunters who had trained since their youth, these light, thirty-pound boats could travel up to a hundred miles in a day or carry over 400 pounds of catch through the choppy waves of the North Pacific. Amazingly, Aleut hunting spears surpassed Russian muskets in hunting marine mammals. Aleut parkas (fur or puffin-skin coats) and kamleikas (waterproof shirts made of animal intestines)

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8 Map from Jones, *Empire of Extinction*, p.72.
were more effective on the open sea than Russians’ cotton, linen, and silk clothing. As the sea otter population declined from overhunting, the Russians sailed farther for furs, and their survival became more dependent on Indigenous knowledge and labor. This reliance, and the eventual interdependence of Russian fur traders and the Indigenous people they needed to acquire sea otter pelts, would come to define the unique labor organization of Russian America.

Though the Russian conquest of the American northwest coast was different from previous imperial projects in many ways, the promyshlenniki carried many old techniques of Indigenous subjugation across the Bering Strait from Siberia. Two of these tactics were the collection of state tribute (*iasak*) and the seizure of hostages (*amanaty*) from local populations.\(^9\) In 1771, one Russian officer noted that, “They [the promyshlenniki] drag their vessels on to shore and try to take as hostages children from the island or nearby islands. If they cannot do this peacefully they will use force. . . . No matter where the Natives hunt… they are forced to give everything to the promyshlenniki.”\(^10\) Because Russian traders were wholly incapable of hunting marine mammals, they made labor a compulsory part of their required tribute. This requirement of uncompensated tribute was completely distinct from French, British, and Dutch fur trading practices in North America, differentiating Russian colonialism on American shores by its particularly extractive nature. Through this especially effective form of unfree, highly coercive labor extraction, the Russians established what would be the only overseas colony of the Russian empire.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, some eighty ships made the journey from Siberia to America, each one bringing disease, terror, and destruction to Aleut communities and

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\(^10\) Ibid, 26.
lifeways. Current scholarship estimates that the indigenous population of the Aleutian Islands declined by roughly 80 percent between 1741 and 1800. By the 1760s, the promyshlenniki had forced Aleut people to hunt the sea otter population of the “near” (the Commander and eastern Aleutian) Islands to nonexistence. Moving further east, the Russians now sought to control the Indigenous population of Kodiak island.

1787 Russian map “Presenting the Convenient Methods of Increasing Russian Trade and Navigation in the Pacific and Southern Oceans.”

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11 Vinkovetsky, Russian America, 19.
Though Russian fur traders recorded landing on Kodiak Island in the 1760s, Indigenous resistance would delay Russian settlement on the island for over twenty years after its “discovery.” Whereas the Commander and Aleutian Islands had smaller populations of Unangan Indigenous peoples and were largely treeless, Kodiak was fertile, densely forested, and populous. Difficulties of communication complicated encounters between promyshlenniki and the Alutiiq of Kodiak, more so because the Russians regarded both the Unangan Aleuts of the Aleutian Islands and the Alutiiq of Kodiak Island as one ethnic group despite their stark cultural and linguistic differences. The Alutiiq people organized strong resistance to Russian subjugation; only after slaughtering hundreds of Alutiiq men and taking hundreds of Alutiiq hostages (mostly women and children) did the promyshlenniki successfully establish a system of tribute on Kodiak Island.14

13 Miller, Kodiak Kreol, 29.
14 Ibid, 32-38.
Only the best-funded merchants and companies could afford to make the long voyage to Kodiak Island and the American mainland. This reduced the number of companies in the trade to only a handful, and in 1799 their numbers were reduced even further. That year, Emperor Paul of Russia granted the official monopoly charter for the Russian American Company (RAC), expelling rival Siberian fur traders and consolidating state—rather than merchant—control over Aleut and Koniag hunters. Modeling their imperialist conquest on the British joint-stock model, Russian imperialists assigned the RAC the administration of the Russian American colony. The extraction of sea otter pelts using indigenous labor was now officially a state-sanctioned operation.

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15 Tucker Jones, 10.
16 Vinkovetsky, Russian America, 34.
17 Ibid, 36.
The success of the Russian American colony on Kodiak Island relied on the Promyshlenniki imposing themselves into pre-existing Alutiit hierarchies. While Alutiit tribes had long taken hostages and kept Indigenous slaves, RAC domination further stratified Indigenous communities. Company officials demanded a set number of male hunters from each chief, and the control they wielded over these men’s wellbeing kept their wives and children under Russian control.\(^\text{18}\) The company further stratified Indigenous laborers by gender, their dependence on the company for survival, and their status as free or unfree within Indigenous society.\(^\text{19}\) Indigenous women on Kodiak Island, with the exception of the wives of chiefs, were obligated to work for the Company; each year, each woman had to meet a quota—a set number of baskets of berries and *sarana*, an edible root, that she delivered to the company for no compensation.\(^\text{20}\)

Interrmarriage between RAC employees and local Indigenous women became a central factor in the labor relations of Russian America. As historians, we can only speculate on the dynamics of these relationships; some were surely abusive, while others may have been affectionate. Undeniably, the fundamentally disparate power dynamic between Indigenous women and RAC men lent these relationships a high potential for coercion.\(^\text{21}\) Additionally, as the demand of tribute reduced Indigenous stores and disrupted Indigenous seasonal gathering and hunting cycles, colonization effected conditions of overwork and starvation, forcing Indigenous dependence on Company supplies and imports. These relationships produced a large creole

\(^{18}\) Miller, *Kodiak Krel*, 38.  
\(^{19}\) The most arduous labor involved in maintaining the colony was done by the *kaiury*, essentially slaves, who the RAC or individual company officials bought from Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, the most independent Indigenous people were the Tlingit of Mainland Alaska, who posed fierce armed resistance to Russian advancement into the mainland. Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 75  
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 77  
\(^{21}\) Miller, *Kodiak Krel*, 68.
population; children of mixed Russian and Indigenous race were groomed for RAC management in Company schools at Kodiak and Sitka. They were trained in Russian Orthodox Catechisms and the typical Russian schooling expected of imperial citizens as well as agricultural techniques. RAC officials envisioned the civilization of the land and its people, with Russian Orthodox missionaries and RAC schools advancing the vision of a Russia-away-from-Russia on Kodiak Island.

The RAC’s efforts to cultivate a competent creole class of administrative and managerial laborers were rooted in desperation; few competent Russians were willing to make the difficult journey to the colony, and even fewer stayed when their contracts ran out. As a former governor remarked in 1852, “a good worker not only will not go to the colony, but a good man can get there only accidentally.” The highly stratified labor organization of RAC employees created a continuum of free and unfree labor even among Russians—the company sold merchandise (clothes crafted by Indigenous women, for example) to the colonists at inflated prices, keeping them in debt. Only a tiny minority of top colonial administrators and commanding officers of Company vessels escaped the cycle of debt and tribute that lower-ranking Russian, Creole, and Indigenous laborers found themselves trapped in. The Issues of heavy work, a poor diet, rough

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22 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 114.
24 Governor Mikhail Teben’kov, qtd. in Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 79.
25 Ibid, 81. “The Russian American case is striking for the intrusiveness of the Company into the lives of the people who comprised its Native labor force. This new, more intimate form of exploitation appears to lack contemporary analogues: New World slavery and Russian serfdom capture some aspects of it, but work conditions in "dependent" Aleut communities and on sea otter hunting flotillas under the RAC also have characteristics that differentiate them from those categories. The use of Native labor in Russian Alaska was a hybrid form of exploitation.”
26 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 79.
climate, disease, and physical danger far outweighed the lucrative benefits that the RAC offered Russians in their recruitment efforts.27

Though Russian Empress Catherine the Great did not support a settler colony in Russian America and refused to finance one, many RAC employees married and had children with Indigenous women. The survival of both Indigenous people and Russian Promyshlenniki in the region came to depend on the labor of low-level RAC employees working alongside Indigenous laborers to sustain the basic functions of the colony.28 It comes as no surprise, then, that many RAC men moved away from Russian forts and into Alutiit women’s semisubterranean houses, built of driftwood and sod by their slaves.29 In 1790 a commander on a Russian naval expedition reported that Russian Promyshlenniki in the Pacific “appeared to be perfectly content to live after the manner of the Native indians of the country; partaking with equal relish and appetite their food, adopting the same fashion, and using the same materials for their apparel.”30 This cultural blending in many ways illustrates the complexity of Indigenous relations in the Russian American context: within a generation of Russian settlement on Kodiak Island, the shared survival of RAC workers and Indigenous laborers relied upon their mutual cooperation.

**Oregon and John Astor’s American Fur Company**

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the most sought-after commodities for European and American traders were animal pelts; the furs of seals, river otters, beavers, bears, and (the most valuable) sea otter fetched high prices in markets from Canton (China) to France. By the 1830s, the hides of California cattle joined this list, and the trans-Pacific trade spread

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28 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 75.
29 Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 53.
30 Gavril Sanychev, qtd in Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, 52. Though it was different from British colonial practices, Miller also notes that the intermarriage and cultural blending of Promyshlenniki and Indigenous populations was no new development in Russian imperial expansion.
from the Aleutian Islands to Baja California. South of Puget Sound on the Northwest coast, sea otter pelts were browner and their fur thinner. The milder climate of the Greater Lower Columbia that reduced the value of the thinner fur otter pelts from the region made the area much more ideal for colonial trade settlement.\textsuperscript{31}

From their earliest encounters with European explorers, the Chinookan and Kalapuyan people of the greater Columbia resisted exploitation. Captain Cook, stopping for supplies in Nootka Sound, would write in his journals that "I have no [where] met with Indians who had such high notions of everything the country produced being their exclusive property as these; the very wood and water we took on board they at first wanted us to pay for."\textsuperscript{32} Well-organized networks of trade and communication, and resistance when provoked favored Indigenous people of the Northwest coast as they negotiated the terms of trade and settlement with fur traders of varied imperial origin.\textsuperscript{33} These networks, and the leverage they lent Indigenous peoples, were critical to the dynamics of labor organization in trading forts and colonial settlements on the Northwest coast.

In 1768, British sea captain James Cook set out on the first of three scientific expeditions in service of the crown. Though he stopped only in Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island, Cook’s voyages—and the widely read journals he produced—brought global attention to the precious sea otter pelts and trade potential of the northwestern Pacific Coast.\textsuperscript{34} Almost twenty years later, funded by Boston merchants, Captains Robert Gray and John Kendrick set sail to follow in


\textsuperscript{32} Igler, \textit{The Great Ocean}, 35.

\textsuperscript{33} Igler 36. “at least fifteen organized assaults on Northwest trading vessels took place between 1785 and 1805.”

Cook’s footsteps, trading pelts from the Pacific Coast directly with China. In 1792, Gray successfully navigated the treacherous mouth of the Columbia River; as the first American mariner to do so, he established a claim to the uncharted lands of the lower Oregon territory for the young United States by right of “discovery.” Later that same year, British ships sailed farther upriver, trading with even more Chinookan people than Gray had. By 1800, the number of American ships sailing for the Pacific Coast surpassed that of any other nation—including Spanish supply ships from Mexico. In the next decades, competing imperial interests in the lucrative Pacific maritime trade would reshape the land, communities, and trade practices of the Columbia region and the greater American Pacific Coast.

While American and British traders made up most trade on the northwest coast in the late eighteenth century, ships flying the flags of Russia, Portugal, France, Spain, Sweden, and Hawai‘i also traded along the coast of the Eastern Pacific. To the majority, if not all of these traders, the Pacific northwest coast was one stop, albeit one with potential for great profit, on an extensive trans-Pacific trade route. It was not until the turn of the nineteenth century—around 1804—that the American Republic developed settler ambitions in the distant and unknown Oregon Country. The colonial and imperial competition for trade on the northwest coast intensified in 1811, when New York financier John Jacob Astor established a small American trading center known as Fort Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia. Astor’s Pacific Fur Company (PFC) was the first settlement of Euro-Americans to promise a consistent supply of trade goods to Indigenous peoples. Lack of military protection in the War of 1812 sharply curtailed the

36 Igler, Great Ocean, 33–35.
37 Igler, Great Ocean, 34.
38 Whaley, Oregon and the Collapse of Illahee, 12.
PFC’s political and economic influence, forcing the sale of the company’s assets to the British-Canadian North West Company, which the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) later subsumed.

Tribes of the Greater Lower Columbia

From the earliest days of the American and British fur trade in the Pacific Northwest, Chinookan and Northern Kalapuyan peoples controlled the terms of trade in the Columbia River region. Indigenous people—especially chiefs like Chinook leader Concomly—derived power from well-established regional trade systems and tightly knit networks of kinship. They

39 Map found in Whaley, Oregon and the Collapse of Illahee, 7.
recognized the value of their goods to Pacific traders as well as continental explorers and were highly adept at bargaining.\textsuperscript{40} These leaders often played competing imperial traders against one another, extending the negotiating process and demanding the highest quality trade items in exchange for their furs.\textsuperscript{41} Foreign traders depended on indigenous guides to navigate the strong tides, currents, and winds—not to mention the treacherous sandbar—of the Columbia. If they made it inland, American and British traders reached the Cascades and the Dalles of the Columbia, neither of which they could portage without the aid of upper Chinook (Wasco-Wishram) labor at exorbitant prices.\textsuperscript{42} The British captain John Meares lamented Chinookan bargaining in 1790, complaining that “We found to our cost” that the Indigenous people “possessed all the cunning necessary to gains of mercantile life.”\textsuperscript{43} After a few devastating losses of ships, goods, and men—most notably the 1811 wreck of the Astorian \textit{Tonquin} in the mouth of the Columbia—American survival in the region became entirely dependent on hired Indigenous guides, translators, and traders for guidance, communication, and food.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{40} Especially in Winter, the Corps of discovery’s Clatsop fort depended on the lower Chinookan tribes for Wapato (the Wahkiakums and the Cathlamets, who had access to marshy river grounds ideal for growing the root). Whaley, \textit{Oregon and the Collapse of Illahee}, 25.

\textsuperscript{41} Robin Fisher, \textit{Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890}, 2nd ed (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 44. There are discrepancies across secondary literature as to who, exactly, did the bulk of the hunting and skinning of land mammals. Igler states that “Native people—rather than Hudson’s Bay Company or Astoria functionaries—did the actual hunting and preparation of furs and pelts,” and Fisher’s \textit{Contact and Conflict} reflects this mode of extractive operation, Whaley argues that “the region’s Native population did little of the actual trapping, unlike the fur trade in Eastern North America, Western traders had to acquire permission to trap in addition to permission to acquire food, resources, and living space” (23). Both understandings afford the Chinookan peoples of the lower Columbia leverage in trading scenarios as well as power in the use of the land, however their implications for labor relations contrast starkly. Based on Fisher’s primary source research (see chapter two: The Land-based fur trade for examples) my interpretation tends toward that of Fisher and Igler, though I am careful to avoid brazen generalization.

\textsuperscript{42} Mathias D. Bergmann, “‘We Should Lose Much by Their Absence’: The Centrality of Chinookans and Kalapuyans to Life in Frontier Oregon,” \textit{Oregon Historical Quarterly} 109:1 (Spring 2008), 41–45.

\textsuperscript{43} John Meares, qtd. in Igler, \textit{Great Ocean}, 35.

\textsuperscript{44} Bergmann, “We Should Lose Much by Their Absence,” 42.
As the Hudson’s Bay Company began farming at Fort Vancouver in the late 1820s, the traders relied less and less on Indigenous trade for provisions. Rather than lessen the traders’ dependence on indigenous labor, however, the development of agriculture merely shifted the Euro-American-Indian relationship. In addition to their guidance, translation, and food supply, Indigenous peoples could sell their labor to settling traders for great profit.45 Indigenous people, especially the Klickitat at Fort Vancouver, ran ploughs on HBC farms, operated mills for the company, and worked in its forts. They began producing English-style hats and moccasins, with demand for such items growing as Methodist missionaries settled the region beginning in the 1830s.46

As the sea otter population dwindled, once-wealthy coastal communities accounted for lost wealth by cultivating other goods in high demand at trading forts. As the botanist John Scouler noted in 1825, the Haida of present-day British Columbia, for example, had been one of the wealthiest tribes at the height of the maritime trade. As traders moved inland, however, the Haida began to cultivate potatoes, carve cedar canoes, and craft “curiosities” to trade at Fort Simpson and with inland Indigenous people.47 For the most part, however, Chinookan people maintained their independence from Euro-American traders and settling missionaries despite missionaries’ and trappers’ efforts to ‘civilize’ them.48

Indigenous slavery had been common practice in the lower Columbia region when traders arrived. The escalation of the fur trade, however, drastically increased Chinookan slave raids in regions neighboring the lower Columbia region.49 Though Hudson’s Bay Company management

45 Bergmann, “We Should Lose Much,” 43.
46 Ibid, 43.
47 Scouler, qtd. in Fisher, Contact and Conflict, 44.
48 Bergmann, “We Should Lose Much,”45.
49 Whaley, Oregon and the Collapse of Illahee, 29.
later purported to oppose the practice—Britain had begun abolishing slavery throughout its empire in the 1700s—fur company employees profited from the labor of Indigenous slaves both directly and indirectly. Often, trappers and traders would marry Indigenous women to solidify trade relations and build alliances with various tribes, and when entering in marriage an Indigenous woman would keep her slaves. Through this roundabout process, as well as through the purchase of enslaved Indigenous women, many HBC trappers and traders, as well as later settlers in the Willamette Valley during the 1830s, used slave labor.50

Chinook practices of stewardship and survival persist to this day, however they prevailed in the lower Columbia region until the 1840s. HBC officials and missionaries alike were frustrated by native peoples’ disinterest in hard labor. In 1824, HBC governor George Simpson complained that if the Chinookan people “would but apply themselves to Hunting during the Winter Months the Trade would be greatly increased…unfortunately they are indolent and lazy to an extreme and cannot be roused into habits of activity.”51 Chief director of HBC operations from the 1820s to 40s John McLoughlin would lament as well that there was “a Good deal of Beaver Yet in the District but the Natives are so Indolent and so Independent of us they will not hunt.”52 This perspective perfectly illustrates the dissonance between extractivist colonial thinking and the Indigenous practices that had maintained the fertile land of the Willamette Valley, the thriving Salmon population, and the populations of furry mammals that seemed so endless to profit-hungry traders.

The Oregon Treaty of 1846 forced the withdrawal of HBC influence, and in 1848 U.S. territorial claim to the land sealed American control of Oregon country. In 1849, the first

50 Bergmann, 45.
51 Simpson, qtd. in Bergman, “We Should Lose Much,” 45.
52 McLoughlin qtd. in Bergmann, “We Should Lose Much, 46.
regiment of U.S. soldiers arrived, and Indian removal was underway. This transition marked the end of Chinookan social, cultural, and economic dominance in the Lower Columbia Region. Even as Chinookan tribes were relegated to reservations, Indigenous labor and lifeways shaped the landscape that attracted so many Americans to Oregon country. The lush, open Willamette Valley prairies full of highly fertile soil were a product of Kalapuyan seasonal burning practices, a mainstay of their seasonal gathering practices. Even after disease ravaged their populations and settler violence removed them from their land, the legacy of Indigenous labor remained inscribed in the fertile landscape, sustaining settler life.

**California Missions**

Early Spanish exploration of the Pacific Coast was slow going. The first explorer to sail north from Acapulco, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, failed in his search for gold after a mutiny. The next year, in 1533, Fortún Jimenez sailed into a bay of what he thought was the island of California; instead of reaching a city of gold, however, he and most of his men died at the hands of Guaycara warriors at the southern tip of the Baja peninsula. When the famed conquistador Hernan Cortés landed in La Paz in 1535, he attempted to build a colony with the four hundred Spaniards and three hundred African slaves in his company. Ultimately, supply shortages and agricultural challenges in the arid, dry desert led to the colony’s abandonment. Once the Spaniards left, Indigenous people burned the settlement to the ground. Despite this repeated pattern of exploration in which the Spanish found little gold and encountered strong Indigenous resistance to their landing and settlement, the Spanish crown claimed much of the Pacific Coast in 1535, when it established the viceroyalty of New Spain. This poorly understood and even more poorly charted claim spanned from the Panama territory to much of the present-day United

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53 Bergmann, “We Should Lose Much,” 54
54 The settlers would outlaw such practices. Ibid, 52
States. Though the empire supposedly held imperial control of land from Florida to California, several hundred thousand Indigenous people lived there, living with little to no contact with Spanish colonizers and governing themselves.  

Without an overland route up the coast, the faltering forts and shaky settlements in Baja California were entirely dependent on shipped supplies. Reeling from the Crown's expulsion of the Jesuits from Spain and its colonies, the missions of Baja California were in dire need of supplies and replacement missionaries. The project of strong settlement and real control of the region gained urgency in 1768, when rumors of Russian settlement in the north of the region sparked fears of imperial competition. The Spanish now had to conquer the Pacific coast first. By January 1769, five expeditions were underway: three by sea, and two by land. They planned to meet at the frail colony of San Diego. From there, a smaller group would march north to Monterey. The devastatingly reduced numbers of them that reached San Diego, which included the Catholic priest Junípero Serra, established the first mission in Alta California. Not until 1776, with the expedition of Juan Bautista de Anza and the establishment of a presidio and the Mission San Francisco de Asís on the southern peninsula of San Francisco Bay, would a strong Spanish presence solidify in the north of Alta California.

From early expeditions of which few members survived, to the conquest of Alta California, Spanish exploration and settlement owed its every success to Indigenous labor. Spanish explorers like Gaspár de Portolá pressed indigenous people into labor as translators;

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56 Ibid, 28–34.
57 Ibid, 42.
these guides would lead his expeditions, making the expedition’s first contact with unknown Indigenous peoples and negotiating safe passage as well as food supplies for Spanish soldiers. Indigenous knowledge of water sources and the landscape saved Portolá’s expedition from complete failure as it sought and failed to find the elusive Monterey Harbor. 59 Though the Spanish missionaries successfully established twenty-one missions, a day’s horse ride apart, from Santa Rosa to San Diego, they could not attract sufficient numbers of Spanish colonists to the poor conditions of Alta California; this meant that the Spaniards extracted nearly all the work to build and maintain the missions from Indigenous people.60 One Indigenous laborer called Pablo Tac recalled the process of building San Luis Rey, recounting the Padre’s orders “to carry stone from the sea . . . for the foundations, to make bricks, roof tiles, to cut beams, reeds and what was necessary” to build the church.61 This was forced labor; though not technically “owned” by the Spaniards, Indigenous people who resisted hard labor or attempted to run away were brutally tortured and sometimes killed.62

By 1786, Spanish California was a productive independent economy yielding steady agricultural production. Mission Neophytes—the term for Indigenous people who had been baptized and were held as laborers in the missions—died at alarming rates from starvation, disease, and abuse. Over half of the Indigenous children born in the missions died by the age of five. In 1830, Padre Jose Viader lamented of the mission Neophytes that “There are many deaths and few births. Sickness is always with us, and I fear it is the end of the Indian race.”63 By 1834, the mission system had devastatingly reduced the Indigenous Californian population; where in

59 Hackel, Children of Coyote, 43.
61 Ibid, 15.
63 Ibid, 18.
1769, at the founding of the first mission, the population had been around 300,000, it was now less than half that.64

By 1833, when the missions were “secularized,” or separated from any state-sponsored religious system, fifteen thousand mission Neophytes were freed from servitude. The newly independent Mexican government decreed that Indigenous workers should be given half the mission lands in the form of thirty-three-acre parcels, but few ever received their land.65 Around ten thousand journeyed inland to reclaim what they could of a pre-colonial lifestyle. A few thousand stayed on or near the missions; many had been born and raised there, and serving the Padres may have seemed like their only option. The rest became wage laborers in the Pueblos and Ranchos of Californios, or settlers, alongside some Mexican laborers. While some became skilled vaqueros, or cowboys, most performed menial labor, processing cattle hides, rendering tallow, and hauling the hides from the pueblos and ranchos to the sea. There, American ships would transport the hides and tallow for sale in the colonies.66

The mission system and cattle industry drastically shifted the Californian landscape and upset Indigenous lifeways. Before Spanish colonization, Indigenous peoples labored when it was necessary for survival. But the demands of the Franciscans and the cattle industry required that Indigenous laborers generate a surplus of goods; on top of farming to feed the colony, mission leaders and Rancho-owning Californios reaped great profit from the goods—specifically tallow and hides from cattle—they forced Indigenous people to produce. As cattle

64 Glass, Mission to Microchip, 20.
65 Glass notes that “In Mission Santa Clara, just seven of the former thousand neophytes received an allotment of land.” Mission to Microchip, 21.
66 Fischer, Cattle Colonialism 136.
trampled the delicate landscapes that had nourished them for so long, the extraction of this labor no longer required military force; many Indigenous people had no options besides this work.  

**Legacies of Indigenous Exploitation on the Pacific Coast**

From Russian Alaska to the forts of English and American Fur traders to the Ranchos and Missions of Alta California, traders and settlers (and those in between) relied on Indigenous labor for both survival and profit. In each region, shifting labor relations disrupted Indigenous lifeways transforming the land and ecosystems that had sustained life along the Pacific Coast for thousands of years.

Conducting written historical research about peoples who kept no written record presents a very real danger of historiographical erasure. Though historical storytelling necessitates some degree of generalization, ever present in my research is the reality that, in every situation, humans have a degree of agency. Another consistency across these three colonial contexts is Indigenous Resistance, and whether it manifested as violent rebellion, hard bargaining, or strategic intermarriage, Indigenous populations challenged exploitative imperialists in a variety of ways. Indigenous people may have formed alliances, entered marriages, or engaged in dealings with exploitative settlers for any number of reasons; rather than place a value judgment on the actions of Indigenous people or the colonizers they dealt with, my study examines the conditions of free and unfree labor because of the universal need for Indigenous skills and labor throughout the colonial Pacific coast.

This study illuminates the reality that Colonial American history did not end in 1776; on the contrary, much of it began in the mid-eighteenth century. It was Indigenous labor on the Pacific coast that made the regions of modern-day California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska

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so profitable to settlers. It was Indigenous labor on the Pacific coast that protected Indigenous lifeways, resisting exploitation through cooperation and conflict. It was Indigenous labor on the Pacific coast that shaped the land and ecosystems of the Pacific coast as we know them today.
Bibliography


