

RE-IMAGINING LABOR AND FREEDOM:  
INDENTURED SERVITUDE, THE 'FREEBORN ENGLISHMAN, AND THE  
RACIALIZATION OF UNFREE LABOR IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIA

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What was the role of indentured servitude in the development of capitalism? What is the relationship between the social conditions of labor and the production of ideologies of inferiority? What were the dynamics of the transition from indentured servitude to slavery on Virginia plantations, and what can they tell us about the relationship between free labor and racism?

This project explores how tensions between unfree labor and emerging ideas about the 'freeborn Englishman' and self-ownership<sup>1</sup> were alleviated by racializing unfree labor and moving English colonists in the direction of free wage labor. The ideology of racial inferiority that formed as bound labor became increasingly restricted to African slaves, and the autonomous individualism that became the backbone of free wage labor and capitalism, have a shared history in this moment of transition. I hope that an understanding of the dynamics of this moment can prompt further thought about how ideologies of inferiority can legitimize the unfreedoms and coercions that are necessary for capitalism to function while maintaining a belief in our autonomous individualism.

The story I want to tell begins at a point before unfree labor became racialized, when the plantations of colonial Virginia depended primarily on the labor of English indentured servants. The African slaves who were in Virginia in the mid- seventeenth century worked on the same plantations as English workers, sharing similar living and working conditions and often becoming free after a term of service. By the eighteenth century, racialized slavery had become entrenched, and English workers were no longer a significant part of the bound labor system.<sup>2</sup> During this period of transition, the discontent of unfree workers and landless freemen intensified, and their struggles posed a challenge to the colonial system of production.<sup>3</sup>

In my thesis, I use Bacon's Rebellion, a crucial point at which the threat of a broad challenge of unfree labor by servants and slaves was evident, and its aftermath, when indentured servitude and slavery began to be more sharply differentiated, to illustrate the shift that occurred. The aftermath of the rebellion provides clues to the trajectories of both slavery and free labor, and the ways in which the racialization of unfree labor served to resolve the tensions that had come to a head.

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<sup>1</sup> See Steinfeld, Robert J. *The Invention of Free Labor*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991, pp. 94-121.

<sup>2</sup> Blackburn, Robin. *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*. London and New York: Verso, 1997, pp. 258-277.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, Edmund S. *American Slavery, American Freedom: the Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975, pp. 235-270.