

BOOK REVIEW

PFAELZER, JEAN. *California, a Slave State*. [The Lamar Series in Western History.] Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) [etc.] 2023. x, 509 pp. Ill. Maps. \$45.00. (E-book: \$35.00.)

California looms large in global cultural imaginaries as a land of freedom and Hollywood, Gold Rush fortune, and tech start-ups. Jean Pfaelzer punctures this idealized Americana with a searing recounting of “250 years of uninterrupted human bondage” in California (p. 17). The book traces shifting regimes of unfree labor in three distinct parts. It sets the stage with an examination of the Spanish and Russian empires. The core examines the pivotal years in the mid-nineteenth century around statehood and the Civil War. It closes with an eye to the present with attention to prison labor, Native American boarding schools, and trafficked sex and agricultural workers. A work of broad synthesis as well as substantial original research, specialist works have examined this history already. But Pfaelzer makes an important contribution by sweeping across centuries and empires and by offering an encompassing inclusion of various forms of unfree and coerced labor. The elevation of the stories, suffering, and resistance of those enslaved, brutalized, and coerced takes center stage. Readers looking for analytical or theoretical precision should turn to the large existing specialist literature. With only passing attention to the broader political economy or systems of domination, the book prioritizes the experience of the enslaved in compelling and unsettling detail, foregrounding “violence and whips, waterboarding and chains [...] rapes and starvation”, while also highlighting acts of resistance from small refusals to large scale uprisings and rebellions (p. 21).

The first part of the book explores the rival empires that aimed to control California’s land and people prior to the mid-nineteenth century. At the Franciscan Missions of the Spanish, some 70,000 California Indians were baptized and then “never again free to leave the mission without a *paseo* – a slave pass” (pp. 36, 39). Punishment and control aimed at sexual, reproductive, and religious governance, as the Spanish attempted to impose a rigid, hierarchical Christian patriarchy on the indigenous inhabitants of California. This invasive religious governance, made even more desperate by the rapacious and unchecked brutality of the soldiers, provoked repeated revolts and uprisings in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. In particular, the Chumash revolt of 1824 overlapped with the emergence of the Mexican Republic. In 1822, Spain’s surrender had abolished slavery and promised citizenship to all, “without any distinction between Europeans, Africans, nor Indians” (p. 66). This raised expectations, and helped provoke the 1824 Chumash uprising. Following this revolt, the Governor of California issued a preliminary emancipation plan in 1826, and this was confirmed with a Presidential Emancipation decree in 1829. However, since legal freedom was not accompanied

by a return of lands, “a forced hybridity of slavery and freedom emerged in California” (p. 75). The Russian empire also expanded into North America, supporting *promyshlenniki* fur hunters and armed traders took “Alaska Native women and children hostage” thereby “forcing native hunters to ransom their kidnapped families with pelts” (p. 84). Tsar Paul I granted the Russian American Company a monopoly on the “full and forced labor of fifty percent of the Native population for a period of five years” (p. 91). Transported and abandoned to hunt, “Alaska Natives were uniquely mobile slaves taken into captivity with their kayaks”, and laboring a “thousand miles away from their Russian overlords” (p. 101).

The heart of the book follows the experiences of indigenous peoples, African Americans, and Chinese immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite the promise of freedom enshrined in the treaty transferring the land conquered in the Mexican American War, coerced labor flourished. From the 1820s to the 1840s, governmental authority impinged only lightly on California, and soldiers and settlers “enjoyed an era of exuberant violence” (p. 66). John Sutter typified the unfettered capacity of settlers to dominate and enslave. Sutter forged a personal empire that he called “New Helvetia” with its own currency. Sutter “captured more than two thousand Indian men and women from over thirty villages – double the number of enslaved Blacks held on the largest plantations in the U.S. South” (p. 165). Newly arrived US Army commanders accused settlers of creating an illegal system of slavery. While appearing to abolish forced labor, the military also authorized white settlers to seize any Native person who “wondered about in an idle and dissolute manner” for punishment “by labor on public works” (p. 167). With statehood, California’s new legislature built upon this military decree with the 1850 Act for Government and Protection of Indians. This legislation allowed settlers to capture any native “found loitering” or “leading an immoral and profligate course of life.” After capture, with no check on abuse, the captive would be leased to the highest bidder (p. 172). In the decade that followed, between 10,000 and 20,000 “Indians were kidnapped, indentured, and delivered into bondage”, a system so pervasive that, by 1852, “one third of Native boys in California were indentured and 65 percent of Native females were bound over before they were fifteen years old” (p. 175). By the end of the 1850s, “three out of four households in Northern California held at least one Native American” captive (p. 187).

This already pervasive system of forced labor was expanded by the amended 1860 Indian Act. Now, “any Native American not already ‘under the protection’ of a white person could be ‘put out’ to any trade or ‘husbandry’ for terms that could last twenty years” (p. 187). The two decades after the Gold Rush saw continuous wars of genocidal extermination, and thus, under the 1860 Act, most captives bound to labor who those who survived the settler-colonial onslaught: most were women, and three quarters of those bound to forced labor were under fourteen years old (p. 187). These women and children were typically sold for \$37.50, disguised as a fee for the “trouble incurred in obtaining possession of the children” (p. 189). George H. Woodman was one of the most well-known of the “baby hunters” of the early 1860s. When he was captured, however, he defended himself as “a philanthropist who had rescued one thousand Indian children ‘from the degradations of savage life’” (p. 197). Lincoln’s new Republican appointees in the early 1860s vowed to crackdown on “actual slavery” in

California and abolish the “unholy traffic in human blood and souls” (p. 199). After the Emancipation Proclamation, California’s Republican governor Leland Stanford, recognized slavery’s national retreat and rescinded the sections of the Indians Act that authorized forced indentures (p. 201).

Alongside this history of tens of thousands of enslaved indigenous peoples, Pfaelzer explores the experiences of enslaved African Americans transported to the state. Despite a state constitution that proclaimed that slavery would never be “tolerated” in California, chattel slavery was actively protected. Far fewer enslaved African Americans labored in California, but they were still a substantial presence: “plantation owners from the South transported about two thousand enslaved African Americans to California” (p. 122). Local courts enforced the sale of enslaved people, and California newspapers openly advertised the sale of enslaved laborers (pp. 125, 131). California’s admission as a “free state” was tied in the Compromise of 1850 to the passage of a dramatically strengthened Fugitive Slave Law. However, in California, where enslaved people typically arrived with their owners, and then escaped without crossing state lines, a loophole existed, prompting the passage in 1852 of a California Fugitive Slave Act. Fugitives would be returned to slaveholders, and “an owner could keep an enslaved person if he intended to take him out of California within a year” (p. 147). Before California’s Supreme Court in 1852, *In re Perkins* confirmed that the constitutional ban on slavery was “inert and inoperative” (p. 156). Yet, in 1855, California’s Fugitive Slave Law expired, marking a brief but powerful commitment to protecting slavery property rights in the state. Given the constraints of the law, Pfaelzer’s claim that this regime “opened the western territories to slave labor” seems overstated (p. 156). Certainly, enslaved people labored in California, but slavery was carefully confined to the margins of the broader political economy. Rather, wealthy elites ensured that enslaved property was carefully protected. The gradual realization of freedom in California rested on the activism of the state’s free Black residents, who in 1851 formed the Franchise League in San Francisco, and began hosting state-wide Colored Conventions in 1855. Told through the remarkable trials and interventions aiming to secure Archy Lee’s emancipation, freedom in California “did not hinge on a freedom provision in the state constitution” but was “delivered by experienced Black leaders and aggressive civil rights lawyers” (p. 228).

Perhaps the most important form of slavery in California in Pfaelzer’s account was that of Chinese sex workers. Initially managed by the Hip Yee Tong in the 1850s and 1860s, Pfaelzer estimates that this criminal syndicate “imported six thousand Chinese prostitutes, or almost 90 per cent of the Chinese women in California” (p. 246). Banned from landownership, Chinese merchants found enslaved sex workers to be a lucrative investment for their capital (p. 250), and enslaved sex workers could regularly command prices as high as \$1,950, considerably higher than the prices of enslaved African Americans in the South (p. 254). With sex workers displayed in cages and notorious markets, the slavery of Chinese sex workers raised outcries. The 1876 Page Act banned the further importation of these indentured sex slaves, but this closure of imports perversely raised the value of enslaved women already in the state (p. 278). Chinese residents, the police, and local courts helped Chinese sex workers escape captivity, with one woman, Qui Com, granted her freedom in 1871 under the Thirteenth Amendment (p. 268).

The final third of the book is the most sweeping and least convincing as it attempts to follow a thread of continuity into the present. California in 1879 was the first state to ban the leasing of convicts, but coerced prison labor nevertheless flourished (p. 311). Just three years later, a massive Jute Mill opened to produce bags for California's booming wheat exports, and thousands of prisoners were put to work and tortured if they failed to meet quotas or produced defective materials (p. 318). At Indian Boarding Schools, the incarcerated students labored under the "outing" system. In a typical year, hundreds of boarding school students were sent out to "cut and able hay, dig potatoes and irrigation ditches, and pick fruit" (p. 351). Lastly, the book turns to modern day trafficking, noting that perhaps two thirds of California's undocumented workers were trafficked to secure entry and access to labor, and with particular attention on marijuana laborers and sex workers as particularly vulnerable groups of coerced workers (p. 362). While suggestive of some intriguing continuities, these sections are so sweeping that they fail to adequately comprehend the complexities of the various conditions of unfreedom in Post-Reconstruction California.

This is a remarkable and valuable book that is at the same time frustrating and uneven. It is a powerful "gathering of witnesses" whose words show that California was a place where "invaders, enslavers, and entrepreneurs" prospered from the fruits of coerced and unfree labor (p. 380). The writing is beautiful, even poetic. It elevates the suffering that unfolded in "this beautiful house of horrors" (p. 29). In an appropriate spirit of enraged denunciation, California appears as "dystopia" (p. 389). Still, the text leaves central analytical questions unclear. The testimonies collected are repeatedly suggestive of unfree labor's connections to various systems of domination – class, patriarchy, racism, age, and state formation – but these more systemic questions are never precisely explored in a narrative focused on personal suffering and resistance. As a territory and a case, California is also underexamined. In what ways was California unique or representative? California remains isolated from its broader context. While the prominence of slave-owning Democrats in the state is foregrounded, one wonders how forced labor in the state operated politically and economically in terms of the larger context of the Spanish empire, the Mexican Republic, and the United States. In addition, while the book stresses a long continuity over centuries, this tends to flatten change and obscure variation in the place and significance of unfree labor over time. Indeed, what appears most striking in this *longue durée* perspective is just how profound the mid-nineteenth century rupture was around the Civil War and Reconstruction, even in a state where plantation slavery never flourished.

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