Jean Pfaelzer begins her 2023 publication of California: A Slave State with the resilient story of an Indigenous Wailaki woman, T'tc-ts'a, who managed, for a time, to avoid capture by slave traders and share her extraordinary experiences as a ten-year-old girl. Her story is part of the history of Californian slavery, beginning with the empires of Spain and Russia, persisting in the countries of Mexico and the United States, and finally ending in the decades after the emergence of California statehood in 1850. At the outbreak of the American Civil War, the war to end plantation slavery, Native Americans along the California coast ironically became the “new” slaves of the American West. In a state constitutionally against the institution of slavery and a member of the Union during the Civil War, slavery continued long after the war ended, in multiple forms.

As some soldiers at Fort Seward, California, were shipped off to the Union lines, many others stayed behind to eliminate the local Native population, capture many of their women and children, and sell them in a “slave-raiding boom” (p. 5), all in hopes of opening up land for California’s white ranchers and homesteaders. The Wailaki were not the only ethnic group targeted during the early years of California statehood. Through introducing these histories, Pfaelzer also charts the longer history of European colonization in the far West with the stories of California Native Americans, Alaska Natives, African Americans, Chinese girls, and convicts to show that the state’s current human trafficking statistics show a culmination of a history of slavery including “two discrete peoples with two discrete legal standings: white and not white” (p. 212).

California: A Slave State’s revisionist history captures the complexity of legal and illegal forms of forced labor in the midst of the war to end slavery. California, despite its statehood roots in abolitionism, had a shockingly myopic view on the elimination of slavery. Just as African Americans
were enslaved based on their ethnicity, eventually prohibited by the 13th Amendment, this was not the case for Indigenous Americans and Chinese laborers. In order to bypass the state’s antislavery policies these captives after the Civil War were considered “vagrants, legally available in the new state for capture, forced indenture, or sale,” under California’s 1850 Act for the Government and Protection of Indians (p. 6).

For scholars of race and ethnic studies, this analysis on vagrancy complicates our understanding of slavery in the European tradition of indentured servitude. This book follows the magnitude and varieties of slavery David Brion Davis exposed with The Problem with Slavery in Western Culture (1988), while connecting to recent publications on Chinese Americans forced into labor after the Chinese Exclusion Act, as with Erika Lee’s At America’s Gates (2003). Pfaelzer makes clear that California was a dominant slave trade region and expands the boundaries of how and where slavery took place in the United States, as well as redefining the definition and scope of slavery in America by including Western Americans, Native American groups, Mexicans, and Chinese in the discussion of race-based slavery. This monograph is an obligatory read for historians of California and the Civil War and would also pair well with Brian McGinty’s recent monograph Lincoln and California (2023).

Pfaelzer pulls no punches when stating that every week “from 1857 to about 1863, soldiers entered the inland valleys and hunted and killed fifty or sixty California Indians at a time, and then marched the survivors to a fort or reservation” (p. 7). Most of these stolen bodies were primarily women and children to be traded. She backs this up with exhaustive archival research. From these sources she has found evidence of over twenty thousand “vagrants” over this short period of time subject to similar forms of violence and enslavement in California. From here, Pfaelzer begins to chart the long and hideous exploitation of various ethnic groups of California’s history, from Spanish colonialism to enslaved Black Americans, and into the state’s ongoing tragedy of human trafficking.

Pfaelzer’s insight and engaging narrative brings voices like T’tc-tsa’s back to life, and, moreover, provides evidence of California’s history of often whitewashed oppression. Her book stands out due to her talent to locate and retell the oral histories of T’tc-tsa and others impacted by involuntary servitude in the Pacific Coast region. Pfaelzer’s work is a needed addition to publications on critical race theory and ethnic studies, particularly those analyzing the varied forms of Indigenous slavery in America, such as Benjamin Madley’s An American Genocide (2016) and Playing Indian (1998) by Phillip Deloria.

As Jean Pfaelzer thoughtfully captures, the history of slavery in California is the “creation story of California” (p. 10). The story of race in America starts with the story of slavery in the Americas. Moreover, race became a barrier for legal rights not just for Black Americans but also for Native Americans, Chinese immigrants, and Hispanic laborers. Slavery, legal or extralegal, begins the story of America and continues to permeate current political debates. Part of the Lamar Series in Western History, California: A Slave State continues the complicated story of the evolution of ethnicity and this thing called “race” in the United States.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery

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