

*FREEDOM'S FRONTIER:
California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor,
Emancipation, and Reconstruction*

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Index. Bibliography.

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In 1850, as California was being compromised into the Union as a “free” state, the California Legislature passed an Act for the Government and Protection of Indians. The act created a system for indenturing Indian children within the state to white families, compromising California’s status as a “free” state. Over the subsequent decade, Californians created a variety of race- and gender-based unfree labor relations. Stacey Smith examines this “history of the unfree West” involving African-American, American Indian, Latin American, and Chinese laborers. In doing so, she challenges many prevailing interpretations of both California and the West in the Civil War era.

California’s gold rush turned the state into “an international labor borderlands” (p. 16). Laborers from all over the world migrated to California to mine the potential rewards from California’s veins. But the need for labor along with the ease of desertion from employers led to the emergence of a multitude of bound labor systems. Debt servitude, indentured labor, tenant labor, concubinage, and apprentice systems were some of the various forms of unfree labor in California. There was even a brief effort to bring Black slavery to California in the 1850s. California experimented with a fugitive slave law that allowed slaves brought to California before statehood to be taken back to the South. The rise of the California Republican Party by the end of the decade, though, ultimately halted the entrenchment of slavery in the state.

Other forms of unfree labor posed greater problems, both politically and ideologically. Mexican “peones” and Chinese “coolies” were particularly troubling. Largely imagined categories, they “became vehicles through which white Californians interrogated the troubling inequities of

the emerging capitalist economy and the unfreedoms of wage labor.” Not only did they represent what wage work could become, but by working for low wages, they could undermine the “rough economic democracy” of white miners (p. 81).

The domestic labor provided by women and children tended to escape the notice of free labor ideology. But Californians attempted to meet the demand for domestic labor in a variety of ways, including capturing, kidnapping, indenturing, and apprenticing Black, Indian, and Chinese children and women. As captured and apprenticed women and children were brought within the household, their exploitation was subsumed under “family relations” instead of labor relations, where male authority was at its apex under law.

Reconstruction affected these relationships in disparate ways. Slavery, of course, was ended with the Reconstruction Amendments. Indian apprenticeship was ended in 1863, although vagrants and convicts remained subject to forced labor regimes. The impact on the Chinese was more ambiguous. Chinese exclusion emerged out of California’s Reconstruction experience. Both the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 grew out of antislavery ideology as they sought to exclude degraded forms of labor like prostitution and “coolieism,” which “helps explain how the Republican Party, ostensibly dedicated to equality before the law, could become a major force for Chinese restriction” (p. 229).

Smith’s study challenges the portrayal of the American West as a “free-labor landscape” (p. 3), and in doing so makes California’s history central to the story of emancipation. California’s diversity in the nineteenth century is what the rest of the nation would become in the twentieth, and its experiences a proving ground. One of the forms of labor left out of her story, though, is worth pursuing in more detail: exploration labor. Explorers in the West used a variety of militaristic labor forms, largely for security purposes. Given the inchoate nature of its government, and its official connections to railroads, agriculture, and slavery, the control of labor would seem to have been central to California’s state-building process.

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