Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 7, no. 2, 2026

Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

California: A Slave State. By Jean Pfaelzer. Yale UP, 2025, 520 pp.

The prologue of Jean Pfaelzer's new book on Californian history quickly makes clear that even the state possibly seen as the most liberal in all of the United States has a past closely entwined with highly problematic, violent, and inhumane practices. In late 1861, with regular Army troops leaving for the theaters of the Civil War further east, the remaining soldiers and volunteers were "to complete the massacres of the Indigenous California tribes who lived inland, capture the refugees, and sell them in a 'slave-raiding boom'" (5). Men called "traffickers" or "baby hunters" took women and children away from their homelands. Many would end up as part of a huge labor force supporting the rise of California's white ranching economy.

This is but one chapter of the region's slavery-related history. Pfaelzer describes how ranchers raised private armies to capture native people, enslaved African Americans were brought to California by their owners during the Gold Rush, and girls in China were kidnapped "for prostitution, shipped . . . seven thousand miles across the Pacific Ocean and sold" in San Francisco (22). She also takes a look at earlier Spanish practices of dealing with Indigenous populations: Father Junípero Serra who, in 1984 (200 years after his death), was named by two-thirds of Californians as "the most important person in the history of the state" (Thomas 186), is introduced as a central figure in Spain's eighteenth-century plan of "removing, regathering and converting Indians into obedient, enslaved members of the empire" (39). There can be no doubt that the Spanish mission system was a violent form of imperialist rule. Pfaelzer, however, oversimplifies its complex legal background. Corporal punishment for runaways, for example, followed the principles used by Spanish parents in regards to a child "going with bad companions or otherwise exposing himself to grave spiritual danger" (Guest 234). Violence or forced resettlement do not necessarily constitute *slavery* (even if people are living in slavery-like circumstances) but rather other forms of suppression based on political, religious, and/or patriarchal patterns of power.

As pointed out earlier by Robert H. Jackson and others, Spanish missions experienced enormous death rates. Over the course of about thirty years up to the 1790s, "six hundred Indian babies had been born in the compound [of Mission Dolores, San Francisco], but 2,400 Indians had died" (62). After a number of rebellions and pres-

sured by Great Britain, Spain (as well as the United States) officially ended their participation in the slave trade – but not slavery per se. Resistance against Spanish and, later on, Mexican rule continued in California, with the so-called Chumash Revolt of 1824 being one of the best-known examples.

Chapters three and four of Pfaelzer's book focus on North America's western coast including Alaska. In this vast region, the interests of Britain, Russia, Spain, and the United States collided with Indigenous traditions. Russian Tsar Paul subjected half of Alaska's male population to the rule of the Russian-American company, "leaving the women, children, and older people to fend for themselves" (91). Alaska Natives were regularly sent to California for otter hunting expeditions – the pelts were then traded across the Pacific to China. Pfaelzer continues by shedding light on the darker aspects of California's Gold Rush. In chapter five, the author makes clear that even a free state that did not record slave status accepted branding of persons as a proof of ownership. Also, "miners longed for female companionship, hungered for cooked meals . . . and craved sex, prompting some slaveholders to transport enslaved women to California and sell them" (131). Paradoxically, enslaved miners would strongly influence the referendum on a new Californian constitution in 1849: "white miners were fearful of competing with teams of unpaid and unfree miners" (134), thus leading to the overwhelming acceptance of a constitution outlawing slavery. However, the state's Fugitive Slave Act of 1852 stated that all enslaved persons brought to California before 1849 "were now 'fugitives from labor' and had to be returned to their owner" (147). In chapter seven, Pfaelzer also revisits the Indian Act that "embraced key elements of slavery" (172), such as the impossibility of terminating indenture contracts or missing requirements for wages, and deals with the mass bondage of Indigenous Californians as well as their mass killings – phenomena that can be explained with "the relatively low cost of *de facto* California Indian slaves" (Madley 640). In the Sierras, Europeans kidnapped girls from the Yuki and other ethnocultural groups who were then carried away – sometimes dozens at the same time – by ranchers. Eventually, the military of the United States "entered the slave trade in California. In the decade . . . leading up to the Civil War, it sold or simply released Indian captives . . . to slave brokers" (183).

Pfaelzer not only points out the victimization of Native Californians and other nonwhite groups but also the agency found in their histories in chapters nine and ten – sections of the book focusing on African American civil rights in the second half of the nineteenth century. She, for example, presents the legal case of Charlotte Brown, a free Black woman who, in 1863, successfully sued a tram company after being forcibly removed from one of its cars. On the other hand, chapter eleven (tellingly titled "The Importation of Females in Bulk") describes the fate of girls from China shipped to California; in 1860, "six hundred of the 681 Chinese women in San Francisco were

captives in the sex trade" (250). Facts like these were then used to justify legal actions against female Asian immigration and, with "fewer Chinese women, the price of sex with Chinese girls soared" (278), resulting in even more brutal methods of keeping the trafficked women from fleeing.

Chapters thirteen and fourteen deal with the development and functions of California's prison system, starting with the Spanish-era presidios before moving on to nineteenth-century prison ships, the opening of San Quentin Prison in 1854, and its character as a place of involuntary labor (where, in 1882, an industrial jute mill began to operate). Later, during the Interwar Period, "San Quentin was a site for pseudo-medical sexual and genetic research on convicts' bodies" (328). Pfaelzer also underlines the fact that the modern prison system is, in fact, an industry: By 2005, Federal Prison Industries (under the trade name UNICOR) "managed 106 factories at 73 prisons with almost twenty thousand prison laborers" (334). The two final chapters focus on the tragic history of Native American boarding schools as well as modern-era sex and labor trafficking. Pfaelzer describes the schools as sites of "the final battle against the Indians" (349) and notes that Californian legislature, in 2018, "explicitly defined modern human trafficking as a form of slavery" (379).

Pfaelzer definitely excels in telling the often-harrowing story of exploitation, subjugation, and violence in California's history. From a scholarly perspective, the lack of a theoretical approach to slavery can be seen as the book's main weakness. Nonetheless, it presents important aspects not only of Californian but also North American history and furthers a deeper understanding of complex realities that go beyond a dichotomy of "slave states" versus states prohibiting slavery, "freedom" versus "unfreedom," and "the past" versus "the present."

Works Cited

Guest, Francis F. "Junípero Serra and his Approach to the Indians." *Southern California Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 3, 1985, pp. 223–61.

Madley, Benjamin. "'Unholy Traffic in Human Blood and Souls': Systems of California Indian Servitude under U.S. Rule." *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2014, pp. 626–67.

Thomas, David Hurst. "The Life and Times of Fr. Junípero Serra: A Pan-Borderlands Perspective." *The Americas*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2014, pp. 185–225.

Martin Gabriel, University of Klagenfurt, Austria
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v7i2.258

Copyright: © 2026 Martin Gabriel. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which allows for the unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.