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Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction by Stacy L. Smith

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Author

Spoljaric, Sarah

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Peer reviewed

Smith, Stacy L. *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2013

Freedom's Frontier examines, through a chronological order, the political and social issues facing California during the reconstruction of America post Civil War and the labeling of slavery contradicting freedom. Smith shows through her use of narratives how historical events are not simply determined by the date stamped on them. Smith also brings to light how reconstruction was actually a nationwide issue and the struggles to gain emancipation even in the Far West.

Chapter one: California Bound, sets the historical background leading up to the Fugitive Slave Act and the influences of the gold rush on California's so called free land. It also revolves around ideologies placed by white men onto the ideas of what it meant to be free or a slave.

Chapter two: Planting Slavery on Free Soil, discusses how California became a state and the turbulence faced due to Southerner's holding stake in Californian slavery. It furthers these issues by examining how slaveholders went to the courts to allow slavery to continue.

Chapter three: Hired Serfs and Contract, continues these themes by showing the relationship between immigration from South America and China and the creation of Peonage and Coolieism. It also discusses the fear white Americans faced when presented with the prospect of turning into slaves.

Chapter four: Enslaved Wards and Captive Apprentices, displays how Republicans and Democrats clashed over whether or not to make Native American's civilized through slavery and the lack of laborers in California.

Chapter five: For Purposes of Labor and of Lust, inspects Chinese brothels and their version of slavery in California. Due to the demands for labor in the gold rush, women were forced to cater to the laboring men and into protection.

Chapter six: Emancipating California, illustrates how once emancipation reached California, Republicans attempted to "liberate" Native Americans and relocate the Chinese brothels.

California, Reconstructing the Nation, wraps up the book by exploring how Republicans and Democrats worked to strangely align antislavery with anti-Chinese sentiments to give a new take on emancipation (p. 229.) Smith also shows how California was not the land of the free as projected during the mid eighteen hundreds.

By uniting all these narratives under the different versions of slavery, Smith manages to show how wide reaching slavery was and the depths it reached in California. She uses vocabulary to evoke feelings from the reader that are not typically associated with the Civil War era in California, such as serf or reconstruction. Overall I would recommend this book because it gives insight to an area Smith describes as lost through Civil War history. This book also made me think about how much of history becomes lost in the cracks in comparison to what is fabricated for the profit of the author.

Sarah Spoljaric