
In the United States the term slavery is usually associated with African American enslavement. Andres Reséndez, Professor of History at University of California, Davis, argues for the central importance of the hidden and overlooked enslavement of Native Americans in North America from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Part synthesis, part original research, Reséndez’s book spans several centuries beginning with the conquistadores and ending with the complicated story of emancipation in the twentieth century.

The Spanish Crown outlawed slavery, but this did not end its practice. Reséndez identifies four characteristics to define enslavement: forcible removal and relocation, the inability to leave the workplace, compulsion to work under threat, and little to no pay. He examines those traits in the Caribbean, Mexico, and the American Southwest. Yet this is not a running history of native enslavement in the Western Hemisphere. Instead he focuses on the conquistadores, the Mexico that inherited the Spanish tradition, the areas Mexico lost in the Mexican-American War, and the Americans who encountered Native slaves.

While Old World diseases contributed to the loss of Native populations, tens of thousands were worked to death. Reséndez establishes a narrative using population decline, silver mining, and the legal abolition of slavery to illustrate the presence of the “other” slavery in early American history. Tracing Native enslavement beyond legal boundaries exposes forms of bondage supported by the state, and unlawful enslavement of Native Americans despite the official end of slavery. Reséndez also investigates the status of the other slaves in society who had increased likelihood for social mobility. By addressing the extensive network of carefully planned trafficking, the magnitude of the trade becomes apparent. This contextualizes American understandings of African and Native enslavement, and the connection between Black Codes and the systems that enforced enslavement.
Reséndez engages the historiographies of slavery and Native Americans, as he also mines period newspapers, legal records, correspondence, local and regional studies, diaries, and testimonies. He succeeds in illustrating the significant impact of slavery in shaping societies that exploited Natives. The explanation for the varying slave count in different regions and the statistical data are enlightening. The argument is particularly persuasive because it demonstrates society’s role as an enabler for the existence of slavery regardless of government legislation. It falls short when it comes to race and gender, and the regions of the United States beyond the Southwest. However, those gaps are also opportunities for further research. This approach is not for beginners because it requires a significant amount of prior knowledge. This monograph is an important resource for those looking for a deeper understanding of slavery and Native American history.

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