

Name

Event Write Up

5 February 2026

Labor, Innovation, and Historical Materialism in Kelsey Roggensack's Candidate Talk

Kelsey Roggensack's candidate talk, "Emancipatory Rituals: African American Women of the Western United States," centers on Black women's practices of mobility and movement in the West. Focusing on the nineteenth century, Roggensack's research question is: "How do we understand the West as told by Black women's stories?" Roggensack presents three Black women who exemplify her theory of "Emancipatory Rituals" -- the theory that Black women resisted oppression through "intellectual, militaristic, and repetitive movement" (Roggensack). During the talk, however, the material conditions and occupations of these women were somewhat left out (which can be due to missing information in the archive), and the economic conditions during the time period were not analyzed.

Roggensack first presented on Pearl Robinson, a woman who "wandered," and "explored" the West, South, and Mexico in search of work. (Roggensack). This case study showed that Robinson used train routes such as the "Sunset Route" and the rise of railroads to travel around the country. Due to Roggensack's extensive engagement with mobility, train routes, and the growth of industrialization in the United States, one would assume that the talk, if brief, would analyze the rise of the Second Industrial Revolution. More specifically, the analysis of *how* this period of rapid industrialization impacted health, mobility, and labor practices—in comparison to agricultural labor—of Black and Brown people would have been impactful. I would have posed the question: other than the fact that technological innovation and the rise of industrial capitalism helped Black women move across the

country, how else did these two ideas impact the lives and status of the Black women in your research? What jobs or opportunities did Robinson (and other Black women in your research) have that helped her travel around the country? How does your research shift if we look at “the West as told by Black women’s stories” *and* their relation to their material conditions, labor practices, and relationship to reproductive labor?

Robinson’s daily journey consisted of looking at the scenery, which she described as being area “heavily deserted” (Roggensack). The natural environment of the West, of course, is highly deserted, but it is a valid question to ask if the nature that Robinson saw was due to the climatic conditions of the region, or the immense damage caused by railroads. In reference to another case study in Roggensack’s presentation, she demonstrates how a Black woman she found in the archives owned a mining operation with her husband—I do believe such mining practices in the West contributed to the damage of the natural environment. In Karl Marx’s “Wage Labor and Capital,” he argues that the division of labor and capitalist development of industries causes “the utilisation of new machines and their improvement, by more profitable and extensive exploitation of natural forces” (Marx 212). Indeed, there is a possibility that the sites and environment Robinson sees are very much destroyed by the extraction of coal, mining practices, and pollution from the train and railroad industry to gain profit and rapidly industrialize on a world-scale.

Forced enclosure and forced confinement, too, were aspects of Roggensack’s presentation. Mary Winrow Johnson, an enslaved Black woman who was forced to relocate to the West, foiled Pearl Robinson’s life: instead of getting to “wander,” she was “confined” in a position that prohibited her from seeing her children (Roggensack). Roggensack talked a little about the divisions of labor, mainly

the sexual division of labor. Roggensack mentions that some women in her case studies were limited in their means of movement, economic stability, and mobility throughout the United States; she states that there is a “restriction of the family unit because of domestic labor and reproductive labor.” This parallels Sylvia Federici’s analysis of reproductive labor in her book *Caliban and the Witch*, where she illustrates that women were “confined to reproductive labor” (Federici 74). However, the forced confinement of the women in both Federici and Roggensack’s projects did not come without resistance. In seventeenth-century Europe, women “destroyed enclosures,” “broke into enclosed fens,” and held up “pitchforks and scythes [to resist] the fencing of the land or the draining of the fens when their livelihood was threatened” (Federici 73). Federici extends this analysis to a global scale in her essay, “Women, Land-Struggles and Globalization: An International Perspective,” where she points out the scales of resistance against “international agencies’ drive to privatize land and commercialize agriculture” (55). As Roggensack presents, in the nineteenth-century American West, Black women and men—such as Mary Fields, Addie Payne, and William Payne—used guns as a means of protection. Here, “violence is a resource to freedom” and a means to “maintain [said] freedom” (Roggensack).

The connections between Roggensack’s presentation and Federici portray how this process of violent primitive accumulation is “ongoing” and constantly reinventing itself. In part, Roggensack’s presentation does engage with Black women’s material conditions in the West. However, an in-depth understanding of the socio-economic conditions of her case studies would help readers understand how the economy, labor, race, and gender divides are tied into systemic institutions. Nevertheless, Roggensack’s research on mobility, resistance, and Black women in the West is a much-needed addition to history in academia.

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Works Cited

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