

Christy Clark-Pujara. *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island.* Early American Places Series. New York: New York University Press, 2016. 224 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-7042-4.

Reviewed by Kate McMahon

Published on H-Slavery (September, 2017)

Commissioned by David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island by Christy Clark-Pujara is a deft examination of the role that Rhode Island merchants and slaveholders played in the larger slave economy of the Atlantic world. In particular, Clark-Pujara argues that slavery was deeply entrenched in the economy of Rhode Island and the larger North, and that “slavery and capitalism, far from being separate and incompatible systems, were utterly interdependent” (p. 2). She notes that unlike in the South, where chattel slavery produced agricultural products, such as cotton and tobacco, slaves toiling in the North never produced cash crops. Rather, enslaved New Englanders largely worked on dairies, in breweries and distilleries, as skilled or household laborers, and most importantly, in seafaring. Slaveholders exploited the labor of enslaved sailors—and those engaged in industries related to the sea—further supporting the economic system of slavery in the South and in the Atlantic world. However, Clark-Pujara rightly demonstrates that black Rhode Islanders, enslaved and free, took every opportunity to express their personal agency and resist both slavery and racism in the state.

Clark-Pujara states in the introduction that she aims to utilize the history of economics to understand how slavery dominated the capitalistic endeavors of Rhode Islanders and how this sys-

tem shaped the lived experience of black Rhode Islanders. However, *Dark Work* is not the history of slavery and capitalism that Clark-Pujara states it is going to be in the introduction. Rather, it is far more a history of people of African descent in Rhode Island resisting first slavery and then institutionalized racism in the region. The first chapter, “The Business of Slavery and the Making of Race,” shows how deeply slavery permeated both the economic and legal systems of the region. She describes how, beginning in the colonial period, white Rhode Islanders began not only to own slaves themselves but also increasingly to support and trade with the West Indies. The economic reliance of New Englanders on trade with the West Indies was noted by both W. E. B. Du Bois in his classic 1896 *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* and Lorenzo Johnston Greene in *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (1942). Rum was traded for slaves, molasses, and sugar in the West Indies, which was distilled in Rhode Island (and in other New England states) into more rum. This economic system allowed for the rapid expansion of both slavery in the state and shipbuilding and shipping, which helped create Newport as a major slave trading port in the Americas by the eighteenth century.

Clark-Pujara is careful to note the human toll that the increase of wealth and power of the slaveholding class had on people of African descent in the state. Unlike in other New England states, slaveholders in Rhode Island were able to consolidate power in state and local governments in order to maintain and expand race-based slavery. She includes a discussion of the efforts that slaveholders went to to police black behavior as early as 1703, when the Rhode Island General Assembly legitimized race-based slavery and racism into law, prohibiting blacks and Native Americans from moving freely and allowing any white person to question and detain them. Yet as Clark-Pujara states in the second chapter, “slavery was a negotiated relationship and ... enslaved people were not powerless” (p. 42).

In 1784, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed gradual emancipation in the state and prohibited Rhode Islanders from participating in the Atlantic slave trade. This, as Clark-Pujara notes, came during the Age of Revolution, when the emancipatory rhetoric of the American Revolution caused an ideological discordance between slavery and freedom. Slaves in Massachusetts, such as Quock Walker and Elizabeth Freeman, leveraged this discord into the abolition of slavery in the state. Yet as Clark-Pujara argues, emancipation at home did not stop white Rhode Islanders from participating in slavery and the slave trade in the rest of the world. The massive wealth generated by the slave trading merchants and those engaged in other industries related to slavery went on to fund major banking and educational institutions in the state, such as Brown University.

Clark-Pujara notes the importance of textile mills to the state and region as a whole during the early years of the Industrial Revolution. In cities like Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Saco and Biddeford, Maine, textile mills were the centers and economic powerhouses of their communities. The raw material, especially cotton, was cultivated and picked by enslaved laborers in the

South, and brought to New England via train or ship. Unlike the rest of New England, however, Rhode Island’s textile mills created clothing primarily for enslaved people in the South. Clark-Pujara states that by 1850, a whopping 79 percent of all textile mills in Rhode Island produced “negro cloth” (p. 90). Slavery became even more important to the economics of the state *after* emancipation there.

The second half of *Dark Work* deals primarily with the agency of both enslaved and free blacks in Rhode Island. Clark-Pujara presents the various institutions that African Americans built, which were meant to uplift the race. She also describes the ways in which whites tried to limit black agency and behavior, particularly their right to vote. She discusses the violent riots that occurred in Rhode Island in which two free black communities, Snowtown and Hardscrabble, were destroyed by white rioters. A consistent theme in *Dark Work* is how attempts by African Americans for citizenship and agency were met by resistance, often violent, by whites. Despite this, black Rhode Islanders created schools, community organizations, churches, and communities, effectively dismantling slavery and much of the state-sponsored racism, like segregated schools, by the end of the Civil War.

Dark Work is an excellent study on the importance of slavery in the economy of Rhode Island. Moreover, it is an examination of how African Americans resisted the social and economic system of slavery and racism in the state and successfully found community, agency, and freedom within often very challenging circumstances.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

Citation: Kate McMahon. Review of Clark-Pujara, Christy. *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49358>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.