

Dark Work: The Business Of Slavery In Rhode Island

Patrick H. Breen

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Recommended Citation

Breen, Patrick H. (2017) "Dark Work: The Business Of Slavery In Rhode Island," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.4.12

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss4/7>

Review

Breen, Patrick H.

Fall 2017

Clark-Pujara, Christy *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*. NYU Press, \$40.00 ISBN 1479870420

Tracing Slavery's Tentacles in New England

Christie Clark-Pujara's *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* has great ambitions for such a little work. Like many recent historians, Clark-Pujara wants to explore the relationship of slavery and capitalism. One of Clark-Pujara's main goals is to contribute to the efforts of Sven Beckert and others who are revitalizing a modern version of Eric Williams's thesis on the relationship of slavery and the industrial revolution. Clark-Pujara argues that slavery made essential contributions to the rise of the industrial revolution in southern New England. As she writes on page 29, "Northerners were not peripheral to the development of slavery in the Atlantic world." Slavery was more prevalent in Rhode Island, especially South County and the ports of Providence and Newport, than many people might imagine. Moreover, Rhode Island traders were deeply involved in the slave trade. In the years just before the Revolution, Rhode Island equipped three quarters of the slave trading voyages outfitted in British North America. Unlike early abolitionists, who used the horrors of the middle passage as a way to exemplify the greatest horrors of slavery, Clark-Pujara focuses her attention on the businesses tangential to the slave trade to show how far the tentacles of slavery extended—from farms to workshops, from wharfs to distilleries—throughout Rhode Island.

Slavery itself was put on the path to gradual extinction in Rhode Island in 1784 (and the last two Rhode Island slaves were finally emancipated in 1842), but Clark-Pujara insists that focusing on emancipation and a 1787 law that prohibited Rhode Islanders from participating in the transatlantic slave trade obscures the way that white Rhode Islanders continued to profit from the business of slavery. As she writes on page 85, "slave trading actually grew tremendously after the slave trade ban was passed." Drawing on the story of the

DeWolf family, whose activities play a prominent role in Katrina Browne's 2008 *Traces of the Trade*, Clark-Pujara shows that slave trading remained an important part of mercantile life in early republic Rhode Island. She finds a similar pattern in the ancillary industries. Even as the number of people enslaved in Rhode Island declined, Clark-Pujara suggests on page 84 that "the number of people involved in the business of slavery increased."

At the end of *Dark Work*, Clark-Pujara turns her attention to what she calls, on pages 4-5, "my primary concern:" how blacks "responded to the restrictions imposed by a socio-economic system that depended on oppressing people of African descent." In a world where slavery was woven into so much of Rhode Island's economy, blacks found themselves persecuted and attacked. Blacks responded to this in a variety of ways, including pursuing economic advancement. By the late eighteenth century, many Rhode Island blacks decided that forming voluntary associations—including the Free African Union Society (1780), the African Benevolent Society (1807) and the African Union Meeting House (1819)—was a smart way to promote their interests. In 1842, black activism became more clearly political, as two hundred armed black men joined the effort to suppress Dorr's populist revolt, which lost favor with blacks when the People's Convention promulgated a revised state constitution that explicitly excluded blacks from suffrage. On the eve of the Civil War, many blacks supported the effort to end segregated schools in Providence, Newport, and Bristol, an effort that finally accomplished its goal in 1866. By this time, the Civil War had ended, but not before hundreds of blacks had rallied enlisted in the Rhode Island Fourteenth Regiment, which eventually enlisted more than eighteen hundred black men, many Rhode Island citizens.

The way that *Dark Work* challenges historians to think about New England's deep and sometimes hidden connections to slavery makes it a useful book, and Clark-Pujara's way of conceptualizing slavery raises new questions about how historians should think about the broad reach of the slave economy. After all, many people in Rhode Island may have made money directly or indirectly from slavery, but what does that mean? Clark-Pujara offers some suggestions. On page 156 of her conclusion, she notes the "centrality of the business of slavery to the northern economy." But was it really central? On page 7, she uses a different metaphor, suggesting that "bondage remained a defining ... aspect of northern life." Did the slave economy "define" the north? Not surprisingly, Clark-Pujara's claims seem to overstate what the evidence she produces suggests about the importance of slavery to the northern economy.

Perhaps one of the problems here is that Clark-Pujara has no way to distinguish the parts of Rhode Island's economy with less significant connections to the slave economy from places, such as the mills, the distilleries, and the wharfs, where products made and consumed by slaves were essential to the functioning of these economic units.

Likewise, her steadfast focus on finding some connection to the slave economies means that she deemphasizes the importance of change over time. But Rhode Island's place in the slave economy changed radically over time: from the seventeenth century, when Rhode Island had some small slaveholding, to the eighteenth century, when Rhode Island merchants latched themselves on to the sugar revolution, to the nineteenth century, when slaveholding and slave trading had become marginalized and abolition emerged, but Rhode Island's connections to the textile revolution made its new factories dependent on the South for both materials and markets. In each period, Rhode Island had some connection to economic world of slavery, but the ways that these connections manifested themselves were strikingly different.

Another place that Clark-Pujara could expand her discussion would be to look more systematically at how the slave economy related to Rhode Islanders' attitudes and beliefs. For example, on page 7, she writes that the movement to abolish slavery in Rhode Island itself "did not mean a new consciousness," mainly because Rhode Islanders were still connected to the world of slavery. But it is possible to both remain enmeshed in the business of slavery and have new attitude toward slavery. To make this argument stronger, Clark-Pujara would have to focus more on the evidence of Rhode Islanders' mindsets. A few times, she offers provocative glimpses, but these cases indicate that a change was taking place in some Rhode Islanders' attitudes toward slavery. For example, on page 93, she quotes Rowland G. Hazard, an agent for Peace-Dale Mills, who travelled extensively in the South. During a state house debate on the Fugitive Slave Law, Hazard declared, "My own convictions are that it [slavery] is the worst form of society for all concerned." Or, on page 81, she quotes a Brown student, James Tallmadge, who launched what Clark-Pujara describes as "a scathing indictment of slaveholding and trading at his commencement exercises." In both cases, individuals were connected to institutions connected to slavery, but this did not stop these men from becoming outspoken opponents of slavery itself. Despite these caveats, *Dark Work* is a valuable contribution to the field. Hopefully it will stimulate more work that will help us think about the North's longstanding and troubling relationship to slavery.

Patrick H. Breen is an associate professor in the Department of History and Classics at Providence College. He is the author of The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt (Oxford University Press, 2015).