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# The Dark Past of Rhode Island in New Light

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## Keywords

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**THE DARK PAST OF RHODE ISLAND IN NEW LIGHT**

**A REVIEW OF**

***DARK WORK: THE BUSINESS OF SLAVERY IN RHODE ISLAND*  
BY CHRISTY CLARK PUJARA**

**(NEW YORK: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016, 205 PAGES)**

**AND**

***DISOWNING SLAVERY: GRADUAL EMANCIPATION AND "RACE" IN  
NEW ENGLAND, 1780-1860* BY JOANNE POPE MELISH**

**(ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1998, 296 PAGES)**

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**R**HODE ISLAND'S HISTORY of involvement in eighteenth and nineteenth century American slavery has been acknowledged only recently. Recent scholarship has shone a light on New England's impact on the slave trade in America, and academics are making note of this shadowed and often overlooked narrative. In February 2017, the University of Rhode Island's Department of Art and Art History facilitated an art installment titled *Invisible Bodies, Disposable Cloth*, an exhibition of visual representations of Rhode Island's slave based economy from 1783 to the 1850s. Arranged by Professor Robert Dilworth, the exhibition featured works by artist Deborah Baronas, independent scholar Peter Fay, and the members of the URI Committee for the Commemoration & Study of Slavery in Rhode Island. This exhibit marked a time when I just started to learn about the dark history of my home state of Rhode Island. I grew up in the state's capital of Providence, and throughout my young life had not once learned of the enormous impact Rhode Island had on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The exhibit and support from University of Rhode Island professor Marcus Nevius inspired me to explore scholarly works on the history of slavery in New England.

Scholarly revision of this history of slavery has been led by two scholars, Joanne Pope Melish, author of *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 'Race' in New England, 1780-1860*, and Christy Clark-Pujara, author of *Dark*

*Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*. Both books also offer readers key insights into the significant history of New England slavery; both books invite readers to engage feminist scholarship as well. Of particular interest to readers in gender and women's studies, Melish uses primary sources to evaluate the condition of black women as domestic laborers before and after gradual emancipation, citing Marilyn Waring's works on feminist economics to address the economic and social impact of slave women's labor on the society that enslaved them. Clark-Pujara's economic research also exposes more about the condition of women in this period as domestic laborers.

*Disowning Slavery* treats as its subject the process of gradual emancipation as a promise of freedom to enslaved black New Englanders. According to Melish, slaveholding New Englanders viewed the process of emancipation as a threat to the right to hold people as property. To support her arguments, Melish examines a variety of primary sources including the town council records of several Rhode Island towns and abolitionist broadsides. Using these records, Melish argues that the history of racialized slavery shaped the process of gradual emancipation. By raising popular awareness of blacks as a "racialized" other, Melish claims New England whites aimed to showcase racial difference, to explain away blacks' degradation, and to advocate for blacks' complete removal from the region. Broad-sides popularized an image of the "true" nature of blacks by depicting them as ignorant, immoral, and naturally unadaptable to civility. For example, she argues the "Grand Celebration of the Bobalition of African Slavery" depicted black people as "beings" who are only able to imitate the practices of "civilized" whites, not actually integrate into their society (p.178). The word "bobalition" itself in these broadsides is a cruel play on the word "abolition," as broadsides often exaggerated pidgin and creole words in an attempt to showcase difference and lower intelligence in free black people (p. 172). In this way, Melish claims, depicting black people as strangers made relocation a viable option. Whites saw the colonization of free blacks to Africa not only as a practical means of removal, but as a way New Englanders might aid the "degraded" race. Colonization, the settlement and establishment of control in a foreign land, was used by the West to exploit the continent of Africa, but the colonization movement in the nineteenth century aimed to relocate as many free blacks to Africa as possible supposedly for their own benefit. Melish argues that as an added bonus, the white settlers anticipated the prospect of a free black population in Africa spreading Christianity among people indigenous to the continent, and possibly leading to economic ties between New England and blacks relocated to West Africa.

Melish also claimed that white New Englanders sometimes engaged in physical acts of violence intended to push blacks from the region. Melish provides evidence to conclude that, starting in 1820, violence against free black people and their advocates increased significantly (p.201). She interprets this outpouring of rage manifested in riots as part of the effort to "warn out" black people from "white" communities, fueling the ideology that black New Englanders were dangerous strangers in "white" communities. She also analyzes acts often directed at women and children. One such incident was the destruction of the Prudence Crandall boarding school, a school established exclusively for young women of color. According to Melish, such acts of violence against black women and girls was not uncommon. Melish notes a unique set of fears surrounding women of color because of slavery. Because black women's bodies were automatically sexually available to white men, open to sexual abuse because slave women were legally property of a

slaveholder, she argues that even after gradual emancipation began, the fear of sexual abuse not only persisted, but became the basis of the highly sexualized popular perceptions of black women. This intersectional understanding of black women's bodies illustrates the fear whites had around the manageability of a free black population, while also exposing the extent to which the fate and standard of this manageability was based on notions of black women's "wild" sexuality and tamed domesticity.

Christy Clark-Pujara's *Dark Work* also follows the history of slavery in Rhode Island from 1636 to the 1860s. The book is based upon primary sources such as the Rhode Island Supreme Court judicial records and the *Rhode Island Gazette*, sources that Clark-Pujara uses to establish the economic history of Rhode Island within the framework of Atlantic and United States slavery. Important laws included Rhode Island's Gradual Emancipation Act, passed in 1784; and, the General Assembly's decision to end participation in the Atlantic slave trade, passed in 1787. In the process of investigating primary sources, Clark-Pujara especially focuses on how Rhode Islanders continued to profit by way of participation in an American slave economy, through networks Clark-Pujara describes as the business of slavery. Clark-Pujara defines the business of slavery as "all economic activity that was directly related to the maintenance of slaveholding in the Americas, specifically the buying and selling of people, food, and goods" (Clark-Pujara, 2016 p.2). She argues that Rhode Islanders' involvement in the business of slavery was complex, and changed over time, and also differed from the traditional story of American southern slavery insofar as the business of slavery positioned New England's merchants and mill operators as a powerful economic bloc, but not in the production of a staple crop such as molasses or cotton. In the eighteenth century, Newport merchants transported significant numbers of Africans on their ships to be sold in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Rhode Islanders who lived in South County maintained farms that were essential to the prosperity of the state, and to the production of foodstuffs that fed slaves in the West Indies. While slaveholding in the state declined in the early years of the nineteenth century, she argues that the textile industry in Rhode Island continued the state's complicity with slavery, providing markets in southern states with coarse, durable fabric, often known as "negro cloth," that clothed slaves. As gradual emancipation started to strain these industries after the Revolutionary War, the textile industry, that consumed Southern cotton, became Rhode Island's economic jewel.

Clark-Pujara's argument is that the business of slavery was crucial to, and in many cases, the basis of Rhode Island industry. Although the state's involvement in the slave trade was banned, "emancipation had done nothing to deter the expansion of the business of slavery in Rhode Island" (p.85). Clark-Pujara's work ties Rhode Island to its history of transporting slaves internationally and domestically, and illustrates how deep involvement in the slave trade fueled extremely profitable rum, agricultural, and marine industries from the 18th to 19th centuries. Clark-Pujara identifies James and Obadiah Brown as the first in the prolific Brown family to engage in the Atlantic trade starting in the 1720's, and observes that "the economic foundation that launched the Brown brothers' diverse investments was...supplying slave societies with necessities. The Browns also invested directly in the slave trade" (p. 23). By 1807, the DeWolf family of Bristol contributed to the persistence of the slave-trade in Rhode Island by underwriting 88 African slave-trade voyages, using their profit to own multiple business in Bristol including textile mills and distilleries (p. 83). As other historians have previously observed,

Clark-Pujara argues that iconic Rhode Island families (such as the Browns in the 18th century and the DeWolfs in the 19th mentioned above) benefited from the wealth generated by slave-vested commerce.

One of Clark-Pujara's motivations is that this history of Rhode Island's involvement in the slave trade remains widely unknown due to the concentrated effort of New Englanders to erase black people from their past, a phenomenon Joanne Pope Melish has termed "historical amnesia" (Melish, 1996 p.214). It was Melish's groundbreaking work that also inspired Clark-Pujara. Melish points out that the erasure of the region's history of slavery paved the way for New Englanders to replace that history with the construct of race, that as previously discussed functioned to racialize and so distance blacks from whites who, in turn, absolved themselves of responsibility for blacks' condition. Clark-Pujara addresses a similar issue of erasure when evaluating the economic history of Rhode Island. Slave traders had the extracted capital value from slaves' bodies and slave labor produced cash crops to fund their own enterprises. These circumstances, Clark-Pujara argues, undergirded Rhode Island's slave-driven economy, and negatively contributed to race relations in the state.

*Disowning Slavery and Dark Work* offer critical contributions to the existing historiography of New England's history of slavery. Yet, both authors might have elaborated more on feminist subjects to provide a clearer picture of the lives of women in this period. Melish addresses feminist concerns in her work, framing them as a question of the social and economic value of women's household labor. Clark-Pujara points to the lack of primary sources that reveal more fully the domestic work black women performed. Her extensive research in Rhode Island provides a deeper look into the position of women as domestic laborers as slaves and as free people that perhaps future feminist scholars will build on. These books are important contributions to the underrepresented study of the African American experience in New England. Reading them together gives a larger picture of how the economic viability and prosperity of slavery promoted the social disenfranchisement of black people, especially black women, as a means to retaliate against their freedom.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Yulyana Torres** is an undergraduate at the University of Rhode Island (URI), majoring in communications and gender women's studies. She has conducted research with Professor Donna Hughes concerning strip club prostitution in Rhode Island, which was presented at the New England Undergraduate Sociological Research Conference (2017) and the Showcase of URI Undergraduate Research, Scholarly, and Creative Arts (2017). She has completed an academic review on the history of slavery in Rhode Island with Professor Marcus Nevius of the URI history department. Her interests focus on sex trafficking research and contextualizing historical and contemporary events within an intersectional framework. She hopes to continue her education and work for human rights in the future.

**Marcus P. Nevius**, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the University of Rhode Island, with a joint appointment in Africana Studies. He received his B.A. and M.A. in history from North Carolina Central University, and his Ph.D. in history from the Ohio State University. He has authored scholarly reviews for the *Journal of African American History* and *H-Net Slavery Reviews*. He is currently completing his first

book tentatively titled “*city of refuge*”: *Petit Marronage and Slave Economy in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1790-1860*, under contract with the University of Georgia Press.

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