

On the margins of the margin



In this wonderful snapshot of the relationship between economic systems and social hierarchies in eighteenth-century New York, Serena Zabin offers an exciting view of life on the margins in the imperial city. For starters, Zabin views New York not as a colonial frontier but rather as an imperial outpost, and she suggests that this vantage is key to understanding how New Yorkers understood themselves and their world at the time—on the margins of empire. Life on the margins of empire was filled with characters generally thought to be marginal to the real elites, politicians, and power brokers in England. But Zabin persuasively demonstrates that work done by poor and middling white women, slaves, servants, sailors, and dance masters was much more central to the imperial struggle for status and authority than previously thought.



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Central to women's economic authority were their relationships with others—mostly men who had the legal standing necessary to conduct business or access to wealth and markets, but also women in the form of family networks. Expanding efforts to understand the significance of marriage and family in women's lives, Zabin finds agency where most historians see only oppression: the law of coverture. Zabin writes, "Coverture reveals not the ways in which women's participation in the market was limited but the ways in which it was channeled" (35). Women navigated the market through their relationships. Though legally erased through the laws of coverture, married women used their marital status for social and economic leverage in order to acquire credit, information, respect, and access to markets, goods, and services. Such astute observations substantiate the book's arguments. Still, the bigger story is how women's work gets hidden in the archives. Historians well know that commonly referenced "court records and city directories" only list occupations of men, but Zabin points out that even when women had the chance to testify about their work in court trials, they neglected to identify their occupations and rather "defined themselves by their husbands' occupation" (39).

The author is a master storyteller whose clear prose and arresting plot lines never betray her thesis. The story of shopkeeper Elizabeth Anderson stands as a perfect example. This compelling, horrific account demonstrates in small part the antagonism that business women were subject to and the centrality of economics to every level of social interaction and authority. When Anderson pursued a group of men who had attempted to rape her daughter Mary, the accused took revenge by trying to destroy her business and reputation. While the case went to trial, it had the unseemly outcome of the public whipping of Elizabeth (you'll have to read the book to find out why). Yet the trial itself is secondary to what the incident reveals about the importance of economics and status.

Zabin's treatment of the alleged 1741 slave conspiracy further emphasizes the tight fit between social and economic forces. While many historians have embraced the evidence suggesting a planned slave insurrection, Zabin relegates most of the conspiracy story to a footnote and shows instead how economic roles shaped the hearings, ruling, and outcome of the trials. Most people involved, aside from Justice Daniel Horsmanden, distanced themselves from the event and moved on. Zabin concludes that "this failed attempt to violently re-inscribe social order through courtroom drama exemplifies the enduring power of New York's economic culture over the simple ideology of white over black often associated with colonial America" (132).

The remainder of the book examines the use of credit, the role of consumer goods, and the treatment of prisoners of war. Here, Zabin offers us stories of social, cultural, and economic fluidity. Social hierarchies were weakened and appearance mattered. Zabin details the different forms of currency available in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the way that access to credit was linked to "cultural assumptions of trustworthiness"—assumptions increasingly threatened by con artists who "used commercial markers of gentlemanly status, such as fashionable clothes and letters of introduction, in order to exploit the modes of commercial exchange that depended on both personal interactions and long-distance exchange" (31).

Imperial New Yorkers were obsessed with appearance and representation, as traditional markers of class status were no longer reliable. How else could people determine their social betters and inferiors? To whom should credit be extended? Dancing masters were a crucial site of enactment of this drama concerning status, highlighting both the importance of appearance and the fluidity of social standing. It was no longer enough to simply be rich or successful. One had to be able to project this persona, as well. Ironically, those charged with training elites in the ways of refinement were far from elite themselves (103).

The unreliability of appearance also shaped race relations. White New Yorkers relied on race to determine slave status, but they found the visible markers of race increasingly unreliable. Spanish prisoners of war challenged the longstanding notion that dark skin constituted eligibility for enslavement. Spanish sailors captured by the British refused to accept being sold into slavery when their captors would not see beyond their dark skin and recognize their status as freemen and prisoners of war. For black sailors living on the margins of competing empires, war and commerce became vehicles for enslavement (113). These accounts provide important windows into the dynamic struggle to codify racial categories as well as the centrality of labor to such debates (117, 122).

Zabin mentions the importance of ballroom heterosociability as well as the significance of "mixed sex" sociability in defining proper social interactions for elites (97). This reader was left wanting to know more about how the concept of heterosociability shaped other economic interactions between men and

women. Did a failure to successfully demonstrate heterosociability affect one's ability to navigate the gendered world of the market? While several scholars of early America have documented the relationship between economic and gendered identities (failures at the market have led to crises of masculinity in more than one study) few have extended this analysis to monetary relationships *between men and women*.

As a scholar of women's crime, I was most taken by the detailed descriptions in Zabin's chapter on the underground, extralegal, and (in her terms) "informal" economies run predominantly by poor white women and black men. The market in used and often stolen goods threatened elites for two distinct reasons: the informal economy undermined the value and "status implications" of luxury goods, and it encouraged interracial economic partnerships between black men and white women (8). While married middle- and upper-class white women were encouraged in their financial transactions, poor women were ridiculed and frequently charged, convicted, and imprisoned. Stealing, receiving, or selling stolen goods were the most common crimes women were charged with during the period, and yet participation in this economy was liberating for slaves and poor white women (80). Historians have long argued that petty theft, particularly of cloth and clothing, was motivated by necessity. Zabin notes that there was an overall increase in the value and significance of consumer goods throughout the period, and argues that we should see slaves, servants, and other poor people involved in the informal economy as consumers who were also aware of the increasing value of luxury goods on the market (66).

Social order is dynamic, unstable, and largely defined by economic rather than political forces. This take on imperial New York is refreshing—not only for its disassociation from the (not yet) pending revolution, but also for its skillful weaving of racial and gendered analysis within a larger, compelling narrative. Zabin sums up her argument, "The primacy of commerce in the British Empire, particularly within the context of a diverse and competitive Atlantic world, worked against any stiff adherence to an abstract social order" (158). The author's writing style and deft turns of phrase make this an excellent choice for the general public and undergraduates. Its substantial archive and careful analysis make it essential for Early Americanists and feminist historians alike.