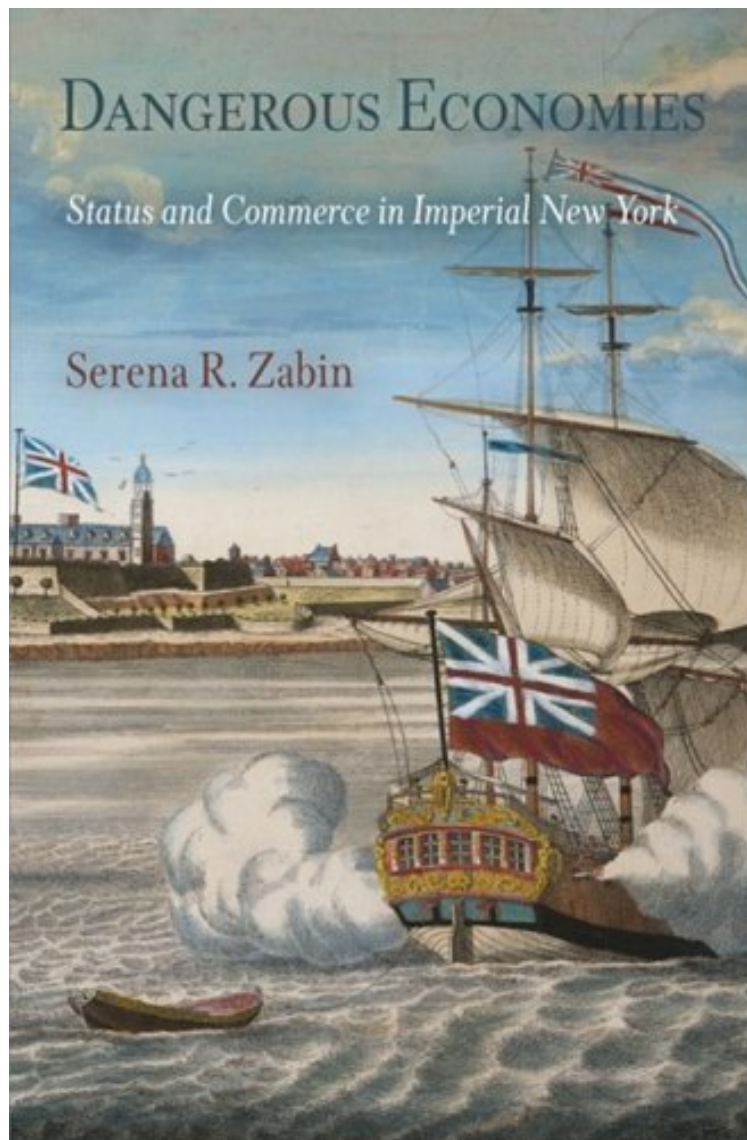


(Mobile book) Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York (Early American Studies)

Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York (Early American Studies)

Serena R. Zabin

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Serena R. Zabin : Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York (Early American Studies) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York (Early American Studies):

1 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Market booms, whether in the 1740s or in the 1990s, are largely

imaginaryBy ROROTOKO "Dangerous Economies" is on the ROROTOKO list of cutting-edge intellectual nonfiction. Professor Zabin's book interview ran here as cover feature on October 2, 2009.

Before the American Revolution, the people who lived in British North America were not just colonists; they were also imperial subjects. To think of eighteenth-century New Yorkers as Britons rather than incipient Americans allows us fresh investigations into their world. How was the British Empire experienced by those who lived at its margins? How did the mundane affairs of ordinary New Yorkers affect the culture at the center of an enormous commercial empire? *Dangerous Economies* is a history of New York culture and commerce in the first two thirds of the eighteenth century, when Britain was just beginning to catch up with its imperial rivals, France and Spain. In that sparsely populated city on the fringe of an empire, enslaved Africans rubbed elbows with white indentured servants while the elite strove to maintain ties with European genteel culture. The transience of the city's people, goods, and fortunes created a notably fluid society in which establishing one's own status or verifying another's was a challenge. New York's shifting imperial identity created new avenues for success but also made success harder to define and demonstrate socially. Such a mobile urban milieu was the ideal breeding ground for crime and conspiracy, which became all too evident in 1741, when thirty slaves were executed and more than seventy other people were deported after being found guilty on dubious evidence of plotting a revolt. This sort of violent outburst was the unforeseen but unsurprising result of the seething culture that existed at the margins of the British Empire.

"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." *Common-Place* "This is not merely an account of a single city but instead a consideration of culture and commerce shaped by political and economic competition and exchange in the Atlantic world. . . . Zabin paints a portrait of colonial New York City that others working on eighteenth-century urban centers will find useful in analyzing how residents thought about their position within the imperial system and their relationships to others, near and far, throughout the empire." *William and Mary Quarterly* About the Author Serena R. Zabin is Associate Professor of History at Carleton College. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction *Imperial New York City* First, a picture. Looking north into Manhattan from the East River, one sees a panorama of boats: dinghies, sloops, and three-masted schooners. The mass of ships, many with sails billowing, nearly obscures the modest collection of buildings in the background. A more careful inspection of the ships reveals that each one is flying an outsize Union Jack. Upon even closer inspection, tiny figures on the dock in the foreground. Individuals on the Manhattan shore are too distant to distinguish. Hidden from view behind the big sugar warehouses are other landmarks of the city. A telescope might allow us to see the city's gallows on the northeastern shore. At those gallows one man jumped off the hangman's cart "with a halter around his neck." Another "behaved decently, prayed in Spanish, kissed a crucifix, and declared his innocence." A woman "stood like a lifeless trunk." Yet another man removed his wig and helped fit the noose around his own neck. Another seemed to hope that even at the scaffold he would receive a pardon. Still more terrible were the deaths of thirteen men burned at the stake. One man laid his leg onto the burning wood and then accused two others with his dying breath. In all, thirty-four people were sentenced to horrible deaths in New York City in 1741. Seventeen men and two women were publicly hanged; some of their corpses were displayed in iron cages on the shores of the East River until they decomposed and burst open. Some ninety people were banished from the colony, and many of them were exiled outside the British Empire. Nearly all of the ninety were black slaves. These deaths make sense only within the larger picture of a city nearly veiled by British flags fluttering in the wind. The executions ended a series of events that began with the burglary of a small shop but grew to become an enormous cause célèbre, generating publicity throughout the British Empire: a conspiracy, some said, of slaves and Catholics to burn down the city of New York and hand it over to Britain's Catholic foes. This vivid illusion of New York in flames has gripped the imaginations of all who studied the events, from contemporaries to modern-day scholars. At one level, the events of 1741 look like a typical colonial panic over a slave conspiracy, in which the specter of race in the New World determined the colonies' legal, social, economic, and political interactions. Yet the story of those events is simply one small part of a larger and equally captivating tale of an imperial port culture defined by war, migration, markets, and social status. These seemingly disparate aspects of the city's culture were paradoxically bound together by New Yorkers' anxious fascination with hierarchy. Residents of the city never questioned the ideal of order and a society organized by social rank, but they continually wrestled with the definition of those ranks. The kinetic nature of this port city undermined hard and fast taxonomies of social distinction. It is this larger story of New York's imperial nature that deserves our attention. We are much more accustomed to thinking of eighteenth-century New York as a colonial rather than an imperial city. Before the American Revolution, however, those who lived in British North America were not just colonists but also subjects of the British Empire. The British Empire in its turn has usually connoted more or less competent government officials, a bewigged and distant Board of Trade, and an enormous British military humming the chorus of Rule Britannia: "Britons never shall be slaves." Yet all empires, regardless of their modes of administration or control, consist at heart of individuals living their daily lives and often unconscious of what it might mean to live in an empire.

Far removed from the administrative center of London, port cities such as New York nonetheless shaped the commercial empire on whose edges they rested. The hustle and bustle of New York's wharves and streets came from the city's full incorporation into the commerce that lay at the heart of the British Empire. The networks of trade, war, and family that tied together these vast overseas holdings intersected in ports such as New York. People and goods traveled along these networks. The frequency and rapidity with which individuals and their property traveled into and out of port also created a social world in motion, a world in which social status might be able to shift with the tides. To think, then, of eighteenth-century New Yorkers as Britons living on the edge of empire rather than incipient American citizens allows us fresh investigations into their world. How did the British Empire appear to those who lived at its margins? How much of it could they consciously grasp? How did the seemingly minor transactions between those who were members of the city's elite and those who were not shape the larger networks of the early modern Atlantic world, and how were they shaped by them? How, in short, did the mundane affairs of ordinary people coalesce into an enormous commercial empire? This study is primarily concerned with the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century, when the so-called first British Empire, which included settlements in North America and the Caribbean, came to an end. The Seven Years' War (1756-63) marked a noticeable turning point in the empire: France and Spain were no longer serious threats to the North American colonies, and British fears of Catholic infiltrators in the American colonies dropped accordingly. Although British victories in the Seven Years' War boosted British patriotism among British Americans, the economic and military realities of the war also precipitated the first of the revolutionary conflicts; in 1765, only two years after the signing of the peace treaty, Americans took part in widespread protests against the Stamp Act, which had been intended to raise revenues for the British army in North America. Yet while the Seven Years' War was still under way, few living in North America including Native American allies and African slaves could have imagined that British colonists would oppose any part of the British Empire. *Dangerous Economies* focuses on the New York City of this earlier era, in which British provincials, far from desiring colonial independence, clung to their powerful empire in the face of near-constant threats from the rival French, Spanish, and Native American empires that surrounded them. In the early eighteenth century, Britain was just starting to catch up with its imperial rivals, France and Spain. Britain possessed nothing equal to the huge colonies of Spanish America or France's small but extremely profitable sugar colonies of the Caribbean. Instead, Britons set themselves off from their competitors by defining themselves as free and rational merchants, spreading Protestantism and the rule of law. The twin pillars of British imperial identity were far-flung commerce and their naval and moral superiority over their Catholic rivals. For much of the century Britain was preparing, waging, or recovering from war with France and Spain. Since its earlier rivalry with the Dutch had been quelled by its alliance with the Netherlands and Sweden in 1688, England could afford to focus on its Catholic foes. This new military focus resulted in three protracted conflicts: Queen Anne's War in 1702-13; King George's War in 1739-48; and the French and Indian War in 1754-63. During all of these violent conflicts New York experienced notable economic and demographic volatility. Twenty-nine years between 1700 and 1763 were spent in open warfare, and many more years were spent preparing for or recovering from war. New York's own multifaceted development was closely tied to these struggles for empire. New Yorkers also linked themselves to the British Empire through trade. The city depended heavily on its trading networks around the Atlantic, in particular the export of foodstuffs from the Hudson Valley to the West Indies and the export of furs to Europe. Although the city eagerly measured its exports of fur at the beginning of the century and wheat in the middle and end, New York's primary function as a port was as a central warehouse, not a major exporter of raw goods. Its strength lay in its ability to handle the complicated banking functions that became an increasingly important aspect of international trade. Moreover, the range of individuals who took part in trade was surprisingly wide. Although a small number of elite merchants dominated the market for some commodities, traders also extended far down New York's social scale. Widows and slaves found ways to participate in both local and international trading networks. Some of these exchanges involved the newest fashions, while others were in secondhand goods. All of them, however, brought people of all ranks into a common marketplace. Remarkably, the early eighteenth-century Atlantic economy had some space and opportunities for socially marginal people to participate economically, thereby holding out the potential for those who were not members of the elite to alter their social status. However, there were costs, to both big players and small. It was a perilous, if necessary, choice to participate in the New York marketplace. The hazards arose from the very personal culture of this place of exchange. For all of these New Yorkers, personal interactions defined economic transactions. Throughout the eighteenth century, North Americans from merchants to slaves engaged in a "consumer revolution," importing an ever larger amount and variety of goods (china, tea, sugar, and cloth in particular) from the rest of the British Empire and around the Atlantic. The nature of these imports also shifted dramatically from those imported earlier. Seventeenth-century imports had focused on comfort: glass provided more and better light in a house, and bedclothes offered warmth and a durability that ensured they could be passed on to the next generation. Eighteenth-century imports, however, often had cultural meaning far beyond their practical value. Tea warmed the body, but the china in which it was served also proclaimed those who drank it to be persons of taste and refinement. The truly revolutionary part of this consumer revolution was not so much the simple expansion of imported items as the cultural relevance that was attached to these items. Goods were not just imported; they also became important. The

ships that carried goods to New York also carried people, and the city's growth in trade went hand in hand with a growth in population. Many of those newcomers did not become permanent residents; the city also served as a point of entry for Europeans to move quickly up the Hudson River or across to New Jersey. New York was full but not full of New Yorkers. When Alexander Hamilton visited New York City in 1744, he misjudged its population to be greater than Philadelphia's. Both cities, in fact, had about eleven thousand residents at the time; what deceived Hamilton was the quantity of visitors passing through the city. The sailors in the harbor and the soldiers at Fort George were all transients as well. New York was thus a city of itinerants, and their mobility created a world that offered certain possibilities to the more marginal members of the resident society: poor white women, slaves, and sailors. Despite New York's location in the Middle Colonies, far from the region traditionally associated with slavery, a significant proportion of the city's population was made up of enslaved Africans, African Americans, and African Caribbeans. Throughout the eighteenth century, New York's black population (most of them slaves) hovered between 11 and 15 percent, making it the largest black community north of the Chesapeake. Urban slavery tended to distribute blacks widely across the city; both women and men performed a large variety of jobs, including domestic, artisanal, and marine work. This large slave population created a vibrant society whose most basic human rites of companionship, family, and burial were continually hindered by the city's white officials. New York's culture emerged from these larger and volatile forces of politics, commerce, and race. The city's individual residents and visitors, in turn, defined their own and each others' identities within this ever-changing imperial context. The transience of the city's people, its goods, and its fortunes created a notably fluid social hierarchy, a structure that did not do away with distinctions of status but made it difficult to establish one's own status or verify another's. New Yorkers shared the human desire to succeed in making a better life and a name for themselves; their city's shifting imperial identity created new avenues for success but also undermined the clarity of whatever success they might achieve. As befits a study that examines the ways in which the actions of individuals come together to create an immense commercial empire, this book is studded with the stories of a diverse array of New Yorkers, from slaves to royal officials. Many of these characters were quite conscious of their social status, or of the markers that would indicate their status to others. All of them were engaged, in some way, in the commercial marketplace. Their worlds reveal the relationship between the eighteenth-century obsession with status and the commercial focus of the British Empire. New York's commercial culture was a particularly appealing place for confidence artists and tricksters looking for a smart swindle. The complex interplay between credit and credibility offered these men, and occasionally women, their chances. Through cleverly deploying a particularly gendered idea of respectable financial and social status, these con artists often managed to swindle others into giving them some financial credit. Merchants looking to make some easy money sometimes ended up holding the bag. Tricksters were not the only ones trying to make the most of limited opportunities and fluid credit networks. New York was justly famous for its female merchants, despite the handicaps put on married women in the marketplace. Relatively well-connected women turned these constraints to their advantage by using the financial credit of their family relationships to trade successfully in the British Atlantic world. Often the same relationships that limited their abilities to act as independent agents, such as coverture, were the routes to their success. At the same time, however, their fiscal credibility was often thrown into jeopardy by these gendered financial practices. While social status may have structured the ways that women participated in the market, it did not exclude the poorer women from New York's economy. Without the overseas connections of their wealthier fellow residents, laboring women had to operate under the radar of the legitimate economy. Women often found lucrative opportunities, especially in secondhand markets, by going into partnership with black men. Yet because their business practices seemed to threaten the city's social hierarchies of class and race, these women also found the New York economy a dangerous place. The elite of New York feared that this market in secondhand goods would not only encourage racial mixing but also, even more terrifying, undermine the status implications of those luxury goods that passed through it. They therefore developed other ways to cultivate social distinction and reassert their status, including bodily deportment. The usage of fashionable goods and clothing, rather than the mere possession of them, could separate the elite from those bounders who only aspired to that status. Elite society thus turned to manners, corporeal and otherwise, to shore up their claims. Given their location on the edge of empire, these New Yorkers needed experts with knowledge of the latest trends in metropolitan polite behavior. They thus turned to so-called "dancing masters," who, for a price, taught them the intricacies of performed gentility in order to assert their elite imperial status. This segment of the city's society resented its dependence on paid itinerant experts but possessed few other connections to metropolitan cultural knowledge. Both dancing masters and their students discovered the perils of buying and selling social status. Elite bodies were not the only ones who proclaimed status. Black sailors captured on Spanish ships by British privateers found that the color of their bodies often determined their initial fate. Looked upon as part of the proceeds of war for commercial supremacy, these sailors refused to let their skin color have the final word. They lobbied in New York's courts to change their legal and social status from enslaved spoils of war to one that mirrored that of their white shipmates: prisoners of war with political standing. New York's booming profits in privateering could not depend on Afro-Spanish sailors always losing their free status. In 1741 this volatile world momentarily ignited. In a desperate response to the city's unpredictable social hierarchies, government officials instituted a series of slave conspiracy

trials. Thirty-four people were executed, almost half suffering gruesome agonies as they were burned alive at the stake. Nearly ninety more were banished from the colonies. For their families, their friends, and presumably many of the blacks and whites who lived in the colony, their deaths were meaningful and terrifying. Yet these trials had almost no noticeable impact in any other measurable way. There was no new slave code passed in the wake of the trials, as there had been two years earlier in South Carolina. There were no new crackdowns on any of the economic or social practices in which many of the suspected conspirators had participated. Perhaps most striking of all, the trials' primary prosecutor and chronicler, Justice Daniel Horsmanden, found his account of the trials remaindered just four years after publication for lack of purchasers. These trials could not permanently inscribe a fixed social world, because the fluid social world of the imperial marketplace was the foundation of the port city's culture. The New York slave conspiracy trials and their aftermath make sense only in a world in which commerce, status, and empire were inextricably bound. *Dangerous Economies* examines how issues of status were continually contested in the context of an imperial port city. It uncovers the ways the city's location at the edge of empire and its commercial character combined to weaken strict social hierarchies. The fluidity of status that this concoction of empire and commerce allowed created opportunities for elite and nonelite New Yorkers alike. However, with those opportunities came risks, often with devastating consequences. A look at New York in the eighteenth century thus reveals the cultural power of the commercial foundation upon which the early British Empire was based.