

[Becker on Rood, 'The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean'](#)

Discussion published by Kristin Condotta Lee on Thursday, December 6, 2018

Review published on Wednesday, December 5, 2018

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Daniel B. Rood. *The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9-065526-6.

Reviewed by Michael Becker (Duke University) **Published on** H-Caribbean (December, 2018)
Commissioned by Sarah Foss (Oklahoma State University)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=52299>

Daniel B. Rood's *The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean* offers a creative, thoughtful, and diligently researched account of the development of slavery's infrastructure in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Adopting the term "second slavery" popularized by scholars like Dale Tomich, Rood describes the ways slavery mutated in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, Haitian Revolution, Industrial Revolution, and the gradual abolitionist turn of the British Empire. While some contemporaries believed slavery's model of production would become outmoded and the competitiveness of free labor combined with new technologies would spell its death knell, Rood underscores instead slavery's turn to new geographies and new technologies—a spatial and technological fix. Yet Rood also suggests that scholars have misidentified some of the key geographies of this new development, tying the technologies and transformations in the construction and maintenance of infrastructure to the Upper South and industrial production rather than the cotton production in the Deep South that has long been the focus of scholarship instead.

Rood gestures to a set of uniquely interconnected economies: the Virginia flour and ironworking industries, the Brazilian coffee trade, and Cuban sugar production. He gestures toward these three sites as one embodiment of the ideal of plantation economies supplying and supporting each other, rather than relying on the production (and, tacitly, sympathies and political will) of economies based on free labor—in other words, one might say, a plantation international. He juxtaposes this network to the "cotton empire" characterized by a more narrow interconnection between the US Deep South cotton economy and the Liverpool textile industry. He argues that these commodities, unlike cotton

whose imperishable nature enabled its shipment to an exterior place for industrial finishing, “required extensive on-site processing” that in turn inspired merchants, planters, and other experts to “reengineer their place in nineteenth-century capitalism’s global division of labor” (p. 4). However compelling his call to focus on this network as a new locus of analysis, Rood’s choice of “the greater Caribbean” to characterize this geography seems to stretch an already capacious category a step too far.

Many of the technological transformations Rood traces are characterized by facilitating preservative techniques and purification of perishable commodities, enabling the shipment of a superior and somewhat longer lasting product. For example, in examining the Cuban sugar economy, Rood points to the developments in sugar-processing technologies that catalyzed this economic rise. Beginning in the 1790s, Cuban planters adopted the Jamaica train, a tunnel-shaped reverberatory furnace that enabled cane juice to pass from a clarifying pan, to boiling pans, to evaporating pans and eventually a “strike” pan, where cane juice finally transformed into granulated sugar. Although this machine required a grueling and unceasing work schedule from enslaved people, its combination of individual processing units to a single machine enabled a cost-effective fuel efficiency. By the mid-1840s, the Jamaica train was increasingly replaced by the Derosne system, a vacuum-sealed process first developed in relation to the European sugar beet industry. However, the need for large quantities of water and reliance on the difficult-to-obtain bone char as a heating device ill-suited this machine for Caribbean production. Norbert Rillieux, a free man of color from New Orleans, through the invention of a vacuum pan that added a cycle of waste heat reuse to the Derosne system and better protected fragile sugar from tropical elements, built on European ingenuity with deep local knowledge of production conditions. Through deep and detail-filled exploration of this and other production processes, Rood contributes an extensive technical and mechanical knowledge to often more abstract discussions of transformation in these processes. Further, Rood demonstrates that “greater Caribbean” planters, merchants, and businessmen were not simply adopters of industrial technology produced in Europe and the northern US but active and able innovators in their own right.

“Greater Caribbean” innovators, he contends, embarked on these innovations on the basis of local agricultural knowledge as well as through an expertise in racial management. Reconfiguration of shipping and warehouse infrastructure on the Havana waterfront, for example, was intended not only to ease and hasten the transportation of perishable sugar and related products to points abroad but also to break the economic power of enslaved and free people of color working as dockhands. Through further marginalizing the ability of enslaved people to exert pressure around their own working and living conditions, slaveholders and their allies secured their economic and political power. Thus, for example, in seeking outside experts to help construct Cuban railways, Cuban elites were attracted to companies like Tredegar Ironworks not only for their experience working with bridges and among mountains and in hot, humid climates but also for their experience “working with a captive, racialized workforce” (p. 108). From these new technologies and processes of production, Rood argues, also emerged a new set of racial ideologies.

Enslaved people, Rood argues, developed specialized knowledge and understanding of the tools, processes, and industries in which they labored, and in applying this knowledge, they were themselves responsible for crucial innovations within this interlocking system. For example, Rood describes the role of Joe, an enslaved blacksmith on Cyrus McCormick’s farm, in developing the reciprocal cutting bars that allowed McCormick’s reaper to cleanly cut damp and thick strands of

wheat. Joe's expertise in ironwork and experience harvesting wheat enabled him to develop an alteration to the machine other early experimenters had not considered. However, this technical expertise was a double-edged sword for slaveholders, as they worried that this knowledge could also prove dangerous, as enslaved people's skills could also enable them to disrupt or destroy the labor process or profitably strike out on their own. It was this fear that sparked white skilled and semi-skilled workers in Tredegar Ironworks to go on strike, trying, unsuccessfully, to pressure their employer to hire only free white laborers. In the reverse direction, the reliance of Brazilian bakeries on enslaved men as skilled bakers provided those trained with this specialized knowledge a unique opportunity to set out on their own, making a living through their in-demand skills. Of course, this innovation also proved a challenge to the racialized discourse of inferiority, as proponents of slavery were forced into rhetorical somersaults to account for how a person they considered inferior could be responsible for technological innovation they had not thought of themselves.

Rood's work reorients scholarly perspectives on the transformation of Atlantic economies in the mid-nineteenth century and the centrality of slavery in this transformation. His rare combination of deep attention to the management decisions of slaveholders and merchants and the labor of enslaved people is laudable and draws together disparate veins of historical research and argument. This book will be of great interest to scholars of slavery and capitalism, economic history, and the history of science and technology. Further, this work is approachable for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students.

Citation: Michael Becker. Review of Rood, Daniel B., *The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean*. H-Caribbean, H-Net Reviews. December, 2018. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52299>

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