



Reviews

No Right to An Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston's Black Workers in the Civil War Era. By Jacqueline Jones. (New York: Basic Books, 2023. Pp. 544. \$35.00 cloth. \$22.99 paperback. \$19.99 e-book.)

The Worlds of Boston's Black Workers

Paula C. Austin

First, Jacqueline Jones' *No Right to An Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston's Black Workers in the Civil War Era* is a big book! 440 pages of content, much of which, in my copy, is currently underlined and/or annotated in some way. I am most familiar with Jones' foundational text *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, published in 1985, which I first read as an undergraduate. The production of Black women's history was relatively new and Jones' contribution to the historiography was (mostly) lauded. At the time, the focus on Black women's resistance and agency was important, but the labor history helped to usher in new definitions of politics, specifically the ways in which groups of people barred, by law and by force, from the ballot box still engaged politically through decisions about labor. New to my undergraduate sensibilities was the ways that Jones brought to life the quotidian work and home worlds of southern Black women from the antebellum period through the Great Migration.

In *No Right to An Honest Living*, Jones focuses on Boston, Massachusetts, and the economic lives of Black workers from the antebellum decades to the turn of the twentieth century.

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Boston often rests on its antislavery and abolitionist laurels, so much so that young people and adults alike are surprised at how long slavery existed in the commonwealth. The traditional narrative of Boston's antislavery activism and the role of Black and white Bostonians in the Saltwater and Underground Railroads, which helped self-emancipated people to and through the city, as well as Boston's early (semi) integrated public school system, makes Boston's late twentieth century busing crisis seem like an anomaly.

The afterlife of Massachusetts slavery, the ongoing national legal institution, and anti-Black racism in Boston laws, cultural norms and practices, politics, and economy made life very difficult for Black Bostonians, whether long-term residents or freedom seekers. Most Black people living in Boston before and after the Civil War were poor and working class. Even those whose names are familiar to us as radical Black abolitionists lived economically precarious lives. As Jones says in the introduction, histories that focus on evolving "legislation and legal rights" obscure "inequities in wage labor." While Black Bostonians gained access to public schools and to voting before and after the Civil War, white Bostonians severely limited and sometimes violently prevented Black access to "workplace opportunities that would serve as pathways to homeownership, financial security, and the health and well-being of one's family" (25–26).

The book begins with the 1847 arrival of the Edloe Sixty-Six, a group of several manumitted Black families from the recently deceased Carter Edloe's 1,800-acre plantation in Prince George County, Virginia. Ranging in age from babies to octogenarians, they joined the ranks of the "chronically underemployed and impoverished" community of post-emancipation Black New Englanders. Jones follows their attempts to make a living and provide for their families, while working for the abolition of slavery and for racial justice across the region.

In the pre-Civil War chapters of *No Right to An Honest Living*, Virginia's and other slave states' Black diasporas converge in Boston. Most Black Bostonians, whether legally free migrants or not, were relegated to service jobs like laborers,

porters, coachmen, waitstaff, or domestic servants and laundresses. Some Black artisans acquired skilled jobs, but the anti-Black racism of merchants and city government alike meant that jobs like stevedores and barbers (which had been considered “Black” jobs) became “white” jobs for the influx of Irish immigrants, who benefited from prevailing racist ideologies (6). When jobs in paving or sewer construction became available thanks to the Back Bay and other urban infrastructure projects, the city hired white workers. Jones outlines the contours of “the fugitive economy,” which spanned legal sources of income and the underground world of dance clubs and gambling rooms, rat catchers, and hucksters (82–83). Both worlds, though, were rife with city regulation and aggressive police surveillance, making Black workers vulnerable to violence and bodily harm.

Part I examines the livelihoods of those who sheltered, fed, clothed, transported, and protected self-emancipated people in Boston. Harriet and Lewis Hayden, for example, were clothing dealers, while others were barbers, tailors, or ran boarding houses that provided meals. It would have been nearly impossible for Black Boston abolitionists to support, rescue, and advocate for fugitives like Shadrach Minkins or Ellen and William Craft had they not been able to run separate businesses. Some activists hired fugitives and other free Black people, offering them a subsistence. Others, like attorney Robert Morris, used their education to advocate for the self-emancipated. Many Boston workplaces became sites of resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law.

By the Civil War, the pervasiveness and impact of anti-Black racism on Black life in Boston was entrenched, “a critical element of the city’s body politic,” as Jones says, “from the lowliest white laborers to the wealthiest merchants and bankers” (190). Jones examines the impact of the war on Boston’s ability to keep its distance from slavery and the perpetuation of many of the institution’s manifestations in its local afterlife. Police court reporters caricatured Black defendants. Black theatergoers were segregated in “pigeon house” galleries. White employment agencies included “colored cooks” in the same advertisements as Scottish, Irish, and “good American . . . housework

girls”—as if Black workers were not “American”—and Massachusetts towns petitioned Congress to “drop the negro question” (216).

Black Bostonians hustled to make a living and provide needed services while supporting the war effort, steadily demanding their inclusion through their toil as soldiers and as educators. Black Bostonians who traveled into warzones sent home critical news. For Black soldiers, conditions of work in the Union Army reflected their experiences in other roles. They coped with “inferior supplies, endless fatigue work, battle action [with little] training, harsh punishment [from] white officers whose highest priority was their own career advancement” (282).

After the war, Boston’s Black diaspora expanded and contracted. The Freedmen’s Bureau sent Black southerners to New England while Black New Englanders, both formerly enslaved and those with professional credentials, ventured south to join the Reconstruction effort. Refugees faced stiff hardships. Jones’ chapters bring into focus the suffering caused by elite white merchants and city authorities, who held the power and resources to support Black children, the elderly, and war widows. Meanwhile, longtime Black Bostonians, who continued to run employment agencies and utilize mutual aid societies, were shut out of public works, factory jobs, and skilled trades. By contrast, Irish immigrants found work as manual laborers, police, firefighters, and teachers. When white workers struck for higher pay and shorter workdays, desperate companies recruited Black workers, who were locked out of most trade associations.

One of Jones’ major contributions is her examination of well-known Black abolitionists, who, try as they might, were unable to support themselves or their families on antislavery writing, public speaking, or touring. Their struggles should make us question the prevailing narrative of New England as the epitome of an abolitionist city. Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, reunited with her brother John in Boston. He traveled extensively as the secretary of the New England Freedom Association. John, who “made precious little

money and often worried about where [his] next meal was coming from" (46), abandoned the antislavery lecture circuit. Harriet worked as a seamstress and as a nanny while battling chronic fatigue and writing her book, again separated from her children as she had been during her escape to freedom (70–71). Jones also recounts the story of Peter Randolph, one of the Edloe Sixty-Six who worked as a blacksmith while enslaved then strained to make a living in Boston. He strove to be a pastor, leaving one congregation after the next because they could not afford to pay him. He and his wife briefly boarded run-aways for a time, an enterprise that likely turned little profit. Randolph piled on more jobs. He worked as a "tender" and a janitor, started a newspaper, and wrote antislavery memoirs.

Jones is proficient and efficient with the vast and diverse source material. She draws on a variety of newspapers, early histories, family papers, organizational records and minutes, antislavery narratives, correspondence, contemporary literature, city records, federal Civil War records, census and Freedman's Bureau records, and city directories. The juxtaposition of sources allows her to create vivid scenes of city life while painting in the key political, social, and legal backgrounds that shaped Black Bostonians' economic lives. The chapters are organized chronologically into digestible chunks. The chapter title "Women in Service" is curious, though, since Black women's work appears throughout the book.

Ultimately, in Jones' rendering, Boston was a place that marginalized Black migrants and longer-term residents, despite its appearance as a sanctuary city. *No Right to an Honest Living* brings into stark relief the contrast between the city's egalitarian rhetoric and its discriminatory reality. This comprehensive history makes clear that Black Bostonians' abolitionist activism was a multifaceted campaign inclusive of local issues such as getting the label "colored" removed from tax and voting lists; ending segregation or getting legal penalties issued on commercial venues that upheld the practice; protesting the ways Black people were caricatured in the press; denouncing discriminatory seating in churches; advocating for Black men to serve in the US military and to receive equal pay; and voting rights.

As Jones notes, despite access to the ballot and jury boxes, by the turn of the twentieth century the “antebellum . . . patterns had hardened into an ossified system of discrimination, limiting Black workers to casual, ill-paid, dead-end jobs,” leaving “Boston’s social division of labor . . . static” (440).

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Black Lives Do Matter in Nineteenth-Century Boston

David A. Zonderman

Jacqueline Jones’ *No Right to an Honest Living* offers readers a deeply researched and richly detailed portrait of Black life and labor in mid-nineteenth-century Boston. Jones has rescued from obscurity dozens of Black activists and orators, boarding-house keepers and root doctors, porters and day laborers. She has shown us where they lived, worked, loved, married, worshipped, and struggled against slavery down south and racism at home up North.

Jones’ meticulous study recreates a world where Black men and women were chronically underemployed and frequently unemployed. Theirs was a life of precarity: struggling to cobble together enough money to live on often through part-time work in constantly changing workplaces, detouring when necessary, into the underground urban economy, and toiling frequently into old age—if they lived that long.

The “Edloe Sixty-Six,” newly manumitted slaves arriving in Boston from a Virginia plantation in September 1847, illuminate the stony path trod by so many Southern rural migrants to the urban North. Both freedpeople and fugitives experienced a world of new opportunities and new competition, a myriad of jobs yet limited occupations, freedom to worship but also freedom to starve on cold streets. Those who arrived with skills