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Joanne Pope Melish. *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 1780-1860.* Ithaca, New York and London, England: Cornell University Press, 1998. 285 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3413-6.

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In the long and rich historiography of North American slavery, relatively few scholars have explored the subject of slavery in New England or the impact of slavery and emancipation in the region on the racial attitudes of New Englanders. Joanne Pope Melish's book *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* seeks, in her words, to put "slavery and the painful process of gradual emancipation back into the history of New England (p. 200)." Melish views as a blind spot the assumption by previous scholars that slavery in New England was peripheral to the economic, social, or political development of the region. She argues that New England slavery had a far more powerful impact on the thinking of New Englanders than they wanted to believe, and their longstanding view of the region as "free and white" has been a kind of historical amnesia, an effort to erase slavery and black people from the history of the region. That erasure of black people, she argues, resulted directly from white anxiety and confusion about how to view free blacks in their midst and what to do with or about them.

Melish maintains that white New Englanders' views of black people emerged directly from their experiences with blacks living in bondage and from their association of blackness with slavery. She writes that the unsettling process of gradual emancipation in the region after the American Revolution stirred white fears that disorderly blacks would threaten the new republic. Whereas blacks assumed that they would become free and independent citizens, whites assumed that blacks still needed to be controlled. She also argues that white people experienced anxiety about racial identity, freedom, and servitude, wondering if freedom would turn black people white and if white people could become slaves.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Melish writes, New England whites gradually resolved these questions by coming to regard blacks as inherently inferior and in need of control. She argues that a clear ideology of race thus first emerged in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century New England, in response to gradual emancipation. New Englanders, she argues, gradually came to view "racial" characteristics as im-

mutable, inherited, and located in the body, and to view the black and white "races" as hierarchical and largely opposite in nature. Such a view permitted white New Englanders to seek to expell or erase black people, both literally and figuratively, from their region.

Melish's book makes an important contribution to the literature on slavery and abolition and fills a significant gap in our understanding of how slavery in New England affected both that region and the nation. Through her use of various local sources including town records, court records, slaveholders' diaries, and the letters, narratives, and freedom petitions of slaves, Melish brings the reader into the world of Revolutionary-era New England masters and slaves. She illuminates their daily interactions and offers insightful interpretations of how masters and slaves each understood the meaning of slavery and emancipation. She makes a compelling case that slavery was indeed significant in the New England economy and society. Using, among other evidence, racist broadsides from the region, she also illustrates clearly the willingness of many white New Englanders to denigrate, harass, and seek to erase black people in the decades after the Revolution.

While Melish is right that most white New Englanders probably did wish black people would go away in the years of the early republic, she may overstate the extent to which New England whites were in agreement on this. She correctly observes that many white New Englanders supported the movement to colonize blacks outside the United States, particularly in Africa. But New England also produced a movement for immediate abolition that was explicitly opposed to colonization and demanded the right of free blacks to live as free and equal citizens of the United States. William Lloyd Garrison of Boston was probably the best-known white abolitionist in the country after 1830, and he was also a passionate opponent of colonization and a strong champion of the rights of free blacks in North America. Free blacks loved Garrison. A host of other New England activists stood with him, demanding the inclusion of free blacks as equal citizens. If most New Englanders sought to expell or eliminate blacks from their midst, these radical abolitionists often embraced the freed slaves, sought to educate them, published their narratives, and even, as in the case of Frederick Douglass, hired them as abolitionist speakers. One goal of the abolitionist efforts was to show the public that black people were fully human, able to be educated, and deserving of all the rights that whites had. Thus, well into the nineteenth century, a segment of white New Englanders actively resisted the view that blacks were inherently inferior and different from whites, and they fought to educate blacks for life as full American citizens. If, as Melish argues, New England whites sought to eradicate blacks, this process was contested by some whites as well as blacks.

Melish's most important contribution may be to the emerging body of literature on how North Americans constructed and made use of an ideology of race. Here she pushes to locate precisely when and how Americans racialized difference and came to define blackness and whiteness as fixed, immutable, biological categories. Her answer, that this process took place in New England during gradual emancipation, is new and surprising.

Melish suggests that New England was first in developing a new ideology of race because of its early experience with slave emancipation. However, the struggle to define the meaning of emancipation and the fundamental nature and place of blacks was also going on in the upper South. There, manumissions increased during and after the American Revolution, and the growing numbers of free blacks increased white anxiety. Indeed, anxiety there was more pronounced than in New England, because of the larger black population. Colonization was also very popular in the upper South, and much of the strongest and most

persistent support for colonization came from that region. In contrast to New England, opponents of slavery in the upper South never embraced the idea that freed slaves ought to remain in the United States, and antislavery activists in the upper South always combined efforts at gradual emancipation with plans for colonization. The process that Melish describes of racializing identity and seeking to expell blacks may thus have been taking place simultaneously in New England and the upper South. A comparative study of emancipation efforts in the two regions would be illuminating. Of course, the upper South did not achieve gradual emancipation, and over time, antislavery activism and even voluntary manumission there were largely choked off.

Melish's book takes the reader through the process by which white New Englanders, through their responses to slavery, emancipation, and black people, created the myth of themselves and their region as free and white. Melish's angle of vision and her argument are both fresh, and she offers new insights and raises new questions about how the end of slavery led to a new construction of race in North America. This is a terrific book, one that all scholars of slavery, abolition, and the early republic absolutely must read. Enjoy this one; I certainly did.

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