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Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860

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Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860.

Joanne Pope Melish. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1998. 285 pp., illustrations, references, and index. \$35.00 (cloth).

Slavery in the north, and in New England in particular, has been the focus of little scholarly attention. Melish's book seeks, in her words, to put "slavery and the painful process of gradual emancipation back into the history of New England (p. 200)." While previous scholarship has held slavery in New England as peripheral to the economic, social, and political development of the region, Melish argues that slavery had a powerful impact on the thinking of New Englanders - their view of the region as "free and white" produced a sort of historical amnesia that sought to erase slavery and African Americans from the history of the region.

Various local sources including town records, court records, slaveholders' diaries, and the letters, narratives, and freedom petitions of slaves are used to bring the reader into the world of New England masters and slaves. Melish illuminates their daily interactions and offers interpretations of how masters and slaves each differently understood the meaning of slavery and emancipation.

Melish argues that it was the unsettling process of gradual emancipation in the region after the American Revolution that stirred fears of disorderly African Americans threatening the new republic. While African Americans assumed that they would become free and independent citizens, the Euro American majority experienced anxiety about racial identity, freedom, and servitude. Beginning in the late 18th century, New England Europeans gradually resolved these questions by coming to regard Africans as inherently inferior and in need of control. She argues that a clear ideology of race developed in which "racial" characteristics came to be seen as immutable, inherited, and located in the body.

The rise and application of an ideology of race is central to Melish's analysis. Here she pushes to locate precisely when and how Americans racialized difference and came to define "blackness" and "whiteness" as fixed, biological categories. 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 African Americans in the new republic was taking place in the upper South, where manumissions increased during and after the American Revolution. Clearly, the analysis of race in the early republic will need to be broadened. None the less, this is an important book for anyone interested in slavery, abolition, and emancipation.

