



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780- 1860. by Joanne Pope Melish

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Women's experiences, too, are only mentioned in passing. While they do discuss religious conflicts, they say little about other cultural or economic divisions.

This is a book rich in detail but weak in analysis. Its audience, therefore, will likely be limited to other historians interested in material culture or midwestern communities.

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Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860. By Joanne Pope Melish. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. xx, 296 pp. \$35.00, ISBN 0-8014-3413-0.)

This fascinating book tells the story of the end of slavery in New England. Using town records, court records, planters' diaries, farmers' almanacs, popular broadsides, and the writings of black and white abolitionists, Joanne Pope Melish has traced the process by which an institution that was once central to the lives of many New Englanders was abolished and replaced with a "republican" social order whose promises of equality reached only as far as the emerging color line between white and black.

Though their aggregate numbers were small, Melish argues, slaves were important members of the "families" of New England slaveholders—assigned a distinct though subservient role within the set of patriarchal metaphors through which New Englanders organized their society. Emancipation came slowly to many: the gradual emancipation laws passed after the Revolution were often very gradual, and erstwhile slaveholders continued, through a variety of legal and extra-legal tricks, to control their former slaves' labor and keep a lid on their ambitions.

More thoroughgoing, Melish argues, were white New Englanders' subsequent efforts to rid themselves of the free people of color in their midst, most notably through colonization schemes but also through the elaboration of a set of ideas about race and region. By the 1820s, providential, social, and historical explanations of the poverty and disadvantage of freed people of color increasingly gave way to biological ones among white New Englanders.

No longer were blacks viewed as part of the society's godly patriarchal order, nor as members of the new republican social order, nor even as the human residuum of generations of local slavery. In spite of the vigorous efforts of black intellectuals, black New Englanders were increasingly treated as aliens distinguished by their race—anomalies in a society nominally distinguished by its white man's republicanism and devotion to free labor. The existence of black New Englanders, as much as the recent existence of northern slavery, became "unthinkable." Even as they closed ranks against the enslaving South, white New Englanders turned their backs on their black neighbors.

Disowning Slavery brims with ideas; it is an exciting and argumentative book. Some readers will take issue with some of its claims: with the argument that New England abolitionists implicated themselves in the objectification of slaves by treating enslaved people as "a class" rather than as "individuals," for example; or with the claim that early black nationalism was comparable to antebellum white supremacy in its use of essentialist ideas about racial identity; and, ultimately, with the idea that liberation is freedom from identity rather than from oppression. What is certain, however, is that both historians and advocates of social change should read this book and take it seriously. *Disowning Slavery* provides a compelling description of the process by which the history of black New Englanders was erased in favor of an originary myth of white man's republicanism and free labor and by which slavery was rhetorically southernized in a way that cleansed the master narrative of early American history—the Puritans, the patriots, and the city on the hill—of its enslaving past.

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Frederick Douglass: Freedom's Voice, 1818–1845. By Gregory P. Lampe. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998. xvi, 350 pp. Cloth, \$45.00, ISBN 0-87013-485-X. Paper, \$22.95, ISBN 0-87013-480-9.)

Frederick Douglass notes in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) that, prior to his first