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Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation And "Race" In New England, 1780–1860



Synopsis

Following the abolition of slavery in New England, white citizens seemed to forget that it had ever existed there. Drawing on a wide array of primary sources—from slaveowners' diaries to children's daybooks to racist broadsides—Joanne Pope Melish reveals not only how northern society changed but how its perceptions changed as well. Melish explores the origins of racial thinking and practices to show how ill-prepared the region was to accept a population of free people of color in its midst. Because emancipation was gradual, whites transferred prejudices shaped by slavery to their relations with free people of color, and their attitudes were buttressed by abolitionist rhetoric which seemed to promise riddance of slaves as much as slavery. Melish tells how whites came to blame the impoverished condition of people of color on their innate inferiority, how racialization became an important component of New England ante-bellum nationalism, and how former slaves actively participated in this discourse by emphasizing their African identity. Placing race at the center of New England history, she contends that slavery was important not only as a labor system but also as an institutionalized set of relations. The collective amnesia about local slavery's existence became a significant component of New England regional identity.

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Customer Reviews

"Joanne Pope Melish argues that the need to portray a virtuous North battling the slave-holding South during the Civil War resulted in the creation of a 'mythology of a free New England' in the antebellum period and that the notion persists to this day. . . . She makes the case that slavery was

far more important to New England's economy than is commonly recognized by historians." *New York Times* "Melish's work is original, important . . . a fascinating work that opens new interpretations of emancipation and race in New England." *William and Mary Quarterly* "Disowning Slavery brims with ideas: it is an exciting and argumentative book." *Journal of American History* "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. . . . This is a terrific book, one that all scholars of slavery, abolition, and the early republic absolutely must read." *H-Net Reviews* "Painstakingly researched, filled with new information and astute analysis, this book is a major contribution to our knowledge of New England slavery and a valuable addition to the understanding of race relations in the United States." *American Historical Review* "Melish's searching analysis compels a reconsideration of many aspects of the conventional narrative of antislavery within both white and African-American communities. . . . This is an important book, one that commands a reconsideration of many of our assumptions about the meaning of emancipation, the development of racial ideologies, and also about antislavery itself." *Reviews in American History* "The work is an invaluable contribution to the emerging picture of slavery and emancipation in the American North. Pope Melish has made it difficult for New Englanders ever to see their history quite the same way again." *Law and History Review* "Fifteen years in the making, this is an unusually mature and finished first book. It is also a major contribution to the study of the construction of American national identity." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* "In this ambitious and often compelling study, Joanne Pope Melish seeks to explore in detail, and then to reconfigure, our sense of the meaning of 'gradual' emancipation in New England. . . . Her relentless vision of New England Americans 'disowning' the enslaved history, and displacing it on the South, illuminates in a new and important way the history of race and regionalism that we must rethink again." *Journal of Southern History* "Melish's determination to put the history of local slavery at the core of New England racial attitudes has produced a highly nuanced picture of the gradual emancipation process that goes well beyond anything of its kind. . . . A tremendous achievement that will have an impact across a wide historiographical spectrum." *Connecticut History* "In this wonderfully observed history, Melish's keen truth-giving shows a new picture of the past, in turn giving us a different perspective on the turbulent race relations of our country today." *Providence Sunday Journal* "Joanne Melish sheds more fresh light on the significance of slavery in the North than any other historian I can think of. *Disowning Slavery* is a brilliant book." *David Brion Davis, author of The*

Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution"Disowning Slavery impressively roots the development of white racial ideology in the antebellum North both in an expansive New England nationalism and in the day-to-day experience of gradual emancipation. An important addition to the literature on race relations and on sectionalism in the U.S."—David Roediger, University of Minnesota

Just the plain truth concerning America's hyper hypocrites.

By now, it should be general knowledge among anyone presuming to comment on American race relations and the Civil War Between the States that the Northern states did not exactly have clean hands when it came to keeping African (and then African-American) slaves. Works like "Complicity" attest to the element of discovery that recent academic research and journalism have made possible. Nonetheless, it is taken as common knowledge that the Northern states achieved emancipation reasonably quickly after the Revolution, even if motivated chiefly by economics. It is still widely presumed that people in the Northern states, the New England states in particular, were particularly enlightened about slavery/emancipation and race, and therefore morally superior to Southerners. For this reason, this book is shocking: while it delineates the gradual, compensated emancipation that was a feature of England's vaunted anti-slavery laws, and thus outlines an alternative method that could have been used to end slavery in all states, it demonstrates that this process coexisted with the kind of racism people routinely associate with the South and the South only. Dialect humor, "darkie" cartoons, and the lingering assumption that Black people owed labor to whites go against the cultivated image of enlightened New England. Even those already skeptical of such claims to Northern moral superiority cannot but find themselves taken aback by Melish's illustrations of Northern prejudice and dismissiveness. For one thing, she hauls a carefully cultivated image up short. For another, the attitudes she demonstrates among Northerners are those that give modern readers pause and cause them to react with distaste. I sense that, down the road, there will or should be a national dialog about the received narrative of Northern clean hands/Southern dirty hands, based on the new expositions and explorations of the history of racial relations in America. This book should help facilitate that dialog.

In *Disowning Slavery*, Joanne Pope Melish strongly refutes the myth of a free New England, untainted by slavery and racial disharmony. While slavery did not exist in either quantity or duration on a scale comparable to the South, Melish conclusively shows that it existed in the northern states well into the 19th century, and argues that it was an important component of New England's

economic success. Like feminist historians who have argued that women's domestic labor was crucial if men were to be able to engage in economic activity outside the home, Melish shows that as domestic servants and agricultural laborers, slaves performed the drudgework that Yankee entrepreneurs would otherwise have been employed in. Because such urban entrepreneur slaveowners were a small (though influential) percentage of the population, slavery was allowed to gradually die out in New England, most often through judicial interpretation. Gradual emancipation meant that there were few great political battles over ending slavery in the North, allowing New Englanders to erase their memories of its very existence. However, because slavery was allowed to die without the benefit of public debate and legislative control, freedmen's legal and social status was never clearly defined, nor was the means by which former slaves were to be integrated into free society. Whites were able to congratulate themselves on their moral superiority as free societies without having to concern themselves with the welfare of now-emancipated slaves. In turning their backs on the problems of freedmen trying to adjust to their new status, they prevented blacks from becoming full members of their communities. They saw proof of blacks' inability to provide for themselves as an insurmountable racial characteristic even as whites refused to provide economic or legal opportunities that would have allowed former slaves to improve their condition. Over time such self-reinforcing racial attitudes grew into a fully developed philosophy of racism, embellished by exaggerated depictions of black caricatures in the popular culture of the North. Indeed, Melish cites a vast array of cultural documents (popular literature, newspaper editorials, plays, and pop art) to demonstrate New Englanders' racist attitudes. Her narrative also amply demonstrates how the process of gradual emancipation allowed the North to forget that slavery had ever been part of their society, leading to their smug moral superiority. However, neither her evidence nor her reasoning adequately explains why it was necessary for Northerners to adopt racist attitudes. It does not seem that the limited number of freed blacks in the North were a significant economic or social threat to whites; there seem to be no concrete reasons for the development of racist attitudes, especially considering how committed many northern whites were to ending slavery in the South for moral reasons. Melish seems satisfied to accept that people have a natural need to define themselves by creating an "other" as a point of (negative) comparison; her work would be greatly enhanced by exploring the reasons that this might be so.

This is a timely book along with some others being researched and written now. It was not easy to read but contains documented historically accurate information unlike much of the history of the North that has been written in the past. It is enlightening to read the truth about Yankee slavery.

This book and some others like it if taught as real history in our schools and universities could lead to bring Americans closer together as the truth, no matter how bad or humbling, can do if we humble ourselves and accept it. We can see from this book that people in both the South and the North were guilty and that most of them, in the North, weren't ending slavery really for the benefit of the African Slave but to get rid of the Africans and return to a white and specifically New England America.

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