

The Abolitionist Imagination

Edward J. Blum

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Review

Blum, Edward J.

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Delbanco, Andrew *The Abolitionist Imagination*. Harvard University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 978-0-674-06444-7

Imagining the End of Slavery

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the raid on Harper's Ferry led by John Brown in 1859, the *New York Times* in 2009 ran two op-eds that could not have been more different. One labeled Brown a "martyr" who should be pardoned posthumously. The other linked Brown to the 9/11 attacks and called him a "fundamentalist" and a "terrorist." To literary historian Andrew Delbanco, these diametrically opposed views signal a deficiency in our approach to abolitionism. Seeing them as saints or as sinners gets us nowhere, he believes. Instead, in his now-published address before the Center for American Political Studies at Harvard University, Delbanco seeks to recast the abolitionists. He does this primarily by situating them vis-à-vis other white Americans of conscience from the nineteenth century who did not join them. Basically, Delbanco wants to know what was it about abolitionism that left thoughtful writers like Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne avoiding it.

Delbanco defines abolitionism as a "recurrent American phenomenon" where a determined minority endeavors to root out an entrenched evil (3). The odds against abolitionists are great; their moral fervor is great as well. They were, Delbanco exclaims, the "thundering Isaiahs and Jeremiahs of their time" (9).

Thoughtful writers like Melville and Hawthorne refused to align themselves with abolitionism, Delbanco continues, because they recognized the world as more complicated. They did not have the Manichean view of good-versus-evil that abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison held. Because of their ability to see human complexity and to avoid either-or moralities, Melville and Hawthorne then rose in prominence in America's literary canon during the middle of the

twentieth century when centrist positions became all the rage in response to Soviet Communism and the Cold War.

Responding to Delbanco, historians and cultural critics John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilfred McClay critique and expand upon several points. Stauffer and Sinha emphasize the unwillingness of proslavery forces to compromise and how this compelled abolitionists into positions of immediatism. They also point out that proslavery forces were far more likely to turn to militant violence than abolitionists themselves. Pinckney channels the 1960s scholarship of Benjamin Quarles to narrate the place of African-American abolitionists in the crusade. And finally, McClay tries to understand how Delbanco renders abolitionism as a cultural symbol of "America" – complicated and fraught, but nonetheless raised out of human bodies and into a disembodied meaning all its own.

Overall, this is a strange book. For all the work that has presented abolitionism as a transnational movement, which will be best exemplified by Caleb McDaniel's forthcoming book on the antislavery movement within transnational reform crusades, there is precious little in *The Abolitionist Imagination* that recognizes the world beyond the United States. Moreover, Delbanco's initial essay is all over the map, supposedly about the abolitionist imagination, but then focusing on Melville and Hawthorne and the literary canon of the twentieth century. His effort to reimagine them as moralists who invoked the prophetic personalities and modes of biblical prophets has nothing particularly new to it. Then in his rebuttal to Stauffer, Sinha, Pinckney, and McClay, Delbanco clarifies his aims. I was left wondering why the clarity of the conclusion was nowhere present in the opening chapter.

Overall, *The Abolitionist Imagination* seems most beneficial for the ways Stauffer, Sinha, and Pinckney historicize the political, moral, and philosophical construction of abolitionism that Delbanco seeks to create. The responses show that in order to understand the moral convictions of any group at any time, we need to understand their context and surroundings. The white American abolitionist positions (and their imaginations) were created around the extremism, unwillingness to compromise, and unfreedoms created by southern proslavery advocates. To divorce them from that milieu seems to misunderstand them entirely. For these points, we can be grateful to Stauffer, Sinha, and Pinckney.

Edward J. Blum is an associate professor of history at San Diego State University. He has published several books on race and religion in American history and his most recent, co-authored with Paul Harvey, is *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (2012).
eblum@mail.sdsu.edu