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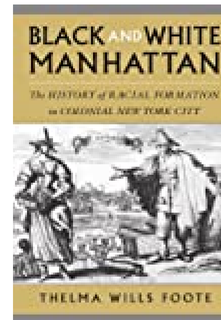

Thelma Wills Foote. *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. x + 334 pp. $93.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-508809-0; $37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-516537-1.

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Those interested in the early history of Manhattan ignore race at their own intellectual peril; historians of American race relations ignore Manhattan at theirs. Thelma Wills Foote's *Black and White Manhattan* offers a valuable contribution to the freshly enlivened discourse on the history of slavery and race in New York City. Foote, an Associate Professor of History and African-American Studies at University of California, Irvine, began working on her study long before the current wave of popular interest in slavery in early Manhattan; the work grew out of a highly informative 1991 Harvard dissertation. The timing of the book that ultimately resulted from Foote's long labors is propitious, coming a year in advance of the New York Historical Society's acclaimed exhibit, "Slavery in New York" and prize-winning Harvard historian Jill Lepore's book, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan.* Foote's strongly made arguments challenge readers to rethink not only colonial Manhattan's history, but also the customary frames built around such broad subjects as colonial American history, African-American history, and the historical concept of race itself. Manhattan's history, Foote indicates, belongs foremost to global or, at least, trans-Atlantic history, and that was true from the very beginning of Dutch colonization. Thus, if the history of what Foote terms "racial formation," the process by which those with cultural power impose racialized categories on particular types of human bodies, was central to the history of Dutch and then English Manhattan, then this story has much to tell us about the early modern world, as well as the post-modern world in which we live.

Foote assails what she labels the "apartheid narrative" of U.S. history, and in doing so, she calls for something far more specific and far-reaching than inclusion or reckoning with good dreams gone terribly awry. Blacks and whites in Manhattan lived in close quarters, the slave-holding patterns dispersing Africans and African Americans across the city's households so that at the turn of the eighteenth century 41 percent of white households contained slaves. Thus, there is no separate story of white and blacks, but rather a single one, in which the two groups were inextricably and, given the labor conditions and high infant mortality rates, fatally bound.

Foote devotes two initial chapters to laying out the social and demographic terrain. The first chapter places the arrival of Africans on Manhattan in the context of Dutch efforts to wrest control of the region from the Indians, who were deemed to be a far more dangerous racial other at first. While seeking the most effective means of exploiting slave labor, the Dutch experimented with a transitional phase of "half-freedom" and at least made gestures toward converting slaves to Christianity.

Foote then deftly reconstructs the subsequent century of English rule, with particular attention to the physical world of black and white Manhattan, including work, patterns of slave importation, and the distribution of slaves through the wards of lower Manhattan, and labor. A disproportionate number of males and widespread exposure to disease were among the reasons that the slave population had more Africans than Americans until after the mid-eighteenth century.

Foote's social history forms the backdrop for an argument about language, power, and race. Foote's study retrofits for an urban, ethnically polyglot island, Edmund Morgan's now classic formulation that white solidarity in colonial Virginia, despite glaring social tensions and economic inequalities, was sustained by the maintenance of an enslaved, racially stigmatized population of African and African-descended slaves. Foote ropes this analysis of anti-black racism tightly to a tale of capitalist-motivated colonization operated initially under the auspices of the Dutch West India Company but carried forward aggressively once the English seized the town. Africans became essential to the securing of power in the midst of linguistic and religious diversity because whites needed the labor and, ultimately, they needed an internal enemy capable of helping Europeans to see themselves as white. Through intermarriage and cultural attrition, politically fractious New Yorkers developed just enough cohesion to survive their rivalries with each other and to convince themselves that their domination of black laborers was legitimized by race as well as being a matter of life-and-death for themselves and the colony. For Foote, the point is not that this is a uniquely American phenomenon foreshadowing an American paradox, but that colonial domination within this imperial framework required the projection of racialized identities onto subjugated populations. White racial views were cemented further by the fact that European Protestant settlers managed to cross over into one another's churches, as time eroded barriers erected by language (Dutch, French, and English), but that Africans, who had their own very different cosmologies, proved indifferent to attempts to catechize them.

Foote's emphasis on the discourse of power is on particularly firm ground when she investigates white supervision and black resistance. Foote offers insightful commentary on the never quite successful effort by white authorities to monitor the day-to-day activities of Manhattan's black inhabitants in the face of persistent black efforts to form social bonds and find social space free from white coercion. As she points out, New York City's slaves had to develop their culture and affinities in public, in streets, alleyways, dram shops, and marketplaces. There were no separate plantation slave quarters to return to at the end of each day that could serve as a hothouse for culture innovation and solidarity beyond the watchful eyes of the master class. Gathering after the workday was done, black men sometimes formed brotherhoods (p. 202) to facilitate burglary, while, as in any port town, drinking was a major recreational pursuit. Meanwhile, in Manhattan's marketplaces, blacks, though enslaved, hawked fruits and vegetables, often brought in to the cities by the slaves who worked in the adjacent countryside. White authorities repeatedly attempted to enforce laws limiting nighttime gatherings of blacks and, like masters throughout British North America, used newspaper advertisements to both describe and to lay claim to black bodies on the run. Imperfect as a means of controlling the black population, such a discourse nonetheless reinforced ideas of inherent difference between those who ruled and those who were subjugated.

Foote's interpretation of the alleged slave plot to seize the city in 1741 will trouble many historians. Deconstructing what she terms "the colonialist discourse of conspiracy," Foote examines the published trial journal as a literary composition designed to convince New Yorkers that a series of mysterious fires that afflicted the city in the spring of 1741 were perpetrated by an extensive network of Manhattan's black population determined to seize power. In Foote's rendering, the trials and punishments demonstrate the desperate need of the ruling elites to secure a necessary measure of white solidarity in the midst of political, economic and military crises. This desperation allegedly led authorities to conjure up the specter of black-on-white mayhem and condemn thirty slaves to their deaths. It is certainly true that the journal invites close textual analysis; clearly, its author, Daniel Horsmanden, wished to validate the existence of a conspiracy of slaves and nefarious whites. Whatever comfort he sought to offer his New Yorkers about the justice of their brutality toward those convicted, the record reveals that the trials were something quite different from an evenhanded attempt at uncovering truth. Biases in the evidence notwithstanding, serious scholars remain split on what to make of this complicated affair, with some emphatically concluding that a plot was in the works. Foote's analysis does not entertain the possibility that a real conspiracy of disaffected black slaves may have been underway. Foote's decision not to engage this possibility is particularly surprising because evidence within her own book indicates at least the plausibility of blacks

planning an internal assault on the city. The motive and the means did exist. Earlier in the book, Foote details Manhattan's 1712 slave rebellion, which also involved arson. Moreover, her study provides evidence of the many ways that blacks defied white authority, at least covertly, throughout the colonial period. Moreover, the main body of the study ends with an excellent discussion of the many New York-area African Americans who cast off the yoke of their patriot masters during the American Revolution, in the process prompting at least some British authorities in occupied Manhattan to assist escaped slaves to secure freedom at the conclusion of the war.

Foote, despite her careful attention to the nuances of events and language, is not so much interested in presenting a narrative from the perspective of the historical actors as she is in offering us the satellite view. Such an approach, accompanied by theory-inflected language, reflects her intention to mount a post-colonial assault on American exceptionalism. This approach has drawbacks. To be sure, colonization was, in one sense, a "project"; yet the twists and turns of Manhattan's history, and the choices made by its diverse inhabitants, also had an unscripted quality that makes framing the story this way somewhat strained. Nonetheless, Foote does trace how Europeans from a variety of religious, national, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds consistently deployed law and language to define critical differences within Manhattan society in terms of race. Indeed, the African Americans during the Revolutionary era who cast their lot with the British seem to have intuited what Foote argues: "the enslavement of black Africans and the installation of the enslaver and the enslaved into relationally constituted subject-positions was not an [unthinking decision] â¦ but a failure to think in any terms except reductive categories of black and white" (p. 235). The new nation inherited that racist failure and thus, as she sees it, the ongoing project of racial domination as well.

Foote's study does not leave enough room for the possibility of an antiracist discourse emerging from or coexisting with the prevailing racist one. The arc of the book's narrative essentially ends with the British departure from Manhattan in 1783, making it easier to foreclose alternative patterns of thought about race and power. In New York, as elsewhere in the Atlantic world, the eighteenth century, for better and worse, dramatically modified discourses regarding both race and slavery. Manhattan changed, too. Through almost the entire English colonial period, the island housed a tiny handful of free blacks, but by 1800, more free blacks than slaves lived there. The increasingly populous island became a central front in the first wave of northern emancipations, and, ultimately, played a critical, albeit contentious, role in later campaigns for southern emancipation. Of course, debates over gradual abolition reflected a legacy of racialized discourse, but this discourse did so in complex and surprising ways, not least because free blacks entered into the rhetorical fray.

In any case, Foote's provocative book is not about a nation or its ideals, or, even about slavery, let alone its abolition. Lincoln at Gettysburg notwithstanding, there never was, in Foote's view, a nation "conceived in liberty." Moreover, the dispiriting process of racial formation in New York City long before the nation was even conceivable is not a shame to be borne by a mere nation anyway, because that process is expressive of an entire Euro-Atlantic worldview that sustains a capitalist-driven colonialism in the twenty-first century, as it did in the seventeenth century. The human significance of such abstractions is poignantly illustrated at the very end of the book's epilogue. When the hammer of racism falls, it falls not with words, but deeds, deeds perpetrated against the bodies of real live human beings, human beings such as West African immigrant Amadou Diallo, shot in 1999 by New York City police 41 times as he reached for his wallet, presuming that his identity was inscribed on a card instead of his skin.

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