



**Sean X. Goudie.** *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 275 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3930-0.

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## Complex Creoles

This is a fascinating and provocative book. Sean Goudie looks at the early national United States and discerns a vital and underexamined presence in its cultural productions. The West Indies, he argues, served as a “shadow double” (p. 103) to the new nation. *Creole America* is a detailed meditation on the role and function of that double in the formulation and enunciation of U.S. identity and nationalism in the early republic. The foundational crux of this claim is a recovery of a colonial mentality in which North American whites—“creoles”—understood themselves as parts of a common British whole that included the West Indies. This is important to Goudie’s project in two ways. For one, it suggests ways in which diverse Britons looked at each other, in addition to looking at the metropolitan center, as they articulated and rearticulated their particular identities and related them to their Britishness. By recognizing and exploring this inter-American and relational process, Goudie contributes to historical scholarship dealing with these “provincial” places in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and to current trends that employ transatlantic perspectives as well.[1] Secondly, emphasizing a North American creole mindset enables Goudie to plumb and parse the tensions experienced by British colonials there, tensions that would endure after Independence with significant impact. Goudie argues that, once they were no longer “British,” these “Americans” forged an identity that was rooted in an assertion of the West Indies as an American antithesis. Nationalism in the early United States was based

on an effort to obfuscate and muffle the U.S.-West Indian relationship—their economic connections and cultural similarities—presenting a polarity where in fact a gradation existed. The resulting “American” moniker masked an ongoing “creole” condition. Following David Waldstreicher, Goudie shows how this development was a function of power. “American” identity was a battleground, not a sui generis reality or a fait accompli; defining it was an act that was performed repeatedly, had consequences, and created winners and losers.[2]

This perspective adds arrows to the quivers of those who continue to hunt U.S. exceptionalism. More specifically, it renders problematic portrayals of the American Revolution as a decisive, finite, and uncomplicated break. Similarly, it engenders a reevaluation of the standard periodization historians employ to demarcate U.S. history, and contributes obliquely to an expanding literature on the American Revolution in memory.[3] Predictably, given Goudie’s orientation towards the West Indies, this work also adds momentum to considerations of the importance of the Haitian Revolution and to considerations of its impact around the Atlantic littoral.[4] Finally, *Creole America* forces the conclusion that treating politics alone is insufficient for understanding this portion of U.S. history. Indeed, Goudie suggests that, by doing so, historians run the risk of replicating and bolstering one side of a contemporary cultural contest. Instead, he demands that we think about culture, and specifically literature, in addition to and in partnership with politics, making a convincing case for their mutual contextuality.

The resources Goudie draws upon to do so structure his study, and may raise flags to historians in the absence of a wider array of evidence. After two chapters in which he expounds upon select writings by Benjamin Franklin, Olaudah Equiano, and Alexander Hamilton, he turns to literary productions, devoting a chapter each to the poetry of Philip Freneau, a play by the unknown J. Robinson, and Charles Brockden Brown's novel, *Arthur Mervyn*. Readers of this discussion list may take issue with some of his assertions about American culture writ large based on such singular samples and without a more extensive treatment of their audience and reception. More worrisome, however, is that historians will be dissuaded from interacting with Goudie's ideas because of the considerable effort needed to unpack and decipher the intricate, dense, and at times jargon-packed prose in which he conveys them.

This would be a mistake. Goudie delivers an argument that gives historians of the early republic a lot to think about. Highlighting the mental gymnastics made necessary by American efforts to elide and negate the presence of the West Indies as they generated a portrait of the national character, he reveals how that portrait, represented as timeless and static, was in fact the reflection of a dynamic process. Even prior to Independence, Americans such as Franklin strove to depict a strict binary between the degenerate and corrupt West Indian New World described by Linneaus and Buffon and a distinctive and progressive continental empire. The consumption of Caribbean goods and the generation of wealth by Caribbean trade, however, belied this strict dichotomy. American trade networks sustained West Indian plantations by providing them with foodstuffs and slaves. Goudie describes this position as "paracolonial": the North American colonies and then the United States aided the imperial effort and benefited by it, but stood putatively outside its framework. While Franklin was ambivalent (and slyly opportunistic) about this relationship, Hamilton embraced it as the basis of the new nation's future. Indeed, one of Goudie's most significant contributions is his resuscitation of Hamilton, not to celebrate or vindicate, but to explore him as a revelatory and representative figure. The commercial empire that he touted was not an aberration or twisting of Revolutionary ideals, but rather an alternate version of the nation's identity, one that centered on the radical capacity of a liberal and enterprising spirit to spread American liberty and independence. If this "empire of commerce" lost out to another iteration of American ideology in 1800—Jefferson's "empire of liberty" rooted in agriculture, western land,

and yeoman independence—both shared a common notion of the United States as distinct from the West Indies and a common commitment to reining in the radical possibilities of Revolutionary ideals by circumscribing American identity around whiteness. Hamilton's version, Goudie insists, was simply more honest in confronting the United States's creole position.

Goudie asks us to consider the political struggles of the 1790s, therefore, as a culture war. Yes, the tensions that arose during this period reflect a competition over the meaning of the American Revolution and the policies that would translate ideals into statecraft, but they also reveal innate fissures and contradictions in an American identity that preceded the Revolution and endured after it. In the latter part of his book, Goudie picks apart an array of cultural productions to show the persistence of those tensions and their workings over time. Philip Freneau's poetry imagines a beneficent American West Indian paracolonial project as a contraposition to British tyranny, yet it also reveals anxieties over American contact with the Caribbean that fuel the poet's increasing antipathy to Hamilton and Federalist policies. Characters in J. Robinson's play embody Hamilton's "man of commerce," but also expose the machinations over and problems arising from defining Americans by racial boundaries. Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* articulates concerns over the ill effects of West Indian corruption on American character, illuminating the acceptance and definition of those racialized boundaries, but also making evident their illogic. American texts, therefore, lay bare the roiling nature of American identity and nationalism in this period. Goudie sees them as marking seams in what has been conceived of as whole cloth, and argues that the stitch-work they bring to light make evident the coercive and manipulative nature of the American national project.

In presenting this case, *Creole America* participates in and extends the use of a vibrant and exciting analytic-creolization—for understanding culture in the Atlantic world. The notion of creolization is a vital one for scholars interested in understanding the interactions among different peoples in New World spaces. Whereas Goudie's actors employ the term "creole" as a means by which to distinguish between members of white populations by dint of their birthplace, historians have come to understand creole less as a genealogical marker and more as a descriptive adjective for the cultural amalgams produced as various peoples met, melded, clashed, and reacted around the Atlantic—"America" in its most catholic sense. The power of Goudie's work is his use of the logic

underlying his actors' distinctions in voicing ideas about "creoles" to enrich our understanding of the parameters of this American intellectual geography and the workings of power in its historical mobilization.

Such an ambitious task inevitably raises questions as it provides answers. In privileging the role played by the West Indies, for example, we are left unsure of the relationship between it and other places and ideas—France and the French Revolution come to mind—that more familiar narratives have taught us were formative forces in the early republic. Are we to understand the influence of the West Indian image as a displacement? A replacement? A modification? One suspects Goudie would be most comfortable seeing the dynamic he describes as being a cultural bedrock, onto which other entities were forged. Knowing more about their points of contact, however, would have been helpful in ascertaining the full ramifications of Goudie's contribution. Similarly, the exact locus of the study is unclear. Goudie describes a broad system at work, but the national culture he evokes is expressed and developed through productions generated solely in the mid-Atlantic and New England states. The role of the creole complex in creating sectional identities is not explored. Finally, given the thrust of his argument, it is appropriate that Goudie turns to white- and elite-derived sources to explore the meanings packed into and out of American identity. As Goudie certainly understands, given his use of the ideas of scholars such as Édouard Glissant, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and Orlando Patterson, studies of Atlantic slavery employ creolization as a tool to explore the fusing of idealized African memories, the workings of shared cultural imprints, and the impact of the structures of white power in the forging of slave culture in the Americas. These and other scholars demonstrate the ways in which that forging process reflected the influence of both slaves' resistance and masters' coercion. The presence of entities such as the African Methodist Church in Philadelphia or Prince Hall's African Masonic Lodge in Boston suggests that other "American" creolization processes occurred beyond those generated in Goudie's texts, and with which the latter were undoubtedly in conversation. What elisions and counter-elisions were undergone in

these struggles? How did "Hayti" stand in relation to "America" as a creole entity articulated by African American mouths? Sean Goudie's excellent book is no less interesting in absence of these discussions. Indeed, its invigorating quality is a testament to the strength of the analytic it develops.

#### Notes

[1]. See Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997) for both an exemplar of this type of study and an example of the approach upon which Goudie's work expands.

[2]. David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997).

[3]. For example, see Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: Madison House Publishers, 1990); Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); and Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

[4]. See David Patrick Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). Also Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1789-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2004); and Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2004). The dynamic Goudie explores with regard to the United States is usefully interrogated with regard to Haiti in Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

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