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Jane Landers. *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. x + 340 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03591-1.

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Slavery, Liberty, and Imperial Rivalries in the Age of Revolutions

In 1998, Ira Berlin contended that many early Africans in the Americas could be better understood as "Atlantic creoles"–products of the Atlantic–than as Africans or African Americans.[1] Over the past decade, scholars have used the concept of the Atlantic creole to provide a more nuanced understanding of precisely who these Africans were, the types of social and cultural capital they mobilized, and the active role they played in shaping the history of the Atlantic. A scintillating example of the maturation of this scholarship is a 2010 monograph by Jane Landers: *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions*.

Atlantic Creoles fleshes out an understudied region and population within the "Age of Revolutions." While the interest in Atlantic connections has generated considerable scholarship on relationships between the American, French, Haitian, and Spanish revolutions, Landers draws our attention to the actions and experiences of African Atlantic creoles on the front lines of these overlapping revolutionary wars. With her background in Spanish Florida, Landers pushes out into a broader Atlantic that includes not only Spanish Atlantic spaces such as Cuba and Florida, but also revolutionary South Carolina, Saint Domingue, and Seminole country. She draws upon sources in Spanish, French, and English. The result is a book of breathtaking scope and insight.

Landers claims at the outset that *Atlantic Creoles* will make two overarching arguments. First, the age of revolutions provided opportunities for African Atlantic creoles to achieve freedom and social mobility, often through military service. Second, Atlantic creoles were "often critical to the balance of power" in the imperial conflicts that marked the era (p. 5). While Landers leaves no doubt that African Atlantic creoles encountered opportunity in war and imperial rivalries, the importance of their actions to the larger conflicts is less clear. She details military engagements, but it is hard to gauge how these engagements figured into the overarching victories and losses of revolutions. Whether or not African participation tipped the balance of power may not be an answerable question. But in the end, it may not matter. For what Landers does show is significant in its own right: the offers of emancipation, military commissions, and refuge arising out of competition between empires; the impact of this competition for African support and labor on imperial policy and strategy; the anxiety produced by the Haitian Revolution and the existence of maroon communities; and best of all, the connections between the empires as experienced Atlantic soldiers traveled from one place to another. The age of revolutions did not merely shape the lives of Atlantic creoles; the actions of Atlantic creoles indelibly contoured the age of revolutions.

Thus, Landers's Atlantic evokes the Ohio Valley of Richard White's *Middle Ground* (1991). The rivalries produced by revolution shaped not only the opportunities for Atlantic creoles negotiating their own middle ground, but also the empires themselves. Atlantic creoles by definition had access to cultural resources that made them more likely to "vote with their feet." They took advantage of emancipation offers from the Spanish, British, or French, or absconded into maroon communities or Native American societies. And these escape routes impressed the consciousness of all members of slave societies, slaveholders and slaves alike. As Landers writes, "Seasoned by war against French planters and British troops, and their own countrymen, and well acquainted with 'dangerous notions' of liberty, equality, and fraternity, despite their monarchical rhetoric, these men became objects of fear throughout the Atlantic world" (p. 79). In fact, Landers shows Atlantic creoles became objects of fear, hope, and value. But as with the Ohio Valley, as imperial rivalries receded, so, too, did the promises of the era.

The geographic and temporal scope covered by this relatively slim volume is beyond impressive. But the genius of this book is that it roots these larger spaces and revolutions in the lives of specific individuals. Each chapter focuses on a different location and thus a different "revolution," but Landers introduces us to runaway slaves, itinerant soldiers, revolutionary leaders. The transatlantic kinship and patronage networks cultivated by these individuals provide a centerpiece to the book. We meet Juan Bautista "Big Prince" Whitten, who escaped with his wife and children from the Carolinas to Spanish Florida. Gabriel Dorotea Barba was a free black barber of Havana who joined the local militia to defend Cuba from British invasion in 1762. We are invited to see Georges Biassou, a lesser known but significant instigator of the Haitian Revolution, as part of this world of Atlantic negotiations. While Toussaint L'Ouverture allied with the French republic, Biassou preferred to ally with Spain and traveled with his men and families to reestablish themselves in St. Augustine. "Despite major language and cultural differences and at least a few incidents of conflict, marriage and godparental ties soon linked the former Black Auxiliaries of Carlos IV with members of the free black community in St. Augustine, many of whom were former fugitives from the United States and had experienced the American Revolution" (p. 89). Thus, the project does not merely compare, it traces connections.

As the reader nears the end of the volume, a third thesis becomes apparent: monarchies provided better conditions for Africans than republics during the age of revolutions. While one might wonder whether Landers perhaps romanticizes the prospects offered to African creoles by the Spanish, she presents considerable evidence that the Spanish empire allowed for greater civic, social, and economic participation than its competitors. Indeed, because the Spanish government recognized Africans and Native Americans as imperial subjects, the Spanish-language sources illuminating the lives and civic participation of these subjects are especially rich. Sources range from loyalty oaths, petitions, lawsuits, as well as civil, religious, and criminal records. The Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown offered numerous avenues for African creole civic participation–for a time at least. But was it monarchical governance that made the difference? Landers concludes the volume with the execution of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (the poet more commonly known as Plácido) in Matanzas, Cuba, for his involvement in the slave revolts of 1843. In Matanzas, the rising sugar economy created a powerful planter elite akin to planter elites in other parts of the Americas. These planters made repeated efforts to eliminate Cuba's free black bourgeoisie and thus to consolidate their influence. La Escalera–the violent repression following the slave revolts–was just one of longer litany of efforts by Cuban authorities to drive Atlantic creoles from the nation by targeting free blacks of foreign origin. To Landers, the cosmopolitanism that had allowed African Atlantic creoles to flourish in the age of revolutions made them a threat to "absolutist monarchs and racist plantation regimes alike. One could say they were undone by their very virtues" (p. 230). Atlantic creoles fled Spanish Cuba for Mexico, Brazil, Jamaica, and Europe.

A final question worth pondering concerns the parameters of the "Age of Revolutions" itself. What precisely defines the age of revolutions? To Robert R. Palmer, the revolutions that mattered most were those of the United States and France. To Eric Hobsbawm, the era included the Spanish American revolutions and stretched to the European revolutions of 1848. To Landers, the period stretches to 1886, not to revolution, but to the abolition of slavery in Cuba. Thus, for her the question of the age of revolutions is not about political upheaval or democratic governance for whites, but a more encompassing transnational demand for liberty coming from slaves and free blacks as well. This more expansive definition becomes unwieldy, to be sure. Yet Landers's appreciation of the connections between liberty, slavery, and the many broken promises made to African Atlantic creoles by the societies to which they tried to contribute reminds us of the failed promise of the era itself, and leads us to wonder how revolutionary the era truly might have been.

Note

[1]. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), 25. See also Berlin's earlier article "From Creoles to Africans: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996): 251-288.

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