The white whale of American identity has tasked observers of the society and culture of the United States practically since the ink dried on the Treaty of Paris that ended the American War of Independence (1775-83). Kariann Yokota, in *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation*, has plotted her quest on a "cultural" (p. 9) course: "The project of nation building and developing national identity in the United States," she argues, "was as much about its people's struggles in 'unbecoming' what had made them British subjects before independence as it was about 'becoming' citizens of a new country" (p. 6). This interesting examination of the cultural anxieties that plagued certain Americans in the early decades of the existence of the United States provides a salutary reminder of the weakness of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it offers nothing substantially new in terms of understanding the character of the emerging new nation or on the history of postcolonialism.

This "long goodbye," in Yokota's terms, centered around the uncomfortable and annoying reality, for Americans concerned about these things, that despite the winning of the war and the creation of a republic, they remained culturally, economically, and even psychologically dependent on their erstwhile parent country. While keen to advance their new country's place in the wider world, they well knew that the wider world had scant regard for their new country. Such regard as the United States did generate tended, to American alarm, to identify--all too readily--"Americans" as "savage Indians" or as effete degenerates from European stock. The American environment did generate interest--in terms of its exotic and rustic character--in European learned circles, but the verdicts rendered by these circles--that America "was less masculine than its European counterpart" and, thus, inferior, rankled (p. 217).

These insults added to the painful reality that those Americans who pursued the cultural refinement they believed characterized the best society still had to rely on imports from Britain to keep up refined appearances: the young United States lacked the capability to produce maps, textiles, fine pottery, and other manufac-
tures, a situation underpinned by British mercantile policy and continuing capacity and the eagerness of the former metropolis to set consumer trends. To boot, political independence had not broken the colonial American habit of cultivating transatlantic patronage and cultural polish nor did it have the desired effect of correcting the corresponding sensibility that American commodities, professions, education, and, by implication, ideas remained dependent upon British approval.

This insufferable situation had to change. Ignoring the ironies (Yokota, of course, does not) of their situation, American printers copied British maps and reworked them to magnify the appearance of the United States, while American commentators both decried the endurance of American preferences for British commodities and exhorted the development of American manufacturing capacity along with a taste for American style in order to achieve real independence. These urges became more palpable—and the dreams they carried more achievable—as Americans extended their geographic and economic interests further afield, especially in trade with China.

Of course, the American in experience in China initially reflected the general position of the United States in the world: in addition to the customary Chinese condescension towards “barbarians,” American traders at Canton had to convince their hosts that not all English-speakers were, in fact, English, a distinction that that Chinese merchants officials did not necessarily find compelling to draw, especially since the long-standing operations of the East India Company provided a daunting comparison. The introduction of the clipper ship, though, along with Chinese demand for ginseng (a commodity unavailable to the British), enabled American access to the lucrative tea and porcelain trades that, in turn, furthered American equality with European competitors in China and, correspondingly, American economic independence.

Even so, the characterization of the “Old World” that the “New” suffered from cultural inferiority continued to preoccupy the architects designing the character of the United States in the first decades after independence. For this verdict not only kept America beneath Europe in the pecking order of civility (which correspondingly obsessed these architects); it also provided an unwelcome reminder of the proximity of those aspiring to refinement to, most particularly, Indians and Africans. Thus, according to Yokota, “the angst experienced in the postrevolutionary period in the United States manifested itself in a continual push to improve, a disdain for anyone deemed inferior, a ravenous hunger for material objects, and an inexhaustible ambition, driving its citizens to unchecked expansion, rampant speculation, and the exploitation of the land and labor of others” (p. 213). In sum, “race,” which Yokota styles as an “American commodity” (p. 213), came to provide the means by which white Americans both elevated the “manly and civilized” (p. 217) character of their culture and relegated non-whites to savage status.

Even so, Yokota argues, the process of “unbecoming British” entailed “a long goodbye” that lasted well beyond the final settling of Anglo-American political relations achieved in the War of 1812 (1812-15). The assurance of political and psychological American independence brought with it the opportunity for the new nation to avail itself of its Louisiana Purchase (1803) and, in turn, advance its domestic economic system away from the continuing tendency of directing raw commodities to the old metropolis. Yet, American consumers still preferred to cultivate European-style refinement at least through the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861-65). For commentators like Ralph Waldo Emerson, the endurance of this cultural orientation both rendered its practitioners feeble imitators (as lampooned, for instance, by English visitors like Charles Dickens) and hamstrung the efforts of the United States to achieve its promise as the “expectation of the world” (p. 233). The saving grace for the progress of America, Emerson speculated during his 1847 visit to Britain, was the country’s youth which, along with “Americans’ possession of British racial superiority,” rendered it “unstoppable” (p. 242); a verdict in accord with the one rendered years before by Thomas Jefferson. The “aging” parent, Britain, would have to stand aside in the end to make room for its former offspring.

One scholar’s “anguish” though, can also serve as one (or more) contemporary’s expansionist fuel. Jefferson, as the tireless architect of the “white man’s republic” that he regarded as the American ideal, would undoubtedly have agreed with much of Yokota’s analysis. As is well known, he regarded the removal of American Indians from their ancestral homelands westward, the purchase of and exploration of Louisiana, and the enslavement or repatriation of Africans, in accord with the extension of citizenship to adult white males, as the means by which United States should achieve the promise set forth in the Declaration of Independence (not coincidentally, of course, penned largely by one Thomas Jefferson). But while Jefferson might have had uncomfortable moments considering the proximity of Indians and Africans to cit-
izens, there seems to have been little, if any, doubt in his mind that the direct exclusion of non-whites from what came to be styled as the promise of American life made the United States a better country. Jefferson’s ideological successor, Andrew Jackson, certainly had no qualms about this issue although Jackson lacks the intellectual cachet of the “Sage of Monticello” and so, unsurprisingly, receives no mention in Yokota’s index.

In the end, Yokota argues, this “story of unbecoming in the early American republic provides a counternarrative to the country’s optimistic and confident projections about its future as a world power,” while a “postcolonial perspective” discloses the “relative economic and cultural disadvantages” of “the founding fathers” while avoiding the trap of triumphal history. “The point here,” she stresses, “is not to reiterate the narrative of American exceptionalism but to address the inequalities that are borne of imperialism”—in the case of the United States, a racism generated “at least in part by postcolonial anxiety” about place of the nation in a “position of marginality” (p. 239).

Triumphalist and exceptionalist accounts are certainly to be avoided by all means. But, ironically and perhaps most importantly for the members of H-Empire, Yokota’s analysis offers no direct comparison between the history of the United States and those of other postcolonial societies. The American case famously involved certain, mostly white, inhabitants of thirteen colonies (although many others remained loyal to empire or stuck their heads in the sand) who resisted imperial “novelty” (direct parliamentary taxation), formed alternative governments, fought for and won independence, and established thirteen republics united under an overarching one (the book under discussion here does not consider this important and peculiar aspect of American “postcolonialism”). For the British Empire, the readiest parallel would, thus, seem to be Rhodesia, although the (white) rebels there famously failed to secure the sort of external support that enabled the Americans to make good their abjuration of George III. Thus, their version of the “white man’s republic,” one rather less subtle than the New World version, returned to the imperial fold in order to proceed, as originally planned, to a rather different sort of independent country, Zimbabwe. Ian Smith for Thomas Jefferson, anyone?

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