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### **Review/Reseña**

Jane G. Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

## **Breaking through National Boundaries: Afro-Creoles, Revolutions, and Nation-Formation in the US and the Caribbean**

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Opening with the epigraph, “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,”<sup>1</sup> Jane Landers argues in this book that in the turbulent period from 1760 to 1850, Atlantic Creoles of African descent in southern North America and the Caribbean “[took] the current when it serves.” They made informed, pragmatic decisions to win

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, act. 4, Scene 3.

freedom, and thus also engaged significantly in the conflicts among Europeans, American Patriots, Native Americans and Africans that shaped the southern United States and the modern island nations of the Caribbean. *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* is an eye-opening history of this less-studied region, and lesser-known leaders and groups in “a period of racial, economic, social, and political change across the Atlantic world” (5). Landers exposes the movements, activities, and influence of Black individuals, families, and communities from the revolutionary battles between Americans and British in Charleston to the slave uprisings in Saint Domingue, the “Indian wars” along the southeastern United States, and the slave revolts of Havana and Matanzas in the first half of the nineteenth century. Significantly, key leaders appeared repeatedly in the various conflicts as Landers signals how Atlantic Creoles carried the ideas and struggle for freedom around the region. Bringing together wide-ranging sources from painstaking research in Spain, the United States, and Cuba, Jane Landers has written an outstanding book that dramatically changes our understanding of the importance of Atlantic Creoles in the revolutionary period, the interconnectedness of the region, and the revolutionary processes themselves. This book is essential reading for scholars and students of the revolutionary period and of the history of the United States and the Caribbean. Students of literature, history, Africana Studies, and political history will also find that *Atlantic Creoles* informs their scholarship and understanding of their fields.

Landers borrows the term “Atlantic Creole” from historian Ira Berlin to refer to people of African descent who, “by experience or choice, as well as by birth, became part of a new culture that emerged along the Atlantic littoral—in Africa, Europe, or the Americas—beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century” (Berlin 254, n7). From Berlin’s definition, Landers emphasizes the self-determination and flexibility of this Atlantic identity. She portrays enslaved and free Blacks as people who did not define themselves primarily by race, but as cosmopolitan actors, who spoke two or more languages, and moved skillfully between regions controlled (or not) by various colonial powers, often acting as interpreters, advisors, and leaders in cultures other than those into which they were born. They were flexible and adaptable and

they studied the geopolitics of their times as they sought strategic alliances with one or another European power to secure and defend their freedom (13).

Landers' clear and fluid writing style makes the book deceptively easy to read, a welcome attribute as the reader sorts through a history too complex to summarize briefly. In this review I point out some of the book's key approaches and contributions before moving to a schematic summary of each of its six chapters. I end the review with a brief note on sources.

*Atlantic Creoles* examines the careers of individuals such as Juan Bautista (Prince) Whitten, Georges Biassou, the maroon Titus, Felipe Edimboro, Benjamín Wiggins, José Antonio Aponte, the Black Seminole Abraham, and Jorge Davison, among others. Landers unearths the lives of key political and military leaders who have been overlooked or dismissed by history. She dedicates equal space to the decisions, movements, and actions of non-elite groups who also made pragmatic decisions to lend their support individually or en masse, with determining force, to one or another Black, European or Native American power to “[shape] the course of international events, as well as local responses to them” (5).

The biographical narratives honor important individuals in their own right, but they also function as representative examples of the processes through which Atlantic Creoles engaged in decision-making, the dissemination of information and thought, and crafting strategic alliances. Landers examines how these individuals gained access to information and skills, how they borrowed the rhetoric of rights and freedom from European and (white) American declarations and revolutions, reformulating it for their own struggles for freedom and self-determination, and then disseminating it around the Caribbean, together with political information and philosophical thought. The exchange of information and ideas occurred through the “slave telegraph,” but also in intellectual gatherings, the international exchange of literature, and the forced as well as free movement of Atlantic Creoles around the region. *Atlantic Creoles* thus participates in the current historiographical efforts to break through the limiting national boundaries that academic disciplines have imposed on the region, revealing a complex and continuous interconnectedness and

flow of people and information among Black populations. As Atlantic Creoles obtained and exchanged knowledge, they employed that knowledge in roles as cultural and linguistic mediators, advisors, and political and military leaders, fighting in defense of the Spanish, British, or French kings, or of independent maroon communities, Native American states, or indigenous-Black alliances, and against the slave-owning class and their supporting colonial governments.

Landers confronts the question of why, in a time of revolutions that touted a rhetoric of freedom, Atlantic Creoles—enslaved or recently freed—so frequently sided with European monarchies rather than with revolutionaries. She questions modern historians who have dismissed figures such as Jorge Biassou on the basis of their perceived counter-revolutionary, monarchical allegiance. The leadership of Biassou in the slave revolt of Saint Domingue, for example, has been overshadowed by that of Toussaint, who (eventually) sided with the French Revolutionaries. Landers argues that the loyalty of Atlantic Creoles to monarchical regimes, while revealing a shared appreciation for the powerful symbolism of kingship, responded primarily to pragmatic decisions to “win and maintain liberty” (5). Ironically, the monarchs of Spain, England, and France did more to free enslaved people “who became their loyal subjects and ardent defenders” (233) than did the American revolutionaries of European descent. Southern United States Patriots did not abandon their racist social organization or efforts to recapture escaped slaves; many participants in the slave revolts of Saint Domingue saw the French revolutionaries as ineffectual against the colonial regime, and the Liberal Constitution of the Spanish Cortes de Cadiz was rejected by Ferdinand VII after his restoration. On the other hand, monarchical governments often made good on their promises of freedom for those who converted to Catholicism or served in the royal militias, and often rewarded them with lands—albeit after much petitioning (233). Landers also outlines corporate aspects of Spanish social organization that Atlantic Creoles learned to use to their advantage. Belonging to free black Spanish militias allowed them not only prosperity and honor, but also access to *fueros* or special privileges; additionally, belonging to trade guilds and Catholic confraternities allowed

a mode of social integration and status absent under revolutionary governments.

*Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* is organized into six chapters that follow, in roughly chronological order, the principal historical conflicts of the period and, with them, the movement of African-descent peoples. Chapter One, "African Choices in the Revolutionary South," considers the battles between British loyalists and American Patriots in South Carolina in the 1770s and 1780s. The protagonists of this chapter are Juan Bautista (Prince) Whitten and his family. The elite of Charleston had acquired African slaves in such numbers that in the 1770s the population of St. John's Parish in Charleston was overwhelmingly African. The fear that South Carolina planters had of the African majority was so great that it moved Loyalists to switch allegiance to the side of independence, knowing that the Africans could obtain freedom by serving the British military against them. Such was the importance of the Africans' choice in this matter that, "in December 1775, South Carolina's reluctant revolutionaries became the first colonists to declare their independence" (27). African slaves in South Carolina knew they could earn freedom by fleeing to Spanish St. Augustine to the south and converting to Catholicism. Thus many of the slaves who were taken by Loyalists to Florida escaped into Spanish territory at the end of the Revolutionary war, becoming free subjects loyal to the Spanish crown. Prince Whitten was one such slave who, in Florida, enlisted in the Spanish free Black militia that defended East Florida in 1795 against attacks from France's Revolutionary Legion and, with the militia, gained experience and "some honor in a culture which valued military valor so highly" (54).

In Chapter Two, "The Counter-Revolution in Saint Domingue," Landers teases out a new reading of Georges Biassou's participation in the Haitian slave revolt of 1791, which culminated in the 1795 treaty that divided the island between French and Spanish regimes. Landers questions modern historians' dismissal of Biassou's leadership as counter-revolutionary and their perpetuation of a negative perception of Biassou's practices as "primitive" and "pagan" (64). She does not shy away from describing the horrific violence perpetrated by the leaders of the slave

revolt or discussing how slaves combined a belief in the protective power of African amulets with their use of French revolutionary rhetoric. She presents evidence, however, that Biassou himself acted with discipline as observed by the French lawyer M. Gros, who survived captivity by the rebels (64). Landers sees Biassou's alliance with Spanish royal forces and his split from Toussaint, who eventually joined the French republicans, as much a pragmatic and circumstantial decision as it was an indication of counter-revolutionary ideology. She portrays the leaders of the slave revolt as "well versed in the competing ideologies of monarchy and republicanism" (93), and argues that they believed more in the past record of the Spanish monarch to deliver freedom to slaves, than in the French, whom they knew best through the slave-backing colonial government of Saint Domingue. Landers ends the chapter with Biassou's forced exile to Havana and his last years in Florida, where he met up with Prince Whitten. Thus she shows the connections that Atlantic Creoles made, carrying their learned rhetoric of freedom and their military experience from Saint Domingue to Cuba to Florida.

Chapter Three, "Maroons, Loyalist Intrigues, and Ephemeral States", lays out the multiple disputes along the southeastern coastline of North America in the early 1800s among European powers, the United States, maroon communities, and Native American entities. This chapter is perhaps the most complicated in the book because of the numbers of interests and powers involved. Here Landers does not follow the career of a single Atlantic Creole, but notes the alliances made by various Atlantic Creole individuals and groups. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, England, Spain, and France all found themselves weakened by attacks on their lands at home or abroad, and all enlisted Atlantic Creoles to settle land disputes militarily. William Augustus Bowles, the "former [British] Loyalist and self-titled Director General of the 'State of Muskogee'," sought to establish an independent Native American state, ending up in 1800 in Mikasuki, near what is today Tallahassee. His "multiracial guerrilla army" (103) attracted numbers of Africans and their descendants. Bowles's project, initially supported by the British, threatened Spanish interests in Florida and the United States' expanding acquisition of "Indian" lands.

While U.S. Commissioner James Seagrove expressed concern, it was the Spanish who sent St. Augustine's free Black militia against Bowles in 1800, first under the command of General Jorge (Georges) Biassou and, later, First Sergeant Jorge Jacobo and then Prince Whitten.

In a subsequent conflict in 1812, Georgian Patriots sought to win control over the Spanish territory of East Florida to hand it over to the United States. Spain sent Black militia from Cuba, Louisiana, and Florida to the defense: "Men who had fought in the American Revolution, the Saint Domingue slave revolt, spin-offs of the French Revolution, the Indian Wars, and Cuban slave uprisings were joined in one polyglot unit" (112). The Spanish militia included Sergeant Felipe Edimboro, whose son-in-law Benjamín Wiggins served as an interpreter, having lived in relationships with English, Senagalese, Seminole, and Spanish communities. The Black militias and their Seminole allies compelled the Patriot and U.S. forces to withdraw from East Florida in 1813.

During the War of 1812, the British recruited large numbers of runaway slaves from Spanish Florida by promising them freedom and land if they fought for the British military. At the end of the war, British Colonel Edward Nicolls set up a "Negro Fort" at Prospect Bluff in Spanish territory on the Apalachicola River. He also antagonized the United States by presenting himself as advocate of the Creek Nation against United States' expansionism. Both the United States and Spain demanded that the British dismantle the fort. Spain sent a commissioner to investigate, but he failed in his mission to do away with the fort. Eventually, in 1816, the U.S. Navy succeeded in attacking and destroying the fort, where, again, Black soldiers had played an important role in forcing the military and diplomatic actions of two regional powers.

The Atlantic Creole soldiers who fought for Spain gained upward mobility through their service, which also aided them in establishing extended kinship networks, and thus social stability. Following these early nineteenth-century conflicts, some established themselves in the prosperous city of Fernandina (now Jacksonville). They defended Fernandina against the attacks of Luis Aury and Gregor MacGregor, revolutionaries from Bolívar's army, who had set out to free Fernandina

from Spain in September 1817, proclaiming it the “Second Republic of the Floridas” (133). By December the United States had taken possession of the city. Notably, in all these conflicts, the Atlantic Creoles sided with anyone but the United States. Landers again sees this as an informed decision to ally themselves with those powers that most convincingly promised their freedom, engaging them at the center of important regional conflicts.

In Chapter Four, “Black Militiamen and African Rebels in Havana,” Landers proves the necessity of her historical method in pulling together in a single book the complicated movements of the Atlantic Creoles. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Cuba saw the consequences of the Atlantic Creoles’ experience in the American and Haitian revolutions and in the conflicts of the North American coastal states. Atlantic Creoles who had fought in these struggles had acquired a rich cultural and geopolitical knowledge. They had considered at length the implications in their own lives of the philosophical arguments and armed struggles for freedom and equality. As a result of their military service they had created in Cuba a sizeable, well-educated and well-connected Black bourgeoisie. They formed religious confraternities and African *cabildos de nación*, which provided the space for the Black bourgeoisie to exchange information and to engage in the international debates over slavery. As the planter elites pushed for a more segregated society, the confraternities, and especially the *cabildos*, enabled free and enslaved Blacks to form a strategic union. In 1811 Atlantic Creoles were quick to spread the news that the Spanish Cortes de Cadiz were debating the future of slavery, and the *cabildos* fell under suspicion as potential hotbeds of slave rebellion. Slaves found inspiration to rebel in rumors about liberation and abolition, and when authorities suppressed the revolts, those executed included members of the free Black bourgeoisie. Francisco J. de Burgos, in his single-issue periodical *El Negrito*, informed Cuba’s Black readership of their rights under the Liberal Constitution of Cadiz of 1812. After King Ferdinand returned to his throne and abolished the Cortes and the liberal Constitution in 1814, the growing cosmopolitan Black community came under renewed repression, and with enslaved Cubans sought total eradication of slavery. These Atlantic Creoles were now



joined by an influx of cosmopolitan Blacks who had left Florida in 1821 when the United States acquired its Spanish territories.

The placement in the book of Chapter Five, “Black Seminoles: A Nation Besieged,” and its interruption of the Cuban story, which Landers takes up again in Chapter Six, speak to the difficulty of creating a linear narrative out of an intricate web of sequential and simultaneous historical events, movements, and international exchanges. Chapter Five follows up on the events of Chapter Three, discussing the resistance of the Black Seminole nation to U.S. expansionism in central Florida. This case portrays a different mode by which Atlantic Creoles inserted themselves into the nation-shaping tumult of their times. The most prominent figure in this story is Abraham, the leader of the Black Seminoles, southern Creeks who had taken in Blacks as slaves, but had also welcomed Black maroons as free leaders and interpreters. The Seminoles valued free Atlantic Creoles for their knowledge of Spanish law, society, and language. Abraham led the Black Seminole nation against U.S. expansionism, loyal first to the British and then to the Spanish. The British abandoned the Black Seminoles when Andrew Jackson marched against them in 1818, destroying their northern towns and scattering them to the west and south. Their final demise came in the Second Seminole War, when the remaining allied Blacks and Seminoles in Florida launched attacks on plantations on the St. Johns River and fought the U.S. Army for two years in the Withlacoochee Swamp. Abraham surrendered in 1838 and led the Black Seminoles into exile in Arkansas.

Chapter Six, “Atlantic Creoles in Matanzas, Cuba,” resumes the narrative of early nineteenth-century Cuba and the legacy of Black militia experience on the formation of an educated Black bourgeoisie in Cuba. Landers moves her focus from Havana to Matanzas, Cuba’s leading sugar-producing region to the east. By the early nineteenth century both Britain and the United States were actively trying without success to suppress the slave trade in Cuba. Fully two-thirds of Matanzas’s population was Black, both free and enslaved. As in Havana, the Black bourgeoisie experienced repression from the planter society on suspicion that they endorsed and were spreading an ideology and rhetoric of freedom and were colluding

with white Abolitionists. Landers's primary focus here is again on the international networks in which the Atlantic Creoles engaged. She highlights the experiences of Jorge Davison as emblematic of the educated and cosmopolitan Black bourgeoisie. Davison's brother worked for the Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. When Davison was arrested in 1837 on suspicion of subversion, the literature found in his house included newspapers from New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Nassau, as well as poetry by Phyllis Wheatley and speeches on slavery by the Paisley Emancipation Society. In 1843 members of the Black bourgeoisie were suspected of leading a series of slave rebellions that were repressed in what was called *La Escalera*, for the ladders on which the rebels were tied in order to be whipped. The most famous victim of the executions was the poet Gabriel de la Concepción (Plácido) Valdés. Many of the Atlantic Creoles left Matanzas to escape the repression, fleeing to Mexico, Brazil, Jamaica, and destinations in Europe and Africa.

To build her intricate narrative argument on the agency, interconnectedness, and importance of the activities of the Atlantic Creoles, Landers carried out a painstakingly broad and rich investigation into archives in the United States, Spain, and Cuba. She consulted correspondence, treasury accounts, reports, petitions, military orders, loyalty oaths, legal suits, interrogatories, and criminal records, among others. She also examined evidence in the published sources of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including eye-witness reports, trade statistics, travel writing, newspapers, runaway notices and advertisements for the sale of slaves.

There are times in her narrative when Landers does not fully succeed in bringing clarity to complexity. As noted, chapter three is especially challenging for a reader unversed in the history of the southeastern United States. There are moments throughout the book where it would be more helpful to find dates in the text itself, rather than hidden in the endnotes. Curious to this reader is the omission of a discussion of the term "Atlantic Creoles," which led to a consultation of Berlin's original definition. However, none of these elements diminishes the tremendous importance of Landers's work, which brings together the histories of people

of African descent in Anglo-, French, and Spanish America in such a convincing way.

Landers is fully persuasive when she concludes that,

Atlantic Creoles and their descendants learned, by necessity, how to read shifting political landscapes and make daring choices. They based their alliances primarily on their desire for freedom and a measure of dignity. By comparing different imperial systems, analyzing new sources, and uncovering new narratives, we can better understand the agency and interconnectedness of Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions, and thus the revolutions themselves. The hopes of Atlantic Creoles for freedom and equality may not have been immediately fulfilled, but this does not diminish their importance to the causes they advanced. (235)

In *Atlantic Creoles* Landers has brought together a wealth of diverse and scattered sources to trace a story of movement, education, transformation, and calculated action through a century and around Spanish, British, French, and Anglo-America. In doing so, she provokes her readers to a new understanding of the “Age of Revolutions,” and to question the limits imposed on scholarship by categories such as nation, polity, and racial identity.

### **Work Cited**

Berlin, Ira. “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53.2 (1996): 251-88.