
The Creole Archipelago. Race and Borders in the Colonial Caribbean, by Tessa Murphy. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. 310 pp. (Book Review)

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Over the last half century, a voluminous literature has emerged on the history of the seventeenth and, especially, of the eighteenth-century Caribbean. No longer considered simply as ‘slaves,’ enslaved Africans are now central to narratives that explore their complex lives, cultures, and modes of resistance. Likewise, the enslavers (the planters, merchants, and politicians responsible for colonizing the islands of the Caribbean) appear in ever more nuanced ways. Indigenous populations – referred to as Kalinago in this important new study – on the other hand, have tended to be overlooked in historical analyses of empires, enslavement, and emancipation as Melanie Newton has noted (5-6). At the same time, Caribbean historiography – particularly in its anglophone mode – often focuses either on islands in the Greater Antilles (like Jamaica) or those colonized in the early years of European settlement (like Barbados). Yet, the experiences of people across the Caribbean varied: what happened in Jamaica or St Domingue does not always reflect very well experiences in other islands or colonies. In her vital new book, Tessa Murphy reverses those twin trends by placing Kalinago people at the heart of her study of the small islands in the Caribbean’s Lesser Antilles.

The Creole Archipelago explores the entangled history of the peoples of the territories often called the Windward Islands. Its focus is on Dominica, Grenada, Martinique, St Lucia, St Vincent, and Tobago and its chronological sweep takes the reader from the mid-seventeenth century Kalinago domains predating initial European incursions, through to the maelstrom of revolution and global war of the last decade of the eighteenth century. “Very big things,” Dr Murphy argues, “happened in relatively small places” (16). It is a story of a world created by mobile Kalinago peoples who moved freely

along an archipelago, which was in the process of being transformed by European colonialism and its concomitant enslavement of Africans. In the end, the world of the Kalinago was disrupted and destroyed as Britain and France waged their imperial rivalries with devastating consequences.

Tessa Murphy’s narrative begins with a compelling discussion of the establishment of these islands as indigenous territories in chapter one, a process made possible by the sea as the means of connecting them. For the Kalinago – as for Europeans and enslaved Africans later – the ability to move between islands was integral to their world. Rather than their communities being separated by sea-bounded islands, the archipelago supported and connected them. By centering her discussion on them, Murphy argues convincingly not only for their survival throughout the period, but for their active roles in the process of imperialism in the Windward islands. In Murphy’s hands, indigenous power and influence operated alongside that of the French in Martinique in the early years of settlement and continued to shape British policy in St Vincent more than a century later. The shift from uneasy coexistence came with the development of plantation agriculture and the large-scale importation of African enslaved labor. In the Windwards, however, this transformation was not effected completely or immediately across the islands before the 1760s. Relatively low levels of European settlement (much of it without official sanction) left space along the archipelago for the indigenous communities to flourish into the later part of the eighteenth century. In some places, like Dominica, they lived alongside European settlers; in others – like Tobago – they lived more or less unimpeded.

Murphy does not really assess Kalinago groups on Tobago, even though there is evidence from maps (which she uses very effectively in chapter

one) that indicate an indigenous presence certainly larger than in Grenada and St Lucia. Thomas Jeffreys' map of Tobago, for example, published in his *General Topography of North America and the West Indies* in 1768, but based on an earlier chart from 1760, indicated three distinctive groups on the island with a population of up to 150. In the aftermath of the Seven Years War, Britain acquired formal rights to islands that had been previously officially designated as neutral by Britain and France. Across the islands of Dominica, Grenada, St Vincent, and Tobago, Kalinago people were dispossessed and, in the case of Tobago, excised from the maps of the island. Forests were reserved for practical and environmental reasons, but indigenous land was not. The process of land sales – outlined by Murphy in chapter three (87-102) – denied the indigenous peoples' rights to their land. All land not owned by Europeans was designated Crown land and sold to settlers. Even where land was reserved for Kalinago groups, as in St Vincent, it was still regarded (by the British at least) as the property of the monarch.

British and French demand for land was driven by the desire to create profitable colonies from islands that were regarded as un- and under-developed. Individual planters, of course, wanted profits of their own. Neither of these things had space for the Kalinago; instead, planters wanted enslaved people. As Murphy makes clear throughout, there was an extraordinarily rapid increase in the enslaved population that had devastating consequences for the enslaved and for indigenous people. Yet neither group, as the final chapter makes clear, lost the capacity to resist.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Britain and France had fought over the Caribbean. All the islands Murphy discusses changed hands at least twice in the second half of the century. The Kalinago and the enslaved were thus confronted by shifting European populations in which French and British settlers lived side by side, sometimes in an uncomfortable truce, at other times in open conflict. When the British secured the Windward Islands in 1763, they made a conscious attempt to secure their governance (124-131) by extending political rights to the French residents (much, it has to be said, to the chagrin of many

Britons). With the outbreak of the American War, French allegiances to France (unsurprising in themselves) were regarded as a betrayal in the minds of the British. When the islands returned to their control, they revoked the pre-war concessions to the French, who resented what they saw as increasingly draconian control.

These twin disputes over land and rights, Murphy argues, lay at the heart of insurrections in Grenada and St Vincent in 1795-96, which are explored in chapter seven. These revolts throw into sharp relief the entanglements between imperialism, enslavement, and indigenous rights; between the British and the French; and between varying definitions of liberty between Europeans and free people of color, all set against the background of revolutions in France and Haiti, and renewed war between Britain and France. The two revolts, which broke out within a week of each other in March 1795, arose from different island circumstances, as Murphy notes. On Grenada, the rising led by Julien Fédon emerged from the community of free people of color (who were usually francophone) and drew in thousands of enslaved people. On St Vincent, the Second Carib War was a continuation of a decades-long struggle by Kalinago people to secure their land and their rights in the face of European incursion.

These insurrections by free people of color, the enslaved, and the indigenous populations drew on the language of the French Revolution in the Caribbean, which has been explored in detail by Laurent Dubois (2004). French forces led from Guadeloupe by Victor Hugues represented a mortal threat to Britain, and rebels in both islands were quick to align with France to secure their own ends. Ultimately, Murphy suggests, the French were too stretched in their conflicts with Britain to support the insurgents sufficiently (220). However, it might equally be argued that the French did want to support the rebels but that their attempts to do so were unsuccessful. The problem for the insurgents was that what connected the archipelago – the sea – could also be used to isolate parts of it. Deployments of the British navy to blockade French ports and islands and patrol sea lanes certainly prevented French support from reaching the two islands.

In some ways Murphy's fundamental point

about the centrality of the archipelago as both a geographical space and a conceptual frame is actually reinforced by the apparent inability of the French to resupply Grenada and St Vincent. The importance of mobility along the island chain was pioneered by the Kalinago and taken on by Europeans and Africans, as indeed was the use of Kalinago maritime technology – canoes, which were not at the mercy of the wind – well into the nineteenth century. But just as these Caribbean waterways supported collaboration, trade, travel, marronage and resistance, whoever controlled them gained a significant strategic advantage in wartime. That advantage (along with a huge military commitment) secured these islands for the British in 1796. Thereafter the Kalinago were summarily and forcibly removed from St Vincent, first to Baliceaux, where around half the 4500-strong community died within a year, and then to Roatán in the Bay of Honduras.

Any minor criticisms aside, Tessa Murphy's book's first – and perhaps most important – contribution is to reinscribe indigenous people in the history of the Caribbean and to emphasize Kalinago survival into the later eighteenth century. This is, therefore, not just a Caribbean history of the enslaved (though they appear here as key actors) or of European empires (again, though, they remain important): it is a history of a creole archipelago inspired by Richard White's "middle ground" but here comprising interactions between people of Kalinago, African and European descent, both enslaved and free.

This book represents a landmark in the history of archipelagos. By regarding island spaces as essentially porous, Murphy speaks not only to the literature on borderlands she cites, but also to scholars of islands who think "archipelagically," to use Gillis' phrase (Gillis 276). She emphasizes the importance of the sea both as a vector enabling the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas, and as a vibrant cultural space. As Hamilton and McAleer argue, islands are important to historical analysis not just as bounded or isolated spaces but because of their connectedness. This has a particular resonance in the Caribbean where new research, such as the University of Copenhagen's *In the Same Sea* project, continues to adopt this approach. Murphy's book will surely inform future

scholarship in this area and provide a model for scholars of archipelagos in other regions. Her analytical framework both recognizes the reality of life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and provides a model for the study of island groups elsewhere in the Caribbean and around the world.

In that sense, this book ought to be seen as a vital contribution to our understanding of the Windward Islands, but it should also be read by all scholars interested in relationships between indigenous communities and invading powers, and by those exploring the role of islands in world history.

Works cited

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Author's Biography

Douglas Hamilton is Professor of History and head of the Humanities Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University. He is a historian of the eighteenth-century Caribbean and enslavement and has written on the relationship between islands and empires. His most recent book is *Islands and the British Empire in the Age of Sail* (Oxford University Press, 2021), edited with John McAleer.