
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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Oceans and seas have been pivotal for the Atlantic World historiography since the 1990's. Up until recently, historians have engaged in thought-provoking debates about the contradictory visions of the sea as either a neutral space that served as a conduit of exchange or a place that required significant international regulation of the people and materials traversing it. One pioneering work that centered on the sea as a crucial unit of analysis was Julius Scott's 1986's PhD dissertation, recently published as *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (2018). Scott focused on the Caribbean Sea as a cultural space, a masterless one, that was simultaneously shaped and controlled by Spanish, British, French, Dutch, African, and Indigenous interventions. Scotts conceived this aqueous space as a multicultural reality deeply influenced by an itinerant, multiracial, and multilingual population that did not identify themselves with one empire or one nation, and whose identity took many forms that depended on political, economic, and socio-racial dynamics. The crucial relevance afforded to the Caribbean Sea allowed Scott to convey an open and malleable space that represented an invaluable opportunity for Afro-Caribbean actors to attain mobility and a masterless existence – a possibility deeply feared by the European power. In a similar vein, Ernesto Bassi's (2016) book *An Aqueous Territory. Sailor Geographies and New Granada's Transimperial Greater Caribbean World* carefully reconstructs the circuits of trade and communication that connected different Caribbean communities throughout the eighteenth century. Bassi creatively shows how sailors, traders, seafarers, smugglers, and revolutionaries – who easily moved on a constellation of islands, small continental towns, and the open waters of the Caribbean – brought to

live their own views of the Caribbean geography, while shaping the imperial imaginings that sought to control it. Thanks to these works and others, today we know that the Caribbean Sea afforded endless opportunities for subordinated groups to configure their geographies and mobility, contest imperial decisions and practices, and envision their participation in an evolving world.

Tessa Murphy's recent book *The Creole Archipelago: Race and Borders in The Colonial Caribbean* joins the exciting and innovative scholarship that conceives the Caribbean Sea as a meaningful and manageable space for interaction and exchange. Her book offers a meticulous and original analysis of the political, economic, and social processes that shaped the complex world of the inhabitants of the "Creole Archipelago," a term she uses to refer to both "the physical space – a chain of small volcanic islands, ... that stretches 280 miles from Guadeloupe in the north to Grenada in the south – and a hybrid community that emerged in exchange, interaction, accommodation, and contestation" (6). Murphy not only approaches the Caribbean as a body of water that allowed for exchange, interactions, and mobility to different communities but, more importantly, she focuses on a region that has often been neglected by the historiography. In the last twenty years, Saint-Domingue has monopolized historical studies of the impact of the French Revolution in the French Caribbean, while less attention has been paid to other French Caribbean colonies, especially the ones located in the Lesser Antilles.

In a recent provocative chapter, Paul Friedland (2018) invites historians to decenter Haiti and pay closer attention to the French Windward islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, where citizens of all colors revolted for different reasons against the local royalist government. Laurent Dubois (2004), Frédéric Régent (2004),

and William S. Cormack (2019) have closely studied the effects of the Revolutions (both French and Haitian) in the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, and have shown how France's revolutionary ideas and narratives provided a script for revolutionary action in the Lesser Antilles that was very influential in the ways political conflict developed in the Caribbean. Murphy's *Creole Archipelago* is a welcome addition to the recent works that have opened a critical window to study the different ways that the age of Revolutions impacted less known areas of the Caribbean; Murphy not only focuses on the understudied southernmost islands of Dominica, Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada and Tobago, her book also offers a more comprehensive view – both temporarily and spatially – that recovers the past of these Caribbean islands that remained uncolonized for a long period of time, reconstructing a detailed history of the indigenous, European, and African communities that were part of this world. Drawing on a variety of archival, archaeological and cartographic resources, Murphy shows that this aquatic region – which during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries eluded imperial control and domination and, later, became a space of inter-imperial contestation and rivalry – remains a meaningful and crucial space to understand how European empires were built up from the ground and how their political, economic, and social structures responded to complicated cross-cultural interactions.

Articulated chronologically in seven chapters, *The Creole Archipelago* is built around three fundamental issues: mobility, interconnections, and imperial experimentation. Each chapter begins with unique stories – historical or mythical – of individuals or groups of people who embarked on navigation journeys along the chain of volcanic islands that formed the arch of the Lesser Antilles. These individual stories introduce the reader to the frequency and familiarity with which the multicultural and multiracial population residing in the Lesser Antilles moved around the Eastern Caribbean archipelago. This pervasive mobility, Murphy shows successfully, refers not only to the capacity to physically move in the space, creating a “lived geography,” but also to the myriad economic, diplomatic, commercial,

and social opportunities that individuals sought for themselves and their communities as they moved around. For example, in the first chapter, Murphy shows how Kalinago – a term that indigenous population who inhabited the Lesser Antilles used to identify themselves – understandings of the Caribbean's maritime geography allowed them to retain spaces of autonomy and dominion. Murphy vividly describes how the Kalinago were able to use “waterways to escape colonial expansion, form alliances with other Indigenous people, launch attacks on Europeans, and continue to engage in established patterns of interisland travel and trade” (21). For most of the seventeenth century and part of the eighteenth century, the Kalinago succeeded in exercising diplomatic and military power, restraining colonization projects, and shaping the geopolitics of the Lesser Antilles.

Murphy approaches the colonial Caribbean as an interconnected and dynamic space rather than as a set of discrete and separated territories. This scope allows her to explore the different islands in intertwined social, economic, and political trajectories, a challenging task that nationalistic and imperialistic historiographies had failed to convey. The world that Murphy describes is navigable, permeable, mutable, and malleable; a challenging space that escaped the Imperial grip, and that provided different subjects – indigenous, Black and white planters, free and enslaved workers and sailors – with possibilities to avoid, contest, and resist imperial attempts to transform the Caribbean frontier into a center of sugar production. In fact, in the first three chapters of the book, Murphy offers ample evidence of how the Kalinago, but also free Black workers, and white settlers “ventured outside the sphere of imperial rule in order to serve their own interests” (53). Free people of color, for example, avoided increasingly discriminatory laws and attitudes by establishing themselves in regions that were not controlled by the French crown, and where they exercised greater influence in processes of racial formation.

The history that Murphy reconstructs is also a history of imperial experimentation, struggle, and rivalry. While chapter three provides a clear and exhaustive analysis of the complicated effects of the Seven Year War in a changing

Caribbean imperial map, as British forces conquered many French possessions such as Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Grenada, chapters four and five explore in detail how new imperial designs and accommodations affected the lives of existing settlers, enslaved, and Indigenous communities. An important argument Murphy develops in these central chapters of the book is that colonial subjects were aware of their social power and did not hesitate to capitalize on this power to demand accommodations or to find new frontiers to escape imperial control. Not all colonial subjects, however, experimented imperial expansion and control in the same way, Murphy shows that while white residents of the Ceded Islands gained electoral and legal privileges that were unthinkable to their counterparts on other British colonies, “for free people of color the extension of British rule heralded harassment, humiliation, and the threat of enslavement” (140). Therefore, they felt the urgency to find new destinations either in French or Spanish colonies.

Imperial experimentation would reach a peak during the decades of the Atlantic Revolutions when broad coalitions of Indigenous, free people of color, enslaved and white people revolted against colonial rule in the Eastern Caribbean. Contrary to previous works, Murphy argues that the rebellions and insurrections that rocked the region during the last decade of the eighteenth century owed less to the revolutionary narratives and actions that flooded the Caribbean basin than to local desires to retain Indigenous autonomy, protect the customary rights of free people of color, and resist the exploitative regime associated with the expansion of sugar production. As she argues at the end of her book, the revolts known as Fedon’s Rebellion and the Second Carib War were “part of a much longer history of opposition – both diplomatic and military – to British colonial reforms and experiments” (227). Murphy’s book successfully covers this broader, longer, and more complicated history.

The Creole Archipelago provides a vivid and comprehensive reconstruction of imperial experimentation, rivalry, and competition in the Lesser Antilles during the Seventeen and Eighteenth centuries. Murphy describes the Creole Archipelago as a “site where overlapping

Indigenous, African, and European polities alternately dominated, vied, and coalesced with one another” (14). Her book, however, focuses almost exclusively on the imperial formulations drawn by British and French colonial authorities, and misses to provide an account of the Spanish presence and influence in the region. The Spanish island of Trinidad, which in the 1780s suffered important transformations – similar to the ones that affected other Lesser Antilles Islands in the same period – is barely mentioned in Murphy’s book, making the reader wonder if Trinidad and, by extension, the Spanish empire, were part of the Creole Archipelago.

In the mid-1770s, the Spanish Crown moved Trinidad, a neglected island with a stagnant economy and an impoverish population, to the center of the eighteenth-century Spanish Bourbon reforms. The Crown wanted to revitalize this geographically strategic post by integrating the island into the Captaincy General of Venezuela while establishing an agricultural and commercial program to recreate the slave-based plantation economy of other French and British islands in the West Indies. To achieve this, the Spanish crown implemented innovative migration policies that, embedded in the crucial family compact between Spain and France, sought to attract French Catholic planters and merchants to settle in Trinidad and bring their capital and enslaved laborers to the island. Within two decades (1777-1797), these imperial formulations turned Trinidad into a diverse and plural society (comprised of French, white, Catholic planters, free people of color, and enslaved Black people from the islands of Grenada, St. Vincent, and Martinique, Spanish white and pardo families, and some British merchants) and an economically promising colony that required the careful orchestration on the part of local colonial officials, foreign migrants, and imperial agents in Caracas and Madrid. The transformation of Trinidad during the 1780’s was a complex process that responded to several forces: Spanish reformist plans, the economic and political interests of colonial governments, but also the circumstances and needs of a French migrant population that was running away from British rule, and the challenging international scenario of imperial

rivalry that struck the Caribbean after the Seven Years War. The large number of French settlers who moved to Trinidad in the late eighteenth century (almost fifteen years before Trinidad was invaded by the British) became a key factor for the economic and social transformation of the island and remains clear evidence of the deep connections that existed between the French population of the ceded islands and Spanish administrators and residents of Trinidad and Venezuela. Murphy's book does not cover the Spanish Caribbean here, but her compelling history will encourage future scholars to include Trinidad and the Spanish empire within the complex, mutable, and hybrid community that formed the Creole Archipelago.

of imperial transition on the Island of Trinidad during the Age of Revolutions.

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Author's Biography

Cristina Soriano is an Associate Professor of Latin American history at Villanova University (Pennsylvania). Her first book *Tides of Revolution: Information, Insurgencies, and the Crisis of Colonial Rule in Venezuela*, (UNM Press, 2018) received the 2019 Bolton-Johnson award for the best book in Latin American History by the CLAH, and the 2020 *Fernando Coronil Prize for Best Book about Venezuela*, awarded by LASA. Her new project focuses on migration movements in the Lesser Antilles and the effects